Dr. Campbell Quotations on Realism


Let us consider the import of realism. It is, without doubt, an essential to the best dramatic novel-writing; though in the hands of different authors its manifestations must, of course, vary greatly. One reason for its value is that it supplies the visual distinctness which is one great charm of the stage. But the necessity for it is more radical. As the painter will study anatomy, in order to a better structural idea of the human form, so the novelist will investigate the functions of all those complicated impulses, emotions, and impressions which we experience from hour to hour, from day to day, and by which our actions and characters are continually controlled, modified, or explained. With his investigation of psychological phenomena or insight into the mysteries of spiritual being, he must unite the study of all that accompany these in the individual; as corporeality, with that curious net-work of appearances, habits, opinions, in which each human person is enveloped. Of all eminently realistic novelists, Turgeneff is, I imagine, the most vigorous, acute, and delicate. A little livelier play of fancy, he might, indeed, allow himself, without injury. That he is capable of it, certain rare touches seem to indicate. Speaking of a dandy, in Dimitri Roudine, he says- "He tried to give himself airs, as if he were not a human being, but his own statue, erected by national subscription." For freshness, airiness, and genial sarcasm, this equals the best flights of Dickens's fancy. Balzac, as well as Turgeneff, however, seems sometimes to fall below the level of completely artistic representation, simply from neglect of these more elastic motions of the mind. Balzac, in particular, is often too matter-of-fact, or too statistical in his statement of characters, situations, and appearances. It is important clearly to grasp the difference between realism and that which is merely literalism.

1. Realism sets itself at work to consider characters and events which are apparently the most ordinary and uninteresting, in order to extract from these their full value and true meaning. It would apprehend in all particulars the connection between the familiar and the extraordinary, and the seen and unseen of human nature. Beneath the deceptive cloak of outwardly uneventful days, it detects and endeavors to trace the outlines of the spirits that are hidden there: to measure the changes in their growth, to watch the symptoms of moral decay or regeneration, to fathom their histories of passionate or intellectual problems. In short, realism reveals. Where we thought nothing worthy of notice, it shows everything, to be rife with significance. It will easily be seen, therefore, that realism calls upon imagination to exercise its highest function, which is the conception of things in their true relations. But a lucid and accurate statement of these relations, in so many words, does not meet the requirements of art. In certain portions of his work, Balzac seems to overlook this. He depends too much upon exact descriptions both of mental processes and physical appearances. He is too much the classifier.


It used to be one of the disadvantages of the practice of romance in America, which Hawthorne more or less whimsically lamented, that there were so few shadows and inequalities in our broad level of prosperity; and it is one of the reflections suggested by Dostoevsky's book that whoever struck a note so profoundly tragic in American fiction would do a false and mistaken thing—as false and as mistaken in its way as dealing in American fiction with certain nudities which the Latin peoples seem to find edifying. Whatever their deserts, very few American novelists have been led out to be shot, or finally exiled to the
artist or writer has done. Especially if they have themselves the artistic impulse in any direction they are taught to form themselves, not upon life, but upon the masters who became masters only by forming themselves upon life. The seeds of death are planted in them, and they can produce only the still-born, the academic. They are not told to take their work into the public square and see if it seems true to the chance passers, but to test it by the work of the very men who refused and decried any other test of their own work. The young writer who attempts to report the phrase and carriage of everyday life, who tries to tell just how he has heard men talk and seen them look, is made to feel guilty of something low and unworthy by the stupid people who would like to have him show how Shakespeare's men talked and looked, or Scott's or Thackeray's, or Balzac's, or Hawthorne's, or Dickens's; he is instructed to idealize his personages, that is, to take the life-likeness out of them, and put the literary-likeness into them. He is approached in the spirit of the wretched pedantry into which learning, much or little, always decays when it withdraws itself and stands apart from experience in an attitude of imagined superiority, and which would say with the same confidence to the scientist: "I see that you are looking at a grass-hopper there which you have found in the grass, and I suppose you intend to describe it. Now don't waste your time and sin against culture in that way. I've got a grasshopper here, which has been evolved at considerable pains and expense out of the grass-hopper in general; in fact, it's a type. It's made up of wire and cardboard, very prettily painted in a conventional tint, and it's perfectly indestructible. It isn't very much like a grasshopper, but it's a great deal nicer, and it's served to represent the notion of a grasshopper ever since man emerged from barbarism. You may say that it's artificial. Well, it is artificial; but then it's ideal too, and what you want to do is to cultivate the ideal. You'll find the books full of my kind of grasshopper, and scarcely a trace of yours in any of them. The thing that you are proposing to do is commonplace, but if you say that it isn't commonplace, for the very reason that it hasn't been done before, you'll have to admit that it's photographic."

IV.

As we said, we hope the time is coming when not only the artist, but the common, average man, who always "has the standard of the arts in his power," will also have the courage to apply it, and will reject the ideal grasshopper wherever he finds it, in science, in literature, in art, because it is not "simple, natural, and honest," because it is not like a real grasshopper.


Doubtless the main difference between the novel and the romance is in the way in which they view reality. The novel renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail. It takes a group of people and sets them going about the business of life. We come to see these people in their real complexity of temperament and motive. They are in explicable relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, to their own past. Character is more important than action and plot, and probably the tragic or comic actions of the narrative will have the primary purpose of enhancing our knowledge of and feeling for an important character, a group of characters, or a way of life. The events that occur will usually be plausible, given the circumstances, and if the novelist includes a violent or sensational occurrence in his plot, he will introduce it only into such scenes as have been (in the words of Percy Lubbock) "already prepared to vouch for it." Historically, as it has often been said, the novel has served the interests and aspirations of an insurgent middle class.

By contrast the romance, following distantly the medieval example, feels free to render reality in less volume and detail. It tends to prefer action to character, and action will be freer in a romance than in a novel, encountering, as it were, less resistance from reality. (This is not always true, as we see in what might be called the static romances of Hawthorne, in which the author uses the allegorical and moral, rather than the dramatic, possibilities of the form.) The romance can flourish without providing much intricacy of relation. The characters, probably rather two-dimensional types, will not be complexly related to each other or to society or to the past. Human beings will on the whole be shown in an ideal relation—that is, they will share emotions only after these have become abstract or symbolic. To be sure,
rigors of a winter at Duluth; one might make Herr Most the hero of a labor-question romance with perfect impunity; and in a land where journeymen carpenters and plumbers strike for four dollars a day the sum of hunger and cold is certainly very small, and the wrong from class to class is almost inappreciable. We invite our novelists, therefore, to concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American, and to seek the universal in the individual rather than the social interests. It is worthwhile, even at the risk of being called commonplace, to be true to our well-to-do actualities; the very passions themselves seem to be softened and modified by conditions which cannot be said to wrong any one, to cramp endeavor, or to cross lawful desire. Sin and suffering and shame there must always be in the world, we suppose, but we believe that in this new world of ours it is mainly from one to another one, and oftener still from one to one’s self. We have death in America, and a great deal of disagreeable and painful disease, which the multiplicity of our patent medicines does not seem to cure; but this is tragedy that comes in the very nature of things, and is not peculiarly American, as the large, cheerful average of health and success and happy life is. It will not do to boast, but it is well to be true to the facts, and to see that, apart from these purely mortal troubles, the race here enjoys conditions in which most of the ills that have darkened its annals may be averted by honest work and unselfish behavior. It is only now and then, when some dark shadow of our shameful past appears, that we believe there ever was a tragic element in our prosperity.


"As for those called critics," [Edmund Burke] says, "they have generally sought the rule of the arts in the wrong place; they have sought among poems, pictures, engravings, statues, and buildings; *but art can never give the rules that make an art.* This is, I believe, the reason why artists in general, and poets principally, have been confined in so narrow a circle; they have been rather imitators of one another than of nature. Critics follow them, and therefore can do little as guides. I can judge but poorly of anything while I measure it by no other standard than itself. *The true standard of the arts is in every man's power; and an easy observation of the most common, sometimes of the meanest things, in nature, will give the truest lights, where the greatest sagacity and industry that slights such observation must leave us in the dark, or, what is worse, amuse and mislead us by false lights.*"

III.

If this should happen to be true—and it certainly commends itself to our acceptance—it might portend an immediate danger to the vested interests of criticism, only that it was written a hundred years ago; and we shall probably have the "sagacity and industry that slights the observation of nature" long enough yet to allow most critics the time to learn some more useful trade than criticism as they pursue it. Nevertheless, we are in hopes that the communistic era in taste foreshadowed by Burke is approaching, and that it will occur within the lives of men now overawed by the foolish old superstition that literature and art are anything but the expression of life, and are to be judged by any other test than that of their fidelity to it. The time is coming, we trust, when each new author, each new artist, will be considered, not in his proportion to any other author or artist, but in his relation to the human nature, known to us all, which it is his privilege, his high duty, to interpret. 'The true standard of the artist is in every man's power' already, as Burke says; Michelangelo's "light of the piazza," the glance of the common eye, is and always was the best light on a statue; Goethe's 'boys and blackbirds' have in all ages been the real connoisseurs of berries; but hitherto the mass of common men have been afraid to apply their own simplicity, naturalness, and honesty to the appreciation of the beautiful. They have always cast about for the instruction of some one who professed to know better, and who brow-beat wholesome common-sense into the self-distrust that ends in sophistication. They have fallen generally to the worst of this bad species, and have been "amused and misled" (how pretty that quaint old use of *amuse* is!) "by the false lights" of critical vanity and self-righteousness. They have been taught to compare what they see and what they read, not with the things that they have observed and known, but with the things that some other.
characters may become profoundly involved in some way, as in Hawthorne or Melville, but it will be a deep and narrow, an obsessive, involvement. In American romances it will not matter much what class people come from, and where the novelist would arouse our interest in a character by exploring his origin, the romancer will probably do so by enveloping it in mystery. Character itself becomes, then, somewhat abstract and ideal, so much so in some romances that it seems to be merely a function of plot. The plot we may expect to be highly colored. Astonishing events may occur, and these are likely to have a symbolic or ideological, rather than a realistic, plausibility. Being less committed to the immediate rendition of reality than the novel, the romance will more freely veer toward mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms.

(Chase quotes from William Gilmore Simms's prefatory letter to The Yemassee) The Romance is of loftier origin than the Novel. It approximates the poem. It may be described as an amalgam of the two... The standards of the Romance... are very much those of the epic. It invests individuals with an absorbing interest--it hurries them rapidly through crowding and exacting events, in a narrow space of time--it requires the same unities of plan, of purpose, and harmony of parts, and it seeks for its adventures among the wild and wonderful. It does not confine itself to what is known, or even what is probable. It grasps at the possible; and placing a human agent in hitherto untried situations, it exercises its ingenuity in extricating him from them, while describing his feelings and his fortunes in the process.


What was realism, exactly? Up to this point I've assumed that we share a rough sense of what it was. If the reader has followed my contentions without any uneasiness over what I understand by realism, then all is well; there is commonality. But if there is only uneasiness, then it is high time I admit that I have adhered all along to René Wellek's description of realism as 'the objective representation of contemporary social reality.' Wellek offers this formula as a period concept, strictly appropriate to nineteenth-century European and American literature. With the proviso that there is no reason for not generalizing the concept (in order to take in twentieth-century non-Western literatures, for instance). I find Wellek's formula satisfactory. But it must be understood that it is only a definition based on a well-informed survey of the subject, and not anything more. Too many studies of American realism tend to confuse definition, which serves to point out and distinguish a group of objects (in this case, realistic novels) and to classify them by their common denominator, with certain other activities an intellectual may reasonably undertake to perform with them. In particular, there is no reason why Wellek's concept cannot lead to the sort of analysis that makes use of the most far-reaching thought on the subject of realism, that of Georg Lukacs.

A definition of a period concept in literature is useful if it opens the way to a fuller sense of literary and historical processes, cleavages, identities. Wellek's definition is particularly valuable in enabling one to get past the confusion concerning Mark Twain. If we entertain the idea that this artist was something other than a realist, we find ourselves following an irresistible line of thought. The widespread, though by no means universal, opinion that the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a realistic book begins to look rather questionable. Not only does this work not deal with contemporary society, it presents a view of ante-bellum life along the Mississippi that is highly colored The picture of Pokesville or Brickville may be factual and pointed, but it does not seem realistic. The Grangerford chapters are wonderful, but whatever they are they are not realistic, as one immediately sees in comparing them to De Forest's sensitive exploration of a family feud in Kate Beaumont. In none of Mark Twain's "novels" was he "objective" or "contemporary." No doubt a debunking factuality was one of the tricks in his trade, but I doubt whether his trade was realism. He was too close to popular and folk art to enter that line of work. Mark Twain was a preacher, public exhorter, moralist, satirist, prankster, entertainer, yarn-spinner, and public fool, not to
mention newspaperman, traveler, pilot, prospector, investor, and writer-businessman. My wife's grandfather, born into a farm family, was named Mark Twain by an enthusiastic parent. Would that baby have been so named if his eponym had been a realist?

Another consequence of Wellek's definition is that the body of writing known as local color, which flourished after the Civil War, can be sharply distinguished from realism. These two forms were born together and remained in close touch, but the difference-local color's adherence to old times rather than the passing scene—cannot be too much emphasized. James, and to a lesser extent, Howells looked down on local color fiction (though James came to admire Jewett). To some extent they were justified in taking this attitude. Local color's devotion to odd places and speech-ways and curious veins and outcroppings from the past all reflected a deep rejection of the contemporary world. Howells and James knew how important it was for the novel to try to come to terms with modern urban, "middle-class," civilized life. The local colorists were animated by a nostalgia that is easy to sympathize with, even though it disqualifies their literature from the centrality realism aspired to. The local colorists were well aware of their peripheral status, for they invariably dealt with regions, cultures, and vernaculars that were picturesque survivals. Certainly The Grandissimes is that rare thing, a good historical novel, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's stories are wonderfully accurate and moving, Harriet Beecher Stowe's Oldtown Folks or Oldtown Fireside Stories preserve rural life in fine artistic form, and Sarah Orne Jewett remains one of the best American writers. A story like "The White Heron," where a country girl protects a bird from a city scientist, deals in an indirect and uncompromising way with the destructive tendencies of modern life. But can modern life, no matter how bad, be understood from a position somewhere off the map? Realism, at any rate, insists that it can't be.

The third and most difficult exclusion is within James's own corpus of fiction. James was a realist for a time—roughly 1876 (Roderick Hudson) to 1890 (The Tropic Muse). But he neither began nor ended as one, and the failure to see this has under-mined many investigations of American literary realism. In James's early disdainful reviews of Trollope and Rebecca Harding Davis, or his first disparaging references to Flaubert, his original antipathy to realism seems clear. He later changed his mind on the two male writers and realism, but he never abandoned a certain contempt for lowlife characters, and on the whole his realism remained conservative. It was always modified by a predisposition to picture the world as a high-minded and finely conscious person would picture it. Sometimes James would upset the high-minded view; sometimes he would endorse it. His ambivalence in this matter corresponds to the sort of ambivalence toward Europe that he dramatized in "A Passionate Pilgrim" and analyzed in his memoirs with such tender irony. His 1884 essay, "The Art of Fiction," is by no means a defense of realism (as it makes a case for Robert Louis Stevenson), but a defense of artistic freedom and an attack on all rules, orthodoxies, cliques, and schools, including the realists. The essays James wrote soon after, on Howells and Constance Fenimore Woolson, clearly anticipated his approaching repudiation of realism in the 1890s, when he wrote a number of rich interiorized fictions. These late books offer a fascinating vision of the world rather than an objective representation of it. I do not see how they can be considered realistic.

The exclusion of Mark Twain, the local colorists, and James's later novels limits the field but still leaves a large corpus of realistic fiction by James, Howells, H. H. Boyesen, E. W. Howe, Joseph Kirkland, John Hay, Henry Adams, Alice Wellington Rollins, and Constance Fenimore Woolson (one of the best of the novelists on the border between local color and realism). The most important and productive of these were clearly James and Howells.

With the field properly marked off, we can now move on to a brief analysis of some essential qualities of the American realistic novel. And first, we must supplement Wellek's definition with a more explicit recognition of the dialectical nature of realism. Wellek concluded his chapter by suggesting that "the theory of realism is ultimately bad aesthetics because all art is 'making' and is a world in itself of illusion and symbolic forms." This objection must be reckoned with, for it points out that no art can be defined simply by referring to its subject matter, even if that subject matter is objectively represented. The
proper response is to recognize that realism was not an independent genre or independent symbolic form or anything of the sort. It belonged to the mid-nineteenth-century genre of the novel, but bore in part an adversary or corrective relation to a major type of novel, women’s fiction. Women’s fiction was characterized by an idealized heroine, a strong appeal to the reader’s fantasies or day-dreams, a great deal of "domestic" social and psychological detail, and a plot based on love interest that led up to a decisive speech—"I love you." As a social institution, this genre was closely tied in to contemporary female roles and definitions of marriage. Once realism is seen as an inevitable reaction within the novel genre, the problem brought up by Wellek vanishes. The detailed verisimilitude, close social notation, analysis of motives, and unhappy endings were all part of a strategy of argument, an adversary polemic. These techniques were the only way to tell the truth about, to test, to get at, the ideal gender types, daydreams, and lies that were poisoning society and the novel. Realism was an analysis of quiet desperation. Attempting to break out, and to help their readers break out, of a suffocated, half-conscious state, Howells and James had to be circumstantial. It was the only way to make their case. Once of James’s early views, which he would never abandon, was that “when once a work of fiction may be classed as a novel, its foremost claim to merit, and indeed the measure of its merit, is its truth.”


5. My project is not to rewrite the history of American realism as a history of success but to move beyond that dichotomous judgment to explore the dynamic relationship between changing fictional and social forms in realistic representation. If realism is a fiction, we can root this fiction in its historical context to examine its ideological force. Why does the fiction of the referent become a powerful rallying cry for some, a point of contention for others, and an assumption taken for granted by still other writers at the particular historical juncture of the 1880s and 1890s? How do literary texts produce a social reality that can be recognized as “the way things are”? And what counterforces threaten to disrupt this process of recognition? How does "reality" come to be associated with depictions of brutality, sordidness, and lower-class life, and how are the same realms often cordoned off as "unreal"? Is realism part of a broader cultural effort to fix and control a coherent representation of a social reality that seems increasingly inaccessible, fragmented, and beyond control?

This book explores these questions by reexamining realism’s relation to three interrelated contexts which have remained central to the study of realism but whose complexity has been obscured by the dominance of the romance thesis: realism’s relation to social change, to the representation of class difference, and to the emergence of a mass culture. These broad contexts are given historical specificity through close analysis of the theory and practice of realism in the works of William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton, and Theodore Dreiser, authors who, each in a different way, have become critical touchstones in the debate about the viability of realism in American fiction.

This study opens with the premise that the urban-industrial transformation of nineteenth-century society did not provide a ready-made setting which the realistic novel reflects, but that these changes radically challenged the accessibility of an emergent modern world to literary representation. Realism simultaneously becomes an imperative and a problem in American fiction. It neither compensates for the absence of a complex social fabric nor records a naïve belief in the correspondence between language and the intractable material world; rather it explores and bridges the perceived gap between the social world and literary representation. Realists show a surprising lack of confidence in the capacity of fiction to reflect a solid world "out there," not because of the inherent slipperiness of signification but because of their distrust in the significance of the social. They often assume a world which lacks solidity, and the weightiness of descriptive detail—one of the most common characteristics of the realistic text—often appears in inverse proportion to a sense of insubstantiality, as though description could pin down the objects of an unfamiliar world to make it real. The realists inhabit a world in which, according to historian
Jackson Lears, "reality itself began to seem problematic, something to be sought rather than merely lived. Realistic narratives enact this search not by fleeing into the imagination or into nostalgia for a lost past but by actively constructing the coherent social world they rep- resent; and they do this not in a vacuum of fictionality but in direct confrontation with the elusive process of social change.

This realism that develops in American fiction in the 1880s and 1890s is not a seamless package of a triumphant bourgeois mythology but an anxious and contradictory mode which both articulates and combats the growing sense of unreality at the heart of middle-class life. This unreal quality comes from two major sources for the novelists in this study: intense and often violent class conflicts which produced fragmented and competing social realities, and the simultaneous development of a mass culture which dictated an equally threatening homogeneous reality. Attempting to steer a precarious course between these two developments, realists contribute to the construction of a cohesive public sphere while they at once resist and participate in the domination of a mass market as the arbiter of America's national idiom.

This study attempts to recuperate realism's relation to social change not as a static background which novels either naively record or heroically evade, but as the fore- ground of the narrative structure of each novel. For it is the sense of the world changing under the realists' pens that makes the social world so elusive to representation. Henry James articulates this dual sense of urgency and evasiveness when he writes of his return to New York in The American Scene in 1904. The enigma of the tall buildings supplants the "absent things" with the "terrible things in America," terrible by virtue of being "impudently new and still more impudently 'novel.' Restating the impossibility of realism in America, James notes the lack of a New York Zola, with "his love of the human aggregation" and more importantly the "huge reflector" of his novelistic tradition. In contrast to James's earlier view of Hawthorne's New England, however, here it is not the absence of a complex social machine but the sense he has, while watching the skyscrapers dwarf Trinity Church, that the enormity of this machine and the rapidity of its changes had outstripped the literary forms available for representing it: "the monstrous phenomena themselves, meanwhile, strike me as having, with their immense momentum, got the start, got ahead of, in proper parlance, any possibility of poetic, of dramatic capture." James articulates both a fear and a challenge underlying many realistic novels, that social "material" as he calls it is not an absence but something monstrous and threatening, and that the novelist is not in the role of reflecting but capturing, wrestling, and controlling a process of change which seems to defy representation.

Thus realism will be examined as a strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change—not just to assert a dominant power but often to assuage fears of powerlessness. The threats of social change surface double-faced in the realistic novel: they appear as the potential for revolutionary upheaval, which the narrative of A Hazard of New Fortunes, for example, works to quell; or as the corporate imposition of novelty as the status quo, the "impudently new" which The House of Mirth both counters and enacts in its narrative structure. In Sister Carrie the threat of and desire for revolutionary change are pitted against the monotony of change as the quotidian, in an unresolved conflict. American realism will be treated in these analyses in part as what Fredric Jameson has called a "strategy of containment," but realism does not totally repudiate revolutionary change by seeking to "fold every- thing which is not-being, desire, hope and transformational praxis, back into the status of nature." The realists do not naturalize the social world to make it seem immutable and organic, but, like contemporary social reformers, they engage in an enormous act of construction to organize, re-form, and control the social world.