

Realism and Anachronism

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For the most part, special issues of *Novel* feature essays that respond to the topic of one of our sponsored conferences or symposia. Sometimes, though, the board of editors finds a number of essays that have made it through the reviewing process combine to make a composite statement that in some important way exceeds the sum of its parts. Such is the occasion of this special issue. The six essays that follow appeared on our docket for final deliberation during 2018–19 and struck us as saying something new and different about the over-theorized concept of anachronism, together showing how that concept can momentarily open up within realism a number of unexpected perspectives on realism's relation to the history and theory of the novel within which the terms *novel* and *realism* become practically interchangeable.

Stefano Ercolino's broad-brush historical account of nineteenth-century realism insists that to formulate the literary historical trajectory that proceeds from the novels of Charles Dickens and Honoré de Balzac straight to literary modernism, one would have to ignore what Ercolino calls "the speculative turn." By this, he has in mind the poetic means by which the *fin de siècle* novel counters the linear narrative of mainstream social realism. When put this way, it seems so obvious that Oscar Wilde, H. G. Wells, Walter Pater, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, and Joseph Conrad, among others, devoted considerable creative ingenuity to reversing the progressive order of time so that these novels divided the tradition of realism against itself. Kristen Starkowski contends that even before that turn, novelists developed a subject-free discourse of magical thinking designed to challenge realism's signature claim that social progress was wed to an economy that mindlessly selected the fittest to survive. Dickens's minor characters make themselves memorable, in her view, as they challenge the presumption that such a competitive force field *also* determines who can qualify as a major character in the general jostling for space on the page. Although they succeed in capturing only small bits of the reader's attention, she argues, any number of such minor characters go the embattled protagonist one better. Observing something like Erving Goffman's principle that "disengagement" can actually amount to a form of political engagement, some of these characters "turn away" decisively from the rat race. To survive, they reject competition and offer themselves as necessary parts of eccentric social configurations tucked away at the periphery of Dickens's novels, where we would never see them had Dickens not granted each such household its curious singularity.

Laura Strout performs an anachronistic reading of the relation of realism to modernism that looks backward from the perspective of the empty rooms in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) to the empty rooms of Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853). Empowered by the Dickensian imagination, its former inhabitants, though now in the family crypt, nevertheless fill the dusty and vacated rooms of Chesney Wold with the clamor of privileged lives once full of possibility. Lest the

everyday of another epoch disappear into the vortex of war,¹ as it does in Woolf's novels, the empty rooms of *Bleak House* operate like white holes to pull living time from within themselves and return it to the present moment. The incompatibility of such inversions of time with the speed of a modernizing process bent on displacing that past momentarily turns the time of capitalism inside out, flooding a world of deserted objects with the qualities of those who lived in relation to them. Maia McAleavey's study of once hugely popular Victorian family chronicles like Charlotte Mary Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* (1856) or Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868–69) shows this popular genre doing something quite similar at the level of narrative form. Where such novels as *Jane Eyre* (1847), *David Copperfield* (1850), and *Jude the Obscure* (1894–95) came up with interesting ways of paring the family unit down to the married couple and perhaps one or two of their offspring, the Victorian family chronicle boasted a household closer to those in which Jane Austen famously played out multiple-sibling marriage plots. Give her domestic configuration an urban setting and an increasingly unstable domestic economy, and any number of those siblings would certainly perish wherever the family chronicle did not turn the parlor clock back by several decades. By doing so, the family chronicle put front and center the miniature welfare state that Dickens allows to flourish only in the peripheral spaces of the industrial city. Contrastingly normative in all other respects than the numbers for whom they must provide, by contrast, Yonge's and Alcott's households look beyond the welfare state to the neoliberal household that dismantled the welfare state a century later—say, in the Gilbreths' *Cheaper by the Dozen* (1948). Together, the first four essays in this special issue invite us to see the familiar trope of exhumation that identifies everything Victorian, from the archeological plundering of antiquities to the discovery of the unconscious as the means of anachronistically experiencing the visceral feelings that certain objects elicited from the people who once lived among them.

Appearing at the turn of the century, neither Sarah Orne Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) nor Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence* (1920) uses anachronism in the interests of a more capacious realism. Quite the reverse, Gabriel Mehlman and John Sampson show how two quite different but equally detailed strains of literary realism develop techniques that aesthetically euthanize the enchantments, respectively, of rural life in picturesque New England and of courtship practices among the elite of Old New York. The anticipated gratifications of each way of life prove devastatingly artificial, as these novels expose the economic precarity that made it necessary to subordinate both pleasure and sexual desire to the principles

¹ John Ruskin's lecture "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century" (1884) is perhaps the best-known piece of nineteenth-century "environmental" writing today, but my guess, based on the similarity between his description of the "plague-cloud" and Bram Stoker's description of Dracula's arrival in England (1897), is that the figure of the storm clouds over England is meant to infuse the narrative of scientific progress with the sense that something has gone terribly wrong. "I leave you," he says, "to compare at leisure the physical result of your own wars and prophecies, as declared by your own elect journal not fourteen days ago,—that the Empire of England, on which formerly the sun never set, has become one on which he never rises. . . . You may not be able to say to the winds, 'Peace; be still,' but you can cease from the insolence of your own lips, and the troubling of your own passions."

of the marketplace. Realism's turn against the very qualities of daily life that had been its bread and butter coincides with the speculative turn in the history of the novel that Ercolino identifies. Mehlman explains Jewett's use of local color as a means of arresting the destruction of an earlier New England in the process of being gobbled up by the tourist industry. Sampson suggests that Wharton does something similar by situating the Metropolitan Museum of Art in an earlier New York when marriage among the elite would certainly have been regulated by old money. By embedding this moment of modernism within traditional realism, Wharton also makes it clear that what happens in a museum that is yet to be built will stay in that museum even after it is built: what the protagonists experience there can never be more than a spontaneous glimpse of sexual freedom within the framework of economic necessity.

If what Roland Barthes meant by "the reality effect" does in fact depend on such untimely moments, then so does the novel's ability to afford readers a critical perspective on their times. The difference is that the two perspectives depend on different forms of anachronism. The anachronism that creates a critical perspective goes back at least to the 1870s. In his *Untimely Meditations*, Friedrich Nietzsche pointed out that if a written work were in fashion, then it was merely fashionable. No piece of writing could offer a critical perspective on its moment, not if the writer failed to reflect back on the present from the future and so anticipated his or her moment from the past. Georg Lukács brought Nietzsche's principle to bear on the historical novel when he identified the relocation of the present in the past as the move that gave the novelist a grasp of the whole, enabling an objective understanding of his moment. Appearing within a year of his *Historical Novel* (1955), one of the essays in Lukács's *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* offers perhaps his clearest statement as to why this particular anachronism is so necessary: "Objectively," as he puts it, "perspective points to the main movements in a given historical process," while, subjectively, a writer's perspective expresses itself in "the selection and subtraction he undertakes in response to the teleological pattern of his own life." For lack of either of these elements, "the novel will lack the historical perspective—or ability to look at its own moment as the *future anterior*—that enables the dialectical leap from the profound inwardness of subjectivity to the objectivity of social and historical reality" (55; emphasis added).

What tends to slip through the crack in this split perspective is the capacity of domestic life to make time stand still. For it is to the household, it seems to me, that realism delegates responsibility for conserving those objects and routines that had over generations elicited sensations in and responses from the inhabitants who once simply took them for granted, a form of cultural memory that exceeds the limit of individual memory. Starkowski, Strout, and McAleavey identify three important techniques that transformed domestic interiors into untimely spaces nested within a nation undergoing industrialization. Each such space counters the relentless translation of things and people into a language based on economic value and, in doing so, not only counters realism but also enhances the reality effect. By no coincidence, the novel intensified this counterargument at the very moment when, in Lukács's view, description supplanted narration in the historical novel,

eliminating the possibility that either novel or readers might arrive at a perspective outside their moment where they might grasp it whole.

Within these untimely interiors, however, the very objects and routine practices that prevent narration from achieving such a critical perspective display the sensations and responses of those individuals who used to live in relation to them. As in life, so in literature, houses can, if so curated, provide a material afterlife for those who once saw, touched, heard, tasted, or smelled them. Each of the obligatory junk shops in Dickens's novels gives us a critical fix on an economy that not only wastes the lives whose remnants accumulate there but also puts those remnants back into circulation.² The empty rooms, curiously furnished interiors, and surplus children they house provide the Victorian novelist with a historical record of an entire way of life obliterated by the master narrative of progress. In this way, novels pay curious homage to many small and often banal acts of care—acts that repurpose useless and discarded things and reconfigure them for readers' enjoyment. Turning to the family chronicle, we see this same feeling work its magic by dividing the proverbial fish and loaves and so multiply the limited resources of an overpopulated household. Realism, for all its attention to the objectivity of things and people, goes to great lengths to grant these small acts of care sufficient power to reverse the logic of the commodity fetishism.

Dickens and his contemporaries understood, as did Marx in his "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret" in *Das Kapital* (1867), that as commodity production converted their individual efforts and needs into abstract social value, the product acquired a curiously demonic power over its makers and consumers. But let that same object be repurposed for the household by a woman of refined feelings and taste appropriate to her husband's wages, and the same novelists would be likely to transform that economic value into the quality of feeling evocative of "home." If fiction can indeed recuperate the human qualities that were tethered to economic quantity, then fiction should in theory be able to rehumanize the reading public of industrial England one household at a time—or so Dickens seemed to have thought. That even a novel like *Jude the Obscure* had to call on the promise of home as compensation for the lack of material gratification that Hardy grants the laborer should tell us how few Victorian novels did not resort to such magic—even though it was bound to go bad. Is it not just this allure that withers and disappears under the self-reflexive gaze characterizing both modernism and the formalist method of reading? Like Wharton and Jewett a decade or two before, Woolf and Proust extract aesthetic sensations from everyday things and practices in order to consign them to a rarified domain of individual imagination, whose magical thinking those things and practices have come to objectify. If Ercolino and Mehlman are right, then well before Woolf, Proust, and Wharton wrote their major novels, the novel was already redefining its task as one of detaching an aesthetic response to sensations from the emotions maintaining the everyday.

In his recent *The Antinomies of Realism*, Fredric Jameson translates the stylistic antinomies of realism articulated most pointedly in Lukács's "Narrate or Describe?"

² For a theoretical explanation of the house as public institution in this sense, see Derrida's meditation on "Freud's last house" (3).

into an opposition between the inchoate responses of the bourgeois body and the Enlightenment system of the emotions. Jameson identifies the emergence of realism with the capture and redirection of those feelings toward the production and consumption of commodities and explains why the emergence of realism is the beginning of its end. These “nameless bodily states,” as he calls them, periodically compete with and overwhelm “the system of named emotions” that separate human responses from objects that elicit those feelings. The present moment in the novel’s history is, in Jameson’s view, one where the novel allows the free-floating and apparently subject-free force he calls “affect” to eliminate the tension between subject and object and submerge past, present, and future in a boundless present.

Jacques Rancière wants to credit Gustave Flaubert for anticipating this move when he brought certain “rules of appropriateness” to bear on realism. As his narrator’s irony shifts the process of reading “from the deciphering of signs to the seizing of intensities,” *Madame Bovary* also turns the descriptive excesses of realism into an instrument for punishing the heroine (*Politics* 24). In curtailing her indiscriminate appetite for objects, the novel also distinguishes the author’s sensibility from “the ordinary world of opinion management” (*Politics* 29). Thus in this as in his other novels, Flaubert established “rules of appropriateness” (*Politics* 15) privileging techniques that made words as much a barrier as an intermediary between writer and readers. This introduced a form of inequality between those readers whom Rancière characterizes as seizers of intensities as opposed to consumers of meaning, an account of literature as a modern invention that depends on understanding of anachronism as a rhetorical figure.

In “The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian’s Truth,” he considers why Lucien Febvre should have so vehemently insisted that his fellow historians “avoid the worst of all sins, the sin that cannot be forgiven—anachronism” (21). Anachronism, as generally understood, was anathema to historians because its sine qua non “consists of putting a fact too early” (22). To see this mistake in action, Rancière suggests that we might look at the moment in which Wharton has the perspective of *The Age of Innocence* momentarily converge with Emma Goldman’s view that love has nothing to do with marriage and so operates as an anarchic force whenever a society requires them to be the same. In addition to this kind of mistake in temporal sequencing, or what happens next, anachronism, in Febvre’s view, could also be a mistake “in a vertical order that connects time to what is above it” (23). This mistake would occur if the sexual freedom of a later epoch had succeeded in disrupting the generational succession of the wealthy Dutch families of Old New York. In opening up this possibility, Wharton made a mistake, not of dates, but of epochs that “mark instead specific regimes of truth” (24). Wharton’s novel hews to the time of realism, which substitutes *causes* and *effects* for the simple *before* and *after* of events, but the novel does so in a way that alerts its readers to a vertical system of time periods that Rancière describes as “time coagulated into epochs” (24).

Like *The Age of Innocence*, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* affords the reader a glimpse of the present as an epochal shift that is overtaking the novel’s subject matter and fast rendering it obsolete. Jewett’s novel also pushes back against moneyed interests in the name of natural beauty by relegating that beauty to the world of art with a sadness that condemns the discourse of prosperity for

promoting the small-town rural life as a retreat for middle-class vacationers. Like *Madame Bovary*, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* exposes the lethal consequences of what Rancière identifies as “the frightening incarnation of the ‘democratic’ appetite” (*Politics* 53). Notwithstanding the angry undertow one senses in her description, it is not in retaliation so much as to conserve the beauty of the landscape that Jewett kills off her novel’s subject matter and prevents the sensations stirred up by the novel from being packaged and sold to urban consumers.

The artificially revived object on which indeed all the essays in this special issue converge takes shape at the point where novels touch readers in a way that necessarily precedes and to some degree compromises a critical perspective that tempts us to side with the past against a present whose human qualities have yet to be adequately named and managed by public opinion. What these essays consequently probe is not the secret of description’s considerable and enduring appeal, although they certainly do that, so much as the power of anachronism to retrieve the human presence at once displaced by and stored in the restless subject matter of realism.

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