

CAN REALISM SPEAK OF AFFECT? FORCES OF EMOTIONAL ALTERITY IN REALIST MODES

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1. Whether we consider the notion, in the sense of Peter Brooks, as a conceptual “constant” transcending its specific historical incarnations¹, or as the codified “movements” of the nineteenth century², literary realism, as both transhistorical impulse and historicised form, has been a favourite target of modern theoretical attack. From Theodor Adorno’s accusations of political reactionism, to Roland Barthes’ undermining of a realist “plénitude référentielle”³, realism’s pretensions to totality, transparency and omniscience, received starkly bad press throughout the development of Russian and French Formalisms, heightening with Post-structuralist and Deconstructionist critiques. Though the causes of such opprobrium are manifold, these negative appraisals often focus on the perceived realist tendency to limit and control the representative and diegetic possibilities of literary texts. Literary realism is seen to ignore, or at least circumvent, those aspects of experience which, because of their alterity and heterodoxy, refuse to be integrated into a stable textual apparatus, and thus resist typical realist values such as formal cohesion, objectivity, totality, and epistemological inclusion (omniscience).
2. Such critiques frequently centre on the question: what do realist modes hide in the midst of their pretension to show? This concern is partly socio-political in nature: even when dealing with socially marginalised content, literary realism, by its very diegetic codes, is understood to implicitly reinforce the dominance of a political (and most often bourgeois) status quo. It is also theoretical

1 See Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision*.

2 The paradigm’s emergence in its modern form is of course highly debated, with critics often seeing it as a fundamental motor at the novel’s inception. For a well-known exploration of this position, and the link of realism’s origins with European socio-economic conditions as early as Richardson and Defoe, see Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. This more general binary – realism as a historical moment or movement, and realism as a representative impulse transcending its programmatic nineteenth-century modes – was already a trope in standard mid-twentieth century definitions of the term. Cf. for instance M.H. Abrams, “Realism and Naturalism”: “Realism is used by literary critics in two chief ways: (1) to identify a literary movement of the nineteenth century, especially in prose fiction (beginning with Balzac in France, George Eliot in England, and William Dean Howells in America); and (2) to designate a recurrent mode, in various eras, of representing human life and experience in literature, which was especially exemplified by the writers of this historical movement.”

3 For a detailed discussion of these various critiques, see Geoffrey Baker, “Introduction”, *Realism’s Others*.

and formal: realist textual devices are believed to tend towards the constraining of semantics within a self-contained referential field. In their pretension to express the totality and universality of experience in an objective or neutral discourse, realist modes are thus reputed to advocate, albeit unwillingly, a naïve lack of authorial and critical distancing (Flaubert's infamous: "L'artiste doit être dans son œuvre comme Dieu dans la création, invisible et tout-puissant ; qu'on le sente partout, mais qu'on ne le voie pas"⁴).

3. Alongside such critiques, and concomitant with realism's supposed persistence as literary modernity's "dominant" narrative form, arises the aporia of a theoretical tradition which, on the contrary, has frequently lauded oppositional counter-attacks. In an institutional context, the nature and extent of realism's "dominance" has been rendered fragile, especially given the ironic institutionalisation of a variety of explicitly anti-realist campaigns. Literary Modernism undoubtedly provides the most well-known example of this paradox, with acts of Modernist rebellion given pride of place in the halls of a modern Academy wherein Virginia Woolf has come to be read and critiqued far more than Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy⁵.

4. Against this heritage, many modern "defences of realism" have of course been articulated, of which Geoffrey Baker, in his useful historical summary, mentions (among others) George Levine's *The Realistic Imagination*, Raymond Tallis's *In Defence of Realism*, Katherine Kearns's *Nineteenth-Century Literary Realism*, or Lilian Furst's *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction*.⁶ Furst, for instance, working from within a Deconstructivist approach, attempts, as Baker puts it, "to rescue realism from its apparent simplicity" by arguing that it "cannot really be monological, since everything textual is of at least two minds when examined deconstructively"⁷. Not only are such recent texts less influential, however, than more hostile Structuralist and Post-structuralist critiques, they generally occupy a defensive outpost, reading realism against the grain of its detractors in order to prove that it is in fact more ambiguous, polysemous, and politically heterodoxical than it has often been deemed. Even when this added complexity is proved, and in spite of realism's supposed "dominance" among readers, the impoverished reputation of the notion among theorists has founded a lineage in which "the unconscious, the foreign, the supernatural—are declared 'other' to realist narrative" (Baker, x).

4 Gustave Flaubert quoted in Thierry Poyet, *Madame Bovary, le roman des lettres*, 27.

5 See Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction".

6 See *Works Cited*.

7 Geoffrey Baker, "Introduction", *Realism's Others*, xi.

5. It is concerning this specific question of realism's relationship with otherness that the term "affect" – the centre of our present inquiry – enters the conceptual fray. We may perhaps epitomise Geoffrey Baker's three excluded terms by a more general category: that is, what is perceived as "other" to literary realism is any object which fundamentally escapes its epistemology, which either cannot be integrated, or only with extreme difficulty, into the formal totality of realist processes⁸.

Affect Beyond Emotionality: Plays of Extra-Subjective Force

6. Given that, in the contemporary context of the so-called "affective turn," affect is most frequently understood as that which precisely describes such unconscious, uncontrollable, and unknowable forces, the question of realist modes' relation to affect must be posed. In the wake of prominent affect theorists such as Brian Massumi, an epistemological deficit is precisely what distinguishes "affect" from "emotion" as a distinct category. Though emotion may be seen to refer to subjectively anchored states of feeling, which nevertheless remain profoundly proteiform, mutable and ambiguous, the subject is nevertheless able to identify such emotional states and associate them with a range of socially identifiable categories of sense. Affect however, as disembodied, extra-subjective emotional intensity, presents an even more radical epistemological trial:

Affect is most often used loosely as a synonym for emotion. But ... emotion and affect – if affect is intensity – follow different logics and pertain to different orders. An emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized. It is crucial to theorize the difference between affect and emotion. If some have the impression that it has waned, it is because affect is unqualified. As such, it is not ownable or recognizable, and is thus resistant to critique.⁹

It is this fundamental epistemological divide which separates the two terms, and which precludes their confusion as synonyms. Of course, the moving ripples of emotion and affect ceaselessly

8 This is in line, moreover, with Frederic Jameson's contention that "realism is essentially an epistemological category framed and staged in aesthetic terms." Rather than seeing this as a disadvantage, however, Jameson posits that we are faced here with "a contradiction which can, however, be reformulated in a productive way, as a tension to be solved and resolved over and over again, in a series of fresh innovations." See "A Note on Literary Realism in Conclusion", 261.

9 Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect", 88.

coalesce: affect becomes temporarily “anchored” in subjects, fixed by social categories of experience, qualified by value, and in turns enters an emotional realm. Affect as intensity, force or movement (or more literally, in the heritage of Spinoza, *that which moves*) never ceases to give rise to recognisable emotional states. To give just one example of this fluid movement in literary-critical terms: in the context of nineteenth-century realism, the term “hysteria” may describe a range of identifiable emotional phenomena, but the gamut of forces at play in its prior causation, and subsequent proliferation, fundamentally escape the awareness or understanding of characters, narrators, and readers themselves. It is this extra-axiological, extra-semantic, extra-subjective range of forces which constitute the extent of a literary text’s *affective breadth*¹⁰. As Seigworth and Greg put it:

Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability. Indeed, affect is persistent proof of a body’s never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations.¹¹

In other words: affect always passes *through*. Emotions, at least for a moment, may remain subjectively assimilated within characters, narrators, authors or their functions – but affect describes the veritable force-field of intensities which ceaselessly pass from one subject-in-formation to the next.

Affect as Alterity: Literary Realism’s Epistemological Divide

7. What then of literary realism? Ironically, in the specific context of its nineteenth-century theorisations, realism may not seem uncomfortable with this exclusion of affect from what it seeks to represent and tell. After all, this hypothetical “absence” of affect is an important aspect of the nineteenth-century realist myth: that of the impersonal, objective narrator, most famously crystallised by Flaubert’s problematic (and perhaps overly famous) claims of authorial distancing

¹⁰ Affect thus appears, as Johnston puts it, as “both a pre-judgmental orientation towards the world, and occurrent ‘crystallizations’ of this orientation, understood as pre-predicative or pre-judgmental disclosures of sensuous values”. Mark Johnston, “The Authority of Affect”, 182.

¹¹ Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Greg, *The Affect Theory Reader*, 1-2.

from narrative events:

Madame Bovary n'a rien de vrai. C'est une histoire totalement inventée ; je n'y ai rien mis ni de mes sentiments ni de mon existence. L'illusion (s'il y en a une) vient au contraire de l'impersonnalité de l'œuvre. C'est un de mes principes, qu'il ne faut pas s'écrire.¹²

Importantly however, such a claim – that, as Flaubert goes on to say in a revealing condensation, “l'Art doit s'élever au-dessus des affections personnelles et des susceptibilités nerveuses” – does not mean that *Madame Bovary* does not “speak of” affect, but rather that affect is considered, from an authorial point of view, as consciously alien to realist authorial *process*¹³. In other words: though it may find various forms of textual incarnation, affect can never be a part of a realist author's conscious intentions, for the reason that it is precisely *pre-intentional*, or better *extra-intentional*, intervening at a point before (or beyond) authorial cognizance and control.

8. The representation of *emotions* may be an appropriate (if problematic) aim for the realist author's goals of scientific objectivity and neutrality; but *affect* is precisely never neutral – not because “nothing is neutral”, in a clichéd postmodern sense, but, far more radically, because affect is *outside of* value, a force not yet fully judged by the axiological criteria of the self. Emotions necessarily have values attributed to them by the feeling subjects in whom they take form: but affect is in some sense extra-axiological, extra-subjective, and thus cannot be neutral for the reason that its neutrality is not yet a question to be posed.

Can Realism Speak of Affect?

9. Can realism thus speak of affect? The question itself may at first appear surprising: why, after all, should the codes and tropes of a specific literary tradition, form or mode – leaving in suspense this thorny designation – necessarily prevent the exploration of an entire aspect of subjective life? The interrogation takes on greater meaning if we understand the notion of affect according to the acceptation outlined above, framed in even more radical terms in the libidinal philosophy of Jean-François Lyotard¹⁴, which poses affect as that part of conscious experience which ceaselessly

¹² Gustave Flaubert quoted in Thierry Poyet, *Madame Bovary, le roman des lettres*, 27.

¹³ Gustave Flaubert quoted in Thierry Poyet, *Madame Bovary, le roman des lettres*, 27. We must not forget of course that Flaubert addresses these lines to a reader in an epistolary context, and their pragmatic, programmatic aspect must be kept in mind.

¹⁴ See Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure ; Le Différend ; Des dispositifs pulsionnels*.

escapes the awareness of the feeling subject. In these versions of the concept, affect not only resists outward presentation in the form of language or descriptive signs, but escapes representation of the self *to itself*. The feeling subject is not only unable to express or describe such affect to others – for it is, by definition, outside of any representative impulse – it is unable to represent it to itself even at the initial level of conscious awareness.

10. What happens then if we are to apply this modern comprehension of affect – as that which, as Brian Massumi puts it, is “not ownable or recognizable”¹⁵ – to the functioning of literary realist modes? The question needs be raised for the reason that realist narrators often seek to create precisely the impression that they *recognize* and *know*: that they are in fact able to name, identify, and narrate a vast range of affective propensities of characters and their world. Even more crucially: in seeking not to foreground moments of rupture and incoherence, this harmony is frequently the foundation upon which realist structures of omniscience and formal coherency are built.
11. Does the very fact that one seeks to better “speak of”, or incarnate, affect in literary form immediately imply then the adoption of a consciously anti-realist mode? A mode which, in contrast to rhetorical control and constriction, would make itself more flexible, more inclusive, more self-referential (thus more self-contradictory, allowing for breakage and spillage) than established realist codes?
12. In literary-historical-terms, a curious parallel is created between, on the one hand, realism as a perceived “dominant” literary mode, but which fails to take into account that which is heterodoxical or refractory in emotional experience, and on the other, affect as precisely the ensemble of this heterodoxical or refractory material itself. Does realism seek always to *recognize* and to *own* – to incarnate emotionality within subjects or subjective states? If affect describes that which “is not ownable or recognizable”, and realism precisely seeks to gloss over, to render more stable and uniform, this uncontrollable magma of affective force, then must realist modes be ruptured in order to allow a repressed affect to surge forth? More explicitly: do Modernist, Post-modernist, and various other anti-realist insurgents thus seek to transform what is “emotional” in literary realism (that is: what is incarnated, subjective, and, at least on a projected epistemological horizon, *able to be understood*) into affect as a play of competing force?

15 Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect”, 88.

Outside of Language? On the Unrepresentability of Affect

13. Each of these questions encounters however a larger paradox: namely, the hypothetical impossibility of all language, any language, to articulate affect, and not merely a specific, hypothetically more constrictive form. As Eric Shouse observes:

Affect cannot be fully realised in language [...] because affect is always prior to and/or outside consciousness [...] Affect is the body's way of preparing itself for action in a given circumstance by adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience. The body has a grammar of its own that cannot be fully captured in language.¹⁶

“Fully realised” should not be taken though to mean “not realised in any way at all.” Nor does it imply that literary texts cannot point towards that which is beyond their scope: they can make felt, in the heart of their unfolding, an unsayable affective absence – Lyotard's affect as “inarticulate phrase” – which remains fundamentally beyond their grasp.

14. This problem is perhaps simply exemplified then in realist traditions which attempt to convince us of their far-reaching capacities to *say*. We may take, for instance, the question of representation: if affect is commensurable with the unrepresentable, how may it ever be represented a second time, so to speak, outside of consciousness, within the confines of a literary text? Not only does the subject not know parts of itself, but it is unable to fully recognise which parts in particular it does not know. According to this tradition, affect is fundamentally related to the subject's own alienation with regard to itself. In a literary context, it would necessarily be related to the alienation of a scriptor who does not fully know its own processes – a limitation which intervenes well before the restricted knowledge of an invented narrator, which serves the role of an expressive guise.

15. This problem takes on a specific colouration in the context of a realist tradition intimately tied to this representative (if not necessarily mimetic) impulse. Realist literature intervenes at a problematic junction: namely at the point where the representation of affect becomes both inevitable and necessary, at least for a formal tradition historically committed to this idea. The problem is not simply whether realist literary modes can represent the unrepresentable (or in this case, affect as the supreme mode of unrepresentability). Ron Katawan expresses the complexity of this question with relation to Jean-François Lyotard:

It is crucial to realize that the affect must not be understood as an encounter with a transcendent, inexpressible reality, or with a thing-in-itself that falls irretrievably outside of the boundaries of our

¹⁶ Eric Shouse, “Feeling, Emotion, Affect”, also quoted in Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique”, 435.

experience. For that would lead us back to the incoherent idea of the representation of the unrepresentable, or the knowledge of the unknowable. Lyotard's theory of phrases is meant precisely to provide a description of experience that goes beyond the oppositions of representation-thing, phenomenon-noumenon, and language-reality. These dichotomies are now replaced by the tension between an experience that is determined by rules and its anarchic disruption. This new opposition ought not to be regarded as an attempt to establish two independent and unrelated realms of experience. Rather, to the extent that it is a disruption of discourse, the affect can only manifest itself within the realm of that which it disrupts.¹⁷

16. If affect, and not merely for Massumi and Lyotard, is thus fundamentally a disruption of discourse, how can it effectively exist within realist modes that often tend towards harmonizing or glossing over disruptions, favouring the creation of a greater unity of narrative, character, and sense? This may seem an important problem for the reason that realist modes tend to minimise narrative and representative disruption, valuing formal coherency and the stability of certain diegetic codes. Among these, we may mention the frequent recourse to omniscient narrators, or the supposed transparency of characters' inner emotional states. In contrast to the early picaresque tradition of the novel in Cervantes or Sterne, high realist modes from the nineteenth-century display markedly less tendency to ironise or play with such textual devices. Narrative omniscience is thus treated with far less distancing in Tolstoy or Balzac for instance, and disruptions are minimised rather than highlighted, or pointed to in self-referential play.

17. It is thus not only a problem of representing the unrepresentable, but of affect as that which always necessarily perturbs established processes of representation itself – so much so that this latter notion ceases to retain its prior, more stable meanings. In signalling that part of uncontrollability and unknowability in emotional life – and textuality's limitations regarding this epistemological blank – affect, we may suspect, will always work against the pretension to stability and omniscience of all aesthetic modes, and not merely those which purportedly aspire to realist omniscience. It will always by definition seek to undo texts' illusory claims to totality, and their propensities towards absolute understanding (however rhetorical this claim may be). It will not simply establish new formal rules for such a text, but will necessarily disrupt *any* formal rule which the text internally forges for itself.

18. Affect may sometimes seem then to have no limit. For what is the limit to what we do not know? Is not this border forever expanding, as soon as we take the time to carefully examine the

17 Ron Katwan, "The Affect in the Work of Jean-François Lyotard".

unstable impression of epistemological stability? As Massumi observes:

As unbounded 'regions' in an equally unbounded affective field, [affects] are in contact with the whole universe of affective potential, as by action at a distance. Thus they have no outside, even though they are differentiated according to which potentials are most apt to be expressed (effectively induced) as their 'region' passes into actuality. Their passing into actuality is the key. Affect is the whole world: from the precise angle of its differential emergence.¹⁸

We may think that this question is only raised if we take affect in this specific acceptation: namely, the libidinal forces underlying all interactions, both inside and outside of the self. According to its diverse definitions, however, affect always speaks of that which is beyond the knowledge and understanding of subjects. The problem is merely exemplified and intensified in the case of such theorists as Lyotard and Massumi, for the reason that affect is not limited to language, meaning, or even the feeling self, but overflows these borders, describing the ever-moving forces of an agonistic world.

Empathy Is Not An Affect: Alienation and Identification in Realist Terms

19. The controversy may appear more clearly if we examine a staple notion of realist technique, which moreover describes a frequent effect aimed at by realist texts: that of *empathy*, or at the very least, *emotional identification*. Here again, affect may at first seem at odds with realist process. Emotions may very well be integrated into a vision of literature as relying on empathetic equivalence, but as Massumi puts it, affect “is not about empathy or emotive identification, or any form of identification for that matter”¹⁹. Affect does not “care about” identification for the reason that it is *beyond* it: it exists in a realm where the notions of emotional adequation, or even “understanding”, are simply not possible, due to the absolute singularity – or at least extreme particularity – of the affective forces which traverse the scriptural subject and its texts.

20. According to this idea, as soon as we may “identify with” an affect, as soon as we may “feel empathy” for it or for its effects, it has ceased to be *affective* and has become *emotive*: incarnated within a distinct but recognisable identity – one which suffers, observes the sufferings of others, and feels *for* them, *with* them, adopting congruent modes.

21. This may make of affect a fundamentally alien and alienating principle; and ironically, it is precisely the inability of realism to incorporate the alien which has so often made it the object of theoretical attack. That which is alien is perhaps by definition *disruptive*: disruptive of a textual and

18 Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect”, 105.

19 Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect”, 102.

formal order, and of a totalising narrative's diegetic control. The well-established traditions outlined above frequently attack realism as a limited tradition, unable to encompass the full range of "disruptive" experience. Such disruption is conceived on a social level – realism's tendency to reinforce accepted values, in spite of appearances – as well as phenomenological (the "flux" of consciousness rendered "falsely" ordered by linear narrative arcs). It is an integral part of the modern reaction against nineteenth-century realist traditions, including Theodor Adorno's well-known attack:

Newspapers and magazines of the radical Right constantly stir up indignation against what is unnatural, over-intellectual, morbid and decadent: they know their readers. The insights of social psychology into the authoritarian personality confirm them. The basic features of this type include conformism, respect for a petrified façade of opinion and society, and resistance to impulses that disturb its order or evoke inner elements of the unconscious that cannot be admitted. This hostility to anything alien or alienating can accommodate itself much more easily to literary realism of any provenance, even if it proclaims itself critical or socialist, than to works which swear allegiance to no political slogans, but whose mere guise is enough to disrupt the whole system of rigid coordinates that governs authoritarian personalities.²⁰

Adorno postulates a rigidity and conformity inherent in realist modes themselves. In doing so, he situates realism in a primarily political dimension; the critique here is of the long-held assumption, perhaps attaining its apogee in the Naturalism of a Zola, that the realist representation of proletarian, middle-class, "quotidian" or "everyday" struggles, constitutes its primary political claim. This might be contrasted with the association of affect as a fundamentally heterodoxical, even revolutionary construct, evident for instance in Antonio Negri's coining of a "value-affect" in political economy:

Our social life, not to mention our productive life, is submerged by the impotence of action, by the frustration of not creating, and by the castration of our normal imagination. Where does this come from? From an enemy. If for the enemy measuring value is impossible, for the producer of value the very existence of a measurer of value is unreal. On the basis of affect, the enemy must be destroyed. Whereas affect (production, value, subjectivity) is indestructible.²¹

22. Realism's supposed phobia of that which is "alien or alienating," to use Adorno's terms, takes on a distinct colouration in the context of affect itself. As stated, affect is in many ways inherently "alienating" in that it implies the subject's division, whether partial or total, from a simple or direct

20 Theodor Adorno quoted in Geoffrey Baker, "Introduction", *Realism's Others*, ix.

21 Antonio Negri, "Value and Affect", 88.

embodiment within corporality: from a harmonious or transparent relationship with the body, the latter simply reflecting or expressing inner emotional states in a hierarchical, arborescent, causal way. Given the tendency of affect to establish complex feedback loops – wherein the individual subject analyses and reacts to his or own unknown desires and affective states in the very midst of their unfolding, substantially modifying both their quality and form – we may think that the ideal literary mode to represent and incarnate affective mitigation would be one which is itself solipsistic and self-aware. An archly self-conscious first-person narrator, who ceaselessly demonstrates his awareness of his own internal divisions with regard to himself – the fact he is aware that he is *not* his body, not his mind, not even “himself” – may initially seem to give a better portrait of a range of affective intensities which lie forever beyond the subject’s awareness and control.

Disrupting a Lack of Disruption: On the Ironic Pretension to Clarity

23. So much for the prosecution’s arguments against realist modes. We must be careful however not to oversimplify literary realism’s lack of self-awareness, nor fail to problematize its own (frequently ironic) pretensions to clarity. Such pretensions are often just that: *pretensions*, in the sense of theatricalised positions which are not meant to be taken as either literal or complete. They are in some sense rhetorical, metaphorical, or at least symbolic: realist narrators pretend to a certain knowledge and insight, all the while leaving in a state of utter suspension that which gives them the ability to encompass the full diversity of the events and emotions being described.
24. Realist texts may appear less “disrupted”; but this apparent “lack” of disruption is ironically a quality of all texts, which ceaselessly seek to hide the internal process of their own making. Disruption is not specific to affect, but may be seen as a fundamental quality of textuality itself. As Derrida puts it in his well-known opening remarks to “La Pharmacie de Platon”:

Un texte n’est un texte que s’il cache au premier regard, au premier venu, la loi de sa composition et la règle de son jeu. Un texte reste d’ailleurs toujours imperceptible. La loi et la règle ne s’abritent pas dans l’inaccessible d’un secret, simplement elles ne se livrent jamais, au présent, à rien qu’on puisse rigoureusement nommer une perception. Au risque toujours et par essence de se perdre ainsi définitivement. Qui saura jamais telle disparition ?²²

Derrida underlines the part of unknowability, fragmentation, imperceptibility and lack of finitude

22 Jacques Derrida, “La Pharmacie de Platon,” *La Dissémination*, 79.

which define textuality itself. Texts “disappear” in the process of their own making. This disappearance itself, however, is invisible: it does not manifest itself at the moment of its unfolding, “*au présent*”, but is only visible by way of a subsequent hypothetical reconstitution, which is temporally and analytically abstracted from our moment of meeting with the text. The rules which govern the textual object do not exist then on the same plane of temporality: the temporality of our initial perception (reading *through*).

25. While it is true that realist modes do not point explicitly to this disappearance, and even attempt to explicitly hide it, it is not clear that they hide them “more” or “better” than narrative texts which “reject” the supposed complacency or conservatism of realist modes. Realism simply frames itself, in a highly theatrically way, as a more stable form, tradition, and mode – though this is, as stated earlier, an integral part of its myth.

26. This does not mean that realist texts are any less inadequate as vessels of passing affective force. On the contrary: affect is not merely exemplary of this quality of textual processes to dissimulate their own rules – it is an *extension* of it into a realm where affect is irremediably present, whether it happens to be “disruptive” or not. An eloquent example is provided by a standard realist technique such as free indirect discourse. Existing in a fluid space between narrator and character, omniscience and a partial knowledge of the world, free indirect style is a veritable conduit of affect’s incessant movement and perspectival change, all the while craftily dissimulating its debt to affective intensity’s unruly flow. As James Wood remarks about the self-referential nature of this high realist technique:

Thanks to free indirect style, we see things through the character’s eyes and language but also through the author’s eyes and language, too. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once. A gap opens up between author and character, and the bridge – which is free indirect style itself – between them simultaneously closes that gap and draws attention to its distance.²³

In case we were wont to see this as somehow less disruptive than conspicuously self-referential texts, Wood underlines the extent to which such a process engenders “an unreliability identical to the unreliable first-person narrator’s”, albeit one couched in a greater degree of ironic dependency on realist tropes.

23 James Wood, *How Fiction Works*, 10.

Narrators of the Ordinary: On Epistemological Limitation in Realist Modes

27. It is a literary theoretical commonplace that narrators of major realist traditions frequently seek to transcend the intra-diegetic perspective of character, having access to reasonings, motivations, and even past and future events beyond characters' limited insight and control. Such a reading may make us think that realism and affect are in some senses antithetical. Whereas affect refers to that which is beyond the limits of each subject's knowledge regarding his or her own internal process, realist traditions often tend towards narrative omniscience and unity. Though such omniscience and unity are never entire or final, and are always necessarily problematic, the fundamental impetus of such notions as ideals, remains.
28. If affect is conceived as that part of subjective consciousness which remains fundamentally unknowable to the subject itself, then in order to appropriately represent affect realist narrators would, at least partially, have to *not know themselves*. In other words: in order to represent affect as that which surpasses conscious understanding – that to which we do not have full conscious and emotional access, all the while being aware that they are *there* – realist narrators would have to admit not only “*This, I do not know,*” but “*I cannot possibly know it, for by definition it fundamentally escapes my apprehension: if not, it no longer deserves the name of affect itself.*”
29. Moreover, this statement of epistemological limitation cannot merely be directed outwards, towards the affective obstruction of a character's own self-knowledge. On the contrary, it must be self-reflexive, implying the narrator as character in a foregrounding which is most often absent from realist modes. We would thus need, as readers, to be confronted not only with evidence that a particular character is unaware of his or her own motivations – a frequent phenomenon, and entirely compatible with omniscient narrative voice – but that a narrator too has parts of his, her, or “its” own self, which remain fundamentally in the dark.
30. This would be to claim that the realist narrative voice, no matter how omniscient and neutral it appears, is *itself* imbued with affect; that the impersonal voice which proclaims “All happy families are alike...” or “It is a truth universally acknowledged...” itself has unknowable aspects of its identity, which remain shrouded in an epistemological, subjective, and inarticulate dark.
31. It would of course be difficult to prove that the narrative voice of a Jane Austen novel explicitly manifests such traits. Can we nevertheless presume their presence? They may very well, in a purely speculative sense, manifest such subjective blindness regarding themselves; but such

voices are neither “characters” nor even “subjects” in the way in which we traditionally understand these terms. Another way to put this would be to ask if omniscient narrative voices have “libidinal intensities” in Lyotard’s sense. Such narrators are not quite “subjects”, and often, they are not even “voices” imbued with a hypothetical corporality which we may presume; regarding their passing affect, they are perhaps more appropriately seen as expressive and representational modes. These modes, in spite of their appearance of stability, are themselves powerful conduits of affective force.

32. Put even more succinctly then: do realist narrators desire? Affect does not merely qualify subjective individuals; it is not restricted to conscious subjective experience but is used to describe a fundamental quality of the external objective world. Such realist narrators do not, in truth, need to be “subjects” nor even “identities” in order to express and represent affect as an interplay of competing energies and force. “Libido” in Lyotard’s sense is not limited to thinking and feeling subjects, but is seen as a network of tensions and processes of a vital world. Given that the libidinal *dispositif*, for Lyotard, is a constant flow of force, this transfer from so-called “objective” narrators to characters is an inevitable aspect of realist texts – no matter how hard they try to hide it or pretend that it is not there. As Lyotard puts it: “La libido ne manque pas de régions à investir, et elle n’investit pas sous la condition du manque et de l’appropriation. Elle investit sans condition.”²⁴ What is perhaps most interesting is not whether omniscient, “neutral” realist narrators are influenced by affect – as according to this reading, like all things in the world, they most certainly are – but why this affect is often hidden from readers, in order to give the impression of the wholeness and stability of their world.

33. This tendency of the realist narrator to pretend to a status of uniformity, stability and omniscience remains a possible object for critique. But the fact that an omniscient narrator shows no apparent fragility or partiality does not mean that, as speaker and hypothetical “subject”, it too is not traversed by unstable libidinal energies. Such fragility, in other words, may undeniably be there, even when there are no signs of its presence. For such energies potentially characterise the totality of the world’s forces, and are not limited by their specific subjective modes.

34. There is a final link between affect and realism that must not be overlooked, namely: affect and realism’s strange shared foregrounding of the ordinary as a valued category of sense. Affect pertains to those unknowable forces which are simultaneously “excessive” and yet curiously omnipresent. Affect is thus both extraordinary and ordinary, strange and ubiquitous – it bypasses the

24 Jean-François Lyotard, *Économie libidinale*, 13.

bounds of the subject's understanding (it is thus extraordinary) with a normalised frequency (thus its utter normalcy). As Seigworth and Gregg affirm, affect “transpires within and across the subtlest of shuttling intensities: all the minuscule or molecular events of the unnoticed. The ordinary and its extra-. Affect is born in in-between-ness and resides as accumulative beside-ness.”²⁵ This is ironically in tune with the “care for the ordinary” which is frequently identified as a staple aspect of realist concerns. Or as Peter Brooks observes:

The instinct of realist reproduction may be a constant in the human imagination [...]. What seems to change with the coming of the modern age – dating that from sometime around the end of the eighteenth century, with the French Revolution as its great emblematic event, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the English Romantic writers as its flag bearers – is a new valuation of ordinary experience and its ordinary settings and things. This new valuation is of course tied to the rise of the middle classes to cultural influence, and to the rise of the novel as the preeminent form of modernity. What we see at the dawn of modernity – and the age of revolutions – is the struggle to emerge of imaginative forms and styles that would do greater justice to the language of ordinary men (in William Wordsworth's terms) and to the meaning of unexceptional human experience.²⁶

Breaking Realism? The Flood of Affect into the Breach

35. Are the varied forms of realist traditions somehow limited then with regard to their representation of emotional states, and especially those states which threaten to overflow the boundaries of realist form into aformality and excess? Is a breaking of realist conventions and form in fact necessary in order to open up new territories of emotional representation? Or is the demand for congruence between literary form and emotion-as-content itself wrongheaded? Does form, in this case of the realist tradition, not in fact restrict or contain an emotional “matter”? Can such realist conventions thus speak of affect without fundamentally rupturing – becoming other than what they are?
36. As shown, in the context of the twentieth-century novel, the controversy is at the heart of a variety of critiques, and even explicit refusals, of the European realist tradition, both contemporaneous with the nineteenth-century emergence and intensifying with Modernist explorations of form. A fundamental tenet of this refusal, ranging from Pound's and Joyce's stylistic

25 Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Greg, *The Affect Theory Reader*, 2.

26 Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision*, 7.

pastiches to Woolf's critique of "Edwardian" schools, was that the "old forms" were inadequate for new ideas. New ideas and perhaps, by extension, new emotional content: the notion of realism's inadequacy at representing affect as *material* is implied.

37. But it is this association of affect with an emotional materiality which is problematic in this attack. We must perhaps resist the initially intuitive tendency of associating rebellious, expansive form with rebellious affect, and conservative form with a conservative limiting of affective force. The idea that a chaotic, ruptured formality better accounts for instances of affective rupture is paramount to suggesting that form and "content" coincide. We may suspect that, concerning affective states, the tendency to argue the superiority of certain aesthetic forms over others, in the abstract, is itself a problematic ideal. It firstly presumes the necessity of a causal relationship – extending even to an explicit mirroring – between content and form, whereby an apparently excessive content, for instance, requires an equally excessive form, and wherein characters' limited epistemologies regarding affect should not be counteracted by an unlimited narrator, author-function or narrative mode. Such a position would effectively negate rhetorical effects of ironic distancing or contrast. Within realist traditions, contrary examples are numerous, most famously the precision, sobriety or "coldness" of Flaubertian style, used to full effect in the depiction of instances of corporal and affective excess.
38. One reason often given for the shift of postmodern texts away from traditional realist modes, and their concomitant rejection of the inherited realist tradition, is related to the notion of realism's formal limitation of the *content* of texts. It is problematic however to think of affect as a content: it is so moveable, in a state of such incessant flux, that a contentual model can only ever be metaphorical, and risks letting slip through its fingers a fundamental quality of affect, which is its mutability itself.
39. It is thus realist modes' pretension to transparency and readability which is frequently criticised, rather than the notion that such transparency is truly attained. This is of course not to minimise the importance and necessity of the Modernist and Postmodernist invention of new and vital forms. We may indeed decide that the novels of Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy were "limited" for the reasons that Woolf explores. But it is simply to observe that while new forms may indeed create new content – and that this very distinction is of course fluid – we may not abstract this proposition to the notion that we are forbidden access to some aspects of experience merely because of a particular form, however stable or repressive it may seem.

40. Can literature itself speak of affect? Can language? Can “we”? These questions lead us to consider the extent to which the specific tradition of realism is not alone in this expressive and representational problem, but rather an illuminating extrapolation of it. Perhaps we believe that we could better represent affect provided that we invent appropriate forms. But how would such forms give us more freedom in relation to this unrepresentable limit? Is not the limit itself dictated by the borders not only of language but of our consciousness itself?
41. Such critiques of realism may thus fall into a particularly slippery trap: in attacking realist modes for their limitation of a hypothetical emotional “content”, they risk implying that affect is far more stable, representable and identifiable than it can ever be. In accusing realist modes of instigating a “limiting” form, such critiques risk themselves being limiting, in that they fail to see the way in which realist texts posit the omnipresence of an unknowable affect precisely *by not speaking of them*.
42. Herein lies the final irony: that affect, in its undetectability and unknowability, is perhaps neither more nor less difficult to incarnate in realist modes, for the reason that affect is precisely not defined by its modes of (re)presentation: it escapes, disrupts, and undoes these forms, no matter how stable or coherent they may seem or claim to be. It is not a question then of which formal processes, and which stylistic codes, “better” represent uncontrollable and unknowable affective force. These affects will always, by definition, work against such codes, and it is indeed this disruptive impulse which may constitute their enduring value for all literary texts.

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