

TO THE READER

This first example or entry in this “Ideas” section comes in two parts. The first consists of a paper I wrote as a graduate student in Iowa City—very long ago indeed, in 1967. I liked writing it, I liked the Result—and, curiously or not, I still do. Written for a course in 18th century British literature, it takes up the subject of “realism” (especially as it was then emerging in the novel) and ends up asking the question of what’s really “real” in any literary work.

That question, for me—what’s “real” in any work of art—has been endlessly fascinating through my adult life and has had as much to do with what my own writing is like and what it tries to do and what it's "for" as any other I can think of.

It isn't, however, a question that carries much weight today, in what I call The Age of Simplification. Today, if asked what’s “real” in, say, a novel, almost everyone would be to say that it’s the “story,” or that it’s the “action,” or perhaps that it’s the “characters.” Well, maybe. But to give any one of those three answers, to my own way of thinking, is to ignore or leave out at half of what’s really real in any significant book, and is to settle for so low a standard of achievement or potential achievement that the reading of a book at that level could hardly be called a *literary* experience at all, but might be something more akin to preferring the crib-notes version of *Hamlet* over the real thing.

Well, I did say, didn't I, that my idea isn't likely to be very popular in our present day and age. Still, it's a riveting question to me, and, if it's of interest to any other readers, I invite them to have a look at my old class paper.

Eric Larsen

A NOTE ON THE QUESTION OF “AUTHENTICITY” IN PROSE NARRATIVE: A DISCUSSION OF ONE ASPECT OF IAN WATT’S *THE RISE OF THE NOVEL*

“[Coincidences in Fielding] tend to compromise the narrative’s general air of literal authenticity by suggesting the manipulated sequences of literature rather than the ordinary processes of life.”

—Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*

“—a pretty story! is a man to follow rules—or rules to follow him?”

—Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

The difficulty, which has become almost traditional, of finding an accurate yet sufficiently flexible set of critical terms and assumptions in defining and describing the

novel as a literary form is perhaps only emphasized by a paper such as this one: for, while my attentions are theoretically directed toward the novels themselves, I find that in reality I am considering them first through considering a critical work that has been written about them. The danger is that in dealing with the criticism, I may finally prohibit myself from a direct confrontation with those very works themselves the existence of which in the first place gave rise to the necessity for their criticism. I will have become entrapped, like a Platonic man, in an inferior world once removed from truth.

Nevertheless, I am forced to run such a risk. Obviously, there are times when a consideration of a critical theory can shed light on the literary works behind that theory. In this case, I hope my comments will not seem to stand simply as a rebuttal of the entirety of Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*.¹ I hope, rather, that by pointing out what seems to me a specific discrepancy in logic in Watt's theory of realism and "authenticity" of narrative, I can at the same time, by implication, arrive at a clearer understanding of what is actually involved in looking at literary art as a transcriber of reality.

It is undeniable—so much so as not to need saying—that in the great novels of the eighteenth century we are faced with a new kind of literary product or genre, one which it is conventional to describe at least partly by use of the adjective "realistic." If adequately controlled and specified, there is nothing wrong with this term. There is, for example, no argument with the basic observations of the following passage, taken from Ian Watt. Having spoken of "the main analogies between realism in philosophy and literature," Watt suggests another comparison:

The novel's mode of imitating reality may therefore be equally summarized in terms of the procedures of another group of specialists in epistemology, the jury in a court of law. Their expectations and those of the novel reader coincide in many ways: both want to know 'all the particulars' of a given case—the time and place of the occurrence; both must be satisfied as to the identities of the parties concerned, and will refuse to accept evidence about anyone called Sir Toby Belch or Mr. Badman—still less about a Chloe who has no surname and is 'common as the air'; and they also expect the witnesses to tell the story 'in his own words'. The jury, in fact, takes the 'circumstantial view of life', which T. H. Green found to be the characteristic outlook of the novel. (p. 31)

Given the fact of the "circumstantial view of life," the basic quality in which the novel differs from earlier genres, it follows, Watt seems to suggest, that there will be two other major ways in which the novel asserts its originality. Both of these are technical: the nature of plot in the novel, and the nature of the language in which the narrative is written. I

¹ University of California Press, 1959. All quotations, unless specified otherwise, will be from this source.

will consider the nature of plot first, and return later to discuss the matter of the language of the realistic prose narrative.

In a concise passage, Watt explains the relation between plot and an awareness of what might be called “real time”:

We have already considered one aspect of the importance which the novel allots the time dimension: its break with the earlier literary tradition of using timeless stories to mirror the unchanging moral verities. The novel’s plot is also distinguished from most previous fiction by its use of past experience as the cause of present actions: a causal connection operating through time replaces the reliance of earlier narratives on disguises and coincidences, and this tends to give the novel a much more cohesive structure. (p. 22)

Considered in the light of this passage, *The Vicar of Wakefield* seems to offer a typical example of prose narrative which recognizes and employs “the time dimension” in the way Watt describes, and yet which does so only partly, as though the work were one of transition from the tradition of timelessness into time. Thus on the one hand the characters do seem to grow, learning through experience to be more wise and less eager for social advancement. The story is not, as it could be, an allegory in which ideas and moral truths exist in abstractions which are not so much experienced *by* the characters as they are applied *to* their behavior. In *The Vicar*, whatever is learned is learned by experience, not precept. The characters, insofar as they learn anything, demonstrate, as Watt says, “development in the course of time” (p. 22).

Yet on the other hand Goldsmith’s short novel is also constructed upon what seems the more arbitrary and less “realistic” use of disguise (Thornhill disguised early in the story as Burchell) and unlikely coincidence. Goldsmith in fact comments on this aspect of the story:

Nor can I go on without a reflection on those accidental meetings which, though they happen every day, seldom excite our surprize but upon some extraordinary occasion. To what a fortuitous concurrence do we not owe every pleasure and convenience of our lives. How many seeming accidents must unite before we can be cloathed or fed. The peasant must be disposed to labour, the shower must fall, the wind fill the merchant's sail, or numbers must want the usual supply.²

The fact that Goldsmith feels compelled to make an apology for the use of coincidences serves, of course, to suggest that he feels they are *not* in fact so natural or readily acceptable—so common, I should say—as he rather earnestly claims: if they were, neither

² *Oliver Goldsmith, The Vicar of Wakefield and Other Writings*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles (The Modern Library, 1955, pp. 450-451).

his nor our attention would be drawn to them, and nothing would need to be said. He appears troubled by a sort of “artificiality” which, however, remains a necessary device to allow the completion of his story.

My purpose in referring to this rather self-conscious comment of Goldsmith’s³ is to suggest that it gives credence to Watt’s general opinion that the use of highly manipulated plot is contrary to the general aim and spirit of realistic narrative. Watt states clearly that the purpose of the narrative method of the novel, which he calls “formal realism,” is to allow expression of the novel’s basic attempt and purpose, which is to be “a full and authentic report of human experience” (p. 32). *Clarissa* and *Pamela* succeed in being such reports, but *Tom Jones*, which, like *The Vicar*, has numerous coincidences and a manipulated plot, does not:

Once again the contrast with Richardson is complete. Much of our sense of Clarissa’s psychological development arises from the way that her experience brings a continual deepening of her understanding of her own past: as a result character and plot are indivisible. Tom Jones, on the other hand, is not in touch with his own past at all: we feel a certain unreality in his actions because they always seem to be spontaneous reactions to stimuli that the plot has been manipulated to provide; we have no sense that they are manifestations of a developing moral life. (p. 275)

The basic dichotomy with which Watt is concerned, then, is that of literary artifice on the one hand, and of human experience on the other. *Tom Jones* is not as successful a novel (given Watt’s terms) as *Pamela*, because “the ultimate cohesive force of the book resides not in the characters and their relationships, but in an intellectual and literary structure which has a considerable degree of autonomy” (p. 277). *Pamela*, on the other hand, “brings us extremely close to Pamela’s inner consciousness” and in fact “makes us feel that we are in contact not with literature but with the raw materials of life itself as they are momentarily reflected in the minds of the protagonists” (p. 193).

This is the dichotomy—artifice as opposed to experience or “reality”—which becomes basic to the presentation of “formal realism” in the novel as Watt puts it forth: but, as we will see by turning now to his comments about the *language* of “realistic” prose narrative, Watt himself is unable logically to maintain his own posited dichotomy. He cannot logically maintain the dichotomy, and yet, in order for his concept of realism and “formal realism” to remain valid and workable, it *must* be maintained.

If the novel is to differ from earlier types of literature by being a “circumstantial” and “full and authentic report of human experience,” then the language of its narrative may be expected to differ too. This proves to be the case, and Watt writes that “the function of

³ Fielding makes a similar “apology” in *Tom Jones*, Book XVIII, chapter II.

language is much more largely referential in the novel than in other literary forms; that the genre itself works by exhaustive presentation rather than by elegant concentration.” (p. 30)

In speaking of “elegant concentration,” Watt is referring, of course, to earlier literary concepts of stylistic decorum and stylistic conventions. He explains the matter as follows:

In any case, of course, the classical critical tradition in general had no use for the unadorned realistic description which such a [referential] use of language would imply. . . The implicit assumption of educated writers and critics was that an author’s skill was shown, not in the closeness with which he made his words correspond to their objects, but in the literary sensitivity with which his style reflected the linguistic decorum appropriate to its subject. It is natural, therefore, that it is to writers outside the circle of wit that we should have to turn for our earliest examples of fictional narrative written in a prose which restricts itself almost entirely to a descriptive and denotative use of language. Natural, too, that both Defoe and Richardson should have been attacked by many of the better educated writers of the day for their clumsy and often inaccurate way of writing. (pp. 28-29)

We are faced here again with the dichotomy between “reality” and artifice: any prescribed or conventionalized style, any suiting of style to subject by reference to the arbitrary code of “linguistic decorum”—either of these are “artifice” which can serve only to hide reality. And as in his discussion of plot, so here too in his discussion of style, Watt is led to present Richardson and Fielding as representatives of the two opposite sides of the dichotomy, Richardson as “real” and Fielding as “artificial.” We are told that “we must regard the break which Defoe and Richardson made with the accepted canons of prose style, not an incidental blemish, but rather as the price they had to pay for achieving the immediacy and closeness of the texts to what is being described” (p. 29).

Fielding, however, is another matter:

Fielding, of course, did not break with the traditions of Augustan prose style or outlook. But it can be argued that this detracts from the authenticity of his narratives. Reading *Tom Jones* we do not imagine we are eavesdropping on a new exploration of reality; the prose immediately informs us that exploratory operations have long since been accomplished, that we are to be spared that labour, and presented instead with a sifted and clarified report of the findings. (pp. 29-30)

In Fielding, “a patent selectiveness of vision destroys our belief in the reality of the report,” while, on the other hand, in Defoe and Richardson, a “very diffuseness tends to act as a guarantee of the authenticity of their report” (p. 30). It would clearly be foolish and erroneous to argue that these basic differences in the two kinds of novels do not exist. Watt is absolutely correct in saying, for example, that Fielding does not “break with the traditions of Augustan prose style or outlook” to the extent that Defoe and Richardson do. But even accepting those aspects of his argument and observations that are undeniable and valid, it is still not possible for the careful reader to accept his views completely.

To argue that Fielding differs from Richardson is fine: this is clear, descriptive, and empirical. But to say that one narrative is more “authentic” than another is an implicit contradiction of Watt’s most basic premise in putting forth his concepts about realism. The impulse of realism, he tells us, is a breaking away from the eighteenth century’s “strong classical preference for the general and universal” (p. 16), away from the neo-Platonic concept of generality which said that reality existed in general ideal “types” or “generalities,” and that “particularities” were simply not as “true” as the ideals of which they were only imperfect or “accidental” versions existing at least one remove from the “real.” The impulse of realism, then, is to accept the “particular” as real or true rather than the “general.” It is, one might say, an impulse to see truth or reality in things as they are rather than as they should be. It is not Platonic in its impulse, it works against traditional conventionalization in literary forms, and it doubts the existence of truth in idealized abstractions.

And yet it cannot accurately be called “realism.” It is not, strictly speaking, more “real” than “conventionalized” literary forms. Watt’s repeated use of and reliance on the term “authentic” in referring to prose narrative reveals the discrepancy in his logic. While he is arguing for a break from idealized truth (from art as reference to “the unchanging moral verities” [p.22]), the very term “authentic” implies *another* ideal to which various works approach according to their greater or lesser degrees of “authenticity.” The idea of “authenticity” becomes a kind of inverse Platonism. *Clarissa* approaches closer to the “ideal” of reality than does *Tom Jones* because its narrative is more “authentic.” That is, it is closer to truth, which must be itself an idealized and absolute concept. Greater or lesser degrees of “realism,” then, come to mean nothing other than more or less “perfect” imitations of a static and unchanging *concept* or *ideal* of reality.

At least this conclusion is implied by the terms and quality of Watt’s argument. Reaching such a conclusion shows why the dichotomy between reality or experience on the one hand and artifice or convention on the other must be maintained: reality or experience must remain the only source of meaning, while literary narrative or artifice must remain nothing more than a means by which to copy, more or less accurately, the reality which already exists. But if this dichotomy should break down, if literary form or artifice should ever become meaningful or a source of meaning *in itself*, then “realism” as Watt uses it can no longer be a valid or meaningful term: for if the form of a work creates meaning in itself, then the existence of an external and unchanging “reality” has been denied. Reality will have been created, not copied.

Yet, returning again to the subject of plot, we find that Watt himself implicitly breaks down this very dichotomy I have been speaking about. The way in which he does this can be seen by comparing his comments about Fielding’s plots with his comments about the plot of *Tristram Shandy*. Excessive coincidences in *Tom Jones*, Watt says, “tend to compromise the narrative’s general air of literal authenticity by suggesting the manipulated sequences of literature rather than the ordinary processes of life” (p. 253). This is, of course, the view we have already discussed. Compare with it Watt’s comment on Sterne’s plot:

Sterne, however, can manipulate until we are giddy without any breach of narrative authenticity, since every transition is part of the hero's mental life which, of course, is very little concerned with chronological order. As a result Sterne is able to arrange the elements of his novel into whatever sequence he pleases, without the arbitrary changes of setting and characters which such a counterpoint would involve in Fielding. (p. 293)

My contention is that Watt has here undercut his previous suppositions of what "authenticity" really means or can mean, and that he has done so by saying that, even though the narrative of *Tristram Shandy* is highly manipulated, it is still "authentic" because it portrays the unique patterns of Shandy's mind. Implicit in this statement is the idea that every mind (Pamela's, for example) can have its own "reality." And if this is so, which I contend it is, we are of course deprived of any standard whatsoever by which to judge or estimate degrees of reality, and the very word "authentic" becomes useless. As many "realities" exist as there are minds or perceiving apparati to react to the stimuli of life and experience. It becomes theoretically impossible to say what is and what is not "truth to individual experience," which is the "primary concern" of the novel (p. 13).

Since Shandy's (Sterne's) mind is unique, there can be no way of determining what constitutes an "authentic" description of it. There is no such thing as a reality to which one can hold up the finished narrative product in order to estimate how close it comes to being a perfect ("authentic") copy. This cannot be done because the "reality" that is being dealt with (Shandy's mind) *is* unique and thus has no counterpart in nature. There is, in fact, only one place and one place alone from which meaning can come, and that is from the narrative itself. No one can say whether the narrative is or is not "authentic" because no one can with certainty experience the reality it describes. It follows, then, that for everyone but Shandy himself, this unique meaning, truth, or individual experience exists only in the narrative itself. The narrative, as far as we will ever be able to know, *is* the experience. For everyone but for Shandy, reality has been created rather than copied. The artifice becomes the same thing as reality or as meaning: the narrative is its reality. We cannot say whether it is authentic or not, but only that it is.

This is why *Tristram Shandy* seems to us so modern a novel—because it is not a more or less "authentic" copy of a changeless or absolute external "reality," but because it is an incorporation of its own truth and reality in itself. Sterne's black pages, for an obvious example, his squiggly lines, his empty spaces—these serve as copies of no "reality" in nature, nor are they "authentic" copies of some concept of unchanging reality: if they are "authentic" representations of anything, it must be agreed that they are representations of Shandy's narrative itself, and it must be agreed as well that that narrative exists nowhere else in nature than in the form Sterne has given it. We are reminded of the words Oscar Wilde puts in the mouth of Vivian in "The Decay of Lying": "Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself."⁴

⁴ Reprinted in *The Modern Tradition*, ed. Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson (New

Oscar Wilde is, admittedly, a long way from Richardson and Defoe, and even from Sterne. And yet I think his relevance is admissible in an argument such as this one. I said that I hoped this paper would not stand simply as a rebuttal of Watt, and I think it is clear that there are many aspects of his work that should not be attacked. His first chapter is an example, where, among other things, he differentiates the novel from earlier and other genres by pointing out its interest in “real” time rather than in a classical timelessness, and its dominant tendency to be a “circumstantial view of life.” Both these qualities, it seems undeniable, do reveal a break from neo-classical neo-Platonism with its tendencies toward conventionalization, personification, and generality. My argument with Watt begins after this much (and more, which does not need summary here) has been made clear. I part company with him when, in attempting to describe “realism,” he posits “reality” as a kind of pseudo-Platonic and unchanging “verity,” and sees literary narratives as means by which to copy that external⁵ “truth” which cannot be found in literary artifact itself.

For it must finally be agreed, it seems to me, that artifact is as much a part of reality as anything else. Perhaps Oscar Wilde is as much of an extremist in his direction (art’s only meaning is in itself) as Watt is in his (art’s only meaning is outside itself). This is an argument or problem I cannot settle here. But I cannot take my leave before asserting once more that what we have in literary art is artifact, no matter how “realistic” the impulse behind its creation may be. All literary art is artifact and convention at least to some extent. The moment pen is put to paper and a word results, we have convention and not a copy of reality. There is in fact no such thing as a copy of reality; there is only artifact, which if course is born out of human existence, while at the same time no human can exist except in reality, or reality of some kind. That, however, is not precisely the point. I do not consider it an over-simplification to assert that for the literary critic (or for the writer) there are basically two phenomena: there is human existence and there are the artifacts produced as a result of that existence, and the two remain essentially separate. Neither is more “real” than the other.

What I mean is this: to speak of one as a copy of the other can lead only to a logical impasse, as I hope I have shown in my analysis of the theory of “authenticity.” And to do so, furthermore, is to misjudge and underestimate much of the greatest value and mystery of literary art. For no literature, not even the great realistic novels of the past, is merely a copy, authentic or otherwise, of reality. If it were so, it would logically be in a position subordinate to reality, and a position of subordination such as that would make difficult to understand either its centuries of continuing fascination or its sheer survival. It seems to me, rather, than the real energy and the real fascination of literature—its own particular truth, if you will—

York, 1965), p. 20.

⁵ Even though, as in *Clarissa*, this “truth” may be the truth of a character’s internal psychological existence, it still remains external, from Watt’s point of view, in the sense that it is external to the literary narrative, which remains a copying device.

exists precisely at that mysterious, indefinable and elusive point where these two intensely separate things, verbal artifact and human existence, or fabrication and “reality,” come into a crucial, ineffable and above all unspoken and wordless union.

To discuss this idea more fully would almost undoubtedly require another and separate paper. The main point I wish to make now, however, is simply that there are certain extremely interesting and serious pitfalls in what may have become for at least some of us a traditional and perhaps even absolute acceptance of the concepts of “realism” and “authenticity.” In truth, the relationship between these two essentially separate things, reality—whatever it is—and verbal artifact, is a uniquely symbiotic, ancient and compelling one. A part of me hopes it will never be entirely explored, or at least never entirely understood, for, in the end, the magic of literature is that it does something that can to a certain extent be described but that cannot, finally, be explained: it remains simultaneously inferior and superior to life, simultaneously autonomous and totally dependent. As for “realistic” or “authentic” prose narratives, whatever else they may justly be in contrast with other types and forms of verbal or literary expression, they, too, remain eternally artifacts, even though at the same time, in an important and indispensable way, they remain eternally real. I wish, however, to avoid needless foundering in paradox. I would like to remain logical up to whatever point an analyst of literature or literary theory can. For this reason, in closing I will appeal to a comment made by probably the greatest critic of common sense, which, although it was written in consideration of another genre than the novel, seems to me comfortingly pertinent here. In the *Preface to Shakespeare*, Johnson writes the famous passage:

It is false that any representation is mistaken for reality; that any dramattick fable in its materiality was ever credible, or, for a single moment, was ever credited. . . The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from first to last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players.