

be precious in itself.⁴ As Auerbach argues, it is the Christian gospel, with its image of God as incarnate in the poor and destitute, its carnivalesque reversals of high and low, which provides the source of realism's elevation of the commonplace. For Christianity, salvation is a humdrum matter of whether you feed the hungry and visit the sick, not of some esoteric cult. Jesus is a kind of sick joke of a Messiah, a parody of regal pomp as he rides a donkey towards his squalid death as a political criminal.

With the advent of realism, then, the common people make their collective entry into the literary arena, long before they make an appearance on the political stage. It is one of the momentous events of human history, which we now take casually for granted. It is hard for us to think ourselves back into a culture for which, say, relations between parents and children, or everyday economic life, was of little artistic merit. Auerbach, a Jewish refugee from Hitler, was writing about the novel while in exile in Istanbul at the same time as Bakhtin was writing about it as a dissident in Stalinist Russia; and both men saw in it a populist strike against autocratic power. In Bakhtin's view, plebeian culture nourishes forms of realism in the classical, medieval and modern epochs; and these finally burst through into the main stream of 'high' literature in the shape of the novel.

There are problems with these claims. For one thing, realism and the novel are not the same thing. Not all realism is novelistic, as Auerbach is aware, and not all novels are realist. Not all novels smack of a plebeian vigour. There is not much earth beneath the fingernail of Mr Knightley or Mrs Dalloway. In any case, earthiness, by no means always subversive. A work of art is not radical simply because it portrays the experience of ordinary people. It is sometimes so that the kind of realism which takes the lid off poverty and squalor, revealing the horrors of the social underworld to a sheltered middle class, is necessarily disruptive. But this assumes that people are insensitive to social deprivation only because they are unaware of it, which is far too charitable a view of them. Realism in the sense of verisimilitude – truth to life – is not necessarily revolutionary. As Bertolt Brecht remarked, putting a factory on stage will tell you nothing about capitalism.

If realism means showing the world as it really is, rather than how some ancient Egyptian priest or medieval knight conceived of it, then we are instantly in trouble, since how the world is is a subject of fierce contention. Suppose some future civilization were to discover a copy of Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame*, in which two elderly characters spend their time sitting in dustbins. They would not be able to tell whether the play was realist or

was not 'literature', and certainly not 'art'. To pretend that your narrative was a real-life one – that you had stumbled across it in a pile of mouldy letters or manuscripts – was a way of indicating that it was not romantic garbage. Even if your claim was not taken seriously, simply making it was a way of being taken seriously.

In the end, the English novel would wreak its vengeance on those who dismissed it as fit only for females by producing some magnificent portrayals of women, from *Clarissa Harlowe* and *Emma Woodhouse* to *Molly Bloom* and *Mrs Ramsay*. It also produced some distinguished female exponents of the craft. As a form, it would grow in importance as poetry became increasingly privatized. As poetry gradually ceases to be a public genre somewhere between Shelley and Swinburne, its moral and social functions pass to the novel, in a new division of literary labour. By the mid-nineteenth century, the word 'poetry' has become more or less synonymous with the interior, the personal, the spiritual or psychological, in ways which would no doubt have come as a mighty surprise to Dante, Milton and Pope. The poetic has now been redefined as the opposite of the social, discursive, doctrinal and conceptual, all of which has been relegated to prose fiction. The novel takes care of the outer world, while poetry copes with the inner one. It is not a distinction which Henry Fielding, let alone Ben Jonson, would have found all that intelligible. The very distance between the two modes reflects a growing alienation between the public and the private.

The problem for poetry is that it seems increasingly remote from 'life' as an industrial capitalist society is coming to define it. There is no obvious place for the lyric in a world of insurance companies and mass-produced meat pies. The phrase 'poetic justice' really means the kind of justice we would not expect to see done in real life. There is, however, an equal problem with the novel's very closeness to social existence. If the novel is a 'slice of life', how can it teach us more general truths? This is a particular problem for devoutly Protestant eighteenth-century authors like Samuel Richardson, for whom the artifice of fiction is only really justified if it conveys a moral truth. Otherwise it is idle, even sinful, fantasy.

The dilemma is that the more graphic you make your realism, the more this drives the moral truth home; but the more it simultaneously undermines it, since the reader becomes more attentive to the realist detail than to the universal truth it is meant to exemplify. There is a related problem here. You cannot, as a novelist, argue that the world should be changed in certain respects unless you dramatize what is wrong with it as compellingly as possible. But the more effectively you do this, the less changeable

The novel is a utopian image – not in what it represents, which can be gruesome enough, but in the very act of representation – an act which at its most effective shapes the world into meaning with no detriment to its reality. In this sense, to narrate is itself a moral act.⁷

Laurence Sterne spots the impossibility of reconciling form and realism, and plucks from the discrepancy one of the greatest anti-novels of all time, *Tristram Shandy*. Tristram, the narrator, cannot give a true account of his chaotic life-history and at the same time fashion a shapely narrative. His story thus falls apart at the seams, to make the point that realism is a self-deconstructing enterprise. As Roland Barthes comments:

The real is not representable, and it is because men ceaselessly try to represent it by words that there is a history of literature . . . literature is categorically realist, in that it never has anything but the real as its object of desire; and I shall say now, without contradicting myself . . . that literature is quite as stubbornly unrealistic: it considers sane its desire for the impossible.⁸

If the novel is the modern epic, it is, in Georg Lukács's famous phrase, 'the epic of a world abandoned by God'.⁹ It must strive for sense and unity in an age when things no longer seem to harbour any inherent meaning or value. Meaning is no longer written into empirical experience. 'Lucky the man who can say "when", "before" and "after"', Robert Musil observes in volume two of *The Man Without Qualities*. As soon as such a man is capable of recounting events in chronological order, Musil goes on, he feels content even if a moment ago he was writhing in agony. In their relationship to their own lives, Musil considers, most people behave like narrators: they like an orderly sequence of events because it has a look of necessity about it. The only problem is that the modern world 'has now become non-narrative'.

One way in which the novel seeks to overcome this difficulty is by the idea of character. 'Character' gathers into unity a varied range of events or experiences. What holds these diverse experiences together is the fact that they all happen to you. Another way is through the act of narrating itself, which involves pattern and continuity but also change and difference. Narrative implies a kind of necessity, as cause and effect, action and reaction, are linked logically to each other. Narrative orders the world into a shape which seems to emerge spontaneously from it.

Yet every narrative implies that one could always have told the story differently; so that despite its air of necessity, every narrative is contingent. Reality will accommodate a whole number of tales about itself, and will not