

THEORETICAL CONTEXTS

Realism and Romance

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Beware of realism; it is the devil: it is one of the means
of art, and now they make it the end!

—Robert Louis Stevenson

Stevenson was the outstanding romancer of his age but also a crucial participant in the 1880s debate that first consolidated a theory of novelistic realism in English-language criticism. This essay documents his role in that “art of fiction” debate with a particular interest in denaturalizing *realism* for undergraduates, both formally and historically. Revisiting Stevenson’s dialogue with Henry James and appreciating the strength of his arguments against realism (he calls it “the devil” in *Letters* 4: 141) can enrich and complicate monolithic notions of the novel’s essential trueness to life. This episode also illuminates the reductive literary history that makes Stevenson’s defense of romance sound so “late” and his antirealism sound so “early.”

Restored to its original context as a debate, the Stevenson-James correspondence is a vivid way of showing students that our default setting as commonsensical readers—interpreting the text as referential, mimetic, and containing truths about recognizable experience—has a contested history. To this end, it is often easier to convey that realism is a constructed, conventionalized way of reading by first showing how it is a constructed, conventionalized way of writing, with its own (particularist) aesthetic agenda, (post-Romantic) history, and (materialist, empirical) epistemology. By showing how these factors, as contested by Stevenson and James, constitute the novel’s claim to artistic legitimacy, we see the crystallization of both a self-conscious technique and a critical rubric for describing fictional practice.

This is not, of course, the rubric most students bring to class, and the school-room commonplace "realism versus romance" is admittedly a limited (and limiting) basis for discussion. As a classificatory device it is crude verging on puerile, and as a definitional schema it merely codifies the self-evident. Despite or perhaps because of these limitations, realism versus romance is likely to remain an attractive framework for beginning English students. For them, its apparent lack of ambiguity provides a sturdy conceptual support to be clung to while taking the first tentative steps in formal and generic description. Stevenson can be used to combat what is gauche and misleading about the opposition between realism and romance while retaining these familiar terms in a more sophisticated critical and literary-historical repertoire.

One of the main problems with realism versus romance is that it is intrinsically weighted toward the first term; we could as easily say that realism tends to place "romance" under erasure. This reflects the dominance of realism in the fictive experience and critical vocabulary most students bring to the classroom and in the handbooks on which they often rely. Take the following gloss from a standard primer, the most recent (ninth) edition of M. H. Abrams's *Glossary of Literary Terms*, under the entry "Realism and Naturalism":

Realistic fiction is often opposed to romantic fiction. The *romance* is said to present life as we would have it be—more picturesque, fantastic, adventurous, or heroic than actuality; realism, on the other hand, is said to represent life as it really is. This distinction in terms solely of subject matter, while relevant, is clearly inadequate. . . . It is more useful to identify realism in terms of the intended effect on the reader: realistic fiction is written to give the effect that it represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that its characters might in fact exist, and that such things might well happen. (303)

This gloss is a small performance of the realist sensibility in itself, privileging tangible, self-evident "effects" (confirmed by untutored experience of how the world "seems") over a conceptual opposition between actual and ideal that is "ideal" by its very nature. By a subtle tautology realism is defined as writing that successfully presses the reader's realist buttons.

Situating this opposition in literary history is only a partial remedy, since the familiar narrative makes the "realism versus romance" binary largely illegible. Consigned firmly to the prehistory of the novel by critical authorities, for our students romance can signal a kind of childish phoniness antecedent to everything worth reading. On the first pages of Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* we learn that the earliest English novelists "viewed their work as involving a break with the old-fashioned romances" (9–10). If romance was obsolete for figures as antique as Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, it quickly declines into the quaintly ancient for most students.

In fact, this debate in English criticism is relatively recent. In 1884, James wrote "The Art of Fiction" in response to the pamphlet publication of a lecture given by Walter Besant. James opens by welcoming Besant's attempt to supply a "theory" for novelistic practice that will bolster the seriousness of fiction and render it "what the French call *discutable*" (53–54). James's attempt to formulate a principle for the artfulness of fiction, largely by analogy with the other fine arts of painting and music, is consciously provisional and open-ended but moves swiftly to first principles—principles Stevenson felt confident, only a few months later, he had demolished.

James begins by rebutting the "old superstition about fiction being 'wicked,'" insofar as it peddles illusions and fosters idolatry, and insists "the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it *does* compete with life" (55–56). Pace the schoolmen and moralists, the fundamental character of the novel is its scorn of rules and formulas. James's emphasis on the novel's freedom and openness is pragmatic and impressionistic:

[T]he good health of an art which undertakes so immediately to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free. . . . A novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say. (61–62)

The first rule of the novel is that there are no rules; we look to fiction for precisely those personal, experiential truths that evade codification and preconception. Authentically reproducing the intensity and disorder of experience preserves the novel's revelatory character; rearranging life to fit artificial conventions or patterns is fatal to its truth.

By this account, experience (actual or imaginative) is both the raw material of fiction and the basis of its own "reality." A special kind of sensitive and imaginative person can amplify and concentrate even the most partial experience, distilling and extrapolating it into artworks that compete with actuality:

The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town, and in the most differing stages of education. . . . "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" (67)

This noticing novelistic sensibility is an acute sensitivity and imaginative responsiveness to the particulars of experience. Transmuting such impressions

into art hinges on "exactness" or "truth of detail" (67). (Stevenson would later write to another correspondent, "Have you observed that the famous problem of realism and idealism, is one purely of detail?" [*Letters* 5: 203]). For James, the concretion of the fictive illusion is paramount: "[T]he air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel—the merit on which all its other merits . . . depend" (67). Any further attempt to delineate the "essentials" of the novel—say, narrative, character, dramatic embodiment—seems to James "to bring the novel back to the hapless little rôle of being an artificial, ingenious thing—bring it down from its large, free character of an immense and exquisite correspondence with life" (79).

Stevenson's rejoinder came four months later (December 1884), also in *Longman's*, under the title "A Humble Remonstrance." Stevenson was initially rather cocky about besting James's theory, describing "The Art of Fiction" to friends as "dreadful nonsense admirably said" and exulting in holding "the whip hand of the argument" (*Letters* 5: 9, 88). In his "charming, most friendly, most genial" letter acknowledging "A Humble Remonstrance," Stevenson wrote, James "seemed to struggle under a combined sense of having been thrashed and feeling that if all were as it ought to be, he should have been the thrasher. We shall see" (5: 52).

In essence, "A Humble Remonstrance" argues that the art of fiction is defined by its distance from and simplification of experience, not by its correspondence to or competition with life. This difference is partly a matter of taste but mainly a matter of necessity. The thrust of Stevenson's critique concerns the benign, readily containable sense of life and experience James's theory seems to presuppose.

No art—to use the daring phrase of Mr. James—can successfully "compete with life"; and the art that seeks to do so is condemned to perish *montibus aviis* ["in the pathless mountains"]. Life goes before us, infinite in complication. . . . To "compete with life," whose sun we cannot look upon, whose passions and diseases waste and slay us—to compete with the flavour of wine . . . here are, indeed, labours for a Hercules in a dress coat, armed with a pen and a dictionary to depict the passions, armed with a tube of superior flake-white to paint the portrait of the insufferable sun. . . . No art is true in this sense; none can "compete with life."

(*Works* 29: 134–35)

What little art can do, Stevenson continues, is a consequence of design, of the deliberate filtering and planned evasion of life's chaos and brutal intensity. A conscious awareness of artifice is therefore necessary in any mature discussion of fictive technique; after all, "phantom reproductions of experience, even at their most acute, convey decided pleasure; while experience itself, in the cockpit of life, can torture and slay" (135).

Art is ruthlessly and defensively selective, subsuming the particular impression under a general and abstract pattern instead of amplifying gross nature. This selectivity applies especially to the narrative arts, whose temporal dimension requires the careful omission and orchestration of reality in order to issue in the designed significance of story. Pattern governs matter:

Man's one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality. The arts, like arithmetic and geometry, turn away their eyes from the gross, coloured, and mobile nature at our feet, and regard instead a certain figmentary abstraction. . . . Painting, ruefully comparing sunshine and flake-white, gives up truth of colour, as it had already given up relief and movement; and instead of vying with nature, arranges a scheme of harmonious tints. Literature, above all in its most typical mood, the mood of narrative, similarly flees the direct challenge and pursues instead an independent and creative aim. (135-36)

If modernist writing, according to Georg Lukács, replaces the "concrete typicality" of the realist novel with a distorted "abstract particularity" (*Meaning* 43), Stevenson rejects the bad faith of mimetic particularism *tout court*, pressing for a recognition that abstract typicality is all the representative artwork can honestly aspire to.

Our art is occupied, and bound to be occupied, not so much in making stories true as in making them typical; not so much in capturing the lineaments of each fact, as in marshalling all of them towards a common end. For the welter of impressions, all forcible but all discrete, which life presents, it substitutes a certain artificial series of impressions, all indeed most feebly represented, but all aiming at the same effect, all eloquent of the same ideas, all chiming together like consonant notes in music or like the graduated tints in a good picture. (*Works* 29: 136)

The fault of James's realism is not stylistic but constitutive: it presupposes a domesticated sense of life and then pretends to boldly, intrepidly reproduce it. The truth is that art cannot avoid reducing life to its own scope and technical limitations:

Life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt, and poignant; a work of art, in comparison, is neat, finite, self-contained, rational, flowing and emasculate. Life imposes by brute energy, like inarticulate thunder; art catches the ear, among the far louder noises of experience, like an air artificially made by a discreet musician. A proposition of geometry does not compete with life; and a proposition of geometry is a fair and luminous parallel for

a work of art. Both are reasonable, both untrue to the crude fact; both inhere in nature, neither represents it. The novel which is a work of art exists, not by its resemblances to life, which are forced and material, as a shoe must still consist of leather, but by its immeasurable difference from life, which is designed and significant, and is both the method and the meaning of the work. (136–37)

James suggested in his initial letter to Stevenson that “we agree, I think, much more than we disagree . . . no one can assent more than I to your proposition that all art is a simplification” (qtd. in J. Smith 101). Yet a crucial disagreement remains. For Stevenson, the literary artist’s duty is “not simply to convince, but to enchant” (*Works* 29: 117 [“A Gossip on a Novel of Dumas’s”]).

Students may usefully debate Stevenson’s position piece on the relation among romance, the childish imagination, and the adult reader—which puts them, as readers, at the crux of realism and romance as a critical problem. Stevenson’s “A Gossip on Romance” (1882) makes the appetites of the youthful imagination the touchstone of literary art: “we read story-books in childhood, not for eloquence or character or thought, but for some quality of the brute incident” (120). Precisely the intense vividness of experience James sniffs in “the air of reality” Stevenson traces to imaginative pleasure and desire: “[T]he great creative writer shows us the realisation and the apotheosis of the day-dreams of common men. His stories may be nourished with the realities of life, but their true mark is to satisfy the nameless longings of the reader, and to obey the ideal laws of the day-dream” (123). The novelist’s role is not to reproduce impressions of actual life but to create a textual experience that makes fantasy real. The fictive impressions so designed and executed have a lasting power that goes far beyond the petty, empirical correspondences of realism, satisfying a “capacity for sympathetic pleasure” that compels us to “adopt into the very bosom of our mind that neither time nor tide can efface or weaken the impression. This, then, is the plastic part of literature: to embody character, thought, or emotion in some act or attitude that shall be remarkably striking to the mind’s eye” (123). Stevenson observes that works of the greatest imaginative transport and appeal, such as the *Arabian Nights* or the novels of Alexandre Dumas, are almost wholly free of realism in James’s (and Abrams’s) sense. “No human face or voice greets us among that wooden crowd of kings and genies, sorcerers and beggarmen . . . the characters are no more than puppets. The bony fist of the showman visibly propels them” (126).

Developing this antirealist point, students can see how Stevenson anticipates later modernist critiques of passive and immersive ways of consuming realist fictions, insisting:

No art produces illusion; in the theatre we never forget that we are in the theatre; and while we read a story, we sit wavering between two minds, now merely clapping our hands at the merit of the performance, now con-

descending to take an active part in fancy with the characters. This last is the triumph of romantic story-telling: when the reader consciously plays at being the hero, the scene is a good scene. . . . But the characters are still themselves, they are not us; the more clearly they are depicted, the more widely do they stand away from us, the more imperiously do they thrust us back into our place as a spectator. (128)

This, I would argue, is a much healthier disposition to the literary text to recommend to undergraduates than Jamesian immediacy, and its conflation of artificial “impressions” and actual “experience.” In the words of Stephen Arata, “Stevenson defines good reading as an ever more refined and sophisticated attention to the surface elements of the text. One is not trying to read through the text to get at something else” (“Stevenson” 199). Stevenson’s critical attitude toward realism—dating from the mid-1880s—has been so thoroughly sidelined that his words may strike us as ahead of their time. In class, students might usefully consider Stevenson’s affinity with Barthesian debunkings of the reality effect or with Brechtian explorations of theatrical identification.

Unfortunately for our students, bluffer’s guides to literary form, and simplistic narratives of literary history, continually reinforce the naturalization of realism as the essential fictive mode. Of course, that serious and modern writers did not regard realism versus romance as a one-way bet and had compelling arguments for going “in quest of the ideal” (Stevenson, *Works* 28: 74 [“A Note on Realism”]) is hardly news to the professional scholar. Ian Duncan’s *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel* (1992) is an excellent tonic to familiar Whiggish histories of the realist novel, and Matthew Beaumont’s collection *Adventures in Realism* (2007) signals a revisionist trend in accounting for the sheer variety and historical dispersion of realist practice. Still, undergraduates are far more likely to resort to shortcuts and handbooks, and here the reification of realism as the sine qua non of literary fiction is actually deepening. Stevenson is included alongside James in Walter Allen’s account of the realism debate in *The English Novel* (1954) and likewise in Stephen Coote’s *Penguin Short History of English Literature* (1993). But James Wood’s otherwise brilliant *How Fiction Works* (2008), which seems destined to become a standard primer for years to come, omits Stevenson’s side of the debate entirely. The book is lucid, winningly accessible, and brims with insights into novelistic technique; it is notably strong on the conventionality of realism; but it is committed to a realist metaphysics of fiction, going out of its way to dismiss as “more or less nonsense” the notion that “realism is a genre (rather than, say, a central impulse in fiction-making)” (169). The peroration of the book declares that

realism, seen broadly as truthfulness to the way things are, cannot be mere verisimilitude, cannot be mere lifelikeness, or lifesameness, but what I must call *liveness*; life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry. . . . The true writer, that free servant of life, is one who

must always be acting as if life were a category beyond anything the novel had yet grasped; as if life itself were always on the verge of becoming conventional. (186-87)

This statement is little more than a repackaging of James's argument in "The Art of Fiction." You would never guess, from Wood's book, that this vision of the novel's "liveness" had been challenged in the intervening century and a quarter; in fact, Stevenson had—at the very least—seriously dented James's central thesis within months of its publication. How perverse that James's generous *essai* should have the last word, that the very arguments employed to render fictional technique *discutable* should now be used to shut down debate. Here is a final reason to attend to Stevenson's occluded role in the formation of realism as a critical paradigm. Simply showing that this argument had two sides demonstrates to students that literary history, like the novel, is profoundly shaped by omissions and suppressions. It may even energize them to doubt categories, perform their own critiques, and embrace different possibilities for experience as romance.

**Approaches to Teaching
the Works of
Robert Louis Stevenson**

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The Modern Language Association of America
New York 2013