

21. Qtd. in Robert Snape, "National Home Reading Union," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 7, no. 1 (2002): 86–110, 93.
22. Leah Price, "Victorian Reading," in *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. Kate Flint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 34.
23. See, for instance, Jerome McGann, "Recitation Considered as a Fine Art," *Experimental Literary Education, English Language Notes* 47, no. 1 (2009): 181–83; Jonathan Culler, "The Closeness of Close Reading," *ADE Bulletin* 149 (2010): 20–25; Catherine Robson, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
24. For a concise illustration of how major Victorian reading theories press upon this distinction in relevant and productive ways, see Stephen Arata, "Literature and Information," *PMLA* 130, no. 3 (2015): 673–78, especially 677.



## Realism

AYELET BEN-YISHAI

IN considering Aru, the young, idealistic protagonist of her 1996 novel *A Matter of Time*, Indian novelist Shashi Deshpande has her narrator muse on her own narratorial/authorial enterprise and technique:

But to [admit knowledge of the future into her narrative] is to admit that Aru is the heroine of this story; only for the heroine can Time be bent backwards.

Is Aru the heroine? Why not? She has youth, one of the necessary requirements of a heroine. And the other—beauty? Well, possibly. The potential is there anyway. (The *Natyashastra* lays down that the heroine should have nobility and steadfastness as well. But we can ignore this. We no longer make such demands on our heroines.) Perhaps there's this too, this above all, that Aru is trying to make sense of what is happening.<sup>1</sup>

Victorianists might easily recognize the allusion to George Eliot's famous "why always Dorothea?" passage from *Middlemarch*, making explicit not only the connection between the two protagonists but also the genres in which they appear. We might then ask: if the allusion to

Dorothea amplifies Aru's youth, misguided idealism, and understated beauty, how does *Middlemarch* function in *A Matter of Time*, or, for that matter, how does Victorian realism function in the twentieth-century Indian novel in English? In other words, Aru is not alone in her need to make sense; she shares that with the novel, with the reader implied by the text, and with the epistemological project of novelistic realism. In short, in order to make sense, the narrator tells us, *A Matter of Time* needs Victorian realism, here neatly coded and synecdochically packaged as Dorothea.

I suggest that Dorothea, the *Natyashastra* (a 2000-year-old Sanskrit treatise on literary theory), *Middlemarch* and Victorian realism, all function here as reifications—as already-packaged and already-known objects, ready to serve as connotative or allusive commodities. The idea of realism as reified might come as no surprise to readers of Fredric Jameson, who argues that realism—born to challenge and “dissolve” narrative archetypes, conventions, and other reifications by force of “the singular or the contingent”—dies under the weight of its own anti-reification impulse. The result is realism's ossification and degradation: the “three basic realist narrative paradigms [who evolved to “dissolve” earlier reifications]<sup>2</sup> will themselves be reified and become more distinct sub-genres, with a tendency to find themselves degraded into mass-cultural forms and versions.”<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, according to Jameson, realism's demise by reification is salvaged by modernism, which subsumes its sub-genres to transcend them. In this view, realism is always already laying the ground for modernism and only comes into its own through its demise.

While Victorianists (myself included) might take issue with this predilection for modernism, I do think that Jameson generates an important, dynamic reading of realism as always process and never object, where the pull to the historical singular is always a corrective—or a dialectical countermove—to the “archetype” or the reification of realist form as genre (145). However, I would argue *pace* Jameson, that this process has not ceded its power to modernism, but continues its dialectical process to this day, not because it has *not* been reified, but *as* reification.<sup>4</sup> In other words, I suggest, if “the work of realism lies in dissolving [the] archetype” (by virtue of the singular), we might also want to think of the ongoing work done by realism *in its reified form*, long after the period known as realist.

As Victorianists committed to realist form (and I realize that this does not include all of *us*, and definitely not all of us in the same way) we have long been used to fighting the losing battle of rescuing realism

from its reification (even fetishization) by modernists on the one hand or by “middle-brow,” “derivative” writers and readers on the other. These reifications assign to Victorian realism a static set of characteristics or meanings, reducing it to a stable, simplified object, rather than process. They include versions of realism as naïve, as bourgeois, as complicit with power, as a genre of the social, as feminine, as long, as unreflective, etc. Certainly, Deshpande’s critics tend to regard her writing (largely because of its unmarked or unremarkable realism) as middlebrow, bourgeois, and that most damning of all criticisms—that of a women’s writer.<sup>5</sup> Deshpande’s realist novels seem to be perfect examples of one of Jameson’s degraded, mass-cultural forms.

But like the Victorian realist novels themselves—which are more different from each other than similar—the reifications of realism vary widely and historically, but are also fascinating and instructive. What would happen then, if we turn to these reifications not to get past them but rather to get at them? What would it mean to think of realism *qua* reification?

If we are also committed to historical specificity we might then want to examine the various specific historically inflected ways in which Victorian realism functions as a reified form in the twentieth and twenty-first century, as well as during the Victorian period itself. Rather than unpacking the reification to discover what realism *really* was (or in addition to unpacking the reification, or in dialectical tension with unpacking the reification) we might try to think of the specifics that went into the various reifications of realism as they were baked into a genre, as they hardened into the formal shorthand as which they have served in the last two-hundred-odd years.<sup>6</sup> After all, one of the interesting things about reifications is that while they seem hardened, they in fact contain the vestiges of the historical specificity and dialectical processes that made them, as Jameson shows like no one else can.

At this point we might need a second, dialectical move: after unpacking reification to understand the process of its hardening into an object, we must then trace the different ways in which these realism-objects have functioned *as* reifications since the Victorian period—and to what ends. What work does realism do in its new context? What happens in the interface between realism-as-reification and the texts that employ it? This question becomes even more salient—as in the example with which I opened—in novels that employ these generic reifications not to negate them but to emulate them, and especially when they also import, via allusion or citation, a Victorian text itself. Aru meets Dorothea; Deshpande’s

narration meets Eliot's; realism as reified narrative convention (in the narrative style of the novel) meets realism as reified object. The friction created between these textual reifications has realism doubling back on itself, exposing the various dialectics at work.<sup>7</sup> Most importantly, both texts (both sides of the dialectic) are realist novels; the process of defamiliarization and de-reification works itself out without needing to have recourse to modernism.

In other words, I am suggesting an afterlife of Victorian realism not as subsumed by modernism, but constantly challenged by an ongoing realism.<sup>8</sup> In this deviation from Jameson's argument, realism—not modernism—dissolves *its own* reifications by “appropriating their archetypal plots for new acts of freedom,” doubling up on itself in a process one might be tempted to call (that might look uncannily similar to) a negative dialectic. Such a process—of realism as signifier in the world, rather than of the world—can give us a better account of realisms in the twentieth and twenty-first century, as well as of their Victorian predecessors.

#### NOTES

1. Shashi Deshpande, *A Matter of Time* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2001), 185.
2. The bildungsroman, the historical novel, and the novel of adultery. The fourth new or subgenre is naturalism, which he discusses as a slightly different special case.
3. Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (New York: Verso, 2013), 143, 150.
4. To clarify, by “reification” I here mean a historical *process* that has been hardened into a self-explanatory ahistorical *object*.
5. For a longer discussion of Deshpande criticism and my reading of *A Matter of Time* see Ayelet Ben-Yishai, “‘By its very presence’: Conventionality and Commonality in Shashi Deshpande’s Realism,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 52, no. 2 (2015): 300–15.
6. See also Carolyn Lesjak, “Reading Dialectically,” *Criticism* 55, no. 2 (2013): 233–77.
7. Freedgood and Schmitt similarly argue for a reading of textual citation that defamiliarizes its referents. Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt, “Denotatively, Technically, Literally,” *Representations* 125, no. 1 (2014): 1–14, 9.
8. See also Joe Cleary, Jed Esty, and Colleen Lye, “Peripheral Realisms,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2012): 255–68.

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## Realism

IAN DUNCAN

### 1 - IMMANENCE

REALISM achieves critical mass in 1856, the year George Eliot turns to writing fiction. She and George Henry Lewes read volume three of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, in which the *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first use of the word to denote a representational code in art or literature. Writing in the *Westminster Review* in April, Eliot comments: "The truth of infinite value that [Ruskin] teaches is *realism*—the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality."<sup>1</sup> Eliot's essay "The Natural History of German Life" (hereafter NHGL), published in the same journal three months later (two months before Eliot begins "The Sad Fortunes of Amos Barton"), opens with a meditation on realism, although Eliot doesn't use the term.

Lewes does, in an 1858 essay, "Realism in Art: Modern German Fiction," which elaborates the aesthetic principles outlined in NHGL and developed by George Eliot in the famous seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede*. For Lewes, realism is not antithetical to idealism (a fallacy that disables most German efforts in the novel) but is the authentic mode of expressing it; it is "that legitimate form of idealization which consists in presenting the highest form of reality."<sup>2</sup> The head of Christ by Titian has "its profound significance and idealism in the wonderful reality of the presentation; the head is more intensely human than any other representation of Christ, but the humanity is such as accords with our highest conceptions." For this, a photographic fidelity to external appearances is not enough. Realism also requires the artist's investment of sentiment, "sympathy with the internal life."<sup>3</sup> Ethical as well as