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*Realism in the arts: a study of aesthetic and moral arguments about the value of realism*

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REALISM IN THE ARTS

a study of aesthetic and  
moral arguments about the  
value of realism.

Janet Fowler

M.A. Thesis 1974.

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Summary of the Argument

The central theme of this thesis is the apparent conflict between the "aesthetic" argument that realism is not art, and the "moral" argument that art should tell the truth.

In the first section some problems of definition are dealt with, and an attempt is made to show that the much-criticized ideas of reality and resemblance implied by the common-sense interpretation of "realistic", are not as inconsistent as is sometimes suggested.

The inadequacies of the mimetic theory of art are exposed; and the claim that realism is not art is accepted, as long as this is taken to mean only that realism cannot be the defining criterion of a work of art. But this is not equivalent to saying that realism is of no value in art: and other reasons for its importance are suggested. The moral argument, although badly-formulated as a rule, is examined in detail, and shown to be, in essence, a valid argument for realism. Attempts to discredit the arguments for realism by appealing to the autonomy of art are criticized, and a case put forward for applying to art criteria other than those which define it.

Thus, by emphasizing the validity of other justifications of realism, I have tried to challenge what seems to be the prevailing assumption that realism in art has been shown to be worthless, simply because the mimetic theory of art has had to be abandoned.

Introduction

Contemporary aesthetics tends to look upon realism with a mixture of disdain and reproach. Throughout its history, Western aesthetics has been led astray, or so it now seems, by the theory that art is the imitation of life. But, since learning the error of its ways, one of the main concerns of aesthetics has been to put realism firmly in its place. It is now almost a platitude of critical theory, particularly in the visual arts, that realism is not art. At best, realism and art are unrelated; at worst, they are incompatible. This theoretical reaction against realism has been evident at least since the end of the last century, and was noted by Arthur McDowall, writing in 1918:

"The place of realism in aesthetic theory is as dubious at the moment as once it seemed secure. The aestheticians, who will barely grant a foothold to the element of representation in art are naturally still more merciless to realism." (1)

And the reaction still continues. Damian Grant ends the Conclusion to his book Realism (1970) with these words:

"One is left with a paradoxical situation. The theory of realism has been discredited, and Robert Scholes writes of those who 'continue to write frantically' in the realist-naturalist tradition as 'headless chickens unaware of the decapitating axe' (The Fabulators p.21) The word has been variously re-defined by a new

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(1) Realism: A Study in Art and Thought p.29

theoretical initiative which sees it as representing 'the sine qua non of literary significance'. But it is still the old definition that governs the word in popular use (on the jackets of novels and in the weekly journals) unperturbed by the collapse of the theoretical understructure. Perhaps this is not, after all, a paradox, but a witness to the inevitable gap between the best that is known and thought and what is generally accepted." (1)

Thus Grant (and he is not alone in this) attempts to dismiss any concern with realism, unless that word is significantly re-defined, as a relic of the days before the inconsistencies in the mimetic theory of art were exposed; a result of outmoded popular assumptions failing to keep pace with the conclusions of philosophy and criticism.

But I think that there is a genuine paradox here, and a paradox which occurs in a more acute form than Grant implies. As he remarks, there is a spontaneous tendency to interpret and respond to realism in a way which seems to disregard what he calls "the collapse of the theoretical understructure". Realism is used unquestioningly as a simple descriptive category and as a criterion of value, both in casual conversation and on the jackets of novels (as on the cover of the Penguin edition of Stan Barstow's A Kind of Loving, where the book is described as having "a realism and honesty that put...(it) in a class of its own). But, in addition, as the juxtaposition of "realism" and "honesty" in this quotation shows, the instinctive appreciation of realism is backed up by a very different kind of theoretical

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(1) Realism p.24

understructure of its own, in the form of an appeal to a moral principle. Realism in art can be, and in the nineteenth-century frequently was, considered in the same light as telling the truth in other spheres. This attitude is expressed, albeit rather too dogmatically, by Theodore Dreiser:

"The sum and substance of literary as well as social morality may be expressed in three words - tell the truth." (1)

What we have here is something more than a simple discrepancy between casual assumptions and critical theory. There is such a discrepancy, and, even in itself, it would be worthy of attention, for the field of aesthetic appreciation is one in which the label "expert" is no guarantee of infallibility. But there is, in addition to this, a conflict between the conclusions of two very different, and yet apparently plausible, lines of argument about the subject. On the one hand, it is concluded from certain well-established assumptions about the nature of art, that art is not a copy of life, and that, therefore, realism is not art. This can be called the aesthetic argument. On the other hand, the moral principle of truth-telling can be applied to art in such a way that realism seems to be an important moral requirement of art. This is the moral argument. It is not enough just to dismiss one half of the paradox as an example of an aesthetic "naturalistic fallacy", although I would not deny that there is such a fallacy. The assumption that art is, or ought to be, simply the imitation of life, does seem to be a misguided

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(1) 'True Art Speaks Plainly' in Documents of Modern Literary Realism (ed. G. Becker) p.155

one, and leads to inadequate criticism. But the exposure of this fallacy is not equivalent to the discrediting of realism itself, but only of one argument in its favour. A distinction ought to be drawn, but seldom is, between the value of realism and the validity of the mimetic theory of art. That there might be considerations in favour of realism which are independent of the theory that art is the imitation of life, is a possibility which is, at present, too often overlooked.

It would be rash to venture very far into a discussion of realism without making some attempt to define that term. This is made doubly necessary here because of the suspicion that the paradox which has been outlined is perhaps not a genuine paradox at all: that what is meant by "realism" in one argument is not what is meant by "realism" in the other. Such an objection is initially quite a plausible one. For aesthetic objections to realism are found predominantly in the work of writers whose primary concern lies with the visual arts. The defence of realism on moral grounds, however, nearly always seems to refer to literature. Closely related to this distinction is the fact that a realistic technique, tending towards illusionism, is less highly-regarded than realism of subject-matter. Discussions and arguments about realism tend to polarise around the concepts of "imitation" and "truth". The imitation of reality is trivial and inartistic; but truth to reality can be an important criterion of good art.

This in no way solves the fundamental problem. The fact that realism is valued in one art form and slighted in

another; respected under one description and despised under another, does not make the two attitudes compatible. We ought not, indeed, to assume that criteria must be equally applicable to all art forms, but we can demand reasons why they should not be. Nor does the suggested distinction between imitation and truth help to provide us with such a reason. For although it is, in general, legitimate to distinguish between truth and imitation, and to do so would certainly offer an easy way out of the difficulty, such a distinction is not necessary in the context of representation, and is probably unjustified. For both "truth" and "imitation" can be appropriately applied to a representation which is "like reality" and this is the fundamental meaning of realism. When an advocate of realism talks about truth in representation, he is talking about a representation which is like reality. When an opponent of realism is talking about imitation, he, too, is talking about representations which are like reality. It is because a work of art can be like reality in some respects and not in others that an attempt can be made to distinguish truth from imitation. But the distinction thus drawn is usually a very arbitrary one, which does not solve the problem of our inconsistent attitudes towards realism, but merely masks their inconsistency by applying them to different aspects of the work in question. We are still left with what seem to be contradictory answers to the question: to what extent should art be like life? And it is with regard to this general question that the paradox and the controversy about realism arise.

To define realism as "like reality" is generally regarded as extremely unsatisfactory, and the problem of definition normally centres around the attempt to give some significant content to that admittedly vague and unhelpful notion, for the sake of aesthetic criticism and terminology. But definitions which do this, necessary and useful though they are in their context, evade, by the actual process of delimiting an area to which "realism" can reasonably apply, the fundamental problem which realism in its general sense poses for aesthetics. For the area so delimited tends to be one in which the conflict between moral and aesthetic considerations need not arise. The three definitions of realism which follow show this very clearly.

One line of approach, exemplified most emphatically today in Socialist Realism, is to take "reality" as meaning, not simply what exists, but what is of ultimate significance in existing reality - a normative use of "real" which is not uncommon. Thus the emphasis and selection of the significant becomes the major characteristic of realism in this sense, a sense in which it can retain its associations of truth while no longer being open to attack on the grounds of being a literal copy. This is to be seen, for example, in Brecht's definition of realism:

"Realist means laying bare society's causal network/showing up the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the dominators/writing from the standpoint of the class which has prepared the broadest solutions for the most pressing problems afflicting human society/emphasizing the dynamics

of development/concrete and so as to encourage abstraction." (1)

Damian Grant suggests an alternative way in which realism can be defined so as to be distinguishable from imitation whilst still having connotations of truth. By substituting a "coherence" for a "correspondence" theory of truth in art, he can claim that the realistic representation is not necessarily one which faithfully depicts the existing world, but rather one which creates a consistent and convincing world of its own:

"The meaning of realism has become generalized to include the achievement of reality, the creation of belief, however this may be arrived at." (2)

A third method, neutral between definitions of realism as truth or imitation, is that adopted by Wellek, who, aware of the difficulties inherent in the subject, is content, for some purposes, to define realism in terms of the historical movement of that name, and to call "realistic" works which embody the typical characteristics of that movement:

"I shall be content with raising the question of realism in the nineteenth century, anchored in a particular moment of history, referable to a well-known body of texts...I shall make some common-sense distinctions and lead slowly to a concrete description of the period-concept of realism, which I shall regard as a regulative

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(1) The Popular and the Realistic: Brecht on Theatre p.109

(2) Realism p. 72

concept, a system of norms dominating a specific time, whose rise and eventual decline it would be possible to trace and which we can set clearly apart from the norms of the periods that precede and follow it." (1)

Definitions of these and other less important kinds are legitimate and valuable in that they serve the purpose of the writer in the context of his argument; and this is a perfectly adequate justification of a definition of a word as vague and ambiguous as realism. Both Brecht and Grant are, in different ways, trying to formulate a new and acceptable critical theory of realism which is free from the paradoxes and contradictions of the traditional theory. Wellek is trying to establish an unambiguous and manageable terminology as a basis for criticism. But the very consistency and practicability of such definitions makes them unsuitable for the present purpose. They are so formulated as to evade the conflict between our ideas about truth and imitation, which arises from the less sophisticated, and more fundamental general concept of realism as meaning simply "like reality". It is with the paradoxes arising out of this conflict that we are here concerned; and that definition which is least satisfactory for most practical purposes, is here the most appropriate. It is anything but a perfect definition of realism, but it raises the problems which most other definitions have been carefully formulated to avoid, but which they have not solved.

The problem with which we are left is that which Harold Osborne describes, although perhaps in language

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(1) 'The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship'  
Neophilologus 1961

which is more appropriate to the visual arts, as:

"in what sense a work of art can, and to what extent it should, be an exact replica of real or possible actuality." (1)

If "reproduction" or "representation" were substituted for "replica" here, the application of the same question to literature would become more apparent.

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(1) Aesthetics and Criticism p.69

Chapter 1: Reality and Resemblance

The idea of a work of art being "like reality" is not one which appears particularly problematic to unreflecting common sense. It seems, at first sight, to be a fairly straightforward matter to apply realistic criteria to art. But when reflection sets in, as it is bound to do sooner or later with words like "reality" and "realism", the initial interpretation of "like reality" begins to look naïve, arbitrary and even inconsistent. The very notion of reality is vague and ambiguous. There seem to be no criteria for deciding which objects or aspects of experience deserve to be called "reality". A case could be put forward for including or excluding anything. Neither is the relation of likeness any more straightforward. Can a work of art be significantly "like" reality at all? And even if it can, it is difficult to explain why we feel that the concept of realism applies more appropriately to those art forms which are called representational than to others. Eventually the whole idea of talking about a work of art being realistic begins to look misguided and inadequate.

Thus those who advocate, and even those who merely talk about, realism, are accused of working with a concept which is either useless, because it can apply to anything and any attempt to limit it must be arbitrary; or impossible, because it is a mistake to talk about a resemblance between a representation and what it represents.

A discussion of the value of realism, in a general sense, would be pointless if the whole concept were

inadequate. But in spite of the complexity of the problems involved, it is still possible for the common-sense notion of realism to emerge relatively unscathed.

### I. Reality

To reformulate the definition of realistic as "like a real x" rather than just "like reality" helps to clarify both the meaning of realism and that of the related concept of representation. The advantages of this apparently tautological reformulation lie in the fact that its more specific logical and grammatical structure clarifies and simplifies discussion by providing a method of distinguishing between primary and secondary uses of "realistic", thus reducing the area to be dealt with, and showing that the ordinary interpretation of realism need not be regarded either as arbitrary or as inconsistent.

To talk about "a real x" rather than just "reality" helps to elucidate the function of "real" here. "Real" refers to the status of an object or event relative to the non-real, imitation, or pseudo-object or event which is what a representation can best be considered as being. This is in line with Charlton's characterization of representation as a kind of alternative to real existence:

"I am suggesting that words like 'representation', 'represented' play the same sort of role in our speech as words like 'reality', 'real'. Thus the expression 'in a picture' functions like the expression 'in real life'. We can say that a horse is grazing in a field in a picture, as we

can say that a horse is grazing in a field in real life. In the one case the horse is represented as grazing; in the other it really is grazing." (1)

This analysis of Charlton's seems to make clear one of the most important characteristics of representation: that it is not so much a statement about, or a description of, something as a non-real something. That something can be described as "an x, but not a real x" means that it satisfies, in relevant respects, the concept of an "x", but in a non-real context. The emphasis here is not on the adjective "real" so much as on the noun to which it applies; and this has significant implications with regard to the analysis of realism. A representation of a duck is a non-real duck. And to say that such a representation is realistic is to say that it is like a real duck. "Real" here clearly does not refer to some sort of Transcendental Essence of Duck, or the Ultimate Reality of Duckness, or anything of the kind. It is not so much "real" as "duck" which determines the concept with which we are working - that of the ordinary phenomenal duck, which swims, flies, is shot, eaten, and described in ornithological textbooks. It is important to recognize that the common-sense notion of "duck" does answer best to the description of "real duck" in this context, where what is in question is the opposition between the real and the imitation/imaginary/pseudo-duck; rather than what the real duck "really" is, whether mass of atoms, Platonic Form, or

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(1) Aesthetics p.59

whatever. Thus we are not wrong to suspect highly unorthodox renderings which purport to show us the "real" duck, and to doubt assertions that there can be no such thing as realism because we have no way of knowing what the real duck is.

## II. Resemblance

The reformulation also helps to solve some of the problems raised by the notion of "likeness" or resemblance. The only thing which can be appropriately said to be "like" a real  $x$  in this context, is a non-real  $x$ . This provides a reason for limiting the application of "realistic" to representations, and for excluding other types of relation which can hold between a work of art and reality. The two most important of these relations are those of expression and truth, which are sometimes, albeit rather tentatively, put forward as realistic.

Why should we not say that a piece of music is a realistic expression of grief, or of storminess? Or that a factory realistically expresses its function, or a piece of pottery the clay from which it was made? The emphasis on the concept of the noun, in the reformulation, helps to explain why not. To merit the description of "realistic", the work of art must satisfy that concept; which in the case of expression it does not necessarily do. Expressive relations do indeed depend upon some correspondences between the work of art and what it expresses, but these are not the relevant correspondences for describing the work as "an  $x$  but not a real  $x$ ". The piece of music is not a non-real storm, nor non-real grief; nor is it a non-real expression

of grief. The factory is in no sense an unreal factory; nor is the piece of pottery made from unreal clay. The similarities which occur here between the work of art and the properties or emotions it expresses are not those similarities between the unreal and the real which merit the description of "realistic".

It is also, I believe, a mistake to assimilate all truth-relations in art to realism. If a distinction between statements and representations is accepted ( and this is in some ways a controversial distinction, which will need to be justified later) then there will be a corresponding difference between the representation which is like the real thing, and a true statement about it. A description or statement, again, is not the sort of thing of which it can be said "this is an x, but not a real x". A work of art can function as a sort of proposition about the world, making true or false statements about it. But when considered in this way, for example as allegory, its relationship to reality is symbolic rather than representational. Most of the characters in The Faerie Queene, for instance, are not very much like real people; but then again, this does not seem to matter, since we realise that they are functioning primarily as symbols of vices or virtues, and relate to other symbols in order to say something about the world. But the relationship has now become one of truth rather than realism. For the symbol functions as part of a statement (admittedly a statement of a peculiar kind) and not as a non-real person, or even as a non-real vice or virtue. Many works of literature, and some

paintings, combine representation and symbolism in various degrees, and can be considered from either, or, preferably, both, points of view. But the ways in which representations and symbols relate to reality are different. It seems odd to talk about The Faerie Queene as realistic or unrealistic; and yet one would want to say of such a work that it can be, in some sense, true, in spite of its lack of realism. It is sometimes assumed, and not only by those who deny the distinction between representation and statement, that what is true is realistic. But when we reformulate "realistic" as "like a real", we can see that, although realism may be considered as a unique type of truth relation, not all true statements about life in art may be appropriately labelled "realistic".

This reduces the scope of "realistic" to the representational arts: but, although the standard of realism can be applied to any representation, it would simplify the question of its value if we could limit the discussion, for the present purpose, still further. In doing so, however, we must be careful not to ignore the very different applications and associations of realism in different artistic contexts. It is particularly important to include both painting and literature in the discussion of realism, because, as was seen earlier, different concepts and assumptions tend to polarize around these different art forms; whilst the general problem of the validity of art being like reality, remains essentially the same. Painting and literature (of the narrative and dramatic kinds) are, although not

intrinsically more important than other forms of art, the two forms that come to the fore in the study of realism. They represent the two poles around which the different concepts tend to group themselves, and they are also the forms which have figured most prominently in the historical controversy over realism. Neither of these forms, then, can reasonably be ignored; but it would seem to be justifiable to simplify the discussion by limiting it to painting and literature. If a general theory of realism is possible at all, it ought to be feasible to base it upon these two extreme cases, and apply it, no doubt with certain modifications, to the other representational arts, such as ballet, opera, cinema and so on.

The distinction, drawn above, between representation and statement, and the concept of representation as a pseudo-reality, might now, themselves, seem inadequate. For they sound as though they apply to painting more than to literature. But a more careful analysis of representation in literature shows that this is not so. Although it is composed of statements, a narrative poem or a novel (as distinct from, say, a meditative poem or a text-book) describes, not the real world or our thoughts about it, but a pseudo-reality. And it is this pseudo-reality, its events and characters, which constitute the representational element in literature. The pseudo-reality of the book will almost always contain elements from the real world, specific places, historical periods and so on; but these (as Margaret Macdonald suggests) (1) may be considered as functioning

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(1) 'The Language of Fiction' in Philosophy Looks at the Arts ed. Margolis.

at the same level of pseudo-reality as the rest of the representation.

The sort of representation which is found in literature could perhaps be described as "indirect representation". The words and the physical structure of the book are not, as a rule, although there are exceptions, the representational element. The representation is the state of affairs to which they refer. The differences between direct and indirect modes of representation might help to account for the variations of emphasis between painting and literature, and the different views of realism which arise in each art. With direct representation, realism of representation is not divorced from the technique used to create the physical work of art. Thus the discussion of realism in painting tends to centre around the painter's technique, and the verisimilitude of what he produces - a verisimilitude which, taken to extremes, culminates in the immediate visual illusion of the trompe l'oeil. The realism of the indirect representation of literature tends to be considered much more in terms of subject-matter; since it is not so much the language and structure of the book which are representational as the "story" which it tells, and which is assessed by criteria, not of illusion, but of probability and consistency. There is no analogy of the trompe l'oeil in literature ( unless one could claim that the sense of involvement, of actually being there, which sometimes arises in the reading of a book, was a genuine case of illusion, which is very questionable). There is, however, a corresponding form of indirect illusion, by which a

fictional story can be taken for a factual report.

The distinction between literature and painting, between direct and indirect representation, is not meant to hold absolutely and in all cases. There are modes of literary writing, such as Joyce's stream-of-consciousness technique, or the journal technique frequently employed by other writers, in which the words of the book themselves have a representational function, and which constitute an attempt to make literature approximate to a realism of a more direct variety. There are also examples of painters and critics for whom realism in painting is a matter of subject as well as of technique. If every picture tells a story (and representational paintings certainly can be seen in such a light,) then the pictorial story, what is happening or portrayed in the picture, can be judged as realistic on the same kind of grounds of probability as a story in literature. It would be a mistake to describe this as an example of indirect representation in painting; rather, it is the transferring of the literary emphasis on realism of subject-matter to the sphere of painting, where, because of the direct mode of representation, such an emphasis does not tend to arise naturally. Linda Nochlin's book, Realism, is mainly concerned with realism in this sense, but it is not what is immediately understood by realism in the visual arts.

Thus it is hardly surprising that attitudes to realism in painting and literature are often very different; for one kind of realism naturally comes to the fore of our thoughts about realism in painting, and another with reference to literature. To talk about realism of subject and technique

might seem to be drawing a false distinction, since it is sometimes argued that subject and technique are inseparable. But although they may be inseparable in practice, it might still be possible to draw a valid theoretical distinction between them. Even this distinction is not always clear-cut, and there may well be cases when it is impossible to say whether something is an aspect of subject or technique, but it is a sufficiently clear distinction to be of use. There does seem to be a conceptual difference between the two kinds of realism, a difference which determines the kind of criteria (probability or illusion) by which realism is identified, and which tends to correspond to the difference between cases where we talk about "truth" and those where we talk about "imitation". But the fact that such a distinction can be drawn does not, as has already been argued, solve the problem of our conflicting assumptions about realism, but merely separates them.

### III. Is Resemblance Possible?

The criterion of realism has not only been accused of being so vague as to be inapplicable; but also of being, at least as it is usually interpreted, fundamentally inconsistent. The distinction between representation and language, the natural and the conventional sign, which I have so far been assuming, has been strenuously denied, and the whole idea of a work of art being "like" reality has been attacked as naive and meaningless. The most forceful attack comes from Nelson Goodman, in Languages of Art :

"The plain fact is that a picture, to represent an object, must be a symbol for it, stand for it, refer to it: and that no degree of resemblance is

sufficient to establish the requisite relationship of reference: almost anything may stand for almost anything else. A picture that represents - like a passage that describes - an object, refers to it and, more particularly, denotes it. Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance."

(1)

What is controversial here is not the denial that resemblance is a sufficient condition for representation; nor yet the denial that it is a necessary condition for reference: but the equation of representation (in this sense) with reference, and the consequent claim that resemblance is not a necessary condition for representation either. Goodman claims that the difference between depiction and description is one of degree rather than kind, based on the relative "density" of the symbol-schemes involved. The same kind of point is made, somewhat less emphatically, by Gombrich, in Art and Illusion:

"Everything points to the conclusion that the phrase 'the language of art' is more than a loose metaphor, that even to describe the world in images, we need a developed system of schemata." (2)

Both writers are led, by their insistence upon the notion of a "language of art", to define realism in art, not in terms of resemblance, but with reference to truth and the symbol

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(1) Languages of Art p.5

(2) Art and Illusion p.76

system, Goodman's view being a qualification of Gombrich's :

"those who understand the notation will derive no false information from the drawing." (1)

"How correct the picture is under the system depends upon how accurate is the information about the object that is obtained by reading the picture according to that system. But how literal or realistic the picture is depends upon how standard the system is." (2)

More important for the present purpose than the idea of a language of art, which only applies to the visual arts, are the reasons which led Goodman and Gombrich to think that such a concept was necessary - reasons which apply also to literature. (Goodman and Gombrich do not apply them to literature presumably because they take it to be self-evident that literary representation is a matter of symbolism, an assumption which has already been questioned.) They are led to conceive of representation in terms of symbolism rather than similarity because of the alleged impossibility of creating in a work of art something which is "like" reality. The most important obstacles in the way of the creation of such a likeness are the limitations of the medium, which lead to artistic conventions, and the subjectivity of the artist's awareness, as manifested in style and treatment. These obstacles do not apply only to visual art. Because of the indirect mode of representation in literature, the writer is less limited than the artist by his medium, except as regards considerations of manageability. But the problem

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(1) Art and Illusion p.78

(2) Languages of Art p.38

of the subjectivity of the writer, and the inevitability of incomplete representation, is just as great, if not greater, in the context of literature.

There is also an unrelated minor objection to the theory that realism is a matter of resemblance, which is raised in passing by Goodman; and it is as well to look at it first, before going on to the more important objections. Goodman's argument is concerned with fictions in art. The existence of realistic fictions, he says, is incompatible with the idea that realistic representations are like the real thing; because in this case, there is no real thing for them to be like:

"The copy theory of representation takes a further beating here: for where a representation does not represent anything, there can be no question of resemblance to what it represents." (1)

Goodman here seems to be ignoring the fact that we can talk quite consistently of something being like a kind of thing, as well as being like a particular thing. This is what is involved whenever we say that something is like an x, rather than like the x; and of the two phrases, both within and outside the realm of representation, the former would seem to be the more usual. To take Goodman's example of Pickwick: Goodman claims that the realism of Pickwick cannot be a matter of being like reality, because there is, in reality, no Pickwick on which he was modelled. He implies that in order to say that Pickwick resembles reality, it

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(1) Languages of Art p.25

would have to be possible to say that he was a "likeness of a-man-called-Pickwick". He ignores the alternative possibility of saying that he is a convincing "likeness-of-a-man called Pickwick" , which seems to be a better analysis. The particularized representation of a man in a work of art is compared, not with a particular real man, nor even with a type of real man, but with real men in general. How we actually manage to assess this sort of generic likeness is a problem which need not concern us here. It is enough to realise that there is nothing inherently illogical about saying that something is like a real thing, but not like any particular real thing. This does not, of course, mean that realistic representations are generalized types. One of the characteristics of real things in general is that they are individuals; and therefore a realistic representation must also be one which is individualized; but it need not be the representation of any actual individual.

The same kind of argument works when transferred from the level of fictitious entities to that of fictitious kinds of things, as with Goodman's other example of the unicorn. We could not say that a representation of a unicorn was like a real unicorn; but we could still say that it was like a real animal, and even analyse it further, saying that its hoofs were like real hoofs, and so on. As long as the idea of resemblance to a kind of thing is admitted, as I think it should be, then fictions do not appear to pose any more problems for a theory of representation and realism based on the concept of resemblance. The concept of realism, however, can only be applied to fictitious kinds

of things, as opposed to fictitious individuals, in the visual arts, where realism is a matter of technique as well as subject. A painting of Saint George and the Dragon, or a Surrealist painting by Dali, might well qualify to be called "realistic" in one sense, although a book with the same subject would not. Even with regard to painting, we might feel the need to qualify our attribution of the label "realistic". The basic concept of realism, the one in relation to which most of the problems which we are discussing arise, is the concept of the faithful reproduction of kinds of things, which are represented just as they are in real life. Fictitious individuals are not excluded from this concept of realism, but fictitious classes of things have a much more doubtful status.

The idea of generic resemblances may also help to explain why realism is associated with a norm of experience; and why anything which is too far removed from that norm, although possible, and perhaps even historically true, is not accepted as realistic.

It is necessary now to turn to the more important and widespread criticisms of the idea that we can talk of a representation being like reality: the related problems of convention and subjectivity. The limitations of the medium, so the argument runs, make it impossible to create something which is a genuine likeness of what is seen or experienced. As Gombrich says of realistic painting:

"It is not a faithful record of a visual experience, but the faithful construction of a

relational model."(1)

And seeing and experiencing are, themselves, not the passive reception of stimuli from the external world, but the active construction by the mind of an intelligible universe, an activity in which perception and interpretation cannot be divorced:

"The innocent eye is a myth...The whole distinction between sensation and perception, plausible as it was, had to be given up in the face of the evidence from experiments with human beings and animals. Nobody has ever seen a visual sensation, not even the impressionists, however ingenuously they stalked their prey." (2)

"there is no innocent eye. The eye comes always ancient to its work, obsessed by its own past and by old and new insinuations of the ear, nose, tongue, fingers, heart and brain...not only how, but also what it sees is regulated by need and prejudice. It selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyses, constructs. It does not so much mirror as take and make." (3)

But neither of these objections shows that a representation cannot be like reality. What they do show is that a representation will not be a faithful reproduction, in every respect, of some sort of noumenal world, and that

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(1) Art and Illusion p. 78

(2) Art and Illusion p. 252

(3) Languages of Art p. 7

is a very different thing. I have already argued that the reality in question must be a phenomenal reality. And a resemblance is not necessarily an absolute or perfect resemblance. Indeed, on some theories, absolute resemblance would constitute identity. Neither objection prevents us from talking meaningfully about a resemblance between representation and reality; and as long as we can do this, the traditional interpretation of "realistic" will be acceptable. It would perhaps help, though, to examine the objections a little more closely.

When Goodman, and sometimes even Gombrich, talk about conventions in art, they make it sound as though the whole representation is a symbolic composition. This is because certain aspects of the real world; light, for instance, or the third dimension, cannot be directly reproduced in a painting, but have to be in some way translated into artistic terms. ( This is an argument which has more force with reference to painting and drawing than to literature. There are representational conventions in literature, too, but these tend to be of a different kind, based on the need to restrict what is represented to a manageable scale, rather than the impossibility of reproducing the effects of life in a particular medium. They are usually selective conventions, such as the concentration on one or two major characters or situations) But it is surely possible to accept the undeniable fact that there must be some conventions in a representation, without concluding from

this that the whole thing is conventional.

A much better view of convention in art, is that of Harry Levin, who speaks of literary conventions as a "necessary difference between art and life" (1), thus apparently implying that there is a more fundamental relationship of resemblance in the background. A similar analysis is given by J.L.Lowes:

"An artist sets to work to paint a landscape.

But the landscape has three dimensions; the flat surface has but two. Out of the limitations of his medium he must construct a set of symbols that will give to the plane the appearance of depth." (2)

The juxtaposition of "symbol" and "appearance" here seems to indicate a certain confusion; but it can also be seen as a recognition of the fact that convention and resemblance are not incompatible, but can both be present in a representation.

Convention, then, does not rule out the possibility of resemblance. A convention, as a "necessary difference" between art and life, can best be seen, not as an obstacle to realism, but as a factor which limits and defines the area to which realistic criteria can be applied. What we accept by convention in representation is not a complete system of symbols, but simply which aspects of resemblance are, and which are not, to count as relevant in a work in a particular medium or style. There is no need at all to

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(1) The Gates of Horn p.18

(2) Convention and Revolt in Poetry p.1

abandon the idea of resemblance altogether, in favour of the apparently more sophisticated notion of a "language of art".

On the other hand, conventions themselves cannot be judged or compared from the point of view of realism. For a convention, by definition, is not realistic. This seems to be the source of much of the confusion about, for example, Impressionism. For in the conventions of Impressionism, a resemblance based on light and atmosphere takes precedence over the traditional emphasis on a resemblance based on figure and outline; and it is impossible to say that the one kind of painting is more realistic than the other.

Neither is the argument from the subjectivity of the artist any more compelling. At one level, it seems to be denying the possibility of realism by denying the possibility of objectivity in any context - a move which leaves the contrary notion of subjectivity little more than vacuous. Taken at another level, it shows only that resemblances between art and reality may be at best imperfect; but this does not amount to a denial of resemblance altogether.

A part of the force of this "innocent eye" argument - that is, the argument which denies the existence of the innocent eye, and of the innocent mind as well - is derived from the idea that the inevitable conceptualization of experience means that we are never aware of things as they are in themselves, of Kant's noumenal reality, but only of the phenomenal world of our own experiences. Thus the artist can never copy reality, since he is never aware of it. But

it is a mistake to equate "real" with things in themselves; and to say that all experience involves interpretation and subjectivity denies significance to either word. The phenomenal world, although it may be a human construct, is both stable and consistent enough to give meaning to the notion of objectivity, and a standard against which we can test "subjective" deviations. As David Pole points out, all that the concept of realism demands is not "innocent eyes", but only "shared sophistication" (1).

This need to give some content to the idea of objectivity in experience, before we can complain about its subjectivity, is very similar to a distinction drawn in a slightly different way, and in a psychological, rather than a philosophical context, by Rudolph Arnheim. This distinction is relevant here because it is prompted by an inconsistency in Gombrich's treatment of the psychology of representation in Art and Illusion. Writing from the point of view of Gestalt psychology, Arnheim objects to Gombrich's failure to differentiate between the influence of perceptual organization and the influence of schemata derived from past experience, whilst at the same time it is one of Gombrich's main theses in the book that the development of realism proceeds by the testing of historical schemata against actual experience. This position does seem to imply that organization in experience can be logically prior to the influence of historical schemata, which latter, with some effort, can be shaken off:

"a theorist cannot invoke appeals to the standards

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(1) 'Goodman and the Naive View of Representation'  
British Journal of Aesthetics 1974

of nature if he asserts at the same time that the view of nature is always a product of traditional schemata." (1)

Thus the argument from the subjectivity of the artist can easily be carried to an unacceptable extreme; and once we do draw a significant distinction between subjective and objective, it becomes much less plausible to suppose that a representation can never be realistic. In simple cases, as Gombrich himself points out, a copy can be as free from subjectivity, in any meaningful sense of the word, as anything could possibly be:

"So complex is the information that reaches us from the visible world that no picture will ever embody it all. That is not due to the subjectivity of vision but to its richness. Where the artist has to copy a human product, he can, of course, produce a facsimile which is indistinguishable from the original. The forger of bank-notes succeeds only too well in effacing his personality and the limitations of a period style." (2)

Nobody would deny ~~that~~ there is all the difference in the world between forging a bank-note and painting a landscape. The latter could not conceivably achieve anything like the accuracy of the former. Yet once we realise, as the bank-note example helps us to do, that we are not completely cut

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(1) Towards a Psychology of Art p.160

(2) Art and Illusion p.78

off behind a barrier of subjectivity, the fact that perhaps every representation is to some extent distorted need not worry us unduly. For the very idea of distortion in this context is parasitic upon the idea of resemblance; and distortion is subject to degrees, ranging from a very close approximation to the subject to a wide deviation from it: that is, from the realistic to the unrealistic. Neither necessary differences, nor necessarily imperfect similarities need force us to deny that a representation can be "like" or "unlike" reality.

It is important to realise, then, that a resemblance does not have to be perfect or absolute in order to be a resemblance. This point is made by J.W.Manns, in an article in which he criticizes Goodman for operating with a concept of absolute resemblance, whilst his concepts of realism and representation are relative and admit of convention. Manns points out that resemblances, too, can be relative and conventional; a fact which helps to defend the common-sense notion of realism from Goodman's attack:

"Realistic representation depends...upon inculcation.' And can't we now say the same of resemblance as well? Some aspects of resemblance are more commonly singled out than others. It is these which we take as natural."(1)

That resemblances can be incomplete and relative is a fact which helps to counter another objection of Goodman's: that representations can be used to classify something, to

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(1) 'Representation, Relativism and Resemblance'  
British Journal of Aesthetics 1971

represent it as something. This function can just as plausibly be seen as performed by selecting certain resemblances in preference to others. Goodman's assumption that resemblance cannot be used in a classificatory way is another conclusion from his absolute concept of resemblance, and does not seem to be justified.

Realism must, therefore, be considered as relative in many ways. This does not mean, however, that there is no way in which we can say that one work of art is more realistic than another. A painting or a book fails to be realistic, not by failing to reproduce reality with complete accuracy and in its entirety, but by significantly distorting the representation within the relevant frame of reference imposed by convention and style, or when what is represented is not the kind of thing which is to be found in the real world. Realism, and especially realism as a moral principle, demands not only the maximum possible fidelity of representation, but also the representation of real kinds of things. Greater realism may also be attributed to works in which the number of relevant areas of resemblance is greater. Hence detail is often a characteristic of realism.

The relevant criteria of realism, then, can be applied in a straightforward and unambiguous way, in spite of the fact that realism is never absolute. Its relativity does not make realism a less manageable or useful concept for criticism and aesthetics.

On the whole, then, the common-sense concept of realism.

is not as naive and inapplicable as it is sometimes made out to be. It does make sense to ask whether or not a representation is "like reality". It therefore also makes sense to ask if a representation ought to be like reality.

## Chapter 2: The Aesthetic Argument

The aesthetic argument claims that realism is not art. It is based on the recognition of the fact that what we value in art is never realism alone; and those other qualities which we do claim to require in art are not only very different from realism, but also, in many ways, opposed to it. The mimetic theory of art, which would make of realism the fundamental aesthetic quality, is untenable without modification. And the modifications of the mimetic theory implicitly subordinate realism to characteristics which are eventually realised to be unrelated to it, and even incompatible with it.

### I. The Mimetic Theory

The mimetic theory is the theory that art is the imitation of life and nature. It has been very widely held, and very differently interpreted, from the time of Plato and Aristotle onwards. But, taken in its most literal sense, as it must be if it is to be considered as the theoretical basis for realism, it has severe limitations as a complete or general theory of art. This is reflected in the fact that the imitative element is, implicitly or explicitly, always subordinated to something else, whether the beautiful, the sublime, the ideal, the instructive, or whatever. It is difficult to find anybody who holds a purely mimetic theory of art, although many people have held a mimetic theory in conjunction with a theory of some other kind.

One of the explanations of the need to qualify the

mimetic theory is that it cannot very easily function as a general theory of art because there are so many forms of art to which its application seems quite inappropriate. The idea of imitation, as we now understand it, although perfectly acceptable in the context of representation, seems very awkward when applied to such art forms as music, architecture and modern painting. Aristotle does try to consider all art forms as imitative, in a broader sense(1), but there is a distinct asymmetricality between the way in which a story or a picture can be said to be an imitation of life, and the way in which music can be said to be one. This limited applicability of the mimetic theory leads to a search for a more general definition of art, which will apply equally to abstract painting, music or literature: a definition of art in terms of, for example, form or expression.

But the main objection to the mimetic theory is that it is simply inadequate. We think that art must be something more than just the reproduction of the existing world. Often quoted in this context is the remark, attributed to Rebecca West, that " a copy of the universe is not what is required of art; one of the damned thing is ample." It should be recognized, however, that there is nothing logically inconsistent about saying that art is essentially the imitation of reality. The only inconsistency here is between the implications of the mimetic theory and our traditional esteem for art. If we were willing to admit that art is perhaps trivial, or is at best a substitute for, or record of, reality, thus subordinating art to life itself or to

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(1) Poetics chap.1

other human activities, such as science or history; then there would be no objection to the imitation theory. One writer who comes closer to accepting a pure mimetic theory than most, is Chernishevsky. And he asserts at the same time that traditional attitudes to art are distorted and exaggerated:

"When one considers how strongly entrenched the opinion is that the beauty of a work of art is supposedly greater than beauty in nature, the briefness of our analysis may really be a fault; this opinion is, however, so shaky, the exponents of it so contradict themselves at every step, that it would only seem necessary to call attention to how unjust this opinion is for everyone to see that beauty in real life is superior to any product of the 'creative' imagination" (1)

But this is a step which few are willing or brave enough to take, and a definition of art is expected also to be a justification of art, a role in which the mimetic theory is particularly unsatisfactory.

This whole problem of the inadequacy of imitation as a justification of art was made all the more acute by the development of photography. This forced people to search for a definition of painting in particular, and art in general, through which it could be seen that art has a value unattainable by the mechanical reproduction of reality in a photograph. The value of a painting was consequently sought in areas other than its imitation of the real world; and

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(1) Life and Aesthetics (DMLR p.55)

here again ideas such as form, expression and creativity come to the fore. It is now almost universally recognized, and, I think, rightly so, that a purely mimetic theory of art is untenable. In fact, this seems always to have been recognized, but not explicitly stated, with the result that the mimetic theory was constantly being modified and qualified, but never actually rejected. What has been happening in more recent aesthetics is that the implications of well-established assumptions about the value and nature of art are being made more explicit, and taken to their logical conclusions: the conclusions that art is not imitation, and that, therefore, realism is not art. This is what I have called the aesthetic argument against realism.

## II. The Aesthetic Argument

An aesthetic argument, in this sense, is one which is concerned with what is, or is not, art. According to a definition, or at least a description of art, it attempts to identify and assess artistic value; in this case, the artistic value of realism. This broad sense of "aesthetic" should be distinguished from the more specific sense in which an "aesthetic" argument is an argument for pure art or aestheticism: theories which maintain that art serves no practical or moral purpose. In the more general sense, an aesthetic argument is not committed to denying a moral or practical function to art. Such a function must, however, be part of the definition of art itself, and not something external to it. An aesthetic argument makes no appeal to considerations other than artistic ones; but the way art is

defined, as long as the definition is consistent, does not matter. Thus something like Tolstoy's communication theory, which is usually used as an illustration of a moralistic, as opposed to a purely aesthetic, approach to art, could be seen, in this case, as the basis of an aesthetic argument.

One objection to the way in which almost all aesthetic arguments are formulated is that specific definitions of art are always inadequate. Art, as a human institution, is extremely flexible, and tends to be different things at different times - just what it is depending to a great extent upon which definitions happen to be in vogue at the time. To attempt to define art specifically as expression, the creation of significant form, the imitation of the beautiful, and so on, seems to be misguided, for art can be all of these, and much more besides. But this does not necessarily invalidate the aesthetic arguments against realism. Where the definitions of art upon which such arguments are based, are helpful, is in drawing attention to some of the most important kinds of assumptions we make about art, and the sort of qualities which we consider to make it worthwhile. We should therefore look at the arguments derived from some of the major definitions of art, not thinking of them so much as rival theories about what art is, but in order to see how some of our most deeply-rooted convictions about art relate to realism.

To talk about "the" aesthetic argument about realism sounds wrong. For there are as many such arguments as there are definitions of art. But the same preoccupations and structure can be seen running through all of them, and it

is simpler to think of one general argument, manifesting itself in different forms, and with different emphases, rather than a number of separate ones. One writer who draws together many of the main threads of the aesthetic argument is Etienne Gilson, in Painting and Reality. Although his own analysis of art is rather an individual one, and in spite of the fact that he deals only with painting, Gilson's approach to realism in this book reflects most of the major concerns of aesthetic arguments in general.

As has already been suggested, the aesthetic argument arises out of the need to find a definition of art which can also explain and justify the esteem in which it is traditionally held. Two criteria of an acceptable definition of art, from this point of view, are that it must allocate to art a function which art alone can fulfill, or postulate a quality peculiar to art; and it must show that such a function or quality is worthwhile. The mimetic theory seems to be unable to do either of these things, and thus needs to be modified, if not abandoned. This preoccupation with the justification of art is shown quite clearly by Gilson:

"To duplicate real objects by a series of images without substance of their own is, to say the least, a pastime more suitable to youth than to persons who have reached intellectual maturity. The only explanation of this phenomenon is that paintings serve some purpose of their own that is not served, or that is less well served, by

the things constituting the world of nature." (1)  
 Another writer whose version of the aesthetic argument against realism is explicitly based on the same considerations is Clive Bell, who says in the Preface to Art:

"Everyone in his heart believes that there is a real distinction between works of art and all other objects; this belief my hypothesis justifies. We all feel that art is immensely important; my hypothesis affords reason for thinking it so." (2)

This seems to be the starting-point of the aesthetic argument: the belief that art must be different from other objects in the world, and from other human activities; and different in a way which is worthwhile. There is nothing logically necessary or self-evident about this belief. It would be perfectly consistent to argue that art is not very important, and is essentially just a copy of reality. But Clive Bell's appeal to "everyone", although rather rash, does not seem to be much of an exaggeration, and the belief that art is important, and that satisfactory definitions of art would justify and explain that importance, is not one with which I wish to quarrel.

The ways in which art is distinguished from other aspects of life are various. Gilson touches upon the most important ones. In the first place, the activity of the artist is distinguished from other activities; and the

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(1) Painting and Reality p.170

(2) Art p.v.

activity from which it seems most important to distinguish it, particularly where realism is concerned, is that of science. The traditional distinction is drawn between the cognitive activity of the scientist and the creative activity of the artist:

"In the case of painting, art is not nature seen through a temperament; rather, it is the ability to create a new being that nobody would ever see, either in nature or otherwise, unless the art of the painter caused it to exist." (1)

The distinction is a very old one, and it is not, as it is in Gilson's example, always confined to painting. A classic statement of the difference between artist and scientist comes in Philip Sidney's Apologie for Poetrie:

"There is no Arte delivered to mankinde that hath not the workes of Nature for his principall object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend as they have become Actors and Players, as it were, of what Nature will have set foorth...Onely the Poet, disdayning to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his owne invention, doeth growe, in effect, another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth foorth, or quite a newe formes such as never were in Nature, as the Heroes, Demi-gods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like: so as hee goeth hand in hand with Nature, not inclosed within

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(1) Painting and Reality p.117

the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging onely within the Zodiack of his owne wit." (1)

(Also relevant in the context of the creativity of the artist is the Romantic theory of art based upon the Imagination, which is described in much Romantic criticism as the synthesizing and creative faculty.) The idea of creativity, associated as it is with ideas of God and freedom, is at most times a strong justification for art, although there have been times when it would be regarded as suspect, as an unlawful attempt by man to rival the creativity of God.

But if the traditional antithesis between the artist and the scientist is accepted, we do seem to be compelled to draw a similar distinction between the artist and the realist. For realism, the attempt to reproduce things just as they are, seems to have much more in common with the cognitive and scientific than with the creative and artistic. Gilson makes this point very emphatically:

"Hence an antinomy within the very notion of imitational art. If it is an art, painting must add something to its imitation of reality. In other words, it must create. Now creation is the very reverse of imitation." (2)

and again:

"Imitation - that is, the representation of reality as it appears to be - stands on the

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(1) An Apologie for Poetrie p.7

(2) Painting and Reality p.250

side of science, or, to use a more modest word, knowledge." (1)

It is not only the opponents of realism who identify it with science. Realists themselves tend to be particularly proud of their scientific approach. Uccello is an obvious example of a Renaissance painter preoccupied with the scientific application of the laws of perspective. Zola is notorious for his "Naturalism": his attempt to apply the methods of a positivistic science to literature. In the preface to La Fortune des Rougon, he describes the series of novels of which that book forms a part, as:

"The Natural and Social History of a Family under the Second Empire." (2)

Even such a relatively uneccentric figure as Constable is quoted by Gombrich as saying:

"Painting is a science, and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature. Why, then, may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which the pictures are but the experiments?" (3)

Some distinction between art and science is needed if art is to be considered as having a function and value of its own. The idea that art is creative both provides the distinction and goes some way to explaining the value. Creativity thus becomes one of the accepted hall-marks of art; and insofar as realism can be seen as abandoning the

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(1) Painting and Reality p.285

(2) DMLR p.116

(3) quoted by Gombrich: Art and Illusion p. 29

specifically artistic ideal of creation, and aligning itself with some branch of science, there is a very strong case for maintaining that realism is not art.

The second main way in which art is distinguished and defined is in relation to the work of art itself, rather than the activity of the artist. It helps us to justify the phenomenon of art, if we can show that a work of art has some quality which sets it apart from objects and events in the non-aesthetic sphere; or that it performs some valuable function which they cannot perform.

Gilson's Aristotelian influences enable him to connect very closely the ideas of creativity and form: the artist creates by imposing a form upon his material. The formal element thus becomes the most important distinguishing quality of the work of art, to which the other elements are to be subordinated.

In the past, the characteristic which a work of art was supposed to possess was described simply as "beauty". Recent attempts to give a more informative description tend to centre around the idea of form (variously interpreted) and related concepts such as unity and structure. Harold Osborne talks of "organic unity"(1); Eric Gill of "original form" (2); and Clive Bell of "significant form" (3). For all of them, a work is a genuine work of art if, and only if, it possesses this quality of form, however interpreted.

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(1) Aesthetics and Art Theory chap. 10

(2) Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Practical Aesthetics'  
(Painting and Reality: appendix 4)

(3) Art

A preoccupation with the visual arts can lead to an over-emphasis on the ideas of beauty and form as the basic aesthetic ingredients. Definitions of art with a more literary orientation tend to give more prominence to the function of the work of art. They attempt to define the work of art by means of some specifically aesthetic function; whether a particular blend of delight and instruction, or the expression or communication of feeling and emotion.

But all these definitions of art agree that the true work of art, even if representational, gives us something which we do not find in the reality it represents. The work of art is not just a copy of, or a substitute for, the things and qualities we find in real life. And this amounts to saying that whatever art is, it is never realism; for realism, as such, is nothing other than the reproduction of reality. Thus, although realism may be, and frequently is, found in conjunction with a quality or function which is genuinely aesthetic, realism itself is not an aesthetic characteristic. And the conclusion that realism is not art is duly deduced from the various definitions of art outlined above. Gilson's own conclusions are that:

"Representational or not, a painting is a true work of art to the extent that it abstracts from all the elements that are not compatible with, or required for, the embodiment in matter of the germinal form conceived by the painter."(1)

"His starting-point is fantasy, imagination,

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(1) Painting and Reality p.258

fiction, and all the elements of reality that do not agree with the creature imagined by the painter have to be ruthlessly eliminated. In this sense, realism should be described as the antipodes of art." (1)

Joshua Reynolds criticizes realism from the standpoint of one who considers that the beautiful, which he equates with the universal norm of a species, is the essence of art. The imitative painter:

"must, by regarding minute particularities, and accidental discriminations, deviate from the universal rule and pollute his canvas with deformity." (2)

Clive Bell, on the basis of his theory of significant form, claims that:

"Formal significance loses itself in preoccupation with exact representation and ostentatious cunning." (3)

and that:

"If a representative form has value, it is as form, not as representation." (4)

Sidney, who puts forward the delight-and-instruction theory of art, says that the artist has the advantage over the historian ( and, by implication, the realist ) that he can alter his material for the maximum didactic effect:

(1) Painting and Reality p.130

(2) Letter to The Idler; Nov. 10th 1759 (Painting and Reality appendix 1)

(3) Art p.23

(4) Art p.25

"For indeede Poetrie ever setteth vertue so out in her best cullours, making Fortune her well-wayting hand-mayd, that one must needs be enamored of her...But the Historian, being captived to the trueth of a foolish world, is many times a terror from well dooing, and an incouragement to unbridled wickednes." (1)

And Tolstoy, on the basis of his theory that art is the communication of feeling, criticizes the pseudo-art of imitative and realist writers:

"The attention of the receiver of the artistic impression is diverted by all these well-observed details, and they hinder the communication of feeling even when the feeling exists." (2)

Thus there is almost universal agreement that the artistic value of any work of art does not lie in the faithful and literal reproduction of reality; rather, it lies in the significant distortions of that reproduction, which make the representation, if there is one, conform to some higher criterion of art, such as beauty, form, communication and so on. Yet it is the undistorted reflection of life which is the ideal of realism: and realism again seems to be not only distinct from, but also in many ways contrary to art. Again the argument against realism is reinforced by the way in which the realist talks about his own work. Not the model of the scientist this

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(1) Apologie for Poetrie p.22

(2) What is Art? p.187

time, but the recurring image of the mirror, with its implications of literal and unselective reflection of the world, exposes the difference between realism and those qualities which we claim to value most highly in art.

One corollary of the belief that art gives us something other than a copy of the real world, is that our reactions to art ought not to be the same as our reactions to real things. From this, a whole doctrine of "the aesthetic response" develops; a doctrine which has at least an indirect bearing upon realism, insofar as a realistic approach to art in general is assumed to encourage people to go to art looking for the emotions and interests of life. A realistic work of art, too, does nothing to further a specifically aesthetic response, which in some extreme cases seems to become not just a necessary condition of aesthetic experience, but the basic criterion of art itself.

One of the most usual analyses of the aesthetic response is that it is a purely contemplative one, concentrating upon the qualities of the work of art itself, and not disturbed by the moral attitudes and practical concerns which we feel for the objects and events of real life. Nor should we expect the work of art to perform some further practical or moral function. This sort of interpretation is put forward by Gilson:

"If he considers a painting as a means to any other end than its contemplation, a man does

not see it as a work of art." (1)

The main recent formulation of this kind of theory is to be found in Bullough's doctrine of psychical distance. Bullough talks about this concept with reference to the experience of a fog at sea:

"In the fog, the transformation by distance is produced, in the first instance, by putting the phenomenon, so to speak, out of gear with our practical, actual self: by allowing it to stand outside the context of our personal needs and ends - in short, by looking at it 'objectively' as it has often been called, by permitting only such reactions on our part as emphasise the 'objective' features of the experience, and by interpreting even our 'subjective' affections, not as modes of our being but rather as characteristics of the phenomenon." (2)

Bullough himself does not consider distance to be the essence of art. He sees it, rather, as a necessary condition of an appropriate response on the part of the percipient. For him, then, distance does not become a fundamental and overriding aesthetic criterion. His ideal is the minimum of distance without its complete disappearance, which is compatible with realism, for realism, whilst it does not encourage distancing, does not

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(1) Painting and Reality p.118

(2) 'Psychical Distance': Aesthetics p.95

eliminate the element of distance altogether. But he still feels that art is basically non-realistic; and this position is carried to its logical conclusion by Ortega y Gasset, in The Dehumanization of Art, where he argues that the purest and most artistic art, at least in the visual sphere, is an art which is "dehumanized", purified from its associations with ordinary, "lived" reality. And this he equates with the tendency towards abstract and unrealistic art. Thus even from the point of view of the response to art, realism can be held to be unartistic.

There is a very different tradition, however, which sees the aesthetic response as one which is characterized, not by disinterestedness and distance, but by emotional intensity. Aristotle's controversial doctrine of 'catharsis' can be interpreted in this way, and it is certainly not unusual to refer to the experience of art as one which is profoundly emotional. Of all the aesthetic arguments and theories, this one is the most compatible with realism. For interest, involvement and identification would all seem to be important ingredients of an intense emotional response, and these realism could help to provide. But although a degree of realism might even be necessary in this context, the criterion of intensity, no less than the criterion of distance, seems to demand at least the transcendence of realism. For if emotional intensity is to be what makes us value art, then it will tend to be described as an intensity greater than, or at least of a different quality from, that found in the norm of experience which is the domain of

realism. The storm scenes in King Lear, for instance, are typical examples of the kind of thing which we would call "intensity", but we would hardly call them realism. Thus even intensity, although it may often be supported by realism, is not necessarily realistic, and does not help to ascribe any artistic value to realism in itself.

### III. Attempts to defend realism

The case against realism looks even stronger when we look at some of the ways in which the realist tries to defend his art from the charges brought against it. Even if he does not go so far as to assert a mimetic theory, which would make realism the basic aesthetic quality, the more modest claim that realism can embody those qualities which are felt to be genuinely artistic, is still beset by objections. For the realist's defence of his work only succeeds in reconciling art and realism by compromising either the theory of realism, or the theory of art to which it is opposed.

By far the most common defence of realism is the argument that realism itself is something more than just the reduplication of life. It is the reproduction of life beautified, organized, intensified, or in some other way modified, so that realism is no longer liable to the kind of objections traditionally brought against it. Qualifications such as this are found again and again throughout realist criticism:

"There is no true depiction without colour,

vital spirit, life and animation, without features and feeling. It would therefore be stupid to apply the preceding definition to mechanical art: vital spirit is depicted only by vital spirit, whence it follows that for many men of letters it would be impossible to depict a live man." (1)

But all that such modifications of the realist theory do, is to subordinate, implicitly or explicitly, realism itself, to some other, less objectionably aesthetic quality. And when this step is taken, the way is left open for it to be taken to its logical conclusion, which is the separation of art and realism, and the assertion that realism, as traditionally understood, is not art (although the label 'realistic' may be retained to denote something very different.)

A slight variation of this kind of argument is based on the impossibility of absolute realism. Even the realist will always modify and interpret his material, so that it becomes something "more" than simple reproduction. Thus Hamlin Garland argues that:

"It will never be mere reproduction so long as the artist represents it as he sees it. The fact will correct the fantasy. The artist will colour the fact." (2)

But to defend something on the grounds that it can never quite be achieved is hardly an adequate justification, and

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(1) F. Desnoyers: 'On Realism' DMLR p.81

(2) Crumbling Idols p.63

is another example of an apparent reconciliation of art and realism which, in fact, implies at least a partial rejection of realism.

There are, on the other hand, a number of apparently plausible arguments to the effect that realism in its unqualified form can be beautiful, creative and so on. But a closer analysis of these arguments reveals that they only work when the "aesthetic" qualities have been reformulated to such an extent that they can no longer provide the distinguishing and justificatory criteria of art which they were originally meant to furnish. Thus, when Zola writes in *The Experimental Novel*:

"Thus instead of binding the novelist tightly, the experimental method leaves him all his intelligence as thinker and all his genius as creator. He must see, understand, invent." (1)

he is using the idea of creation in a way so modified that it can no longer be the basis of a definition of art which distinguishes it from other things and explains its particular value. Neither can Raymond Williams' denial of the creation/perception distinction:

"Reality as we experience it is a human creation."  
(2)

help us to equate realism and art, but only indicates that the difference between them might be a difference of degree rather than kind. In the sense in which all experience can

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(1) DMLR p.169

(2) The Long Revolution p.18

be said to be creative, creativity cannot be used as the defining criterion of art.

Much the same objection can be made to the type of argument which sees no discontinuity between realism and beauty, because it claims that the beautiful in art is the reproduction of the beautiful in nature. For this leaves no room for the concept of a specifically valuable artistic beauty, and makes art very definitely a substitute for, and subordinate to, life. A simple "beauty is truth; truth beauty" point of view, on the other hand, as expressed by Dreiser, is little more than rhetoric and has no force as a serious argument:

"a true picture of life, honestly and reverentially set down, is both moral and artistic." (1)

Likewise a documentary function of art, which would tend to support realism, fails to furnish the required distinction between art and other activities, such as science and history:

"We have had the figures, the dates, the bare history, the dime-novel statement of pioneer life, but how few real novels! How few accurate studies of speech and life! There it lies, ready to be put into the novel and the drama, and upon canvas." (2)

Such a distinction is what is provided by theories which replace the communication or expression of facts, by the

(1) 'True Art Speaks Plainly' DMLR p.156

(2) Crumbling Idols p.16

communication or expression of feelings as the function of art.

It is perfectly feasible to claim that realism is not incompatible with that psychical distance which is often put forward as a necessary condition of the aesthetic response. Any work of art which we recognize as such will be the object of a distanced response: or, if it is not, the failure to distance is more likely to be, as Bullough himself points out, a result of subject-matter, rather than of realism itself:

"explicit references to organic affections, to the material existence of the body, especially to sexual matters, lie normally below the distance-limit, and can be touched upon by art only with special precautions. Allusions to social institutions of any degree of personal importance - in particular allusions implying any doubt as to their validity - the questioning of some generally-recognized ethical sanctions, references to topical subjects occupying public attention at the moment, and any such like are all dangerously near the average limit and may at any time fall below it, arousing, instead of aesthetic appreciation, concrete hostility or mere amusement." (1)

But if distance is used as the criterion of good art (as it is by Ortega y Gasset) then the degree of distancing which

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(1)'Psychical Distance' :Aesthetics p.102

realism arouses is no longer sufficient to classify it as art, but leaves it on the side of the "lived" reality of ordinary experience, as opposed to the "observed" reality of the truly artistic. Even on some sort of catharsis theory, it is possible, though less easy, to object to a defence of realism on aesthetic grounds. For if the emotional experience of art is meant to be used as an aesthetic criterion, it will be distinguished as an experience of a quality which we cannot derive from life or from a history book. Thus realism, although doubtless stimulating the emotions, may still not give rise to experiences of the concentration, richness or completeness which can be postulated as characteristics of the genuinely aesthetic experience.

Thus, if we once accept that qualities such as beauty, creativity, expressiveness and so on, are the typical kinds of aesthetic qualities, it becomes very difficult to reconcile realism with art. Neither can we claim that realism has some particular aesthetic value of its own; for the mimetic theory of art is not only untenable in itself, but also conflicts, to a greater or lesser degree, with all the more acceptable theories. Thus we are led to the conclusion that realism is not art.

From this initial conclusion, however, two different positions with regard to the status of realism in art are deduced. Some maintain that realism and art are completely opposed, and that realism is hostile to art. Others say merely that realism is irrelevant to artistic value. Each

of these positions is consistent with the conclusion that realism is not art, and which of them we decide to adopt depends on whether we think that art ought to be being artistic all the time, or whether we think that it should just embody aesthetic qualities in some way. From the point of view of the aesthetic argument, all that it is necessary to show is that realism is not art; and this, I think, the argument succeeds in doing.

One further point which should be made is that, although realism can be seen as the ultimate in representation, the aesthetic argument is only really compelling when applied to realism: that is, to faithful representation rather than to representation in general. Most of the theories of art suggest that some modification of representation is necessary, but this is a very different thing from saying that representation itself should be excluded from art. In any case, a non-representational narrative, for instance, is a contradiction in terms, and there are many considerations such as significance and comprehension, which can be used to defend representation, although not that extreme of representation which is realism. The advocates of pure art, meaning non-representational art, in painting, one of whom is Gilson, seem to be taking the aesthetic argument to an unnecessary, and in many ways, an unacceptable extreme.

Chapter 3: The Justification of Realism

There is, then, a strong case for saying that realism is not the quality which identifies and distinguishes a work of art; and that the distinctively aesthetic qualities are only achieved by sacrificing realism to a greater or lesser degree, and vice versa.

But the conclusions which are drawn from the aesthetic argument, to the effect that realism is at best a worthless characteristic, and ought to be discouraged in art, seem to rest upon a confusion of two different meanings of "art". "Art", in the sense in which realism has been shown to be "not art", is the defining criterion of a work of art, the quality which sets it apart from other things. But when we try to assess the value of realism in art, we are now talking about "art" as an institution, the sum total of all works of art, considered from every relevant angle. The two meanings of "art" are quite distinct; and to show that realism is not art in the first sense is by no means to show that it is of no value to art in the second. The theory that the only qualities which are important to art as a whole, are those which define it, is one particular theory of art, which will have to be considered later. At the moment, I shall simply try to show some of the ways in which realism, although not a specifically aesthetic property, can make a significant and valuable contribution to art in the general sense. These considerations, although, strictly-speaking, they are neither aesthetic nor moral arguments, form a useful bridge between the two, in that they help to reveal

some of the limitations of the aesthetic argument, and the kind of way in which realism can be defended, which, in turn, leads into that more emphatic defence of realism, the moral argument.

The aesthetic argument, as we have already seen, shows that realism cannot be pure art, or even to be compatible with pure art, however pure art may be defined (this need not always be in a formalistic way, although the phrase "pure art" has associations of formalism). But a strong defence of realism can be built on the grounds that impure art is in many ways of more importance than the pure variety. Realism is best considered as a valuable aesthetic impurity; and this, incidentally, helps to show why the discrediting of the mimetic theory is hardly relevant to the importance of realism in art.

#### I. Technical and Cognitive Values of Realism

The technical skill which is involved in the creation of a realistic representation, and the information and insights about some aspect of life which are conveyed by it, are characteristics which provide important reasons for our undeniable admiration for realism. Technical skill is a quality which we appreciate in painting, rather than literature; and the importance of cognition seems greater in literature than in painting: but this distinction is no more an absolute one than was the distinction between direct and indirect representation.

In painting, then, a large part of our respect for

realism is based upon the appreciation of the sheer manual and technical virtuosity of the painter. We are fascinated to see how he has managed to produce such an impressive likeness of the real thing in the medium of paint and canvas. In The Truths of Fiction, Alan Rodway tries to apply the same idea to literature, and, incidentally, suggests that virtuosity in handling the medium could be a source of aesthetic appreciation. His analysis of the artist's skill would be even better fitted to this aspect of realism in the direct representation of visual art:

"But if the degree of verbal skill in attaining an illusion of reality is sufficiently high, we can get an aesthetic pleasure even from realism: not from the realities of the content, but from the superb handling of the language...putting what is eminently more than verbal into nothing more than words, but doing it better than the reader could." (1)

The importance which we attach to technical skill should not be underestimated. It is something which we admire, although our admiration is limited, even when the context in which it is exercised is a trivial or even an immoral one: we have a degree of admiration for the juggler and for the master-criminal. And, in art, realism is the natural and legitimate exploitation of some of the possibilities which representational art yields for the development and display of skill and virtuosity. We should regard realism, therefore,

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(1) The Truths of Fiction p.165

with the respect with which we regard such accomplishment in any other sphere. There are, of course, many other ways in which the artist's skill is exerted in his art, but realism does bring with it the additional advantage of having a definite criterion of success. We know, more or less, what real things look like, and, assuming that the artist is trying to produce a realistic representation, we can tell, with some accuracy, to what extent he has succeeded. With other kinds of art, it is more difficult to estimate the skill of the artist, because we usually have no way of knowing what he was trying to do, apart from what he has actually done. This advantage of realism is in some ways dangerous, since it makes realism a criterion which can be applied too easily, and misguidedly used to assess the achievement of artists who were not even trying to produce a realistic representation.

But our admiration for skill, although genuine and valid, is also limited. And we frequently feel, for instance with some purely illusionist art, that the cleverness shown by the artist is not of sufficient importance to justify the sacrifice or more aesthetic qualities. A stronger reason for our regard for realism is its cognitive value. A realistic representation can have cognitive value in two ways. It can extend our experience by giving us an insight into the conditions, and an understanding of the problems which are to be found in areas of life of which we have no immediate experience. As well as this, a realistic work of art can often strike us as a discovery of some previously

unnoticed aspect of familiar experiences. The representations of art do seem to influence the sort of things of which we are aware, although it would be rash to speculate on the extent of this influence. The artist who recognizes and depicts something which has previously been neglected by art, can in some ways be seen as helping us to discover something new about the world.

Art which in either way carries forward this process of exploration of experience is very highly respected, and respected for precisely these cognitive qualities. A great deal of the current esteem for the work of Solzhenitsyn, for example, seems to me to be based, not so much on aesthetic criteria, in the narrow sense (although this is not to deny that his work has aesthetic merit) as on its documentary significance and force. And this is a perfectly legitimate and valid reason for admiring any work of art, although I do not see how we could say this if we accepted that realism was of no value in art. The approach from the aesthetic argument tends to see in the cognitive function of realism a deviation from the true ends and ideals of art. But there are others who have seen it as a valuable contribution to art, giving it a seriousness, value and significance which it would otherwise lack. Zola, for instance, ridicules purely aesthetic, or at least formalistic, criticism, thus:

"What a pretty piece of mechanism it is! And one piece is beautifully adjusted to mesh with another piece, which in turn sets the whole mechanism in motion! The critic preens himself;

he cannot find words sufficiently full of praise to express the pleasure he gets from this gadget. Wouldn't you think he was talking about a toy, a puzzle, which he is proud of scrambling and putting together again? As for me, I am unmoved by Le Fils Naturel. Why is that? Am I more stupid than the critic? I do not think so. Only, I have no taste for clockwork, and I am very fond of truth. Yes, to be sure, it is a pretty mechanism. But I should like it to be glorious with life. I should like life, with its thrill, its amplitude, its power. I should like all of life." (1)

and another realist writer says:

"I consider it of the utmost importance that the novel has ceased to be a work of mere entertainment, a means of passing a few hours pleasantly, and has been raised to the level of social, psychological, historical analysis - in short, a study." (2)

One consequence of the cognitive value of realism, which ought to be mentioned at this point is that the discoveries of art do not have the same value when repeated as they do when they are first made. This is of less importance in literature, where the possibilities of making new discoveries and conveying new information about life seem to be infinite. But it might help to explain why Vasari could, quite

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(1) 'Naturalism in the Theatre' DMLR p.229

(2) Emilia Pardo Bazan: Preface; Un viaje de novios: DMLR p263

legitimately wax lyrical about aspects of Renaissance painting which were then major discoveries about the appearances of things, but which are now disregarded as the common property of every hack artist. It is misleading to represent our lack of interest in perspective and so on as a sign that we have advanced beyond the naive realistic principles of Vasari. It shows, rather, that the value of a discovery is essentially a historical value, and cannot be repeated.

## II. Realism and the Representational Tradition in Art

So far, we have been looking at the contributions which realism can make to art, if not exactly in vacuo, then at least not in the context of the whole tradition of representational art. And yet to look at realism out of this context is to neglect some of the most important considerations in its favour.

The aesthetic arguments against realism are reinforced by an insistence upon the "passivity", the "sterility" and the "mechanical" character of copying life in art. This sounds true as long as we think only of what the artist is doing to the reality which he is copying. If he is a realist, he is not altering it in any way - or at least he is trying not to. But this approach plays down the fact that what is given to the artist is not only life, but also a tradition of art in which life is represented and reproduced in different ways and for different purposes. Much of the importance of realism lies, not in the way in which it

modifies, or rather fails to modify, life, but the way in which it modifies and develops the representation of life in art.

Realists themselves criticize imitative art. But by this, they do not mean art which copies nature, but art which slavishly adheres to the conventions and traditions of the art of the past, and thus becomes lifeless and insignificant. In relation to art of this kind, realism, for all that it tries just to copy reality, is anything but passive and servile. Realism in art is better characterized as something vital, and even revolutionary; and it has frequently been hailed as a fresh and life-giving force in an otherwise false and sterile artistic tradition:

"At last Realism is coming!"

It is through this underbrush, this battle of the Cimbri, this Pandemonium of Greek temples, lyres and jews harps, of alhambras and sickly oaks, of boleros, of silly sonnets, of golden odes, of rusty daggers, rapiers and weekly columns, of hamadryads in the moonlight and the tenderness of Venus, of marriages in the manner of M. Scribe, of witty caricatures and unretouched photographs, of canes and false collars, of toothless discussions and criticisms, of tottery traditions of ill-fitting customs addressed to the public, that Realism has made a breach." (1)

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(1) F.Desnoyers: 'On Realism' DMLR p.87

"It would be difficult, I think, for any one but a realist novelist to overrate the good that realism in fiction has done. It has cleared the air of a thousand follies, has pricked a whole fleet of oratorical bubbles." (1)

Realism, then, is not just something simple, passive and boring. The faithful representation of reality involves the recognition and elimination of those elements of misrepresentation which have become embodied in art, and are known as "conventions".

In one sense, the sense in which a convention is a necessary difference between art and life, conventions and realism cannot be hostile to one another. It is only by accepting such conventions that we can say that a work of art is realistic at all. But another kind of convention is that traditional difference between life and art which is not necessary, but which has become so well-established that it is no longer questioned, and perhaps not even recognized as a conventional element. And it is towards this kind of convention that realism is hostile. One such convention, and its relationship with realism, is dealt with by Auerbach, in his book Mimesis. Among other things, Auerbach traces the tendency for realism in literature to move away from the conventional separation of high and low styles, towards a portrayal of ordinary life in which the serious and the problematic are adequately expressed. Conventions are to be found, not only in the manner of representation, but also in the selection of the subjects represented. It is a common characteristic of realism to

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(1) Edmund Gosse: 'The Limits of Realism in Fiction' DMLR p392

break away from the traditional and "poetic" subjects and to represent the contemporary scene, and aspects of life which are usually disregarded by art. The realist attempts, not just to copy life, but also to recognize and correct those perhaps unnoticed misrepresentations which we have come to accept in art. For the realist, this corrective aspect of his art is often the most important; and many sympathetic discussions of realism emphasize this by defining and describing it as essentially a reaction against convention in art, rather than just a straightforward attempt to copy reality. At a practical level, Gombrich tries to show how the creation of a realistic representation in painting comes about by a dialectic of schema and correction, by the testing of the conventional schemata against real life, and their consequent modification. His analysis of realism makes it dependent upon the artistic conventions of the past:

"the illusions of art are not only the fruit,  
but also the indispensable tools for the artist's  
analysis of appearances." (1)

At the theoretical level, too, the aims of the realists are more adequately described as an attempt to liberate art from convention, and not just as an attempt to imitate life and nature. One writer who particularly emphasises this aspect of realism is Harry Levin. He describes realism as:

"an endeavour to emancipate literature from the  
sway of conventions." (2)

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(1) Art and Illusion p.25

(2) The Gates of Horn p.19

And he describes the realistic method as:

"a literary technique of systematic  
disillusionment." (1)

"fiction approximates truth, not by concealing  
art, but exposing artifice." (2)

Linda Nochlin, too, talks of the aims of realism in much  
the same terms:

"that perennially obsessive desire of artists to  
bring reality back alive, to escape from the  
bonds of convention into a magic world of pure  
verisimilitude." (3)

This idea of realism as a reaction to conventional  
representation in art is important, not only as a more  
adequate characterization of what realism involves, and  
what the realist is trying to do, than simply "copying  
reality": but also because it is the foundation upon which  
the moral argument for realism rests. The moral argument  
claims that art misrepresents the world, and that such  
misrepresentations can lead to morally dangerous  
misconceptions and attitudes, which it is necessary to  
dispel. One way of doing this is through realistic art.  
Thus the moral argument is not based on the theory that art  
ought to imitate reality; but on the fact that art does  
imitate reality, and often imitates it wrongly. Here again  
the importance of looking at realism as a development  
within a representational tradition, is apparent.

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(1) The Gates of Horn p.48

(2) The Gates of Horn p.49

(3) Realism p.15

## Chapter 4: The Moral Argument

The point which I wish to make about what I have called the moral argument, is that here we have what seems to be a consistent and widely-accepted line of thought about realism, which is based on very different considerations and reaches very different conclusions from the aesthetic arguments examined before. The implications of "art must tell the truth"- a very much over-simplified statement of the moral argument - are, or appear to be, quite contrary to the implications of "realism is not art".

### I. The Formulation of the Moral Argument

Although I have just claimed that the moral argument is widely accepted, it is perhaps misleading to refer to it as an argument at all, because it is seldom formulated in any detail. It is assumed and implied in the theory and practice of many writers, but their explicit statements of it leave much to be desired. Theodore Dreiser, quoted earlier, claims that:

"The sum and substance of literary as well as social morality may be expressed in three words - tell the truth." (1)

This is, in essence, the moral argument for realism: but as it stands it is scarcely tenable. Not only is it exaggerated; it also lays itself open to a number of

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(1) "True Art Speaks Plainly" DMLR p.155

more specific and, apparently, damaging objections. What right have we to demand that art should tell the truth, when the artist does not claim, and is not trying, to do anything of the kind? Why equate truth with realism anyway? And is truth of such over-riding importance to morality? These are the main objections which come to mind when we are confronted with just the simple assertion that art must tell the truth. It seems both unnecessarily moralistic and completely out of touch with the real nature of art and of our response to it. But the reasons behind the demand for truth in art seem to be, in many cases, much more complex and subtle. A more adequate idea of what the realist's demand for truth is all about, can be gained if we are sensitive and responsive to other, less explicit, and seemingly unrelated, suggestions and assumptions which occur in the work of writers both within and outside the realist tradition. The simple demand that art should be true has to be supplemented by other, more unobtrusive considerations before we can be persuaded to take it seriously. But when a fuller picture emerges, and when the necessary qualifications and limitations of application have been made, the moral argument is really quite persuasive. There is obviously a lot of room for subjectivity and distortion in an attempt to reconstruct an argument from casual hints and implications: but if we ignore them, we do not do justice to the argument for realism, and are in danger of dismissing as superficial and facile a position which, if it were more fully defined, could carry a great deal of conviction.

It is in the realistic novel itself that some of the most emphatic and fully-developed presentations of the moral argument are to be found. In a more light-hearted vein, it is suggested by the main theme of Cervantes' Don Quixote and Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey; the differences between the occurrences of ordinary life, and the kind of thing which we are led to expect in the typical Romantic or Gothic novel. But for a more serious treatment of the same theme, we should turn to Flaubert's Madame Bovary. Flaubert distrusted the label of "realist", but Madame Bovary makes a very good starting point for an examination of the moral considerations in favour of realism.

Madame Bovary is essentially the story of a young woman, Emma Bovary, whose expectations of, and attitudes towards, life are quite disproportionate and irrelevant to her actual situation. She is the daughter of a fairly well-to-do provincial farmer, married to a good-natured, but not very prepossessing, doctor. Her attitudes, however, are to a great extent derived from Romantic and sentimental literature. In Chapter 6, in which he describes Emma's education, Flaubert emphasises the way in which her reading of Romantic literature has influenced her whole outlook on life:

"She had read 'Paul and Virginia', and seen in her dreams the little bamboo hut, Domingo the nigger and Faithful the dog, and, above all, the dear little brother, gentle and loving, who fetches down red-fruits for you from great trees taller than

church steeples, or comes running barefoot along the sands to bring you a bird's nest." (1)

"They were all about love and lovers, damsels in distress swooning in lonely lodges, postillions slaughtered all along the road, horses ridden to death on every page, gloomy forests, troubles of the heart, vows, sobs, tears, kisses, rowing-boats in the moonlight, nightingales in the grove, gentlemen brave as lions and gentle as lambs, too virtuous to be true, invariably well-dressed, and weeping like fountains,.. And so for six months of her sixteenth year, Emma soiled her hands with this refuse of old lending libraries." (2)

The effects of this "education" are felt throughout the book, and Flaubert's irony never lets us forget the fundamental discrepancy between the kind of life which has captured Emma's imagination, and the actual possibilities of her existence. The consequences of this discrepancy are drastic. It is not just that Emma lives in a sort of dream-world, divorced from real life, but that her real life is corrupted and ruined because she finds it impossible to accept life as it really is, and accept her responsibilities in it. The whole discussion of her education is prompted by her disappointment with her marriage - a disappointment which is explicitly and unambiguously related to the false expectations which she has derived from literature:

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(1) Madame Bovary p.48.

(2) Madame Bovary p.50.

"Before the wedding, she had believed herself in love. But not having obtained the happiness that should have resulted from that love, she now fancied that she must have been mistaken. And Emma wondered exactly what was meant in life by the words 'bliss', 'passion', 'ecstasy', which had looked so beautiful in books." (1)

Emma's characteristic state of mind is one of "ennui", a sense of boredom and disappointment with life for failing to come up to expectations. In her attempts to find in life the charm and the excitement to which she had been accustomed in her reading, she is led to deceit, debt, infidelity and finally to despair and suicide. Not only is Emma dissatisfied with life; this is only one aspect of the inadequacy of her attitudes. She is also incapable of responding genuinely or "realistically" to the situations with which she actually has to deal. Flaubert brings this out particularly with regard to Emma's attitude to death. Some time before she commits suicide, Emma has been ill and thinks that she is going to die. Her response is nothing but a mass of sentimental confectionery:

"Her flesh found rest from thought; a new life had begun; it was as if her soul, ascending to God, were about to be swallowed up in His love like burning incense vanishing in smoke.....Then she let her head drop back on to the pillow, seeming to hear through space the harps of the seraphs

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(1) Madame Bovary p.47.

playing, and to see, seated upon a throne of gold in an azure Heaven with His Saints around Him bearing branches of green palm, God the Father, resplendent in majesty, at whose command angels with wings of flame descended to Earth to carry her up in their arms." (1)

Here there is just no awareness of the ugliness or horror of death, of the sort of physical or spiritual suffering which are to characterize her actual deathbed:

"At once her lungs began to heave rapidly, the whole of her tongue protruded from her mouth, her rolling eyes turned pale like the globes of two guttering lamps: she might have been dead already but for the frightful oscillation of her ribs, that shook with furious gusts as though her soul were leaping to get free" (2)

And her last vision is no longer of God the Father, but of the blind beggar, who has appeared at various stages of her downfall:

"And Emma started laughing, a ghastly, frantic, desperate laugh, fancying she could see the hideous face of the beggar rising up like a nightmare amid the eternal darkness." (3)

It is not only in relation to Emma that Flaubert offers us a contrast between the conventions of literature and what he represents as real life. The whole book is constructed around this principle. Emma's disillusionment is part of the story, but the book itself is meant

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(1) Madame Bovary:Part 2. Chap.14. pp. 224/5  
 (2) Madame Bovary:Part3. Chap. 8. p.336.  
 (3) Madame Bovary:Part3. Chap. 8. p.337.

also as a shock to the conventional expectations of the reader. Charles Bovary, Emma's husband, for instance, presents us with an unusual combination of almost saintly goodness, and utter stupidity. At the other end of the scale, the selfish and self-satisfied chemist, Homais, does not get what in many books would be his just deserts, but continues to go from strength to strength.

In Madame Bovary, Flaubert pushes his theme as far as it can go, and it is, if anything, an overstatement of the moral argument. From this book, however, we can get a much clearer idea of the sort of reasoning which lies behind the realist's demand for truth in art; or at least of one possible line of reasoning which could lie behind it. We can, too, find many echoes of the same kind of argument in the work of other writers, which helps to give us a fuller picture of what the moral argument for realism would be, if it were more thoroughly analysed and formulated.

The distorted representation of life in art, so the argument would seem to go, fosters responses in those who are influenced by it, which are invalid and inadequate for life. Unrealistic art encourages people to develop attitudes and expectations which are completely inappropriate to real life; resulting in a failure to come to terms with life's actual possibilities, problems and moral responsibilities. This is precisely the criticism of unrealistic, and particularly idealistic art, which George Eliot makes:

"And I would not, even if I had the choice, be the clever novelist who could create a world so much better than this, in which we get up in the morning to do our daily work, that you would be likely

to turn a harder, colder eye on the dusty streets and the common green fields - on the real, breathing men and women who can be chilled by your indifference or injured by your prejudice." (1)

One of the best statements of the kind of distortion of consciousness of which the realist is afraid comes from a writer who, paradoxically, does not advocate a realist position, I.A. Richards. In his discussion of bad art he says:

"The losses incurred by these artificial fixations of attitudes are evident. Through them, the average adult is worse, not better, adjusted to the possibilities of his existence than the child. He is even in the most important things functionally unable to face facts: do what he will, he is only able to face fictions, fictions projected by his own stock responses." (2)

The realist would agree entirely with this analysis, which would, incidentally, fit Flaubert's presentation of Emma Bovary perfectly. But the realist would also claim that there was a direct relation between unrealistic attitudes and unrealistic art, a question which will have to be examined in more detail later. We even find Dr. Johnson suggesting a similar reason for approving of the realistic and disapproving of the unrealistic in art:

"This, therefore is the praise of Shakespeare,

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(1) Adam Bede Chap 17  
 (2) Principles of Literary Criticism. p.203.

that his drama is the mirror of life, that he who has mazed his imagination in following the phantoms which other writers raise up before him, may here be cured of his delirious ecstasies, be reading human sentiments in human language." (1)

It is this basic preoccupation with the dangers of the "dreamings of a distorted imagination" (2) which is at the centre of the moral argument for realism in art. Essentially, the argument is concerned with the dangers of unrealistic art; but this cannot really be separated from the requirement of realism. For if we object to unrealism in a work of art, we seem to be implying that it ought to have been realistic. Thus, George Eliot, in the passage from Adam Bede already referred to, is not only suspicious of unrealistic representation, but therefore feels an obligation to offer us a realistic one instead:

"I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box, narrating my experience on oath." (3)

The existence of unrealistic, romantic and idealistic works of art is also felt to create a need for realistic works as a corrective. This, as we saw, was one of the functions of Madame Bovary; and the same kind of idea seems to have been in the minds of Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, when they wrote:

"The public loves false novels: this is a true one" (4)

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- (1) Preface to Shakespeare. Selected Works pp.266/7  
 (2) Chernishevsky: Life and Aesthetics. DMLR p.59  
 (3) Adam Bede Chap.17. DMLR p.113.  
 (4) Preface Germinie Lacerteux. DMLR. p.118

To set the moral argument in its context, as I have been trying to do, helps to defend it against many of the objections which can be made to the simple assertion that art must tell the truth. The moral argument rests on certain unproven, and perhaps unprovable, assumptions about psychology and morality, and it cannot be made absolutely water-tight. The aesthetic argument, on the other hand, resting as it does on the implications of the definition of art, is much simpler and much tidier. But it is possible to show that many of the objections to the argument with which we are dealing at the moment rest on a misunderstanding of what it is really about; and that the assumptions upon which it rests are, although not undeniable, at least very much in line with current trends of thought. The moral argument is worthy of more serious consideration than it usually gets.

One of the most important ways in which an understanding of the context of the moral argument helps to strengthen it, is by suggesting the limitations of its applicability. It seems to be rather fatuous to object to any and every case of unrealism in art as untrue and therefore immoral. There are some cases to which we feel that the need for realism is much greater than it is in others. The argument for realism tends to arise in reaction to romantic, sentimental, idealistic and melodramatic art, and it is only in relation to art of such kinds that it is really compelling. What the realist is afraid of is the propagation of misconceptions about reality, and, very closely related to this, the development of inadequate and irrelevant attitudes on the part of the public. They tend, therefore, to be

suspicious of art which appears to be straightforwardly representational, and yet is exaggerated or distorted in some way; and which falls into patterns which, although unrealistic, appeal easily to the imagination, and so might exert a dangerous influence over our attitudes and responses to life. Thus realism sees as its greatest enemy, art which represents life as more exciting, just, or glamorous than it really is, and not art which modifies representation in order to startle us and make us think. It is unlikely that the realist would have much quarrel with the kind of unrealistic art produced by Beckett or Kafka or even with some sorts of science fiction. His quarrel is much more likely to be with the writer of popular adventure stories, or romantic serials in women's magazines.

Neither does the moral argument give us any reason for demanding truth about the kinds of things which are irrelevant to morality. This helps to explain why a moral concern with realism tends to arise much more in literature than in connection with the visual arts. It is of no great moral consequence if we are confused and not very much aware of what the visual appearances of things are really like. It is of consequence, however, if we are unaware of what people are really like, and what sort of things can reasonably be expected to happen in life. Since it is literature, rather than the visual arts, which could be expected to influence our attitudes to life in general, it is to literature, and to the representation of character and action within literature, that the moral argument tends basically to apply. The moral argument, then, does not commit us to

saying that art must always be realistic in every respect. But it does say that there are some circumstances in which there is a need for realistic representation.

There are three other important lines along which the realist's demand for truth in art can be criticized. Is a work of art the kind of thing of which truth can be demanded as a moral obligation? Why identify truth with realism? And are true attitudes, and true attitudes only, of moral value? These objections tend to make the realist look as though he is very naïvely, and very heavily-handedly trying to apply one particular moral principle, in a context where it is inapplicable, and in ways which are inappropriate. But here again, a fuller sense of the context of the argument and the considerations upon which it is based help, if not to prove the argument, at least to show that it is the objections, rather than the moral argument itself, which have missed the point.

## II. Art and Attitudes.

The realist claims that art ought to tell the truth. But it is only legitimate to make this claim if art is the sort of situation to which it is applicable. For, however important we may think truth is, there are a lot of circumstances in which we would never dream of demanding that the truth be told; not because we think that the truth should not be told, but because the very concept of truth has no use or meaning in the context.

We only require truth, or so it seems, when somebody is giving us some information. And many people would say, very plausibly, that since the artist never, or at least very seldom, claims that his representation is a faithful

picture of life, then we are never, or very seldom, justified in demanding that it should be truthful in the sense of realistic. This is the most important, and the most forceful, of the objections to the moral argument. There are, of course, a few works of art - and they form a very subordinate class, mostly of minor works - which claim to be giving us a faithful picture of what life is like. And in these cases there would be little argument about the validity of saying that they ought to tell the truth. In this context it would be almost trivial. But the realist seems to be saying that even works of art which have no pretensions to being faithful and accurate documents ought to be judged by the standard of their truthfulness. Put like this, it certainly does seem to be a highly questionable claim; and it is frequently urged that we can have no right to demand truth of something which does not make any claim to be true. This is the line of defence which Philip Sidney adopts in response to the objection that poetry is the "mother of lies" :

"Now, for the Poet, he nothing affirmes, and  
therefore never lyeth." (1)

In a more recent discussion of the subject by Alan Rodway, the same point is made and elaborated: and the realist's point of view is held up as an example of a "naturalistic fallacy":

"Properly taken, however, 'truth to' leads to  
the naturalistic fallacy, when closeness to

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(1) An Apologie for Poetrie. p38.

life is taken as the sole standard of judgement, realism the sole proper mode of being. Of course, little fallaciousness is involved if the work clearly purports to be a work of realism, (though it does no harm to bear in mind that in principle even such a work could be considered from other angles, moral, linguistic, sociological and so forth). Often enough, however, works which make no pretence of realism are simply disparaged as absurd or fantastic or not 'true to life'." (1)

But this objection, convincing though it is, seems to me to miss the whole point of the realist's argument. The realist, as much as anyone else, is aware that many works of art make no claim to be true. Yet he does not feel that this makes it impossible for him to demand that they ought to be true. He does not do this because he is unbalanced or unduly conscientious, but because he thinks that he can see another factor, apart from a specific claim to be true, which could provide a reason for applying the criterion of truth to art.

This factor is not a logical, but a psychological one. It does not matter so much just that something purports or does not purport to be true information. What is also important is whether or not it influences and directs our awareness of life, and our attitudes to it. Truth is important because it is essential to a full understanding of the world, and thence to the development of genuine, adequate and responsible reactions to it. If, as the realist argues, unrealistic art, no less than an actual

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(1) The Truths of Fiction p.90

falsehood, can provide us with misconceptions about the world, and unsatisfactory attitudes to it, then we surely have the same right, obligation even, to demand realism in art as we have to demand truth in evidence.

The important question, then, is not what the work of art purports to be, but the way in which it is capable of influencing us. And it is one of the assumptions of the moral argument that a work of art can influence our awareness of life, even when we recognize that it is not, and does not claim to be, true. This is clearly a psychological question, and whether or not the moral argument can stand up depends ultimately upon whether or not it is in fact true that art has this sort of influence upon us. This is the sort of question which could hardly be verified in anything like a satisfactory way, but there does seem to be quite a lot in favour of the way in which the realist is arguing.

Simply from the evidence of experience and introspection, it would be, for me at least, hard to deny that one does tend to relate situations which one meets in reality to similar situations, however fictional, previously encountered in literature, and one also tends to be very susceptible to, and fascinated by, some of the patterns of experience which occur throughout literature, but perhaps not throughout life. It is much easier to admit than to deny that, to some degree, our consciousness and our imagination are influenced by the sort of thing we come across in art, and are influenced in much the same way that the realist suggests. The situation of Emma Bovary, although no doubt exaggerated, is one which must be recognized by many, and

and it certainly does not strike the reader as particularly implausible that a girl who has been brought up on romantic and sentimental literature should have difficulty in coming to terms with real life.

As well as this, the realist's assumptions about psychology seem, paradoxically, to be supported by the kind of argument which is frequently put forward to show the alleged impossibility of realism in art. The current emphasis upon the impossibility of a passive experience of reality, and the part which past experiences and mental conceptualization play in the construction of an intelligible world, in this case serves to reinforce the argument of the realist. An artistic representation usually offers us a very highly - and very clearly - organised experience, and it would be rash to deny that art has perhaps quite a strong influence upon our consciousness of the world.

The realist's case, then, is not very much affected by the fact that not all works of art claim to be telling the truth. The moral argument, although, as we have seen, limited in its applicability, legitimately applies to more works of art than those which specifically claim to be truthful. The main question, from this point of view, is whether or not art influences our awareness as the realist says it does. And to this it would seem to be possible to answer that it does.

### III. Truth in Art.

Even granted a degree of respect for truth, why should we equate truth and realism? But the problem of what constitutes truth in art is a very wide topic, and not one which could be fully dealt with here. Realism, as is often

pointed out, is not the only thing with which artistic truth can be identified. But when we look in more detail at the reasoning behind the moral argument, we can see why it should be neither arbitrary nor unwarranted, but perfectly natural, for the realist to consider realism as the fundamental meaning of truth here. Again it is the critic of realism, rather than the realist himself, who seems to be ignoring significant considerations.

The sort of truth which is demanded by the moral argument, truth about what is being represented, is, to adopt the terminology of Damian Grant in Realism, a truth of correspondence rather than coherence. And one of the more common ways of trying to forestall the moral argument is by substituting a coherence for a correspondence theory of truth in art, the line which Grant in fact adopts. The coherence theory has the advantage of being perfectly compatible with typical aesthetic theories. Coherence itself, meaning the internal consistency of the work, is an aspect of formal unity, and can thus be seen as a positive aesthetic quality. At the same time it can claim a certain, though dubious, moral status as 'truth', thus apparently eliminating any conflict there might be between moral and aesthetic considerations. Grant quotes Flaubert's theory as a typical example of the coherence theory:

" 'Ce qui me semble beau, ce que je voudrais faire, c'est un livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure, qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style, comme la terre sans être soutenue se tient en l'air, un livre qui n'aurait presque pas de sujet, ou du moins où le sujet serait presque invisible,

si cela se peut....' (Correspondence II 345/6)

There could be no clearer, more final statement of the coherence theory of realism than this - and no plainer illustration of how this theory supersedes the clumsier idea of establishing

truth by the laborious process of correspondence"

(1)

The assumption of the superiority, from an aesthetic point of view, of the coherence over the correspondence theory, seems to be fairly typical of discussions of truth in art outside the realist tradition. The implication seems to be that, even if we can demand truth in art, this is not the same as a demand for realism. But one cannot simply substitute coherence for correspondence as the criterion of truth in art, and presume that this satisfies the moral argument's requirement of truth. For in the context of the moral argument, a correspondence theory of truth is the only kind of theory which is applicable; and no matter how important, in other respects, the internal consistency of a work of art may be, it is quite without relevance to the moral argument. For if we require truth in art, because we are afraid of the distortion of our attitudes to life, then the sort of truth which we require can only be a truth of correspondence between the representation and the reality which it represents.

The same sort of line can be taken with most of the other candidates for the title of "truth" in art. Although, considered out of context, they have as much right, perhaps, as realism, to be called "truth", they do not satisfy the

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(1) Realism. p.17.

requirements of the moral argument. A case could be made out for saying that almost any representational work of art in some way tells the truth: that it takes reality as its starting-point and expresses it in some way. But a work of art which is true in this way would not necessarily be one which helped to counter the possible misconceptions and distortions of attitudes which could be brought about by art. For this purpose, realism comes much closer to the sort of truth which is required.

The realist does not have any quarrel with art such as caricature, or the kind of exaggerated or allegorical art which points out features of the world, and obviously does so, rather than provides us with a "true" representation of it. But it is the latter which, for the realist, is the primary and central meaning of "truth" in the context of the moral argument, although the former can also be said to be "truth" of a different kind. The first priority of the realist is to attain a clear and undistorted picture of what life is like. And this purpose is better served by straightforward realism than by drawing attention to particular aspects of experience in the manner, say, of the Theatre of the Absurd, or a caricaturist. The sort of things which artists like Ionesco or Hogarth emphasize in their work may very well be true. The very technique of emphasis, however, which is used to point such things out to us is an obstacle to our estimation of just how prevalent and significant such aspects of experience really are. In order to assess this, we need precisely that undistorted and literal picture of life which the realist is trying to give us. Although we can accept that there are other kinds of truth in art apart from realism, there is still a case for saying that it is not only truth,

but also realism which is, in some cases, required of art.

Thus what at first sight seems to be a rather arbitrary and unjustifiable identification of realism and truth, can be seen to be perfectly consistent when the aims and implications of the moral argument are taken into account. It is also possible to object to the equation of realism and truth on the grounds that truth in art is impossible. The arguments involved here are the same as those which we encountered when discussing the alleged impossibility of realism. Since what the realist means by truth in art is realism, the objection tends to resolve itself into the question whether realism itself is possible, which we have already dealt with. Absolute truth, like absolute realism, must be admitted to be unattainable by art; but it is still possible for some works of art to be more true, or true in more important respects, than others.

The problem of fiction seems to crop up in an even more acute form with the concept of "truth" than it did with the concept of "realism". Truth is normally a notion reserved for matters of fact, whilst fiction, in contexts other than art, is generally called falsification or lying. To claim that fiction can be true is certainly unusual. But here again we must remember that what the realist means by truth is not historical truth, but the sort of representation which will not mislead us about what the world is like, or make us unfit to live in it. As long as the representation is "like reality" in the more general sense, (and we saw earlier that for this to be so, it does not have to be modelled on any actual object or event), then it can be said to be, in the realist's sense, true. It is in this context that we should remember the earlier objection that very few

works of art purport to be historically true; and the importance of historical truth is very slight in any theory of art, however strongly orientated towards realism. That art is concerned with general truths, however, is an idea which has had the most respectable history, and is explicitly formulated by Aristotle in his Poetics:

"It is not the poet's function to describe what has actually happened, but the kinds of things that might happen, that is, that could happen because they are, in the circumstances, either probable or necessary..... For this reason, poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history; for while poetry is concerned with universal truths, history treats of particular facts." (1)

#### IV. Truth and Morality.

One of the most interesting, and perhaps the most difficult, of the problems which are raised by the moral argument, is the question of the relationship between truth and morality. Both the interest and the difficulty arise from the fact that the question is not a factual or logical one, but a question of moral principle.

On some views, the relationship between morality and truth is not a particularly strong one. Sometimes, and this is the view of the propagandist, it is thought to be better for morality if people do not always have a very clear idea of the sort of things that actually happen.

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(1) Poetics. Classical Literary Criticism. p. 43.

One Renaissance theory of tragedy, for instance, was that it was meant to discourage rulers from becoming tyrants by impressing upon them the Awful Doom which awaited them if they did. A realist would be much more likely to show you a tyrant who prospered. The same sort of principle is involved in the way in which crime is depicted on television. On television, the criminal is seldom, if ever, allowed to get away with his crime. The realist's work, in which the criminal was not brought to justice, would, on this line of argument, be seen as an active encouragement to vice. From the point of view of social morality and stability, there is quite a lot to be said for this kind of attitude to art. But from the point of view of the individual, it may be seen as depriving him of the responsibility of making his own decisions on the basis of a true awareness of what life is like. This responsibility, and the honest approach to the facts which it involves, is a very important factor in individual morality, and, as well, in society's moral obligation towards the freedom of the individual. The whole ethos of a democratic society seems to be contrary to any sort of indoctrination and propagandist art. In most circumstances, including art, we would now be inclined to agree with Zola that:

"It is not possible to be moral outside the truth"  
(1)

But a more subtle way of justifying the unrealistic in art, is to consider art, not so much as propaganda, in the above sense, but as part of an ideology, something which shows us the sort of existence to which we ought to aspire, which fills our imaginations with elevating thoughts of the

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(1) 'Naturalism in the Theatre.' DMLR. p.209.

Beautiful and the Good. Again, there is a lot to be said for this sort of outlook. We do attach a great deal of importance to the appreciation of goodness and beauty: and what better way to cultivate such appreciation, it may be argued, than through the arts?

But there is, nevertheless, a danger - and we do incline to regard it as a danger - that in our preoccupations with our Elevated Thoughts we might tend to lose touch with the real business of living, and forget about the actual limitations of the world. Yet it is only in relation to the real world that any value and significance can be attached to ideals. It does seem to be important, then, for art to assert, at least sometimes, its commitment to the real, as opposed to the ideal, world; and this is what the realist seems to be trying to do. As Chernishevsky says:

"Reality is greater than dreams, and essential significance more important than fantastic pretensions." (1)

Also relevant here is Arthur McDowall's assertion of the logical priority of the real:

"For life has, as Amiel said, the incomparable advantage of being there to start with. It presents itself independently of our ideas about it, and with it our action and reflection must square." (2)

The connotations which the words "realistic" and "idealistic" have come to acquire with regard to attitudes apart from the context of aesthetics, helps to indicate the different way in which we feel towards each

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(1) Life and Aesthetics. DMLR. p.77.

(2) Realism: a Study in Art and Thought. p.4.

of them. "Realistic" has associations almost entirely of praise; but "idealistic", although by no means derogatory, suggests that such an attitude is not altogether satisfactory, and that its owner still has a lot to learn about what it is possible to accomplish in the real world.

It is very unusual to find any sort of discussion of the relationship between realistic attitudes and morality. Usually, the relationship tends to be assumed, one way or the other, without question. One place where the problem is treated is in Flugel's Man, Morals and Society. From a psychological point of view, Flugel discusses the comparative merits of realistic and unrealistic (or 'autistic') thinking. Although he admits that 'unrealism' may sometimes have its practical, and therefore moral, advantages, (for instance, unfounded confidence can be a major factor in the success of a project, or recovery from illness,) he still emphasizes its dangers:

"Of the disadvantages of autistic thinking, and the disabilities it imposes on our attempts to deal with 'real' problems, there can unfortunately be no doubt." (1)

Whether or not we ought to attach more importance to the real or to the ideal is the kind of value-judgement which it is notoriously difficult, and probably impossible, to prove by logic and reason. But the emphasis upon the real, upon which the realist seems to be building his case, would seem to be very much more in harmony with the present climate of thought than either the idealist or the propagandist view of art.

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(1) Man, Morals and Society. p. 238.

## V. The Validity and Importance of the Moral Argument.

The moral argument implies that there can be a need for realism in art. In pieces of straightforward narrative, realism is sometimes required instead of potentially misleading distortions. And the realistic work of art is often needed as a corrective to those misrepresentations which have already become embedded in the artistic conventions of the day.

As long as this argument is kept within its context, and within its limitations, it has a lot of force. It would be ludicrous to try to object to every piece of unrealism as immoral. But it is not at all ludicrous, nor is it particularly unusual, to object to certain kinds of unrealism, such as sentimentality and escapism, on the sort of grounds which the realist puts forward. Although his argument is not, and probably never could be, watertight, it draws attention to a danger which many people seem to have felt to be inherent in art, and particularly in popular art, which has a wide and immediate appeal.

But how is this sort of argument related to the aesthetic arguments which we examined earlier? If we start by asking what art is, we finish up with the conclusion that whatever it is, it isn't realism. But if we approach the whole question from another angle, and ask what sort of effects certain kinds of representational art might have on people, it is quite possible to reach the conclusion that realism might well be very important, even necessary, to art. There are other reasons, as we saw earlier, which might be put forward to suggest the value of realism in art; the opportunity it affords for the

display of technical skill; or its cognitive function. None of these reasons has anything to do with the original argument that realism is not art, and the grounds on which they are based are so different, that it is very difficult to see just how they are related, and what their relative importance is.

I have already suggested what I think to be the correct solution: that we ought to distinguish between two senses of "art" and recognize that the defining criterion of a work of art is not necessarily the only relevant criterion in assessing its value. This question of the relationship between purely "aesthetic" and other criteria is a controversial one, but it is very important to the problem of realism in the arts, since any value which realism might be said to have, is a value which is not dependent on purely aesthetic considerations.

Chapter 5: Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic Criteria.

The problem which has thus arisen is how much importance we ought to attach to considerations purely of art, and how much to other considerations, such as those of morality, in the assessment of a particular work of art, or of works of art in general. The assumption that realism is a harmful or irrelevant characteristic only seems tenable as long as we adopt the position that only purely aesthetic criteria are relevant. Realists themselves, on the other hand, tend to be preoccupied with criteria of very different kinds: technical, cognitive, and moral.

The distinction between the aesthetic and, say, the moral, is not always an easy one to draw. It is clear-cut when what is understood by "aesthetic" is the purely formal quality of the work; but in the criticism of Tolstoy, for example, where the definition of art is conceived very largely in moral terms, it becomes much more difficult to differentiate between the two.

The best way of doing so seems to be by seeing on what sort of considerations the criteria are ultimately based. Tolstoy's, for instance, although they have a decidedly moral flavour, are based on a concern with what is, or is not, art, as the title of his essay 'What is Art' indicates. Other criteria, such as those invoked by the moral argument, are conceived independently of definitions of art, and do not seem to be at all concerned with them. It is here that the problem arises. For the arguments against realism are based, as we have seen, on considerations deduced from some suggested definition of art;

that is, upon aesthetic considerations. The defences of realism, and most notably the moral defence, arise out of problems which have little or nothing to do with the question of what art is. And the difficulty is to discover what sort of significance we should attribute to criteria such as those which are not based on aesthetic principles.

### I. The Autonomy of Art.

This brings us up against the rather ambiguous notion of the "autonomy of art." This is a phrase which seems to cover a number of different positions which it is possible to hold with regard to the relative importance of aesthetic and other criteria: and it is difficult to decide what the central principle is. What does seem to be very near the centre of the doctrine, however, is the idea that the way in which we evaluate a work of art must be carefully distinguished from the way in which we evaluate other things in the world and from the way in which we would respond to the same thing in real life. There are some considerations which would quite legitimately influence our reaction in real life, and to other kinds of things, which it would be irrelevant and inappropriate to bring into our assessment of the work of art. We must judge art in accordance with criteria which are appropriate to art, and these are very often different from the kind of practical and moral criteria which we apply in our ordinary life. One of the classic statements of the autonomist position comes from A.C. Bradley, in his lecture on "Poetry for Poetry's Sake":

"What, then, does the formula 'poetry for poetry's sake' tell us about this experience?"

It says, as I understand it, these things. First, this experience is an end in itself, is worth having on its own account, has an intrinsic value. Next, its poetic value is this intrinsic worth alone. Poetry may also have an ulterior value as a means to culture or religion; because it conveys instruction, or softens the passions, or furthers a good cause; because it brings the poet fame or money or a quiet conscience. So much the better: let it be valued for these reasons too. But its ulterior worth neither is nor can directly determine its poetic worth as a satisfying imaginative experience: and this is to be judged entirely from within. And to these two positions, the formula would add, though not of necessity, a third. The consideration of ulterior ends, whether by the poet in the act of composing, or by the reader in the act of experiencing, tends to lower poetic value. It does so because it tends to change the nature of poetry by taking it out of its own atmosphere. For its nature is to be not a part, nor yet a copy, of the real world (as we commonly understand that phrase) but to be a world by itself, independent, complete, autonomous: and to possess it fully you must enter that world, conform to its laws, and ignore for the time the beliefs, aims and particular conditions which belong to you in the other world of reality. " (1)

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(1) 'Poetry for Poetry's Sake. Oxford Lectures on Poetry p. 4

There is, I think, a real need to assert the autonomy of art; for it is not uncommon for art to be subjected to a kind of criticism which is quite inappropriate and which implies a lack of appreciation of, and a failure to understand the work of art. It is all too easy to apply to art criteria which are irrelevant or inappropriate, and there is a danger that the application of such criteria obscures the real meaning and the genuine merits of the work of art, and leads us to value or condemn it on the wrong grounds. To value Blake's 'Jerusalem', for instance, purely or mainly as a patriotic hymn, is to ignore most of the things which are of significance in the poem, to wrench it out of context and distort its meaning. Another kind of misguided criticism, which is particularly relevant to the discussion of realism, is the simplistic moralism which judges a work to be good because it depicts good people, or bad because it portrays evil, and so on, assessing the work of art by exactly the same criteria as those by which one would assess the subject of the representation in real life. This sort of approach ignores the effect of the artistic context of the representation, and all the qualities which are aesthetically significant; and it is rightly attacked. The principle of the autonomy of art, then, warns us, among other things, against carrying the concerns, beliefs, and moral criteria of life directly into art, and evaluating a representation on the basis of our normal attitude to what it represents. Such an argument is often found in connection with discussions of the disinterestedness of the aesthetic response. Clive Bell says much the same thing in Art, and Charles Lamb objects to an over-literal response to representation in his essay on Restoration Comedy:

"Idle gallantry in a fiction, a dream, the passing pageant of an evening, startles us in the same way as the alarming indications of profligacy in a son or ward in real life should startle a parent or guardian." (1)

This is only one way in which criticism of art can be based on the wrong sort of considerations, but I have chosen to elaborate upon it here because it seems, at first sight, to be the kind of mistake which a realist might make. In fact, objections such as Lamb's are really directed against a naive moralism of which the realist cannot properly be accused. Indeed the realists, probably more than anyone else, have suffered from this kind of criticism. In the nineteenth century, their work was frequently denounced as immoral because they depicted immorality, as in the National Vigilance Association's collection of documents on "Pernicious Literature" amply shows:

"There can be no question that Zola is filthy in the extreme, and obscene to the point of bestiality. He is more unclean, and realistically so, than any other writer, not an oriental, whose name we can record." (2)

The realist claims that his work is moral; and he can only do so because he is very conscious of the difference which the artistic context makes as regards what is, and is not, moral. If he still claims that truth is as important in art as it is in real life, it is not because he is not aware of the difference, but because, in this case, he thinks that it does not affect the issue.

The demand, which seems to be at the bottom of the

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(1) 'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century': Essays of Elia p.193

(2) DMLR p.281

autonomist's position, that art should only be judged by criteria which can appropriately apply to it, need not, necessarily, be interpreted in such a way that it is hostile to realism: to moral and other non-aesthetic criteria. As long as such criteria are applied in a way which does justice to the distinctive nature of works of art in general, and the particular work of art in question, there might be no need for us to object to them. We could save our objections for cases, such as the above, where criteria are applied in ways which the work of art does not justify. A case could, and I think ought to, be made out for distinguishing between irrelevant or extraneous criteria and criteria which, although not aesthetic, are still applicable. Religious and philosophical criteria are relevant to the work of Donne, Herbert, or to Paradise Lost, in a way in which patriotic considerations are not relevant to Jerusalem. It is noticeable that Bradley, in his discussion of the 'ulterior worth' of poetry, is lumping together criteria of very different kinds, some of which are completely extraneous, and others which are just non-aesthetic. The difference between valuing a poem as a 'means to culture or religion, because it conveys instruction or softens the passions', and as something which 'brings the poet fame or money or a quiet conscience' seems quite marked.

But the principle of the Autonomy of Art is more frequently associated with the much stronger claim, as is suggested by Bradley, that the only criteria which are, strictly speaking, relevant to art are those criteria which are purely aesthetic - however aesthetic may be defined. The supremacy of aesthetic values is usually modestly limited to the sphere of aesthetics itself, but it has sometimes been extended to include the whole of life, as in Wilde's dialogue,

The Critic as Artist:

"Even a colour-sense is more important, in the development of the individual, than a sense of right and wrong." (1)

(It might be objected to this that the notion of importance is, itself, a moral notion: but I am not sure that this is necessarily so, as will be seen later.)

It is more usual, however, to claim, not that aesthetic values are all-important, but that they are the only values which are relevant to the criticism of a work of art. Thus technical skill, when not subordinated to aesthetic considerations, is artistically worthless. If the work of art tells us something about the world as well as being beautiful, expressive or what have you, this does not matter at all. And the possibility that it might have a moral value or disvalue in addition to whatever moral value is implicit in the definition of art, is quite without significance. This interpretation of the autonomy of art is clearly damning to the realist, for it makes realism valueless unless it can be justified as art: and the aesthetic arguments have already shown us, quite forcefully, that realism is not art.

## II. The Overridingness of Morality.

But the realist, if he is a realist on moral grounds, can retaliate with a principle of his own: that of the overridingness of the demands of morality. It has been claimed that moral principles are by their very nature overriding. That means they have greater authority than all other kinds of principles, including aesthetic ones,

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(1) Complete Works of Oscar Wilde. p. 1058.

and no doubt the principle of the autonomy of art. Overridingness is often considered to be a defining characteristic of a moral principle. Beardsmore, for instance, considers moral principles to be logically superior to others, because - so he claims - they are concerned with the evaluation of the different ends of human action, rather than how those ends are to be achieved. Thus any choice as to what ends we are to pursue becomes, by definition, a moral choice. Beardsmore rejects:

"the autonomist's claim that we may choose between the demands of art and those of morality. For the question of the relative importance of those demands is one which could be raised only from within the standpoint of morality. And from within that standpoint, the question answers itself." (1)

For Hare, too, moral principles are those which a man accepts as being of ultimate importance in his life; those to which he is prepared to sacrifice all other principles:

"A man's moral principles, in this sense, are those which in the end, he accepts to guide his life by, even if this involves breaches of subordinate principles, such as those of aesthetics or etiquette." (2)

But there is a flaw, which has not gone unnoticed, in this claim that moral principles are almost by definition overriding. Both Hare's and Beardsmore's accounts are satisfactory only as long as we are prepared to define moral principles by their status alone; as those principles on which we decide between different possible aims, or those by which we ultimately govern our lives. But moral

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(1) Art and Morality. p.30.

(2) Freedom and Reason. p.169.

principles, as so defined, could have any content. If overridingness is made the criterion of morality, then any principle which is overriding will on that account be a moral principle. But this is not exactly what those who appeal to the doctrine are trying to show. They are attempting to establish the authority of a certain kind of principle. "Moral" has descriptive meaning as well as hierarchical status. When a moral principle is considered, as it usually is, as one with a certain type of content, then there does not appear to be any logical necessity for it to occupy an overriding position among principles. As C.K. Grant says:

"Why might not a man sometimes or always refuse to act in accordance with certain moral rules entirely on the ground that in the situations in which he sometimes or always finds himself, other non-moral principles, that he sincerely believes to be of greater importance, are relevant? "

(1)

### III. The Importance of Non-Aesthetic Criteria.

Thus an appeal to the overridingness of morality, however plausible it might seem, is not, in itself, an adequate defence of realism against the attack of the autonomist. There are serious flaws in the whole doctrine of overridingness. We may feel that moral principles ought to be overriding, but this is a moral, rather than a logical, principle, and cannot therefore answer the autonomist.

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(1) "Akrasia and the Criteria of Assent to Practical Principles" Mind. July, 1956.

Nor does the doctrine help to re-instate other criteria which are not moral, such as the technical and cognitive criteria which, as we have seen, are also relevant to realism.

A more satisfactory way of defending realism is to point out the weaknesses of the autonomist position. There is nothing wrong with the claim that a work of art should be judged only by criteria which are relevant and conducive to a full understanding of it. But the attempt to limit such considerations to purely aesthetic ones seems to me to be taking the demand to an unnecessary extreme, and even to be conflicting with the need for a complete appreciation of the work of art.

Other criteria are not, a priori, irrelevant to the assessment of art. I think that it is a mistake to claim that the defining criterion alone is the relevant standard of judgement. In other cases we would hardly ever think of limiting the criteria of value to the criteria which distinguish, and even which justify, something. A good man, a good dog, a good school, a good table, all of these would be assessed by other criteria as well as those which define them: and in order to come to a complete and adequate decision about them, it is considered necessary to look at them from as many, not as few, angles as possible. Someone whose definition of a good school, for instance, was based only on strictly academic criteria, would be thought to have a narrow and misguided approach. And the same can, I think, be said of someone who tries to evaluate art on strictly aesthetic criteria alone. It is true that art is perhaps particularly vulnerable to inappropriate criticism, and attempts must be made to guard against this. But to look at art solely from the "aesthetic" point of view is to ignore aspects of the work

which are frequently of great importance, both to the artist himself, and to the reader or viewer whose appreciation has not been corrupted by exaggerated notions of artistic autonomy. Autonomy, in this sense, is an obstacle to that complete and appropriate response to the work of art which the very same principle of autonomy was originally meant to ensure.

We have, then, every right to apply criteria of morality, skill, and whatever else is relevant to any particular work of art. Morality, in particular, is a criterion which would be almost always applicable. And the fact that realism is justified by moral, technical, and not aesthetic, considerations in no way means that it is of no value to the work of art. There would be a case for saying that the completely realistic work, with no hint of an "aesthetic" quality, was not art at all. If something lacks the defining criterion of art, whatever that may be, it will be true that it is not art, and this is what we feel about Madame Tussaud's waxworks, and some examples of illusionist art. In the same way, a school in which there was no sign of any academic training would hardly qualify to be called a school. But when realism is found, as it often is, in conjunction with "aesthetic" qualities, it is a mistake to say that it is the "aesthetic" qualities alone which give the work its value. Realism, too, can be an important ingredient of art, in a general sense.

Conclusion.

I have been concerned, not so much with building up a watertight case on behalf of realism, (although I have tried to suggest some of the reasons for which we can, and do, value it), as with showing that the case against realism, as we frequently see it today, is very much over-stated. The reasons upon which we are asked to base our contempt for realism do not provide adequate grounds for this contempt: and realism - realism in its simplest and most literal sense, without sophisticated re-definitions and re-formulations - has not been proved to be impossible, illegitimate or irrelevant in art.

In order to defend realism it is not necessary to deny the claim that realism is not art. This seems to be a perfectly valid claim, when it is understood as meaning that realism is not the quality which distinguishes something as being a work of art, and provides a justification for the existence of works of art in general. If art is capable of being defined at all, it will certainly be defined as something other than a copy of the world. We do well to remind ourselves of the distinction between realism and art, if only to avoid making the mistake of assessing all works of art solely by realistic criteria, and ignoring those criteria, frequently more important, which give the work its aesthetic significance.

But the mistake which the opponents of realism make is in thinking that, because realism is not art in this sense, we are justified in ignoring it, perhaps even criticising it, when we come across it in a work of art. This line of approach is supported by the unwarranted assumption that

the justification of realism must be in terms of an argument which can show that realism is art or that art is realism. Thus a great deal of time and energy is spent upon discrediting the mimetic theory of art, a theory which has perhaps never been held in the form in which it is attacked, and is certainly not the only, and probably not even a very important, defence of realism. Here again, those who attack realism, although they do not prove their point, do help to clarify our thinking about art a great deal. By clearly distinguishing between art and imitation, they have no doubt helped to reduce the amount of time which is wasted in attempts to modify and reformulate the mimetic theory in order to make it a consistent and acceptable theory of art. It is as well to have the flaws in the mimetic theory well and truly exposed, so that, if we want to, we can concentrate on the real business of deciding what it is that makes something a work of art, without feeling obliged to make it compatible with an imitation theory. But the exposure of the mimetic theory only prevents us from valuing realism for the wrong reasons. It does not, in itself, prove to us that realism is either harmful or irrelevant.

For our reasons for respecting realism are not grounded on considerations of what is, or is not, art; but they are the result of a very different approach to the whole subject. The criteria by which realism is seen to be valuable are not distinctively aesthetic ones, but those technical, cognitive, and moral criteria which we apply in many different circumstances. And the value of realism according to these criteria is emphasized and supplemented by contrast with the existing tradition of representational art, to which realism.

is a reaction, and a corrective. To depict realistically what before has been depicted conventionally, or not depicted at all, demands observation and skill; and can have a revelatory effect which is of both cognitive and moral value. None of these aspects of realism is sufficiently emphasized by a discussion of realism apart from the representational tradition in which it arises; and yet the aesthetic arguments against it are almost always developed without reference to this tradition. When realism is considered in its rightful context, however, we can much more easily become convinced that there are very good reasons for not ignoring it.

The moral defence of realism is particularly important because it raises, in its most acute form, the question of how much authority we ought to attribute to the arguments in favour of realism in art. We might be quite willing to allow that technical, and perhaps even cognitive considerations should, in artistic circumstances, give way to aesthetic ones: and we might be prepared to admit that if realism is not art, then, whatever its value in other respects, its value in a work of art is negative. But if we value something on moral grounds, we are much less happy about subordinating or sacrificing it to other considerations, unless we have a very good reason for so doing. And thus we reach an apparent stalemate, with the argument on the one side that realism is not art; and on the other, the argument that art must tell the truth. Each position is based on very different kinds of considerations: and the advocates on either side claim that their considerations are the most important. Opponents of realism appeal to the principle of the Autonomy of Art: whilst those who defend it imply, if

they do not actually say it, that moral demands override even aesthetic ones.

The arguments on both sides are convincing, and the conflict between them is not best to be solved by denying either of them: but by clarifying the relations between them in order to show that they do not have to conflict at all. It is here that it is necessary to draw some sort of distinction between the two meanings of "art": art as the defining characteristic of a work of art; and art as an institution: as the whole class of works of art, considered from all relevant angles. And it is here, I think, that the arguments against realism overreach themselves, either because they fail to draw the distinction, or because they assume that the principle of the autonomy of art implies that the defining criterion of art is the only one which can properly be used to assess the value of a work of art. But if we recognize that the idea of the autonomy of art is essentially an attempt to guard against irrelevant and inappropriate criticism, and to ensure an adequate understanding of the work of art, then we can see that it is not necessary, and that it is even mistaken, to interpret it so that all non-aesthetic criteria are, for that reason, held to be inappropriate. To fail to appreciate those aspects of a work of art which are not, strictly speaking, aesthetic, is to look at art from a point of view so purified that not only what is irrelevant, but also much that is significant, has been excluded.

It is in this way that the apparent conflict between our opinions about realism can best be resolved. We can, and should, accept that realism is not art, in the one sense, without being committed to denying that it is of no value to

art in the other. Thus those who claim, or simply imply, that the rejection of the mimetic theory of art necessitates the rejection of realism itself, seem to be making an unwarranted leap between different kinds of argument. The case against realism is by no means as conclusive as it is sometimes made out to be. In fact it is very unsatisfactory.

The implications of all this extend far beyond the problem of realism itself. The controversy over realism only serves to bring to a head issues of a wider nature, concerning the kind of ways in which we can and should respond to a work of art. And this would still be important, even if the particular arguments about realism which we have been discussing, were shown to be unfounded. The lesson which we should learn, I think, from this whole question is that we ought to have an attitude to works of art which is broad and flexible enough to admit the value of non-aesthetic considerations in art. To try to confine art, and the correct response to art, within the limits of the strictly aesthetic, is to impoverish, and not to purify, them.

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