



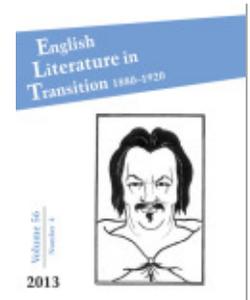
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An Interlude: We Have Never Been Modernists

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WHAT A DIFFERENCE a sovereign makes. Who knows how the nineteenth century, and consequently nineteenth-century studies, would have fared differently had the young Queen Victoria, recently married and expecting her first child, not been tragically shot and killed in 1840 by the insane Edward Oxford while she was riding with her husband on Constitution Hill? It is against the backdrop of the ensuing sixty years' worth of contentious regencies, short undistinguished reigns, and agonistic successions that we still recognize the nineteenth century for what it was: a time of political and economic volatility, radical technological innovation, scientific revolution, massive urbanization, spasmodic imperial expansion, and elaborately reticulated geopolitical and geocapital networks; a time of working-class migration, subjection, and unrest, and of epochal reforms; a time of tectonic shifts in male enfranchisement, female labor and mobility, and multiplying sexual discourses, communities, and ontologies. Without the camouflage of a single, stable monarch, the paroxysms of nineteenth-century culture, too, have long been vividly clear to us. We know the nineteenth as the birth century of the manifesto in England—not only the Communist manifesto, translated into English in 1850, and the points and petitions of Chartism but also realist manifestos such as chapter seventeen (“In Which the Story Pauses a Little”) of George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* and, ten years previously, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood’s literary manifesto in the *Germ*, which announced the arrival of *avant-garde* realism. In comparison to these detonations, the dime-a-dozen manifestos of the Georgian period look like the belated exercises they were.

The Georgian period was named for George V, who was distantly related to the slain Queen Victoria and who finally ended the dog’s breakfast of regents and unremarkable monarchs by ruling, steadily and as a moral exemplar, from 1901 to 1965. To be sure, this was a

period not short on cultural and technological change, mass political movements, economic volatility, world war, genocide, and imperial contraction. Nonetheless, it was given continuity in England by a single unbroken reign—so much so that historians until recently used the term “Georgian” to refer to the same period in United States history.

In literary studies, where we have a high tolerance for the miscellaneous, we name one of these periods after a mode, the other after a monarch: the realist period followed by the Georgian. We may debate how much before 1840 realism started or whether it makes sense to divide the Georgian period into early and late Georgian. But in our job descriptions and our curricula, we generally cleave to the conventional way of compartmentalizing and naming Anglo-American time. We do the same thing in our journals and professional societies. I am, for instance, President of the RSA, or Realist Studies Association, whose affiliated journal is the house organ of what we’ve come to call the New Realist Studies. (The journal’s called *REALISM/reality*.) There’s the Realist Journals Project, which makes the great works of nineteenth-century serial fiction available in the contexts in which they originally appeared, yet stops around 1901 despite the fact that little magazines were important for early Georgian literature. For its part, scholarship on the long post-1901 period continues, despite intermittent challenges from within the scholarly community, to sail under the flag of the longest-reigning British monarch, with its journals *Georgian Studies*, *Georgian Poetry*, the *Journal of Georgian Culture*, the *Georgian Periodicals Review*, *Georgian Literature and Culture*, etc., etc. The odd exception—*Twentieth-Century Literature*, run out of UCLA by Michael North, for example—merely proves the rule.

I’ll confess, there are days when I feel I’ve surfeited on realism—really just had enough. Days when, if I see one more book with the title (adjective)-*Realism* or *Realism-and-*(noun) I’ll simply start raving: *Late Realism*, *Green Realism*, *Bad Realisms*, *Realism and Imperialism*, *Realism and Copyright*. Days when “realism” seems to me a term at once indispensable and indefensible, clung to out of habit and the strong self-perpetuating energies of professional categories and associations. By requiring every book in the field to engage the question “What *was* realism?” we have inspired the minting of a thousand atomized realisms on the basis of each of which a totalizing and finally not very persuasive theory of realism *tout court* is launched. These are days on which I find myself wishing we could treat “realism” as a weak theoretical term; let it lie fallow and stop forcing it to do more of the

kind of conceptual heavy lifting that may already have broken its back. Let it become a minor term the way, say, “futurism,” “modernism,” and “surrealism” are in Georgian studies.

I feel a little guilty, too, about how the New Realist Studies, largely for purposes of self-consecration, casts Georgian literature in the role of straw man: as the weak echo of nineteenth-century turbulence, energy, innovation, and iconoclasm. Yet at the end of the day I’m unwilling wholly to surrender the portrait of the nineteenth century as a period when self-critical political modernity and its concomitant literary forms explored the complex dialectic between political and aesthetic modernity—a period when realism was necessary because, as Fredric Jameson has argued, there was, in fact, a new reality to describe. I find it correspondingly hard to give up the portrait of the Georgian era as culturally rather inert despite the period’s geopolitical eventfulness—as the faint afterimage of realism’s bolder aesthetico-political engagement with discontinuity and auto-critique, an afterimage that can glorify freedom only in aesthetic terms.

There’s one thing I think I can say without worrying that it’s just my New Realist Studies chauvinism talking. The identification of the period 1901 to 1965 with a sovereign, particularly one who reigned during the decline of empire and the consequent revival of English insularism described by my Georgianist colleague Jed Esty in *A Shrinking Island*, has meant that the transnational turn came, like all things, belatedly to Georgian studies. By contrast, realist studies has for decades been attracting multilingual comparatists who have undertaken projects as diverse as tracing the imperial and global circuits of trade, labor, violence, law, print culture, and education; producing comparative and transnational studies of religious and working-class movements; and pursuing the complex itineraries of various nineteenth-century realist *avant-gardes* working in several genres and media. It’s worth pondering how Georgian studies in the Anglo-American academy has remained so monolingual in comparison, despite its earlier engagement with new historicism, which one might have expected to push it in a comparatist direction. In other words, I want to ask, what was it about new historicism that could insist on thickened contexts without immediately recognizing transnational, and particularly translational, pathways of exchange as one of those contexts? It might be a revealing sort of counterfactual thought experiment to imagine a different sequence of methodological landfalls—to imagine, for example, a real-

ist studies that had grappled with new historicism *before* making its transnational turn.

But rather than indulge in that kind of lightweight speculative exercise, I'd like to close with an observation about the difference made not by sovereigns but by accidents of adjective formation. Twentieth-century British literature scholars can separate themselves adjectivally from their period of study: those who work on Georgian literature and its era are Georgianists. But to study an "-ism" is to be denied that terminological distance. If you study realism and realists, you are neither a *realism-ist* nor a *realist-ist*; you're a *realist*, and consequently any neurotic identification or other transferential relationship you may have to the field is underscored, or even solicited, by the terms of your scholarly self-reference. You are invited to think that you are what you study, that field is a byword for ontology. Am I crazy to think that this must have some nontrivial effects on scholarly habitus in the field of realist studies? Or is it just self-evident that the most evenly hovering realist intelligence will tend to entangle itself libidinally with the field and its period logic, and to an even greater extent than happens between most scholars and their fields and periods?

I dunno. Call me a realist.