

THE STRIKING SUSTAINABILITY OF LITERARY REALISM

An exploration of the red line between traditional realism and contemporary realism, based on a comparison between George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections & Freedom*.

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CONTENTS

- INTRODUCTION
- CHAPTER 1: FROM GENERAL REALISM TO HYSTERICAL REALISM
 - § 1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF LITERARY REALISM
 - § 1.1 THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION
 - § 2.1 THE CONDITION OF ENGLAND DEBATE
 - § 2. DEFINITIONS AND IMPORTANT FEATURES OF REALISM
 - § 3. CRITICAL APPROACHES TO REALISM
 - § 4. CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF REALISM
 - § 4.1 CRACKPOT REALISM AND HYSTERICAL REALISM
 - § 5. CONCLUSION
- CHAPTER 2: GEORGE ELIOT'S *MIDDLEMARCH*
- CHAPTER 3: JONATHAN FRANZEN'S *THE CORRECTIONS AND FREEDOM*
- CONCLUSION
- BIBLIOGRAPHY

INTRODUCTION

In 2000, British critic James Wood caused a literary stir by stating that Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* was a clear example of hysterical realism. Although he considers the separate details, characters and events in novels like *White Teeth* as elements of traditional realism, Wood states that it is the endless combination and interaction between all the elements that creates the 'exhausted and overworked' plots typical for hysterical realism [Wood 2005: 179]. The result are 'inhuman novels [... that] clothe real people who could never actually endure the stories that happen to them' [180], one of the typical faults in these hysterical group of big, ambitious novels written in the first decade of the 21st century. Wood's concept of hysterical realism is quite similar to another contemporary subgenre of realism named crackpot realism [Bukiet 1996]. In this thesis I argue that, although more than a century separates them, these contemporary forms of realism can be traced back to traditional realism and the rise of the novel at the beginning of the 19th century. I state that just like the first realist novels, of which *Middlemarch* [1871] by the 19th-century British author George Eliot is considered a cornerstone, crackpot and hysterical realist novels reflect the lives of common people against the background of the most turbulent times in history. Taking *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010) by American author Jonathan Franzen as examples of different states of hysterical realism I provide examples to underline the statement above that these novels are mirrors of the contemporary American society.

To get a good idea of the literary line that connects the novels of Eliot and Franzen, the first chapter of this thesis provides a general exploration of the history and the concept of literary realism, as well as a short debate on a selection of theoretical approaches to the genre. Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* and Roland Barthes' *The Rustle of Language* serve as keynote texts in this thesis, for they have each contributed important notions and visions on literature in general, and literary realism in particular. This exploration of traditional realism provides a logical transition to the discussion of contemporary subgenres of realism in § 4. The examples from the three novels in chapters 2 and 3 provide the remaining proof to underline the statement that realism, by its evolution from traditional to crackpot and hysterical realism, seems to be the answer to the recurrent question how to write a novel both that truly reflects its time.

CHAPTER 1: FROM GENERAL REALISM TO HYSTERICAL REALISM

To understand the red line between traditional realism and contemporary realism, it is important to understand the historical background, the exact characteristics and the critical approaches of the genre. The first aspect, the historical background, leads back to the midst of the 18th century with the first signs of the coming industrial revolution, after which the genre developed in different ways and directions during the 18th and 19th century. The second aspect, exact characteristics of realism, will prove to be more problematic and complicated to describe, due to the fact that a coherent picture of the genre has never really existed. But the list of important general definitions and features in the next paragraph will shed more light on the genre. A short overview of some of the most striking critical visions on the genre will not only contribute to a general understanding of realism, it also connects it to the recurrent question of how writers should reflect the society in their work. This general background will serve as the theoretical foundation for the examination of two striking contemporary forms of realism.

§ 1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF LITERARY REALISM

Realism emerged as a genre in the second half of the 19th century, first in France and then in the rest of Europe. The rise of literary realism is closely bound to the rise of the novel, which sets the historical boundaries of the genre not farther back than the 18th century. In *The Rise of the Novel* [1957] British critic Ian Watt (1917-1999) states that ‘the novel is the form of literature which most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation [...and] is thus the logical literary vehicle of a culture which, in the last few centuries, has set an unprecedented value on originality’ [13]. Watt’s claim connects the origins of the novel to a very important shift in the history of the Western arts: the shift from rigid imitation to originality and reflection. Michel Foucault summarizes this dominance of *imitatio* in the Western arts in *The Order of Things* [1966] as follows:

Up to the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture. It was resemblance that largely guided exegesis and the interpretation of texts; it was resemblance that organized the play of symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them. [Foucault 2004: 19].

Foucault sees this dominance of imitation as the universe being ‘folded in upon itself’ [19], or in other words, artists only captured what was directly before them, rather than taking a critical or reflective position towards their surroundings. The romantics broke up this dominant motion of imitation and reflection in the arts. Romanticism, as it arose during the first half of the nineteenth century, replaced imitation with originality, spontaneity and ‘free spirits expressing their own imaginative truths [‘Romanticism’, def. 1]. It can be perceived as a countermovement that reached in two different directions. On the one hand, romanticism was a reaction on the doctrine of imitation or resemblance, and on the other hand, it was a reaction on to the ‘ordered rationality’ of the age of enlightenment in the 17th and 18th century. As a phase in Western history, the enlightenment replaced superstition and faith with knowledge and reason as the dominant guidance to live ones life. According to the romantics, this strong believe in reason resulted in a cold sphere and an impersonal attitude that needed to be replaced with ‘emotional directness of personal experience,’ and ‘boundlessness of individual imagination and aspiration’ [‘Romanticism’, def. 1]. Within literature these romantic ideals resulted a range of dominant aesthetic changes. Important features of romantic literature were the dominance of (dramatic) plots, extensive use of hyperbolic and metaphoric language, rich descriptions of feelings and nature, and idealized mysterious or even impossible events and characters. Romantic author such as William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley were worshipped as genius and hero, unique artists in possession of outstanding originality and imagination, to which the ‘gift of art’ came even ‘beyond the reach of conscious thought’ [‘Genius’, def. 1]. Although some critics think that we still live in the romantic period¹, it is a generally accepted vision that it ended around 1840 and as a literary genre was succeeded by the genre of literary realism.

In her book *Realism*, Lilian Furst provides an acute summary of the background of the genre:

As an artistic movement realism is the product and expression of the dominant mood of its time: a pervasive rationalist epistemology that turned its back on the fantasies of Romanticism and was

¹ For example the Dutch philosopher Maarten Doorman, who states in *De Romantische Orde* that we are still captured in a romantic way of thinking and speaking, that is dominated by a number of contradictions, such as the self and the

shaped instead by the impact of the political and social changes as well as the scientific and industrial advances of its day [Furst 1992: 1].

Furst points out that both realism and romanticism were reactions, although very different ones, on the dominant 'rationalist epistemology' that typifies the age of enlightenment and the industrial revolution. As a reaction on romanticism, realism shows many opposing literary features. Where romanticism emphasises individuality and subjectivity, realism lays the focus on the ordinary and objective. The material of the realist story is drawn from the material reality, instead of the genius mind of the author, and heroic characters with metaphorical names are replaced with common people, living in an everyday world, doing ordinary things. In short, the romantics aimed to show a magical world of feelings, and the realists wanted to capture a world of plain reality. What the genres have in common is that both romantic and realist novels reflect perfectly the fast changes in attitude and in worldview that took place in the wake of the industrialization.

§ 1.1 THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

On a more general historical level, literary realism is generally perceived as a response to the substantial economical and social changes that resulted from the industrial revolution. Starting in the midst of the 18th century in England, and soon spreading throughout Western Europe and the rest of the world, the industrial revolution marks a major turning point in history, and the rise of realism will prove to be closely bound up with these interesting times. The industrialization occurred mainly as a result of a number of important innovations in England in the 18th century, major developments in technology, transportation, manufacturing and agriculture. The invention of cotton mills and steam power and the use of coke, instead of charcoal, in the iron industry laid the foundation for an economic growth that would change essentially every aspect of life. Railways and highroads were being build, and the country became less rural and more urban, for people from the countryside moved to the vastly growing cities to become labour force in the new factories. Due to the new speed and character of the production of goods, new markets and new methods of trade arose and capital increased, changing the economy entirely. Due to healthier living situations and the developments in the medical science, mortality rates increased, resulting in a rapid growth of population [Ashton 1997: introduction].

Essential to the development of literary realism were the social changes that resulted from these industrial and economical developments. The whole organisation of society was transformed, swapping away old privileges and monopolies and offering new opportunities and changes to the lower, - and middle classes, as becomes clear in the introduction of *Industrial Revolution* from T.S. Ashton:

The State came to play a less active, the individual and the voluntary association a more active, part in affairs. Ideas of innovation and progress undermined traditional sanctions: men began to look forward, rather than backward, and their thoughts as to the nature and purpose of social life were transformed [Ashton: 3].

For those who were 'able and willing to move to centres of opportunity' [Ashton: 2], general living standards became higher. There was more comfort due to inventions like electric lightning and running water and houses became better build and more luxurious. The standard of personal hygiene became higher, another factor that stimulated the growth of population, resulting in a healthier living environment. All these changes resulted in a considerably larger, and also much more powerful middleclass.

Another important effect of the changing world in perspective of the development of realism was the spread of literacy and books. In consequence of all the changes in the industry, infrastructure and economy, the wide spread of the printing press, already invented by Gutenberg in 1440, became possible. At the same time, more and more people got educated and were taught to read and write, resulting in a rapidly increasing reading public. In this perspective it is not surprising that the term 'reading public' is a 19th century coinage of the writer and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), who used the term to refer to the increasing group of 'common readers' in the first half of the nineteenth century. That the rise of the middle class was not received unreservedly positive proves the way how Coleridge addresses the changing climate in an edition *The Statesman's Manual; or The Bible The Best Guide To Political Skill and Foresight: A Lay Sermon* from 1816. According to the title page, the sermons in this magazine are 'addressed to the higher classes of society', a statement on which Coleridge elaborates by pointing out that 'not even as a Sermon would I have addressed the present Discourse to a promiscuous audience; and for this reason I likewise announced it on the title-page, as exclusively *ad clerum*; i.e. (in the old and wide sense of the word) to men of *clerkly* acquirements, of whatever profession.' [Coleridge 1816: Sermon 1, p. 45]. He goes on to state that it is not possible anymore to direct specific publications to 'its

appropriate class of Readers,' 'For among other odd burs and kecksies, the misgrowth of our luxuriant activity, we have now a READING PUBLIC, as strange a phrase, methinks, as ever forced a splenetic smile on the staid countenance of Meditation; and yet no fiction!' [45-46]. On his rhetorical question what the result of these changes may be, the author exclaims: 'From a popular philosophy and a philosophic populace, Good Sense deliver us!' [46]. Despite Coleridge's strong and cynical objections, his words mark a great shift in the world of reading that occurred in the course of the 19th century. A new mass reading public came to be, consisting for the most part of middle class people. This change disrupted the old equilibrium, in which the higher classes used literacy (and illiteracy, for that matter) as a way to overpower the lower classes [Altick 1957: 84-85]. One of the ways in which literature became available to the middle and lower classes was via public and circulating libraries. Altick points out that these libraries were popular and widely available by the end of the nineteenth century, and that these institutions were an important contribution in the democratization process of reading for all the classes of society [239-239]. In view of realism, it is important to note the considerably less successful rise of Mechanics' Institutes, which aimed to 'impart the elements of scientific knowledge to workingmen through classes, lectures, and libraries' [188]. And although the classes, to which people from the working class could attend after work, were no success, Altick points out that these institutions helped to bring literature to the working class and contributed in the development of mass literature. The following quote gives an idea about the figures behind these developments:

[T]he 'reading public' in the 1840s can be thought of as a core of perhaps half a million sophisticated and relatively affluent readers, with a body of several million less-skilled readers; these figures growing steadily throughout the 1860s and 1870s, [...] although the real explosion in literacy was not to come until after the establishment of compulsory education in 1871 ['readership', def. 1].

This citation shows that, although there arose a reading public, as there had never been before, the numbers show that it was still nothing compared to the reading public today. In relation to this, it should also be stressed that in terms of classes, reading was still mainly reserved for the higher and middle classes, and still not for the lowest classes of the Victorian society [Watt: 48]. Nevertheless, the increase in literacy and the growing availability of books were very important factors in the emancipation of the middleclass.

In anticipation of the analysis of *Middlemarch* (1871-72), it is important to realize that George Eliot stood in the very midst of these developments, something that is clearly reflected in her novel, as will become clear in chapter 2. Another important factor is the effect of this new reading public upon literature. The new, bourgeois readers demanded other things from books than the select group of elitist men Coleridge addressed in his sermons. Although a general education in reading and writing became more standard, the common reader did not yet receive enough knowledge to read classical literature. Therefore, both writers and publishers (booksellers, as they were called then) felt forced to provide this new reading public with easier forms of literature. New authors from the middle classes, like Daniel Defoe and Samuel Johnson stepped in to fill the vacancy left by classical authors without the skills to write something that would appeal to the new reading public [Watt: 59]. Their work fulfilled the demands of the new public that wanted to read about the things they could relate to on a personal level, things like the question how to deal with the newly acquired amount of freedom and leisure time and the need for new guidelines in a time where the former social institutions providing security, like the church, the guild and the family, were no longer granted [Watt: 60-61].

§ 1.2 THE CONDITION OF ENGLAND DEBATE

In the wake of this major revolution of industrialization, many critics stepped forward to express their concerns and ideas about the dramatic changes in the social situation of the English working-class. These intellectual debates, which took place between the 1810s and the 1870s, came soon to be known as the ‘Condition of England Debate’ [Gallagher 2005]. The concerns of these intellectuals are reflected in a body of novels from the same timespan, which are also referred to as industrial novels or social (problem) novels². The phrase ‘condition of England’ is generally ascribed to Scottish critic Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) who addressed the problem of the conditions of the English working class in his book *Chartism* from 1840. Chartism was a movement of working class people between 1838 and 1848, that fought for political reform of Britain, and that can be perceived as a reaction on the

² The industrial novel can be perceived as a subgenre of the social novel, both of which depicted the social changes and the difficult conditions of the working class in the course of the industrial revolution. George Eliot’s *Felix Holt* (1866) is generally seen as an industrial novel. Other famous industrial novels are Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil* (1845), Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), and Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times* (1854) [Gallagher 2005].

division of the English society and the poverty of the majority. Carlyle's definition of 'chartism' clearly captures the goal of this movement: 'Chartism means the bitter discontent grown fierce and mad, the wrong condition therefore or the wrong disposition, of the Working Classes of England' [Carlyle 1840: 2]. In view of the origins of literary realism, it is important to note that Carlyle's main concern in *Chartism* is to discover exactly why people from the working class were discontented, because 'the condition of the great body of people in a country is the condition of the country itself' [5]. This was rather a new way of looking at society, for up until that time, most intellectuals merely focused on religion and abstract intellectual problems, rather than on practical problems from lower classes. According to Carlyle, it was necessary to focus on the exact conditions under which the working class lived, what they thought and what they felt, 'as it is in reality' [8]. From this phrase it becomes clear that Carlyle's concerns (as well as those of other contributors to the debate, like Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill) were very tightly connected to the concerns of early literary realism, as will become evident in the following paragraphs. In essence, both Carlyle and the first realist novelists tried to capture the exact conditions in the lives and the minds of 'common people' from the middle class. Standing in the heart of the industrial revolution, a revolution that changed essentially every inch of English society, authors like Thomas Carlyle and George Eliot were both eyewitnesses of these severe social changes, something that is clearly reflected in their work. Eliot expressed her opinion on these matters on several occasions, both in her essays and in her novels (see §3.1).

According to Catherine Gallagher in her book *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, the Condition of England Debate 'extended into almost every area of English intellectual and cultural life, changing the nature of many disciplines and literary bringing others into existence,' and 'Industrialisation gave not only a new content but also a new shape to English cultural and intellectual life, creating, merging, and rearranging its constituents' [Gallagher 1988: XI/Introduction]. From these remarks it can be understood that this debate over social struggle and injustice in industrial English society, influenced the novels of its time as much as those novels influenced the debate. Both within the debates and in the industrial and realist novels, three major controversies stand out: 1: The nature and possibility of human freedom; 2: The sources of social cohesion; and 3: The nature of representation, probing in particular its methods of transforming facts into values [Gallagher: Introduction/XII]. These three major debates found their way into the work of the critics, but also became the core of the industrial novels. According to Gallagher, the primal task of industrial fiction was the 'unmediated

presentations of social reality' [XII] and many novelists tried to 'overcome the discontinuity between freedom and determinism in their work by shifting the location of the novel's action from the public, social world to the private world of the family' [113-114]. This shift from public to private is clearly visible in most realist novels, for example in *Middlemarch*, where most of the action occurs in the homes of the main characters.

§ 2 DEFINITIONS AND IMPORTANT FEATURES OF REALISM

Although the meaning of literary realism will become gradually clear with every following paragraph and chapter, it is necessary to say something about the different definitions of the term that occurred during its rise and its dominant features. As a literary genre, the roots of realism can be traced back to 1856, when the French literary critic Duranthy used the term as the title for his literary journal (*Réalisme*) [Watt 1957: 10]. Something that becomes rapidly clear when reading some critical reflections on the history of realism is the fact that it has always been hard to capture a clear, unified definition of the genre. Furst ties this problematic status of realism to the fact that there has never been 'an organised corpus of theory' [Furst 1992: 1]. Watt, on the other hand, lays the problem with the fact that from the beginning of the genre and the rise of the novel, the term 'realism' had 'the grave defect of obscuring what is probably the most original feature of the novel form,' a statement that he explains as follows:

If the novel were realistic merely because it saw life from the seamy side, it would only be an inverted romance; but in fact it surely attempts to portray all the varieties of human experience, and not merely those suited to one particular literary perspective: the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it [Watt 1957: 11].

Watt's words explain why the term realism was problematic from the start; in the first stages of the novel, realism was critically approached as one of the defining characteristics of the novel. From that point of view, the realism of the novel was the focus on banal and vulgar things and characters, a part society of society that had never found its way through the pens of literary authors until that time. It was only in the following decades that realism became a genre on its own, and came to be seen in a more positive light [Watt: chapter 1]. But it is striking that even in present-day visions on realism, the genre is celebrated as being more than just a genre. In a collection of essays from 2008 titled *How Fiction Works*, James Wood offers a concrete vision on what realism should behold:

Realism, seen broadly as truthfulness to the way things are, cannot be mere verisimilitude, cannot be mere lifelikeness, or lifesameness, but what I must call *lifeness*. Life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry. And it cannot be a genre; instead, it makes other forms of fiction seem like genres. For realism of this kind – lifeness – is the origin [Wood 2009: 186].

It is remarkable how much superiority Wood is bestowing on the realist genre, in comparison to other genres. According to him, realism is more than just a literary genre; it is the adaptation of reality into fiction. This vision reminds of Ian Watt's take on realism as being synonym to the novel or fiction in general. In the rest of the text, Wood points out that the 'true writer' is a 'free servant of life' and must 'always be acting as if life were a category beyond anything the novel had yet grasped; as if life itself were always on the verge of becoming conventional' [187]. Although it may seem that Wood slightly undermines his first claim on realism by suddenly stating some preconditions, from the words 'acting as if', it can be understood that he really deems the realist genre capable of capturing real life in words.

This vision of Wood touches on the general misconception of realism at the start of the 18th century, as mentioned above. This misconception resulted in the idea that the genre aims to represent 'everything about real life and character'. Both Watt and Furst point out that this attempt would not only be vain, it would also result in the sort of idealized, romantic fiction that the new (realist) novelists did not approve of. Instead of the general and idealized, it became the particular and individual that both the novel and the realist genre keep as their main focus. Watt makes another, rather important observation about the focus on the individual:

THE novel's serious concern with the daily lives of ordinary people seems to depend upon two important general conditions: the society must value every individual highly enough to consider him the proper subject of its serious literature; and there must be enough variety of belief and action among ordinary people for a detailed account of them to be of interest to other ordinary people, the readers of novels. [Watt: 60].

The two conditions he points out, the appreciation of individuality and the level of relevance of common people to write and read about, are very important factors in the impact of the new reading public on the rise of realism, a point that was already stressed in the paragraph on the industrial revolution. The new focus on individuality was inextricably linked with the increasing amount of choice people from the middle class were provided by the industrialization of society. This new position of the individual in society is reflected in the

rise of the (realist) novel, for it focused on that what interested them the most: their own perception of the everyday environment that they lived in.

The conclusions above return in one of the contemporary definitions of realism, defining the genre as ‘a mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or ‘reflecting’ faithfully an actual way of life’ [‘Realism’, def. 1]. According to this definition, realist novels depict the stories of the middle- and lower classes, stories ‘in which the problems of ordinary people in unremarkable circumstances are rendered with close attention to the details of physical setting and to the complexities of social life’. Lilian Furst provides us with another, rather general definition:

‘[Realism presents a] concrete, individualised figure embedded in the context of a particular place at a particular time. The impression of fidelity to life which it creates stems above all from the individualisation and particularisation of the figures,’ [6] ‘[resulting in] a certain directness, simplicity and unadorned artlessness well attuned to the mid nineteenth-century preference for sober factuality,’ [2-3] ‘[and the notion that] truth to life denoted [...] comprehensiveness, a willingness on the artist’s part to extend his vision to include commonplace, the everyday, essentially the ordinary lives of humble people’ [Furst: 3].

This vision corresponds with that of Ian Watt, both stressing the focus on the individual and particular, with Furst providing a more practical definition of the genre.

The handbook for literary criticism *Narrative Fiction*, in turn, speaks of a ‘realistic argument’, that ‘sees characters as imitations of people and tends to treat them – with greater or lesser sophistication – as if they were our neighbours or friends, whilst also abstracting them from the verbal texture of the work under consideration’ [Rimmon-Kenan 2003: 32]. This abstraction of characters from their literary foundation results, according to this handbook, in ‘a speculation about the characters’ unconscious motivations and even constructs for them a past and future beyond what is specified in the text’ [32]. Rimmon-Kenan’s comment refers to yet another important characteristic of realism, namely the shift in focus from the plot to the character. In correspondence with the rise of the middle class and the new individualism in modern society, realist fiction put the character at the heart of the novel.

What all these different definitions and visions have in common is the idea that realism focuses on the ordinary, everyday circumstances and people from the working class. As a clear result of the changed reading public, novels did no longer depict stock characters in idealized worlds, but reflected the world in which the new working class-readers lived. Key

terms in the definition of literary realism are ‘truth’ and ‘verisimilitude’, both of which know a long history in literature and literary criticism. Verisimilitude points to ‘the semblance of truth or reality in literary works; or the literary principle that requires a consistent illusion of truth to life’ [‘Verisimilitude’, def. 1]. According to the same definition, the term stands for the exclusion of improbabilities, as well as for the disguising of improbabilities in non-realistic literature. Both truth and verisimilitude are intertwined concepts with the concept of mimesis, the latter reaching back as far as the Ancient Greeks, standing for imitation that points to the reproduction of the external reality (for example the imitation of nature) in art [‘Mimesis’, def. 1]. Both Aristotle and Plato wrote extensively on the concept of Mimesis, and Plato had a rather critical take on the matter³. Baring in mind that for three centuries ago there were no novels as we now know them, but still merely poetry and tragedy, performed for the illiterate public on stage, Plato saw the (performance) arts as a danger to the illiterate minds of the masses, that could easily be tempted to get wrong ideas about ethics and God. According to Plato, the only true representation of nature, and therefor the only way to learn something was merely a subject to the philosopher [Plato: 56]. But Plato did built in an escape clause for the future of literature:

And we may further grant to those of her defenders who are lovers of poetry and yet not poets the permission to speak in prose on her behalf: let them show not only that she is pleasant but also useful to States and to human life [Plato: 299]

This statement of Plato on the possibilities of prose seems to foreshadow the core of realist fiction of so many centuries later. From this point of view, it becomes clear that literary realism should be seen against a rich historical background.

Since the time of Plato, the debate on the representation of reality in the arts did not cease and the concept of mimesis has become a ‘code phrase for realism, or more precisely works of art that attempt to present reality in its most everyday and mundane sense’ [‘Mimesis’, def. 1]. One of the critics that expressed his view on the matter was the French philosopher Roland Barthes (1915-1980). In *The Rustle of Language* [English translation: 1989], Barthes dedicates a chapter to ‘The Reality Effect’. Barthes concentrates on a very important matter in relation to following chapters, namely the function of the large amount of descriptive details

³ At the base of Plato’s philosophy lies the vision that the material world as we see it around us exists merely of copies of ‘Ideas’, where Ideas are things that can be understood as the pure concept-versions of everything. In this sense, art reproduces things that are already reproductions of Ideas, pale shadows of the real, pure Ideas. Plato saw the poet as someone who produced these reproductions of reproductions under the spell of divine madness and inspiration, not being held back by any attempt to capture the truth. [Plato: Book X/*The Recompense of Life*].

in realist fiction [Barthes: 141-148]. Taking Flaubert's detailed descriptions in *Madame Bovary* as prime example, Barthes points out that 'realism must seek a new reason to describe' [146], a very important issue in relation to the large amount of detail in both *Middlemarch* and the novels of Jonathan Franzen. Barthes sees the key to this problem in the shift in understanding of the term 'verisimilitude', a term already defined as 'the semblance of truth or reality' or 'lifelikeness', but given a whole new gravity by Barthes' vision that 'unavowed verisimilitude [...] forms the aesthetic of all standard works of modernity' [148]. He points out that classical culture was dominated by the notion that 'reality could in no way contaminate verisimilitude' because the latter is merely subject to opinion. This resulted in a break between 'the ancient mode of verisimilitude and modern realism,' and a new form of verisimilitude 'which is precisely *realism*' [147]. Leaning back on the semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure⁴, Barthes explains that the reality effect in realism is produced through the details, which can also be seen as the signifiers of realism. The details in realist novels are supposed to create a web of logical cause, a web that forms the logical basis of the novel's plot. As will become clear in the paragraph on contemporary realism, this observation on the role of details in realism foreshadows one of the most important characteristics of both hysterical and crackpot realism.

Finally, Ian Watt points out in his *Rise of the Novel* attention to one of the most important issues surrounding the realist genre:

[I]t is very significant that, in the first sustained effort of the new genre to become critically aware of its aims and methods, the French Realists should have drawn attention to an issue which the novel raises more sharply than any other literary form -- the problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates. [11]

This statement is especially important in view of the main investigation of this thesis, namely that realist novels, due to their reflection of common life and their elaborate depiction of detail, perfectly reflect the age they are written in. It is important to stress that both the novel in general, and the realist genre in specific show a radical break with literary traditions that were until then omnipresent. This fracturing of old traditions mirrors the radical changes happening in every inch of society as result of the industrial revolution.

⁴ See Ferdinand de Saussure's theory about the linguistic unit he calls the sign is enrolled. According to De Saussure a sign consists of two components: the signifier (the sound image) and the signified (the concept behind that sound image). Both the signifier and the signified are not concrete objects, but the linguistic denotations of real objects, or the referents. Ferdinand de Saussure: *Course in General Linguistics* [1916].

§ 3 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO REALISM

Since its emergence over the course of the 19th century, literary realism has often been food for criticism. From psychoanalysis to structuralism and from feminism to postmodernism: from all corners of the realm of cultural and literary criticism visions on the genre have been expressed. But there were also important contributors to the discussion among the early realist authors themselves. Flaubert expressed his thoughts in dozens of letters, which taken together can be seen as a coherent vision on realism. But also authors like George Lewes, Henry James and Balzac are seen as important contributors to the formation of a realist theory. In addition, the next chapter will show that George Eliot can also be seen as another important critic on the realist genre, expressing her opinion on social and cultural matters in general, and realism in particular in several critical essays and articles.

It is not surprising that in more recent history humanist critics expressed their thoughts on the realist genre. For humanists ‘concern themselves with common human needs and the rational (rather than supernatural)’ [Furst: 51], an approach that fits perfectly on works of literary realism, which generally portrait common people against ordinary backgrounds. According to Furst, ‘humanist readings thus suppose that the realist work is a reflection of the social reality of its time, and examine how this is translated into literary texts’ [Furst: 51]. Two important representatives of this humanist approach to literature are the German critic Erich Auerbach (1892-1957) and the already mentioned Ian Watt. In contrast to earlier authors and critics, who mainly focus on the way in which characters should be depicted in realist fiction, Auerbach and Watt focus on the interplay between the realist characters and their specific social and historical backgrounds, stating that the realist characters are ‘determined by their social context’ [Furst: 21]. This is a very important shift in the vision on the relationship between literary characters and their context, for it means that characters are no longer independent bodies, floating above the specific time in history against which they are portrait, enduring absolute isolated incidents that have no relation to historical circumstances or developments whatsoever. Instead, realist characters are interacting with this background and dependent on the specific context in which they are described. To stick to Watt’s words, in realist fiction ‘past experience [is] the cause of present action: a causal connection operating through time replaces the reliance of earlier narratives on disguises and coincidences [Watt: 22]. Not only does this causality mean a shift away from earlier forms of literature, as Watt

points out, it also foreshadows one of the main features of hysterical realism, namely the ‘connectedness’ as James Wood calls it (see § 4.1). Ian Watt also points to another important feature of hysterical realism that originates from traditional realism:

Formal realism, in fact, is the narrative embodiment of a premise [...] which is implicit in the novel form in general: the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms [32].

According to Watt, the novel represents an authentic report of human experience and may include as many details as necessary to fulfil this requirement. Together with the causality between the experiences of the characters and the historical background against which these characters are portrait, this emphasis on the amount of details used in realist fiction forms the essence of the humanist approach. These two elements also form the main characteristics of hysterical realism, as will become clear in the following paragraphs.

Finally, it is important to note that Erich Auerbach ascribes a great deal of influence to early realist authors like Stendhal and Balzac, who according to him ‘opened the way for modern realism, which has ever since developed in increasingly rich forms, in keeping with the constantly changing and expanding reality of modern life’ [Auerbach: 489]. According to this statement, the ‘increasingly rich forms’ of realism (that will be discussed in the next paragraph) are an evolving reflection on the historical developments that occurred since the industrial revolution. From this point of view, it may be concluded that hysterical realism can be seen as a reflection of what is happening in our society today.

The hypothesis that literature reflects society knows a long history within (literary) criticism. In two interesting articles from the 1950s, Milton C. Albrecht (1912-1982) provides a systematic overview of critical thinkers on the matter⁵. Albrecht states that the theory of reflection ‘is a manifestation of a change in man’s perspective, crystallized during the nineteenth century in philosophies of history, in the formulation of the theory of evolution,

⁵ See: Albrecht, Milton C., ‘The Relationship of Literature and Society’ (March, 1954) and “Does Literature Reflect Common Values?” (December, 1956). In these articles Albrecht explores the different thoughts on the hypothesis that literature reflects society by providing a systematic list of contributors, ranging from Plato and Auguste Comte via a large group of Marxist-thinkers like Christopher Claudwell and Ralph Winston Fox to more contemporary critics like Oswald Spengler, Pitirim A. Sorokin, Bernard DeVoto and Ruth Inglis.

and in the sociological conceptions of societies and their changing character throughout successive ages' [425]. This observation echoes the thoughts of Ian Watt on the rise of the novel, and shows that the novel in general, literary realism in particular and the reflection theory applied to them, are all intertwined and cannot be separated from the historical background of the industrial revolution. That Albrecht seems to have specifically realist fiction in mind when speaking of the reflective function of literature, shows his notion of a genre he calls 'sensate literature' [428]. This kind of literature is characterized by 'secular, commonplace topics and events,' that are 'erotic, individualistic and sceptical,' written in a style that is 'sensational, and naturalistic and the techniques are elaborate and complex' [428]. Albrecht has borrowed this term from Pitirim Sorokin (1889-1968), who coined it in his book *Social & Cultural Dynamics, A Study of Change in Major Systems of Art, Truth, Ethics, Law, and Social Relationships*, published in 1957, Sorokin sees sensate literature as one of two fundamental types of literature. As opposed to a symbolic, transcendental form of fiction described as 'ideational literature,' (under which fall all kinds of religious, symbolic and magical literary works) sensate literature is described as a 'purely "realistic" and "naturalistic",' form of literature that 'strives to reflect empirical reality and, in its pure examples, to describe this reality with all the accuracy of "scientific" observation' [Sorokin 2010: 187]. Looking back at the features of traditional realism, it becomes clear that the notion of sensate literature echoes the major characteristics of realist literature. Especially the level of accuracy and the scientific observations are very important notions in regard to the work of George Eliot (see chapter 2).

But even more striking is the fact that this sensate form of literature foreshadows the future developments of realism into the subgenres of crackpot realism and hysterical realism.

§ 5 CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF REALISM

'The times they are a-changin'', observed Bob Dylan in 1964⁶, and indeed, the times have changed dramatically since then. The last century has been dominated by what some people

⁶ Bob Dylan released his album *The Times They Are a-Changin'* in 1964. On this album he pays attention to issues that are typical for literary realism in general, like social struggle, racism and poverty. Dylan directly addresses writers and critics in the title track: 'Come writers and critics / Who prophesize with your pen / and keep your eyes wide / The chance won't come again / And don't speak too soon / For the wheel's still in spin / And there's no tellin' who / That it's namin' [Bob Dylan. "The Times They Are a-Changin'." *The Times They Are a-Changin'*. Columbia, 1986. CD]. This vision

call a third industrial revolution, namely the digital revolution [Rifkin 2011: introduction]. As a result of the industrialization, the world had already experienced the most rapid and massive changes that have ever occurred in history. But when the analogue production of goods was replaced by digital technologies, the level of mass production was raised to an even more massive standard. Digital technologies like computers and portable telephones increased the ‘interconnectedness’ between people everywhere around the globe who had access to the necessary technologies. These new overwhelming opportunities of communication diminished former boundaries, both literally and figuratively, leading to the globalization. Just like the impact of the industrialization changed the personal life of people in the 18th century, the digital revolution has had a major impact on everyday life in the new information age. The enormous amount of information a single person has to bear every single minute of the day in modern society is, to say the least, overwhelming. Susanne Rohr provides some insight by listing some of the disorientating experiences that most people have endured in this new digitalized, globalized world:

[People] are no longer sure how to interpret or cope with their disturbing reality of globalization, gender crossings, nationalism as redefined according to the laws of the international market, changing role behaviour, deteriorating patriarchy, conventions of political correctness, materialism gone haywire, addiction, eroding family structures, and the like [Rohr 2004: 99].

In accordance reflective function of realist fiction, it is not surprising that present-day authors are overwhelmed by the increasing complexity of life, and that they are struggling with the question how to portrait this new world. Joseph Murtagh, in the article cited earlier, puts it like this:

A challenge facing novelists ever since the eighteenth century has been the representation of an increasingly compartmentalized society from a single point of view. Surveying the state of the contemporary novel, one might conclude that a genre that once aimed to represent a complete society has now fractured into a potpourri of rhetorical microworlds [Murtagh 2011: 88].

In anticipation of the next paragraphs and chapters, an interesting discussing between James Wood and Jonathan Franzen on the same matter as addressed by Murtagh catches the eye. In his review of Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* in 2001,⁷ which include some comments on

on the role of the writer/critic will come back in the chapter on George Eliot, who also saw an important role for authors and critics.

⁷ With this ‘discussion’ I mean the comments of James Wood on both *The Corrections* and on an earlier essay from the hand of Jonathan Franzen. The original text in which these comments appeared was published in *The New Republic* on October 15, 2001, under the title ‘Abhorring a Vacuum’. A slightly altered version of the article entitled ‘Jonathan

one of Jonathan Franzen's most famous essays *Perchance To Dream* [1996].⁸ Wood concludes that Franzen does ask the right question, namely 'how to write a novel both of its [disturbed] time and properly resistant to it [?]' [Wood: 196-197]. In other words, they agree that the main concern of today's writers should be the question how to write a social novel that properly reflects the hegemony of modern society, without going into minute detail on the indescribable chaotic amount of aspect and facets. This recurrent question indeed seems to be the main concern of both authors and critics throughout the modern ages. And, although Wood doesn't agree with Franzen's reasoning, they are unanimous on the solution that 'the novel should stop trying to act like the culture, and become properly aesthetic' [Wood: 198]. But Wood also notes that 'an aesthetics without any faith in either morality or in the arguability of aesthetic distinction – without beauty or truth, in effect – is a starved one' [200]. It is important to keep these conclusions in mind in view of the following explanation of two contemporary forms of realism, for they mark an important element within both crackpot and hysterical realism that sets these genres apart from other contemporary genres like postmodern literature.

Wood's and Franzen's vision on the future of literature also contributes to the answer on the question why literary realism seems to dispose of more flexibility and endurance to keep up with the changes in time. For it is quite remarkable that, within all the chaos of collapsing boundaries and shifting social conditions, literary realism (the genre to which Murtagh is pointing in the citation above) has never ceased to exist. In a world where 'time and again the questioning, breakdown, and reconstruction of all possible ordering systems – literary or other – throughout the eras of modernity and post-modernity' [Rohr: 91] occurred, realism evolved with time into different sub forms that were all able to reflect their own historical background. This realisation raises the question why realism is apparently more capable of capturing the 'truth about common life' throughout the ages than all the other genres that have appeared and ceased again in time. The answer to this question can be found both in the historical background of traditional realism as recorded above, and in the comparison to the problematic

Franzen and the "Social Novel" was included in the collection of essays "The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel" from 2005. In this thesis, I will be quoting from this 2005-version of the review. It is also good to note that both Wood and Franzen wrote dozens of intellectual and personal essays in which they broadly address the same issues. From Franzen the following collections of essays have been published: *How to Be Alone* [2002], a memoir entitled *The Discomfort Zone* [2006] and one more essay bundle entitled *Farther Away* in 2012 (see list of works cited for the exact references).

⁸ A long essay of Jonathan Franzen by the title of "Perchance To Dream: In the age of images, a reason to write novels" was published the *Harper's Magazine* of April 1996.

discourse of postmodernism, that dominates Western culture since the 1980s [‘Postmodernism’, def. 1]. From the perspective of traditional realism, it is the combination between three important factors, the shift from the general to the personal level, in combination with a focus on the ‘banal side of life’, registered in a large amount of details, that provides realism with the possibility to describe realistic and personal experiences of characters against the background of the most turbulent times in history. Susanne Rohr agrees with this vision on the power of realism, stating that ‘the realist construction of a novel [...] allows for extended studies of character and social relations and, finally, for explorations of deep shifts in the *condition humaine*’ [102]. This power of realism stands out, especially in comparison to postmodernism, as the following examination of two contemporary forms of realism will prove. This conclusion will also be confirmed by the analyses of *Middlemarch*, *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, which will underline the unwavering presence of the evolving forms of literary realism.

§ 4.1 CRACKPOT REALISM AND HYSTERICAL REALISM

[D]iscourse is no longer guided and limited by structural imperatives of the anecdote (functions and indices), nothing could indicate why we should halt the details of the description here and not there; if it were not subject to an aesthetic or rhetorical choice, any “view” would be inexhaustible by discourse: there would always be a corner, a detail, an inflection of space or color to report [Barthes: 145].

From a present viewpoint this rather ironic observation of Roland Barthes made in 1968 shows some remarkable progressive insight into future literary developments. He implicitly raises the rhetorical question where the borders of the amount of descriptive details in realist fiction should be placed, probably not realizing that almost 50 years later successive literary critics like James Wood’s would answer without any hesitation that there are no borders left. According to Wood, present-day realist writers have blown up all the borders that held realist plots together since the rise of the genre in the 18th century. The result is a form of fiction in which there is no limit to the amount of details to describe that everything is connected with everything.

Two realist subgenres are most typical for this new form of contemporary realism: crackpot realism and hysterical realism. The term crackpot realism occurs in at least two articles on the

work of Jonathan Franzen by Melvin Jules Bukiet and Susanne Rohr, both of which have already been mentioned in the chapters above⁹. Hysterical realism originates from the work James Wood, who coined the term in his 2001 review of Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*¹⁰. Many similarities are discernable between these two subgenres, starting with the main description of the genre and its members. According to Bukiet, a small group of writers can be distinguished that produce 'the quintessential fiction of this age' [15], and he names Thomas Pynchon, Richard Powers and Jonathan Franzen as the main members. Wood's describes it as the 'contemporary "big, ambitious novel"', and also names Thomas Pynchon as one of the main ambassadors, but replaces the others by Salman Rushdie, Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, and of course Zadie Smith. The recurrence of the name of Thomas Pynchon raises the question in what sense these two forms of realism differ from the postmodern literature, for Pynchon is generally associated with postmodernism rather than with literary realism. Although postmodernism as a whole is still highly problematic and ambiguous, it is possible to define some general characteristics of postmodern literature. Although he acknowledges that 'we find in postmodernist writings echoes of crackpots' worldview of chaos and disruption,' [16] Melvin Jules Bukiet sees the solution to Pynchon's problematic literary status in the evolving of time. He states that since 1973, when Pynchon's 'magisteral opus' *Gravity's Rainbow* was published and marked as truly postmodern because of its absurdity and strangeness, 'Pynchon's diabolical fantasia has become the daily bread of our lives,' [16]. So fiction that was in those years seen as the height of postmodernity 'is the mundane reality of today' [16], according to Bukiet. Pynchon's postmodernity is overhauled by reality, consequently moving his work from the postmodern realm to the corner of the contemporary realisms of Bukiet and Wood, 'literature that faces the absurdity of modern life' [Bukiet: 16].

⁹ In his article 'Crackpot Realism: Fiction for the Forthcoming Millennium' [1996] Melvin Jules Bukiet's central concern is the explanation of the term crackpot realism. In "'The Tyranny of the Probable" – Crackpot Realism and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*' [2004], Susanne Rohr accepts Bukiet's vision on crackpot realism and of Franzen as a member of this group to examine whether *The Corrections* 'has been prepared according to this recipe' [Rohr 2004: 92]. The term 'crackpot realism' was originally coined in 1958 by sociologist C. Wright Mills, who introduced the notion in his political book *The Causes of World War Three*, but Bukiet explains that he borrows the notion from Richard Powers' novel *Prisoner's Dilemma*, originating from 1988. According to Bukiet, the main character of this novel realizes that he has to choose faith over logic to guide him in his life choices, a motto he calls by the name of Crackpot Realism [Bukiet: 17]. [See: Powers, Richard. *Prisoner's Dilemma*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002: p. 297]

¹⁰ James Wood's original review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* was published in *The New Republic*, vol. 223, Issue 4, July 24, 2000, pp. 41-45, under the title 'Human, All Too Inhuman'. A slightly altered version of the article entitled 'Hysterical realism' was included in the collection of essays 'The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel' from 2005. In this thesis, I will be quoting from this 2005-version of the review.

Another similarity between crackpot and hysterical realism occurs in the general characterization of the genres. Crackpot realism is described as a ‘stylistically overheated mesh-mosh,’ [14] and an ‘overflowing stewpot of meditations on wars, governments, media, mayhem, chaos,’ [21] set against a background of ‘military, scientific, or political pandemonium,’ [19], which provide the plots with ‘a genetic link to atrocity’ [20]. Hysterical realism, generally definable as ‘realistic fiction that is characterized by overblown prose and intellectual digressions’ [‘hysterical realism’, def. 1], is according to Wood ‘embarrassed into velocity,’ and marked by a ‘culture of permanent storytelling [with] the pursuit of vitality at all costs’ [178]. Both critics observe that, within these overcrowded and overflowing plots, silence seems to be something akin to swearing in church. Bukiet states that ‘mutability itself may be the most under-acknowledged’ [14] in this kind of novels, and Wood argues that these novels are like ‘perpetual-motion machine[s]’ that ‘seem to want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence’ [178]. In relation to this absence of silence, both Wood and Bukiet point out that the novels belonging to their subgenre are full of unlikely stories, events and characters, but that it is not possible to describe them absolutely impossible. This is a very important feature of both genres, for it shows the struggle of the authors in the representation of a new, overwhelming reality. According to Bukiet, crackpot novels are dominated by conspiracies that are ‘though highly implausible, [...] cannot be discounted as absolutely impossible,’ [14] and Wood argues that within hysterical realism the ‘conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, overworked,’ [179] and that ‘these are not stories that could never happen [...]; rather, they clothe people who could never actually endure the stories that happen to them. [...] They are stories which defy the laws of persuasion’ [170-181]. He points out that the problem of these novels is that there is just too much of it: ‘on its own, almost any of these details [...] might be persuasive. Together, they vandalize each other’ [183]. In other words, these stories could be chopped up into realist pieces, but together these pieces have lost their credibility and the resulting story has become highly unlikely. So although these two sub forms of realism show extreme and ‘overheated’ tendencies, their main mode of writing is still essentially realist. And it is exactly this ambiguous implausible-yet-possible-character that distinguishes the crackpot and hysterical realist genres from other contemporary literary genres.

From all these similar characteristics it becomes clear that both crackpot and hysterical realist novels are dominated by ‘too much of everything’, although that ‘everything’ is still composed of realist elements. This conclusion leads to another important feature of both

subgenres, described by Wood as ‘connectedness’ [182]. He criticizes hysterical realist novels for their ‘paradoxical position of enforcing connections which are finally merely conceptual rather than human’ [182], leading to his conclusion that it is exactly that what these stories miss: human characters (hence the ironic title ‘Human, All Too Inhuman’, with its obvious reference to Friedrich Nietzsche¹¹):

Yet it is the relatedness of these stories that their writers seem most to cherish, and to propose as an absolute value. An endless web is all they need for meaning. Each of these novels is excessively centripetal. The different stories all intertwine, and double and triple on themselves. Characters are forever seeing connections and links and plots, and paranoid parallels [181].

It is the arduous connectedness that turns these stories into the already quoted observation that these novels are full of ‘*inhuman* stories [that] clothe real people who could never actually endure the stories that happen to them’ [180]. In turn, Bukiet observes dryly that ‘it all connects’ [21], concluding that ‘what makes [a novel] truly crackpot is not merely the grandiosity of the scheme and its ecocosmic effects but the perfect slipknot of strands that goes way beyond the normal coincidences that all fiction, as indeed all life, shares’ [17]. It is this over-presented connectedness, in combination with the realist details of crackpot and hysterical novels that distinguishes them as clear products of an increasingly complex time in history. This extreme form of ‘connectedness’ is directly related to the in realist novels required causality, as pointed out by Ian Watt in § 3 of this chapter. Since causality became a demand in the representation of realist characters and backgrounds, and it is already concluded that realism is the genre that has never ceased to exist, but always changed with the times, it is not surprising that the causality in present-day hysterical realist fiction has moved into the extremes. The extreme connectedness reflects the continuous information overload experienced everyday in modern society. The novels of Jonathan Franzen are exemplary for this kind of novels, as will become clear in chapter 3.

Finally, Bukiet and Wood both pay attention to another point that is important in the understanding of these new forms of realism. This is another characteristic of these realisms that separates them from postmodern literature, for where postmodernism has eliminated the idea that there would be some sort of universal truth; both crackpot and hysterical realism

¹¹ Nietzsche published a collection of philosophical aphorisms in 1878 under the title *Human, All Too Human*. The humans of the title are the common people without a free spirit, people who have not freed themselves from the bounds of the dominant culture and the lower temptations of life. In § 4 of this chapter I will come back to the question why James Wood put in such a explicit referent to Nietzsche’s work by naming the review of Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, *Human, All Too Inhuman*.

display the assumption of some form of greater cause that need to be uncovered. According to Bukiet, a crackpot realist ‘feels, senses, is certain but cannot prove, that there’s more than meets the eye to be understood,’ [B: 18] and he uses his novel to search for some kind of hidden truth or treasure. And Wood points out that hysterical realists, like Zadie Smith, have the higher ambition to ‘tell us how the world works,’ by tying ideas and themes together and solving problems ‘from other places and worlds’ [W: 186]. This rather abstract and vague ambition is typical for hysterical realist novels, according to Wood. So although both crackpot realists and postmodernists believe that ideas create reality [B: 18], the assumption of crackpots that ‘some of us are shaping the world and it’s up to [the literary characters] to discover who’ [B: 18] is very opposed to the postmodern view that everything is relative and that personal interpretation is the only thing one can rely on. The ambition to tell how the world works, as shown in hysterical realism, is even more opposed to postmodern thought. For Bukiet sees the three selected crackpot realists as the ‘handful of contemporary novelists [who] are attempting to explore the transformations of the last half-century,’ [B: 14] and concludes that their work ‘takes us into an orbit where the imagination changes the political, the emotional, and occasionally, the physical ground rules of existence’ [B: 14]. These observations make clear that crackpot realists believe in some meaning and order in the world, while postmodernist believe there is only chaos and subjectivity. It also shows the huge impact Bukiet ascribes to the work of crackpot realists, for he considers them able to change the ground rules of existence. In other words, under the pressure of the ‘absurdity of modern life’ [B: 16], which seems to have made postmodernists dismiss every possible order, meaning and purpose, it are the crackpot realists (and the hysterical realists for that matter) who have found a literary form to reflect the absurd world around them. By way of their ‘stylistically overheated mesh-mosh[ed]’ prose and their stubborn conviction that there is some meaning and order to be discovered in all the chaos, the crackpots have overruled the dominant postmodernists, and the resulting novels seem to be as close to reality as possible. And it is precisely this positive view on the power of crackpot fiction that distinguishes Bukiet from James Wood’s take on hysterical realism. For, although both Bukiet and Wood have observed that their realisms see some higher truth that may be discovered in their work, Wood stresses the critical observation that, for the sake of a higher truth and all the interconnecting storylines and details, ‘character has been sacrificed’ [W: 194] within hysterical realist novels. For these ambitious contemporary novels don’t ‘dare a picture of life,’ but instead ‘shouts a spectacle’ [W: 193]. This observation is reflected in *White Teeth*, in which ‘over the length of the book Smith’s stories will develop, and develop wildly, but her

characters will not' [W: 193], and he concludes that it is 'an urgent task of contemporary American fiction' to bring back the human character into the ambitious novel' [W: 202]. Wood repeats his criticism on the level of character contemporary realism in an interview in 2010:

[T]he rather lazy stock-in-trade of mainstream realist fiction' does the same thing, over and over again. These contemporary novels are guilty of consisting the following list of 'cinematic sweep, followed by the selection of small, telling details [...]; the careful mixing of dynamic and habitual detail [...]; the preference for the concrete over the abstract [...]; vivid brevity of character-sketching [...]; plenty of homely "filler" [...]; more or less orderly access to consciousness and memory [...]; lucid but allowably lyrical sentences [...]' [Wood 2010].

This extended catalogue of the general platitudes with which most present-day realist novels would be flooded shows Wood's rather critical vision on contemporary realists, including hysterical realists. So although in general crackpot realism and hysterical realism can broadly be seen as depictions of the same kind of fiction, the two critics are not united in their judgement on the amount of success of these genres. This difference of opinion gives way to an interesting analysis of the novels of Jonathan Franzen in chapter 3, as examples of crackpot and hysterical realist fiction.

§ 5 CONCLUSION

Looking back on the historical developments from traditional realism towards the two mentioned contemporary forms of realism, there are some striking observations possible. One thing that catches the eye is the fact that, although they are separated by more than a century, realist authors like George Eliot and Jonathan Franzen make use of the same set of literary tools to reflect on the turbulence in society. And although it may seem that there are hardly any similarities between their stories, it is important to keep in mind that Eliot was extremely progressive in her time. Her important role in the Condition of England Debate is a good example of the level of her involvement in the social and cultural developments during the 19th century. It also reflects the organic development of Eliot's career from cultural critic to realist fiction-writer. Placed in a wider perspective, the observation of social hardship and cultural struggle is one of the most important features of literary realism in general. The fact that the world has not changed as much as it has changed during the last 200 years, and

that these changes are at the core of realist fiction also explain why the genre has shown such sustainability. For, although a general vision is that 'literature has always changed with the times,' [Bukiet: 14], realism has always developed with it. With its focus on common lives in troubled times, realism proves to be one of the few literary genres that keeps getting adopted by authors throughout the years. Striking subgenres like crackpot realism and hysterical realism confirm this conclusion, for they perfectly reflect current state of society without abandoning the basic rules of realism. From this point of view, these extreme subgenres of realism can be understood as the literary outcome of the historical developments from the industrial age to the information age. This 'literature without boundaries', in which everything is connected to everything and there seems no limit to the amount of descriptive details, can be seen as the perfect reflection of present society. The increasing complexity of life, starting in Eliot's time, found its way into the work of realist authors today.

CHAPTER 2: GEORGE ELIOT'S *MIDDLEMARCH*

Against the broad background of realism described in the first chapter, an analysis of *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (1819-1880) will show why the roots of hysterical realism can be traced back to the 19th century. Eliot was one of the first authors to write about technical subjects, specialized occupations and intellectual descriptions. In his article on *Middlemarch*, Joseph Murtagh explains why Eliot played such a pioneering role within the realm of literature:

Eighteenth-century novelists and readers shared the assumption that specialized occupational details had no place in the novel, because they had no interest to a reading public. [...] In the late nineteenth century, however, as specialized skills earned a higher degree of public respect, these frank admissions of ignorance fell out of favor as novelists focused greater amounts of attention on the details of particular types of work. [Murtagh 2011: 89-90].

His observation can easily be placed against the historical development described in more detail in this chapter. The industrialization and urbanization of English society led to a vast increase of intellectual professions like mechanical engineer, medical occupations like surgeon, doctor or pharmacist and newspaper printer or journalist. As noted before, these new occupations meant that middle class people got the possibility to climb along the social ladder by way of education, and one of the results was the new reading public. It could be said that George Eliot was one of the authors that took the reading public by the hand in these times of storm. To illustrate this statement, it is best to let Eliot right away, for it is the author herself that can give the best description of these turbulent times. Describing how 'municipal town and rural parish gradually made fresh threads of connection' [96], Eliot provides the following description:

Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement: had not only its striking downfalls, its brilliant young professional dandies who ended by living up an entry with a drab and six children for their establishment, but also those less marked vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence. Some slipped a little downward, some got higher footing: people denied aspirates gained wealth, and fastidious gentlemen stood for boroughs; some were caught in political currents, some in ecclesiastical, and perhaps found themselves surprisingly grouped in consequence; while a few personages or families that stood with rocky firmness amid all this fluctuation, were slowly presenting new aspects in spite of solidity, and altering with the double change of self and beholder [Eliot: 96].

This marvellously detailed picture captures the contemporary mode in all its aspects, focussing on every layer of society in the small town of Middlemarch. Reading this description with regard to the fact that George Eliot stood in the middle of these major reformations, not providing her with the advantage of some retrospective distance, it is not surprising to realise that Eliot is generally considered to be one of the most important Victorian authors. Her striking insight into social and cultural developments is not only visible in her novels, but also in her non-fictional work. As editor for *The Westminster Review*, a position she held from 1852 till 1854, Eliot wrote many essays on literature and society, which have been collected by Nathan Sheppard in 1883. In view of realism, one of the most interesting essays from this collection is *The Natural History of German Life*, originating from 1856 [Eliot 1883: 141-177]. In this essay Eliot points out that it is necessary to get ‘a real knowledge of the people [of the working-class], with a thorough study of their habits, their ideas, their motives’ to awaken ‘social sympathies’ among every class of society, especially among the higher classes [146-147]. Eliot regrets that common people, like the mill-owner and the clergyman, have the opportunity to make ‘precious observations on different sections of the working-classes, but unfortunately their experience is too often not registered at all, or its results are too scattered to be available as a source of information and stimulus to the public mind generally’ [147]. What the author envisions can be essentially understood as an early and practical theory of realism:

If any man [...] would devote himself to studying the natural history of our social classes, especially of the small shopkeepers, artisans, and peasantry, –the degree in which they are influenced by local conditions, their maxims and habits, the points of view from which they regard their religious teachers, and the degree in which they are influenced by religious doctrines, the interaction of the various classes on each other, and what are the tendencies in their position towards disintegration or towards development, –and if, after all this study, he would give us the result of his observations in a book well nourished with specific facts, his work would be a valuable aid to the social and political reformer [147].

Not only does Eliot provide us with an early theory of realism, she also points to the great amount of potential influence that is accredited to realist literature. If meeting all the mentioned conditions, realist fiction would have the power to contribute to social and political reformations.

Another source which shows the authors vision on literature is perceptible in Eliot's first novel *Adam Bede* (1859). In the middle of the novel, in chapter XVII, Eliot makes room for what can easily be distinguished as a critical essay about realist fiction. In this chapter, titled *In Which the Story Pauses a Little*, the narrator addresses the intended reader in a fictional conversation [Eliot 2008: 193-202]. She (I say 'she', for it is both tempting and plausible to perceive Eliot's voice through that of the narrator) points out that it is not the 'highest vocation of the novelist to represent things as they never have been and never will be,' but that it should be the 'strongest effort [...] to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind' [193].

The narrator describes her own method as being very precise and accurate, visible in the closeness of her observation of detail and the precise and extended description of character: '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' [193], and she points out that she 'would not, even if [she] had the choice, be the clever novelist who could create a world so much better than this [one]' [194]. Instead, she is 'content to tell [her] simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were' [194]. Seeing these statements aligned, it would seem that George Eliot is quite absolute in her literary method, but the author does not lack any form of self-criticism. She repeatedly points out that it is not easy, or maybe even impossible to capture the absolute truth in fiction: 'The mirror [in my mind] is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused,' [193], and 'falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult' [195]. As Lilian Furst points out, this is a problem that was not only a subject to thought in Eliot's time, but that it 'continues to preoccupy critics in our age' [Furst: 3]. She summarizes this problem as 'the realisation that realism saw its mission as telling the truth about ordinary life, but that it is extremely difficult, perhaps hardly possible, to achieve this aim in the medium of words because they are so laden with associations and sometimes open to a spectrum of denotations.' [3-4] Both these statements on realism, expressed centuries apart, show the ultimate struggle of the genre; capturing common life in words.

Besides these reflections and statements, the narrator in *Adam Bede* also provides the reader with another set of basic rules to which realist fiction should stick: 'Let all people who hold unexceptionable opinions act unexceptionably. Let your most faulty characters always be on the wrong side, and your virtuous ones on the right,' and 'Examine your words well, and you will find that even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings – much harder than to say something

about them which is *not* the exact truth' [194-195]. These warnings can be add up with the statements expressed in her essay, and contribute to the conclusion that realism encompasses a struggle between common reality and the representation of this reality in words.

In the rest of this chapter, the narrator extensively advocates the literary representation of less perfect, less handsome and less interesting events and characters:

In this world there are so many of these common coarse people, who have no picturesque sentimental wretchedness! It is so needful we should remember their existence, else we happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy, and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes. Therefore let Art always remind us of them; therefore let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things [196-197].

In conclusion to the other general statements about realism, this citation makes clear that at the beginning of the realist genre, authors like George Eliot weren't naïve in their intention to capture the plain truth about common life and people. The author shows self-criticism by pointing out that the images she gives in her novels are not objective, but coloured by the author's concealed prejudices and subconscious. But her words also indicate the great amount of influence she described to realist fiction.

In preparation for her novels, Eliot made an extensive study of all the major new professions that arose in the wake of industrialization. She read all the scientific books she could lay her hands on, and developed a wide knowledge of modern science. She translated this newfound knowledge into a literary method that is ascribed to her, according to a recent biography of the author:

[George Eliot] developed a new method [...] of science she applied to literature. Science has adopted the method of analysis, of inductive inquiry, of search in all the facts of nature for the laws which underlie them. [...] With George Eliot began a wider use of the new method and its application in a more sympathetic spirit to the deeper problems of the mind and heart. [...] Here was a new conception of man, which regarded him as the last product of nature, considered as an organic whole. This conception George Eliot everywhere applied in her studies of life and character. She studied man as the product of his environment, not as a being who exists above circumstances and material conditions. [Cooke 2010: 395-396].

This citation shows not only how much ahead of her time Eliot was in her research method, but also points out that her work is still of great influence on novel writing today. Her inclusion of a specialized vocabulary into the realm of the novel to reflect the increasingly

complex society she lived in, made her a literary pioneer. The best way to explain her use of ‘the language of professionalism’ to use Murtagh’s accurate description of the new specialized discourse, is to look at the result of it in her novels. The use of professional vocabulary can best be seen in the character of the country doctor Tertius Lydgate in *Middlemarch*. Lydgate represents the younger generation of medical professionals who was educated in major industrial cities like London and aspired to reform and professionalize medical practice. His generation clashed with the older, more conservative generation from provincial towns that wanted to keep things as they were before the industrial revolution and the Medical Act from 1858¹². In *Medical Practices in Modern England: The Impact of Specialization and State Medicine* [2003], Rosemary Stevens describes this clash between the old and the new medical generations:

The staffing system of the voluntary hospitals did not encourage innovation. Competition for admission to the honorary staff meant years of anxious waiting for the aspiring physician or surgeon while he performed junior work in the hospital and hoped to attract the favorable notice of his seniors. Vacancies arose only through the retirement or death of an incumbent. The aspirant could not afford to be an innovator; he was compelled to pay at least lip service to the practices and beliefs of his seniors. This meant adherence to the concepts of a wide generalist medical culture rather than to the new specialized scientific medicine which was emerging from the empirical research and diagnostic practice of the early and middle nineteenth century [Stevens 2003: 26].

Stevens points out that there occurred not only a clash between generations, but also a clash between the progressive medical educational systems in the cities and the conservative medical practices in the provincial towns. It is against this tumultuous historical and professional background that the young Lydgate moves to Middlemarch at the age of 27 after finishing his medical education in London. Coming from a poor background as an orphaned child, Lydgate became one of those self-made men who got their change to climb the social ladder through (autodidactic) education. He comes to the small provincial town of Middlemarch full of hope and self-confidence, determined to go against the narrow-minded attitude of older medical generation and reform their medical practices. ‘Such was Lydgate’s plan of his future: to do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world,’ [153] Eliot concludes her introduction of the character.

¹² The Medical Act of 1858 was introduced to regulate the increasing professional medical practice in Britain in the course of the 19th century. The General Medical Council was a new office, institutionalized to supervise the medical practice and keep a register of certified medical practitioners. The original act is published on a website from the British government: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/21-22/90/contents/enacted>

In the same chapter where Lydgate is introduced, Eliot exposes her vast knowledge of the medical science by describing in a very detailed fashion how the ‘great Frenchman [Bichat] first carried out the conception that living bodies, fundamentally considered, are not associations of organs which can be understood by studying them first apart, and then as it were federally; but must be regarded as consisting of certain primary webs or tissues, out of which the various organs – brain, heart, lungs, and so on – are compacted’ [152]. From a modern perspective this remark may seem rather self-evident, but bearing in mind that in the middle of the 18th century bloodletting¹³ was still one of the main treatments if a physician didn’t understand the nature of a disease, it is quite remarkable that George Eliot put in such a deliberate and well-informed observation on the evolution of the medical practice in her own time. As noted by Cook in the first quote of this chapter, Eliot considered man as an ‘organic whole,’ a vision that is still present in current medical practice. Her elaborate knowledge of the medical field is further shown in terms and phrases like ‘living organism,’ ‘anatomical analysis,’ ‘oxy-hydrogen’ and ‘primitive tissue’ [153].

Her descriptions of Lydgate show another important aspect of George Eliot’s realist mode of writing, an aspect that reaches back at the primary goal of realist fiction: the description of common characters from the middle classes rather than the portrayal of idealized romantic heroes. In romantic literature, it is likely that Tertius Lydgate would have been much more like a stock-character, representing the ideological doctor who married a beautiful country girl, while curing the people of horrific diseases with his modern treatments. Instead, Eliot gives her doctor many shades, describing the positive sides, as well as the less prosperous sides of his character:

Lydgate’s spots of commonness lay in the complexion of his prejudices, which, in spite of noble intentions and sympathy, were half of them such as are found in ordinary men of the world: that distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardour, did not penetrate his feeling and judgment about furniture or women [155].

It seems to be no coincidence that Eliot chooses the word ‘commonness’ to describe Lydgate’s weaknesses, for it may be concluded that it is her deliberate goal to portrait him as a human being, rather than a heroic figure, as he would have been in former forms of literature. Realist characters are meant to be as human as people of flesh and blood.

¹³ See: *A Brief History of Bloodletting* by Gilbert R. Seigworth, M.D.. Web: June 22, 2012. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/redgold/basics/bloodlettinghistory.html>

From the examples given above it becomes clear that George Eliot has found a way to effectively describe, and comment on the social and cultural movements of her time. Through detailed observations on the level of the characters, *Middlemarch* shows a remarkable insight into the disturbance that resulted from major shifts in social class and in the 19th-century society and economy in general. Her bold inclusion of medical vocabulary has probably shocked her readers, for such knowledge and terms were far less commonly known and used than they are nowadays. With this progressive direction, Eliot paved the way for contemporary authors, a way that lead to the adoption of a far more extreme use of discourses and vocabularies used in modern society in contemporary forms of literature like hysterical and crackpot realist fiction.

CHAPTER 3: JONATHAN FRANZEN'S *THE CORRECTIONS AND FREEDOM*

The extensive amount of descriptive and technical details brought to attention in the analysis of *Middlemarch* makes clear this feature, in combination with the representation of a turbulent and often harsh reality in a rapidly changing social climate, proves to be an indispensable characteristic of traditional realism. The examination of two contemporary forms of realism already showed that these features are still present in realist subgenres today, complemented by an even higher amount of interconnecting elements between all the layers of the novel. And finally, a short comparison of crackpot and hysterical realism with postmodernist literature has made clear that these evolved forms of realism seem to provide the best literary tools to reflect the absurdities of today's world in literature, again proofing the sustainable character of literary realism in all its different forms. The following analysis of Jonathan Franzen's two latest novels, *The Corrections* [2001] and *Freedom* [2010], will confirm all these conclusions.

Looking at both novels, a wide range of resemblances strikes the eye. Both plots are for the main part set against the background of contemporary American suburbia's, portraying typical middle class families who experience familiar social and cultural problems of the last decennia. And in both novels a few inevitable events lead to an unstoppable downward spiral, resulting in the collapse of all the familiar, social and ethical boundaries that, until then provided the characters with the necessary security and position in life. Or in the words of Susanne Rohr, the realist novels of Franzen: 'stage their discourse along the precise contours of a disturbing reality, and stage their disputes on the state of affairs and their negotiations about the fashioning of society within the nucleus of the basic social unit, the circle of family and friends' [104]. This general picture is typical for most contemporary (mostly American) novels. Especially the collapsing of boundaries that lead to a loss of the feeling of safety and meaning is characteristic for the 'contemporary "big, ambitious novel."' [Wood: 178] the 'handful of contemporary novelists [...that produce] the quintessential fiction of this age,' [Bukiet: 14-15] or the 'novel of globalization' [Rohr: 92] of today. With this in mind, it soon becomes clear that both *The Corrections* and *Freedom* are clear examples of crackpot or

hysterical realism. They contain all the major characteristics of the genres; they are set against a background of a military, scientific, or political pandemonium, their plots are cramped with an endless amount of interconnecting story lines and details and their style is absolutely chaotic and overheated. But a detailed comparison between the two novels will also make clear that Franzen's novels don't show an exact equal amount of 'crackpotness' or 'hystericallity', but can be seen as two evolutionary points in the development from something closer to traditional realism towards these more extreme forms of realism. From this point of view, *The Corrections* stands closer to social processes described in *Middlemarch* than *Freedom*. The evolution of the social situation that started with the industrialization and urbanization as described by Eliot is also reflected in the two novels of Franzen. And although these novels are separated by less than ten years, *Freedom* clearly shows a later stage in this evolution than *The Corrections*. One example that affirms this conclusion is the fact that the *pater familias* in *The Corrections* represents the old, industrial economy. He has worked his whole life as a railroad engineer, a job that is the clear result of the first construction of the railroad through the town of Middlemarch. The *pater familias* in *Freedom*, on the other hand, is a typical product of the information age and the new free-market economy: as a lawyer and an environmentalist he is a clear representation of modern American economy and society.

Another example of a characteristic that reflects this evolution from traditional realism towards contemporary realism is the increasing amount of technical and descriptive details used. Just like George Eliot in *Middlemarch*, Jonathan Franzen makes use of a great amount of technical details and descriptions, both in *The Corrections* and in *Freedom*. It is not surprising that, with an eye on the shift from the industrial to the information age in the time between the works of these two authors, the amount of details has increased in Franzen's work, compared to *Middlemarch*. Joseph Murtagh addresses this issue with the following observation:

[T]oday's novelists have become ethnographers of knowledge, mapping unknown professional and technical subcommunities, translating their discourses into a publicly accessible form, seizing on specialized vocabularies that are wielded like a kind of rhetorical sword [Murtagh: 92].

But it is important to stress that it was George Eliot, with her technical descriptions of the medical world surrounding her character, paved the way for modern novelists like Jonathan Franzen. From this point of view, it may not be a mere coincidence that it is also a medical

matter that is described in great technical detail in *The Corrections*. One of the facts that lead to downward spiral in the carefully composed equilibrium of the novels main family is the growing level of dementia as result of Parkinson's disease, from which father Alfred, once the rigid and dominant cornerstone of the Lambert family is suffering. When his symptoms increase in more and more rapidly, two of his three children Gary and Denise decide to attend a promotional lecture on a new drug that is supposed to help. And just like Eliot used medical terms that must have been highly obscure and overwhelming to readers in the 19th century, Franzen picks up a medical vocabulary that overwhelms even the most well-read and learned reader at the beginning of this millennium. More than 20 pages are filled with a detailed account of the lecture, and most of these pages are flooded by medical terms like 'Electropolymerization,' [C: 219] 'reverse-tomographic methods,' [220] and 'active neural pathways' [227]. An excessive amount of medical vocabulary is also used in the observations of the narrator: 'Curly Eberle had reappeared in his intracranial desk chair with a plastic model of an electrolyte molecule in each hand' [C: 224]. And quoting from the medical catalogue of the promoted drug, the son Gary observes 'the old man's clear account of "electrical anisotropy" in "certain ferro-organic cells" and his proposal that these gels be used to "minutely image" living human tissues and create "direct electrical contact" with "fine morphologic structures."' [C: 219-220]. And although today's mainstream is probably much more used to the use of medical discourse than the public in Eliot's times, the amount and extent of a highly technical vocabulary is still very overwhelming and confusing.

Within the context of the developing scale of extremeness between the three exemplary novels, it may not be surprising that Franzen has found an even more extreme level of interconnecting technical detail in his last novel. The patriarch of the family in *Freedom* whose position starts to crumble away is Walter Berglund. Once a discrete and tame prudent man and convinced ambassador of a sustainable and inclusive economy, under the pressure of his own insecurity and long-hidden competition urge Walter sells his soul to a devil named 'mountaintop-removal mining' [F: 198; 218-246]. The extensive account of this kind of mining addressed to Walter's long-time friend and rival Richard Katz (who is essentially the reason of his crisis) has an even more overwhelming and suffocating effect than the medical account in *The Corrections* as addressed above. Even in spite of the conversational use of language, the plot is cramped with an endless list of entangled firms, politicians, scientists and entrepreneurs, biotechnical technologies and places.

In both novels, the use of extreme amounts of descriptive, technical details and vocabulary mirrors the extremeness of the American economy and society. But contrary to the slightly more centred technical accounts in *The Corrections*, in *Freedom* the technical details and vocabulary are shattered over the plot, resulting in an even higher density of connections, chaos, and information. This is exemplary for the evolving amount of interconnected plot lines and details in hysterical realism, as Wood pointed out. Where the different technical elaborations are still reasonably isolated elements in *The Corrections*, in *Freedom* the plot is not only flooded by political, technical and economical issues, it is essentially made up by them. Walter's personal breakdown is mirrored both by the concrete breakdown of nature, that is in turn mirrored by an ethical breakdown of the American economy. Zooming out, this conclusion confirms the hypothesis that crackpot and hysterical realism reflect the social and cultural situation of today's hysterical and overwhelming world. The increasing complexity of society, even in the last decade, is mirrored by the transition from the reasonably separated story lines in *The Corrections* to the endlessly intertwining story lines in *Freedom*. A

Another example of this mirroring effect between the novels and their specific background is visible in the actions of the two sons. In *The Corrections*, youngest son Chip has been fired as professor due to his relationship with one of his students. Although in the eyes of his traditional parents a promising and intelligent son, after his discharge and failed attempt to write a movie script, Chip seems to have concluded that a honourable life is just not worth all the trouble and boredom. Instead, Chip decides to embrace the ultimate American mission to get rich fast. In order to reach his new goal, he teams up with a former Lithuanian diplomat in a megalomaniac swindle to sell the national recourses of the corrupted nation of Lithuania to greedy American investors over the Internet [C: 504-528]. Of course, the whole operation turns into a pretty dangerous fiasco, forcing Chip to flee back to America while Lithuania is burned down in his wake. The following tone and amount of absurd details used in a list of selling points to lure the American investors, is typical for this part of the novel:

'discretionary immunity from left-turn-on-red prohibitions!' and 'inclusion of the investor's likeness on commemorative stamps, collector's-item coins, microbrewery beer labels, bas-relief chocolate-covered Lithuanian cookies, Heroic Leader tracking cards, printed wrapping tissue for holiday clementines, etc.!' [C: 505] These sentences not only reflect the same mocking of American hedonism and empty materialism as seen in the account of the medical conference described above, it also shows the absurd amount of descriptive details that mirrors the absurdness of some part of American culture.

In *Freedom*, the same construction becomes visible through the character of Walter's son Joey, who also adopts a rather megalomaniac and mala fide plan to make money. Rebelling against his father's green worldview, Joey becomes a republican and takes on a Not by accident, Joey also uses the internet, as well as \$50.000 from his rather naïve girlfriend, to track down spare parts for the Pladsky A10, an out-dated Polish truck that the American army was using in the Iraq war. Discovering enough parts at a military-supply business in Paraguay, Joey travels down there to buy them, only to discover that the huge pile of rusted old parts is most likely completely useless and will kill American soldier in Iraq. But, although with an increasing feeling of guild, Joey buys the parts anyway for the bargain price of \$20.000 and the promise of unimaginable wealth the moment the parts would arrive at their destination in Iraq. The moment Joey lays eyes on the parts is representative for the extremely detailed style of this section of the novel:

They pushed through weeds ever higher and woodier and more buzzing with outsized South American hornets, until, by a rear fence crowded saggily with concertina, they reached the mother lode of Pladsky A10 truck parts. The good news was that there were certainly a lot of them. The bad news was that they were in abominable condition. A line of rust-rimmed truck hoods lay semi-fallen like toppled dominos; axles and bumpers were jumbled in piles like giant chicken bones; engine blocks were strewn in the weeds like the droppings of a T. rex; conical mounds of more severely rusted smaller parts had wildflowers growing on their slopes [C: 462].

Although other descriptions of Joey's swindle show more technical and military vocabulary, this citation perfectly reflects why Franzen's novels can be considered as crackpot or hysterical realist fiction. Clearly sticking to realist ways of description, Franzen builds his characters against the background of military, scientific and political pandemonium, all at the same time and completely intertwined. Comparing this to the plot of *The Corrections*, all the elements of crackpot of hysterical realism in *Freedom* seem to be slightly enlarged and magnified in accordance to the changes in the American society.

CONCLUSION

The world has never changed so rapidly as it did during the last 200 years. Starting with the industrial revolution in England in the 18th century, every inch of culture, economy and society has been transformed. One of the results of all these major changes was the rise of the middle class. The study of Ian Watt showed that the consequent rise of a new reading public went hand in hand with the rise of the novel in general. And although in the early stages of the genre, realism was widely condemned as a rather obscure and banal characteristic of the novel, it soon grew out to be one of the most enduring and reflective literary genres. Contrary to the dominant mode of imitation that characterize classical literature, as well as in opposition to the romantic and generalized heroes of the succeeding literary period, traditional realism as represented by George Eliot and her contemporaries aimed to reflect what the industrialization really meant for the people from the middle class on a daily basis. No longer stopped by a set of dogmatic descriptive rules, the traditional realists started to describe the common lives of common people, set against a familiar turbulent background of the new industrial society. Especially the use of a great amount of descriptive details and the bold inclusion of technical and scientific vocabulary, for example visible in the descriptions of doctor Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, were very progressive elements in literature in that time. The durable and flexible character of this new literary genre has become clear in the examination of two contemporary subgenres of realism. In essence still of a clear, realist nature, crackpot and hysterical realism can be seen as both the evolution of realism and the outcome of an extreme and overwhelming time in history. For, although George Eliot and Jonathan Franzen are separated by more than a century, it is possible to draw a clear line of comparison between their realist fiction. Just like the industrialization changed the life of common people in every sense, the information age has transformed daily life into an overwhelming roller-coaster ride. James Wood's connectedness perfectly reflects the results of the digitalization for our worldview. An infinite amount of information, images, bits and bytes is poured over a citizen of modern society. Globalization has diminished borders that gave people in former times the necessary stability and feeling of safety. All these severe changes are mirrored in novels like *The Corrections* and *Freedom*. And where Franzen's first novel still bears some relation to the conservative, industrial economy, his latest novel is completely intertwined with the information age. From all these conclusions and observations, an answer to the persistent question how writers can capture the extremeness

and craziness of modern times and society can be distilled: by way realist fiction. For, what all the examples from *Middlemarch*, *The Corrections* and *Freedom* have certainly proven the fact that literary realism, in all its evolutionary forms and states, is the most sustainable and useful literary genre to reflect the common lives of common people, even in not-so-common times.

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