

On the Discrimination of Realisms in the Literary Work of Art

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The vocabulary of 'realist' and 'realism' is extremely confusing, and there is virtually no hope of introducing order into the use of these terms, since any attempt at unifying our use of them will require the reformulation of a great many terminologies in the rich theoretical literature of the past. Readers no longer certain about the exact meaning of these terms must deduce it from the implied or explicit opposites of 'realist' and 'realism' in each text. 'Realist' takes on a more precise and unambiguous meaning when contrasted with 'romantic' or 'symbolist', 'abstract' or 'schematic', 'fantastic' or 'idealisational'.

An attempt at a systematic description of admissible and responsible uses of the vocabulary of 'realism' in theoretical and critical writings on literature, theatre, the cinema and the visual arts is, therefore, desirable in itself. But such an attempt may also lead us to a better understanding of nothing less than the possibilities of literary and artistic representation.

I

The term 'realist' when predicated of a literary or artistic representation may denote the following :

1) Its belonging to a specific literary (or artistic) school or trend, which is differentiated from other schools and trends by its thematic preferences,

artistic devices, etc. Its opposites in this case will be, for example, 'symbolist' or 'romantic'.

2) The qualities of the representation within the given literary or artistic work. Its opposites in this case will be terms such as 'abstract' or 'schematic' whereas the 'realist' representation would be described as 'rich', or 'vivid', or 'illusionistic' (the latter in the sense of tending to create the illusion of a full resemblance to reality).¹

3) The relation of the representation within the work to reality outside it. In this case its opposites would be 'fantastic', 'idealisational' or simply 'unrealistic'.

Each of these fundamental meanings of 'realism', moreover, can itself be interpreted in a number of ways. There have been, for example, many 'realisms' in the history of arts, and each of them has been described differently by different scholars. The second fundamental meaning of 'realist'- that which has to do with the 'lifelikeness' of the representation- is particularly pregnant with submeanings: a description that is lifelike may be construed to be 'vivid' or 'detailed' or 'complete' or 'natural' in the sense of being unconventional and free of cliché.² As for the third fundamental meaning, a novel may be regarded 'very realistic' in presenting a locale or a milieu and yet 'very unrealistic' in describing the psychology or the motivation of the people belonging to this milieu.

It is nevertheless useful to distinguish clearly these three kinds of uses of 'realism' even if there are works of art to which we may legitimately ascribe the term in two or all of its fundamental uses.

In what follows I intend to analyse only the second and third meanings of 'realist', which I shall call the first and second *universal* meanings of the term. I will therefore confine my discussion of historical 'realism' to remarking the difference between them and those 'realisms' which are universal in the sense that they may be ascribed to an artistic representation irrespective of its period or place.

The identification of a specific historical 'realism' is usually done in terms of one or both universal 'realisms', or, more precisely, in terms of universal qualities of representation. For instance, the historical phenomenon described by E. Auerbach as realism, culminating in the 19th-century novel is characterised not only by a union of the separate 'stylistic levels' of antiquity and classicism but also by a greater completeness in the presentation of human life.³ The historical phenomenon described by G. Lukacs is congruent only in part with the phenomenon described by Auerbach. The term 'realism' is justified in Lukacs

by the relation between the representation within the work and nonliterary reality. This is carefully distinguished from particular qualities of representation within the work. These immanent qualities of the representation (repleteness of detail, illusion) are considered as one of the contraries of 'realism' ('naturalism' or 'decadence') if they are not aimed at representing typical characters and situations, while typicality is seen as the condition for representing historical trends, social forces and other 'universals' of human reality.⁴

We may thus conclude - and an examination of specific 'realisms' in the history of the visual arts will buttress this conclusion - that a given historical realism will be assessed as the specific realisation of some universal norms (such as the capability of inspiring 'poetic faith' or of being 'a true representation of general nature'), all drawn from one or both universal meanings of 'realism'.

The discrimination of (historical) realisms will involve quite often a certain combination of the two universal meanings of 'realist'. A representation complete with details might seem more faithful to the external reality it seeks to represent. R. Wellek considers the introduction of descriptions of sex and dying as one of the defining characteristics of modern literary realism.⁵ E Auerbach takes a similar view of the introduction of economic and political factors into the literary portrayal of human life. All these may signify not merely a greater completeness in the representation of human reality, but also a truer, because a less idealised, representation. The accumulation of details in a representation makes it more complete - but the completeness of a representation may not of itself make it more true, or, to put it differently, the values of one universal meaning of realism cannot always be translated into the values of another.

Despite the clear dependence of historical realisms on certain universal qualities recognized as 'realistic', it is of course easy to distinguish between them. A reader may judge, for example, the description of old age in *Ecclesiastes*⁶ as being more 'realist' than a description of old age as, say, 'a sage and serene envoi to life'. It is clear that this use of 'realist' - taken here in its second universal meaning - has to do with the view one takes of old age, and only indirectly with the poetic presentation of this view. Still it is a legitimate use of the term, even if it has nothing to do with any union of 'stylistic levels' or with the representation of any social or historical types. Another reader may find Homer's description of Pandaros shooting an arrow at Menelaus⁷ a very realistic description due to the narrative's patience for detail. Of course Homer's narrative may be offered as a model for a specific

historical 'realism'. But it may also be recognized for the specific qualities of realism (in its first universal meaning), and contrasted with more schematised and formulaic - and therefore less realistic - representations in Homer himself.

The distinction between historical and non-historical 'realism' is cogently illustrated when we judge the representation of reality in work of a certain historical 'realist' style to be less realistic than the representation of that reality in a 'classicist' or a 'romantic' work. One might say, for example, that human wickedness is represented in the classicist drama of Racine more realistically than in Shakespeare. It is not clear what rules of interpretation allow one to see such inventions as Iago or Phaedra as representing *real* human wickedness. But this very latitude of interpretation makes it impossible to prevent the reader from seeing these characters as representative of this more general moral reality, and such a reader may indeed prefer Racine to Shakespeare.

II

The last example can assist us in discriminating not only between historical and universal realisms but also between the two universal realisms themselves. A representation *X* may be much more lifelike than a representation *Y* without representing any reality at all or while representing it in a much inferior way. A science fiction novel may create 'aesthetic illusion' but unless we see it wholly or partly as an allegory we do not treat it as a representation of reality; and we see no point in discussing it in terms of the second universal meaning of 'realist'. On the other hand, naive allegory may present us with an image of a social reality which we may accept as 'realistic' yet we shall not find any reason to discuss this representation in terms of lifelikeness. A lifelike representation can represent nothing at all and an abstract symbol may represent reality without resembling it in any way. Iago is presented more 'fully' than Phaedra. We see him in a plurality of actions and situations and in a variety of styles. Phaedra, on the other hand, is more fixed, both dramatically and stylistically. But as soon as we stop considering them as *dramatis personae* and seeing them as representations of a general 'essence', the richness and multiplicity of their aspects become less important. In this sense the absence of guilt in Iago might discredit him dramatically as too pure and perfect a villain; realism would require a more complex, and hence more faithful, personification of human evil.

The description of novels, plays and paintings as 'realist' usually conflates these two distinct meanings since the paradigmatic cases of realism in literature - such as Tolstoy or Balzac - often involve both meanings. Their work's representations are considered to be both: a) 'lifelike' (vivid or full) and b) accurate

portrayals of a certain milieu or historical moment. Yet we can see from many other uses of 'realist' that its two universal meanings are quite distinct. Critics talk of 'schematic realism' meaning a true representation devoid of details. The author of an essay on pastoral describes it as distinguished by a kind of 'idealisation realism':⁸ there is a repleteness of detail in the description of the shepherds' lives, yet surely there exists no shepherd who could answer to these 'realistic' descriptions. 'Dry realism' can be used to designate a representation of reality unclouded by sentiment *or* a generalized representation lacking vividness and colour.

Therefore the number of representations that can be characterized as 'realistic' or 'non-realistic' in each one of the two separate senses is much greater than the number of representations which would plausibly fall under both rubrics. Of realism as repleteness, vividness or illusion we may speak in connection with imaginary landscapes in painting and any other representation which is grasped as purely imaginary. A narrative of an invasion from Mars can - in this sense - be more or less 'realistic'. 'Realism' in its other universal meaning may be attributed to the content of non-artistic communications in much the same way as it is attributed to artistic representations. (A representation that is 'faithful to reality' need not also be a work of art and to be a literary work of art a rerepresentation cannot fall only under the second universal meaning of realism.)

'Realist' in its two universal meanings is a comparative and relative term. Representations are 'realist' compared to other actual or possible representations, but the comparison is made in the two cases against a different background. The background of 'realist' as lifelike (in any of its submeanings) is always generic. A vivid, full or illusionist representation of *X* will be judged by a comparison with other representations of *X*, and by attributing to *X* in the representation generic qualities: the invaders from Mars will be 'of flesh and blood', the unicorn will act 'like an animal', the devil will be 'real' (that is, he will have the features of things that belong to the recognizable genus of 'real' things). The background of the comparison between different representations of the same reality, which introduces the use of 'realist' in its second sense, will always involve real and particular existence which is seen as reality explicitly or implicitly represented. This reality does not have to be individual from the point of view of ordinary Ontology. It need not be an individual human face or a particular landscape. It may very well be the Russian nobility of the nineteenth century, or British society, or youth, or even 'the human condition'.

'Resemblance to reality' or 'verisimilitude' is usually invoked in popular discussions of paintings, films and fiction. We can always ascertain the sense of realism meant in such discussions by asking the question: 'Resembling what?' When the answer is given in generic terms - resembling a big city, a marriage or even 'reality' - we use 'realist' in its first sense. Only when we conceive resemblance to be related to a particular real existence which may in principle be known outside the series of artistic or fictional representations we use 'realist' in its second sense. In the discussion of a specific representation it is, therefore, possible to move from one sense of 'realism' to the other by introducing the assumption that some actual reality is being represented. The portrait will then be discussed not only in terms of 'truth' or 'faithfulness to reality'. Even science fiction is amenable to such a move, once we are ready to consider it as wholly or partially an allegory or some other indirect description of real things.

It is therefore impossible to discuss in pure artistic terms the 'realism' of representations in the last sense, since such a discussion will always involve prior beliefs about reality.

III

We may now categorize various artistic representations in terms of the relations or tensions created in them by the presence or absence of the qualities of these two 'realisms'. There are in theory four possibilities, all of which are realized in literature, cinema or drama.

There is, first, the possibility that a representation will be very lacking in lifelikeness, and in this sense, 'unrealistic'. Such a representation will be very schematic or its verisimilitude will have been discredited. It will therefore exclude any possibility of 'poetic faith' or illusion. Its mimetic deficiencies will nevertheless point up its intention to represent 'realistically' some aspects of reality.

This is the case with fables - such as those in which animals are made to speak, but for the sake of faithfully conveying actual characteristics of moral life - and with pure or naive allegories. When fables are not explicitly concluded with a moral - and allegories do not include in their text rules or instructions for allegorical interpretation - it is precisely their deficiencies as lifelike representations which drive us to interpret them in terms of the moral, psychological or social reality represented. On the other hand, as the representation tends towards lifelikeness the risk grows that the represented world will be

mistaken for a self-sufficient, and autonomous "poetic world" and the greater will be the need for explicitness, either of the fable's proverb or the allegory's rules for interpretation.

The second possibility is the symmetrical opposite of the first one. The representation will be mimetically rich, as in the farce, or situationally vivid, as in the joke. Yet it will not be 'serious': the paradigmatic elements of the representation - the story and the characters - will lack logic, consistency or plausibility, and the problem or the conflict will be sharply revealed as spurious.⁹ The tension derived from the expectation for a genuine resolution will be released at one stroke (in the joke) or will be gradually dissolved (in the farce) by the persistent contradiction between the visual life-likeness of the image and the implausibilities or absurdity of the chain of events. That is how jokes formulating in their story familiar or clear-cut problems, and cinematic farces - such as Buster Keaton's - presenting the spectator with splendid visual 'realistic' images on the screen, carry the extreme lifelikeness of their representation to a point where it may no longer be taken as a model of any *reality*. In doing so they rely heavily on the frustration of expectations formed in the reader, listener or spectator by 'serious' fiction. Those who view fiction as parasitic on real speech-act map consider these non-serious fictions as parasites of parasites.¹⁰

The second pair of possible relations between the two different qualities of realism in the artistic representation aim at balance rather than tension. This pair consists of a) the explicit representations of reality in non-fictional works of literature (memoirs, histories) insofar as they aspire to aesthetic values such as vividness or lifelikeness and b) works of fiction insofar as they aspire to contain cognitive 'implied truths', or any kind of serious speech act.¹¹

The issue here is the equilibrium of aesthetic and cognitive values in works which aspire to both - and therefore not included are memoirs and histories which are mere protocols of events, and hence of only informational value, as well as works of fiction that do not intend to communicate or imply truths about reality. What distinguishes the two kinds of works is fictionality; the sentences of a memoir or a history *refer*, the sentences in a work of pure fiction do not (except, perhaps, to fictional entities). But the sheer distinction between fictionality and non-fictionality does not warrant the classification of works according to the dominance of the aesthetic function over the cognitive function or vice-versa.¹² Such a procedure of classification would be imprecise because the dominance of a function in a multifunctional work is bestowed upon the work by the reader. It is reading which fixes the hierarchy of functions or values

in the text by bringing a group of elements or qualities to the foreground of its attention while allowing other groups to recede to the background. And here every work permits in principle two kinds of readings, 'cognitive' and 'aesthetic': the novel may be read for the ethnographic or historical information it provides and the memoir or history may be read for the aesthetic pleasure of its vivid portrayals of characters and events. It should be observed that the aesthetic values of which we speak have to do not with felicities of style, but rather with qualities of the representation. For this reason not every artistic non-fiction belongs here.

A more proper procedure of classification would discriminate the avowed points of departure of the two kinds of works; what matters is the tradition of writing from which they set out, and not so much the value-relations within them.

Yet it is important to remember that it is nonetheless always legitimate for the critic to assess both the veracity or vividness of the representation in a work of these two kinds, no matter how they are read; which is to say that in the case of a work aspiring to both cognitive and aesthetic values 'realism' in both senses can be predicated of 'the work itself' over and above the various readings it may receive.

Unlike allegory and farce which are polar opposites, the relation between a memoir which is rich with aesthetic values and pure fiction whose "world" may be taken as a model of some non-fictional aspect of life, is a binary one. We may speak of a continuum ranging from memoir or history to pure fiction. The *roman a clef*, the fictional temoignage (e.g. one Day in the Life of Iven Denisovitch), find their place on this axis. Yet their place in this continuum - easily defined by the degree of their fictionality - tells us nothing about the extent of the representation of reality (cognitive values) contained in them. Fictionality and degrees of fictionality may be determined by the number of sentences in the text which refer outside (i.e. to independently existing entities) and by the centrality of these sentences to the poetic world created by the text.¹³ Yet it is clear, however, that any fantastic work may contain explicit references to existing events, institutions and people without losing its fantastic character, while a purely fictional story may offer a model for the understanding of some real aspect of life thereby becoming a 'realistic' story (in the second universal meaning of 'realistic').¹⁴

The capacity to represent reality may be built into the supralinguistic qualities of the poetic world and lack any direct connection with the logical and semantic status of the individual sentences of the text. In this case it

will have to do with our recognition of the existence of resemblances between fictional persons and types and prototypes of reality. Such a recognition may bring us to the conclusion that the fictional poetic world *represents* (in the strong, referential, sense of this word) some non-fictional event, person, institution or social structure. In the same way the purely imaginary character of a poetic world may also be recognized by the qualities of the representation and not by the amount of non-referential sentences in the text from which it was constructed.

As there is no such thing as a 'non-figurative' or 'abstract' literature¹⁵ a verbal description or a poetic world is always taken by the readers to be more - or less - or not at all - realistic in the two different universal meanings of the term.

Any literary work involves, therefore, a tension between the two different qualities of realism and enables a constant play in which a work may move from serious fiction to farce, or from the mode of pure farce to a more serious speech-act. It is here, I believe, that recognition of the four possibilities of relations between the two different kinds of 'realism' may be of value both to literary theory and to the interpretation and evaluation of specific text.

Notes & References

1. The distinction between 'illusion in this sense and 'delusion' was insisted on by J.S. Mill and is central to E.H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1960). See also M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 323-25) and M. Brinker, 'Aesthetic Illusion,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 36, 1977, no.2. pp. 191-96.
2. I cannot deal here with the important problem of conventions in representation and their relation to the problems of realism. This is discussed in my paper "Conventions, Realism and Beliefs," forthcoming in *New Literary History*. However, I must add this :
The opposition between a 'natural' representation (minimizing, motivating or disguising the use of literary and artistic conventions) and the consciously 'artistic' representation has to do with the illusion of resemblance to reality mentioned above. It has usually very little to do with the arguments for (or

against) seeing a certain representation as realistic in the third meaning of the term. It may, however, be fruitfully linked to disputes about 'faithfulness to reality' once ideologies are introduced to defend or to attack certain modes of representation. Such ideologies will assume the existence of absolutely 'true' or 'correct' modes of representation, and will shift the discussion to the third meaning of realism insofar as they will justify their literary and artistic preferences with a prior conception of the represented reality.

3. E. Auerbach, *Mimesis, The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. W.R. Trask, Princeton, 1953, pp. 554-55.
4. See especially G. Lukacs, "Erzählen order Beschreiben," in *Probleme des Realismus*, Aufbarr-Verlag, Berlin, 1955, pp. 103-45; and *Realism in our Time*, Harper Torchbooks, 1964, esp. pp. 42-44, 119-21.
5. R. Wellek, "The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship", in *Concepts of Criticism*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1963, p. 241.
6. *Ecclesiastes*, 12 : 1-5.
7. The *Iliad*, Book IV, lines 102-32, tr. R. Lattimore, University of Chicago press, 1962, p. 116.
8. P V. Marinelli, *Pastoral*, Methuen, London, 1971.
9. See, for example, Kant's

analysis of the joke in *Critique of Judgment*, tr. J. Meredith, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1973 p, 199.

10. I have in mind here J. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1962 p. 104; and J. Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse", *New Literary History*,⁶ (1975),
11. I employ here the formulations of the cognitive value of fiction proposed by J. Hospers in his "Implied Truths in Literature". *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 19, 1 (Fall, 1960), pp. 37-46; and the article by J. Searle mentioned above.
12. This has been suggested by some essays of the Czech structuralist, Jon Mukorovsky; see especially *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*, tr. M.E. Suino, Ann Arbor, 1970.
13. For the definition of fiction mentioned here, see, for example, M.C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics, Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1958, pp. 411-14, 441-43.
14. J. Searle, in the essay mentioned above, defines fictional discourse by the non-referentiality of its sentences: he suggests that degree of fictionality will correspond with the extent of fictional discourse in a given work. But he confuses

degrees of fictionality with degrees of representation of reality when he says that "in the case of realistic or naturalistic fiction, *the author will refer to real places and events* intermingling these references with the fictional references, thus making it possible to treat the fictional story as an extension of our existing knowledge" (p. 331). Real reference

(reference to existing people or events) is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for the *representation of real events and people.*

15. This limits the value of the analogy between 'abstract units' in the visual arts and in literature proposed by N. Frye (*Anatomy of Criticism*, Athenaeum, New York, 1968, pp. 131-40)

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