THE REAL THING: REFLECTIONS ON A LITERARY FORM. By Terry Eagleton. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2024. 219 pp.

Realism is a family of concepts, and like many a family they do not always see eye to eye. (Eagleton 45)

In Henry James's short story "The Real Thing", Mr. Monarch and his wife make themselves available to the portrait artist as models due to hard financial circumstances, yet they end up dismissed as they are too real to inspire the artist's imagination. Their sketches look exactly like them; a stereotypical duplicate of themselves which resists all possibilities for portrayal, questioning thus the very meaning of being real as well as the dialogic relationship between realism and artistic creation, keeping in mind that "too much reality can be detrimental to realism" (75) for "art presents things as they are only by an imaginative transformation of them- one which may make them seem even more real than they appear in everyday life" (76).

This would extend to debate the shaping factors of literary realism within the boundary dynamics of the factual and the fictitious; the object and its representation. Besides, the artist's dismissal of the Monarchs owing to their failure to be transformed into visual recreation puts into question the complex relationship between reality and reproducibility, hence shaking the taken-for-granted mirror effect of realistic fiction.

In this tone, the fascinating book *The Real Thing: Reflections on a Literary Form* discusses the term realism in relation to literature, bringing into question the framing strips of reality and realism within the literary, social and political realms of truth, illusion, faithfulness, representation, imitation, and interpretation.

Written by the distinguished literary and cultural theorist and critic Terry Eagleton, the book is regeneratively pregnant with a non-finite series of philosophical debates about the sense and essence of 'the real thing' as a concept, a theory and a practice which has much to do with literary formations. It is divided into five main chapters. The first introduces realism and the idea of getting real. The second and third discuss the question: what is realism? The fourth chapter debates the politics of realism, and the fifth is about realism and the common life.

The book initiates with discussing realism in language, philosophy and fiction, opposing the concept to illusion, fantasy and idealism, as it resonates with the factual within the shores of empirical, cognitive and moral theories. This sparks a subsequent debate about the interrelationship between the realistic, the reasonable, the rational and the feasible.

To be realist is to receive outer reality as it really is. However, to what extent can one's act of reality reception be validated as real since it stems from a series of subjective inner impressions and perceptions of images, voices and ideas that abide by compact sensory systems which are, in their turn, highly sensitive to a chain of socio-cultural politics of meaning formations? If what people consider as facts are mere subjective interpretations - as affirms Nietzsche and his postmodern successors, through what standards can realism be measured? Are these standards a private property of individuals themselves or rather part of common sense, as suggests Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* through "someone who exclaims, 'But I know how tall I am!' and places his hand on top of his head. He fails to grasp the fact that height is measured by a common standard. Instead, he is as tall as he is tall?" (31)

This questions the relevance of the expression 'it's true for me' which considers one's own referencing system as the radical base for all convictions and interpretations, ignoring that no definition or comparison can be done without some shared criteria, and thus "consensus of some kind is unavoidable even for disagreement" as " we determine what is true or false in language, and language is nobody's private property" (30-31). Yet, at the same time, language cannot be

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considered as representing reality, for "concepts […] are not best thought of as mental pictures. [They are rather] ways of using words, not reflections of objects. Meaning is a social practice, not in the first place a process in our heads"; striking examples in this context are expressions like 'maybe' and 'Hi there' (71-72).

Eagleton affirms that "the term 'realism' seems to have entered the English language in 1853, as a way of describing the fiction of Honoré de Balzac" (46) known for its satirical tone towards French nobility though sympathizing with it, "blend[ing] emotional engagement with intellectual impartiality" (43). As a reaction against the false poetic idealism of romantic and neo-classical art, then the manners, hypocrisies and fancies of eighteenth and first half of nineteenth centuries, with pens as those of George Eliot, Stendhal, George Sand, Alexander Pushkin, Arnold Bennett, George Moore, Josiah Gilbert Holland, Jack London, Henry James, Charles Dickens, Ian Watt and Iris Murdoch to name a few, realistic fiction claims itself to be "the bible of an increasingly godless age" (12) which voices out the 'Populace'- the working class as well as the lower and middling middle classes, from Gulliver and Robinson Crusoe to David Copperfield and Dorothea Brook (165), over aristocrats, nobles and mythical heroes; " an art of unmasking and debunking" (50) the atrocities of the classical, neo-classical and Victorian social conventions, scandalizing the worlds of Sophocles, Pope and Racine; an art of "deceptive clarity" (103) which shifts concern from the church, erotic love affairs, unbalanced family relationships, and notions of blood and nobility to masses' daily hardships and common spheres, or "what George Eliot in *Adam Bede* calls the faithful representing of common thing" (167).

Nonetheless, Eagleton stresses the fact that "realism is by no means confined to prose or to the modern period.", because "what counts as realist is culturally variable" (59), giving examples of realist poetry as that of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Wordsworth's '*Michael*', and Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* which he describes as 'a comic epic in prose'. This suggests that "realism is parasitic on previous literary forms, rather as a lot of modernist art continues to depend on the very realism it spurns" (111). For György Lukács, realism's "three major phases are ancient Greece, the Renaissance and early nineteenth- century France" (140). Realist fiction, for him, stands as revealing the fundamental currents and conflicts of society, yet at the same time unifying them into an artistic whole, combining the typical with the individual (134-135), and highlighting the underlying historical significance of art's surroundings (139). This Marxist viewpoint would be confirmed by Raymond Williams, asserting that "in the highest realism, […] society is seen in fundamentally personal terms, and persons, through relationships, in fundamentally social terms", which relates realism with contingency and necessity (122-123).

Eagleton also questions realist fiction's illusive faithfulness to reality, being exposed to some degree of author's manipulation which makes "the gap between actual and poetic justice looms embarrassingly large" (104), especially that "plenty of fictional protagonists seem to have strayed onto the realist stage from myth, epic or romance" (48). In this sense, the phrase 'literary realism' would be self-contradictory as 'realism' suggests the gritty, unadorned, caustic and abrasive, while literature is shaped with technique and literary devices (57). This recalls the initial question: how would 'realist fiction' belong to fictitious world and at the same time be realist? A possible answer may be 'it should not read as *Alice in Wonderland*.'

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