

LIVING REALISM

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“As a method Realism is a complete failure.... Life goes faster than Realism.” (Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying” 991-2)

“The very essence of real actuality – that is, of the completely real – is *process*.” (Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* 274)

“Appearance has the completeness of reality, but only as appearance. As anything other than appearance it is error.” (Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* 51)

"By reality and perfection I understand the same." (Spinoza, *Ethics* 114)

Realism in literature is a topic that has not been much debated or discussed in recent years. In contemporary theory and criticism, “Literary Realism” usually is understood to refer to the movement in fiction and related criticism at the end of the nineteenth century that purported to stay true to the facts of the everyday world and to avoid the imaginative excesses of Romanticism. The more general theoretical topic of the nature of reality as it is represented and expressed in literature is rarely addressed directly. One difficulty is that there is no easy way to distinguish clearly between representative and non-representative language in literature, as the representational in the visual arts is distinguished from the abstract and expressive. It is extremely difficult to create a work of art in verbal language that

is entirely or even largely non-representative of some version of recognizable reality, although Gertrude Stein and her experimental and language poet heirs certainly have made the effort. But such work makes up a very small fraction of what is conventionally considered to be literature. The remainder involves some form, at least, of realism.

Although the topic of realism in literature largely has been absent from recent theoretical discussion, it has thrived as a critical judgment, in the sense that a frequent criticism of a literary work is that it has achieved or failed to achieve a sense of being realistic and true to life. Realism in literature also has been operative by its absence as a criterion for defining genre literature such as fantasy and science fiction, which occupy worlds that are purposefully unrealistic in the conventional sense. And yet, even in these genres, there is a general attempt to maintain a psychological realism of motive and behaviour, and a logical realism of cause and effect.

Our failure to be theoretically self-conscious about realism in literature has broad ramifications in terms of our understanding of the relationship between the literary work and our actual and real lives. For the nature of what we understand to be real has altered dramatically since the late nineteenth century period in which the theory of literary realism was developed, a theory that defined realism in literature in the way that we still habitually use the concept, as the mimetic copying of the actual world of fact. But this was never a very adequate or useful critical concept, even in its heyday, and it has become much less so as our understanding of the nature of the real has been altered and complicated by general relativity, quantum physics, and the uncertainty principle; as well as by the more recent rise of organic and complex systems theories involving nonlinear dynamics, feedback loops and dissipative structures.

As our understanding of the nature of the real as it relates to life itself has become more nuanced and complex, so our concept of realism in literature should change with it, or else we will be mistaken in both theory and practice. Among other things, we will not be able to recognize and appreciate examples of non-mimetic literary realism when we encounter them, which helps to account for the marginalization of modern and contemporary writers who have written fictive works that have challenged the nature of literary realism from within by creating generically mixed realisms that are complexly relational and

participatory in a manner that implicitly questions the adequacy and veracity of mimetic representation, as modern science has disrupted and complicated the Newtonian universe.

We might begin a reconception of realism in literature by acknowledging that, in our actual lives, we live simultaneously in two real worlds, the world as given and the world as desired, and that there is a complex and evolving relationship between the two. To make such a statement is to acknowledge the reality of the past, present, and future in any real world experience; the past is the given world, the future is the desired world, and the present is the complexly evolving intersection of the two. When reality is conceived of in this manner, our understanding of the fundamental relationship between subject and object in our representation of reality in literature is transformed from the mimetic realist's paradigm, in which the relationship of subject to object involves the faithful apprehension by a subjective observer of a set of objective static facts, to a participatory subject-object paradigm in which the future is creatively and interactively evolved out of the past. In the mimetic realist paradigm, reality is always and only present, but in our actual lives, the present is suffused with our creative and purposive progress into the future, so that, as the process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead observed, "The future is to the present as an object for a subject. It has an objective existence in the present" (AOI 194). Whitehead further explained that it is only when "viewed in abstraction [that] objects are passive, but viewed in conjunction they carry the creativity which drives the world" (AOI 179).

In his focus upon the creatively progressive nature of reality, Whitehead was implicitly affirming Oscar Wilde's contention that "life goes faster than Realism" (991), by which Wilde meant the conventional mimetic realism that recently had arisen as the dominant fictive mode of his day. Such realism takes as its goal and criterion of judgment the reproduction of the world in the artistic work as it is experienced in ordinary life. The problem, of course, is that there is no such *living* thing as ordinary life. It is living reality that has been made into a normative abstraction, a life-like concept, which is to be made unliving, as Wilde's American contemporary William James poignantly observed: "Reality *fails* in passing into conceptual analysis; it *mounts* in living its own undivided life – it buds and burgeons, changes and creates" (264). Reality as it is presented to

us in the concept of conventional mimetic realism is only *possible* reality, that which seems possible given the world we live in now, or given the world the critic and artist once inhabited; and possible reality is, by its very nature, a dead reality, as Gilles Deleuze explained in describing the manner in which the possible is derived from the real: It is not the real that resembles the possible, it is the possible that resembles the real, because it has been abstracted from the real once made, arbitrarily extracted from the real like a sterile double. Hence, we no longer understand anything either of the mechanism of difference or of the mechanism of creation. Evolution takes place from the virtual to actuals. Evolution is actualization, actualization is creation (*Bergsonism* 98).

The world conceptual mimetic realism seeks to reproduce is the world of completed actualizations, commonly referred to as “reality,” devoid of the realm of virtual potentials from which it is derived. It is the world of appearance, as Simone Weil referred to it above. As a world of appearance, it is complete in itself. But it is not living reality, and to mistake it as such is to make a sterile double (in effect, an idol) of what is only an abstract stage in an ongoing real process of creation.

The real world, or reality itself in its fullest sense, is comprised of both the virtual and the actual, the realm of being and the realm of becoming; it is ever-changing and everlasting, and it is beyond reproof, as Spinoza famously posited. The virtual realm of being exists in the actual world of becoming as a future-oriented task or goal. In terms of human progress, it exists as the ideal of Utopia, which has the living reality of potential actualization, as Wilde observed with his typical aplomb:

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias (1089).

It is the artists, Wilde argued, who lead us on this creative, evolutionary journey: “The future is what artists are” (1100). The great artists are not mimetic materialists, according to this conceptual viewpoint, but are visionary realists, who demonstrate for us the manner in which the virtual is made actual through interactive creation. They do not slavishly copy the world as it is given, but creatively found living realities that open up the future. In so doing, they form

connections between the eternal realm of being and the existent realm of becoming, demonstrating the dual, dialectical nature of reality as a whole.

The theoretical underpinnings of such realism may be unfamiliar to students of literary history, who typically are taught that literary realism means life-like mimesis, the faithful reproduction of the world of appearances as it is ordinarily experienced. But the concept of this alternative, prophetic and living realism would be familiar to the student of the history of philosophy, in which the "realist" is one who considers representative mimesis a form of idolatry. In the history of philosophy, the realists are those who believe in the reality not only of the existing particulars of the apparent actual world, but also of the reality of the eternal, inexhaustible, and ultimately unrepresentable realm of being in which resides the general ideas and ideals, potentials and virtuals, that give birth to and make sense of these particulars and give them value. The philosophical realists' opponents through long centuries of debate have been the nominalists who believe "in the sole reality of actual physical particulars," and who contend that all generalizing ideals and values are derived from our experience of the particulars, but have no innate reality in and of themselves (Feibleman 7). Thus, for the nominalists, what we think of as "the good" would depend upon our particular psycho-physical situation, our historical and social constructs, our individual class and status, etc. The good in a larger, more general and ideal sense would be understood by the nominalists to be merely an average, or a least common denominator, of the various particular goods in the actual world. If such a concept seems familiar and also perhaps correct, it may be because our culture is primarily a nominalistic one, as Terry Eagleton recently noted in lamenting that the nominalist belief that such general ideals as objectivity and reason are merely self-serving creations of our subjective circumstances contributes to making our socio-political world a particularly unpleasant place in which to live (102).

The hallmark of philosophical realism is its insistence on the necessity of being double-minded, of being able to perceive and acknowledge that the actual world of changing existence is everywhere related to a virtual-potential realm of eternal being (they are *in toto* one perfect reality), but that the two realms are conceptually incommensurate. Such conceptual dualism was demonstrated by Spinoza at the beginning of modernity in his philosophical response to

Descartes' nominalist hypothesis that the human soul is actually housed in a particular place within the body – in the pineal gland, as he hazarded. Spinoza's clarifying realist response was to insist upon the separate systems of mind-soul and matter-body operating in and through the one individual organism, as Roger Scruton succinctly explained, "Mind and body are one thing; but to describe that thing as mind and to describe it as body is to situate it within two separate and incommensurable systems" (61). Our existential task, according to Spinoza, is to bring the two separate and incommensurable systems into working harmony with one another by coming to "conceive things under a system of eternity" (307), which is to be able to perceive the actual and particular realm of material necessity in which we bodily exist as intimately related to the virtual realm of values and ideals that we conceive of as the ultimate good, without, however, failing to acknowledge what Plato referred to as the "real difference" between the necessary and the good, in the space of which the drama of life is enacted (729).

The nominalist error of assuming that the actual is ultimate – of mistaking the realm of apparent particulars for reality as a whole – has had implications on the language we use and on the way in which we use language. Just as Descartes irrationally assumed that the soul was housed within the body, as an inhabitant in a dwelling, so linguists began to assume that words carried their meaning as a truck carries its load, having deposited which, their job is done. From the point of view of such a model, words come to seem merely convenient linguistic substitutions for the real world of phenomena, which exists wholly apart from them and to which they can only refer. Such a notion caricatures the complex metaphysical relation between symbol and meaning, just as Descartes' pineal-gland hypothesis made a simplifying mockery of the profoundly mysterious relation between matter-body and mind-soul. As George Steiner noted in his critical response to deconstruction, *Real Presences*, used (misused) as some kind of representational grid or facsimile of "the real," language has indeed withered to inert routine and cliché. Made to stand for inaccessible phenomenologies, words have been reduced to corrupt servitude. (97). When, in response to the "vulgar illusion" that language maintains a "correspondence to a 'world out there'" (Steiner 95), Ferdinand de Saussure and his linguistic heirs conceived of language, rather, as a self-enclosed dyadic system of signifiers and signifieds – a system of displacement in which the only systemic reality is the difference

between one sign and another (a reality of absence) – they replaced the objectivist error of simplistic correspondence with the subjectivist error of systemic autonomy, but they remained working wholly within a nominalist world-view in which words as powerful and living symbols connecting us to real presences beyond the world of actual appearances had become entirely inert. When pressed far enough, the self-enclosed Saussurean sign system leads inevitably to what Steiner defined as “a rigorously consequent nihilism or nullity” (133) – an ever-receding dead end, or *aporia*, with which we are all too familiar. Steiner concluded that the very meaningfulness of meaning ultimately is tied to our belief in the reality of a “theological-metaphysical transcendence” (119) – that is, to our belief in the philosophical realists’ transcendent virtual realm of being that gives value to the apparent world of actual particulars; and he stressed that it is the task and privilege of art “to quicken into presence the continuum between temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between man and the ‘other’” (227).

In making his impassioned argument for a belief in the reality of the realm of metaphysical transcendence, without which “certain dimensions of thought and creativity” which make life ultimately meaningful and valuable “are no longer attainable” (229), Steiner was building upon and echoing the argument made by Owen Barfield in his seminal 1965 *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*. Writing during the same period in which Jacques Derrida was formulating deconstruction, but with a significantly different purpose, Barfield contended that “all things came into being through the Word” (125), which ties the actual existent in mystic union with the eternal realm of being, bestowing value on the particular. Before the Word, there was no phenomenal world; the origin of language was coincident with the origin of our world as world (123). Barfield’s major assertion is that that original Word is still living today (as the earth’s first living cell, which asexually reproduced, remains alive with us). In our own use of language in thought, word, and deed, we continually *recreate* the phenomenal world, at once imbuing that world with meaning and value. When, on the other hand, we conceive of language as referring simplistically to a separately existing world of phenomena, we treat both our living words and the phenomena themselves as unliving “idols” (62), making of ourselves, by extension, mere things in a world of things. The Saussurean-deconstructive model idolizes the

self-enclosed sign system itself, with a similar alienating result. Our failure to recognize the participatory nature of living reality does not result in a non-participatory world; but our failure consciously to participate in creating that reality effectively *devalues* the world, eliminating “all meaning and all coherence from the cosmos” (Barfield 145), making us fundamentally ir-responsible creatures – creatures for whom response itself has become meaningless (Steiner 90). Spinoza diagnosed the dire condition of un-responsive, irresponsible modern man succinctly when he wrote that the man who is unconscious of his active participation in creating reality is an “ignorant man,” who, “as soon as he ceases to be acted on... ceases to exist” (316).

Neither Steiner nor Barfield disputed the objective reality of the world as such; rather they insisted that *all* reality as we know it is participatory and interactive – thereby questioning the very division of the phenomenal world into the Cartesian-Newtonian categories of subject and object. Their insistence upon the participatory nature of living reality and their critique of the mind-body, subject-object split enforced by the scientific revolution is in agreement with the often overlooked scientific revolution of our own time, as described by Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers in their vital 1984 *Order out of Chaos*, in which they contended that, “whatever we call reality, it is revealed to us only through the active constructions in which we participate” (293). The nobel-prize-winning work of Prigogine in “dissipative structures” concerned the manner in which chemical systems far from equilibrium creatively evolve themselves in nonlinear and indeterminate ways through interactive relation to their environments. In *Order Out of Chaos*, Prigogine and Stengers elaborated upon the implications of this discovery and of related work in organic process systems theory, suggesting that we are heading toward a new synthesis, a new naturalism. Perhaps we will eventually be able to combine the Western tradition, with its emphasis on experimentation and quantitative formulations, with a tradition such as the Chinese one with its view of a spontaneous, self-organizing world. (22)

In such a naturalism, we may find ourselves at home again within an organic natural world, which, “instead of being a machine turns out to be more like human nature – unpredictable, sensitive to the surrounding world, influenced by small fluctuations” (Capra 193).

Such a comprehensive and integrated view of human and non-human nature was philosophically theorized by Whitehead in his revolutionary but largely neglected “philosophy of organism” developed in the early decades of the 20th Century in response to the rising science of organic systems. Prigogine-Stengers and others have pointed to Whitehead’s organic process philosophy as the most ambitious and successful attempt in modern thought to incorporate modern scientific theory into a systematic metaphysical conception of reality that is embracing of all of nature, from “stones to man” (Prigogine 94). Whitehead was particularly interested in demonstrating “the connection between a philosophy of *relation*... and a philosophy of *innovative becoming*” (Prigogine 95). He stressed that the Cartesian and Newtonian subject-object paradigm that has shaped and limited our understanding of reality in the modern world mistakenly assumed the actuality of stable and particular subjects with circumscribable individual identities that react with other such subjects as objects. He countered that such subjects and objects are in effect only useful *concepts* that are abstracted from a phenomenal world in which “process, activity, and change are the matter of fact” (MOT 146) and in which “actuality is in its essence composition” (MOT 119). When we think of ourselves and our world as being comprised of stable physical particulars, Whitehead contended, we not only mistake a conceptual abstraction for an ultimate reality, but we reduce all values, goals, and ideals to mere subjective qualities characterizing those particulars, which is the nominalist error. Whitehead’s alternative is to conceive of our world as being composed of networks of organisms creatively evolving in pursuit of their essentially aesthetic aims – a world which he conceived in the manner of the philosophical realist: “The creativity is the actualization of potentiality” (AOI 179), with the ultimate purpose of the “perfections of harmony” between the ideal and the actual, the good and the necessary, art and nature (AOI 271).

Whitehead’s biologically-based assertion that aesthetic aim as creative purpose and self-enjoyment is the most fundamental aspect of the evolutionary process of reality (MOT 152) is in profound agreement with Wilde’s slightly earlier assertion that the evolution of history demonstrates to us that life imitates art, rather than art imitating life: “Life is Art’s best, Art’s only pupil” (983). Both assertions are decidedly realist in the philosophical sense, in that they insist that

reality proceeds from mind-based virtuals to physical and particular actuals; and they are both organic models in which reality is conceived as a process of creative evolution. The purpose of art *as* art in such a system is creatively to envision the future, as Wilde asserted when observing that “literature anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose” (983). When, on the contrary, literature – and art and criticism in general – takes as its avowed ideal and purpose the mere faithful imitation of life as it is found in actuality, it sinks into “true decadence, and it is from this that we are now suffering” (Wilde 978). It is the decadence from which we continue to suffer, for it is all too evident that neither Whitehead nor Wilde was successful (has *yet* been successful) in arguing modernity out of its nominalist error. Rather they – and other philosophical realist visionaries such as Barfield, Weil, Deleuze, and Steiner – have striven to keep alive the concept of a creative and living realism alternative to the dead-end idolatry of mimesis.

This alternative living realism has been kept alive in our modern and contemporary literature as well, where it has occupied the margins of canonicity. Alternative living realist works by critically neglected authors such as Ronald Firbank, James Purdy, Jane Bowles, and Penelope Fitzgerald have been misunderstood and underappreciated because their assumptions are fundamentally realist in the double-minded and participatory philosophical sense, rather than in the conventional mimetic and nominalistic sense that continues to dominate our literary taste and habits of reading. One might, of course, argue that the major literary movements of the past century, modernism and postmodernism, were both alternative living realism movements in that they were directly opposed to the simplifying mimesis of conventional literary realism and naturalism. I would contend, however, that the modernists and postmodernists for the most part merely substituted a subjective nominalism for an objective nominalism, replacing an oppressive and dehumanizing objective reality with an all-too-human subjective world-view, as Saussure replaced a utilitarian objectivist sign system with a self-enclosed subjectivist model. The famous and fascinating theoretical argument between Georg Lukacs and Theodor Adorno concerning the validity of modernism as a form of realism explored the implications and ramifications of such a replacement, Lukacs arguing that the modernist subjectivist world-view makes reality as a whole

“opaque, fragmentary, chaotic and uncomprehended” (39), leading to a “disintegration of the will” (44) that renders the individual a passive observer of an oppressive actuality; and Adorno countering that art’s very function is “to remain the antithesis of that which is the case” (159), serving as “the negative knowledge of the actual world” (161). Between the two arguments, there is no middle ground, and that – from a philosophical realist perspective – is because they are occupying the same metaphysical plane of actuality, the alternative to which is a different plane altogether, that of the virtual and ideal from which the actual is born. Without that entirely alternative perspective, dialectical argumentation is merely a mono-linear process of continual substitution (such as postmodernism’s substitution of an attitude of *jouissance* for modernism’s *angst*) as Simone Weil observed in one of her piquant notebook entries: “The great mistake of the Marxists and of the whole of the nineteenth century was to think that by walking straight on one mounted upwards into the air” (GG 174). The mistake, in other words, is to link the present actual to the future possible rather than to the virtual-eternal potential, which occupies another plane – one that is closer even to the impossible than it is to the merely possible (Weil, GG 175). Our existential task, Weil argued, echoing Spinoza, is consciously to link the two planes together in our understanding of reality, without allowing one plane to subsume the other, “We have to rediscover the original pact between the spirit and the world” (GG 153).

The primary error in the conventional concept of mimetic realism is to assume that there is such a living thing as a self-evident, autonomous and non-participatory reality – a reality that exists either outside of one’s body (objective nominalism) or inside of one’s head (subjective nominalism) – and that the realist writer’s task is merely to reproduce it on the page. That which is reproduced by the conventional mimetic realist is thus deemed innately realistic; we have only to look at the actual world around us, or at the world of consciousness in our heads, as the theory suggests, in order to recognize the similarity, and thus the authenticity, of the reproduction. That one could even consider that a reproduction is more or less authentic is indicative of the ultimate irrationality of such a model.

The conception that a work is authentically realistic because it faithfully reproduces reality as it really is, is akin to the fundamentalist assertion that a text

means exactly what it says. One crucial virtue of deconstruction is that it pointed out the irrationality of such an assumption by pushing it to its inevitable non-sensical and valueless conclusion. Steiner commented that “deconstruction dances in front of the ancient Ark” housing the original “Word,” which it knows to be “empty” (122), and he contended that “such total disinvestment” in language as meaning was necessary to “restore to words their magical energies.... the unlimited creativity of metaphor which is inherent in the origins of all speech” (98). Barfield likewise contended that, once we succeed in recognizing that, through words, we participate in creating the phenomenal world in all of its richness and meaning, then we can begin to “perform the act of figuration consciously” – becoming active participants in creating and positively changing our real worlds. In his 2002, *At the End of an Age*, the historian John Lukacs noted Barfield’s theoretical acuity when arguing that, with the “affirmation of the Uncertainty of Indeterminacy principle” (95), empirical science itself had acknowledged the “human inseparability of the knower from the known,” with the result there is an “inevitable participation of the knower in the known” (209). The concept of objectivity in such a paradigm is not a simple fact but an existential task; it is an *ideal* that is approached through infinite approximation. Likewise, the most objective actor is not the experimenter who claims absolute disinterested objectivity (the uncertainty principle demonstrated empirically that there is no such thing), but the one who most clearly acknowledges and accounts for his subjective context and purpose.

Living realist writers have demonstrated such accountability by performing their subjective acts of figuration consciously, highlighting the participation of the knower in the known. They have accomplished this contextualization through their creative uses of traditional, double-minded and participatory genres in tandem with conventional mimetic realism. Different genres imply different world-views (in effect, different *realities*) that are inherent in the genre itself. The conventional mimetic realist genre implies and endorses a nominalist-materialist world-view, as we have discussed. The genres that living realist writers have tended to conjoin to conventional mimetic realism – such as allegory, pastoral, and parable – function, rather, as implicit critiques of the single-level nominalist paradigm, while endorsing a dual-realm philosophical realist world-view. The manner in which each of the genres expresses such a

world-view is particular to its nature. Allegory emphasizes the overall dual-realm nature of reality by focusing on the divide between the virtual and the actual, being and becoming, the ideal and the existent, the desired and the possessed. Pastoral envisions a potential world in which the realms on the two sides of the divide are fully connected and in which the human is wholly at home within a meaningful and value-laden natural and real world. While parable instructs the alert and engaged reader in the means and manner by which the connection between the realms is effected and a value-imbued world is created and maintained.

That modern and contemporary criticism largely has failed to recognize or appreciate the fact that realist fiction writers have been working in such traditional genres in tandem with conventional mimesis is indicative of our culture's nominalist assumptions and predilections. When, under the influence of the scientific revolution and the Cartesian subject-object paradigm, intellectuals in the Western world began to think of the world of actual appearances as the whole of an ultimate and self-evident reality, the idea of genre came to seem artificial and unnecessary, and even a dangerous and willful distortion of things as they really are. In *Validity in Interpretation*, published in 1967, E. D. Hirsch argued otherwise in an effort to save the lingering philosophical realist conceptions of contextual meaning and value from the contemporary post-structuralist theories that would culminate and punctuate the modernist nominalist error. "Understanding is itself genre-bound" (78), Hirsch contended, as meaning, in order to be meaningful, must have a working context. Every text, and indeed every speech act, operates in and through such a context, which Hirsch labeled an "intrinsic genre," contending that "valid interpretation is always governed by a valid inference about genre" (113) and that a "disagreement about an interpretation is usually a disagreement about genre" (98). Hirsch further emphasized that "the unifying and controlling idea in any type of utterance, any genre, is the idea of purpose" (99). By demonstrating the conscious aim that is part and parcel of any language act, Hirsch's argument implicitly counters the post-structuralist dicta of the death of the author and the autonomy of the text. The operation of genre as the intrinsic context and purpose of any language act implies, rather, an actual existential speaker addressing an actual existential audience.

“When living realist writers chose to work in and through double-minded genres in tandem with conventional mimesis in creating their fictive realities, they were in effect emphasizing the inherent artifice of all knowing, implicitly affirming Wilde’s pronouncement that “truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style” (981). To consider truth a matter of style is to emphasize the participatory nature of reality, acknowledging the possibilities and limitations of any particular viewpoint from which knowing occurs. It is, in effect, a plea for humility in our approach to understanding the world – which is to admit, among other things, that “our thinking of the world is unavoidably anthropomorphic, just as our exploration of the universe is inevitably geocentric” (John Luckacs 211). Recognizing the limitations of our viewpoints does not necessitate the abandonment of our belief in the reality of transcendent virtues and ideals; rather it enables us to *actuate* those ideals by recognizing the realities of other viewpoints, as Eagleton argued when he defined the idea of “objectivity” as meaning, “among other things a decentered openness to the reality of others” and the idea of “reason” as being

closely related to generosity... [it is] being able to acknowledge the truth or justice of another’s claim even when it cuts against the grains of one’s own interest and desires. To be reasonable in this sense involves not some desiccated calculation but courage, realism, justice, humility, and largesse of spirit; there is nothing clinically disinterested about it. (123)

Eagleton emphasized that all virtues and values only become actual through our participation in making them so, and he argued that the postmodernists who treated such ideals as mere tools of an oppressive patriarchy and a deluded Enlightenment have thereby forfeited their ability positively to change the world in a misguided and indulgent act of nihilistic rebellion.

There is a parallel between the concept that the virtue of reason becomes an actuality when one thinks and acts reasonably and the sense in which a fictive text is actualized in the response of the reader. The concept of conventional mimetic realism reduces the ultimate task of the reader’s creative response to that of a judgment as to whether the reality presented in the text is life-like or not. The model is that of fidelity. If the text is judged as having been faithful in reproducing the world as it is generally perceived to be, or is likely to be, in actuality, the mimetic reader will be in turn faithful in mentally actuating

the text. In such a model, responsibility is tantamount to obedience to the text's authority and creative choice is reduced to a minimum. At its essence, the critical concept of mimetic realism is a form of creative tyranny. Reality as it is habitually experienced tyrannizes the author who in turn tyrannizes the reader. Recognizing and responding to such tyranny, modernists sought to sabotage the system by frustrating the creation of meaning. As the conventional realists and naturalists who dominated late nineteenth-century literature had created all too possible worlds that the obedient reader was obliged to actuate in mental response, so the experimental modernists created worlds that were all but impossible mentally to actuate. Crucial modernist texts such as James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, and Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* function as nearly impassable barriers between figuration and actuation, art and life. As with Saussure's self-enclosed sign system, such texts maintain fidelity mainly to themselves; the existential world of the reader is excluded, or at least made unimportant. These modernist giants left behind great aesthetic disasters and tremendous existential failures, in the ruins of which postmodernists have been playing. Steiner contended that the "break of the covenant between word and world" that modernism witnessed and expressed was followed naturally and inevitably by the "negative semiotics" of deconstruction, as the classical Greek "tragic, prophetic drama" was followed by a farcical "satyr play" (115). The relation between the high modernists and their postmodern heirs is a similar one.

The difference in attitude towards literary realism between prototypical modernist and postmodernist authors and living realist writers is evident in their contrasting uses of traditional genres. When they consciously employed such genres, modernists and postmodernists did so for the most part ironically. The irony functioned as a lament for the necessary subjectivity of any particular viewpoint. The disappointed modernist-postmodernist attitude toward the subjective nature of human knowing is parallel in some ways to that of Albert Einstein who, although he himself brilliantly demonstrated the subjective and relational nature of scientific knowing, was nevertheless dissatisfied with the seeming limitations of such a paradigm and yearned for a totalizing universal model that would demonstrate the ultimate reality and knowability of objective truth. When the celebrated postmodern poet John Ashbery wrote in a typical

passage, “Each person / Has one big theory to explain the universe / But it doesn’t tell the whole story / And in the end it is what is outside him / That matters” (202), he was both demonstrating and lamenting the subjective-objective divide that confounded Einstein and upon which the non-participatory nominalist paradigm inevitably founders. It is this divide that accounts for the irony inherent in the modernist-postmodernist use of genre, which is treated implicitly as the subjectivizing cause of the divide between self and world, whereas it is merely a symptom of the nominalist paradigm’s ultimate irrationality. For, as Hirsch pointed out, genre is the intrinsic element in any language act that demonstrates the necessarily contextual, purposeful, and participatory nature of all knowing. Genre tells us that we cannot evade the subjective limitations of our individual viewpoints, and thus of our existential worlds. This is a matter for lament for those who hunger for the singular authority and stable certainty of an ultimate objectivity, but it is positive and enabling knowledge for those who actively participate in creating the infinite realities of our pluralistic universe. The *reality* of pluralism is the revolutionary meaning of Wilde’s dictum that truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style, which too often has been interpreted to mean that truth is whatever we, in our special pleading circumstances, choose to say that it is. Such flexible, cynical, and strategic “truths” are not even true for ourselves.

A genre that is used ironically, as Pound in *The Cantos* and Ashbery in *Three Poems* used the genre of epic, for instance, is a genre that is not functioning correctly. The genre is not being allowed to be itself and the work in which it is operative is, in a generic sense, necessarily a failure from the start. This is not to say that *The Cantos* or *Three Poems* are failures as poems, but that they are failures as epics, which both poems readily admit. With *The Changing Light at Sandover*, James Merrill demonstrated that a 20th century American poetry epic was indeed possible. He succeeded where Pound and Ashbery failed in part because his purpose was *not* to demonstrate the difficulty or impossibility of creating a modern epic, but simply to do so. His use of the epic genre was a good faith effort and the genre in turn enabled the effort.

Living realist fiction writers are more complex genre cases in that reviewers and critics of their work typically have been insufficiently alert to the possibility of the works’ alternative generic allegiances and affiliations. Such critical

misapprehension may be accounted for by the fact that living realist writers have been working in genres that have been overlooked and discredited as fictive structures as a result of the overwhelming dominance of the nominalist mimetic-realist paradigm, which is the paradigm from which the work of such marginalized alternative realist authors as Firbank, Purdy, and Henry Green typically and mistakenly has been approached by incomprehending reviewers and critics.

But the argument need not be limited to such special cases of historically misunderstood and undervalued writers. Realist fiction writers who are true creators have never merely copied actuality according to the proscriptions of an unimaginative and narrow-minded conceptual mimesis; rather they have commented and critiqued, altered and augmented, prophesied and envisioned. Our most valued realist writers have always been doing so, and the greatest of them – such as Charles Dickens, Marcel Proust, and Willa Cather – created living realisms so convincingly vital and profound as to put to shame the mere actualities of our everyday worlds. If we are alert to the possibility, we can observe the manner in which each of these authors relied on a traditional double-minded genre to critique and challenge the actualities of their mimetic worlds – Dickens employing complex allegories as satirical societal prods, Proust envisioning elaborate pastorals as existential solace and retreat, and Cather crafting aesthetic-ethical parables in the guise of nostalgic historical tales.

The living realism practiced by such masters of the craft invites – and to some extent requires – the interactive participation of the reader, who, by dint of her willing engagement with the reality of such imagined worlds, sets herself in implicit opposition to her contemporary actuality. This opposition is more than mere imaginative play or escapism. It is, rather, an existential choice to assent to the living reality of a desired potential as being aesthetically and ethically superior to the current actual. The importance of the reader's willing engagement as creative choice can hardly be overstated, for it is that which allows and enables creative artists to change our worlds through the living potential of their created realities.

If one were to try to put one's finger on the intellectual historical moment in which Western literary-theoretical culture first entered the existential cul-de-sac that a nominalistic modernism/postmodernism has proved itself to be, one might well focus on the linguistic theory of Saussure, the basis and inspiration for Derrida's theory of deconstruction, which helped to convince a generation of readers and critics of the ultimate inefficacy and unreality, even, of the reader's creative and purposive response to a text. According to the Saussurean-Derridean model, language is a self-involved dyadic system of signifiers and signified that exists apart from its users, and which indeed *uses* its users, rather than being used by them. As John K. Sheriff noted in his crucial 1989 critique of deconstruction, *The Fate of Meaning*: Structural and deconstructive theory's "final no" to meaning is not a denial of meaning, but a denial that people can control it; it is a loss of faith in human action. The "yes" on which the future of the world depends is an acknowledgment, an affirmation that meaning is ultimately grounded not by the rules of rationality, but by human choice (140).

Sheriff is of course alluding to Wallace Steven's famous poem, "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard," which begins, "After the final no there comes a yes / And on that yes the future world depends" (247). Sheriff finds the source of such a yes, as regards the efficacy of human choice in responding in and to language, in the semiotic theory of Charles Peirce, which Peirce developed in the same period as Saussure elaborated his system. The crucial difference in the Peircean system of semiotics (a word he coined) regards the function and importance of the language user in the language system. For Peirce, the living structure of a sign is always triadic, involving the existential interpretant, "A sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Peirce 2.228). As Sheriff glosses, Rather than posit some sort of autonomous system of arbitrary relations independent of sign users, Peirce, without denying the social nature of language, says that "the symbol is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind, without which no such connection would exist" (2.299). His theory neither centers nor decenters man; it merely makes mind and language interdependent (137).

Sheriff contended that the Saussurean-Derridean "dyadic sign is a remnant of classical Western thinking, which assumes that to study things as they 'really are'

is to study them as external, autonomous, isolated objects, to see everything as parts and wholes" (48).

This tendency is related, of course, to the concept of mimetic realism, which was developed as a way to make fictive literature more objectively scientific. Taking a value-neutral materialistic science as a paradigmatic model was a disastrous, if perhaps historically unavoidable, misstep for the humanities, for it undermined their very nature and purpose. And a positivistic mimetic materialism is not even good science when it comes to understanding the nature of living systems, as Prigogine-Stengers and others have demonstrated empirically, and as Whitehead observed more than seventy years ago in arguing that a scientific view of nature that ignores the primary importance of creative and purposive behavior in all living things fundamentally misunderstands the nature of life itself:

The characteristics of life are absolute self-enjoyment, creative activity, aim.... Science can find no individual enjoyment in nature: Science can find no aim in nature: Science can find no creativity in nature: it finds mere rules of succession. (MOT 150, 154). Rules of succession, like the paradigm of mimetic realism, can comprehend the relationship of the past to the present, but they are blind when it comes to understanding the manner in which the future is creatively, purposively, and joyfully evolved out of the present and past. And it is of course the future that most concerns us in living our lives, both individually and collectively, as Wilde observed in, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," when discussing the distressing failures of our all too short history of human civilization: But the past is of no importance. The present is of no importance. It is with the future that we have to deal. For the past is what man should not have been. The present is what man ought not to be. The future is what artists are. (1100)

It is, in any case, what they ideally should be, as any theory of a *living* realism must strive to comprehend. If we are to put into practice such a theory, we must train ourselves to identify and analyze the relationship in the literary work between the world as given and the world as desired. To do so is to acknowledge and pay heed to the fact that the literary work has aesthetic-ethical values and aims. In the past several decades, Western literary criticism has become admirably subtle and adroit at recognizing the political, psychological,

and linguistic implications and ramifications of literary works. But these aspects of the literary work most often have been approached in a negative sense, as befits the criticism's underlying nominalist-materialist Marxist, Freudian, and Derridean theories. The result is that literary criticism has become on the whole skeptical and suspicious in its relation to the work of literature. Such a hermeneutic of suspicion only hinders us when we attempt to identify and analyze the aesthetic-ethical aim and purpose of literary works, which are expressive of a constructive and creative desire to shape and alter the world according to an aesthetic-ethical envisioning of the beautiful and the good, words and ideals that one rarely encounters in contemporary theory and criticism.

When the literary work is conceived as an aesthetic-ethical act, the existential aim of realism in literature is understood to be *not* to compel the world in fiction to conform to the world in actual fact, but to inspire the actuality of the real world to evolve in creative relation to our idealistic envisioning of the beautiful and the good. Within such a critical paradigm of interactive reality, literature is itself reclaimed from its degraded status as a product and symptom of historical error, psychological bad faith, and linguistic imprisonment, and is conceived as a catalytic agent for progressive change and improvement in our world.

In a relational and participatory paradigm of literary realism, the intrinsic nature of the real is no longer understood to be the mimetic realist's set of actual facts, but is rather *actualized value*, the ever-progressing realization of our values and ideals. In terms of literary history, such a concept involves a return to the Romantic paradigm of experience in which the imagination is primary and its actualizations are secondary. Whitehead noted the perspicacity of the Romantics when he observed that the Romantic movement in literature was "a protest against the exclusion of value from the essence of matter of fact" (SMW 94), which was the enervating result of the Newtonian-Cartesian separation between human subject and world object. Wilde likewise praised the Romantics for their paradigmatic insistence upon the creatively progressive nature of the imagined real, which he contrasted to the retrograde effect of the mimetic-realist project, contending that, "Life goes faster than Realism, but Romanticism is always in front of Life" (1091). Wilde, whom Northrop Frye rightly recognized as "one of our few genuinely prophetic writers" (37), predicted that a time would

come when our culture finally would grow tired of its misguided belief that it is the duty of realism in art to copy "commonplace" life as a set of actual facts, at which point we as artists and critics might turn once again for inspiration to our most enlightened and enlivening ideals, which have the power to alter the very nature of reality, as Wilde prophetically envisioned:

And when that day dawns, or sunset reddens, how joyous we shall all be! Facts will be regarded as discreditable, Truth will be found mourning over her fetters, and Romance, with her temper of wonder, will return to the land. The very aspect of the world will change to our startled eyes. (991)

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