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NOTES TOWARD A HISTORICAL DEFINITION OF REALISM

Past scholarship "has contributed astonishingly little to clarifying the essence of Realism". This statement was an accurate description of the state of affairs some thirty years ago, when made in a review of one of the most important books on Realism written in German since World War II[1]. What is more, my perception is that the argument still holds true, because there has been no breakthrough in the definition of the term in the last decades. As evidence, I could refer to various dictionaries of literary terms published recently, which summarize earlier theories rather than conceptions more recently developed,[2] indicating that Realism may not be one of the concepts in the forefront of contemporary scholarship. In any case, the task of formulating rules that define Realism in a historical sense is not like the task of defining a term with an established usage.

My first intention is to examine some of the criteria which have been used in definitions of Realism. Although I tend to regard most of these as questionable, I do not aim at an indiscriminate dismissal of the term. My assumption is that a reappraisal of the existing criteria may lead us away from sweeping generalizations and help us formulate less rigid and more

[1] Henry H. H. Remak, "Richard Brinkmann, Wirklichkeit und Illusion. Studien über Gehalt und Grenzen des Begriffs Realismus für die erzählende Dichtung des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts", *The Germanic Review* XXXIV, no. 2, April 1959, p. 155.

[2] See for instance, *Metzler Literatur Lexikon.* Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984, pp. 353–354.

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convincing conclusions about the narrative structures that may be specific to 19th century Realism. Without attempting any comprehensive or even systematic survey, I wish to comment on some of the processes that go into the worldmaking of such novels as Balzac's *La Vieille Fille*, Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right*, and Fontane's *Effi Briest*. My choice is purely arbitrary, except that I would like to transcend national boundaries. Originally I planned to include two other novels, one by Dostoevsky and one by the Hungarian writer Kemény, but the technical difficulties of quoting from Russian and Hungarian texts have deterred me from trying to be more comprehensive. In any case, my choice is justified on the ground that the three novels date from different sub-periods and are widely considered to be representative of Realism. We may therefore ask the question as to whether the strategies commonly associated with Realism are characteristic of these three works of narrative fiction.

To see if the facts square with the theory, it is convenient to start with René Wellek's highly influential definition of Realism, because it is meant to be historical, which gives it an enormous advantage over prescriptive approaches. For him Realism is "a system of norms dominating a specific time, [. . .] which we can set apart from the norms of the periods that precede and follow it".[3] Although the identification and characterization of these norms would amount to a highly appropriate definition of Realism, the way Professor Wellek proceeds to specify the historical position of this literary trend strikes me as somewhat problematic. Arguing that it emerged with "the end of romanticism",[4] he makes the following observation: "It rejects the fantastic, the fairytale-like, the allegorical and the symbolic, the highly stylized, the purely abstract and

[3] René Wellek, "The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship" in *Concepts of Criticism*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1963, p. 225.
[4] Wellek, p. 240.

decorative. It means that we want no myth, no *Maerchen*, no world of dreams".[5]

It would be foolish to deny the partial truth of this statement. What I wish to suggest is that it depends at least partly on the reader whether a mythic structure is recognizable or not in a given text. *La Vieille Fille* has been interpreted as a new version of the tale of "la Belle au bois dormant",[6] and I tend to accept this as one of its possible readings, in the same way as I would be inclined to give legitimacy to the interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw* as a new version of *Genesis*. What is at issue here is intertextuality, and it would be difficult to deny that the reading of a novel by Balzac may be influenced by the fact that the author and the reader share a common tradition. Some statements made by Realist writers to the effect that they planned to make their public forget it was reading books instead of having an experience of "life" should not blind us to their habit of reminding the reader of other texts. At several stages of the story Balzac's narrator presented scenes as variations upon scenes in earlier works of literature, or at least referred to a passage in Voltaire's *Œdipe*, Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro*, or Shakespeare's *Richard III* as giving the clue to the understanding of his own novel[7]. It would be tempting to detect ironic reversal as the guiding principle behind the strategies of overt or covert intertextuality in Realist fiction, but even this might prove to be a simplification. The point of the many allusions to *Othello* in *He Knew He Was Right*—from the first hint that the wife, Mrs. Trevelyan is from an alien world to the central episode set in Venice—is exactly how relevant the old pattern is in a seemingly new world.

At this point, it is probably worth emphasizing that evidence based upon the analysis of a novel by Trollope may be decisive, because unlike Stendhal or Dickens or even Balzac, he cannot

[5] Wellek, p. 241.

[6] Nicole Mozet, "Introduction" to Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976, vol. IV, p. 806.

[7] Balzac, pp. 818, 842, 930.

be described as a novelist marking a transition from Romanticism to Realism. His work would suggest that Realism should be viewed as post-Romantic rather than anti-Romantic, because the values of Romanticism are not so much invalidated as taken for granted in a Realist novel. Needless to say, not only Wellek's definition may be called too rigid on this ground, but also such a more recent description of the conventions of Realism as the one outlined by Philippe Hamon. His claim that "le héros réaliste voyagera sans doute fort peu loin de son milieu", because Realists reject the Romantic value of "un ailleurs"[8] is in sharp contrast with the prominent role of the exotic in *He Knew He Was Right*, and in this context one could also refer to another major work of Trollope's maturity, *The Way We Live Now*, as well as to many other examples of European Realism. One may even wonder whether Realist fiction is not bound up with the portrayal of tensions between value systems belonging to different parts of the world. From the early works of James to Realist fiction written in Russia or in Central Europe, numerous novels could be cited in this context.

Without pursuing this line of argument any further, my intention is simply to suggest that the relation between Romantic and Realistic worldmaking may be more than a matter of simple contrast. In many cases Romantic values are not invalidated but rather admitted as an existing frame of reference in Realist fiction. To take another example from *He Knew He Was Right*, when her sister tries to urge Nora Rowley to become the wife of Mr. Glascock, a rich man with great moral integrity, Nora's answer is that she has to think of her own feelings, thus reminding the reader that Romanticism has liberated emotions from the control of reason. Passion may turn out to be a destructive force – as in the case of the jealous Trevelyan – or it may prove

[8] Philippe Hamon, "Un discours contraint" in Roland Barthes, Leo Bersani, Philippe Hamon, Michael Riffaterre, Ian Watt: *Littérature et réalité*. Paris: Seuil, 1982, p. 137.

to be a supreme moral value – as with Nora Rowley and Hugh Stanbury –, but in either case it has an autonomy never questioned by the narrator. In consequence, the barrier breaks down between Romanticism and Realism, especially if it serves as a proof of a radical break between pre-capitalistic social formations and capitalism, of the claim that "capitalism has effectively dissolved all the older forms of collective relations, leaving their cultural expressions and their myths as incomprehensible to us as so many dead languages or undecipherable codices."[9]

A more helpful definition of 19th century Realism can be suggested by Foucault's thesis that there are "deux grandes discontinuités dans l'épistémè de la culture occidentale: celle qui inaugure l'âge classique (vers le milieu du XVIIe siècle) et celle qui, au début du XIXe, marque le seuil de notre modernité."[10] The transitions from general grammar to philology, from natural history to biology, and from the analysis of wealth to political economy, as well as the emergence of literature and history, "la constitution de tant de sciences positives", and "le repli de la philosophie sur son propre devenir"[11] could be taken as preconditions of Realist writing, and Foucault's idea of an earlier discontinuity may also caution us against overemphasizing the connection between Positivist philosophy and Realist fiction.

A nominalist distrust of general abstractions, a phenomenalist denial of any distinction between phenomenon and essence, surface and depth, a rejection of value judgements or normative statements, and even a belief in the universal validity of the empiric methods of natural science may well have exerted an influence upon the ideals of the leading novelists of the second and last thirds of the 19th century, but it is hard to say how deeply that influence affected their artistic practice. In some

[9] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act.* Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1981, p. 69.

[10] Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines.* Paris: Gallimard, 1966, p. 13.

[11] Foucault, p. 233.

cases their attitude revealed elements of anti-Positivism, partly because they had to justify the relative independence of literature, a status which had hardly existed before the Romantics. It would be too easy to refer to *Hard Times* or point out the fairy-tale structure in several other novels by Dickens, but it is probably worth recalling that there is hardly any novel written by a 19th century Russian author in which transcendence does not play a major role, while Victorian novels almost never fail to correspond to the rules of a Christian ethic, and many works of Realist fiction contain a hidden metaphysics. In other words, they seem to confirm Foucault's claim that Kantian criticism, Romantic metaphysics, and Positivism may be viewed as integral parts of the same intellectual context,[12] so that the emergence of Realism can be taken as a proof that from the early 19th century "l'homme est apparu comme doublet empirico-transcendantal".[13]

There is, however, one basic hypothesis underlying Foucault's conception of history which must be rejected if we aim at a workable tentative definition of Realism. The conclusion that "dans une culture et à un moment donné, il n'y a jamais qu'une *épistèmé*, qui définit les conditions de possibilité de tout savoir"[14] is almost as far-fetched as some drawn by Lukács or Jameson. The underlying assumption of Realist fiction that the world as a whole is describable and reality is accessible to verbal formulation certainly echoes the Classicist view of language, "la grande utopie d'un language parfaitement transparent où les choses elles-mêmes seraient nommées sans brouillage".[15] What is more, the Realists' claim that language could be reality's direct and unmediated expression was based on the conception that signs had a binary structure, an idea which did not emerge until the advent of Classicism in the 17th century, before which "le système des signes dans le monde occidental

[12] Foucault, p. 258.
[13] Foucault, p. 332.
[14] Foucault, p. 179.
[15] Foucault, p. 133.

avait été ternaire, puisqu'on y reconnaissait le signifiant, le signifié et la 'conjoncture' ".[16] If there was any element of anti-Romanticism in the goals of the Realists, it must be conceded that those who formulated them relied heavily on Classicist conceptions of language. Their program was based upon the stubborn belief that the phenomenality of words naturally corresponded to the essence of things. In other words, they seemed to ignore that "what *materiality* names can never be encountered as such because it is always mediated by language or other signs, as Hegel and Marx, each in his own way, recognized. (. . .) we are forbidden ever to have direct access to what the word *materiality* names or nicknames. We can know the material only through names or other signs." Since Realism was bound up with a cult of the proper name, the distance between 19th century Realism and our own age can be explained in terms of our belief that "no name is 'proper.' All names, proper or common, are sobriquets, nicknames, figurative substitutes for proper names that can never be given and that cannot exist."[17]

It could, of course, be argued that whatever the intentions of some Realists may have been, most of them did not write in a style that could be called transparent. In *Effi Briest*, for instance, major events are anticipated on the level of surface structures. At the end of Chapter 3 Vetter Dagobert makes the remark that "Fräulein Cousine stehe zwar auf dem Punkte, sich zu verheiraten, es sei aber doch vielleicht gut, die 'Insel der Seligen' schon vorher kennengelernt zu haben",[18] and this early indication is followed by a wide range of metaphorical statements and puns pointing towards the conclusion, or hinting at what is assumed to be inexpressible in the novel. It is thanks to the connotative character of his language that Fon-

[16] Foucault, p. 57.

[17] J. Hillis Miller, "Presidential Address 1986. The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base", *PMLA* vol. 102, no. 3 (April 1987), p. 289.

[18] Theodor Fontane, *Effi Briest. Sämtliche Werke* IV. München: Carl Hanser, 1963, p. 23.

tane can combine brevity with depth. Less than a page is devoted to the duel between Crampas and Innstetten, the central scene of the whole novel, and the same terseness makes the reader constantly aware of Fontane's great stylistic achievement, so that he may feel it necessary to stop at sentences which seem to have multiple meanings.

"Mythologie war immer mein Bestes." This remark made by Effi to her daughter Annie, near the end of the novel,[19] may remind us that metaphoric statements often serve as modes of expressing mental states. In Kessin Effi is fully convinced that she lives in a haunted house, and she often has hallucinations, dreams, and nightmares. Far from being absent from the novel, the fantastic has a psychological motivation. Once again, it seems desirable to replace the strong thesis formulated by some theoreticians by a weaker one: in Realism it is not necessary that the fantastic and the metaphorical be rejected; what seems to be essential is a " 'dévalorisation' de l'intrigue",[20] which may involve an ironic distance towards the characters. What we have is low rather than high mimesis, the events take place in a "*bon* siècle (par opposition au *grand* siècle)", as Balzac maintained,[21] but even this feature should be called post- rather than anti-Romantic, for "la peinture des mœurs intimes", the emphasis upon "le génie de la province"[22] may owe much to the Romantic cults of "couleur locale" and of cultural relativism.

The foregoing thus appears to suggest that there may be two reasons why it is difficult to have a satisfactory definition of 19th century Realism: on the one hand, artistic practice may contradict intentions, especially when seen in retrospect; on the other hand, some features which seem to represent anti-

[19] Fontane, p. 273.

[20] Philippe Hamon, *Texte et idéologie. Valeurs, hiérarchies et évaluations dans l'œuvre littéraire.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984, p. 89.

[21] Balzac, p. 817.

[22] Balzac, pp. 865, 851.

Romanticism on a first impression may prove to be in harmony with Romantic poetics on a deeper level. The battle Petőfi fought against artificiality in poetic diction in the 1840s started as a self-conscious reaction against Vörösmarty's highly metaphorical style, but in the long run it turned out to be another stage of Hungarian Romanticism, somewhat reminiscent of the cult of simplicity propagated by some German and English Romantics. Coleridge almost immediately saw the contradiction between Wordsworth's ideals and his practice, and a similar discrepancy characterized the activity of Balzac. His aspirations for scientific accuracy were based on the false assumption that the line between artistic and scientific judgement coincided with the line between subjective and objective and on the equally untenable notion of the Real as that which resisted symbolization. Yet whatever Balzac's program may have been, his narrator almost never ceased to make the narratee aware of the artificiality of the world presented, thus reminding the reader that "a work of literature constructs its own 'reality' while simulateously describing it."[23] *La Vieille Fille* is certainly not one of the novels with conspicuously Romantic elements, but even this work is full of passages emphasizing fictionality: Suzanne, one of the main characters, is compared to women painted by Titian and Rubens, Agnes is contrasted to a character in Molière, and at one point the reader is reminded that he must turn to *Les Chouans*, another part of *La Comédie*, if he wants to have a proper understanding of a certain passage in *La Vieille Fille*.[24]

A similar discrepancy can be observed in the scenes or tableaux which are often regarded as macrostructural units specific of Realist fiction. While it may be true that Champfleury spoke for most Realists when he insisted on "la qualité suprême

[23] Benjamin Harshaw (Hrushovski), "Fictionality and Fields of Reference. Remarks on a Theoretical Framework", *Poetics Today* 5: 2 (1984), p. 232.

[24] Balzac, pp. 822, 859, 852.

de l'horreur de la composition",[25] the structure of a long scene in a novel by Kemény or by Tolstoy shows an arrangement as strict as a ritual: the beginning and the end are presented from a distant point of view, while the central part of the episode seems to be close to both the narrator and the narratee, so that the contrast between background and foreground is supplemented by an opposition between fast and slow rhythm.

"Realism bears the great handicap that in order to ascertain how real it is one ought to know the real."[26] Simple as this statement may seem to be at first sight, it may be taken as a sound formulation of the most fundamental reason why it is more difficult to define Realism than almost any other literary trend. The term itself seems to suggest an irreconcilable contradiction. Offering an alternative to conventionality, it demands the transparence of the signifier, an ideal that cannot be realized without a heavy dependence upon a socio-cultural code full of stereotypes, creating maximum readibility which is hardly possible without an emphasis upon intertextuality, one of the chief sources of conventionality. If Realist novels are predictable, they are so because of a coherence produced by causal motivation. In other words, the credibility which may be a *sine qua non* of Realism is a form of redundance inseparable from phatic procedures whose conventionality is at variance with the claim that Realist style is free of artificiality.

At this point we must remind ourselves of the fact that once our aim is a historical definition of Realism, we cannot ignore the historical nature of reading. What may have passed for "empirical" narrative in the 19th century might turn out to be tradition-bound, even heavily conventional at the close of the 20th century. Just as a historical survey of photography will reveal how that allegedly objective form of art has always been

[25] Hamon, *Texte et idéologie*, p. 71.

[26] Henry H. H. Remak, "Peasant Sentimentalism or Peasant Realism? George Sand's *La Petite Fadette* and Gottfried Keller's *Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe*", *Beiträge zur Romanischen Philologie* XVII (1978), Heft 1, p. 129.

vulnerable to the influence of changing habits of visual interpretation, the synecdochic arrangement of descriptions and the metonymic structure of plot – two distinguishing features of Realist fiction – will appear to be highly stylized if seen in retrospect. Even the outside knowledge of science that a writer may bring to bear on his novel is exposed to historical changes – as the cases of Balzac and Kemény testify, whose physiological learning, manifest in their ideas upon human character, has been invalidated by later developments.

In view of this, the claim, which Wellek surprisingly shares with Lukács, that Realism is "the objective representation of contemporary social reality",[27] can be taken as a definition of ideals rather than of artistic practice. The only specific interpretation of objectivity I can think of is based on the alleged absence of a narrator, an ideal that was most consistently formulated by the author of *The Awkward Age* but had been a guiding principle underlying Realism from the first half of the 19th century. The climax of *La Vieille Fille* is written in a dramatic form, and many scenes in other novels have a central passage indicating the hypothesis that pure dialogue may have the highest mimetic value. Yet even this tendency is vulnerable to the self-contradictions of Realist objectives. The aim of a writer who tries hard to remove his narrator from the scene may be to give maximum information, but to be able to achieve this the story-teller must assume authority, and this he cannot do without making his presence felt. That is why the practices of Trollope and James are less different than their ideals, and the omniscience of the narrator does not seem to be a useful term when applied to actual novels.

"Wilke schmunzelte. 'Is doch ein Daus, unser Fräulein', so etwa gingen seine Gedanken."[28] These words seem to illustrate a strategy characteristic of most works of Realist fiction. As if he did not care to know everything, the story-teller may have

[27] Wellek, p. 242.
[28] Fontane, p. 14.

both more and less information about the events than the characters. Accordingly, new information may be given either directly or indirectly, and both narrated consciousness and interior monologue are possible. Both naming what is familiar and explaining the unknown may play a significant role in Realist fiction, and explaining can hardly exist without evaluation, so that instead of associating Realist fiction with the value-free ideal of Positivism, it seems more advisable to assume that collective norms are at play in the world presented in such works. It is at least partly the historical nature of these norms that makes prescriptive interpretations of Realism hardly acceptable.

Among these the conception developed by Lukács may have been the most sophisticated and most widely influential. It lies beyond my scope to deal with the circumstances under which he wrote most of his essays on the subject in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, conditions which cannot be ignored if one wants to avoid errors of judgement. For our purposes it is enough to say that normativity is almost never absent from them; it impairs his ability to follow a historical argument, even when what he seems to aim at is a comparison between 19th century Realism and later trends: "Aber der Dichter muss eine feste und lebendige Weltanschauung haben, er muss die Welt in ihrer bewegten Widerspruchlichkeit sehen [. . .]. Dieser verkehrte Weg kann zu keinem Ergebnis führen. [. . .] Und diese Krise muss sich im Laufe der Zeit noch verschärfen"[29]. The categorical imperatives setting the tone reflect a kind of normativity which goes hand in hand with a reluctance to examine the terms used and with an almost wilful disregard of the historical nature of artistic conventions: "Die Porträts von Cézanne sind ebenso blosse Stilleben, verglichen mit der menschlich-seelischen Totalität der Porträts von Tizian oder Rembrandt,

[29] Georg Lukács, *Probleme des Realismus*. Berlin: Aufbau, 1955, pp. 132–133.

wie die Menschen Goncourts oder Zolas im Vergleich zu Balzac oder Tolstoi."[30]

My quotations are from the essay on description and narration, but I could also refer to other texts. In "Grenzen des Realismus",[31] for instance, Lukács maintains that a Realist concentrates on the essential qualities of reality and he remains faithful to them; his works are literary reflections of the objective reality of human life. Accordingly, Hoffmann is a Realist, while Karl Kraus is not. From this line of argument it is clear that Lukács seems to have ignored that history is constituted by interpretation; rather, he has assumed the objective status of a stable point of reference. Still, his conception is not only insufficiently historical, but is also self-contradictory: his long essay on Tolstoy clearly indicates that his immanent, essentialist definition of Realism is at variance with his idea of *Weltliteratur*, based on the concept of influence:

> So eigenartig diese Wirkung Tolstois in Europa auch gewesen sein mag, es handelt sich hier nicht um eine vereinzelte Erscheinung. Die Periode, da Tolstoi in der Weltliteratur wirksam wird, ist zugleich jene Periode, in der plötzlich und mit beispielloser Geschwindigkeit die russische Literatur und die der skandinavischen Länder eine führende Rolle in der europäischen Literatur erringen. Bis dahin wurde im 19. Jahrhundert der große Strom der Weltliteratur von den führenden westlichen Ländern, von England, Frankreich und Deutschland beherrscht. Schriftsteller anderen Nationen tauchen nur vereinzelt und episodisch am Horizont der Weltliteratur auf.[32]

What is more, the concept of *Weltliteratur* is bound with that of *Weltgeschichte*, because

> Nur solche Illusionen des Schriftstellers, die in der gesellschaftlichen Bewegung notwendig begründet sich, deren dichterischer

[30] Lukács, *Probleme des Realismus*, p. 129.

[31] Lukács, "Grenzen des Realismus?", *Deutsche Zeitung*, 27 February 1939.

[32] Lukács, *Der russische Realismus in der Weltliteratur*. Berlin: Aufbau, 1952, pp. 156–157.

> Ausdruck der Schriftsteller ist, die als Illusionen, oft tragische Illusionen, von einer welthistorischen Notwendigkeit sind, werden für eine solche objektive Gestaltung der Gesellschaft kein unüberwindliches Hindernis sein.[33]

In sum, the basic criterion of Realism derives from social history:

> Die subjektive Aufrichtigkeit des Schriftstellers kann nur dann zu einem großen Realismus führen, wenn sie der schriftstellerische Ausdruck einer bedeutenden gesellschaftlichen Bewegung ist.[34]

For Lukács Realism is an ideal, his terminology is based not on historical considerations but rather on a dichotomy of acceptance and rejection. A contrast is made between the "Grundlage der richtigen Empfindungen und des richtigen Denkens" on the one hand, and "falscher Objektivismus" and "falscher Subjektivismus" on the other,[35] and the conception of "man" underlying this opposition is not only abstract but even anti-historical. One may go even as far as suspecting that his prescriptive view of Realism may have something to do with the Positivistic assumption that "fiction is fabricated and fact found".[36] At first glance, the terms "Erzählen" and "Beschreiben" seem to have been given a historical dimension, since they are characterized as representing "Mitleben" and "Beobachten", "notwendige Verhaltensweisen der Schriftsteller zweiter Perioden des Kapitalimus",[37] but the ground of the distinction is again questionable. The stand Lukács takes seems to correspond to the Conservative position as described by the young Jakobson: he regards any departure from the system of

[33] Lukács, *Der russische Realismus*, p. 165.
[34] Lukács, *Der russische Realismus*, p. 164.
[35] Lukács, *Probleme des Realismus*, pp. 133–134.
[36] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis–Cambridge: Hackett, 1978, p. 91.
[37] Lukács, *Probleme des Realismus*, p. 111.

representation he has become accustomed to as a deformation of reality.[38]

The key words in the definition offered by Lukács – "eine richtige und tiefe Widerspiegelung der objektiven Wirklichkeit"[39] – can be misleading, because they may be read without an awareness that both the concept of reality and the ways of creating have changed in the course of the centuries. Lukács fails to recognize that "What we often mistake for the actual world is one particular description of it. And what we mistake for possible worlds are just equally true descriptions in other terms. We have come to think of the actual as one among many possible worlds. We need to repaint that picture. All possible worlds lie within the actual one."[40]

No historical definition is possible before it has been admitted that the real is always a system of institutionalized values. What seemed to be natural in a novel by Trollope to 19th century readers may strike a late 20th century reader as strangely artificial, for various reasons (e.g. the growing temporal distance) which cannot be ignored, because the real is not reconstructed but constructed from the text. As credibility is indispensable for Realism, I am almost tempted to think of a Realist way of reading, or at least to view Realism as both style and performance, a mode of reception with certain rules. It is precisely because I regard the hypothesis that there is no fixed, permanent reality shared by author and reader across the last two centuries as a precondition of the understanding of Realism that I cannot accept the definition given by Lukács or take the Structuralist viewpoint and associate Realism with „une *démodalisation* du message"[41], an absence of narrative

[38] Роман Якобсон, „О художественном реализме", Ladislav Matejka, comp., *Readings in Russian Poetics*. Ann Rabor: Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, 1971, p. 23.

[39] Lukács, *Probleme des Realismus*, p. 115.

[40] Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*. 4th ed. Cambridge, Mass.–London: Harvard UP, 1983, p. 57.

[41] Philippe Hamon, "Un discours contraint", pp. 150–151.

modality, a concept which seems to do as little justice to history as Barthes's earlier term of "le degré zéro de l'écriture". Despite its somewhat rhetorical formulation, Jameson's caution against these conceptions "that neither the reader's reception of a particular narrative, nor the actantical representation of human figures and agents, can be taken to be constants of narratives' analysis but must themselves ruthlessly be historicized"[42] seems to be highly pertinent.

No critic of the ideas of Lukács on Realism can do justice to his theory without mentioning the concept of "type", which even Wellek accepted as a term that could resolve the tension between description and prescription.[43] Yet here again, Jameson's remarks are very much to the point. In his view Lukács' theory of typification is objectionable on two counts: "on the one hand, it fails to identify the typifying of characters as an essentially allegorical phenomenon, and thus does not furnish any adequate account of the process whereby a narrative becomes endowed with allegorical meanings or levels. On the other, it implies an essentially one-to-one relationship between individual characters and their social or historical reference, so that the possibility of something like a system of characters remains unexplored."[44]

What has been called type by Marxist theoreticians from almost the very beginning of that tradition may turn out to be a manifestation of a more general rule observable in Realist fiction, an assumption underlying low mimesis that life is neither good nor bad. "Was ich vom Leben halte? Viel und wenig. Mitunter ist es recht viel und mitunter ist es recht wenig". This answer given by Pastor Niemeyer to a question asked by Effi, near the end of the novel,[45] may be typical of the conclusions of works which can be read as pieces of Realism. The outcome in most of them is a change of perspective, which may be re-

[42] Jameson, p. 152.
[43] Wellek, p. 253.
[44] Jameson, p. 162.
[45] Fontane, p. 281.

garded as a guiding principle in Realist fiction. "Er mass seitdem mit anderem Masse, sah alles anders an."[46] These words about Innstetten apply to Effi as well, and to so many other characters in 19th century fiction that I am tempted to associate Realism with the frequency of a spiral conception of time. In any case, from *Ηδυοm* to *The Way We Live Now* or to *A rajongók* by Kemény, many novels seem to suggest an eternal recurrence, a return to a balanced *status quo*, thus leading us to the assumption that "le réalisme, en général, tend à proclamer le nivellement, l'égalité et la neutralisation éthique du train quotidien."[47]

In Hungarian literature there are two writers, Kemény and Jókai, who were almost exact contemporaries, yet their work represent an epitome of what a Realist can and cannot do. Jókai's novels are full of "flat", i.e., black and white characters, while for Kemény the credibility of such a dichotomy is suspect, and thus his characterization is based on neutral (neither ... nor) or complex (both ... and) structures. What must be emphasized though is that the difference is not between Romanticism and Realism – it could be argued that of the two writers Kemény had the more profound understanding of the Romantic legacy –, but rather between romance and novel. In Realism the protagonist can have none of the distinguishing features of an exceptional human being – it is worth recalling that *Vanity Fair* was subtitled as "a novel without a hero" –, because there is no privileged focus. It could even be suggested that Realism was the product of a historical process pointing the way from the teleology of the *Bildungsroman* to a neutralization of character. During that process, the "personnage de la 'bande'"[48] emerged as a representative of social codes, narrowing the gap between principal and major characters. From Balzac to Trollope most 19th century novelists made

[46] Fontane, p. 285.
[47] Hamon, *Texte et idéologie*, p. 187.
[48] Hamon, *Texte et idéologie*, p. 79.

their narrators quote public opinion, sometimes in the form of proverbs or stories illustrating communal values.

It is by no means easy to say at what stage the decline of the status of the major characters and the growing importance of the role played by anonymous communities may have led to the dissolution of the conventions of Realism. If later events can transform earlier happenings, this would apply also to the 19th century novel. In any case, from the perspective of the late 20th century, several of the earlier definitions of Realism may appear to be outdated. It is possible to read *Henry Esmond* in the light of the 18th century, but it is no more absurd to read *Bleak House* in the light of *Der Prozess*. 20th century developments may have taught us that continuity based on a causal arrangement of events is less pervasive a determining force in Realist narratives than it may seem to be. In some cases crucial links in the action may be missing. We do not know much about the honeymoon of Effi and Innstetten or about what actually happened between Effi and Crampas, and we are never told what Crampas wished to say before his death. All these gaps, due to the use of a limited point of view and of a narrator who is far from being omniscient, may lead to differences in interpretation and are sources of indeterminacy hardly less obvious than the story-teller's silence about the exact nature of the illness of Milly Theale or about the events of a certain hour of Mathias's journey on the island, in *Le Voyeur*. In view of such forms of absence, the claim that "le discours réaliste a horreur du vide informatif"[49] will prove to be exaggerated. The hypothesis that some novelists may have abandoned the use of a central focus with the intention to present a more credible vision of reality seems to be more convincing. In the same way that Manet, Degas, or Seurat, or Toulouse-Lautrec painted human figures moving in different directions and occasionally even beyond the frame of the picture, Trollope cut some of his characters in half, to make the impression that the reality he

[49] Hamon, "Un discours contraint", p. 161.

was portraying went beyond the limits of his narrative. An interesting example of this kind of indeterminacy is characteristic of the treatment of Priscilla Stanbury, a highly intelligent, self-effacing, independent woman who attracts the attention of the narrator of *He Knew He Was Right*, but later fades from view.

If indeterminacy plays a far from negligible role in 19th century fiction, it seems questionable whether Realism can be associated with the use of a referential speech act. To prove or refute the accuracy of the hypothesis, underlying Ian Watt's conception of Realism, that Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding were the first writers to give full proper names to their characters,[50] cannot be my concern here – not only Allworthy, but even Lovelace is a name that would hardly qualify as such –, but I would like to risk the hypothesis that both the metonymic arrangement of the plot and the synecdochic structure of descriptions may have set limits to the use of full proper names in Realist fiction. Novelists intent on the portrayal of communal values certainly could not help creating names which it would be hardly possible to regard as proper names in the strict sense. In *He Knew He Was Right* the private detective hired by Trevelyan is given the name Bozzle, "an amalgam of blue-bottle and the noise the fly makes"[51] and his name is repeated so many times and in such a specific context[52] that the reader learns to accept it as a sign of an impersonal destructive force that can smear anybody or anything it touches.

It might be urged that the foregoing argument unduly simplifies or at least fails to do justice to the complexity of the theses formulated by Watt in his book. In any case, it is certainly necessary to ask the question as to how our literary movement is related to generic considerations; in other words, to what

[50] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel. Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1957.

[51] John Sutherland, "Introduction" to Anthony Trollope: *He Knew He Was Right*. Oxford–New York: Oxford UP, 1985, p. XVII.

[52] Trollope, pp. 363–365.

extent the emergence of Realism was bound up with the rise of the novel.

Although some German and Central or East European theoreticians have made desperate attempts to define Realism in lyric verse, the case against their thesis is quite formidable: if Realism is to be interpreted as a trend in 19th century literature, it must be associated with a detailed presentation of socio-historical milieu, and this is hardly possible beyond the scope of a generic combination whose basic components are narrative and descriptive. The semi-narrative and semi-discursive genre of the portrait as developed by journalists and raised to a high artistic level by Hazlitt, Macaulay, Sainte-Beuve, and Kemény exerted a considerable influence on novelists who devoted whole chapters to individual characters.

Description, which Lukács viewed as "ein schrifstellerischer Ersatz für die verlorengegangene epische Bedeutsamkeit",[53] is in fact indispensable for Realism; most 19th century novelists show a keen topographical interest and look upon reality as a kind of inventory which can be decomposed into discrete items. The great emphasis put on detail is certainly an inalienable quality of the writing of Balzac, Dickens, or Trollope, and is a source of complexity, because of its double character so aptly analyzed by Barthes:[54] on the one hand, the minute details of Realistic descriptions seem to be insignificant, even superfluous from the point of view of narrative structures, on the other, they create the impression that the real has a solidity which is resistant to meaning, and thus it will never cease to be a mystery that defies interpretation.

Yet, despite the fact that descriptions may create an impression of plenitude, the most important source of the complexity of Realist worldmaking must be sought on a deeper level. The urge James constantly felt to dramatize and the way of struc-

[53] Lukács, *Probleme des Realismus*, p. 118.

[54] Roland Barthes, "L'effet du réel" in Roland Barthes, Leo Bersani, Philippe Hamon, Michael Riffaterre, Ian Watt: *Littérature et réalité*, pp. 81–82, 87.

turing for which Bakhtin gave the somewhat unfortunate, because misleadingly metaphorical name "polyphonic," may be two aspects of this more fundamental characteristic: the novelist's desire to depart from a monologic form of discourse, his aspiration to cover a wide range of different idioms, and his attempt to present a clash between different value systems, conflicting truths, and multiple actual worlds. Once again, we must regard Realism as a stage in a longer historical process. Dialogue taken in an axiological sense is certainly less obvious in *Oliver Twist* than in *Bleak House*, *Barchester Towers* is monologic if compared to *The Way We Live Now*, and it is for similar reasons that we consider the late novels of Dostoevsky more complex than the works of Turgenev. It cannot be doubted, however, that this line of development eventually led towards ideals hardly compatible with Realism, since the disorientation of the reader undermined the principle of credibility, and deconstructed the chronotopes characteristic of 19th century fiction.

Besides the breakdown of communal belief systems, changes in the modes of publishing and in reading habits were also responsible for the dissolution of Realist conventions. The more close-knit structure of the novels of Flaubert, Fontane, and James owes much to the fact that they were not written for serial publication. Neither Balzac nor Dickens could resist the temptation to create suspense at the end of the installments, and few could deny that the constant delays may create an impression of long-windendness or of melodrama when the text is read in book-form and by late-20th century readers accustomed to more economic ways of structuring.

Apart from this surface segmentation, many 19th century novels follow the pattern set by the principal parts of *La Comédie humaine:* they start in the durative mood, and "le cercle de la vie quotidienne n'est rompu que par l'intervention d'un élément étranger."[55] The first chapters would present a kind of *Lebensbild*—scenes from provincial life, bringing into relief

[55] Nicole Mozet, p. 796.

certain pervasive features of the life of a more or less closed community—, which later on may be interrupted by some unexpected occurrence—the arrival of a visitor from the outside, for instance—, questioning the relevance of the local value system, bringing about all sorts of complications, until the balance is redressed. From *La Vieille Fille* to *The Europeans* many novels seem to follow this pattern. Seemingly arbitrary montage, which the storyteller does not care to justify, hardly ever occurs in these works; different localities are linked together by embedding (a scene outside a building, involving a great many characters, is followed by a scene of intimacy inside the building, or vice versa), by a forward movement (the narrator follows the steps of a traveller), or by the successive presentation of simultaneous events (two characters say good-bye to one another, and the narrator follows one of them and later returns to the other).

This linear arrangement is often thrown into relief by a structuring principle based upon the distinction between foreground and background, mentioned above. The rhythm of narrating events in the background is fast, whereas the events of the foreground are related either in a durative mood or at a slow pace. In many cases, the central part of the action does not cover more than a relatively short period—two or three years—, but it contains specific indications of when and where. "Eine kurze Spanne Zeit [. . .]. Und doch, was war alles seitdem geschehen!" These words from Effi's indirect interior monologue[56] are symptomatic: the underlying idea is that significant events are clearly distinguishable from the usual state of things, which appears to be almost timeless, since it shows people playing games with rules that are taken for granted by the members of the community and thus obliterate chance for the participants.

A further emphasis was given to dimensionality by the introduction of historical figures. In most novels they belong

[56] Fontane, p. 191.

to the background. Whether the gap is considerable between the period in which the narrated events take place and the story-teller's own period – as in Kemény's *Özvegy és leánya* –, or less wide – as in *La Vieille Fille*, *Vanity Fair*, Война и мир, or *Effi Briest* –, not to mention cases in which the two overlap – as in *He Knew He Was Right*, started in 1867 and written about events taking place in the same year –, the guiding intention is always to create the impression that private life, even patriarchal intimacy is closely related to history.

Because of its relative lack of complexity, *La Vieille Fille* can be regarded as a text showing the most general rules in the use of chronotopes which are observable in Realist fiction. The first words refer to historical time and are followed by a longer passage in the durative mood. Next, time is arrested by a minute description, which is later replaced by another portrayal of habitual actions, and then gradually transformed into a characterization. It is only after such a careful preparation that individual scenes are presented, separated from each other by shorter durative passages and/or by the narrator's comments bringing the action to a virtual standstill. The closure is anticipated by a return to the durative, and the end of the novel is cast in the present of the narrator and the narratee.

The final sentences are in fact a manifestation of what Jakobson called the phatic function of language. This seems to be an almost indispensable ingredient of Realism. While relating the story, the narrator also carries on a dialogue with the narratee. Prime among his functions is that of a generalizing observer, but he also orders the sequence of events and orients the narratee in time and space. If his main intention is to convey information, he might speak in the first person and address the narratee in the second, but from time to time he will resort to the first person plural, whenever he wants to create a sense of community. Both the allusions to historical figures and intertextuality may indicate what kind of narratee the story-teller has in mind: he draws upon a tradition he shares with his audience. These factors also serve credibility, together with

topical, anecdotal allusions and proverbs indicating common sense, which forms the basis of all the value-judgements made by the narrator with the intention that they be accepted.

If I can draw any conclusion from these tentative remarks, I must put great emphasis on the communication between narrator and narratee. Instead of associating it with anti-Romanticism, the rejection of the fantastic, the transparence of the signifier, the dominance of the referential speech act, a reluctance to present the consciousness of the characters, the absence of narratorial interference, or the omniscience of the story-teller, I would like to highlight chronotopes and the phatic use of language as terms crucial for a hypothetical definition of Realism. In my interpretation the most important distinguishing features of this literary trend, important in 19th century fiction, are the distinctions between background and foreground, durative and singulative, open and closed space, and a language game played by the narrator and the narratee. This game is based on the tacit acceptance of certain communal beliefs which guarantee the credibility of the story-telling and the reliability of the narrator's value-judgements, two conditions without which no Realism is possible.