

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



Special Issue – Is There Truth Through Fiction?

The Question of Literary Realism. Adorno and the Form of the Novel

Author

MARIO FARINA

Affiliation

UNIVERSITÀ DI FIRENZE AND
UNIVERSITÀ DEL PIEMONTE
ORIENTALE

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to investigate the notion of literary realism both in the contemporary debate and in aesthetic reflections of the twentieth century. What I intend to show, in fact, is the possibility to exploit some conceptual tools developed during the last century in the context of German literary aesthetics in order to give an answer to a set of problems closely connected to the contemporary discussion. To this aim, I intend to present Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno's notion of 'literary realism' as a possible solution to some problematic refrains in the philosophical investigation of literature. My argument is here divided in three steps: first, I'll sketch out the basic lines of the historical debate about realism in novels; second, I'll outline Adorno's notion of realism, in order to discern it from Lukács' elaboration of the notion; third, I'll try to show to what extent Adorno's definition could provide an answer to recurring issues in current debates.

La *Cousine Bette*, par exemple, est simplement le procès-verbal de l'expérience, que le romancier répète sous les yeux du public.

INTRODUCTION

Despite what the title of this paper might suggest, it is not my intention to investigate why literature, as a determinate artistic form, constantly raises the issue of realism; on the contrary, I assume as a matter of fact that a discussion about realism is always implied by any attempt to philosophically investigate literature. No one asks whether Manet's *The Luncheon on the Grass* is true, or real, in any sense; conversely, since the beginning of the history of philosophy, literature has been constantly challenged precisely in relation to its ability, or rather inability, to express, depict, imitate reality and truth.¹ The realistic quality of a narrative piece, so it seems, is admittedly something different from the realism of a painting, a statue or a musical composition. In fact, in current debates, narrative is often defined as 'fiction', that is by a word belonging to the semantic area of 'reality'. On this ground, Walton for example investigates the reasons behind *Fearing Fictions*, by reminding us of the differences between the quivering in front of a fictional piece and our normal beliefs in the existence of fictional entities.² Accordingly, contemporary debate intends, broadly speaking, the realistic quality of literature in a general cognitive sense: 'it might be thought that the prominence of *fiction* in imaginative literature makes the truth issue easy to solve, for how could something fictional or made up aspire to be truth?'³ It is clear, then, that when we discuss the reality of a narrative piece, we mainly still follow the line traced by the old Aristotelian quarrel concerning verisimilitude and imitation.

What I suggest, however, is to focus on a determinate literary form, whose basic structure naturally calls into question the problem of realism, that is the form of the novel. In this context, my purpose is to provide a notion of the novel – in its relationship with reality and realism – which is able to theoretically justify the fact that several narrative genres with different claims toward reality (e.g., realistic fiction, fantasy, sci-fi, non-fiction) are actually included by critics and public in the same literary category: that of the novel. With this approach, I intend to show the possibility to investigate literature based on a wider and not necessarily cognitive notion of reality as truth, in the sense of the classical *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. By trying to wriggle out of the polarity cognitivists versus anti-cognitivists, whose purpose is to define the status of propositional truth in literary sentences,⁴ the aim of this paper is notably to present Adorno's notion of 'literary realism' as a viable solution to some problematic refrains in the philosophical investigation of literature. To this aim, I'll divide my argument in three steps. First of all, I'll sketch out the basic lines of the historical debate about realism in novels; secondly, I'll outline Adorno's notion of realism; thirdly, I'll try to show to what extent Adorno's definition could provide an answer to recurring issues in current debates.

I. THE HISTORICAL DEBATE

Since its appearance, the literary notion of the novel has been forced to face the question of realism. According to what is conventionally accepted, the birth of the novel, or better the birth of the novel as a consciously defined literary genre, coincides with the European (especially English) novel of the 18th century. I specify ‘as a self-conscious defined literary genre’ because, from a modern point of view, several literary products of ancient times can be described as novels. In this sense, every national poem (e.g. the *Genji monogatari* in Japan, *The Arabian Nights*, Homer’s poems, and so on) could be defined as novels.⁵ This is, say in passing, exactly the reason why Lukács sees a direct continuity between epos and novel. According to Lukács, the novel is the modern declination of ancient epic poetry.⁶ Based on its origin, one might claim that the novel starts off as a form of realistic description of the bourgeois life and world, as it is the case for Richardson’s *Pamela*. Nevertheless, the query about the realistic quality of the novel never stops to torment writers, literary critics and scholars in general.

Already at the confluence of 18th and 19th Century, in fact, novelists began to trouble the linear realism of the novel, as shown by Laurence Sterne, by the German Romanticism or by French authors such as de Maistre in his *Voyage autour de ma chambre*. The literary swinging between realism and anti-realism became however searing and explicit in the first part of the 20th century, when the so-called Brecht-Lukács-debate divided the literary scene into partisans of the realistic reproduction of reality (Lukács’ side) and advocates of the expressionistic deformation of human relations (Brecht and Benjamin, among others).⁷ This was, sure enough, some sort of historical reenactment of the basic lines of the quarrel between Enlightenment and Romanticism, showcasing the conflict between the harmonic exteriority of the beautiful form and the sublime interiority of the tormented subject.

One could still wonder, though, why it is the case that, when it comes to the novel, the problem of realism seems to be much more urgent than in any other literary forms. According to a traditional philosophical account, poetic lyric consists indeed in the expression of the subject’s emotions and feelings in the form of a plastic linguistic structure.⁸ If we consider for example Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 116*, it does not raise any realistic question. Speaking about love, says Shakespeare:

[...] Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand’ring bark,
Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.

In reading these verses, nobody wonders about the existence of the tempest or of the ‘ever-fixed mark’; one simply enjoys the literary image metaphorically presented to one’s imagination. A lyric, as a plastic exposition of the author’s feeling, does not consist in a report of facts; it might well take the external structure of a report, but in this case, typically a modernist or postmodernist approach, it becomes a sort of critique of the traditional lyric form; it (metaphorically) sometimes expresses the impossibility of a traditional plastic – enjoyable – metaphorical expression; it sometimes stresses the autonomous power of words to communicate meaning, even in the report of an everyday life event. Similarly, a dramatic piece (or nowadays a movie) equally eludes the general question of reality: I watch the scene and I do not ask, for example, if Prospero really lives on an enchanted island. I see the island, I see the duke of Milan and I see his daughter. I immediately accept the fictional pact. In poetry and theatre, the question of realism concerns only the style of the product, the trend followed by the author. In this sense, Ferdinand Freiligrath, Georg Herweg and Heinrich Heine belong to the German realistic movement called Vormärz, while André Breton, among others, supported a non-realistic idea of poetry. Very differently, the novel, as literary form, is intrinsically tied to the question of its realism. A novel is, in essence, the voice of a subject whose literary activity consists in telling a sequence of facts. On this ground, Lukács can formally distinguish the novel genre from that of drama: ‘The character created by drama [...] is the intelligible “I” of man, the character created by the epic is the empirical “I”’. In this respect, it is also worth remarking that the presence of an ‘epic-I’, that is to say of a narrator, is precisely what defines the novel as the modern substitution of the ancient mythical epic:

The epic and the novel, these two major forms of great epic literature, differ from one another not by their authors’ fundamental intentions but by the given historico-philosophical realities with which the authors were confronted. The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given.⁹

Resulting from the formal determination termed by Szondi ‘epic-I’,¹⁰ the core literary unity of the novel amounts to telling stories in the form of facts. The novel can be written in first or third person, the narrator can be part of the story as in Proust’s *Recherche* or in epistolary novels, or it can be some sort of neutral voice as the omniscient narrator of Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks*. At any rate, its writing is inspired by the ideal of storytelling and the fairy-tale sentence ‘once upon a time’ is, in a way, the paradigmatic incipit of every novel. As the novel tells stories and reports facts, it implies questions about the truthfulness of those facts. One can object here that also the dramatic form can be seen as an evocation of past events, for example in Greek tragedy (as representation of the mythical age) or in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. An important difference, however, is that during dramatic

representations the audience partakes in something that is absolutely real, visible in front of one's eyes, and the relation with the reality of the story is clearly mediated by the presentation of staged actions.

According to well-established accounts,¹¹ the literary form of the novel comes historically to the fore in the form of fictional story-telling presented as true events.¹² This definition is often employed, within established frameworks, to explain why a text such as, for instance, Gibbon's *The History of Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is not a novel. Due to its high-level literary quality and its refined linguistic structure, such a text can be certainly taken as an example of a non-fictional work of art,¹³ but since its aim is to inform about true facts, it can never be an example of a novel. As a practice of telling fictional events in the form of true facts, the novel voices what looks like reality while the narrator makes appeal to self-declared authority:

Among other public buildings in a certain town, which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning, and to which I will assign no fictitious name, there is one anciently common to most towns, great or small, to wit, a workhouse.¹⁴

Or:

I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull.¹⁵

Along the same line, also more contemporary novels provide good examples:

He speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful.¹⁶

A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now.¹⁷

Not surprisingly, then, the form of the novel never stops to bring into play the issue of realism. Traditionally this has been framed within the vocabulary and parameters of the long-lasting *querelle* concerning imitation and verisimilitude, following in the steps of Aristotle's theorisation of the relationship between reality and poetry.¹⁸ The element of verisimilitude, for instance, still plays a major role, even when literary realism is clearly differentiated from a 'truth-telling conception of literature'. Lamarque and Olsen notably claim that 'any special "positive relation" which the realist novel is supposed to hold to something outside literature ("social reality") is better accounted for in non-referential terms, perhaps similarity or verisimilitude'.¹⁹ As a result, the contemporary discussion concerning realism mainly lingers on the literary work's ability to in some way reproduce reality without being at the same time a matter of fact. Literature can be as close as possible to the world of

things, but it is not in turn a thing (apart from its being printed on a physical object). This approach would maintain, roughly speaking that the question of realism is a question about the possibility of literature to reproduce reality while remaining at the same time ‘literature’.

As we have already partly seen, a well-established discussion exists about the artistic quality of books concerning history (like Gibbon’s, but also like Tacitus’s *Histories*), science (e.g. *The Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* of Galileo), or even philosophy (e.g. Plato’s dialogues and the *Confessions* of Augustine of Hippo). Nothing prevents, however, from taking these works, written centuries ago with an aspiration to truth (historical truth, astronomical truth, metaphysical and religious truth), as good examples of literature. More problematic according to accepted definitions is, instead, to take as novels books that have been written with the precise purpose of reproducing real facts. With this description, I mean all those literary products that fall into the general category of non-fiction: generally speaking, reportage, non-fiction novel, and UNO (Unidentified Narrative Objects).²⁰ This kind of product decisively differs from what we have seen as one of the basic features of the novel. Traditionally understood, novels tell, in fact, fictional facts in the form of real events; however, things appear nowadays less simple than that. After century-long historical sedimentation of this narrative-reality relation, non-fiction now tells real events but in the form of fictional facts told as real events.

It is then legitimate to wonder to what extent Emmanuel Carrère’s books can still be considered novels, since the author admittedly contents himself with re-telling real events. To what extent, then, is Capote’s *In Cold Blood* a novelist’s product since it is written as a journalistic reportage? It is clear to me that, within the framework of verisimilitude and imitation, this kind of queries leads necessarily to a never-ending discussion. I therefore avoid trying to understand whether a single proposition, a set of propositions or even a system of propositions included in a narrative product do or do not refer to something like the external reality (in the sense of Lamarque and Olsen’s critique of Martin);²¹ notably because, if we believe the correspondence between fiction and the world should determine the reality of the novel, there is always room for questioning the honesty of the observer: was the author a sufficiently careful observer? Along this path, we clearly end up in a world with no real or realistic novels.

A different framing of the matter is indeed required if the aim is to be able to place something like Saviano’s reportage and Pynchon’s virtuosity together under the same literary category, that of the novel. What I suggest here is to pursue a definition of the novel which maintains the reference to its intrinsic realistic dimension, but avoids understanding ‘realism’ in terms of stylistic preference or in terms of a correspondence between sentences and an alleged external world. A broader and more complex notion of realism is required

here. Such a notion, and this is my suggestion, can be found in the dialectical, non-referential, henceforth paradoxical, notion of realism developed by 20th century philosopher Theodor W. Adorno.

II. ADORNO'S REALISM

It might certainly appear unusual to resort to Adorno's aesthetic thought in order to define a literary notion of realism. As is well known, in fact, Adorno engaged in a harsh debate with Lukács' late – and Soviet – notion of realism. Broadly speaking, he rejected the idea that 'realism' consists in repeating, replaying, or representing reality as it simply appears in front of our eyes. It might then appear unwise to call upon Adorno's arguments in order to justify the literary quality of contemporary non-fiction novels, which showcase exactly the repetition of reality Adorno complained about. However, a less superficial understanding of the overall aim of Adorno's criticism of Lukács might well help clarify the matter.

When demolishing Lukács's writings on realism, Adorno's target is mainly their strictly normative theory of realism, along with their dependence on the alleged totalitarian attitude of Soviet politics. With mocking and sometimes unfair tones, Adorno attacks Lukács's late works by claiming that he somehow betrayed his young and engaged spirit, as expressed in *The Theory of the Novel* and in particular in *History and Class Consciousness*. In the essay titled *Extorted Reconciliation*, he says for instance that 'it was probably in *The Destructions of Reason* that the destruction of Lukács' own reason manifested itself most crassly'.²² Adorno's essay was notably published in the occasion of the release for a Western publisher of Lukács' book *Wieder der missverstandenen Realismus (Against Misunderstood Realism, 1958)*, in which the Hungarian critic tries to reconnect the interrupted wire of his thought by going back to the topics and attitude of his first works; Adorno perceives there a 'nostalgia for his early writings'.²³

In spite of Lukács's attempt to replicate his early inspired analysis, Adorno reproaches him his at that point mechanical absorption of socialist realism: 'the conceptual structure to which he sacrificed his intellect is so constricted that it suffocates anything that would like to breathe more freely in it'.²⁴ Adorno ultimately blames Lukács for his somehow unconscious display of the normative and rigid realism imposed to authors and critics by Soviet cultural authorities. It is indeed true that realism was considered as an effective dogma by Soviet literary theory, a dogma that Lukács himself has contributed to conceptually define. Among the most influential ideas in Lukács's aesthetics one finds, for instance, that of 'mirroring', or 'reflection' (in German, *Widerspiegelung*).²⁵ Moving from a materialist interpretation of Hegel's philosophy of art, Lukács understands the artwork as an exhibition, a mirroring, of the social conditions in which it takes pace; given that communist, Soviet, social reality was advertised as featuring the conditions of a finally fulfilled

humanity, roughly speaking, art and literature were expected to simply describe such a real world. This command, however, was not only applied to what was written under the Soviet rule, but clearly also expanded, as some sort of universal normative standard, to the entire history of literature. What Adorno rejects therefore in Lukács's ideas, is exactly this kind of basic assumption when it comes to literature. Soviet social reality – or any other for that matter – does not showcase the achievement of the free human condition, and the mere description of reality is not the way to literarily express the world. On the contrary, what Lukács construes as a peaceful harmony between the individual and the State, between citizen and social order, is nothing but an *Extorted Reconciliation*, as suggested by the title of Adorno's essay:

The postulate of a reality that must be represented without a breach between subject and object and which must be 'reflected' – the term Lukács stubbornly adheres to – for the sake of that lack of a breach: that postulate, which is the supreme criterion of his aesthetics, implies that that reconciliation has been achieved, that society has been set right, that the subject has come into its own and is at home in its world.²⁶

Beyond the surface of Adorno's harsh critique, we can then still recognise the real target of his charge, that is Lukács's depreciation of Beckett's works – as an example of so-called literary formalism – and especially of Kafka, often construed as the antagonist of Thomas Mann's great realism (although Lukács' position on Kafka undergoes anguished changes).²⁷ According to Adorno's interpretation, instead, both Kafka's and Beckett's works (as well as Thomas Mann's), due to the fact that they deserve the qualification of literary masterpieces, are great examples of sharp and disturbing literary 'realism'. In other words, and to be more precise, to the extent that Kafka's and Beckett's works have to be considered literary and novelist artworks, and precisely for this reason, they are realistic in the strongest sense.

According to Adorno's aesthetics, and in line with Hegel's ideas, artistic and therefore literary products, qua artistic, are objects which are able to express reality and, at the same time, and this is the clearest point of divergence from Lukács, to judge its irreconciled form. The work of art can accordingly be described as a 'non-judging judgment',²⁸ that is as a non-predicative product, nevertheless able to judge reality only by means of its mere objective existence. This is the twofold nature of the artwork Adorno maintains uninterruptedly from his early writings to his late works. The work of art is, together, a mirror or reflection of society and a critique of its fundamental tensions. The twofold effect of the artwork stems, moreover, from the notion of autonomy of art, which Adorno originally (and ironically enough) takes exactly from Lukács, who in *The Theory of Novel* writes:

Art, the visionary reality of the world made to our measure, has thus become independent: it is no longer a copy, for all the models have gone; it is a created totality, for the natural unity of the metaphysical spheres has been destroyed forever.²⁹

Adorno, for his part, accepts Lukács's idea of autonomy and independence of art and reshapes it according to a social rather than metaphysical account. In an early essay, written in 1931 under the title *Why is the New Art so Hard to Understand?*, Adorno defines the autonomy of art in the light of its reification, and as result of a socio-economic development that turns every good in commodity. The artwork becomes a product whose laws derive from the product itself, inasmuch as the alienated society, by definition, rejects the artistic formal conciliation.³⁰ Along the same line, in the *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno claims that 'the artwork's autonomy is, indeed, not a priori but the sedimentation of a historical process that constitutes its concept',³¹ which explains why 'art's double character as both autonomous and *fait* social is incessantly reproduced on the level of its autonomy' and, at the same time, 'art's double character – its autonomy and *fait* social – is expressed ever and again in the palpable dependencies and conflicts between the two spheres'.³²

In short, the twofold nature of art is expressed by what we can consider as art's mirroring and criticising of society. Art, in fact, arises from the social contradictions of the real world, it preserves these contradictions, but to the extent that it reshapes reality into an aesthetic form; it then presents real contradictions as artistically reconciled, revealing therefore their being unresolved in the social world. In Adorno's words: 'it embodies something like freedom in the midst of unfreedom'; or better: 'it measures its profundity by whether or not it can, through the reconciliation that its formal law brings to contradictions, emphasise the real lack of reconciliation all the more'.³³

This representation of art defines as well art's relationship with reality and therefore the peculiar notion of realism adopted by Adorno. Realism, in fact, is here the aesthetic quality thanks to which art is in the position to express and judge reality. Lukács's Soviet realism could do without the judging element inasmuch as, according to him, there was nothing to judge. Since Soviet social reality was supposed to be the fulfilment of humanity, it qualified as a world to mimetically express, not to critically judge. On the contrary, Adorno recognises the oppressive character of the Eastern bloc: 'The kitsch of the Soviet bloc says something about the untruth of the political claim that social truth has been achieved there'.³⁴ Precisely based on this idea of the art-reality relationship, a novelist like Kafka can be defined a realist and his masterpieces, *The Trial* for instance, has to be regarded as realistic, as much as Thomas Mann's description of the decline of a bourgeois German family. The realism of literary works amounts then to logic and formal realism, not to referential realism. Realistic is not the superficial composition of the events, but instead the capacity of literature to communicate the actual alienation of

the real world. Adorno defines accordingly Kafka's prose in terms of *déjà vu*: 'Each sentence says "interpret me", and none will permit it. Each compels: the reaction, "that's the way it is", and with it the question, "where have I seen that before?"; the *déjà vu* is declared permanent.'³⁵ As a result, the Kafkian prose has the ability to recall the real world and to represent it in front of the reader, not as the word superficially is, but as it is in its core and constitutive tensions. Deep inter-connections pertaining to the reality of the social world are then revealed by Kafka, thanks precisely to the distortion of the real surface: 'His attitude towards expressionist painting is similar to that of Utrillo to the picture postcards which are supposed to have served as the models for his frosty streets.'³⁶ The apparently insignificant details of reality compose, in Kafka's world, a sort of fragmented picture in which social tensions and the social oppression of subjectivity reveals themselves literally (both, as a literary piece and word for word):

The attitude that Kafka assumes towards dreams should be the reader's towards Kafka. He should dwell on the incommensurable, opaque details, the blind spots. The fact that Leni's fingers are connected by a web, or that the executioners resemble tenors, is more important than the Excursus on the law.³⁷

Literary realism is therefore an immanent feature of the novel itself, even of those novels devoted to a surrealist description of reality. Reality penetrates the form of the novel at a very intimate level, shaping how the prose relates to the world. The voice of the narrator, in fact, imposes a commitment toward reality, but in the world of late capitalism, made of disenchanted relations, of fragmented and damaged life, that voice needs to elaborate new strategies in order to express reality. As Adorno writes in the essay on *The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel*: 'Today that position is marked by a paradox: it is no longer possible to tell a story, but the form of the novel requires narration';³⁸ and as he states in the same text: 'The more strictly the novel adheres to realism in external things, to the gesture that says "this is how it was," the more every word becomes a mere "as if," and the greater becomes the contradiction between this claim and the fact that it was not so.'³⁹

On these premises, the realism of the novel is far from being a normative stance, or a precept, externally imposed on the author. Realism is not just a stylistic choice, but rather the condition of the novel itself, even when it takes the form of a rebellion against the surface of reality. Realistic is the suffering of the subject in the world dominated by economic exchange, whose ultimate attempt to revolt can be seen (according to Adorno) in Joyce's 'rebellion against discursive language'.⁴⁰ Realistic, in this sense, is the way in which Kafka describes the Statue of Liberty with a sword in her hand ('The arm with the sword now reached aloft, and about her figure blew the free

winds') instead of a torch as to represent the threat of economic freedom in the alienated world; realistic is the way in which the form of the dream can describe the inner core of real experience in the world:

Because everything that does not resemble the dream and its pre-logical logic is excluded, the dream itself is excluded. It is not the horrible which shocks, but its self-evidence. No sooner has the surveyor driven the bothersome assistants from his room in the inn than they climb back through the window without the novel stopping for one word more than required to communicate the event.⁴¹

III. THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Now, if we go back to our opening question, that is the query about the status of literary realism in the context of non-fiction novels, we can observe a structural change in the core of the problem itself. At first sight, in fact, the question of realism has been equated to the question of verisimilitude. Peter Lamarque, for example, defines the notion of realism as 'the idea that literary works should "mirror" reality'.⁴² Analogously, Lamarque establishes the relation between literature and truth based on such an idea of realism:

works of fiction can make references to people and objects in the real world; they often have a real-world setting (place and historical period); in the realistic genres they are constrained by principles of verisimilitude [...]; works of fiction can offer generalisations about human nature.⁴³

This kind of notion of realism, however, conceives literary works basically in terms of linguistic structures, whose logic, ontology and referential dimension face the same problem of any other written text, or even non-written text. Issues such as the correlation between Shakespeare's Verona and the real Venetian city are, indeed, typical issues of philosophy of language, in the terms of Frege's distinction of sense and meaning or Putnam's thought experiments about mental meanings.⁴⁴ Even in Lamarque and Olsen's solution, which eludes the problem of the analogy of literary and ordinary texts by a normative and 'Wittgensteinian' comprehension of the former,⁴⁵ the question of reality emerges as the adequacy of text and external world, that is in a non-literary and unlikely solvable way. How can the issue of non-fiction literary products be addressed, instead? On what ground could one claim that they belong to a fictional genre such as that of novels?

Clearly, in the light of Adorno's conceptual apparatus, the issue of realism undergoes a structural shift. It is not the normative command to 'mirror' reality that identifies a realistic stance, not the possibility to reproduce human experience, emotions or relations, but instead the literary efficacy to express

reality's contradictions in an aesthetic and therefore reconciled – that is, enjoyable – form. Clearly, this definition does not exclude the experience of dissonance, ugliness or sublime. I intend aesthetic reconciliation, here, as the possibility to enjoy the form, not in the terms of harmony and balance, as in a classicist stance. I take the reconciliation of the aesthetic enjoyable form in the same sense in which even the most disturbing artistic experience (for example that of Marina Abramovic's performances) is perceived as a successful work.⁴⁶ It is not the verifiable existence of the Martello Tower in Sandycove what makes Joyce's *Ulysses* realistic, but rather the way in which the objects of the real world, twisted by consciousness activity, impose their power on the subject, forcing out the stream of consciousness and showing the powerlessness of the subject against objectivity. In the thirteenth episode of the book, right at the apex of the sacrilegious but poetic parallelism between a church mass and Bloom's voyeurism, an insignificant object from the market, that is to say a mere commodity, interrupts the flow, and precisely as commodity diverts the stream:

she never made a bigger mistake in all her life because Gerty could see without looking that he never took his eyes off of her and then Canon O'Hanlon handed the thurible back to Father Conroy and knelt down looking up at the Blessed Sacrament and the choir began to sing *Tantum ergo* and she just swung her foot in and out in time as the music rose and fell to the *Tantum ergo cramen tum*. Three and eleven she paid for those stockings in Sparrow's of George's street on the Tuesday, no the Monday before Easter and there wasn't a brack on them.⁴⁷

Clearly, based on this idea, realism is not a matter of textual efficacy in describing reality, nor it pertains to the critic's ability to discover parallelisms between the world and the narrative; realism is rather an artistic reaction to social reality conveyed for instance in a novel.

However, one could still wonder whether this approach entails the rejection of the ordinary realistic stance in literature, as Adorno in his charge against Lukács sometimes seems to suggest. It is true, for instance, that the unconditional praise of Kafka, even in the most astonishing passages, is often coupled with a critique of realistic descriptions. The only real 'realism', Adorno seems to say, consists in the distortion of reality: 'Again and again, the space-time continuum of 'empirical realism' is exploded through small acts of sabotage, like perspective in contemporary painting; as, for instance when the land-surveyor, wandering about, is surprised by nightfall which comes much too soon.'⁴⁸ According to this kind of suggestions, it seems that only in the distortion of reality the novel matches realism; one would then argue that the accurate description of the external world should be banished from the realm of novel. At variance with *prima facie* impressions, I would instead

argue that not only Adorno's definition of realism accepts non-fiction – hence 'traditional' realistic products – as complying to realistic parameters, but it also supports the inclusion within its framework of extreme realistic products, such as contemporary novels.⁴⁹ Adorno is here more an argumentative inspiration than a direct source to be reproduced. This is especially so when it comes to adapt his contribution to current debates. In this respect, once we avoid approaching it as a philosophical dogma, Adorno's charge against literary realism in the fifties does not force us to restate nowadays the same negative evaluation.

One should be notably aware that Adorno's critique of realism was pursued against the backdrop of the modernist literary movement, of avant-garde experimentalism, of the expressionistic distortion of reality; one might then want to take it as an answer to this kind of historically-determined cultural problems. Kafka's, Beckett's and Joyce's fragmented prose as well as their hermetic stance against full comprehensibility derive from the disorientation feeling experienced by the subject in the first decades of 'late capitalism', that is to say almost one hundred years ago. However, the reference to Adorno allows us, more fruitfully, to underline here the limits of realism taken as an abstract norm, as a normative command, imposed on literature to the aim of faithfully describing reality. Accordingly, by acknowledging how the realistic nature of the novel can survive even through the distortion of reality, realistic elements can be found nowadays in all literary products which are able to variedly absorb reality.

After the experience of the postmodern novel, in fact, literature lays claim again on a realistic style. Especially American postmodern novels between the seventies and nineties highlight, in this sense, that the obscure and oppressive feeling that the subject perceives in the world can be conveyed not only through a linguistic distortion of reality, but also through a crystal-clear description of it. As Don DeLillo shows, there is an almost imperceptible and surely indefinable *White Noise* in reality's surface, but this noise can be vaguely heard only in the scientific vivisection of every single atom of reality. What James Wood defined as 'hysterical realism',⁵⁰ is, in fact, nothing but a deep immersion in reality. In this immersion the subject finally discovers the *Underworld*, in DeLillo's view, that is the constant element which is able to hold together the entire cold war history: a baseball ball, a mere offcut of consumption economy, an outcome of the production chain, identical to any other ball, whose significance originates from its having (maybe) been part of a great entertainment show, precisely during the first Soviet nuclear test. The surface of the world must be obsessively described in order to see in its structure the historical reality:

I was suddenly aware of the dense environmental texture. The automatic doors opened and closed, breathing abruptly. Colors and odors seemed sharper. The sound of gliding feet emerged from

a dozen other noises, from the sublittoral drone of maintenance systems, from the rustle of newsprint as shoppers scanned their horoscopes in the tabloids up front, from the whispers of elderly women with talcumed faces, from the steady rattle of cars going over a loose manhole cover just outside the entrance. Gliding feet. I heard them clearly, a sad numb shuffle in every aisle.⁵¹

On this ground, nowadays ‘realism’ could mean once again verisimilitude. A verisimilitude however that allows reality to express all its contradictions; a verisimilitude able to see in superficial happiness the misery of the world, and that in the overall depression and addiction reveals at the same time reality as an incredible *Infinite Jest* (1996), as Wallace would put it.

What I believe to be particularly relevant in Adorno’s position is finally its efficacy in defining ‘realism’ as a general quality of a successful literary product, both when it comes to the description of the world and to its distortion. Realism, in other words, does no longer pertain to a simple subjective attitude, but rather to the effective artistic quality of the novel. While relying on Adorno’s argument, my intention was to show how difficult and articulated the question of realism in the novel actually is. Realism, in an artistic and literary sense, cannot be conceived as a norm, or ideal and abstract criterion. On the contrary, the literary capacity to express and reveal the deepest structure of reality has changed throughout history. The need for realism in contemporary literature can then be seen, I suggest, as the result of all the postmodern fragmentary descriptions expressed through novels and, ultimately as the exposition of an overabundant, that is to say not homogeneously comprehensible reality. Accordingly, not the surrealist distortion of the world, nor the expressionistic display of the subject’s suffering, in other words, not the modernist questioning of the subject-object relation is what nowadays judges and expresses reality; this task is instead entrusted to the obsessive description of the world, through an incessant journalistic reportage style, to the point of seeing literature turning ‘fiction’ into ‘non-fiction’.

Non-fictional novels, in this sense, can be taken as a punctual historical outcome of the development of realism in literature. As previously mentioned, Carrère’s and Saviano’s works, good examples of currently acclaimed novels in contemporary literary criticism, might seem to share absolutely nothing with the previous modernist literary trends, which used to entrust the expression of reality to the most extreme distortion of reality. On the contrary, what I’ve tried to show is that, underneath the surface of ideological conflict, in artistic writing, realism cannot be seen as a normative stylistic stance which is sometimes fulfilled, sometimes missed. At some point in history, the realistic expression of reality might well require the modernist distortion of its surface. At some other point in history, for instance nowadays, after that the unexpected triviality of the underworld has been exposed by post-modern literature and after that reality has been exposed as an empty jest, the realistic

expression of reality might instead come to the fore in the form of an obsessive and journalistic description of its core and no longer hidden essence.

mario.farina@gmail.com

NOTES

1. See the famous example in Plato, *Republic*, 386a-408e (Plato 2000, 71-100).
2. Walton 1978.
3. Lamarque 2009, 221.
4. For a summary of the recent debate on the cognitive value of literature, see Mikkonen 2013, 9-12.
5. See, for example, the "Introduction" of Moore 2010.
6. Lukács 1971, in particular p. 56.
7. Bela Kiralyfalvi underlines the fact that 'realism' in the Brecht-Lukács-debate is not a matter of style, or trend, but instead a methodological problem; see Kiralyfalvi 1985, 340-341.
8. See, for example, the German classical tradition, in particular: 'Ideas, intuitions, feelings are the specific forms in which every subject-matter is apprehended and presented by poetry, so that, since the sensuous side of the communication always has only a subordinate part on to play, these forms provide the proper material which the poet has to treat artistically' (Hegel 1975, 964).
9. Lukács 1971, 47 and 56.
10. Szondi 1987, 9.
11. On the everlasting ambiguity of the novel between realistic form and fictional contents, see Goody 2006, 20-26.
12. Lamarque and Olsen say something similar when they assert that 'since the very beginning of the novel, novelists have been concerned that their stories should be read with the same seriousness as history' (Lamarque and Olsen 1994, 289).
13. See Mikkonen 2013, 3, who supports his theory through Warner's arguments Warner 1999, 48-49.
14. Dickens 1994, 3.
15. Defoe 2007, 3.
16. DeLillo 1997, 11.
17. Pynchon 1973, 3.
18. About tragedy, Aristotle says: 'it offers verisimilitude when read no less than when performed' (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1462a 19-21 (Aristotle 2013, 55)), on the problem of verisimilitude, see in general: *Poetics*, 1451a 38 and 1451b (Aristotle 2013, 37 and 27-29).
19. Lamarque and Olsen 1994, 315.
20. UNO is a literary category particularly connected to the so called New Italian Epic, a literary wave that comprehends authors like Roberto Saviano (*Gomorra*) and the Wu Ming Foundation (a literary collective that produces metahistorical fiction).
21. See Lamarque and Olsen 1994, 292-296 in response to Martin 1982, 225-233.
22. Adorno 1991, 217.
23. Adorno 1991, 218.

24. Adorno 1991, 217.
25. See Lukács 1963, 52-55.
26. Adorno 1991, 240.
27. 'If we follow the development of such major realists as for example Anatole France or Thomas Mann, it is instructive to observe how the uneven and contradictory process of developing consciousness of this spontaneous rebellion against capitalism emerges from the necessities of literary portrayal itself' (Lukács 1981, 149-150). In the collection of essays at which Adorno's critique is aimed, Lukács presented the alternative between *Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann?* (Lukács 1963, 47).
28. Adorno 2002, 20.
29. Lukács 1971, 37.
30. Adorno 1997, 824-831.
31. Adorno 2002, 17.
32. Adorno 2002, 5 and 229.
33. Adorno 1992, 248 and 249.
34. Adorno 2002, 349-350.
35. Adorno 1981, 245.
36. Adorno 1981, 263.
37. Adorno 1981, 247.
38. Adorno 1991, 30.
39. Adorno 1991, 33.
40. Adorno 1991, 31.
41. Adorno 1981, 247.
42. Lamarque 2009, 42.
43. Lamarque 2009, 221.
44. See the famous thought experiment about Twin Earth in the essay *The Meaning of 'Meaning'* (Putnam 1975, in particular 139-142).
45. See Lamarque 2009, 132-137. About literature and truth, see also Olsen 1985, 72-81.
46. See Adorno's definition: 'The truth of artworks depends on whether they succeed at absorbing into their immanent necessity what is not identical with the concept, what is according to that concept accidental.' (Adorno 2002, 101).
47. Joyce 2000, 468.
48. Adorno 1981, 260-261.
49. To be clear, when I use the term 'demonstration', I mean a critical deduction of a cultural and historical phenomenon in the sense of the Hegelian process of art critique.
50. cf. Wood 2000.
51. DeLillo 1995, 169.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund. 1981. *Prisms*. Boston: MIT Press.
- . 1991. *Notes to Literature, 1*. Volume 1. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1992. *Notes to Literature, 2*. Volume 2. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1997. *Musikalische Schriften*. Volume 18 of *Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno Gesammelte Schriften*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

- . 2002. *Aesthetic Theory*. London. London / New York: Continuum.
- Aristotle. 2013. *Poetics*. Oxford / New York: Clarendon.
- Defoe, Daniel. 2007. *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press.
- DeLillo, Don. 1995. *White Noise*. New York: Scribner.
- . 1997. *Underworld*. New York: Viking.
- Dickens, Charles. 1994. *Oliver Twist*. London: Penguin.
- Goody, Jack. 2006. “From Oral to Written: An Anthropological Breakthrough in Storytelling.” In *The Novel 1*, edited by Franco Moretti, Volume 1, 3–36. Princeton / London: Princeton University Press.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 1975. *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Joyce, James. 2000. *Ulysses*. London: Penguin.
- Kiralyfalvi, Bela. 1985. “Georg Lukács or Bertolt Brecht?” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 25:340–348.
- Lamarque, Peter. 2009. *The Philosophy of Literature*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Lamarque, Peter, and Stain Haugom Olsen. 1994. *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Lukács, Georg. 1963. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. London: Merlin.
- . 1971. *The Theory of The Novel*. London: Merlin.
- . 1981. *Essays on Realism*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.
- Martin, Graham D. 1982. “A New Look at Fictional Reference.” *Philosophy* 57:223–236.
- Mikkonen, Jukka. 2013. 2013. *The Cognitive Value of Philosophical Fiction*. London, New York: Bloomsbury.
- Moore, Steve. 2010. *The Novel: An Alternative History. Beginnings to 1600*. New York / London: Continuum.
- Olsen, Stain Haugom. 1985. *The Structure of Literary Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plato. 2000. *The Republic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Putnam, Hilary. 1975. “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’.” *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, pp. 131–193.
- Pynchon, Thomas. 1973. *Gravity’s Rainbow*. New York: Viking.
- Szondi, Peter. 1987. *Theory of Modern Drama*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Walton, Kendall L. 1978. "Fearing Fictions." *Journal of Philosophy* 75:5–27.
- Warner, Martin. 1999. "Literature, Truth and Logic." *Philosophy* 74:480–496.
- Wood, James. 2000. "Human, All Too Inhuman. On the formation of a new genre: hysterical realism." *The New Republic*, july.
- Zola, Émile. 1881. *Le roman expérimental*. Bibliothèque Charpentier. Paris: G. Charpentier.