

GENETIC REALISM

It may seem superfluous to address the question of realism once again, in view of the fact that since the mid-nineteenth century it has in all likelihood been the single most debated topic among literary scholars and artists alike. And yet, this question is perhaps worth revisiting because its far-reaching scope, the large number of possible answers to it, and the contradictory nature of many of these answers—due in part to the polemical tone that has always accompanied the discussion on realism—require a continuous revision of previous conclusions. And all the more so when some of these conclusions suffer—as I have just implied—not only from ambiguities but also from a troubling polysemia that blurs the boundaries of the concept.

Echoing these problems in the wake of, among others, Benedetto Croce and Karl Mannheim, Harry Levin cites, in one of his fundamental books about realism (1974, 87–89), George Moore's somewhat hyperbolic, and for that very reason extremely eloquent, statement, highlighting the far-reaching range of the concept: "There has never been a literary school other than realism." Moore's statement implies that the question of realism goes beyond the scope of a certain literary period or trend, such as the nineteenth-century French and other European schools and their successors up to the present, precisely because it is a constant of all literature (as well as of all other arts).

If the first, historical aspect of realism falls within the purview of literary history, criticism, and comparative studies as disciplines belonging to the science of literature, the second, conceptual aspect falls entirely within the scope of literary

theory, which could well make it the main focus of its interest, in the manner in which Aristotle grounded his *Poetics* in the principle of *mimesis*. In fact, *mimesis* was the classical name of the relationship between literature and reality before it was replaced by the relatively recent term "realism."

A retrospective glance at the numerous past explorations of literary realism reveals that many of the difficulties that we presently encounter in rethinking the topic have perhaps derived from a confusion of its three different facets: realism as a period or school in modern and contemporary literature; realism as a constant feature of all of these schools as well as of their precursors; and lastly, realism as an object of theoretical reflection.

Historical contributions, such as the one by Harry Levin (1974) or the equally familiar one by René Wellek (1961), are the most frequent, and they are certainly necessary, as are the critical studies of a stylistic nature, among which Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1942) stands out. But, by virtue of the necessary interdependence of all the basic disciplines comprising the science of literature, one cannot ignore the purely theoretical aspect that should enable us to define the concepts of realism and *mimesis* in an unambiguous manner. It is true that such theoretical concepts can be reached only by starting from identifiable common elements in concrete texts and literary series; but one cannot chronicle or critically evaluate realistic literature in the absence of a clear theoretical formulation.

We do not lack historical examples of the cavalier way in which the definition of the concept as well as the theoretical framework of literary realism has been treated. Reviewing Auerbach's book in 1954, René Wellek (1954, 304-305) blamed him precisely for his "extreme reluctance to define his terms and to make his suppositions clear from the outset," a flaw resulting from the false belief that a textual analysis with certain historical implications such as Auerbach's could succeed "without a clear theoretical framework." (Recently, Christopher Prendergast [1986, 212] has reiterated the same judgment: "Auerbach's magisterial *Mimesis* is magisterial precisely because for him the concept of 'mimesis' as such was intrinsically non problematic.") According to E. B. Greenwood

(1962, 89), Wellek himself committed a similar error when seven years later, perhaps stimulated by his dissatisfaction with Auerbach's book, he devoted a critical study to "The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship" (Wellek 1961), separating, in Greenwood's words, "the period realism from the perennial realism," ignoring "the fundamental epistemological problem of the relation of art and reality"—that is, the most genuinely theoretical aspect of the realistic-mimetic question—and confining himself to a definition of realism as "the objective representation of the current social reality."

There is also Anna Seghers's interesting request in an epistolary exchange with Georg Lukács between 1938 and 1939 (collected in the latter's *Probleme der Realismus*, 1955, 323–329): "Please define once again what you mean exactly by realism. This request is not gratuitous. In your discussion, all terminology is employed in a very different, and occasionally imprecise way" (Letter of June 28, 1938). Neither would Lukács's response satisfy his correspondent: "To me your letter was nothing but a partial answer" (February 1939). Thus, the old vices that Roman Jakobson had denounced around 1921 in his essay on artistic realism were very much alive in the late thirties (and to some extent still are). Jakobson attributed the inoperativity of the concept to the vague and empty verbiage with which literary research attempted to define it as the artistic trend leaning toward reproducing reality as faithfully as possible and aiming at a maximum of verisimilitude; to the absolute relativism with which the realistic criterion was applied to both innovative and traditional writers; and to the tautological frivolity of conferring this attribute upon certain literatures as a defining feature, in the same way in which one could aphoristically proclaim that "the twenties are an age proper to man" (Jakobson 1921, 98–108).

Precisely this last type of tautological argument, applied to Spanish literature, had provoked a vigorous reaction from Ortega y Gasset in 1912, whose challenge to young scholars to enter the lists in favor of dismantling the false notion identifying Spanish literature with realism was seconded by Dámaso Alonso in his well-known essay "Escila y Caribdis," published in 1927. Years later, Ramón Menéndez Pidal considered the

term "extremely imprecise," a phrase that serves as a motto for a study by Fernando Lázaro Carreter, published in 1969 in homage to his by then deceased master and entitled "El realismo como concepto crítico-literario." In this study, Lázaro Carreter asserts that realism "has been given such diverse hues and has been carved with so many faces . . . that by meaning so much it has come to mean almost nothing" (Lázaro Carreter 1969, 125). A few years before Lázaro Carreter, Stefan Morawski (1963, 52) had also denounced its polysemic ambiguity, and a year after, Damian Grant, in a respectable monograph (1970, 1), ventured to call it the most elastic and prodigious of literary terms, suffering from a chronic instability evident from its tendency to accumulate adjectives, of which he listed no less than two dozen.

I share many of Lázaro Carreter's general assumptions and conclusions in the present book, which I see as a continuation of his study as well as a further contribution to a difficult and important debate—a debate that has already provoked wide discussions outside of Spain without having much of an echo among us, so that Carreter could reasonably claim that he attempted to "break the silence, or, if one wishes, to rekindle the flame" (1969, 121). Indeed, although Spanish writers and what Northrop Frye liked to call "public critics" did carry out a debate in the sixties about novelistic realism and neo-realism—social, critical, and so forth—one can find nothing of interest in this regard in the Spanish scholarly world, with the exception of a timid attempt, closely related to Lázaro Carreter's study (cf. Alfonso Rey Álvarez 1970, and Lázaro Carreter 1970). In those days, the very evolution of literary theory (and even that of Spanish narrative and poetic genres), influenced by a formalist approach, as well as the pendular reaction against a very strict poetics identified with formalism, doubly favored the lack of critical interest in realism (and not only in Spain; in Italy, for example, Piero Raffa—1967, 272—discerned in many of his country's artists and intellectuals a deliberate tendency of avoiding the topic or even the term).

For all these reasons, therefore, it does not seem inappropriate to confront the issue of realism again today. Although the difficulties in tackling this issue have not gone away, I

trust that the development of our disciplines in the last two decades will provide us with a critical-theoretical methodology, if not completely new, at least partially modified. In any case, I shall attempt to reexamine the fundamental principle of literary realism from the perspective of contemporary discourse theory, just as Raffa examined it in the sixties from the perspective of a semiology of art, which was then in vogue in Italy and France, but was still far from reaching Spain.

Realism and Mimesis

Raffa himself (1967, 280–281) states that realism understood as a faithful and non-distorted aesthetic reproduction of external phenomena as we perceive them “can be considered a particular version of the old principle of mimesis,” because in the end it represents the continuation of that perennial literary constant by which the art of discourse has never ceased to relate to human and physical reality, albeit in a rather complex and subtle manner, engendering numerous theoretical puzzles. A confusion between the theoretical and historical levels is precisely what caused Jan Bruck (1982, 190) to maintain paradoxically that Aristotelian *mimesis* “has nothing to do with ‘realism,’” for the former is a “general characteristic of all works of art and literature” whereas the latter is a particular mode of representation confined to a certain epoch or school. The scholarly consensus actually runs the opposite way. The very title of Auerbach’s book (*Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*) assumes the common identity of mimesis and realism, and one of the most rigorous contributions to the subject, Stephan Kohl’s *Realismus: Theorie und Geschichte* (1977), establishes a firm line of continuity between classical mimesis and modern realism, from Plato to the “nouveau roman.” M. H. Abrams, in his book on Romantic aesthetics and the critical tradition (1953), also emphasizes the mimetic constant throughout the history of literature.

But what is perhaps of even greater relevance is the first nineteenth-century realists’ acknowledgement of the close kinship between their postulates and those of Platonic-

Aristotelian *mimesis*. George J. Becker's very useful collection of documents on modern literary realism (1963) abounds in such acknowledgments. For example, Louis Edouard Duranty, in his journal called precisely *Réalisme* (published during 1856 and 1857, in the aftermath of the furor that Gustave Courbet's painting exhibit and realist manifesto produced in Paris), stated that the new artistic procedure had always existed and that the only new thing about it was its name (Becker 1963, 97). Around the same time, *The Westminster Review*, which had first introduced the term in English in 1853 with an article on Balzac, published another piece in which G. H. Lewes defined the new school in the same terms that had been used by Aristotle in relation to *mimesis* (Becker 1963, 6). One should, moreover, note that Lewes, when translating the term *mimesis*, prefers at times to use "representation" instead of "imitation," as some of the most recent translators of the *Poetics* do (cf. Mieke Bal, 1982. Also V. Bozal, 1987, and M. I. Spariosu—editor—1984).

Although the modern literary term originates in Aristotle, the real roots of *mimesis* go back to Plato's thought, where it transcends a strictly artistic context, being at the core of his entire idealistic philosophy. This is one more indication of the enormous complexity of the problem of realism, for, apart from the various literary perspectives one can bring to it, there are at least three fundamental aspects of it that will necessarily concern us in the present study. The first is, of course, the philosophical aspect. The very denomination of "realism" has its origins in the old dispute about the universals or archetypal ideas to which Plato granted absolute reality. Consequently, as Book Ten of the *Republic* indicates, for Plato poetic imitation appears to be conditioned by what W. J. Verdenius (1949, 16) calls "his conception of a hierarchical structure of reality." Plato thus presupposes three levels of reality: that of the ideal or archetypal forms, whose ontological validity cannot be questioned; that of the visible objects or phenomena, which are nothing but pale reflections of ideal forms; and a third level composed of images, which would comprise the mimetic arts in general and literature in particular; and these usually take as a model a sensible reality which

in turn is an imperfect copy of a more genuine one. Therefore, a direct literary imitation is located two steps below the essential nature of things, and a truly ambitious art of realism must rise above the always precarious material world in order to approach ideal reality, different from its visual appearance.

Aristotle departs radically from this paradoxical Platonic identification of realism with idealism, as well as from a concept of *mimesis* which refers to the basic relationship between the archetypal (*paradeigmatos eidos*) and the sensible-perceptible (*mimema paradeigmatos*) and which, therefore, goes well beyond the restricted realm of art. Without rejecting the concept of universals, Aristotle does not consider the latter alien to things but, rather, incarnated in and derivable only from them. That is why Mario Bunge (1985, 42) warns of the absurdity of speaking only of *philosophical realism*, for one has to acknowledge from the beginning, as a result of this Platonic-Aristotelian confrontation, a *metaphysical realism* as opposed to a gnoseological one.

The first consequence of this second, Aristotelian realism is that sensible reality does not appear to be an image of anything that transcends it, and that *mimesis* definitely confines itself to the specific realm of art and literature. In this respect, Richard McKeon (1936, 161–162) notes in a major study on literary criticism and the concept of imitation in classical Antiquity: "For Aristotle imitation is not, at one extreme, the imitation of ideas, such as philosophers and the Demiurge indulge in according to Plato. . . . Moreover, for Aristotle imitation is not an imitation of an idea in the mind of the artist; . . . imitation is of particular things; the object of imitation, according to the statement of the *Poetics* . . . is the actions of men." Therefore, as M. H. Abrams (1953, 25) also emphasizes, in Aristotle the word *mimesis* becomes a specific term for the arts "that distinguishes them from everything else in the Universe, liberating them from competition with other human activities" (Abrams 1953, 25; cf. also Boyd 1968, 133). Going against the strictly mimetic principle of the Platonic concept, Aristotle identifies it with a *representation* of reality.

There is a very obvious kinship, then, between the general ontological, epistemological, and philosophical principles

of what Jan Bruck (1982) calls eighteenth- and nineteenth-century "bourgeois" realism (which, as I have already pointed out, Bruck wishes to see as something alien and different from Aristotelian *mimesis*) and Aristotle's concept of art and reality. As a matter of fact, the tradition of rationalism, sensualism, and empiricism—starting with Descartes, Locke, and Berkeley, continuing with Thomas Reid's school of "common sense," and going all the way to nineteenth-century positivism—does not constitute, in this regard, any substantial break with Aristotelian philosophy, for it tends to strengthen the reality of the objects perceptible in themselves, outside the perceiving mind. It is not surprising, therefore, that Ian Watt, in his book on the consolidation of the realistic novel in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English literature, should state that "this literary change was analogous to the rejection of universals and the emphasis on particulars which characterizes philosophic realism. Aristotle might have agreed with Locke's primary assumption [in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. 1, Ch. 2, sect. XV], that it was the senses which 'at first let in particular ideas, and furnish the empty cabinet' of the mind" (1957, 15).

Quite different, however, are the aesthetic consequences of a particular conception of reality and the world, as noted by Max Wundt (Ermatinger 1930, 427–452). So, for example, an artist steeped in Platonism will be a *realist* through the stylized forms, purified from the world of the senses, liberating this world from its imperfections and bringing it closer to the archetypes; whereas an Aristotelian artist will present the visible in an integrative manner, in order to discover an authentic reality in it. That is the distance separating a pastoral novel such as *Diana* from *Lazarillo de Tormes*, or the treatment of a mythological theme by a Renaissance painter, such as Botticelli, from the treatment of the same theme by a Baroque artist, such as Velázquez or Rubens.

Therefore, the philosophical component determines the artistic component, and the second fundamental implication of realism and *mimesis* is precisely an aesthetic one. Some often-quoted definitions of realism consider both components, such as Becker's in his *Documents of Modern Literary*

Realism (1963, 36): "Realism, then, is a formula of art which, conceiving of reality in a certain way, undertakes to present a simulacrum of it on the basis of more or less fixed rules." Becker's discreet caveat concerning the different manners in which the writers who consider themselves realists conceive of the world is expressed in a much stronger form by Raffa (1967, 316) when he warns that "a theory of realism, if it truly wants to escape the limitations of a particular poetics, cannot or should not offer any specific definition of reality."

Consequently, there are different poetics, various formulas and artistic rules that will produce realism, so that, as I have argued from the beginning, I will not identify realism with any specific school or trend, not even with the one that specifically bears its name in the nineteenth century, but rather with this other mimetic constant of art that beholds and reproduces reality creatively. In this regard, one can mention a second aesthetic aspect, proposed by Fernando Lázaro Carreter in the form of a central conclusion of his study: "literary realism is a phenomenon that takes place within a literary series as its dynamic principle, i.e., as an ideal which guides the artists in their quest for novelty, and which always subjects itself to the law of estrangement [in the Russian formalist sense of the term]. This estrangement is one of the multiple conventions that make literature possible and may include a search for unusual angles of observation, a presentation of rare realities—the more "real," the more verifiable—and, of course, an interposition of stylistic variations. The 'ingenuous' perspectives and plain language can effect a high degree of estrangement in contrast to prevailing procedures, if the latter are based upon a clear exhibition of artifice" (1969, 141).

But, in addition to the philosophical and the purely aesthetic aspects, there is a third aspect that largely conditions the theoretical understanding of realism, namely language.

Mimesis and Language

In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M. H. Abrams shows how from the time of the full rediscovery of Aristotle in the Italian

cinquecento until the mid-eighteenth century, the principle of *mimesis* had generally been accepted as a foundation of all art, according to the text of the first chapter of the *Poetics* (1447a 10–21), which does not speak only of what we moderns understand by literature. Thus, Aristotle says:

Epic poetry and Tragedy, Comedy also and Dithyrambic poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation. They differ, however, from one another in three respects,—the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation, being in each case distinct.

For as there are persons who, by conscious art or mere habit, imitate and represent various objects through the medium of color and form, or again by the voice; so in the arts above mentioned, taken as a whole, the imitation is produced by rhythm, language, or "harmony," either singly or combined.

Thus in the music of the flute and of the lyre, "harmony" and rhythm alone are employed; also in other arts, such as that of the shepherd's pipe, which are essentially similar to these. In dancing, rhythm alone is used without "harmony"; for even dancing imitates character, emotion, and action, by rhythmical movement. (tr. S. H. Butcher 1907, 7–8)

But Abrams also points out that in the eighteenth century there were several Aristotelian commentators who paid close attention to the different means of imitation employed by various arts. Consequently, whereas in 1744 James Harris still stated in a "Discourse on Music, Painting and Poesie" that *mimesis* was common to the three arts despite the instrumental differences between them, some years later, Henry Home, Lord Kames, restricted that principle to painting and sculpture. According to him, music and architecture were no longer a "copy of nature," but "productive of originals"; and literature, of which language is the medium of expression, could be considered mimetic only when imitating the sounds and movement of reality.

In 1789, Thomas Twining, also a translator and commentator of the *Poetics*, went even further. Anticipating the modern findings of Saussurean linguistics and Morris's semiotics, Twining proposed that the iconic arts (those that are similar to what they denote) be distinguished from those that signify by mere convention. Hence, pure *mimesis* should be reserved for the arts whose forms display an immediate and obvious likeness to the copied model; namely, painting, sculpture, and drawing. Music is not imitative in any way, and of literature only the dramatic can be considered as such, for it imitates speech with speech, bodies with bodies, light with light, sound with sound, etc. (Abrams 1953, 31–32).

So the problematic of the medium of imitation within the Aristotelian tradition introduces the third basic aspect of the theoretical concept of realism, i.e., the linguistic one. The fundamental importance of this aspect hardly needs to be emphasized, as it points to the very core of literature as a verbal art, so that sooner or later one must always come back to it. The fact that words are, with a few exceptions, purely symbolic rather than iconic signs, and that their ability to signify has no direct relation to what they signify is no sufficient reason to deny the mimetic potential of all the non-dramatic genres; it nevertheless introduces a large number of new elements that cannot be ignored, considerably complicating the process of the mimetic representation of reality that the verbal art *de facto* involves.

Today, we have certainly moved far away from the empirical theory of language in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), according to which words are direct images of reality, of things perceived through the senses, even though Locke's linguistic ideas have remained substantially unchanged until as recently as the early Wittgenstein (1921), for whom language represents a sort of scale map of the whole world. As we read in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (5–6), "die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt" ("the limits of my language mean the limits of my world," 1921, 163). Wittgenstein's early concept of language, no less than Locke's, ultimately suffers from the same "referential fallacy" that Umberto Eco (1975) mentions in his well-known treatise on semiotics.

The distance between a literary realism based on Platonic thought and one based on Aristotelian principles has thus been duplicated by the distance between a linguistic *mimesis* of the Lockean kind and the other linguistic view that discards the idea of words as transparent images, granting them the full power of creating, by themselves, the world of which they speak to us; words have this power because of their inner efficiency and their combinatory skill as "language games," in the manner of the later Wittgenstein, for whom there are no essential meanings anymore, but only relative ones. All of the issues pertaining to language, including that of its relation to reality, have now become one of the main concerns—if not the primary concern—of contemporary philosophy, both in the so-called analytic schools and in the neopositivistic ones.

In sum, the linguistic, aesthetic, and philosophical implications of realism are so numerous that it is almost impossible to deal with all of them in a single study, which would, moreover, have to stray far beyond the realm of literary theory. Nevertheless, I wish to address a specific issue within this vast problematic, in which various philosophical, aesthetic, and linguistic elements come together, namely the apparent contradiction between two basic assumptions that are equally important for a correct understanding of the literary phenomenon and yet seem at first sight to exclude each other. I am referring, on the one hand, to the principle of the autonomy of the literary work and, on the other hand, to the remarkable relation of the literary work to reality—a relation without which literature could not play the role of an authentic social institution that it undoubtedly plays and would most certainly lose the interest that has motivated readers of all times to turn to it again and again.

One of the necessary requirements for understanding in depth the working of a literary text is to consider it in a strictly immanent fashion, according to the fruitful and indispensable legacy of the various formalisms that have marked the development of literary criticism and theory in our century. The verbal work of art is ruled by its own laws, and what affirms its essence as such, its *literariness*, has nothing to do with the referential matter that it may convey to us, but

purely with the articulation of its forms, i.e., with its composition and style. But along with this centripetal drive by which literature gives us an account of its own essential being, the formalists themselves acknowledge, as René Wellek (a staunch defender, since the nineteen forties, of the "intrinsic access" to the work of art) recently indicates, that "literature does refer to reality, says something about the world, and makes us see and know the external world and that of our own and other minds" (Wellek 1982, 30).

It is true that today one need no longer rethink the point of equilibrium between literature and reality, although a not too distant past forced upon the student of literature an unequivocal choice between the notion of autonomous art and that of art as a witness and reflection of reality. As might be expected, both positions gave rise to fallacies that can be called *aesthetic* (or *formal*) and *mimetic* (or *genetic*), respectively; and both of them resulted from a utopian attempt to explain a phenomenon as complex as literature from a single, exclusive standpoint, as if it were not possible to work out a notion of realism on a solid theoretical basis that would transcend such oppositions. As our questions become more complex, so will the conceptual arsenal required for answering them. In attempting to develop an integrative notion of realism, we need not only constantly to interweave aesthetic, linguistic, and philosophical aspects, but also to evaluate each and every factor that intervenes in the complex literary process (i.e., the author, the text, and the reader).

Although my ultimate goal is to reach a balanced understanding of literature as an art form and a sign of reality, I shall first consider the position—of which Damian Grant's study (1970) can be a perfect illustration—that assumes not one, but two critical-literary modes of realism, akin to the antinomies and the oppositions I have just mentioned. The first mode places a special emphasis on the literary work's ability to imitate or reproduce a reality external to it, whereas the second mode shifts its focus from a world that precedes the text to another world, autonomously created within it. This other world results not so much from imitation or correspondence, but from an imaginative creation

that filters the objective materials presumably at the origin of the whole process, subjecting them to a principle of immanent coherence that will make them signify more through an estrangement from, rather than an identification with, factual reality.

In the pages that follow I shall describe these two main theoretical positions that advocate, on the one hand, a "realism of correspondence," also called "conscientious realism" by Grant (1970) and "subject-matter realism" by Göran Sörbom (1966); and, on the other hand, a "realism of coherence," which Grant calls "conscious realism" and Sörbom, "formal realism." Given the basic principle of interdependence among all literary disciplines, I shall certainly resort to concrete textual examples, even though I shall have to limit them severely because of space considerations. The same considerations will play a role in dealing with an issue which I have already mentioned briefly and which also requires a large amount of historical documentation: the conceptual identity and temporal continuity between Aristotelian *mimesis* and modern realism, consecrated in the nineteenth century. Although I cannot explore this issue in detail, I shall frequently refer to the most important past contributions to it, both those focusing on the mimetic principle—for example the work of M. H. Abrams (1953), John D. Boyd (1968), Jan Bruck (1982), Hermann Koller (1954), J. D. Lyons and S. G. Nichols, editors (1982), Richard McKeon (1936), Göran Sörbom (1966), Mihai I. Spărișu, editor (1984), Władysław Tatarkiewicz (1987), J. Tate (1928, 1932), W. F. Trench (1933), and W. J. Verdenius (1949)—and those recording the appearance of the term "realism" in different European languages and the avatars of its technical-literary meaning: E. B. O. Bornecque and P. Cogy (1963), Bernard R. Bowron Jr. (1959), Robert Gorham Davis (1951), H. U. Forest (1926), Henry C. Hatfield (1951), F. W. J. Hemmings, editor (1974), Stephan Kohl (1977), Harry Levin (1963), Renato Poggioli (1951), Wolfgang Preisendanz (1977), Christopher Prendergast (1986), Albert J. Salvan (1951), J. P. Stern (1973), J. L. Styan (1981), A. J. Tieje (1913), Ian Watt (1957), Bernard Weinberg (1937), and René Wellek (1961).

The Concept of Genetic Realism

The first of the two critical-literary modes of realism is based on a principle of transparent correspondence between the literary text and external phenomena (Northrop Frye 1976, 798), being mainly of genetic origin. It has generally tended toward a pure and elemental literalism, and more so in the theoretical-critical descriptions of it than in artistic practice. For, as René Wellek (1961, 223) points out, "in the history of literary criticism the concept of imitation was, whatever its exact meaning in Aristotle may have been, often interpreted as literal copying, as naturalism." Wellek understands "naturalism" as it essentially was: an exacerbation of the postulates of nineteenth-century realism and their articulation in a theoretical system perfectly adjusted to a literary practice that affected a large number of subsequent works as well. This theoretical system, moreover, was clearly linked to the mimetic tradition. For example, reviewing Jane Austen's *Emma* in 1815, Walter Scott defined the novel as the art of copying nature as it is.

Naturalism is nothing but genetic realism, for it assumes the existence of a univocal reality which precedes the text and which is scanned by the author's perceiving consciousness in all its hidden aspects through minute and efficient observation. Its result should be a faithful reproduction of this reality, owing to the transparency or thinness of the literary medium (language) and to the artist's "sincerity." We find this theory of genetic realism structured to the last detail in Zola, although all of its components had already appeared separately throughout the nineteenth century. In "Le roman expérimental," Zola proclaims the starting point that is true reality: "Nous partions bien des fait vrais, qui sont notre base indestructible" (Zola 1971, 66). "Plus de lyrisme," Zola adds in his "Lettre à la jeunesse," "plus des grands mots vides, mais des faits, des documents" (1971, 135). But it is in another essay, "Le naturalisme au théâtre," that Zola introduces the second fundamental factor of genetic realism, the observer, and then links his theory with Aristotle and Boileau—to the latter we owe the well-known lines in *L'Art poétique*: "Rien

n'est beau que le vrai: le vrai seul est aimable;/il doit régner partout, et même dans la fable." Zola claims only to "avoir inventé et lancé un mot nouveau, pour désigner une école littéraire vieille comme le monde" (1971, 139). Here Zola also inserts his famous definition of fiction as "un coin de la nature vu à travers un tempérament" (1971, 140), with the two basic ingredients of a realist work, nature and the subject that perceives it, i.e., a double genetic principle: a) "Le retour à la nature et à l'homme, l'observation directe, l'anatomie exacte, l'acceptation et la peinture de ce qui est" (Zola 1971, 143); and b) "Je suis simplement un observateur qui constate les faits" (1971, 139). In sum, "le sens du réel, c'est de sentir la nature et de la rendre telle qu'elle est" (Zola 1971, 215). Hence Zola's absolute identification of his novelistic job and method with that of an experimental scientist. He propounds geneticism because "la nature suffit"; it is only a matter of "l'accepter telle qu'elle est, sans la modifier ni la rogner en rien; elle est assez belle, assez grande, pour apporter avec elle un commencement, un milieu et un fin" (Zola 1971, 149).

Zola's arguments possess a high theoretical value, summing up most accurately the various ways of understanding mimesis and realism that had immediately preceded him. It is not my intention to outline a history of the theoretical conceptualizations of realism, especially since the Polish aesthetician, Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz (1987) has already accomplished this task. So here I shall simply limit myself to giving a few examples of the genetic view.

In Russian literary criticism, for instance, Vissarion Grigorevich Belinsky advocated, in 1835, a modern *realistic* literature in the sense of a faithful reproduction, rather than creation, of life as it is (Becker 1963, 41-43). In turn, Nikolay Gavrilovich Chernishevsky (acknowledged by Marx and Lenin as a quintessential materialist philosopher), in an 1853 essay attempting to apply Feuerbach's philosophy to major aesthetic issues, maintained that the main goal of the art work was to reproduce what occurs in real life and concerns human beings.

During the early 1850s, the term "realism" as such, as well as in the literary sense that concerns us, began to appear in English journals such as *Fraser's Magazine* and *The*

Westminster Review. (Soon afterward, during the same decade, the first occurrences of the adjective *realista* are documented in Spanish. Cf. Fernando Lázaro Carreter 1969, 122, n. 1.) But as early as 1821, in the *Mercure français du XIXe siècle* (XIII, 6), the word, the concept, and its complete identification with *mimesis* became part of the French language through an anonymous article: "Cette doctrine littéraire qui gagne tous les jours du terrain et qui conduirait à une fidèle imitation non pas des chefs-d'œuvre de l'art mais des originaux que nous offre la nature, pourrait fort bien s'appeler le *réalisme*: ce serait suivant quelques apparences, la littérature dominante du XIXe siècle, la littérature du vrai" (in Elbert B. O. Borgerhoff 1938, 839).

But it is the late 1850s that witness the controversial irruption of genetic realism as a school or an artistic—mainly literary—movement on the French cultural scene. From there it spreads throughout Europe, with the famous "Pavillon du Réalisme" and Courbet's manifesto, with Duranty's journal *Réalisme* and Champfleury's essay of the same title, and finally with the release of *Madame Bovary*, following a court trial.

Champfleury was a fervent champion of "sincerity" as a root of art; according to that principle, he divided writers into two groups, *sinceristes* and *formalistes*, a division that corresponds to the two modes of realism under consideration here. Needless to say, Champfleury regarded the non-genetic or "formal" realists as the more inconsistent of the two. In fact, in addition to the solid evidence of a univocal and unquestionable reality, the guarantee of an authentic realism of the sincere kind lies in the artist's capacity of observation—but not particularly and exclusively in his artistic abilities—and above all in his faithful compliance with the truth—in his sincerity; this is one of the three necessary requirements for creating an authentic work of art, together with a clear expression and the moral truth of the subject matter, as Tolstoy argued in an 1894 article on Maupassant. According to Abrams (1953, 564), moreover, sincerity "became a favorite Victorian test of literary virtue," as George Henry Lewes and Matthew Arnold demonstrated. In sum, "the realist ideal" means, in Becker's

words (1963, 32), "to come as close as possible to observed experience." Such ideas of genetic realism have persisted in both theory and artistic practice up to the present day.

The Goncourt brothers were also loyal champions of genetic realism. For example, in presenting their *Germinie Lacerteux* to the public in 1864, they categorically stated: "Le public aime les romans faux: ce roman est un roman vrai. . . . Il aime les livres qui font semblant d'aller dans le monde: ce livre vient de la rue." Of course, the "truth" that the Goncourt brothers have in mind here is one that complies with what modern semantic logic understands by the "correspondence-theory concept of Truth" (Doležel 1980, 14), and not with D. J. O'Connor's "coherence-theory concept of Truth" (1975), which can be fully applied, however, to non-genetic or formal realism, as we shall presently see.

George J. Becker's useful collection can provide us with numerous other proofs of the remarkable persistence of genetic realism. It is very revealing, for instance, that the famous "Manifeste des cinq contre *La Terre*," which appeared in *Le Figaro* on August 18, 1887, and which has been interpreted as marking the end of the Médan school—i.e., as a reorientation of naturalism toward a less closed aesthetics, more receptive to symbolism—should attack Zola's most recent work for his departure from true reality, his deficient observation of that reality, and, consequently, his replacement of genetic fidelity with some kind of imposture. This confirms Roman Jakobson's and Fernando Lázaro Carreter's observation that virtually any new literary school asserted its identity by proclaiming that its realistic impulse was more genuine and more accurate than that of its predecessors.

Only a few years before the "Manifeste des cinq," two German naturalists, the brothers Heinrich and Julius Hart, in their essay *Für und gegen Zola*, had maintained that the sole task of literature was to reflect all of reality like a mirror or, according to Becker (1963, 254), "in the meaning of Aristotle's *mimesis*, to mirror and reshape it." Becker's paraphrase again illustrates the connection between realism and mimesis; it also appropriates, for realism, the famous trope of the mirror, of obvious genetic import, coined by Saint-Réal and made pop-

ular by the epigraph to Chapter 13 of Stendhal's *Le rouge et le noir* (1831): "Un roman: c'est un miroir qu'on promène le long d'un chemin."

Here I should perhaps note that my term "genetic realism" does not carry any pejorative connotations. It merely describes a textual practice, isolating a theoretical concept to be compared with other such concepts in order to reach a proper understanding of a complex and ineffable phenomenon such as the delicate balance between pure creation and the articulation of reality involved in any literary act. I shall soon have occasion to refine my description of the genetic mode of realist literature, the more vulgar and literalist versions of which cannot be blamed on the genre itself, but on certain obtuse critics and mediocre artists—a feeling equally shared by Harry Levin (1963, 553).

There are, moreover, examples of extraordinary artists, both emulators and critics of Zola's naturalism, who subscribed to a realism that stemmed from their personal confrontation with an observed reality that deserved to be faithfully reproduced, in order to offer their readers a certain truth about nature, the social world, and human beings, entirely opposed to idealistic and romantic humbug. For instance, Leopoldo Alas aspired "to know how to copy the world as it is in its forms and movement; to know how to imitate the likely combination of ordinary accidents; to know how to copy the solidarity in which events, beings, and their works coexist." So the novelist's main talent is "to know how to see and copy" but also, and to no lesser degree, "to know how to construct" (Leopoldo Alas 1982, 142). In turn, Henry James, in one of his most important theoretical texts, "The Art of Fiction" (1884), even as he repeatedly defends the novelist's creative freedom in his controversy with Walter Besant, does not hesitate to affirm: "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life. When it relinquishes this attempt, the same attempt that we see on the canvas of the painter, it will have arrived at a very strange pass" (1884, 46). According to James, "a novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life" (1884, 50); moreover, "you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality" (1884, 52).

James Miller Jr. (1976) analyzes in detail James's views on reality and the novel, so that I do not need to insist on them here. Nothing would be easier, however, than to trace genetic realism in successive links—from Theodore Dreiser to twentieth-century American naturalism, from European neorealism to the "nouveau roman" and "dirty realism"—preferably rising above such anecdotal attitudes as that of Alain Robbe-Grillet, who made a winter trip to Brittany in order to closely observe the seagulls and the ocean waves so that he could later describe them exactly and "sincerely" in *Le voyeur* (cf. Robbe-Grillet 1963, 181–182).

A genetic concept of realism equally informs Auerbach's *Mimesis*, e.g., when he argues for the indubitable mimetic value of Gregory of Tours's Latin prose in his *History of the Franks*, since the bishop, by virtue of his job, "is professionally in contact with all the people and conditions he writes about. . . . From his activity in the pursuit of his duties, he acquires his ability to observe and the desire to write down what he observes" (Auerbach 1953, 92). Later on, in the chapter on Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, which precedes the one on *Don Quijote*, Auerbach seems to support his view that the Spanish literature of the period was more mimetic than the literature of Elizabethan England with a tautological argument that could be summarized as follows: the Spanish reality was more *realistic* than its English counterpart because of a greater participation of the lower classes in the historical process, due to certain favorable political circumstances (1953, 311–312). For Auerbach, realism is "the serious representation of the social reality of that epoch, based on continuous historical movement" (1953, 486), a critical desideratum that is finally fulfilled in nineteenth-century France with Stendhal and Balzac. For example, he comments on Balzac's Letter of October 1834 to Frau von Hanska (specifically on Balzac's remark about his *Etudes de moeurs*: "Ce ne seront pas des faits imaginaires: ce sera ce qui se passe partout"): "What is expressed here is that the source of his invention is not free imagination but real life, as it presents itself everywhere. Now, in respect to this manifold life, steeped in history, mercilessly represented with all its everyday triviality, practical preoccupations