



Jakobson, age twenty-three, summer 1920, Prague

ROMAN JAKOBSON

Language in Literature

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On Realism in Art

Until recently, the history of art, particularly that of literature, has had more in common with causerie than with scholarship. It obeyed all the laws of causerie, skipping blithely from topic to topic, from lyrical effusions on the elegance of forms to anecdotes from the artist's life, from psychological truisms to questions concerning philosophical significance and social environment. It is a gratifying and easy task to chat about life and times using literary work as a basis, just as it is more gratifying and easier to copy from a plaster cast than to draw a living body. In causerie we are slipshod with our terminology; in fact, variations in terms and equivocations so apt to punning often lend considerable charm to the conversation. The history of art has been equally slipshod with respect to scholarly terminology. It has employed the current vocabulary without screening the words critically, without defining them precisely, and without considering the multiplicity of their meanings. For example, historians of literature unconsciously confused the idealism denoting a specific philosophical doctrine with a looser idealism denoting behavior motivated by other than narrow considerations of material gain. Still more hopeless was the web of

confusion surrounding the term "form," brilliantly exposed by Anton Marty in his works on general grammar. It was the term "realism," however, which fared especially badly. The uncritical use of this word, so very elusive in meaning, has had fateful consequences.

What is realism as understood by the theoretician of art? It is an artistic trend which aims at conveying reality as closely as possible and strives for maximum verisimilitude. We call realistic those works which we feel accurately depict life by displaying verisimilitude. Right off we are faced with an ambiguity, namely:

1. *Realism may refer to the aspiration and intent of the author; i.e., a work is understood to be realistic if it is conceived by its author as a display of verisimilitude, as true to life (meaning A).*

2. *A work may be called realistic if I, the person judging it, perceive it as true to life (meaning B).*

In the first case, we are forced to evaluate on an intrinsic basis; in the second case, the reader's individual impression is the decisive criterion. The history of art has hopelessly confused these two interpretations of the term "realism." An objective and irrefutable validity is ascribed to individual, private local points of view. The question as to whether a given work is realistic or not is covertly reduced to the question of what attitude I take toward it. Thus meaning B imperceptibly replaces meaning A.

Classicists, sentimentalists, the romanticists to a certain extent, even the "realists" of the nineteenth century, the modernists to a large degree, and finally the futurists, expressionists, and their like, have more than once steadfastly proclaimed faithfulness to reality, maximum verisimilitude—in other words, realism—as the guiding motto of their artistic program. In the nineteenth century, this motto gave rise to an artistic movement. It was primarily the late copiers of that trend who outlined the currently recognized history of art, in particular, the history of literature. Hence one specific case, one separate artistic movement, was identified as the ultimate manifestation of realism in art and was made the standard by which to measure the degree of realism in preceding and succeeding artistic movements. Thus a new covert identification has occurred, a third meaning of the word "realism" has crept in (meaning C), *one which comprehends the sum total of the features characteristic of one specific artistic current of the nineteenth century.*

In other words, to the literary historians the realistic works of the

last century represent the highest degree of verisimilitude, the maximum faithfulness to life.

Let us now analyze the concept of verisimilitude in art. While in painting and in the other visual arts the illusion of an objective and absolute faithfulness to reality is conceivable, "natural" (in Plato's terminology), verisimilitude in a verbal expression or in a literary description obviously makes no sense whatever. Can the question be raised about a higher degree of verisimilitude of this or that poetic trope? Can one say that one metaphor or metonymy is conventional or, so to say, figurative? The methods of projecting three-dimensional space onto a flat surface are established by convention; the use of color, the abstracting, the simplification, of the object depicted, and the choice of reproducible features are all based on convention. It is necessary to learn the conventional language of painting in order to "see" a picture, just as it is impossible to understand what is said without knowing the language. This conventional, traditional aspect of painting to a great extent conditions the very act of our visual perception. As tradition accumulates, the painted image becomes an ideogram, a formula, to which the object portrayed is linked by contiguity. Recognition becomes instantaneous. We no longer see a picture. The ideogram needs to be deformed. The artist-innovator must impose a new form upon our perceptions, if we are to detect in a given thing those traits which went unnoticed the day before. He may present the object in an unusual perspective; he may violate the rules of composition canonized by his predecessors. Thus Kramskoj, one of the founders of the so-called realist school of Russian painting, recounts in his memoirs his efforts to deform to the utmost the principles of composition as advocated by the Academy. The motivation behind this "disorder" was the desire for a closer approximation of reality. The urge to deform an ideogram usually underlies the Sturm und Drang stage of new artistic currents.

Everyday language uses a number of euphemisms, including polite formulas, circumlocutions, allusions, and stock phrases. However, when we want our speech to be candid, natural, and expressive, we discard the usual polite etiquette and call things by their real names. They have a fresh ring, and we feel that they are "the right words." But as soon as the name has merged with the object it designates, we must, conversely, resort to metaphor, allusion, or allegory if we wish a more expressive term. It will sound more impressive, it will be *more striking*.

To put it in another way, when searching for a word which will revitalize an object, we pick a farfetched word, unusual at least in its given application, a word which is forced into service. Such an unexpected word may, depending on current usage, be either a figurative or a direct reference to the object. Examples of this sort are numerous, particularly in the history of obscene vocabulary. To call the sex act by its own name sounds brazen, but if in certain circles strong language is the rule, a trope or euphemism is more forceful and effective. Such is the verb *utilizirovat'* (to utilize) of the Russian hussar. Foreign words are accordingly more insulting and are readily picked up for such purposes. A Russian may use the absurd epithets *gollandskij* (Dutch) or *moržovýj* (walruslike) as abusive modifiers of an object which has nothing to do with either Holland or walruses; the impact of his swearing is greatly heightened as a result. Instead of the infamous oath involving copulation with the addressee's mother, the Russian peasant prefers the fantastic image of copulating with the addressee's soul—and, for further emphasis, uses the negative parallelism: *tvoju dušu ne mat'* (your soul not your mother).

The same applies to revolutionary realism in literature. The words of yesterday's narrative grow stale; now the item is described by features that were yesterday held to be the least descriptive, the least worth representing, features which were scarcely noticed. "He is fond of dwelling on unessential details" is the classic judgment passed on the innovators by conservative critics of every era. I leave it to the lover of quotations to collect similar judgments pronounced on Puškin, Gogol', Tolstoj, Andrej Belyj, and others by their contemporaries. To the followers of a new movement, a description based on unessential details seems more real than the petrified tradition of their predecessors. But the perception of those of a more conservative persuasion continues to be determined by the old canons; they will accordingly interpret any deformation of these canons by a new movement as a rejection of the principle of verisimilitude, as a deviation from realism. They will therefore uphold the old canons as the only realistic ones. Thus, in discussing meaning *A* of the term "realism" (the artistic intent to render life as it is), we see that the definition leaves room for ambiguity:

*A*₁. The tendency to deform given artistic norms conceived as an approximation of reality.

*A*₂. The conservative tendency to remain within the limits of a given artistic tradition, conceived as faithfulness to reality.

Meaning *B* presupposes that my subjective evaluation will pronounce a given artistic fact faithful to reality; thus, factoring in the results obtained, we find:

*B*₁. I rebel against a given artistic code and view its deformation as a more accurate rendition of reality.

*B*₂. I am conservative and view the deformation of the artistic code, to which I subscribe, as a distortion of reality.

In the latter case, only those artistic facts which do not contradict my artistic values may be called realistic. But inasmuch as I hold my own values (the tradition to which I belong) to be the most realistic, and because I feel that within the framework of other traditions my code cannot be fully realized even if the tradition in question does not contradict it, I find in these traditions only a partial, embryonic, immature, or decadent realism. I declare that the only genuine realism is the one on which I was brought up. Conversely, in the case of *B*₁, my attitude to all artistic formulas contradicting a particular set of artistic values unacceptable to me would be similar to my attitude in the case of *B*₂ toward forms which are *not* in opposition. I can readily ascribe a realistic tendency (realistic as understood by *A*₁) to forms which were never conceived as such. In the same way, the Primitives were often interpreted from the point of view of *B*₁. While their incompatibility with the norms on which we were raised was immediately evident, their faithful adherence to their own norms and tradition was lost from view (*A*₂ was interpreted as *A*₁). Similarly, certain writings may be felt and interpreted as poetry, although not at all meant as such. Consider Gogol's pronouncement about the poetic qualities of an inventory of the Muscovite crown jewels, Novalis' observation about the poetic nature of the alphabet, the statement of the Futurist Kručenyx about the poetic sound of a laundry list, or that of the poet Xlebnikov claiming that at times a misprint can be an artistically valid distortion of a word.

The concrete content of *A*₁, *A*₂, *B*₁, and *B*₂ is extremely relative. Thus a contemporary critic might detect realism in Delacroix, but not in Delaroche; in El Greco and Andrej Rublev, but not in Guido Reni; in a Scythian idol, but not in the Laocoön. A directly opposite judgment, however, would have been characteristic of a pupil of the Academy in the previous century. Whoever senses faithfulness to life in Racine does not find it in Shakespeare, and vice versa.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a group of painters

struggled in Russia on behalf of realism (the first phase of C , i.e., a special case of A_1). One of them, Repin, painted a picture, "Ivan the Terrible Kills His Son." Repin's supporters greeted it as realistic (C , a special case of B_1). Repin's teacher at the Academy, however, was appalled by the lack of realism in the painting, and he carefully itemized all the instances of Repin's distortion of verisimilitude by comparison with the academic canon which was for him the only guarantee of verisimilitude (from the standpoint of B_2). But the Academy tradition soon faded, and the canons of the "realist" Itinerants (*peredvizniki*) were adopted and became social fact. Then new tendencies arose in painting, a new Sturm und Drang began; translated into the language of manifestos, a new truth was being sought.

To the artist of today, therefore, Repin's painting seems unnatural and untrue to life (from the standpoint of B_2). In turn, Repin failed to see anything in Degas and Cézanne except grimace and distortion (from the standpoint of B_2). These examples bring the extreme relativity of the concept of "realism" into sharp relief. Meanwhile, those art historians who, as we have already indicated, were primarily associated with the later imitators of "realism" by virtue of their aesthetic code (the second phase of C), arbitrarily equated C and B_2 , even though C is in fact simply a special case of B . As we know, meaning B covertly replaces A , so that the whole difference between A_1 and A_2 is lost, and the destruction of ideographs is understood only as a means of creating new ones. The conservative, of course, fails to recognize the self-sufficient aesthetic value of deformation. Thus, supposedly having A in mind (actually A_2), the historian of art addresses himself to C . Therefore, when a literary historian brilliantly declares that "Russian literature is typically realistic," his statement is tantamount to saying, "Man is typically twenty years old."

As the tradition equating realism with C became established, new realist artists (in the A_1 sense) were compelled to call themselves neo-realists, realists in the higher sense of the word, or naturalists, and they drew a line between quasi- or pseudo-realism (C) and what they conceived to be genuine realism (i.e., their own). "I am a realist, but only in the higher sense of the word," Dostoevskij declared. And an almost identical declaration has been made in turn by the Symbolists, by Italian and Russian Futurists, by German Expressionists, and so on. These neorealists have at various times completely identified their aesthetic platforms with realism in general, and, therefore, in evaluating the rep-

representatives of C , they had to expel them from the ranks of realism. Thus posthumous criticism has periodically questioned the realism of Gogol', Dostoevskij, Tolstoj, Turgenjev, and Ostrovskij.

The manner in which C itself is characterized by historians of art, especially historians of literature, is very vague and approximate. We must not forget that the imitators were those who decided which characteristics typified realism. A closer analysis will no doubt replace C with a number of more precise values and will reveal that certain devices which we indiscriminately associate with C are by no means typical of all the representatives of the so-called realist school; the same devices are in fact also found outside the realist school.

We have already mentioned the characterization of progressive realism in terms of unessential details. One such device—cultivated, incidentally, by a number of the representatives of the C school (in Russia, the so-called Gogolian school) and for that reason sometimes incorrectly identified with C —is *the condensation of the narrative by means of images based on contiguity, that is, avoidance of the normal designative term in favor of metonymy or synecdoche*. This "condensation" is realized either in spite of the plot or by eliminating the plot entirely. Let us take a crude example from Russian literature, that of the suicides of Poor Liza and Anna Karenina. Describing Anna's suicide, Tolstoj primarily writes about her handbag. Such an unessential detail would have made no sense to Karamzin, although Karamzin's own tale (in comparison with the eighteenth-century adventure novel) would likewise seem but a series of unessential details. If the hero of an eighteenth-century adventure novel encounters a passer-by, it may be taken for granted that the latter is of importance either to the hero or, at least, to the plot. But it is obligatory in Gogol' or Tolstoj or Dostoevskij that the hero first meet an unimportant and (from the point of view of the story) superfluous passer-by, and that their resulting conversation should have no bearing on the story. Since such a device is frequently thought to be realistic, we will denote it by D , stressing that this D is often found within C .

A pupil is asked to solve a problem: "A bird flew out of its cage; how soon will it reach the forest, if it flies at such and such a speed per minute, and the distance between the cage and the forest is such and such?" "What color is the cage?" asks the child. This child is a typical realist in the D sense of the word.

Or an anecdote of the type known as the Armenian riddle: "It hangs

in the drawing room and is green; what is it?" The answer: "A herring."—"Why in a drawing room?"—"Well, why couldn't they hang it there?" "Why green?"—"It was painted green."—"But why?"—"To make it harder to guess." This desire to conceal the answer, this deliberate effort to delay recognition, brings out a new feature, the newly improvised epithet. Exaggeration in art is unavoidable, wrote Dostoevskij; in order to show an object, it is necessary to deform the shape it used to have; it must be tinted, just as slides to be viewed under the microscope are tinted. You color your object in an original way and think that it has become more palpable, *clearer*, more real (A_1). In a Cubist's picture, a single object is multiplied and shown from several points of view; thus it is made more palpable. This is a device used in painting. But it is also possible to motivate and justify this device in the painting itself; an object is doubled when reflected in a mirror. The same is true of literature. The herring is green because it has been painted; a startling epithet results, and the trope becomes an epic motif. "Why did you paint it?" The author will always have an answer, but, in fact, there is only one right answer: "To make it harder to guess."

Thus a strange term may be foisted on an object or asserted as a particular aspect of it. Negative parallelism explicitly rejects metaphorical substitution for its proper term: "I am not a tree, I am a woman," says the girl in a poem by the Czech poet Šrámek. This literary construction can be justified; from a special narrative feature, it can become a detail of plot development: "Some said, 'These are the footprints of an ermine'; others reported, 'No, these are not the footprints of an ermine; it was Čurila Plenkovič passing by.'" Inverted negative parallelism rejects a normally used term and employs a metaphor (in the Šrámek poem quoted earlier: "I am not a woman, I am a tree," or the following from a play by another Czech poet, Čapek: "What is this?—A handkerchief.—But it is not a handkerchief. It is a beautiful woman standing by the window. She's dressed all in white and is dreaming of love").

In Russian erotic tales, copulation is frequently stated in terms of inverted parallelism; the same is true of wedding songs, with the difference that in the latter, the constructions using metaphors are not usually justified, while in the former these metaphors find motivation as the means by which the cunning hero can seduce the fair maid, or as an interpretation of human copulation by an animal incapable of

comprehending it. From time to time, the consistent motivation and justification of poetic constructions have also been called realism. Thus the Czech novelist Čapek-Chod in his tale, "The Westernmost Slav," slyly calls the first chapter, in which "romantic" fantasy is motivated by typhoid delirium, a "realistic chapter."

Let us use *E* to designate such realism, i.e., *the requirement of consistent motivation and realization of poetic devices*. This *E* is often confused with *C*, *B*, and so on. By failing to distinguish among the variety of concepts latent in the term "realism," theoreticians and historians of art—in particular, of literature—are acting as if the term were a bottomless sack into which everything and anything could be conveniently thrown.

This objection may be made: No, not everything. No one will call Hoffmann's fantastic tales realistic. But does this not indicate that there is somehow a single meaning in the word "realism," that there is, after all, some common denominator?

My answer is: No one will call a "key" a "lock," but this does not mean that the word "lock" has only one meaning. We cannot equate with impunity the various meanings of the word "realism" just as we cannot, unless we wish to be called mad, equate a hair lock with a padlock. It is true that the various meanings of some words (for example, "bill") are far more distinct from one another than they are in the case of the word "realism," where we can imagine a set of facts about which we could simultaneously say, "this is realism in the meaning *C*, *B*, or A_1 of the word." Nevertheless, it is inexcusable to confuse *C*, *B*, A_1 , and so on. A term once used in American slang to denote a socially inept person was "turkey." There are probably "turkeys" in Turkey, and there are doubtless men named Harry who are blessed with great amounts of hair. But we should not jump to conclusions concerning the social aptitudes of the Turks or the hairiness of men named Harry. This "commandment" is self-evident to the point of imbecility, yet those who speak of artistic realism continually sin against it.