1.2.1 The Modern Emptiness of Life

The realists’ and naturalists’ claim that they could reach out to “the place where things are real” conferred to their readers a prerogative that was still novel in the era of classic realism, and was indeed the reward of a victorious cultural struggle (Frank Norris qtd. in Bell 118): readers of realism, Phillip J. Barrish writes, were invited “into a world whose governing claim to their interest [was] to be as plausible, actual, as the readers’ own world” (42). They were allowed to access the novelistic arena as if it were contiguous with everyday life. Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905) begin with their heroines boarding a train: Dreiser’s Carrie Meeber is heading for Chicago; Wharton’s Lily Bart is leaving New York to join the summer estate of one of her wealthy friends. In either case, no literary threshold marks out life from fiction; no narrative frame or authorial intrusion eases the transition toward Lily’s and Carrie’s environment. Such immanence of the social world with regard to its literary representation is the goal Erich Auerbach ascribes to mimesis. In a survey spanning two millennia of literary history, Auerbach records the erosion of the barriers preventing the integration of everyday occurrences within literary, historical, even religious texts. Authors pursuing a socially

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1 This paper is the third instalment of a book-length study provisionally entitled *On Virtual Grounds: A Theoretical Paradigm for Realism at the Turn of the Twenty First Century*. Previous instalments are available on Academia.edu.
progressive variant of mimesis, Auerbach contends, have long striven toward the “tragic-problematic” (38) portrayal in plain language of incidents affecting characters of “the humblest social station” (41). Transposed into Northrop Frye’s terminology, Auerbach’s argument implies that realistically minded writers have fought for the aesthetic legitimacy of the low mimetic and ironic modes. Conversely, Auerbach uses the term “the elevated style” (40)—roughly equivalent to Frye’s high mimetic mode—in order to designate the idiom by which aesthetes of the past flaunted their opposition to the “serious treatment of everyday reality” (491). During Antiquity, not even Aristotle’s Poetics—the most famous ancient defense of mimesis—challenged this elitist socio-aesthetic norm (Aristote 80; Auerbach 44); only the Christian gospels, Auerbach points out, departed from it (Auerbach 41). Accordingly, Auerbach views the rise of the realist school in the nineteenth century as a significant victory against a centuries-old inegalitarian aesthetics. After Stendhal, Balzac, and Zola, it was possible at last for the common reader to enter the frame of a novel without feeling alienated both in social and discursive terms.

A simplified narrative of nineteenth-century cultural history would suggest that, from Balzac and Zola to Proust, Woolf, and Joyce, the battle against the elevated style followed a fairly swift curve from victory to retreat. Realists initially managed to supersede what American novelist William Dean Howells called “the monstrous rag-baby of romanticism”—the aesthetic idiom that privileged otherworldly illusions over the phenomenal world (qtd. in Herman 34). Later, however, the realists lost their newly acquired cultural primacy to modernism. The latter movement rejected the supposedly alienating social world of modernity, and thereby invented a new, experimentalist version of the elevated style: it rendered art qualitatively different from social life again.

This schematic scenario is supported by many statements from authors and critics. It is, however, too crude for multiple reasons. There is admittedly considerable evidence corroborating the fact that romanticism and the romance, whether in their canonical or popular variants, served as countertype for classic realism. Yet romanticism is a complex movement: it comprises its own realist dimension, which manifests itself in William Wordsworth’s and Samuel Taylor

2 For discussions of the rejection of romanticism by American realists and naturalists, see Parrington (248-49), Kazin (5), Becker (184), and Barrish (15-19).
Coleridge’s resolution to write about “incidents and situations from common life […] in a selection of language really used by men” (59), or in the literary and painterly portrayal of peasant life and industrial conditions.\(^3\) Conversely, the distinction between realism and modernism is more porous than previously believed. Histories of modernism do not always register the fact that the French realist movement of the 1850s was the first artistic group for which the word avant-garde was coined.\(^4\) Realism conferred to its artists the alternative or oppositional social status that would later be emulated by similar avant-garde groups within modernism and beyond. Above all, realism shared with later avant-gardes a common artistic and philosophical opponent. In an innovative discussion of nineteenth-century culture, Toril Moi argues that realism reacted primarily against the older tradition of aesthetic idealism. The latter was partly embodied in romanticism, yet more substantially in neo-classical academicism (Moi 94-96). In this view, realist artists, as they shed the idealist celebration of eternal beauty, initiated a pioneering cultural dynamic out of which modernism itself would later develop (Moi 102-03). Moi’s argument helps us discern, for instance, that the aesthetic divide separating late-nineteenth-century academic painter William Bouguereau from both realist Edouard Manet and pre-modernist Vincent Van Gogh is wider than the difference between Manet and Van Gogh themselves, or between Zola and Proust.

In this light, interpreting the modernist critique of mimesis amounts to analyzing the process by which realism forfeited its status as a cultural avant-garde: we must clarify how the gesture that makes art contiguous with life ceased to be regarded as culturally empowering and how one specific feature of modernism—the rejection of mimesis—was allowed to become hegemonic among artists and academic readers. Moi’s reflections suggest that this cultural shift unfolded as a complex contest among aesthetics sharing the same cultural space. The present discussion can admittedly not fully render justice to this complexity: it offers a review of critical arguments, not a detailed historical narrative. I cannot, for instance, factor in the areas of twentieth-century culture where, against the modernist grain, classic

\(^3\) The realist dimension of Romantic pastoralism is evoked in Koch (15) and Mayoux (191).
\(^4\) Bourdieu (100-01) and Dubois (19) point up the status of mid-nineteenth-century realist as an avant-garde movement.
realism and naturalism still played a central role. Likewise, I can only mention in passing a factor that discreetly yet powerfully shapes our awareness of the deligitimization of realism—the time lag separating the initial formulation of antirealist arguments from their accession to the status of a late-twentieth-century modernist and postmodernist doxa. Modernism indeed initially enjoyed a discreet, sometimes even marginal status in academic scholarship. Some of the critical texts discussed below, which are now regarded as pillars of the modernist corpus, were made available to Western European scholars in translation sometimes only decades after their publication (one thinks of Russian Formalism, particularly). Accordingly, the belief in a solid antirealist tradition originating, say, after the decline of European naturalism in the 1890s is to some extent a retrospective misperception: the rejection of mimesis in the name of modernist art became academic common sense only as of the 1960s or ’70s, after the controversial rise of the French New Novel, the 1950s debates about the presumed “death of the novel” in the US (Herman 218), and the emergence of structuralist and poststructuralist cultural theory.

If we bracket out these complexities, we may consider the working hypothesis that modernist anti-realism justifies realism’s relegation from the avant-garde for two main reasons. First, it challenges the relevance of realism as a literary mode on existential grounds. By modernist standards, the realist project of making art contiguous with life is misguided: it leads authors, as Virginia Woolf famously put it in a critique of her Edwardian predecessors Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells, to “spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and transitory appear the true and the enduring” (187). Second, modernism reproaches realism with remaining blind to the stakes of artistic form and genre. Realism is faulted for styling itself as non-art, and therefore for failing to acknowledge its status as a verbal construct. The former objection—existential inadequacy—reproaches realism with being unable to perceive the crisis of meaning induced by modernity: authors devoted to mimesis cling to the naive belief in the congruence of social phenomena, meaning, and values. Their ideal of cognitive and existential transparency, which is the very foundation of realism’s preference for the low mimetic or the ironic modes, obscures either the alienating impact of modernity or the vaster possibilities of

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5 The resilience of literary realism in the twentieth-century literary field is highlighted in Alfred Kazin (ix) and Wayne C. Booth (23-64).
empowerment that could be achieved in fields of experience transcending everyday life. The formalist objection, on the other hand, implies that realism, with its devotion to non-artistic prose and documentary procedures, either produces poor artistry or ignores the genre conventions on which it covertly models itself. In the logic of modernism, the latter flaw is no mere technical matter, as the concern for form is inseparable from the existential critique. Realist authors’ neglect of art makes them unable to perceive that in an alienated environment, the crafting of artistic discourse serves either as solace or as strategy of resistance. Contemptuous of the logic of artistic language and form, realism refuses to constitute itself as an autonomous aesthetic practice, distinct from—or critical of—the supposedly inauthentic idioms of the modern world.

In what follows, I discuss the existential dimension of modernist antirealism through Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukács’s analysis of the nineteenth and twentieth-century novel. Lukács not only offered one of the most insightful discussions of the novel’s social status under realism and modernism, but, intriguingly, he did so successively from the opposite perspectives of each movement. His early works—Soul and Form (1910); The Theory of the Novel (1916)—paved the way for modernist antirealism in so far as they make existential authenticity and alienation the main concerns of fiction. On the contrary, the Marxist works of his maturity—The Historical Novel (1937), Studies in European Realism (1948), The Meaning of Contemporary Realism (1955)—turn against modernism and prescribe realism as a philosophical and political norm. Choosing Lukács as theoretical reference point in a discussion of modernism is admittedly no neutral gesture: this decision fits the needs of a pro-realist argument. Some of Lukács’s contemporaries—fellow Western Marxists Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, particularly—examined the problematic of the loss of meaning under modernity and reached conclusions opposite to Lukács’s as to the value of experimental art (Morris 18-21). Yet Lukács is useful here precisely because of because of his resolution not to forsake the realist project—a choice based on his clear awareness of what the waning of mimesis entails.

Existential pessimism in Lukács’s proto-modernist Theory of the Novel manifests itself in the author’s contention that the literary idiom of Cervantes and his followers charts a world in which “the immanence of meaning in life” has receded from human grasp (41). Whereas
fullness of experience was available to ancient masters of the epic such as Homer, modernity has created a context where lived authenticity has withdrawn from the phenomenal world and is now “beyond recovery” (41). Writers can therefore only produce novels featuring “problematic individual[s]” (80) who embark on a “demonic,” unfulfilled quest for lost values (100). Though The Theory of the Novel does not mention realism by name, it voices concerns that inform all of Lukács’s later essays and are indeed central to Auerbach’s discussion of mimesis as well. The disquieting prospect that values may recede from human experience highlights by contrast the fact that the imitation of life in art, if it is to retain any existential validity, must take for granted what we might call the marriage of appearances and meaning: realism assumes that substantial artistic, social and existential insights may be reached by the mere observation of phenomena. Long before Lukács and Auerbach, Plato had argued in The Republic that mimesis would be philosophically sound only if perception were spontaneously compatible with truth (92-93). The Greek philosopher found this trust in appearances unwarranted. In this, his writings offer a conceptual foundation for the existential malaise affecting those early-twentieth-century artists and intellectuals who, like the young Lukács, deplored the modern “emptiness of life” and distrusted the artistic practice that limits itself to reproducing phenomenal reality (“Narrate” 147).

The Theory of the Novel somewhat enigmatically attributes the emergence of modern alienation to the “gradual working of a spell” (42). Lukács’s pro-realist essays, published after his endorsement of Marxism, provide instead an economic and sociological rationale for this disaster: they attribute it to the fall of the old feudal order, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and the ensuing development of a capitalist economy so complex that it defies cognitive mapping (Historical 205, 245). While the Marxist Lukács concedes that the early-nineteenth-century victory of the bourgeoisie triggered a moment of revolutionary empowerment, he adds that the resulting mode of production soon degenerated into an agent of what he calls reification, bringing about the modern uncoupling of phenomena and authenticity. Lukács elaborates the concept of reification on the basis of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism. In these reflections, Marx and Lukács contend that the intricacy of networks of economic interdependence and the

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6 For a sociological analysis of literary fiction based on Lukács’s concept of the alienated protagonist, see also Goldmann (23).
development of monopoly capitalism have made it ever more difficult for subjects to perceive their own relation to the economy in human terms (Lukács, *Historical* 205;). Advanced monopoly capitalism confers to historical development the mystifying shape of an “alien force,” obscuring history’s nature as a sum of human actions (Marx, *German* 48; also Lukács, *History* 10-40). According to the Hegelian premises of this theory, the most negative aspect of reification is its ability to break up the “totality of life” that makes human existence meaningful (Theory 49). For Lukács, The Hegelian concept of the “totality of [...] experience” indeed subsumes what has been lost because of capitalist development (“Narrate” 143): as economic processes fragment the existential totality, they make “immanence of meaning in life” disappear (Theory 41).

Literature’s ability to counteract or, conversely, to abet reification constitutes the benchmark of Lukács defense of realism and his condemnation of modernism. In his pro-realist essays, Lukács contends that the masters of the early or mid-nineteenth-century novel (Walter Scott, Honoré de Balzac, Leon Tolstoy) enjoyed epistemological privileges similar to those he previously ascribed to Homer. As members of what was still a revolutionary class, they were minimally affected by reification. As such, they had the capacity to understand the key historical processes of their own time and to fashion these events into “well-organized and multifaceted epic composition[s]” (“Narrate” 143). The novelistic gift required thereby, Lukács repeatedly points out, is never purely a matter of documentary technique—of crafting a proper snapshot-like replica of phenomenal reality (*Historical* 43; *Meaning* 55). The realist marriage of appearance and meaning depends on the possibility to depict “man as a whole in the whole of society”—to anchor lived, local fact in overall meaning, fulfilling the Hegelian aspiration for totality (*Studies* 5). Specifically, classic realism is attentive to the significance conferred on specific events by their embeddedness in historical sequences—their relation to past and future (Lukács, *Meaning* 55). Lukács argues, however, that by the second half of the nineteenth century, capitalist reification increasingly narrowed writers’ insight into historical causality (“Narrate” 122-23). After the revolutions of 1848, naturalist writers such as Gustave Flaubert or Emile Zola cut themselves off from the totality of social conditions by severing their bond to the revolutionary proletariat. They were as such in a less favorable position to resist reification. As a result, they became precursors of modernists such as Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, James
Joyce and Virginia Woolf. The latter writers, instead of counteracting reification and alienation, merely register their symptoms (*Meaning* 78-79): their works compile a “kaleidoscopic chaos” of fragmented facts, cut off from meaningful history (“Narrate” 133). Worse still, they orient the novel towards the escapist representation of socially decontextualized subjectivities. The essays of Lukács’s late career suggest, however, the possibility for “critical realism” to survive under modernity (*Meaning* 93): there remains a vital need for a literary idiom attempting to reverse the impact of reification by subjecting alienated modernity to the “reasonable” question (*Meaning* 69)—that is, by elucidating the historical determinants that it forth. Yet the threat of the modernist “emptiness of life” hangs like Damocles’ sword over this endeavor.

In spite of his anti-modernist bias and his reliance on schematic historicist narratives, Lukács never ceased to take the measure of a cultural change that has shaped considerable segments of twentieth-century experimental literature and has benefited from considerable support in twentieth-century philosophy and aesthetic theory. Disenchantment with the emptiness of modern life underlies the taxonomies of authenticity and inauthenticity that, I pointed out in the Introduction, inform much of twentieth-century continental thought. Martin Heidegger’s obsession with “being” [*Sein*] (23), Henri Bergson’s celebration of “duration,” and Jacques Lacan’s references to the non-objectifiable “real” (Bergson 230; Lacan 64) express the same recoil from the banality of phenomenal experience as that diagnosed by Lukács in modernist literature. Pam Morris aptly summarizes this structure of feeling when she points out that realism was bound to lose its legitimacy during decades when “the first impact of mass urban society” provided ample evidence for philosophies proclaiming the inauthenticity of the lifeworld (22). I point out in Chapter 6 that, by the end of the twentieth century, the same problematic was given a new formulation by postmodernist theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard, with similarly dire consequences for realism. Modernist disenchantment, reformulated according to the terminology of postmodernism, leads Baudrillard and Lyotard to suggest that late-twentieth-century society is moved by forces so out of proportion with
human cognition that it may only be an object of “astral” contemplation or of the sublime (Baudrillard 10; Lyotard 31-32).[^7]

Realism’s main flaw, the modernist critique of inauthenticity suggests, is therefore its clinging to a discursive mode targeting an inappropriate object. By focusing on externalized social interactions, realism fails to acknowledge the psychological and aesthetic impact of reified modernity. On the contrary, advocates of modernism praise experimental writers for rendering justice to this sense of estrangement and for exploring the utopian remedies that might palliate it. Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, and James Joyce were in this logic existentially clear-sighted in so far as their works either gave literary expression to angst, or sought a revitalization of experience beyond the visible present. Kafka’s fiction privileges the former axis of this program, Woolf and Joyce the latter. Joyce’s concern for the vital past and Woolf’s cultivation of interiority and pre-verbal intersubjective bonds illustrate what Ihab Hassan calls the modernist yearning for “transcendence”—the aspiration to access spheres of authenticity such as the afterworlds of the inner life, of primitive urges, or of aesthetic perfection (92). These are the “true” and “enduring” levels of experience Woolf faults Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells for failing to pursue (187). Of course, the quest for transcendence is only fully warranted if one assumes that the visible scene of modernity has become too insubstantial and resistant to scrutiny to sustain a literary endeavor devoted to social thematics of realism. Part II of the present essay takes as its premise that this pessimistic judgment is beyond proof. An artistic realist practice seeking to interpret the logic of social appearances is in this perspective not pointless.

1.2.2 The Autonomy of Artistic Form
What modernism regards as realism’s second major failing—its purported blindness to genre conventions and the autonomy of artistic language—has been one of the chief concerns of formalist criticism from the beginnings of this movement in early-twentieth-century Russia to its later developments in the Anglo-American New Criticism and classic structuralism. Literary works of art, formalist critics argue, are not meant to document the state of world: they should instead foreground their own structure—their textual principle of construction.

[^7]: All quotations from French originals and French editions of non-English sources are in Christophe Den Tandt’s translation.
Genuine literary texts, in other words, flaunt their ability to shape verbal material into what Joseph Frank and Cleanth Brooks respectively call “[s]patial [f]orm” and “[w]ell [w]rought” structures in the same way as modernist nonfigurative painting deploys pure patterns of shapes and color (Frank 4; Brooks 1). We will see below that this formalist argument supports a two-pronged attack on realism. Ostensibly, formalism demystifies realism’s epistemological ambitions: the language of realist texts is shown to be inherently non-referential in so far as it is tied down to literary conventions. Realism’s actual practice, in this logic, is not the imitation of reality but the deployment of verisimilitude—the elaboration of what is essentially a literary norm. Simultaneously, formalism drives realist works back into the fold of verbal art: realist works cannot help being lattices of literary language, regardless of the socially referential agenda advertised by their authors.

For Russian formalists, literature’s ability to foreground its own structure is rooted in the aura of strangeness characterizing literary language—the feature that sets it off from the non-literary world. Victor Shklovsky’s “Art as a device,” the essay often regarded as the origin of twentieth-century formalist literary theory, contends that the “singularization” of literary language has a defamiliarizing momentum (Chklovski 89): it marks the prevalence of a text’s literariness over non-literary verbal usage, thus over the idiom by which speakers refer to the world in everyday situations. In short, literary form and genre conventions work at the expense of a text’s referential function. Shklovsky shows for instance that Leon Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* is structured according to a logic independent of its ostensibly realist agenda. In each scene, the narrator feigns he is depicting objects alien to himself, as if discovering them for the first time (Chklovski 89). This device, which Gérard Genette later called “external focalization,” undercuts the realist orientation of Tolstoy novel: it manifests the text’s autonomy—the strange singularity—of its purely literary structuring mechanisms (Genette 207).

Shklovsky’s critique of realism is taken up with relish by Roman Jakobson in “On Realism in Art,” initially published in 1921. With ironical exhaustiveness, Jakobson, provides a letter-coded list of what he takes to be the inconsistent definitions of realist verisimilitude. In the sequence of literary history, he points out, verisimilitude has been defined in turn as the product of authorial intention (definition A) (“Du réalisme” 99), as a literary norm acknowledged by readers (definition B) (“Du réalisme” 99), as a set of principles laid down by the
nineteenth-century realist movement (definition C) (“Du réalisme” 100), as the effect of an excess of background details (definition D) (“Du réalisme” 106), and as the result of the systematic concealment of literariness (definition E) (“Du réalisme” 108). Jakobson approaches this grab-bag of definitions from two theoretical perspectives. On the one hand, in remarks that set the tone for later formalist/structuralist theoreticians (Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, Gérard Genette), he claims that any “natural” verisimilitude in “literary description” is “evidently devoid of meaning” (Jakobson, “Du réalisme” 100). Textual devices regarded by authors and critics as hallmarks of realism’s referential accuracy act like any other set of cultural conventions. Their primary function consists in exposing the artifactual status of the artistic canons that preceded them in the sequence of literary history. Thus, as nineteenth-century realism developed its own set of norms, it rendered obsolete the conventions of neo-classical academicism and romanticism (Jakobson, “Du réalisme” 103). For the rest, any “concrete content” of realism is “absolutely relative” (Jakobson, “Cu réalisme” 102). Todorov rephrased this aspect of Jakobson’s argument in a late-1960s treatise on structuralist poetics, contending that verisimilitude does not designate “a relation to the real” (37) but, instead, the conformity with “the rules of the [literary] genre” (36; italics in the original). In this logic, the marriage of the hero and the heroine at the end of sentimental novels, however unlikely by comparison with the course of actual human relations, must be regarded as a requirement of these texts’ verisimilitude, comparable to the equally conventional expectation that protagonists of naturalist novels come to a tragic end.

On the other hand, as the formalists dismiss the referential pretensions of literary texts, they bring to light structural devices specific to literary mimesis—the specialized literariness of realism, as it were. This aspect of formalist antirealism concerns definition C in Jakobson’s classification (verisimilitude as defined by classic realists), as well as its corollaries, definitions D and E. In the Russian formalists’ early writings, the principle of construction identified as the chief signature of nineteenth-century mimetic fiction is the “motivation” of literary devices (Chklovski 86). Realist motivation, targeted specifically by Jakobson’s definition E, consists in the disingenuous compulsion to provide a “consistent [...] justification” for realism’s conventional “poetic constructions” (Jakobson 108). The realist text, in

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8 See also Genette (71) for a formalist definition of verisimilitude.
this logic, cannot let its reader discover that, like all other varieties of verbal art, it obeys structural principles that are purely literary in nature and have little to do with the imitation of reality. Accordingly, in a gesture Gérard Genette compares to the logic of the judicial “alibi” (Genette 97), realism feigns that even its conventional formal features are instrumental in securing mimesis. This travesty of referentiality is often secured by means of the strategy subsumed under definition D: realist works spuriously justify—in fact, cover up—their literariness on the basis of parasitical displays of didactic anecdotes, background information, and pseudo-referential specifics—the whole parade of details for which realism is indeed famous. Didacticism in this case is a mere excuse: it conceals the “foreign, surprising” momentum of the literary principle of construction (Chklovskii 94).

In the late 1960s, Roland Barthes’s famous reflections on the “reality effect” rephrased Shklovsky’s and Jakobson’s theory of realist motivation along structuralist lines (81). Literary works pursuing “referential illusion,” Barthes argues, disavow their own literariness by spurning the formalist principle requiring that all elements of a narrative be functional with regard to its overall structural skeleton (89). Referential writing features instead “insignificant” details devoid of any organic role in the narrative chain (Barthes 82). Flaubert, for instance, as he evokes a provincial interior, depicts a piano on top of which are piled up “under a barometer, a pyramid-shaped stack of boxes and cardboard” (Flaubert qtd. in Barthes 81; italics in original). It would hypothetically be possible to squeeze some psychological or social significance from this insubstantial literary bric-à-brac (the barometer points to bourgeois rationality and caution). Yet the “scandalous” profusion of information, Barthes suggests, mostly serves to gesture connotatively towards “some sort of background”—to “the real,” that is (82, 85, 89). The scattering of details acts as a textual mist that, at an abstract level, signifies reality itself without actually addressing it in any substantial way; it signals the text’s overall devotion, if not to reality, at least to the referential function. As such, the “reality effect” is in essence a literary device: it is the very mechanism by which realist writing covers up its status as an autonomous verbal artifact (Barthes 89).

Jakobson’s essay of 1921 fails to mention a second formal feature of realism often discussed in formalist and structuralist theory—the metonymic structuring of literary prose. This topic became a key element of Jakobson’s reflections on language and literature only in the
later developments of his theoretical corpus, most famously in his essay on aphasia and in several articles on poetics. In these texts, Jakobson describes metaphor and metonymy as the expressions of two fundamental structuring principles of discourse. Metaphor is based on a general principle of “deliberate similarity,” which is dominant in poetry (“Notes marginales,” 64); metonymy relies on “association by contiguity,” which determines the workings of (realist) prose (“Notes marginales” 64). Poems, in this logic, are regulated both in their verbal chain and in their mechanisms of meaning production by a logic of likeness and equivalence. Similarity determines the presence in the verbal chain of symmetries, repetitions and contrasts (Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson, “Les chats” 183-84). At the level of meaning, it is the matrix of poetic comparisons and metaphors, which dominate poetic imagery. Prose, on the contrary, is structured according to relations of proximity, which are the foundations of metonymy. This figure of speech substitutes one sign for another, provided their referents are contiguous in space, time, or within a causal chain. Smoke can therefore be made to mean fire; a train may be identified by the time at which it departs (“the 9:42”), and a book by the name of the author who brought it into existence (“open your Shakespeares”) (Groupe µ 117-18). “Narrative prose” obeys this logic, Jakobson argues, in so far as its “inherent momentum” drives the story “from one neighboring object to the other, along a causal or spatial-temporal pathway” (“Notes marginales” 64). Thus, in the sequence of the reading chain, readers of (realist) prose are encouraged to reconstruct a world whose elements are tied by relations of proximity.

The relevance of Jakobson’s remarks on metonymy and prose to the analysis of realist description is patent. Balzac’s portrayal of Saumur in the first chapter of Eugénie Grandet is a complex weave of metonymies, synecdoches (i.e. spatial metonymies), and occasional metaphors in which the leading principle is the metonymic progression of an observer’s gaze zooming in on the urban landscape, starting from a totalizing perspective toward an ever closer scrutiny of the city’s local details. Likewise, the opening chapter of Dreiser’s Sister Carrie, as it chronicles the heroine’s travel to Chicago, prepares the reader for the discovery of the metropolis by means of a carefully planned management of contiguity. As the train approaches the city, signs of the

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9 The relevance of Jakobson’s theory of metonymy to realist representation is discussed in Furst (69) and Herman (56).
latter’s presence proliferate and are itemized according to their rank in a spatial-temporal sequence. The heroine’s later investigation of the “miles and miles of streets” of the Midwestern metropolis, notably during her frustrating job hunts, follow the same metonymic path (Dreiser 16). Ironically, we will see in a later section that Jakobson’s argument on metonymy partly contradicts formalism’s and structuralism’s disregard for reference. Metonymy, the above reflections suggest, is a referentially based trope: it takes for granted an objective ordering of the world as well as the procedures securing the latter’s proper discursive representation. Metonymies are indeed rhetorically felicitous only if the extra-linguistic universe has a given shape: the world must be governed by contiguity and therefore devoid of discontinuities, even free from strangeness or surprise. Additionally, metonymies require a determinate relation between language and world. In the absence of the latter, the world’s orderly contiguity could not be mimicked in prose. Therefore, Jakobson’s argument about the metonymic nature of literary mimesis is partly grounded in knowledge of the world; it cannot be derived from the merely formal analysis of artistic language.

The approach towards realism adopted by Anglo-American formalism proved less radical, less counterintuitive, yet for those same reasons also less theoretically consistent than the critical revolution initiated by the Russian school. Anglo-American formalists—The New Critics, in particular—devoted most of their attention to poetry, a field in which they regarded formal consistency as the very measure of literary excellence. If the New Critics had summarily conferred to fiction the status they ascribed to poetry, they would have advocated a separation of literature from the social world no less abrupt than that described in the writings of their Russian equivalents. The New Critics’ emphasis on the spatial form of poems was indeed predicated on the idea that literature should not address the world in the same fashion as both scientific discourse and the more literal-minded realist fiction do: poetic texts—a phrase that in New Critical parlance often refers to all literary works, should act as internally consistent verbal systems, liberated, as I. A. Richards puts it, from “any external canon” (Richards 253; emphasis in original). In Principles of Literary Criticism, one of the seminal essays of Anglo-American formalism, Richards famously contends that poetry—and therefore literature at large—should not aspire to be “true” according to the norms of empirical “reference”
Modernist Alienation and the Solace of Form 62

(Richards 251, 245; emphasis in original). Its statements lend themselves to an “emotive” use of language, distinct from the referential, “scientific” one (250 emphasis in original). “[E]motive” in this context implies that literary works should by virtue of their high degree of formal coherence foster the “organization and systematization” (51) of “internal states of affairs” (246)—the complex mechanisms of “needs and desires” (246). Admittedly, Richards denies that his theory of poetic language implies the complete separation of art from life. The theory of “‘Art for Art’s sake’” is in his view a “misapprehension” (64) of the proper function of poetry, which, instead of isolating art from experience, should act as a structuring matrix allowing “ordinary experiences” to become “completed” (219). Still, his emphasis on the capacity of good literature to foster the optimal consistency of attitudes and mind creates an outlook where external, referential “stimuli” are suspect of acting as contingent, even random disturbances with regard to the superior systematizing power of well-crafted texts (214).

The Anglo-American formalists who chose to deal with the novel and its embarrassingly realistic legacy feign, however, to resist the anti-referential drift of Richards’s comments on poetry. They aspire instead to an inevitably fragile compromise between the claims of art and phenomenal experience. Rather than rejecting mimesis altogether, they claim to define the latter’s rightful position within a craft-oriented conception of narrative prose. René Wellek and Austin Warren, in their influential Theory of Literature, still consider it possible to distinguish between “[t]he novel” and “the romance” on the basis of the former’s capacity to be “realistic,” as opposed to the latter’s devotion to the “poetic,” the “epic,” or the “mythic” (216). Likewise, Wayne C. Booth, in The Rhetoric of Fiction, does not summarily dismiss the contention that “‘[t]rue [n]ovels [m]ust [b]e [r]ealistic’” (23). While Booth may not take seriously the expectation that novels provide access to “[u]nmediated [r]eality” (50), he does number among the legitimate ends of fiction Henry James’s literary ambition to make novels produce “‘intensity of illusion’” (James qtd. in Booth 42): novels should give readers the impression that “genuine life has been presented” (Booth 44). However, in Booth as in other mid-twentieth-century Anglo-American critics, this possibly unexpected acknowledgment of realism is qualified by the formalist expectation that a favorable bargain will be struck between the novel’s referential prerogatives and the structuring mechanisms it must develop in order to secure its aesthetic consistency.
as a genre. Percy Lubbock implicitly makes this point in the analysis of
narrative point of view—the reflections that laid the groundwork for the
New Critical discussion of fiction. On the one hand, he privileges
limited over omniscient narration—the “scenic” over the “panoramic”)
method—partly on realistic grounds: a narrative situation should be
allowed to “tell its own story” (Lubbock 156)—to offer itself to the
reader’s gaze as it might be perceived in the apprehension of everyday
experience. On the other, such felicitous handling of point of view
requires a tightening of novelistic form. It demands a degree of self-
reflexiveness more likely to appear in Henry James’s works than in the
rambling serialized fictions of the nineteenth century.

It is in this light hardly surprising that the Anglo American
formalists, in spite of their professed wish to balance the claims of art
and life, should have proved better able to conceptualize structure,
genre, and form than to provide an account of literature’s link to the
world. Symptomatically, the passages in which they pay lip service to
the literary representation of the social context leave the foundations of
nineteenth-century mimesis largely unexamined. Booth, Wellek,
Warren, as well as and more recently Lilian Furst, use Henry James’s
abovementioned formula as benchmark for fictional realism: novels
should provide “‘intensity of illusion’” (Wellek and Warren 213; Furst
viii). This remains, however, a poorly defined and paradoxical precept.
Only a truth-based theory of literary reference, unavailable in Anglo-
American formalism, could provide standards of evaluation
determining what is required to make the intended illusion referentially
compelling, and, conversely, what renders texts so remote from reality
that they fail to secure the semblance of reality suitable to novelistic
illusion. In the absence of such standards, privileging illusion as a
foundation of realism confers to the literary imitation of life a negative
connotation: the latter is covertly associated to trickery and deceit. On
the contrary, when Anglo-American formalist essays discuss the
mechanism by which fiction may achieve formal consistency, their
argumentation is conceptually more effective. For instance, Wellek and
Warren, in keeping with Richards’s concept of the emotive value of
literature, explain how literary coherence is most easily secured when a
novel’s “factual truth” is given only a last-resort status (212). Literary
fictions, they argue, aspire to construct a “Kosmos”—a world vision
endowed with a distinct, presumably superior “self-coherent
intelligibility” (214 emphasis in original). In this endeavor, tight
internal patterning outweighs adequacy to external conditions. It is
therefore tempting to jettison literary referentiality altogether and to
conclude that “[r]ealism and naturalism” are mere “conventions,
style”—the features of a syntactic genre (Wellek and Warren 213). This
view—an obvious echo of Russian formalism—implies that the only
possible distinction in matters of verisimilitude “is not between reality
and illusion, but between differing conceptions of reality, between
differing modes of illusion” (Wellek and Warren 213).

The allure of formalism proved so difficult to resist in Anglo-
American criticism that it affected even those authors seeking to
reclaim realism against the New Criticism’s one-sided focus on literary
craft. Most Post-WWII pro-realist essays indeed unwittingly carry out
a Copernican reversal of realist premises: as they attempt to
circumscribe the literary devices enabling realism to map the social
world, they confer to these supposedly referential features the status of
formal constructs, portraying them as constitutive features of a genre.
This phenomenon can be traced in the evolution leading from George
G. Becker’s 1949 assessment of “the modern realistic movement”
(184), through Ian Watt’s famed analysis of the rise of the novel in the
late 1950s, to later authors such as Furst and, beyond the limits of the
Anglo-American corpus, French structuralist Philippe Hamon. Becker
still praises realism for being “closely allied with the development of
physical sciences and positive philosophy” (184). Watt, on the contrary,
endorses a paradoxically agnostic view of the novel’s status with regard
to its social context. On the one hand, he regards realism as the defining
feature of the English novel as it emerged in the eighteenth century.
Accordingly, he singles out the rejection of the supernatural, the attempt
to situate individualized protagonists within specific social and
historical environments, and the use of everyday language among the
elements that make Daniel Defoe’s, Samuel Richardson’s, or Henry
Fielding’s fiction a more accurate vehicle of social mapping than poetry
or verse drama. Yet in a spectacular concession to formalism, Watt
undercuts his remarkable analysis of literary reference by calling
“formal realism” the system of distinguishing features his research has
brought to light (34). The latter phrase, he writes, only designates a
literary “convention” (35). There is “no reason why the report on human
life” offered by novels adhering its principles “should be … any truer
than those presented through the very different conventions of other
literary genres” (35). In this logic, Dreiser’s remarks on the
development of American metropolises in *Sister Carrie* or Edith
Wharton’s sociologically based portrayal of the New York upper classes in *The House of Mirth* would have to be perceived as hallmarks of literariness, subjected to the same reading logic as the codes of verisimilitude analyzed by Jakobson or Todorov.

Furst explicitly builds upon Watt’s legacy, yet seeks to elude the deadlocked debate on the prerogatives of form and reference in which the English critic’s argument is entangled. To this purpose, she adopts a performative, pragmatist analysis of fiction stipulating that the realists’ “pretense of truth” (25) is mostly an “act of persuasion” (26; also 94). Realism, in this view, cannot aspire to be an accurate mirroring of the world: it is a performative practice to be analyzed under the light of speech acts theory. I indicate in more detail in a later section that the appeal to a performative model remains an empty gesture if it stays, as is implicitly the case in Furst, within the limits of neo-pragmatism or of the poststructuralist understanding of signifying performance: the latter approaches fail to define the conditions of felicity of a realist speech act. Still, confident that this theoretical basis frees the novel from “the crushing burden of mimesis,” Furst sees the possibility of reinterpreting, even broadening Watt’s theory of formal realism (23).

On the one hand, she reconceptualizes along pragmatist lines the cornerstones of realist representation defined by Watt—the concern for socially defined characterization, determinate location, and historical temporality. On the other, she includes within realism’s referential apparatus devices that had been portrayed by Lubbock and the New Critics as obstacles both to novelistic objectivity and to formal consistency. Furst claims, for instance, that realism’s referential agenda is furthered, not hampered by the self-conscious authorial intrusions—the “dear reader” passages—whereby nineteenth-century novelists negotiate the narrative frame separating their texts from the non-literary world. In this logic, the gestures by which “engaging narrators” acclimatize their readers to the “determinate illusion” of fiction buttress the work of literary reference (69, 29). Thus, Furst’s pragmatist analysis of fictional illusion fulfills the formalist reversal I sketched out above: it fails to make clear how realist texts may be trusted to designate the world, and simultaneously extends the gamut of realist devices that can be reclaimed as the constituents of realism’s syntactic genre.

Philippe Hamon’s early-1970s essay “Un discours contraignant” is informed by a tension between form and reference symmetrical to that characterizing Watt’s and Furst’s arguments. Hamon could, however, not possibly be suspected of swerving towards formalism: his text is
anchored in French structuralist theory and takes antirealism for granted. The methodological reversal, in this case, works in the opposite direction: in apparent breach of Jakobson’s and Barthes’s antireferential credo, Hamon provides an analysis of realism’s discursive devices so extensive, sympathetic, and varied that it seems propelled by the same concern to preserve mimesis as that informing Anglo-American criticism. Hamon’s theoretical premises anticipate Furst’s essay in several respects. First, he includes within the perimeter of literariness not only the structure of the fictional world mapped by realist novels—its treatment of place, time, and social structure—but also the apparatus of perception and cognitive observation the latter set up. Secondly, he anchors this analysis of narrative perception in a performative paradigm of discourse, symptomatically with little concern for the procedures of validation any realist “pragmatics” might require (132). Realism, Hamon claims is the vehicle of a cognitive “speech act” (132)—a communicative gesture that cannot copy reality but can, by virtue of its “illocutory posturing … make us believe” that it does so (132). Hamon’s main focus lies accordingly on the numerous strategies by which novelists assert what we might call their voice of cognitive authority or their realist gaze—the mechanics that make an “ostensibly knowledgeable discourse” both epistemologically credible and literarily palatable (145). Thus, Hamon points up the character types, locations, situations, figures of speech, or apparatuses of reception that render realism’s didactic agenda technically and literarily viable. He emphasizes, for instance, the effectiveness of descriptive scenes in which a character endowed with cognitive prestige—a “specialist, [...] erudite, [...] local authority, [or a] doctor”—both describes and performs a technical act (142): a text portraying an engineer taking apart a locomotive piece by piece for the sake of an apprentice indeed validates its realist credentials without excessively foregrounding its didactic nature (144). Conversely, Hamon highlights the elements that impede transparent cognitive transmission. He points out, for instance, that cognitive authority is best maintained if realist texts scan an environment or an historical context familiar to their author and readers. “[T]he realist protagonist is unlikely to travel far from his or her own environment”, he writes, for such a displacement would introduce the cognitively unsettling dimension of the exotic (137).

Hamon’s reflections, like those of his Anglo-American counterparts, reveal that the formalist deconstruction of realism, as it itemizes the
devices mobilized by would-be referential texts, gives the lie to the often-voiced opinion that this literary mode is stylistically formless. Although formalism often handles the aesthetic of mimesis dismissively, it fosters realism’s reintegration into literary art. Though paradoxical on first inspection, this reversal should hardly be surprising. The formalist attitude towards realism was emblematized early on in the critical gesture by which Boris Eichenbaum exposed under the gritty texture of Nikolai Gogol’s stories of social and spiritual alienation a clever lattice of puns, discursive contrasts, and “grotesque hyperbolic distortions” managed by a self-conscious narrator (“Comment” 235). Thus, under the formalist lens, the ostensible artlessness of the realist text—its supposedly misguided attempt to model itself on a formless extra-literary field—is shown to be a veil through which the constructedness of literary form is bound to peer through. Small wonder then that in the field of Anglo-American literature critics of the 1950s should have resorted to formalist approaches in order to make the considerable pre-WWII corpus of American realism and naturalism palatable to the readership of Faulkner and the premodernist Henry James. The remarkable efforts of Charles Child Walcutt and Donald Pizer to vindicate Howells, Dreiser, or Norris consisted partly in indicating that writers who had been regarded as purveyors of documentary prose and proletarian propaganda could also be approached as literary craftsmen. In this perspective, the canonical redemption of literary realism and naturalism required that readers focus their attention no longer on writers’ eagerness to disclose hitherto ignored aspects of social life but rather on the phenomena that had mobilized the New Critics’ attention—the texts’ ability to shape their material into a self-supporting artistic vision. Similarly, readers were encouraged to overlook the link between realism and documentary reporting and to take into consideration its affinities with literary currents—transcendentalism and canonical American romance—that paved the way for formally reflexive modernist fiction. These formalist re-evaluations lead to the paradoxical conclusion that realism possesses a rich referential apparatus deprived of referential prerogatives: the more refined the awareness of realism’s discursive structures, the lower the confidence in its ability to designate the world.

10 Nivat provides further comments on Gogol’s grotesque imagery (33).
11 For a discussion of the political aspects of the formalist reappropriation of American realism and naturalism, see Walcutt (vii, 23) and Pizer (“Is American” 390).
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