

# GETTING TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER: REALISM AND MODERNISM IN THE NOVEL

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- **ABSTRACT:** This article elaborates on a model to assess the evolution of formal realism in the novel since its inception up to the modernistic turn starting in the last decade of the nineteenth-century. I argue that realism in the novel is connected to a central philosophical issue: representation. Yet the very concept of “representation” became a point of difficulty in literature and in modern philosophy, seeing one cannot compare linguistic representations with reality itself as a test for accuracy because what we mean by “reality” already involves issues of representation. To better understand this puzzle, I examine two explanatory-models – one focusing on the critical development of literary conventions, the other on psycho-sociological developments – concluding that none of them can, alone, explain the impulse toward realistic representation and the evolution of key formal literary techniques that led to the modernistic turn.
- **KEYWORDS:** Representation in the novel. Self-overcoming realism. Narrative techniques. Philosophy and literary criticism.

Having placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes’ chewing, I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant and preoccupied expression. I reflected on the subject of my spare-time literary activities. *One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings.*

Flann O’Brien (2001, p.5).

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But what book is that next to it? – The “Galatea” of Miguel de Cervantes, said the barber. – That Cervantes has been for many years a great friend of mine, and to my knowledge he has had more experience in reverses than in verses.

Miguel de Cervantes (2012, p.89).

## Introduction

The task of securing a date for the birth of the novel as a literary genre is highly demanding. If in attempting to do so we privilege issues of methodology, *formal realism* emerges as a common denominator among different narrative methods across the genre. This classificatory procedure merely stipulates the significance of methodology, however, and is general and unspecific as regards different technical strategies applied in various literary works. It is nonetheless worth stressing that formal realism has been invoked as central to the genesis and evolution of the novel by authors as otherwise dissimilar as Ian Watt (2000), Terry Eagleton (2005), and Stephen Mulhall (2009).

Equally contentious is the establishment of one specific work as “the first instance of the genre”, as *the* first novel. A broad and diverse critical tradition has stipulated that Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* is to be held as the inaugurator of the novel, but this conclusion is again debatable, since *Don Quixote* can be considered a parody of the then nascent genre<sup>1</sup>, displaying the tempting appeal of the chivalric romantic model (a temptation that many characters in the novel are themselves unable to resist) whilst ironically undermining its status. Confronting his reader with the insanity of the romantic idealist Alonso Quijada (or “Quesada”, or “Quesana”), a voracious reader of chivalric romances who now believes that he is a medieval knight pursuing the fictional adventures described therein, Cervantes presents a reflection on the very conditions of the possibility of the novel from a sort of inverted approach to the issue. Contrary to what happened to Quixote, the true purpose of the modern novel consists in overcoming the dangers of *anachronic idealism* – appropriately called “quixotism” – through confrontation with reality in all its disenchanting roughness. The hero of the work should remain sane throughout this process, as should its reader.

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<sup>1</sup> Even taking into account this sort of reflexive twist in Cervantes’s masterpiece – a feature that only widens its creative potential, as we shall see – this should not serve as a reason for discounting its claim to being the legitimate inaugurator of the genre. As Stephen Mulhall (2009) points out in *The Wounded Animal*, a work of fiction’s reflecting on the conditions of possibility of the novel does not prevent that work from itself counting as a novel.

To the extent that this is true, it seems fair to view the origins of the novel as based on a meta-reflection on the formal conditions of a work's ability to represent reality. What I want to defend in this paper is *the closure of a reflexive circle regarding the very conditions of possibility for the novel* – one that connects the supposed inaugurator, *Don Quixote*, to the modernist tradition (itself usually taken to date from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the end of World War II). Precisely because it aims at accurately representing reality as it is perceived by the novelist, the modernist novel must employ ever more dense techniques of representation, thereby strengthening the level of self-awareness of the literary prose itself to a point of parody by no means inferior to that depicted by Cervantes (as testified in the above quotation from Flann O'Brien, with its direct reflection on the various possible ways of starting a story, itself undertaken precisely in the context of his already having started one).

## **The realist movement and formal realism: methodological principles and representation**

Historically, the realist movement (in painting) has its origins in nineteenth-century France, after the 1848 Revolution, and was first introduced to describe the work of Gustave Courbet<sup>2</sup> and a group of fellow painters – including Jean-François Millet, Jules Breton and Jean-Baptiste Camille – all of whom squarely rejected the idealization of both subject and technique in pictorial representation and whose most important subject was the everyday life of the working class.

The main artistic goal of the realist movement was the reliable depiction of daily motives, undertaken via the avoidance of both intricate technical conventions and any appeal to supernatural or exotic subjects. Thus the work of French realists clearly departed from the romanticism that had dominated the figurative arts (including literature) in France throughout the eighteenth century, and it did so by renouncing academic painting and the idealization and emotional excess depicted therein. At odds with their romantic predecessors, painters like Courbet and Millet dedicated their work to the representation of the working class – thus already investing in a sort of social realism – boldly revealing the social and economic difficulties faced by this group as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Also unlike their predecessors, these painters drew influence from technical achievements in photography, which prompted a determination to produce works representing their subjects in a way that was “objectively real”.

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<sup>2</sup> The work of Gustave Courbet is of special interest to us here. In addition to providing a realistic, almost photographic depiction of everyday themes, representing even polemic subjects (see: *L'Origine du Monde*), Courbet, like Cervantes in *Don Quixote*, consciously intrudes into his own paintings, directly inserting his own name as he does so (see: *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet*).

The realist movement is a historically framed artistic trend, which can be viewed alongside other trends (such as impressionism, surrealism and cubism). Its maxims and methodological principles can nevertheless be conceived as the artistic determination of a distinct “method” – one much more indebted to the founding texts of modern philosophy than to any artistic school or movement. After all, the means of expression at work in Defoe, Richardson and Austen is precisely that found in Descartes, Locke and Hume: a natural language. In this respect, Ian Watt’s classic work on the rise of the novel is enlightening:

The general temper of philosophical realism has been critical, anti-traditional and innovating; its method has been the study of the particulars of experience by the individual investigator, who, ideally at least, is free from the body of past assumptions and traditional beliefs; and it has given a peculiar importance to semantics, to the problem of the nature of the correspondence between words and reality. [...] The novel is the form of literature which most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation. Previous literary forms had reflected the general tendency of their cultures to make conformity to traditional practice the major test of truth: the plots of classical and renaissance epic, for example, were based on past history or fable, and the merits of the author’s treatment were judged largely according to a view of literary decorum derived from the accepted models in the genre. This literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience – individual experience which is always unique and therefore new. The novel is thus the logical literary vehicle of a culture which, in the last few centuries, has set an unprecedented value on originality, on the novel; and it is therefore well named (WATT, 2000, p.13).

As Watt also stresses in his introduction to *The Rise of the Novel*, the most important influences of the main trends of thought in modern philosophy on the novel, from Defoe onwards, are methodological in nature. That is to say: the modern novel, *whilst not itself philosophical*, mirrors and embodies in its narrative form the methodological commitments common to both empiricism and rationalism.

The formal features that novels since *Don Quixote* can be said to borrow from the methodological constraints at work in the most important works of modern philosophy are thus relatively easy to summarize: a very detailed presentation of individual characters, who are identified by a common, non-typified proper name and to whom are ascribed both reasonably detailed physical characteristics and a deeply developed psychology – all framed, crucially, by a detailed description of the characters’ social environment. As far as specifically literary conventions go, the type of plot characteristic of the novel departed from previous literary structures to the extent that it came to fix previously narrated events as causes of present action. In

the novel, a causal connection operating through time comes to replace a previous reliance on coincidences or supernatural happenings, thus lending a much more coherent structure to the narrative.

To better understand this literary embodiment of early modern philosophical method, we shall now turn to the descriptive detail at work in what is considered the first realist English novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, first published in 1719, and examine how its thoroughly descriptive prose respects both the four precepts of method advocated by Descartes in *Discourse on Method* (which had been published in 1637) and the limits set to human understanding by Locke and Hume, respectively<sup>3</sup>. *Robinson Crusoe* is an autobiographical memoir, which narrates fictional events in chronological order, and Defoe doesn't allow its plot to contravene the imaginary physical limits set forth by the narrator. The story is told in the first-person, proceeds from the start of the protagonist's life, and likewise closes with Crusoe's final years and return to England.

Thus the opening of Defoe's masterpiece especially does justice to the third Cartesian precept of method, namely, "to conduct thoughts in an orderly fashion, by commencing with those objects that are simplest and easiest to know, in order to ascend little by little, as by degrees, to the knowledge of the most composite things, and by supposing an order even among those things that do not naturally precede one another"<sup>4</sup>. The narrative embodiment of these principles in *Robinson Crusoe* reads as follows:

I was born in the Year 1632, in the City of York, of a good Family, tho' not of that Country, my Father being a Foreigner of *Bremen*, who settled first at *Hull*: He got a good Estate by Merchandise, and leaving off his Trade, lived afterwards at *York*, from whence he had married my Mother, whose Relations were named *Robinson*, a very good Family in that Country, and from whom I was called *Robinson Kreutznaer*; but, by the usual Corruption of Words in *England*, we are now called, nay we call ourselves and write our Name *Crusoe*, and so my Companions always call'd me (DEFOE, 2001, p.1).

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<sup>3</sup> See Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* - 1689 and Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* -1738.

<sup>4</sup> The four precepts of method Descartes sets forth in Part II of the *Discourse on Method* are stated as follows: "The first was never to accept anything as true that I did not plainly know to be such; that is to say, carefully to avoid hasty judgement and prejudice; and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to call it in doubt. The second, to divide each of the difficulties I would examine into as many parts as possible and as was required in order better to resolve them. The third, to conduct my thoughts in an orderly fashion, by commencing with those objects that are simplest and easiest to know, in order to ascend little by little, as by degrees, to the knowledge of the most composite things, and by supposing an order even among those things that do not naturally precede one another. And the last, everywhere to make enumerations so complete and reviews so general, that I was assured of having omitted nothing." (DESCARTES, 1998, p.11).

Now, the mirror-like presentation of a fictional story, minutely adjusted to a consistent timeframe, will soon become a literary problem in its own right. The first edition of *Robinson Crusoe* dates from 1719, but by 1759 Laurence Sterne had already published *The life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, the main aim of which was to parody formal realism and the convention of time linearity in particular. The story of Tristram Shandy presents to the reader an array of linguistic and literary problems, which sharply contrast with the more straightforward temporal narrative progression of *Robinson Crusoe*. To begin with, Sterne allocates the narrative voice to *the mind* of his story's protagonist, whose first main difficulty is to bring the plot to the point of his birth, which, of course, does not correspond to the beginning of the book. The opening of Sterne's novel can thus be read as a staged rejection of the easy (or dogmatic) way in which Daniel Defoe introduces Crusoe to his reader:

[..] figure in the world, from that in which the reader is likely to see I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly considered how much depended upon what they were then doing; – that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind [...] might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost; – Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly, I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different me (STERNE, 2009, p.3).

The opening of *Tristram Shandy* presents at least two formal challenges to the realist technique adopted by Defoe. On the one hand, Sterne shows us that the reader's introduction to the world of the story is far from the easy and direct process suggested by Defoe's choice of structure. On the other hand, Sterne's introduction shows how the alleged authority of a writer over his literary characters can be challenged by the autonomy that might be won by the latter with regard to the former – especially when the narrative voice is located within the protagonist's conscience.

## Realism and self-subversion

As a literary parody, Sterne's masterpiece (sometimes called an "anti-novel") embodies a critical stance towards the structure of the (serious) realistic novel inaugurated by his English predecessors. The narrative method of *Tristram Shandy* is grounded in a strong awareness of the main features of formal realism: the particularity of time and space with regards to the narrated action, a detailed presentation of the characters, and a reliable time sequence framing narrated events. The author sets all these formal features in place, however, only to subvert them in

the text itself. Sterne's main target of criticism is a certain way of presenting narrated action in time, and his strategy of parodying the realistic presentation of temporal events characteristic of former novels is twofold. First, although he tells his story in the first person (a device also used by Defoe), he allocates the presentation of the entire narrative to his protagonist's *consciousness* – thus connecting the temporal sequence of the action to the temporal course of Tristram's consciousness.

Furthermore, Sterne adopts an odd literary device according to which each hour in the life of his protagonist ought to correspond to both an hour of writing, on his own part, and an hour of reading on the part of his audience. By means of this technique, he aims to create a literal one-to-one correspondence between narrated literary events – between moments as they are lived by the protagonist and as they are followed by the reader. Put differently, the author sets himself the task of building an absolute temporal correspondence between one hour of his writing, one hour in Tristram's consciousness, and one hour of our own engagement.

Now, it goes without saying that the result of such a hyper-realistic enterprise is doomed from the start, since it inevitably takes the author much more than an hour of writing to relate an hour in Tristram's life (that is, an hour of his awareness of his deeds); the more Sterne writes, the longer it takes us to read, moreover, and thus Sterne's first (impossible) target recedes at the same pace as the narrative's unfolding and the reading process. Precisely by pushing the temporal precepts of formal realism to their extreme, Sterne offers a *reductio ad absurdum* of the realistic foundations of the genre of the novel – something that will render him a widely acknowledged precursor of modernist writers in the beginning of the twentieth century<sup>5</sup>.

Long before Sterne's parody of formal realism in the English novel, though, Cervantes had already attempted modernist experiments in *Don Quixote*. This daring modernist potential is especially strong in a passage from Chapter VI of Part One, where the curer and the barber of the village in La Mancha thoroughly scrutinize the ingenious gentleman's library and burn a great deal of his books, for the sake of his mental health. On the one hand, we see here how difficult both find this enterprise – contrary to the practical, wise advice of Quixote's niece and the housekeeper, they find it extremely difficult not to praise some of the stories of chivalry, let alone to burn them. Here's how they find themselves mesmerized by the romances in Alonso's library:

“God bless me!” said the curate with a shout, Tirante el Blanco here! Hand it over, gossip, for in it I reckon I have found a treasury of enjoyment and a mine of recreation. Here is Don Kyrieleison of Montalvan, a valiant knight, and his brother Thomas of Montalvan, and the knight Fonseca, with the battle the bold Tirante fought with the mastiff, and the witticisms of the

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<sup>5</sup> Sterne was actually championed by Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

damsel Placerdemivida, and the loves and wiles of the widow Reposada, and the empress in love with the squire Hipolito – in truth, gossip, by right of its style it is the best book in the world. Here knights eat and sleep, and die in their beds, and make their wills before dying, and a great deal more of which there is nothing in all the other books. [...] Take it home with you and read it, and you will see that what I have said is true (CERVANTES, 2012, p.87).

On the other hand, we later encounter the barber and the curer discovering in Quixote's library one book by Miguel de Cervantes himself:

But what book is that next to it? – The “Galatea” of Miguel de Cervantes, said the barber. – That Cervantes has been for many years a great friend of mine, and to my knowledge he has had more experience in reverses than in verses. His book has some good invention in it, it presents us with something but brings nothing to a conclusion: we must wait for the Second Part it promises: perhaps with amendment it may succeed in winning the full measure of grace that is now denied it; and in the meantime do you, señor gossip, keep it shut up in your own quarters (CERVANTES, 2012, p.89).

This parodied reference to the work's own author – in a book dated back to 1605 – is an early prompting of the very modernist “awareness of art as art”, though it is used here as a satiric technique in the service of his resourceful critique of a whole lineage of chivalric romancers.

Cervantes's main literary purpose may be conceived as a staged overcoming of the typical chivalric idealism in romances, in terms of both plot and technique or style. Upon reflection, though, we find that precisely this kind of strategic questioning of literary ancestors comes as an inheritance to the modernist novel<sup>6</sup> – thus establishing a common feature across otherwise very different instances of a literary genre particularly hard to define in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.

Almost paradoxically, two seemingly disparate elements each belong within a broader, richer understanding of “formal realism”: on the one hand, a realistic prose meant to depict in language both the psychological world and the day-to-day experience of a set of characters, and, on the other hand, subtle technical devices that illuminate the prose's status *as art*, as itself the product of technique and

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, J. M. Coetzee's modernist reflection on main features of formal realism in Elizabeth Costello: “The blue costume, the greasy hair, are details, signs of moderate realism. Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves. A procedure pioneered by Daniel Defoe. Robinson Crusoe, cast up on the beach, looks around for his shipmates. But there are none. “I never saw them afterwards, or any sign of them”, says he, “except three of their hats, one cap, and two shoes that were not fellows”. Two shoes, not fellows: by not being fellows, the shoes have ceased to be footwear and become proofs of death, torn by the foaming seas off the feet of drowning men and tossed ashore. No large words, no despair, just hats and caps and shoes” (COETZEE, 2003, p.4).



convention, thereby unmasking and revealing the structures through which reality is communicated to the reader.

It is in light of these two seemingly conflicting strands that one might insist upon an interesting similarity between the epigraphs to this paper written by Cervantes and O'Brien. Both texts embody the aim of representing the subject-matter truthfully, as imaginatively perceived by the novelist and intentionally conveyed to his reader via the conventional device that is the tool of his trade. On the one hand, a strongly denotative employment of language, in contrast with a merely allusive or metaphorical one, is as pervasive in *Don Quixote* as it is in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (or in *Elizabeth Costello*, for that matter); this is a dominant feature of formal realism, as is the detailed presentation of individual characters (rather than merely abstract human types) and a historical rooting of the plot in a specific social milieu. On the other hand, in both epigraphs the text refers to itself in some way or another. In the first example, the author chooses to open the story with a reflection on the structure of the text at hand; in the second, the writer very critically refers to himself as the author of another book. The two texts thus employ stylistic devices that, in resonating with the content of the story itself, are now typically associated with some of the neo-realistic features characteristic of self-reflexive ponderings on the literary prose itself deployed by classics of literary modernism.

## **Two interpretive models, one issue: how to represent an invented reality**

In his 2005 study, *The English Novel: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton, in a broadly Marxist approach, insists that it was the extraordinary rise of the middle-class throughout eighteenth-century Europe that, via a narrative mirroring of its social struggles and aspirations, paved the way for the realist novel. Eagleton grounds his critical reading of canonical English-language novels, reaching from the work of Daniel Defoe to that of Virginia Woolf (the book not only argues for an historical model for interpreting the evolution of the genre, but also follows the historical evolution of the canon), on an essentially sociological model, arguing that the ascending middle-class can be characterized in its *praxis* as the great protagonist of the liberal values of individual self-determination and prosperity, unwilling to stand for romantic myths and general abstractions – and that its most representative writers projected the main values defended by the class to which they belong. For Eagleton, then, the realistic prose of most eighteenth-century literature both mirrors and embodies the pragmatic values of a new social order. If we accept that the purpose of the realistic novel is to do justice to the facts, to life as it stands in the new social dispensation, we must also assume that the mirroring of this social arrangement via an inevitably *conventional* medium – a natural language – is the true purpose of

realistic prose. The linguistic convention that makes narrative possible is an essentially *phenomenal* device, in the sense that it allows for the linguistic manifestation of the facts as they stand.

Both in the introduction to his study, “What is a Novel”, and in his critical discussion of the English canon, Eagleton relies on a socio-dialectical model to explain literary formal realism. According to this stance, the realistic, self-effacing style of the eighteenth-century English novel is as much a product of the contemporary *liberal social order* as the modernistic turn of the early twentieth century is a product of the social and political disasters that resulted in the Holocaust. To Eagleton, if the novel indeed has representative potential, so does the social order whose essentially evolutionary dialectic can also be depicted by conventional linguistic means.

By contrast, Stephen Mulhall (in a chapter in *The Wounded Animal*<sup>7</sup> and in two essays in *The Self and its Shadows*<sup>8</sup>) considers the tension between realism and modernism in the work of John Coetzee, detecting in this development what I have schematically termed a “conventionalist” pattern of self-overcoming with regard to inherited literary styles.

At the risk of oversimplifying Mulhall’s dense account of realist modernism in the contemporary novel (which will serve my own purposes below), I would describe his proposal as follows. Mulhall insists upon the existence of an inner and inevitably doomed struggle within literary prose itself, present since the very inception of the novel. Thus the novel struggles against its own conventional status as a genre in the name of fidelity to the facts. However, since these supposed facts are themselves a product of the literary imagination (and since, as linguistic creations, they are particularly conventional), the realistic novel is logically doomed to inflict on its descendants the same Oedipal tension that it inherited from its ancestors. Mulhall describes this dialectic process as follows:

The history of the novel since Defoe, Richardson and Sterne might therefore be written entirely in terms of the ways in which novelists repeatedly subject their inheritance of realistic conventions to critical questioning in order to recreate the impression of reality in their readers (in large part by encouraging those readers to see prior uses of convention to represent the real as *merely conventional* in contrast with their own, far more convincing ones). [...] [I]t is not simply that the novel has a cannibalistic relation to *other* literary genres; from the outset, its practitioners had a similarly *Oedipal relation to prior examples* within the genre of the novel, and so to the prior conventions within which they necessarily operated (MULHALL, 2009, p.145, my emphasis).

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<sup>7</sup> Chapter Nine of Part Two: “Realism, Modernism and the Novel” (MULHALL, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Especially in “The Melodramatic Reality of Film and Literature” and “Countering the Ballad of Co-Dependency” (MULHALL, 2013).

This dialectic of self-overcoming is made all the more acute by the progressive awareness, on the part of the novelist, that the methodological design of formal realism cannot but be accomplished through a means of expression which is highly conventional or non-natural. And this self-awareness, as we have seen before, can be detected in works as early as *Don Quixote*.

The potential for reflection afforded by the insurmountable barrier separating the realistic writer from the factual world that his prose intends to represent provides a path for awareness of the facticity of the prose itself and for reflection, through that very prose, on both its representative potential and its representative limits. This in turn calls for a reflective fold within the prose itself in what concerns the conditions of its own possibility as a (conventional) representative device. In a textbook on literary modernism, Peter Childs describes this decisive shift as follows:

Typical aspects to this kind of “modernist” writing are radical aesthetics, technical experimentation, spatial or rhythmic rather than chronological form, self-conscious reflexiveness, skepticism towards the idea of a centered human subject and a sustained inquiry into the uncertainty of reality.[...] Modernism [was thus] concerned with self-referentiality, producing art that was about itself and texts that were self-contained rather than representational (CHILDS, 2008, p.19).

This element of self-referentiality, though, can be traced back, as we’ve seen above, to the very inception of the genre in Cervantes masterpiece.

### **Self-subverting models: concluding remarks**

To the extent that the above suggests a strict dichotomy between two possible interpretive models of the evolution of the realism/modernism dialectic in the history of the novel, I myself have been generating a fiction about the sort of literary prose that aims to represent invented stories about made up characters whilst doing justice to social and psychological reality. To that effect, I have identified two models with terms of my own, stating that whereas Eagleton’s model is essentially socio-dialectical, Mulhall’s account emphasizes a conscious self-overcoming of the constraints provided by literary convention. And now I want to say that, in truth, neither of the two models functions *exclusively* of the other as a means of capturing the true nature of the development of literary realism and the turn to modernism. Even if one accepts as one’s starting point the historical emergence of the European middle-class from the eighteenth century onwards – insisting, e.g., upon the increase of literacy over this period, as Ian Watt does in his classic study<sup>9</sup> – the shattering events of the twentieth

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<sup>9</sup> See Watt (2000), chap. II: “The Reading Public and the Rise of the Novel”.

century are such that the historical developments emphasized in the socio-economic model come to be reflected in precisely the struggle against inherited convention emphasized by the “conventionalist” approach outlined above. The struggle against inherited conventions comes to acquire a political slant on its own. Given the unique and devastating nature of the historical realities in question, reflection on one element cannot be undertaken in isolation of careful reflection on the other.

In other words, as the life conditions of the rising middle class become less and less uniform, shifting from the rural and bucolic to the urban and industrial, to the point of a complete emptying of the value of the external, social world – a world which, running from the horrors of the Industrial Revolution up to the carnage of World War I, is about to become a source of sheer trauma – such changes must come into the prose of its novelists. And thus no sociological model that can account for the *modernistic turn* in the European novel in the last decade of the nineteenth century can dispense with Oedipal struggles within and against literary conventions that have become either incomplete or totally obsolete as a means of representing reality as it truly stands. As the relevant social developments themselves come to be characterized by a breakdown in structure, unity and value, their representation becomes inseparable from a struggle against increasingly inadequate conventions.

Without ever losing sight of his Marxist approach, Terry Eagleton himself touches on this interlacing of perspectives in the introduction to his study when he writes:

“Organic form” is now so unattainable, or so flagrantly arbitrary, that it is either thrown to the winds or, as with a work like James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, grotesquely parodied. The modern world is too fragmentary for the novel to mold it into a totality; but it is also because there is simply too much of it, too many specialist jargons and domains of knowledge, that this is no longer feasible. What the modernist novel tends to give us instead is a kind of empty signifier of a totality which is no longer possible (EAGLETON, 2005, p.19).

But Mulhall goes deeper in his approach to the issue, perhaps in part because he is able to do without methodological glasses (either Marxist or of any other sort). Both in *The Wounded Animal* – especially in those chapters that most insist upon the dangerous overlapping of the literary identities of Elizabeth Costello and J.M. Coetzee – and in the more recent “Countering the Ballad of Co-dependency”, Mulhall explores various possibilities for staging the literary encounter between realism and modernism in the story of Elizabeth Costello, displayed in the novel of the same name. But that *staging* is never merely theoretical, if only because his philosophical prose embodies what it stands for.

Allow me to clarify this thought. Readers of *Elizabeth Costello* are introduced to events that take place in the protagonist's academic life and in her everyday family life – both of which happen to be products of Coetzee's literary imagination. We come to read about *her* physical decay, which contrasts sharply with the prodigiousness of her literary imagination and the playful recreation of the history of the novel that she provides in *The House on Eccles Street* (supposedly a novel by Costello herself, to which we as readers of Coetzee's book have no access whatever), in the Gates Lecture at Appleton College, and in private conversation with John, her son. In the course of her lecture at Appleton College, Costello even tackles the meaning of Kafka's *Report to an Academy*, the strange narrative starting point of which (an ape addressing a human audience) perhaps resembles her own situation in delivering the Gates Lecture.

The set of episodes in Costello's life brought together by Coetzee in a novel several years after their individual presentation as talks<sup>10</sup> does not present us with a theory about the (realistic) evolution of formal realism up to the modernistic turn; rather, the book *stages* or *performs* this evolution, in part by including the representation of some rather unexpected events during Costello's (fictional) visit to Appleton College and John's family.

What happens during this visit (both the lectures and the meetings they occasion), provides the raw material for a realistic novel which, in a modernistic fashion, reflects both upon its own conditions of possibility and development as a specimen of the genre and upon the historical evolution of the latter. *Elizabeth Costello* is precisely this novel, and Mulhall, in his reading of it and the modernistic turn it instantiates, chooses to bring neither its story nor the puzzle of the identity of its author and narrator into a scholarly frame. Instead, battling against the standards relied upon by his own analytic-philosophical tradition, he does justice to the literary and philosophical aspects of both (story and puzzle) and gives them a voice in his own reading – itself an example of the interdisciplinary “conversation” between philosophy and literary criticism that becomes possible when traditional, discipline-specific strictures are loosened. In precisely this way, his own work represents a critical response to traditional philosophical modes of investigation, and thus also an Oedipal overcoming of his methodological inheritance, in a philosophically replicated enactment of the model he had been proposing to interpret the evolution of the genre of the novel.

FALCATO, A. C. Chegar ao coração da matéria: realismo e modernismo no romance. **Revista de Letras**, São Paulo, v.55, n.1, p.9-23, jan./jun. 2015.

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<sup>10</sup> The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at Princeton University in 1997, under the title “The Lives of Animals” and published in 1999.

- **RESUMO:** *Este artigo elabora um modelo teórico para avaliar a evolução da técnica do realismo formal no gênero do romance, desde o seu nascimento até ao giro modernista iniciado na última década do século XIX. Defendo que o realismo no romance está estruturalmente conectado com uma questão de índole filosófica: a questão da representação. Porém, a própria noção de “representação” torna-se um ponto de discórdia na literatura e na filosofia modernas, na medida em que não é possível comparar representações linguísticas com a própria realidade, como teste de precisão para aferir o respectivo acordo entre ambas, uma vez que aquilo que entendemos por “realidade” já implica questões de representação. Para melhor entender este puzzle, examinam-se dois modelos explicativos: o primeiro foca especialmente o desenvolvimento crítico das convenções literárias, o segundo parte de desenvolvimentos de tipo psicossocial. A conclusão extraída do balanço de ambos os modelos é que nenhum dos dois pode, por si só, explicar o impulso para um método de representação realista e a respectiva evolução de aspectos formais determinantes nessa convenção, que conduzirão ao giro modernista.*
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Representação no romance. Realismo e auto-superação. Técnicas narrativas. Filosofia e crítica literária.*

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