

An illustration of two men in a room with a decorative window. One man is on the left, leaning over and using a tool on the floor. The other man is on the right, kneeling and looking down. The floor is covered with a pile of debris or leaves. The window has a decorative metal grille.

THE ANTINOMIES
OF REALISM
FREDRIC JAMESON

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V
V E R S O
London • New York

First published by Verso 2013

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“The Experiment of Time” first appeared in Franco Moretti, ed.,

Il Romanzo, Torino: Einaudi, 2004

“War and Representation” was first published in *PMLA*

124:5, October 2009

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Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG

US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201

www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-78168-133-6

eISBN (US): 978-1-78168-191-6

eISBN (UK): 978-1-78168-502-0

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

v3.1

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Introduction: Realism and its Antinomies

PART ONE: THE ANTINOMIES OF REALISM

- I The Twin Sources of Realism: The Narrative Impulse
- II The Twin Sources of Realism: Affect, or, the Body's Present
- III Zola, or, the Codification of Affect
- IV Tolstoy, or, Distraction
- V Pérez Galdós, or, the Waning of Protagonicity
- VI George Eliot and *Mauvaise Foi*
- VII Realism and the Dissolution of Genre
- VIII The Swollen Third Person, or, Realism after Realism
- IX Coda: Kluge, or, Realism after Affect

PART TWO: THE LOGIC OF THE MATERIAL

- I The Experiments of Time: Providence and Realism
- II War and Representation
- III The Historical Novel Today, or, Is it Still Possible?

Introduction: Realism and its Antinomies

I have observed a curious development which always seems to set in when we attempt to hold the phenomenon of realism firmly in our mind's eye. It is as though the object of our meditation began to wobble, and the attention to it to slip insensibly away from it in two opposite directions, so that at length we find we are thinking, not about realism, but about its emergence; not about the thing itself, but about its dissolution. Much great work, indeed, has been done on these lateral topics: on the former, for example, Ian Watt's canonical *Rise of the Novel* and Michael McKeon's monumental *Origins of the Novel*; and on the latter, any number of those collections entitled "problems of realism" (in which Lukács deplored the degeneration of realistic practice into naturalism, symbolism and modernism), or "towards a new novel" (in which Robbe-Grillet argued the unsuitability of Balzacian techniques for capturing our current realities). I will later explain how these slippages determined the form of the theory about to be presented.

First, however, we must enumerate a number of other possibilities which are not explored here (but which this particular theoretical exercise is by no means intended to exclude). Thus the most ancient literary category of all—mimesis—still inspires work and thought, enshrined as anthropology and psychology in the Frankfurt School's idiosyncratic notion of the mimetic impulse; and provocatively worked out, following Lenin's reflection theory (*Widerspiegelung*) by scholars like Robert Weimann.¹ (Auerbach's use of the term, not exactly classical, will be mentioned below). Aristotle did not, of course, know that form we call the novel, a product of Hegel's "world of prose"; nor are we taking theatrical practice into account in the present book (so much the worse for it!); and indeed, my suspicion is that later discussions of the term tend to be contaminated by those of the visual arts, and to be influenced either in the direction of representationality or abstraction (in painting) or that of Hollywood or the experimental in film.

This is the moment at which to assert the inevitability, in the realism debate, of what has just been illustrated by the turn to visuality, namely the inescapable operative value, in any discussion of realism, of this or that binary opposition in terms of which it has been defined. It is this, above all, which makes any definitive resolution of the matter impossible: for one thing, binary opposites make unavoidable the taking of sides (unless, as with Arnold Hausen or in a different way, Worringer, one sees it as some eternal cyclical alternation²). Realism for or against: but as opposed to what? At this point the list becomes at least relatively interminable: realism vs. romance, realism vs. epic, realism vs. melodrama, realism vs. idealism,³ realism vs. naturalism, (bourgeois or critical) realism vs. socialist realism, realism vs. the oriental tale,⁴ and of course, most frequently rehearsed of all, realism vs. modernism. As is inevitably the case with such a play of opposites, each of them becomes inevitably invested with political and even metaphysical significance, as, with film criticism, in the no

somewhat antiquated opposition between Hollywood “realism” and formal subversions such as those associated with the *nouvelle vague* and Godard.⁵ Most of these binary pairs will therefore arouse a passionate taking of sides, in which realism is either denounced or elevated to the status of an ideal (aesthetic or otherwise).

The definition of realism by way of such oppositions can also take on a historical, or periodizing, character. Indeed, the opposition between realism and modernism already implies a historical narrative which it is fairly difficult to reduce to a structural or stylistic one; but which it is also difficult to control, since it tends to generate other periods beyond its limits, one of postmodernity, for example, if some putative end of the modern is itself posited; or of some preliminary stage of Enlightenment and secularization invoked to precede the period of realism as such, in a logic of periodization bound to lead on into the positioning of a classical system or a pre-capitalist system of fixed modes and genres, and so forth. Whether such a focus on periodization necessarily leads out of literary history into cultural history in general (and beyond that to the history of modes of production) probably depends on how one situates capitalism itself and its specific cultural system in the sequence in question. The focus, in other words, tends to relativize realism as one mode among many others, unless, by the use of mediatory concepts such as that of modernity, one places capitalism uniquely at the center of human history.

For at this point another combination comes into play, and that is the tendency to identify realism with the novel itself as a uniquely modern form (but not necessarily a “modernist” one). Discussions of either concept tend to become indistinguishable from the other, at least when the history of either is invoked: the history of the novel is inevitably the history of the realist novel, against which or underneath which all the aberrant modes, such as the fantastical novel or the episodic novel, are subsumed without much protest. But by the same token, chronology is itself equally subsumed, and a Bakhtin can argue that “novel-ness” is itself a sign, perhaps the fundamental sign and symptom, of a “modernity” that can be found in the Alexandrian world fully as much as in the Ming dynasty.⁶

Indeed, Bakhtin is himself among the major figures for whom the novel, or realism as such, is both a literary phenomenon and a symptom of the quality of social life. For Bakhtin, the novel is the vehicle of polyphony or the recognition and expression of a multiplicity of social voices: it is therefore modern in its democratic opening onto an ideologically multiple population. Auerbach also invokes democracy in an analogous sense, even though for him this opening is global and consists in the conquest and achievement of a “realist” social life of modernity around the world.⁷ But for Auerbach “realism,” or mimesis in his sense, is a syntactic conquest, the slow appropriation of syntactic forms capable of holding together multiple levels of a complex reality and a secular daily life, whose twin climaxes in the West he celebrates in Dante and in Zola.

Lukács is more ambivalent in his reading of the novel’s formal and historical record: in the *Theory of the Novel*, the form is essentially distinguished by its capacity of registering social problematization and the irreconcilable contradictions of a purely secular modernity. The latter becomes reidentified as capitalism, in the later Lukács, and the novel with realism whose task is now the reawakening of the dynamics of history.⁸

But in all three apologists for the realist novel as a form (so to speak), it is never very clear whether that form simply registers the advanced state of a given society or plays a part

society's awareness of that advanced state and its potentialities (political and otherwise). The ambiguity (or hesitation) will characterize the evaluative approaches to realism I want to outline in this initial survey, and which grasp the problem in terms of form and content, respectively.

Realism as a form (or mode) is historically associated, particularly if you position the *Quijote* as the first (modern, or realist) novel, with the function of demystification. It is a function which can take many forms, in this foundational instance the undermining of romance as a genre, along with the use of its idealizing values to foreground features of the social reality they cannot accommodate. I have mentioned a first period of modernity in which the tasks of enlightenment and in particular secularization were fundamental (in a kind of bourgeois cultural revolution): these are for realism essentially negative, critical or destructive tasks which will later on give way to the construction of bourgeois subjectivity, but as the construction of the subject is always an intervention supported by taboos and inner restrictions of all kinds (one model of which is Weber's "protestant ethic"), the eradication of inherited psychic structures and values will remain a function of realist narrative, whose force always comes from this painful cancellation of tenaciously held illusions. But later on when the realistic novel begins to discover (or if you prefer, to construct) altogether new kinds of subjective experiences (from Dostoyevsky to Henry James), the negative social function begins to weaken, and demystification finds itself transformed into defamiliarization and the renewal of perception, a more modernist impulse, while the emotional tone of such texts tends towards resignation, renunciation or compromise, as both Lukács and Moret have noted.

But the very ideology of realism also tends to stage it in terms of content, and here clearly the realist mode is closely associated with the bourgeoisie and the coming into being of bourgeois daily life: this, I would like to insist, is also very much a construction, and it is a construction in which realism and narrative participate. Sartre argued that mimesis is always at least tendentially critical: holding up a mirror to nature, in this case bourgeois society, never really shows people what they want to see, and is always to that degree demystifying. Certainly the attacks on realism which have already been mentioned are based on the idea that the literature of realism has the ideological function of adapting its readers to bourgeois society as it currently exists, with its premium on comfort and inwardness, on individualism, on the acceptance of money as an ultimate reality (we might today speak of the acceptance of the market, of competition, of a certain image of human nature, and so forth). I myself argued elsewhere in this collection that the realistic novelist has a vested interest, an ontological stake, in the solidity of social reality, on the resistance of bourgeois society to history and change.¹⁰ Meanwhile, it could also be argued that in a stylistic and ideological sense, the consumerism of late capitalism is no longer a bourgeois society in that sense, and no longer knows the forms of daily life that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: so that realism inevitably gives way to modernism insofar as its privileged content has become extinct. This argument thus makes a fundamental distinction between a bourgeois classical culture and the economic dynamics of late capitalism.

I have outlined these multiple approaches to realism not only to make the point about its contextual variability as an object, but also to admit, finally, that I plan to do none of these things here. Realism, as I argued elsewhere, is a hybrid concept, in which an epistemological

claim (for knowledge or truth) masquerades as an aesthetic ideal, with fatal consequences for both of these incommensurable dimensions.¹¹ If it is social truth or knowledge we want from realism, we will soon find that what we get is ideology; if it is beauty or aesthetic satisfaction we are looking for, we will quickly find that we have to do with outdated styles or mere decoration (if not distraction). And if it is history we are looking for—either social history or the history of literary forms—then we are at once confronted with questions about the use of the past and even the access to it which, as unanswerable as they may be, take us well beyond literature and theory and seem to demand an engagement with our own present.¹²

From a dialectical standpoint it is not hard to see why this is so. Both sociology and aesthetics are superannuated forms of thinking and inquiry, inasmuch as neither society nor what is called cultural or aesthetic experience are in this present of time stable substances that can be studied empirically and analyzed philosophically. History, meanwhile, if it is anything at all, is at one with the dialectic, and can only be the problem of which it claims to be the solution.

My experiment here claims to come at realism dialectically, not only by taking as its object of study the very antinomies themselves into which every constitution of this or that realism seems to resolve: but above all by grasping realism as a historical and even evolutionary process in which the negative and the positive are inextricably combined, and whose emergence and development at one and the same time constitute its own inevitable undoing and its own decay and dissolution. The stronger it gets, the weaker it gets; winner loses; its success is its failure. And this is meant, not in the spirit of the life cycle (“ripeness is all”), or of evolution or of entropy or historical rises and falls: it is to be grasped as a paradox and an anomaly, and the thinking of it as a contradiction or an aporia. Yet as Derrida observed, the aporia is not so much “an absence of path, a paralysis before roadblocks” so much as the promise of “the thinking of the path.”¹³ For me, however, aporetic thinking is precisely the dialectic itself; and the following exercise will therefore be for better or for worse a dialectical experiment.

But we need to have a better idea of what Deleuze might have called the image of the concept, the shape of some new dialectical solution, before continuing. Hegel’s thought certainly had some distinctive shapes, but it is not a question of adopting any of those forms here and today; nor does the word “dialectical” give us much help except to revive antiquated formulas, many of which are not even historically accurate.

The unity of opposites, for example, will certainly characterize a situation in which what brings a phenomenon into being also gradually undermines and destroys it. But the content of these fundamental categories is not identifiable: what is negative and what is positive in the trajectory of realism (it being understood that the struggles over its ideological value are not yet even in play here)? Indeed, on any responsible reading of Hegel it will have been clear that what is positive in its own eyes is negative from the standpoint of its opposite number and vice versa: so nothing much is gained here except the notion of unity—unity not as synthesis but rather as antagonism, the unity of attraction and repulsion, the unity of struggle.

What is also gained—but it may well simply have been some unconscious structuralist premise, smuggled in *avant la lettre*—is the sense that we still have to do here with a binary opposition. I have argued elsewhere that the play of oppositions we have grown accustomed

to since structuralism is not some newfangled linguistic supplement, but already exists fully developed in Hegel's own time and work, who derives them from ancient philosophy.¹⁴ But now what we need to do is not only to give some literary content to this abstract form, but also to demonstrate such an opposition at work within realism itself (and not externally between realism and some other kind of discourse). Meanwhile, the superficial traits that come at first to mind—the new plain-language *écriture* versus the language of dialogue, for example—must not only be specific to realism itself but must also entertain some relationship to the seemingly more external question of realism's coming into being and going hence.

Taken all together in bulk, the heterogeneous materials that somehow end up coalescing into what we call the novel—or realism!—include the following: ballads and broadsheet newspaper sketches, memoirs, diaries and letters, the Renaissance tale, and even popular forms like the play or the folk- or fairy-tale. What is selected from such a mass of different types of writing is its narrative component (even when, as for Balzac or Dickens, the component is first offered as a seemingly static description of characteristic types of activities, of picturesque or costumbrista evocations). To put it this way is to isolate something like a narrative impulse which is also realized in the novel as a form, but perhaps does not exhaust the novel's energy sources.

What could then constitute the opposite of the narrative impulse as such? Taken too abstractly and speculatively we could surely think of any number of non-narrative sentence types: judgements, for example, such as the moral a storyteller might want to add on at the end, or a bit of the folk wisdom with which George Eliot liked to regale her readers. But the most inveterate alternative to narrative as such reminds us that storytelling is a temporal art and always seems to single out a painterly moment in which the onward drive of narrative is checked if not suspended altogether. The shield of Achilles!: this is the most famous instance of that suspension of narrative which still remained to be theorized as late as Lessing's *Laocoon* in the late eighteenth century. Will the ancient rhetorical trope of ekphrasis be sufficient to fold this descriptive impulse back into narrative homogeneity?

Everyone knows the patience one must bring to his novels as Balzac slowly sets in place his various components—description of the town, history of the profession, the loving enumeration of the parts of the house, inside and out, the family itself, the physiognomy of the protagonist and his or her favorite clothes, his or her favorite *emploi du temps*—in short all those different types of discourse which as raw material were to have been fused back together in this new form, but which Balzac unapologetically requires us to plow through on our way to the story itself (which will eventually satisfy any taste for reckless momentum and suspense and action we may have had to hold in check during those opening pages).

But if all it accomplished was to lead us back to Lessing and the status of ekphrasis today, this search for the opposite of the narrative impulse will not have been very productive. Perhaps, indeed, the more satisfactory identification of narrative's opposite number is better sought at the other end of the history of the genre, namely at the moment of realism's dissolution, which we always seem to call modernism, without feeling the need to rummage among the innumerable modernisms, not all of them reducible to a single denominator in the first place.

But this procedure, which assumes that by subtracting the modern from narrative we will be left with the essence of realism, assumes that some general definition of what modernism

is (or was) is available, an optimistic assumption which generally results in a few stereotypical formulae (it is subjectivist—the inward turn; reflexive or conscious of its own procedures; formalistic in the sense of a heightened attention to its own raw materials; and narrative; and deeply imbued with a mystique of art itself). Roland Barthes took a wiser and more prudent position on the matter: “When it comes to the ‘modern,’ you can only carry out tactical-style operations: at certain times you feel it’s necessary to intervene to signal some shift in the landscape or some new inflection in modernity.”¹⁵ But his own experience, to be sure, expressed the preoccupations of the post-war period, in which, in what I have called the “late modern,” the effort to theorize and to name what had happened in the first half of the twentieth century became a dominant theoretical ambition.

There are also more paradoxical trajectories to be followed: as for example in film, where Tom Gunning has identified what in our present context might be described as a movement from modernism to realism. D. W. Griffith, who rightly or wrongly is traditionally credited with having invented the modern (fiction) film as we know it (relying indeed very heavily on literature and in particular on Dickens), began with atmospheric sketches (of a photographic nature) which it was his mission to develop into plots and narrativity as such.¹⁶

The example suggests that, whatever thematic clue we choose to follow in our identification of the opposite number to the narrative impulse, its theorization will ultimately involve that most paradoxical of philosophical problems, namely the conceptualization of time and temporality. In the world of art, it is a dilemma compounded by our limited vocabulary: for even the *récit* or tale, whose events are already over and done with before the telling of it can begin, is experienced by listener or reader (and above all, of course, by the viewer) as a present of time, but it is of course our present, the present of reading time and not that of the events themselves.

So in what follows I will approach the question of realism from the angle of temporality and I will suggest that the opposite number of that chronological temporality of the *récit* has somehow to do with a present; but with a different kind of presence than the one marked out by the tripartite temporal system of past-present-future, or even by that of the before and after. For all kinds of reasons, to be developed in the following pages, I will identify this present—or what Alexander Kluge calls the “insurrection of the present against the other temporalities”¹⁷—as the realm of affect.

As the rather crude misuse of this term will be explained later on, I might as well generalize our other impulse with equally decisive approximation and replace the very general word “narrative” with a far sharper and more limited *Fremdwort*, which is the French “*récit*,” and which transforms narrative into the narrative situation itself and the telling of a tale as such.

This means that we now have in our grasp the two chronological end points of realism: its genealogy in storytelling and the tale, its future dissolution in the literary representation of affect. A new concept of realism is then made available when we grasp both these terminus points firmly at one and the same time.

A number of images come to mind for the shape of this thought: the electrical one of negative and positive currents is perhaps not the most reassuring one. But one can also imagine the strands of DNA winding tightly about each other, or a chemical process in which the introduction of a fresh reagent precipitates a combination which then slowly dissolves.

again as too much of the element in question is added. But it is the dialectical formulation which, taken as an image of thought rather than a philosophical proposition in its own right, still strikes me as the most suggestive: for in it positive force becomes negative (quantity changing into quality) without the determination of a threshold being required, and emergence and dissolution are thought together in the unity of a single thought, beyond all too-human judgements that claim to separate the positive from the negative, the good from the bad. Still, what I will want to insist on in such images is the irrevocable antagonism between the twin (and entwined) forces in question: they are never reconciled, never forced back into one another in some ultimate reconciliation and identity; and the very force and pungency of the realist writing I here examine is predicated on that tension, which must remain an impossible one, under pain of losing itself altogether and dissipating if it is ever resolved in favor of one of the parties to the struggle.

What we call realism will thus come into being in the symbiosis of this pure form of storytelling with impulses of scenic elaboration, description and above all affective investment, which allow it to develop towards a scenic present which in reality, but secretly, abhors the other temporalities which constitute the force of the tale or *récit* in the first place.

The new scenic impulse will also detect its enemies in the hierarchy of characters who people the tale, which can scarcely be conceived without a protagonist. In particular, it will wage a ceaseless muffled battle against the structures of melodrama by which it is ceaselessly menaced; in the process also throwing off other genres such as the *Bildungsroman*, which for a while seemed so central to it as to define it. Its final battle will be raged in the microstructures of language and in particular against the dominance of point of view which seems to hold the affective impulses in check and lend them the organizing attribution of central consciousness. Engaging this final battle will however exhaust and destroy it, and realism thereby leaves an odd assortment of random tools and techniques to its shrivelled posterity, who still carry its name on into an era of mass culture and rival media.

So Part One of the present text is by way of offering a phenomenological and structural model, an experiment which posits a unique historical situation without exploring the context of that situation, as so many indispensable studies of the various realisms have already done. Of the two chronological sequels to the moment of realism—modernism and postmodernism—only the latter outcome will be briefly sketched in conclusion. The essay that comprises Part One is followed by three monographs on the relationships of narrative possibility to its specific raw material. *The Antinomies of Realism* constitutes the third volume of the sequence called *The Poetics of Social Forms*.

April 2011

¹ Robert Weimann, "Mimesis in Hamlet," in Geoffrey Hartman and Patricia Parker, eds., *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, New York: Routledge, 1985; and see also Dieter Schlenstedt, ed., *Literarische Widerspiegelung*, Berlin: Aufbau, 1981.

² I refer to Arnold Hauser's *Social History of Art* (1954) as well as Wilhelm Worringer's influential and rather cosmological oppositions in *Abstraction and Empathy* (1907).

³ The provocative concept of an idealist novel was developed by Naomi Schor in her study of George Sand and elaborated by Jane Tompkins in her work on the American western, where it also involved Christian religious and familial traditions (which the traditional western functioned to undermine).

- ⁴ See Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
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- ⁵ And with *Screen* magazine in its heyday in the 1960s and '70s.
- ⁶ See, for example, his essay, "Epic and Novel," in Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogical Imagination*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.
- ⁷ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952, "a common life of mankind on earth."
- ⁸ The most succinct summary of Lukács' formal views is to be found in "Narrate or Describe?" in George Lukács, *Writer as Critic*, London: Merlin, 1970. We will see that this opposition is fundamental in explaining his (equally political) rejection of Zola's naturalism.
- ⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature? and Other Essays*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, 91: "The mirror which he modestly offers to his readers is magical: it enralls and compromises."
- ¹⁰ See "The Experiments of Time: Providence and Realism," in Part Two of this volume.
- ¹¹ See Jameson, "The Existence of Italy," in *Signatures of the Visible*, New York: Routledge, 1992.
- ¹² It is not only the content of literature which is itself profoundly historical (and necessarily has its own shaping influence on the form), it is also the sensory medium itself; it is always instructive to recall Marx on the history of the senses (*Early Writings*, London: Penguin, 1975, 351–55).
- ¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, 132.
- ¹⁴ See Michael N. Forster, *Hegel and Skepticism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, 10–13, on "equipollence."
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Why I Love Barthes*, trans. Andrew Brown, London: Polity, 2011, 39. My own proposals for modernism can be found in *A Singular Modernity*, London: Verso, 2002.
- ¹⁶ See Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991.
- ¹⁷ The title of one of his books: *Der Angriff der Gegenwart gegen die übrige Zeit*, Frankfurt: Europaeische Verlagsanstalt, 1985.

PART I

THE ANTINOMIES OF REALISM

Chapter I

The Twin Sources of Realism: The Narrative Impulse

If there is anything distinctive to be discovered about realism, then, we will not find it without somehow distinguishing between realism and narrative in general, or without, at least, mapping some vague general zone of narrative which lies outside it (at the same time including it as well, since the realisms are presumably narratives themselves). Single-shot answers always seem possible: the fantastic, for example, or so-called primitive myth (the very word *mythos* means narrative); or in some narrower and more literary sense, the epic (insofar as we distinguish it from the novel), or the oral tale, insofar as we distinguish it from the written one.

This is not the solution I want to begin with here, for I am looking for a storytelling impulse that precedes the formation of the realist novel and yet persists within it, albeit transformed by a host of new connections and relationships. I will call the products of this impulse simply the tale, with the intent of emphasizing its structural versatility, its aptness for transformation and exploitation by the other forms just enumerated. The tale can therefore be pressed into service by epic performance fully as much as by tribal and mythic storytelling, by the Renaissance art-novella and its equivalents in the Romantic period, by the ballad, by sub-forms and subgenres like the ghost story or SF, indeed by the very forms and strictures of the short story itself, as a specific strict formal practice in its own right with its own history.

At the level of abstraction at which we are working, then, the tale becomes the generalized object of which narration is the generalized production process or activity, but this general specification also becomes a convenient way of evading psychological or anthropological analysis of that activity, which would be a distraction in our present context.

Yet we may retain one feature from traditional or modern psychological theories of the faculties and/or functions, in which narrativity might be opposed to cognition for example, or emotion to reason; and that is the requirement that the storytelling function, if we want to call it that, must form part of an opposition, must be defined against something else; otherwise the potentiality we are trying to circumscribe risks extending over the entire field of mental activity, everything becoming narrative, everything becoming a kind of story.¹

So it is that in an influential pronouncement of the 1920s, Ramon Fernandez developed an opposition between the tale and the novel—or rather, to use the more precise and often imperfectly translatable French terms, between the *récit* and the *roman*.² It was a distinction that proved useful for several generations of French writers from Gide to Sartre; and that will remain helpful for us here, particularly since the same general opposition has taken somewhat different forms in other national traditions.

In effect, Fernandez organized his distinction around two distinct genres, which may be

taken as markers for either historical developments or structural variations. Translators have tried to render “*récit*” in English with its cognate, the recital, which is suggestive only to the degree to which someone might recite an account or even a chronicle of events. But even the word “tale,” which I prefer here, bears a weight of generic connotation, and can easily crystallize back into historical forms such as the Renaissance novella or the Romantic anecdote or story.

This is the sense in which the active content of Fernandez’ theory lies in the opposition itself and the differentiation it generates. For in itself, the term “novel” is even less structurally operative here than that of the *récit*: the latter can be more rigorously specified, particularly with the use of those national variants I mentioned. As for the novel itself, however (not to speak of the realist novel which interests us here), very little is to be deduced from Fernandez’ opposition, and writers have tended to fill in their own blank checks according to their aesthetic and their ideology.

So it is that Gide, conceiving of the *récit* as the tale of a unique personal existence or destiny (mostly, for him, a tale told in the first person), is able to draw the conclusion that the novel ought then to be a “*carrefour*,” a crossroads or meeting place of multiple destinies or multiple *récits*. The only book of his own that he was willing to call a novel, then, *Les faux-monnayeurs* (*The Counterfeiters*), offers just such a convergence of a number of different lives or stories; and it may be agreed that many writers, particularly those specializing in the short story, have thought of the novel in this general way, as a sort of formal Everest to be confronted.

Sartre, on the other hand, has a much more philosophical and ideological conception of the opposition, which he grasps in temporal terms and wields with no little critical and polemical power. Here is his evocation of the Maupassant short story, which he grasps as a kind of bourgeois social institution and translates into a concrete after-dinner situation set in the domain of cigar-smoking affluent men:

The procedure is nowhere more manifest than in Maupassant. The structure of his short stories is almost invariable; we are first presented with the audience, a brilliant and worldly society which has assembled in a drawing-room after dinner. It is night-time, which dispels fatigue and passion. The oppressed are asleep, as are the rebellious; the world is enshrouded; the story unfolds. In a bubble of light surrounded by nothing there remains this élite which stays awake, completely occupied with its ceremonies. If there are intrigues or love or hate among its members, we are not told of them, and desire and anger are likewise stilled; these men and women are occupied in *preserving* their culture and manners and in *recognizing* each other by the rites of politeness. They represent order in its most exquisite form; the calm of night, the silence of the passions, everything concurs in symbolizing the stable bourgeoisie of the end of the century which thinks that nothing more will happen and which believes in the eternity of capitalist organization. Thereupon, the narrator is introduced. He is a middle-aged man who has “seen much, read much, and retained much,” a professional man of experience, a doctor, a military man, an artist, or a Don Juan. He has reached the time of life when, according to a respectful and comfortable myth, man is freed from the passions and considers with an indulgent clear-sightedness those he has experienced. His heart is calm, like the night. He tells his story with detachment. If it has caused him suffering, he has made honey from this suffering. He looks back upon it and considers it as it really was, that is, *sub specie aeternitatis*. There was difficulty to be sure, but this difficulty ended long ago; the actors are dead or married or comforted. Thus, the adventure was a brief disturbance which is over with. It is told from the viewpoint of experience and wisdom; it is listened to from the viewpoint of order. Order triumphs; order is everywhere; it contemplates an old disorder as if the still waters of a summer day have preserved the memory of the ripples which have run through it.³

Gide practiced both “genres”; Sartre has nothing but contempt for the kind of anecdote which forms the structural core of the *récit* and which he associates with the oppressive cult of “experience” wielded by the older generation over the younger (see *La nausée*). But it is precisely that judgement that allows him to formulate what the novel ought to be—the authentic, existential novel—in temporal terms.

The time of the *récit* is then a time of the preterite, of events completed, over and done with, events that have entered history once and for all. It will be clear enough what the philosophy of freedom must object to in such an inauthentic and reified temporality: it necessarily blocks out the freshness of the event happening, along with the agony of decision of its protagonists. It omits, in other words, the present of time and turns the future into a “dead future” (what this or that character anticipated in 1651 or in 1943). Clearly enough, then, what Sartre calls upon the novel to reestablish is the open present of freedom, the present of an open, undecided future, where the die has not yet been cast, to use one of his favorite expressions. The aesthetic of the existential novel will then bend its narrative instruments to the recreation of this open present, in which not even the past is set in stone insofar as our acts in the present rewrite and modify it.

We will not fully appreciate the force of this conception of the novel until we recall the devastating critique of François Mauriac’s novels, with their sense of impending doom, their melodramatic rhetorical gestures (“this fatal gesture,” “she was not then to know,” “the encounter, in retrospect so full of consequences,” etc.), their built-in predictable mechanism of sin and judgement. All this, Sartre tells us, is narrated from above, with a God-like omniscience of past and future alike. “Dieu n’est pas bon romancier,” he concludes, “Mauriac non plus.”⁴

But just as surely, even though more subtly, the Sartrean recipe for the novel is shaped and determined, preselected, by its own historical content: the time of the momentous decision and the impending Event, the effacement of everyday life and the iteratives of peacetime, the pressure of what he called extreme situations. The Sartrean taboo on foreknowledge will be replicated in a somewhat different way by the Jamesian ideology of point of view, and both will be appropriated, as we shall see, for far more inauthentic purposes after the end of realism as such, in what I will call a more commercial realism after realism.

What we can retain of the Sartrean perspective on the *récit*, however, is its insistence on irrevocability, on which a somewhat different light is shed by the German tradition, relatively poor in novels as it may be, but extraordinarily rich in storytelling of all kinds, particularly in the Romantic era. We have, for example, Goethe’s memorable encapsulation of the content of storytelling as an “*unerhörte Begebenheit*”⁵—an unheard-of event of conjuncture, one thereby itself memorable and worthy of retelling over and over again, and of being passed down in the family and even the community: the time of the single lightning bolt that killed three people at once, the time of the great flood, of the invasion of the barbarians, the time Lizzie Borden took an axe, and so forth. It is then this time of the memorable event, of the traditional tale or story, that Walter Benjamin memorialized in his great essay “The Storyteller” (on Leskov).

Indeed, Benjamin makes it clear what so many examples of the “*unerhörte Begebenheit*” have in common: namely death. “Warming your hands on a death that is told” is the way he characterizes the *récit*⁶; and if we feel that this is too bleak, we may substitute for death

simply the mark of the irrevocable. This irrevocability adds a new dimension to Sartre's critique of the inauthenticity of the *récit*: the temporal past is now redefined in terms of what cannot be changed, what lies beyond the reach of repetition or rectification, which now comes to be seen as the time of everyday life or of routine. The irrevocable then comes to stand as a mark of one specific temporality which is separated off from another kind; and Goethe's definition may then be reread to designate, not strangeness or uniqueness, but precisely this shock of a marked time brutally differentiating itself from ordinary existence.

It should be added that for Benjamin, this ordinary existence is itself grasped as collective and historical, as the time of peasants or of the village, in which, as opposed to the great industrial metropolis of a later date, the tale as such flourishes.⁷ Indeed, we may further point out that for Benjamin, the opposite number of the tale or *récit* is not the realistic novel at all: it is the dissolution of the memorable and the narratable in Baudelaire's modernism, or the technological and political recuperation of Baudelaire's fragments in Eisensteinian montage, in the so-called reproducible work of art.⁸

Meanwhile, in a paradoxical turn-about, this new notion of the irrevocable mark as the very basis of the *récit* is also susceptible of a Sartrean authenticity very different from the bourgeois inauthenticity of the Maupassant smoking den. Indeed, the irrevocable also comes in Sartre to define the heroic, the freely chosen act, one that marks you forever and from which there is no turning back: the act one drags about with one like a ball and chain (again a Sartrean figure). It is then the recoiling in horror before such a choice that is inauthentic; and we may draw on *Peer Gynt* for a comic example. For when Peer is welcomed into the kingdom of the trolls, he is promised everything: the troll king's daughter, riches beyond price, a life of leisure and pleasure, the succession to the throne—and all this, the king assures him, on the most minimal condition, namely, that you let yourself—painlessly, to be sure—undergo hideous defacement as a pledge of solidarity with us and a guarantee that you will never seek to return to the world of ordinary humans. Peer draws the line at that kind of guarantee, that mark of irrevocability, preferring to keep his options open and his “Sartrean freedom” untouched by any such binding commitments.⁹

We may thus grasp the lightning bolt of the *récit* as the marking of a body and the transformation of an individual into a character with a unique destiny, a “life sore,” as one American novelist puts it, something given to you uniquely to bear and to suffer¹⁰: something “*je mein eigenes*,” as Heidegger described individual death. This brings our account of the *récit* or the tale a little closer to the destinies once offered in spectacle by tragedy as a form. In modern times, however, such destinies at best mark a character as one of Todorov's “*hommes-récits*,” the Thousand-and-One-Nights characters who *are* their own stories,¹¹ at the high tide of the *récit* as a form; while at worst, in yet more modern times, they are taken to be little more than bad luck. Still, I will retain the category of “destiny” or “fate” as the deeper philosophical content of this narrative form, which might also be evoked as the narrative preterite, the mark of irrevocable time, of the event that has happened once and for all. What has happened in the course of our discussion—it will be important later on—is that this mark has slowly been turned or rotated in the direction of other people: it is not only my act, for myself, which defines my destiny: the latter also becomes my scar, my sore or limb, my being-for-other-people, which is also to say my existence as a character in a story.

It will not have escaped notice that in this lengthy discussion of the *récit*, we have

completely lost sight of its opposite number, namely the *roman*. Sartre seemed to have made a place for it in that existential present in which the choice was in the process of being made or being refused: a time before destiny, in other words, and perhaps before the *récit* itself. We need to retain this notion of an existential present as it is opposed to the irrevocable past tense of the *récit*; but we now need to approach it in a different way, and for this I will turn to yet a third tradition, that of English-language narratology or rather, to be more precise, about it, the American tradition.

Here, of course, the fundamental theoretician is Henry James in his *Prefaces*, its ideas codified and popularized in Percy Lubbock's *Craft of Fiction*. And here the distinction between *récit* and *roman* takes on a much more familiar appearance: it is simply that between "telling" and "showing." You tell, you *recite*, the events; you show them happening in the present of the novelistic scene. To be sure, the novel includes both types of discourse; indeed, the very passage from one to the other is itself stylistically and even metaphysically significant—the "choice," as André Malraux put it, "of what is to become scene or to remain *récit*, the emplacement of those porches where a Balzac or a Dostoyevsky lie in wait for the characters as destiny itself waits on man."¹²

Yet Malraux, along with James himself, is biased in favor of showing rather than telling, and we must factor this prejudice in favor of scene, this commitment to Jamesian "point of view," into their theorization of the opposition.

For James himself, it would seem that mere telling—the *récit* part of what he describes—a "double pressure" on the novel—means shirking his job.¹³ The narrative summaries and foreshortenings are in effect sheer laziness, they are the sign he has not lived up to his calling, the august vocation he invented for himself (and for others). "One's poor word of honor has *had* to pass muster for the show."¹⁴ "The poor author's comparatively costly affirmation or thin guarantee"¹⁵ he calls such passages, on the point of drawing the whole process into an economic transaction (as he does so often), while calling on the literary critic to live up to their vocation and denounce all the "dodges" (his word) the novelist has thereby had recourse to. The more modern language of discourse versus story does not really modify this bias, which I hope my own dual model will redress, giving some of the honor back to the great storytellers and the framers of the great art-novellas.

But James is very clear about the antagonism between the two modes of *récit* and their presence. He characterizes it as

the odd inveteracy with which picture, at almost any turn, is jealous of drama, and drama (though on the whole with a greater patience, I think) suspicious of picture. Between them, no doubt, they do much for the theme; yet each baffles insidiously the other's ideal and eats round the edges of its position; each is too ready to say, "I can take the thing for 'done' only when done in *my* way."¹⁶

In defense of telling, however, and by way of redressing the scales so heavily weighted by Sartre against the extraordinary storytelling art of Maupassant, it may be well to insist on the relative insignificance of "showing" in the narratives, not only of the great oral practitioners but even in that of more sophisticated practitioners such as Boccaccio. Many are no doubt the candidates for the most beautiful story in the world, but I am not far myself from endorsing the view of the distinguished German writer Paul Heyse,¹⁷ who based his so-called *Falkentheorie* on the ninth tale of the fifth day of the *Decameron*, whose "moral" or summary

herewith append:

9. In courting a lady who does not return his love, Federigo degli Alberighi spends the whole of his substance, being left with nothing but a falcon, which, since his larder is bare, he offers to his lady to eat when she calls to see him at his house. On discovering the truth of the matter, she has a change of heart, accepts him as her husband, and makes a rich man of him.¹⁸

Heyse thought that the perfection of this little tale lay in the way in which its convergences were crystallized in a single object, namely the hawk of the title, in such a way as to concentrate the temporality of narrative into something the mind could uniquely appropriate and hold to itself, time made space, in other words, the event materialized, in a fashion perhaps not so distant after all from Benjamin's conception of a moment which becomes "memorable."¹⁹ This object is not a symbol; it is not its meaningfulness which is essential but rather its unity and density.

Heyse is here clearly enough specifying the properties of the most usable anecdotal starting point (or "subject" as Henry James liked to call it), rather than a structural law of some kind. In contemporary stories objects tend to be far more contingent, resembling Barthes' *punctum*²⁰ more than they do his *studium*. What gives his theory its plausibility is, however, the part of the story Boccaccio has dropped, either by negligence or by design, from his little summary. For the hawk—in this, paradigmatic of most twist or trick endings, even those which do not turn on a single object—is double-valenced, which is to say that it can serve different functions in each of the contexts in which it appears, switching back and forth in a kind of Gestalt effect.

What is curious here is that Boccaccio has omitted both contexts, both storylines which converge here, from his brief outline. For the hawk is not only his master's prize possession (and not merely his only one, as the summary suggests), it is something of a substitute for the desperate and forlorn passion he nourishes for the pointedly indifferent and uninterested Monna Giovanna, so that he will have sacrificed with it everything that still gives any meaning to his sad existence.

But the hawk also stands at the center of the other storyline, the reason for Monna Giovanna's unusual visit to a man she has every reason to avoid, inasmuch as its possession also constitutes the passionate desire of her beloved son, deathly ill and unlikely to recover, even if he is able to have this last wish satisfied.

The story shows us that Federigo is willing to do anything she wants, and the banquet with which he regales her is intended to dramatize that willingness. The hawk thereby unites the tragic failure of three passions, and its story thereby triumphantly wins its nomination, not only for the saddest story ever told but also for the most perfect.

But it is a tale that needs no "showing," no scene, no present of narrative at all; and this is the point of its introduction here, as the purest form of the *récit*. The anecdote not only needs no dialogue and no point of view (it has all these in Boccaccio's brief "telling"), but the whole art of storytelling lies in this possibility of the anecdote, the *fait divers*, to be expanded and contracted at will, and according to the practical necessities of the situation. Even more important from our perspective is the palpable fact that the tale cannot exist in the present; its events must already have happened: this is the "moment of truth" of Sartre's analysis, for whom in this sense the absolute past, what has already happened, the irrevocable, cannot

exist, for it can always be rewritten, reevaluated, revised by the power of a new act in the present or the future. The mode of the récit now seals this event off and makes such revision impossible (and the death of the hawk is the figure for this irrevocability of death in general). What confuses the issue is of course the eternal present of the reader, who brings a different temporality to the process.

This is then the moment to distinguish two kinds of time, two systems of temporality which will be the basis for the argument that follows. The distinction is one between the present of consciousness and a time, if not of succession or of chronology, then at least of the more familiar tripartite system of past-present-future. I want to assert that the present of consciousness is somehow impersonal, that consciousness is itself impersonal; while it is the subject of consciousness or the self that is the locus of personal identity in the ordinary sense. That self, however, is itself only an object for the impersonal consciousness of the present, and in a way all the personal identifications of past-present-future in the other sense are distinct from the impersonal present, mere objects in it, no matter how inseparable they are from it. You can say that theories of this kind reflect the famous “death of the subject” or that they articulate the split subject of poststructuralism or Lacanianism: we won’t follow those debates any further here, but will only draw some interesting consequences for the narrative theories in the process of elaboration. In particular, it becomes clear that the regime of the past-present-future and of personal identities and destinies is at its outer limit the realm of the récit; while the impersonal consciousness of an eternal or existential present would at its outer limit govern pure scene, a showing that was altogether divorced and separated from telling and purified of it. Let’s see what an event might look like from the second temporal perspective:

Lunch went on methodically, until each of the seven courses was left in fragments and the fruit was merely a toy, to be peeled and sliced as a child destroys a daisy, petal by petal.

This is a rather different lunch from many we can remember reading about: the one which makes Mr. Bloom belch with satisfaction in *Ulysses*; the immense two-hundred-page lunches of Proust, from which all the gossip and anecdotes fan out like a rhizome; the truly abominable lunch break that sets everything in motion at the beginning of *La bête humaine*; some elegant English luncheon in which, according to the newspapers, someone ingests a virulent particle of radiation; or that infinitely sad lunch to which Boccaccio’s impoverished hero invited his beloved. All of those—and I will treat you to yet another lunch later on, a truly wondrous well-nigh salvational one—all of those are inserted into one or another kind of narrative time; the anonymous lunch in which one course is peeled off after another is not.

Many are to be sure the theories of metaphor from time immemorial, from Ricoeur’s identification (based on Aristotle) of metaphor as the very source of Being itself²¹ to a number of tropological systems, let alone systems of resemblance and recognition. In our context, however, what is inescapable is the function of metaphor to detemporalize existence, to dechronologize and denarrativize the present, indeed, to construct or reconstruct a new temporal present which we are so oddly tempted to call eternal. The word is evidently an attempt to escape the temporal overtones of the normal vocabulary for experiences of time, and is consistent with the “eternity” of individual consciousness itself as long as it lasts (inasmuch as in that sense, consciousness has no opposite and we are in it, even in sleep,

some absolute and inescapable fashion).

What we can at least conclude from this discussion is that we have here finally located the definitive formulation for the discursive opposition we have been trying to name. Now it can be articulated not as *récit* versus *roman*, nor even telling versus showing; but rather destiny versus the eternal present. And what is crucial is not to load one of these dies and take sides for the one or the other as all our theorists seemed to do, but rather to grasp the proposition that realism lies at their intersection. Realism is a consequence of the tension between these two terms; to resolve the opposition either way would destroy it; James's guilt feelings are not only justified, they are necessary. And this is also why it is justified to find oneself always talking about the emergence or the breakdown of realism and never about the thing itself, since we will always find ourselves describing a potential emergence or a potential breakdown.

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- ¹ Jack Goody's stern rebuke to pan-narrativists (such as myself) overlooks the distinction between a restricted use of the term for a generic type of discourse (songs, divinations, orations and the like) and a more general, dare I say hermeneutic use of the term in which the object of analysis is temporal movement of a more musical kind (in which, for example, mathematical problems are solved or one follows the adventures of a named concept through a technical philosophical argument): Jack Goody, "From Oral to Written," in Franco Moretti, ed., *The Novel, Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
 - ² My impression is, however, that the fortunes of this opposition were in fact based on a misunderstanding: Fernandez, in his essay on Balzac (in *Messages*, 1943) seems to have meant "récit" to mean the background and "backstory" passages which accompanied the various characters, and not a distinct form of discourse in its own right.
 - ³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* and *Other Essays*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, 125–126.
 - ⁴ Sartre, *Situations I*, Paris: Gallimard, 1947, 67.
 - ⁵ Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe*, Vol. I, Basel: Birkhäuser, 1945, 210 (January 25, 1827): "denn was ist eine Novelle anders als eine sich ereignete unerhörte Begebenheit."
 - ⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Der Erzähler," *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 2, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989, 457: "Das was den Leser zu einem Roman zieht, ist die Hoffnung, sein fröstelndes Leben an einem Tod, von dem er liest, zu wärmen." It will be remembered that earlier in the same section he compared the construction of a novel to the building of a fire.
 - ⁷ The "origin" of storytelling, according to him, lay in the intersection of travelling seamen and merchants with the sedentary life of the villagers.
 - ⁸ I believe that Benjamin's three essays, on Leskov, on Baudelaire, and finally on Eisenstein and film, make up a trilogy that stages history as the rise and fall of narrative as it symptomatizes experience itself.
 - ⁹ Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, Act II.
 - ¹⁰ See Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987, 70. (The writer referred to is Paule Marshall).
 - ¹¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *Poetics of Prose*, Ithaca: Cornell, 1977, chapter 5, "Narrative Men."
 - ¹² André Malraux, *Les voix du silence*, Paris: Gallimard, 1951, 353.
 - ¹³ Henry James, *The Art of the Novel*, New York: Scribners, 1934, 300. James's foundational distinction between telling and showing now finds confirmation in the light of David Kurnick's remarkable *Empty Houses*, Princeton UP, 2012, which is documenting the theatrical failures at the heart of much of the modernist canon now grasps modernist showing as formal and structural nostalgia for theatricality.

¹⁴ Ibid., 298.

¹⁵ Ibid., 301.

¹⁶ Ibid., 298. (The quotes are all part of the Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*.)

¹⁷ Paul Heyse, "Einleitung," *Deutscher Novellenschatz*, Munich: Oldenbourg, 1971.

¹⁸ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, London: Penguin, 1995, xiv.

¹⁹ Benjamin, "Der Erzähler," 453–54, section xiii on *Erinnerung*.

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *La Chambre Claire, Œuvres complètes, tome III*, Paris: Seuil, 1995, 1126.

²¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, Toronto: University Press, 1977, 307.

Chapter II

The Twin Sources of Realism: Affect, or, the Body's Present

We have, to be sure, ourselves omitted something significant from our account of “The Hawk,” and it is the happy ending: the boy recovers from his illness (despite the absence of his beloved falcon), Monna Giovanna relents, and, although she fails to develop any genuine passion for Federigo, consents to the marriage, in which “they all live happily ever after” and so forth. But this involves a lowering of tone, and as it were a decompression, a return to the flatlands of everyday life, a slow disengagement from the intensities of the Event (the narrative or *récit* itself) and a consent to the less exhilarating yet ultimately more humanly bearable comfort of the everyday (using this last word in Auerbach’s heightened sense, with its connotation of a realism to come).

The shift, then, from tale to daily life simply confirms the point being made about the two temporalities at stake here. Yet also to be noted, if not unduly stressed, is the mild desolation that accompanies this narrative, whether in its major mode as a *récit* or in the coda. I have used the word “sad” (to which we will return in a more official context): is this feeling only to be attributed to the reader or is it possible that it suggests a dimension of narrative we have not yet taken into consideration?

This observation will then serve to introduce the second agency in my story, and the other impulse—affect—I want to associate with the emergence of realism as such. I will first stage this second impulse as the opposite of the narrative one: that is to say, I will approach it from the standpoint of temporality, for which the *récit* has seemed to embody a temporality of the past and of the preterite, a temporality of the chronological, in which, everything having happened already, events succeed each other in what is today loosely called “linear time” (a rather faddish expression I believe we owe to Marshall McLuhan). Is it possible to imagine a temporality so different from this conventional one that the word “time” ceases to seem altogether appropriate for it (something we already mused about in connection with the term “eternal”)?

In the hindsight of the theory (and historical experience) of the postmodern, and of what we have called “the end of temporality,” perhaps we can add greater specificity to the kind of temporality (or lack of it) at stake here. “The End of Temporality” theorized a shrinking of contemporary (bourgeois) experience such that we begin to live a perpetual present with a diminishing sense of temporal or indeed phenomenological continuities¹: this perpetual present was, I believe, what Deleuze and Guattari described as a schizophrenic present (in the *Anti-Oedipus*)², but theirs was an altogether Utopian account which takes its place in the tradition of literary celebrations of temporal immediacy from Wordsworth’s imbeciles and Flaubert’s “simple heart”³ on down to modern times. I believe that the contemporary or postmodern “perpetual present” is better characterized as a “reduction to the body

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