

## **DRAINED DISCOURSES OF THE EVERYDAY IN RICHARD YATES' *REVOLUTIONARY ROAD***

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This essay seeks to discuss the ways in which Richard Yates' novel *Revolutionary Road* presents a mode of realist writing which stages the corrosion of everyday language in post-War American middle-class life, thereby reflexively negotiating its own fictionality, all the while maintaining a representational impulse. Various modes of discourse, from corporate-speak to marital arguments, are presented as drained of meaning, triggering a yearning for silence by way of response. In the limited field of Yates scholarship, the emphasis is primarily placed on his realist tendencies. In their monograph, David Castronovo and Steven Goldleaf set the agenda by giving the opening chapter the heading 'Richard Yates: An American Realist' (1). Morris Dickstein, in turn, has named him as 'one of the last of the scrupulous social realists' in an age when literary realism was on the wane (217). Through this reading of *Revolutionary Road*, I will demonstrate how Yates' novel contains currents which resist a limiting categorisation within a classical realist framework.

During the 1950s, popular discourse in the United States was rife with speculation around the emerging professional middle classes. As the dominant middle class position shifted from property-owning entrepreneurship to property-less wage-earning, and as the economic emphasis shifted from the production of goods to the creation of new markets in which to sell those goods, books like C. Wright Mills's *White Collar* and William Whyte Jr.'s *The Organization Man* sought to explore the new identities that were being formed within this economic climate. Mills saw a worrying development, a downward trajectory for the middle class, even as middle-class status was becoming more widely available than ever before: the middle class were the new 'little people', alienated and apathetic (xviii).

Much as classical American realists like William Dean Howells and later naturalists like Theodore Dreiser had been informed by emerging sociological, legal and political discourses of the late nineteenth century, many popular novelists of the 1950s borrowed the tone and formal techniques of contemporary social analysis in chronicling the lives of the new middle class (Jurca 136). For all the concern about new class positions, however, the post-war economic boom also saw unprecedented affluence within American society, an affluence which would aid in a shift of focus toward therapeutic issues and away from class consciousness among the rapidly growing middle classes, replacing Marx with Freud as chief analytical influence (Dickstein 110). Since Stalin's non-aggression pact with Hitler, there had been a strong sense of disillusionment

with the Communist party among American intellectuals, who begun to employ concepts of anxiety and conformity when engaging in social analysis rather than relying on the vocabularies of economics or traditional sociology (Schaub 4).

Within this landscape, it is perhaps not surprising that literary realism in America was at a low ebb at the time of *Revolutionary Road*'s publication in 1961. The dominant tendency towards literary realism at the time was arguably found in what David Castronovo has dubbed the 'naturalistic blockbuster' (23). Its practitioners, authors like Herman Wouk or Sloan Wilson, would employ the tools and strategies of classical realism—everyday language, 'normal' (i.e. white, middle-class) characters, unspectacular events—to appeal to a wide, middle-class readership looking for a good read, rather than having their perceptions challenged. Ultimately, this was a literature of consensus, supporting the perception of the 1950s as a decade of conformity and forced calm after the far-too turbulent 1940s. Sloan Wilson's bestselling novel from 1955, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, occupies an interesting position in relation to Yates' novel. They share a number of external characteristics, each focusing on a married, white, middle-class couple feeling out of place in the suburbs. This apparent similarity even caused a rejection of *Revolutionary Road* by publishers Atlantic-Little Brown, who saw it as 'one of the many imitators of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*' (Bailey 178). Wilson's novel fits into a mid-1950s literary trend of identifying what has become known as the PMC—short for the professional-managerial classes—as the main victims of postindustrialisation and suburbanisation (Jurca 9). Where Yates differs from Wilson, however, is the way he in *Revolutionary Road* sets about deliberately emptying this territory of meaning.

Without getting into a detailed analysis of Wilson's novel, suffice it to say that he plays it straight, offering up the discontented Tom and Betsy Rath for the reader's unambiguous sympathy. Whatever unease they may feel is safely contained, to the point where the following dialogue between Tom and Betsy can be staged, entirely in earnest:

“Ever since you came back to me tonight, I've been remembering a line from a poem that used to sound ironic and bitter. It doesn't sound that way any more. Tonight, for a little while at least, I feel it's true.”

“What is it?”

“God's in his Heaven,” he said, “all's right with the world.”  
(Wilson 301)

Conversely, Yates creates a textual universe where no one, least of all the protagonists, is free from the corrosive processes of late modernity. Laced with irony, the novel negotiates the popular vocabularies of the time, holding up the discourses of the everyday as entirely hollow, contributing to an overall sense of

epistemological uncertainty for its characters. In this way, the novel's sceptical take on language complicates realism's commonly held trust in language to accurately portray material reality, especially as the linguistic hollowness in the novel directly drives the narrative. The book follows Frank and April Wheeler, a married couple living with their two children in a recent suburban development on the east coast in the 1950s. In describing this environment, Yates evokes a deliberate sense of artifice and two-dimensionality: houses are described as appearing 'weightless and impermanent, as foolishly misplaced as a great many bright new toys that had been left outdoors overnight and rained on'. Cars take on a cartoonish quality: oversized and candy-coloured, they 'wince at the mud', crawling 'apologetically' down the road. Shops have forcedly jolly names like SHOPORAMA and KING KONE (5). This sense of stylised infantilisation serves a dual purpose: to comment on suburban life in post-war America, thereby demonstrating realist intent; and—crucially—to foreground the artifice of the text itself, emphasise its constructed-ness.

The American critic Jerome Klinkowitz has framed Yates within an updated incarnation of the novel of manners, namely 'the novel of manners in a post-realistic age' (1). Klinkowitz adapts this strand of the novel to the age of semiotics: the characters in *Revolutionary Road* understand that the world is a system of signs to negotiate and manipulate. I wish to extend and elaborate on Klinkowitz' argument: the Wheelers are indeed living in a world of signs. However, the signs themselves are distorted, the link between the signifier and signified corrupted, all meaning drained. So the emphasis on surfaces inherent in the self-conscious negotiation of a sign system here becomes a recurring theme of surfaces covering nothing, or at best something vague and insubstantial, of unsuccessful performances. The opening chapter, describing April's community theatre's embarrassing failure on opening night in excruciating detail, serves as a proleptic introduction of the theme. The very first sentence is heavy with anticipated disaster:

The final dying sounds of their dress rehearsal left the Laurel Players with nothing to do but stand there, silent and helpless, blinking out over the footlights of an empty auditorium. (Yates 1)

As well as preparing the reader for an awkward evening of amateur dramatics, this sentence contains the novel's major themes and events in condensed form. 'The final dying sounds' suggests death; the dress rehearsal setting and the naming of the Laurel Players both evoke performance or acting; the characters' lack of autonomy, their locked-in state, is foreshadowed by the use of the word 'helpless'; the 'silent' which accompanies it points toward the novel's closing image, of Howard Givings switching off his hearing aid.

Viewing themselves as bohemian free thinkers stranded in suburbia, Frank and April concoct a plan to move to Paris, so that Frank, who has long held on

to an image of himself as an ‘intense, nicotine-stained, Jean-Paul Sartre sort of man’ (23), can ‘find himself’ (109). Before they can do that, however, Frank needs to resign from his job in what is referred to as ‘something called the Sales Promotion Department’ of Knox Business Machines, a growing computing firm (77). Both Knox the company and Frank’s job within it are emblematic of the emerging white-collar world in which promotion and sales are becoming increasingly important in the marketplace, and where machines are used to crunch numbers rather than, say, build furniture (Mills 67). The use of the words ‘something called’ obviously highlights the vagueness of what Frank actually does for a living, a vagueness reflected by his limited investment in the job, which he had initially taken as a kind of joke following April’s first, unplanned, pregnancy, Knox being the company his father had worked for. Yet leaving becomes a problem when Frank practically by accident excites the interest of the general sales manager of the Electronics Division. Hurriedly, in order to avoid problems with his immediate superior, Frank has produced a brochure entitled ‘Speaking of Production Control’, a piece of sleight of hand employing the most dynamic corporate-speak to cover up the fact that ‘he didn’t quite know what he was talking about’ (124). To his surprise, the brochure proves a big success, triggering ideas of making a whole series of ‘Speaking of . . . ’ titles, with Frank at the helm. As well as being a humorous take on the emptiness of corporate jargon—a predecessor to what has become known as ‘buzzword bingo’ in the twenty-first century, in which employees tick off boxes containing stock phrases of the business world during meetings—this series of events evokes Tony Tanner’s discussion of entropy as a dominant theme in post-war American literature. In his book *City of Words*, Tanner argues that one of the reasons for the attractiveness of this concept is its place within late industrial, or even post-industrial society. Such societies necessarily reproduce an abundance of processes and actions based on mechanised movement (Tanner 143). Knox Business Machines becomes a site of linguistic entropy, where words are put to work until they lose all meaning. A minor, yet telling example of how Knox subjects words and names to a form of mechanical process can be found in the name of a former sales manager, Otis Fields, who had denied Frank’s father a promotion several decades earlier. As Frank discusses the computing industry with the newly impressed sales manager Bart Pollock, he asks whether Bart remembers Fields, which he does not, until he realises that they are talking about *Oat* Fields (Yates 199). The institutionalised informality between men of the professional-managerial classes, which automatically turns William into Bill and Robert into Bob, also turns Otis into Oat, whether it is a name or not. As it turns out, Frank’s meaningless brochure proves pivotal. Tempted by the increase in pay and status, Frank is no longer so certain about the idea of moving to Paris. Or rather, he seeks to incorporate the previously unimaginable role of successful businessman into his self-image as cultured, urbane bohemian, now daydreaming about ‘a Henry-James sort of Venetian countess’ telling him how

‘you and Mrs Wheeler are so very unlike one’s preconceived idea of American business people’ (208). Crucially, the vocabulary Frank and April use to create their identities is shown to be as drained of meaning and substance as Frank’s ‘Speaking of Production Control’. Frank’s aforementioned idea of himself as an ‘intense, nicotine-stained, Jean Paul Sartre sort of man’ had, during his twenties, appeared to him as a hindrance with regards to erotic conquests, as he was unwilling to go for ‘intense, nicotine-stained, Jean Paul Sartre sorts of women’ (23). Then, when he many years later decides to seduce Maureen Grube, a secretary at Knox, he draws on the death of Dylan Thomas, the ‘myth of Free Enterprise’, philosophy, and how ‘this generation was the least vital and most terrified in modern times’ to impress her (96). Frank’s available vocabulary of high culture and social analysis is all surface, a series of noises employed to get Maureen into bed, an elaborate mating-call.

The brittleness of the Wheelers’ self-image as cultured bohemians is further highlighted by their reliance on clichés: both in their thoughts and in their conversations, they rely on tired phrases and imagery borrowed from the mass culture they claim to despise. After the Laurel Players embarrassment, Frank considers how he had imagined the evening to turn out:

[Himself] rushing home to swing his children laughing in the air, to gulp a cocktail and chatter through an early dinner with his wife; himself driving her to the high school, with her thigh tense and warm under his reassuring hand (‘If only I weren’t so *nervous*, Frank!’); himself sitting spellbound in pride and then rising to join a thunderous ovation as the curtain fell; himself glowing and dishevelled, pushing his way through jubilant backstage crowds to claim her first tearful kiss (‘Was it really good, darling? Was it really good?’); and then the two of them, stopping for a drink in the admiring company of Shep and Milly Campbell, holding hands under the table while they talked it all out. (13)

These imagined scenarios are clearly informed by the kind of sanitised conservatism he otherwise rails against. In fact, playing with his children quickly bores him, and his fantasy of himself as a reassuring, central presence, a stable patriarch whose validation and comfort April seeks, has little to do with their actual relationship at this moment in time. A similar, deliberately false note is struck when April first suggests they move to Paris so that Frank, we recall, can ‘find himself’: she says he is ‘the most valuable and wonderful thing in the world. You’re a man’ (115).

Not only is this the kind of dialogue normally performed with swelling strings in the background, just before the camera’s gaze shifts from the embracing couple to a roaring fireplace, it is also pre-emptively, and furiously, contradicted by April herself. During the first argument of the book, she taunts him: ‘*Look at*

you, and tell me how by any *stretch* of the imagination you can call yourself a man!’ (27–28).

The setting, or rather set, for much of Frank and April’s performance is their house, ‘really rather a sweet little house’, as their realtor and local busybody Mrs. Givings calls it (29). Their behaviour here repeatedly appears as if following a script; when their friends Shep and Milly Campbell come over for drinks, they immediately assume their positions in a social play bereft of spontaneity, every facial expression and gesture ‘in character’.

Milly Campbell dropped her shoes and squirmed deep into the sofa cushions, her ankles snug beneath her buttocks and her uplifted face crinkling into a good sport’s smile—not the prettiest girl in the world, maybe, but cute and quick and fun to have around.

Beside her, Frank slid down on the nape of his spine until his cocked leg was as high as his head. His eyes were already alert for conversational openings and his thin mouth already moving in the curly shape of wit, as if he were rolling a small, bitter lozenge on his tongue.

Shep, massive and dependable, a steadying influence on the group, set his meaty knees wide apart and worked his tie loose with muscular fingers to free his throat for gusts of laughter.

And finally, the last to settle, April arranged herself with careless elegance in the sling chair, her head thrown back on the canvas to blow sad, aristocratic spires of cigarette smoke at the ceiling. They were ready to begin. (58–59)

The house itself reflects the couple’s view of themselves: just as the Wheelers see themselves as a little island of bohemia in an ocean of conformity, so their small wooden house is initially presented as a respite from the Revolutionary Hill Estates nearby. Still, whatever potential the house may have initially held is proven illusory, the frequently watched television in the corner revealing a closer alliance with mainstream culture than the Wheelers would care to admit. The picture window, a staple of suburban housing, is grudgingly accepted by Frank upon first viewing it with the words ‘I don’t suppose one picture window is going to destroy our personalities’ (29). As their domestic drama unfolds, the picture window frames them like a TV screen frames a soap opera.

A crucial aspect of the novel is found in the way that *everyone* puts on a performance. It is not simply a case of a suburban couple lying to themselves and others; this is the only available mode of behaviour. John Givings is an interesting example. As a paranoid schizophrenic, he is on the surface located outside the social structures within which Frank and April find themselves. He combines confrontational fury with a knack for perceiving the flaws in others, if

not in himself. His insanity notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to simply read him as a kind of return of the repressed, or an uncomfortable reminder of the side effects of suburban conformity, as Dickstein does (221). Rather, there is a clear sense that he quite relishes the role of madman-as-truth-teller. Like Frank, he is an educated man: a former academic who used to enjoy long conversations with his colleagues about the ‘emptiness’ of life (Yates 189). It follows that he, like the Wheelers, is well-versed in bohemian outsider myths:

You want to play house, you got to have a job. You want to play very *nice* house, very *sweet* house, then you got to have a job you don’t like. Great. This is the way ninety-eight-point-nine per cent of the people work things out, so believe me buddy you’ve got nothing to apologize for. Anybody comes along and says ‘Whaddya do it for?’ you can be pretty sure he’s on a four-hour pass from the State funny-farm; all agreed. (187)

This little monologue is permeated with nothing so much as smugness. He is just so pleased with himself, with his implicitly chosen position outside the 98.9 per cent—an imagined statistic simply employed to give an air of gravity to his words. His overly informal speech patterns are an obvious affectation, a deliberately conspicuous rejection of his parents’ bourgeois tastes and behaviour (as is his preference for sherry on the rocks). It is part of a tough-guy performance, resembling Frank as a younger man, back when he was working as a longshoreman and enjoying a reputation as an ‘intense, nicotine-stained, Jean Paul Sartre sort of man’. While his mental instability is real enough, he is not above self-consciously manoeuvring the mythos associated with such instability.

The notion of the centred subject, the autonomous self, is a category shown to be constantly under attack. This is of particular interest in relation to Fredric Jameson’s argument that the realist novel, upon emerging in the nineteenth century, produced, rather than simply reflected, the new world of industry, measurable time, market demands and empiricism; through creating a referent while simultaneously claiming to be its realistic reflection, the realist novel would shape the public consciousness, forming the kind of subjects which would be willing to embrace these changes (*Political Unconscious* 138). Conversely, Yates repeatedly highlights the hollowness of precisely the kind of complicit subjects Jameson accuses realism, as part of a larger bourgeois cultural revolution, of generating. I have already pointed out the artifice inherent to the way characters behave, the recurring theme of poor performances. Furthermore, the suburbs themselves take on a contagious quality, threatening to alter the subjects who occupy them, a process Frank and April try to resist.

Economic circumstance might force you to live in this environment, but the important thing was to keep from being

contaminated. The important thing, always, was to remember who you were. (Yates 20)

Those who do not resist end up as chattering, ‘beaten, amiable husks of men’, their selves eroded by their absurd jobs, their dull home lives (102).

Towards the end of the book, this contagious quality is intensified, as their living environment starts to resemble a monstrous, cruel organism. April dies following a self-administered abortion gone wrong, and Frank, running out of the house in despair, finds his surroundings wholly unsuited to his emotional state:

The Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy. Even at night, as if on purpose, the development held no looming shadows and no gaunt silhouettes. It was invincibly cheerful, a toyland of white and pastel houses whose bright, uncurtained windows winked blandly through a dappling of green and yellow leaves. Proud floodlights were trained on some of the lawns, on some of the neat front doors and on the hips of some of the berthed, ice-cream colored automobiles.

A man running down these streets in desperate grief was indecently out of place. Except for the whisk of his shoes on the asphalt and the rush of his own breath, it was so quiet that he could hear the sounds of television in the dozing rooms behind the leaves—a blurred comedian’s shout followed by dim, spastic waves of laughter and applause, and then the striking-up of a band. Even when he veered from the pavement, cut across someone’s back yard and plunged into the down-sloping woods, intent on a madman’s shortcut to Revolutionary Road, even then there was no escape: the house lights beamed and stumbled happily along with him among the twigs that whipped his face, and once when he lost his footing and fell scrabbling down a rocky ravine, he came up with a child’s enamelled tin beach bucket in his hand. (323)

This toyland, the domain of what Frank has disdainfully considered ‘beaten, amiable husks of men’—the word ‘husk’ obviously evoking the theme of hollowness—is having its revenge on him, mocking his situation. By describing the estate as ‘not . . . designed to accommodate a tragedy’, the passage comments not only on Frank’s despair, but also on the literary mode of tragedy and the incompatibility of art’s grand gestures with the banality of suburban life in the post-war period. The estate becomes the site of Frank’s ultimate emasculation. His manliness, or lack thereof, has been a recurring theme, as seen in April either denying or saluting it. Like the hollowed-out subjectivity generated by their material conditions, the category of masculinity is fragile,

unstable, ultimately destroyed. As their children are taken away to live with their aunt and uncle, Frank is left stripped of all his defences against his contagious surroundings. Recalled through the perspective of Shep, Frank is no longer his opinionated, pugnacious old self; he is just ‘so damned mild!’, his laugh a ‘soft, simpering giggle’ (350), unable to produce any discernible emotion or assert himself in any way. The old surface of intellectual bluster has been usurped by the ‘beaten, amiable husk’ so familiar from his commuter train ride into New York every morning. The transformation’s ultimate manifestation is represented by Frank’s embrace of psychoanalysis. Earlier, Frank sneeringly referred to psychoanalysis as ‘everybody’s intellectual and spiritual sugar-tit’ (65). Now, Shep finds himself bored by Frank’s repeated ‘my analyst this’ and ‘my analyst that’. No longer interested in society at large, the inward turn of Frank’s gaze echoes the shift from historical/sociological to Freudian analysis mentioned earlier.

As Frank’s trajectory removes his outer markers of identity—his opinions, his posture, his displays of temper—he is literally decentred within the narrative, rendering him a ghost-like presence in the text in which he has, until now, been the protagonist. The novel’s final chapter is presented through the previously peripheral points of view of the Wheelers’ friends and neighbours. Shep’s evaluation of Frank as mild and boring follows a growing feeling of annoyance with his wife Milly, who in the months following April’s death tells the story ‘many, many times’ (326). In the telling and retelling of the tragic event, Milly distorts the story, adding saccharine poignancy and a kind of ‘voluptuous narrative pleasure’ (327). The final chapter thus stages a corrosion of the preceding narrative, turning a rich text into neatly structured gossip. As she revels in yet another account, Shep steps outside so as not to have to hear the rest, and so that he can let out a few sobs in his grief over April, the long-standing object of his secret affections. Yet even his grief threatens to be coloured by the kind of exaggeration Milly performs, his sobs taking on a theatrical quality as he ‘exaggerate[s] their depth with unnecessary shudders’ (332). Within Yates’ text, no human utterance is free from distortion.

The novel’s final scene represents a definitive move towards silence, away from the noises that constitute everyday language in *Revolutionary Road*. Mrs Givings, the Wheelers’ estate agent, is talking ceaselessly to her husband about the new residents and their congeniality, and how they differ so from the ‘neurotic’, ‘trying’ Frank and April (336). Where Milly had distorted their narrative by embellishing, Mrs Givings distorts by reduction. Her limited knowledge of the Wheelers reduces their story to an observation on how they had let their house depreciate. Presented from the point of view of her husband, her monologue is cut short as he switches off his hearing aid, and ‘a welcome, thunderous sea of silence’ is all that remains (337). It is a concluding image of total refusal, extending to the very nature of narrative itself. The system of everyday language navigated by the characters, the system which again and

again has been shown up as a site of confusion and uncertainty, is rejected. Without the available option of meaningful language, silence is the only alternative.

This move away from words, away from narrative, resonates with literary figures not normally associated with realism. Ihab Hassan identifies this move towards silence following a disillusionment with language as a cornerstone of postmodern literature, tracing a genealogy from de Sade, via Hemingway and Kafka, to Genet and Beckett. This tendency finds its most extreme embodiment in Burroughs' claim that 'to speak is to lie', a claim which enables the 'neo-Dada collages' borne out of the cut-up method (Hassan 249). Obviously, Yates was no neo-Dadaist. Nevertheless, his persistent exposure of fraudulent language reveals an engagement with issues more commonly associated with postmodernism. Incongruous resonances are heard when John Barth writes, in the short story 'Title' from the collection *Lost in the Funhouse* from 1968:

Whatever happens, the ending will be deadly. At least let's have just one real conversation. Dialogue or monologue? What has it been from the first? Don't ask me. What is there to say at this late date? Let me think, I'm trying to think. Some old story. Or. Or? Silence. (106)

Barth's story, a self-conscious dramatisation of the struggle to write when 'everything's been said already, over and over' (*Lost in the Funhouse* 105), displays his concern with the exhaustion of literary forms, a concern previously voiced in his famous essay from 1967, 'The Literature of Exhaustion'. In this essay, Barth bemoaned the prevalence of what he referred to as 'technically old-fashioned artist[s]' (*Friday Book* 66), writers remaining within the nineteenth-century novel format, which he found to be used up, its moment having been and gone:

A good many current novelists write turn-of-the-century-type novels, only in more of less mid-twentieth-century language and about contemporary people and topics; this makes them considerably less interesting (to me) than excellent writers who are also technically contemporary. . . . It's dismaying to see so many of our writers following Dostoevsky or Tolstoy or Flaubert or Balzac, when the real technical question seems to me to be how to succeed not even Joyce and Kafka, but those who've *succeeded* Joyce and Kafka and are now in the evenings of their own careers. (*Friday Book* 66–67)

Initially this—which Barth himself later denounced as 'a very silly thing' (*Friday Book* 67)—may seem as a direct attack on Yates himself: Flaubert's

*Madame Bovary* was an admitted influence on *Revolutionary Road*, Emma Bovary's bored provincial existence echoing throughout. The novel certainly uses the language of the day to engage with contemporary people and topics. But one of the novel's main achievements is to undermine the discourses of the everyday upon which the classical realist novel rests, from marital arguments through the vocabulary of psychoanalysis to business jargon and on to the courtship rituals of the mid-twentieth century. Barth described his novels *Giles Goat-Boy* and *The Sot-Weed Factor* as 'novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author' (*Friday Book* 72). Deliberately artificial, these novels locate themselves in a moment after the novel's glory days, when the traditional form of the novel is only accessible through self-conscious play, rather than by earnestly following the rules. Yates' strategy of remaining within the territory of suburban realism while simultaneously staging a corrosion of everyday language serves as a form of disguise: he becomes a postmodernist in realist clothing, anticipating and antagonising Barth in equal measure.

In a speech originally delivered at Stanford University in 1960 and published as the article "Writing American Fiction" the following year, the year of *Revolutionary Road*'s publication, Philip Roth verbalised a crisis of realism as a direct result of the nature of reality itself in the mid-twentieth century United States in his article 'Writing American Fiction':

[It] stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. (Roth 120)

When reality itself becomes increasingly unreal, how does the writer go about engaging with that reality? *Revolutionary Road* provides an early enactment of this crisis, which would only intensify as the 1960s progressed. But where the 1960s provided implausibility in the form of dizzying absurdity and a frenetic pace, the 1950s of *Revolutionary Road* is a decade of flattening, of timidity, evoking Jameson's 'new depthlessness' inherent to the postmodern (*Postmodernism* 5). Unreality comes from a lack of substance rather than sensory overload. This allows the novel to disrupt some of realism's implicit claims without abandoning the world of work, marriages, commuter trains and drinks before dinner which constitutes a life for so many.

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