CHAPTER - V
REPRESENTING THE UNREALITY OF REALITY – POSTMODERNISM AND ITS NARRATIVE STRATEGY

One of the difficulties of any discussion about realism is the lack of any effective vocabulary with which to discuss the topic. Most discussions turn on the problems of the production of discourse that will adequately explain the conceptual foundations of the real. This notion of adequacy is accepted both by the realists and indeed by the anti-realists whose main argument is that no discourse can ever be adequate to the multifarious nature of the real.¹

Fiction as a literary genre in fact is identified with the tradition of realism. Starting from its formative stage, realism has been one of the most dominant determining characteristics of the novel. As a recognizable literary mode, realistic fiction writing started in the 18th century with the works of Defoe and Fielding, but as a literary convention it triumphed during the 19th century under the double influence of the growth of science and philosophical rationalism. The critical conventions of humanism and Marxism further consolidated the dominance of realistic fiction during the 20th century. Realism in the humanist tradition is provisionally related to bourgeois realism in which the novel is intimately associated with life in its individualist mode, originating from the bourgeois world view and in the social placement of characters. On the contrary, Marxist view emphasizes ‘social realism’, central to class struggle. With the emergence of modernism, fiction lost to a considerable extent the secured sense of reality of the 19th century.
Modernism affected the linear development of the events and represented everything as discontinuous. Abstract expressionism by breaking up narrative continuity, representing characters in modes contrary to the traditional standards, modernist fiction assimilated such writers as Dostoevesky, Mann, Joyce, Kafka, Woolf and Faulkner back into a spirit of 'relative realism'. The novel, in the hands of the modernist novelists, as Malcolm Bradbury maintains, turned inward with its emphasis on formal and symbolist resources. However, during the 1950s, French writers of the 'new novel' (La nouvelle roman). Natalie Saurraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Michel Butor seeking to intensify our awareness of 'reality' argued that we now know so much of the complexity of human personality that the characters of earlier realist novelists such as Balzac’s appear today too simplified and artificial. It was Robbe-Grillet who in fact contested strongly the claims of realism and maintained that realistic story-telling has falsified the world of objects by humanizing them.

J. Hillis Miller in his essay “The Figure in the Carpet” explores the twin concepts of ‘continuity and completeness’ in trying to establish linkages in fictional representation. Examining the Jamesian framework of the realist novel, Miller feels that it is not self-referentiality which subverts the assumptions and procedures of realistic fiction, since self-reference is still reference and therefore is assimilable into the assumptions of mimetic representation. He further argues that the Anglo-American study of the novel has been caught up in a false assumption of mimetic representationalism. The claim of self-referentiality is in fact an understanding of its mirror image of extra-referentiality. It is in this sense
the realistic novel couches in it something other than the so-called real. This position is further consolidated by the new novel in its resistance to the norms of the 19th century novel in asking questions about consciousness and interior experience. In this perspective truth is relativized and hitherto ontological assumptions regarding the fiction are challenged.

As we enter into a heterocosm the multiple worlds of the contemporary fiction – we move through provisional suppositions, a technique that requires suspension of belief as well as of disbelief. Thus the emerging novel grounds itself in an ontological landscape that allows mediations and creates subuniverses of meaning. The ontological landscape is complex, a jigsaw puzzle of jostling world views, or different social classes, castes, religious sects, occupations, etc. Well below the threshold of conceptualization, however, lies the shared social reality of every day life. While this shared reality constitutes the common ground of interaction among the members of a society, these same members also experience a multiplicity of private or peripheral realities: dreaming, play, fiction, and so on. The postmodern fictions while exploring the private and peripheral realities, do contest some of the assumptions about realism that have been consolidated in a shared or universalist discourse. This perspective provides the basis for conceptualization of a proposition like the ‘unreality of reality’ that postmodern fiction represents employing different narrative strategies.

Postmodern literature is a literature that registers the dissolution of traditional literary values, Romantic as well as Modern. In the words of Richard Poirier:
Contemporary literature has come to register the dissolution of ideas often evoked to justify its existence: the cultural, moral, psychological premises that for many people still define the essence of literature as a humanistic enterprise. Literature is in the process of telling us how little it means.¹

What makes up the postmodernist art in general is a common commitment to an apocalyptic view of the world, arising out of a sense of what Erick Heller describes as ‘the loss of significant external reality’ (which in tum results from a changed perception of ‘reality’) and the consequent futility of traditional ways of making sense of the world. This has led to the Postmodern artist’s refusal to take art seriously and to his use of art itself as a vehicle for destroying its traditional pretensions. Thus Barth’s The End of the Road seeks to demonstrate ‘mythotherapy’ as a failed strategy and points to the end of the road for myth and metaphor as the Moderns understood it. In his novel Snow White, Barthelme deploys a Modernist device but only to subvert it. Henry James, the father of Modern Poetics of fiction, has this advice for the prospective writer: ‘Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost’. Now in the following passage, Barthelme parodies it:

“Try to be a man about whom nothing is known”, our father said, when we were young. Our father said several other interesting things, but we have forgotten what they were ... Our father was a man about whom nothing was known. Nothing is known about him still. He gave us the recipes. He was not very interesting. A tree is more interesting. A suitcase is more interesting. A canned good is more interesting.⁵

Here Barthelme inverts the Jamesian assumptions about character, psychology and the authority of the artist. In his fiction, character like
any other external reality is something about which nothing is known, lacking in discernible motive or discoverable depth. James had laid stress on the importance of artistic selection and ordering and on the duty of the artist to order his material so as to render it interesting. Barthelme subverts these principles by injecting a law of equivalence whereby nothing is more interesting than anything else. Such a device undermines the importance of artistic selection and regards canned goods as legitimate artistic subject matter on par with human beings. Postmodernist art in general takes its impetus from an extreme reaction to the world we live in this world or reality is so extraordinary, horrific or absurd that the traditional mode of mimesis or realistic emulation will no longer suffice. Ours is indeed a world of altered human relationships, of epistemological scepticism, of high technology and strange and distorted history, of an anarchic and revolutionary subjectivism and a disoriented sense of human purpose. Many a contemporary artist, therefore, feels that there is no point in creating fiction that gives an illusion of life when life itself seems so illusory.

Besides fabulation and non-fiction novel, which are the more radical forms of Postmodernism, there is the novel about itself or the problematic novel. Writers hesitating to take the radical path to fabulation or reportage, sometimes build this very hesitation into the text. Whereas the fabulator is discontented with reality, and the non-fiction novelist is impatient with fiction, the problematic novelist is loyal to both but is diffident of reconciling them and makes the problematic nature of his undertaking his subject matter. What is more, he makes the reader
participate in the aesthetic and philosophical problems that the writing of fiction presents today.

It will be now apparent that the classification of Postmodernist fictions into fabulation, reportage and the problematic novel proves tentative, for a good many of them can fit into more than one category, depending on which aspects of the text the emphasis is placed. Thus Slaughterhouse-Five is not only a fabulation based on science fiction but is also a collage of factual reporting and fantasy writing as well as a novel in which the conventional distance between the text and the world is sought to be destroyed. Take for instance, the last scene of the book - Billy is in a latrine in a German prison camp:

An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, ‘There they go, there they go’. He meant his brains.

That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book.6

Further it can also be noticed that many a postmodernist writer often tries his hand at more than one of the categories e.g., Mailer, Barth.

Similarly, it is difficult to say whether Pynchon’s fictions are fabulations or problematic novel. Perhaps they are both. His Gravity’s Rainbow for instance, which Fiedler finds too arty and therefore, not pop, because it is reflexive and auto-destruct, was on the best-seller list in America for quite some time. Malcolm Bradbury has rightly remarked, since World War II, the novel does indeed seem to have became, in criticism, the exemplary literary object displacing the poem, and, to a
lesser extent, the play, compelling criticism to grant it the primacy of attention that Henry James has for long claimed for it.

The phenomenon of Postmodernism has been global. The narrative is a sombre philosophical meditation on the universe as a labyrinth, an image of the possible proliferation of varying realities in time as well as in space. In Postmodernism there is a new liking for fragmented forms, discontinuous narrative, and random-seeming collages of disparate materials. Finally, there was a rejection of traditional realism (chronological plots, continuous narratives relayed by omniscient narrators, ‘closed endings’, etc.) in favour of experimental forms of various kinds:

If you were to bother to read my books, to behave as educated persons would, learn that they are not sexy, and do not argue in favor of wildness of any kind. They beg that people be kinder and more responsible than they often are. It is true that some of the characters speak coarsely. That is because people speak coarsely and even our most sheltered children know that. And we all know that those words really didn’t damage children much. They didn’t damage us when we were young. It was evil deeds and lying that hurt us.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.’s Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) has turned out to be one of the most popular fictions of the postwar period. And the popularity is due, in a large measure, to the fact that it has drawn heavily on the repertoire of science fiction. The myth informing the text is the myth of voyage into space. The supportive myth is that of unconventional sex. Hence the disquisition about the so-called ‘seven sexes on earth, each essential to reproduction’ etc. If the science fiction
portions of the text cater to the contemporary reader’s avidity for fantasy, those relating to World War II leave a deep impression of the horrors of war on the reader’s mind. Some such scenes are: the one in which the elderly Big Derby is shot dead for stealing a teapot from among the cinders of Dresden! (Ironically pilgrim has managed to bring home a diamond as war booty) that in which a pole is hanged for having had sex with a German woman; the one in which soldiers, unable to remove the rotting dead bodies from houses and buildings, rush in, remove the jewels, rush out, and throw fire in etc. It is Vonnegut’s clever juxtaposition of fantasy and near-factual reportage that has, as it were, redeemed Slaughterhouse-Five from being a mere science fantasy fiction.

Lionell Trilling has remarked that we do not tell each other stories any more, in the traditional sense, that is. But a novelist needs to unfold his narrative in time. The Postmodern novelist or writer therefore employs diverse strategies in this regard. Slaughterhouse-Five bears little resemblance to the traditional novel: there is nothing of the linear movement of the narrative. There is no intricate plot, crying for resolution. Instead the reader confronts a narrative wherein scenes of war and scenes of science fiction are flashed before him. And the narrative itself slides from the one to the other and vice versa. In his use of this technique of science presentation in lieu of linearity, Vonnegut has striven to render his art truly contemporary.

In postmodern writings, we see that people are always striving to recruit us to their games or movies or roles. their version of what is real. We are, most of the time, trapped in “imposed” language, versions of reality, and roles of existence: are fixed in rigid structures. It is healthy
therefore to step out of all this into some kind of free space. Postmodernist literature is time and again described as ‘apocalyptic’, that is, as a literature that registers the dissolution of narrative, self and represented world. In *The Crying of Lot 40* we witness the narrative breaking down and the represented world dissolving. The reader witnesses objects and even historical figures being reduced to mere linguistic phenomena, shorn of any authentic existence, past or present. ‘The historical Shakespeare … The historical Marx. The historical Jesus’. ‘… they’re dead. What is left?’ ‘Words’. Pynchon shows language as breaking down. He is a prophet of double entropy: thermodynamic and communication. Not only is this world, as averred by physicists, heading towards heat-death but is also on a headlong rush towards a dead end of communication and inter-subjectivity. Pynchon’s *Lot 49* is illustrative of the following features of postmodernist fiction, too: interpolation of verse in the form of song, intertextuality, preference for the colloquial to the formal language, and inclusion of a large body of scientific information. It is in these respects that these fictions have caught the rhythm of contemporary American life. Just like Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Pynchon’s *Lot 49* also undermines the authenticity of the text. If this is disconcerting to the reader, *Lot 49* has an answer: ‘It was written to entertain people, like horror movies. It is not literature. It doesn’t mean anything’.

The protagonists of the Postmodern fiction are a distraught ex-soldier (pilgrim), a hallucinating housewife (Oedipa), a ‘psychopath’ (McMurphy), a pervert (Humbert) and a transvestite (Myra). The typical Postmodern hero is hopelessly sick and is unsure if he has a self of his
own to speak about. Billy Pilgrim is so sick of life that he allows his comrades to kick him about as they please. At one point, a target of German soldiers shooting from hide-outs he lingers for a few seconds more on the middle of the road giving them a second chance to shoot him dead. Humbert is a maniac, or rather monomaniac, and sure needs psychiatric care and curing. Lolita is a pathetic victim of the culture in which she is brought up and 'educated'. (For that matter it can be said nearly every human figure we find in these fictions is the flotsam and jetsam that American culture throws up). Consequently a good number of postmodern protagonists give a strong impression of being mere role players. They are more often than not formless performers and cardboard cut-outs with no Forsterian roundness about them. Each has patterned his or herself on this or that celluloid hero or comic book Zombie or cowboy. The narrator in *Myra Breckinridge* can comprehend a gesture, an action, even the look of any human being, including herself, only after she can find an analogue for it in those of her favourite screen heroes or heroines. Having donned a cowboy cap and adopted the mannerisms of a superman, McMurphy increasingly feels obliged to stick to the role of the Zombie and play it right up to the end. (He exhibits determination and verve to achieve his goal – to liberate the inmates. In this respect McMurphy is admittedly more than a typical postmodern protagonist).

It is often remarked that there is an absence of psychological growth or causation in the human figures of postmodernist literature. But then, given their experience of contemporary reality, many writers feel they can yield to us only a post-humanist model of man. The hero of the postmodern novel feels like:
‘a human something floating about in a universal culture medium’. His existence is negative because he has been completely available to others, to causes, to events, and forces, as if he were a kind of liquid capital. He is extremely disposable .... (His self is) constructed of standard materials according to a few efficient methods.\textsuperscript{11}

He is like a dog engulfed in quicksand, caught at the moment before the head, too, disappears. The protagonist of \textit{Under the Volcano} dies feeling like a dog. ‘Somebody threw a dog after him down the ravine’ -- is the last sentence of the novel, as if the shame of it was meant to outlive him.

As W. Sypher says, Hiroshima and concentration camps have once for all destroyed the Promethean image of man. Sypher also notes two ironies: a liberalist culture, such as the American, which sprung from the ideal of a free self, has ended up by granting the self only a statistical existence. Second, individualism has indeed been abandoned on both sides of the iron curtain. If, then, one finds the Postmodern novel a dehumanized text, corresponding to the dehumanized painting, where most of the traditional human preoccupations and emotions are conspicuous by their absence, it may be that the absences are significant and that what is displaced from the text is more significant than what is actually placed there and that the Postmodern art would draw our attention to what is missing.

The postmodernist writing emerging from the terrible social disruption of the West, attempted to subvert the foundations of our accepted modes of thought and experience so as to reveal the ‘meaninglessness’ of existence and the underlying ‘abyss’ or ‘void’, or ‘nothingness’ on which any supposed security is conceived to be precariously suspended.\textsuperscript{12} William Burroughs belongs to the group of Beat writers and Beat movement that forms an important component of
postmodernist movement. His *Naked Lunch* is an important Beat achievement in its breathless, chanted celebration of the down-and-out and the subculture of drug addicts, social misfits, and compulsive wanderers, as well as in its representation of the derangement of the intellect that affected the senses by a combination of sexual abandon, drugged hallucinations and religious ecstasies.

*Naked Lunch* underlines a reality that is supposedly unreal for our conventional understanding. It confirms to Michel Foucault’s discourse of madness that underlines the fact that madness is constructed socially as prohibitive, tabooed and unsocial. The whole discourse in fact deflects upon the conventional understanding of things and helps us to understand the real-real. The pertinent question here is how does one define the real. The real conventionally has been defined and understood as something concretely available, socially acceptable and manifestly conventional. The postmodern novelists interrogate this position and takes us beyond the conventionality to an understanding of things which are self-reflexive and underpins the manifestation of unreal as real and the invisible as visible. The so-called new novel is couched in a theoretical projection of Postmodernism that the accepted reality is an illusion. We understand reality as something concrete through which we order our experience. The Postmodern view deconstructs this position and asserts that reality is simulated. Therefore, it is a mode of simulacrum.

John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Richard Brautigan, Robert Coover, Ishmael Reed, Jerzy Kosinski, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., William Gass and Donald Barthelme are those novelists, who deliberately, opposed the literary tendencies and traditions of modernism and ushered in a new
wave of writing labelled as postmodern fiction. They interrogated the concepts; the concepts of reality, truth and accepted belief(s). They also began to challenge the terms that define modernist fiction, that is to say, the element of description – representation of social reality and social language, and the formalism (stream of consciousness, interior monologue, psychological depth, and syncopated syntax) associated to the inscription of the subject into a text. As we look back on Modernism (that is to say, the fiction that goes from Flaubert to Joyce, and beyond that in America, from Dreiser to Bellow), it appears today as a coherent movement for which a theory can be formulated. The same, cannot however, be said of Postmodernism.

A common element in the bewilderingly diverse range of theoretical postmodernisms is a recognition and account of the way in which the ‘grand narratives’ of Western history have broken down. Without such metanarratives (God, history as purposefully unfolding immanent dialectic, Reason), history itself becomes a plurality of ‘islands of discourse’, a series of metaphors which cannot be detached from the various institutionally produced languages which we bring to bear upon it (Foucault), or a network of agnostic ‘language games’ where the criteria are those of performance not truth (Lyotard). The implication of this is that ‘truth’ cannot be distinguished from ‘fiction’ and that the aesthetic, rather than disappearing, has actually incorporated everything else into itself. For the philosopher Richard Rorty, therefore, we should embrace the potential this offers to us to reshape our world by abandoning altogether an outworn rhetoric of metaphysical truth. Instead of seeing knowledge through the image of mind as mirror of eternal truths, a
'Glassy Essence', we should see it 'as a matter of conversation and of social practice' and thus 'We will not be likely to envisage a metappractice which will be the critique of all possible forms of social practice'. In a more recent book, Rorty extends this insight to the view that literature, rather than philosophy, can more usefully provide the model for a new form of social knowledge, for 'a poeticised culture would be one which would not insist we find the real wall behind the painted ones, the real touchstones of truth as opposed to touchstones which are merely cultural artefacts.'

Instead of trying to rebuild the collapsing foundations of Western knowledge we should rather concentrate our energies on refurbishing the interior. And poets and novelists, who have always dealt with the contingencies of 'style' and human particularity rather than the universal absolutes of systematic 'truth', may be the philosophers of the future. Their modes of irony and contingency may come to provide the possibility of imaginative expansion of human sympathy and empathy as a basis for that social and political solidarity no longer available in the philosophical, historical or religious grand narratives of the past. Though 'postmodern' in its emphasis on irony and contingency and in its critique of analytic philosophy, Rorty's vision of the aesthetic as the basis for a new social consensus is, however, hardly a radical departure from a firmly established tradition of Western aesthetics running from the work of Schelling through Arnold to cultural pessimist from Theodor Adorno to T. S. Eliot. In seeking to understand Postmodernism, in particular, art must illuminate theory as well as theory offer conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches to art. We must regard Postmodernism firstly
as a mood or style of thought which privileges aesthetic modes over those of logic or method; secondly as an aesthetic practice with an accompanying body of commentary upon it; and thirdly as a concept designating a cultural epoch which has facilitated the rise to prominence of such theoretical and aesthetic styles and which may or may not constitute a break with previous structures of modernity.

Postmodernism is not simply a mode of counter-Enlightenment, it is, fundamentally, a late modern Romanticism. Philosophically, each orientation has been expressed in ways most relevant to the postmodern debate by Nietzsche (whose radical fictionality can be traced back to Coleridge and forward to Wallace Stevens or Thomas Pynchon or critics such as Ihab Hassan and Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending*) on the one hand, and Heidegger (whose concept of situatedness or Being-in-the-world connects Wordsworth with writers such as Charles Olson or critics such as Susan Sontag) on the other. Postmodern theory itself increases our self-conscious awareness of the proliferation of little narratives as it implicitly substitutes itself in the place of those overarching grand narratives which provided the framework for Romantic thought. One can see it as a foundationalism of the aesthetic which was always, in fact, implicit in Romantic thought. Romanticism and Postmodernism both articulate a critique of Enlightenment faith in the purely rational. In each there is a recognition of the aesthetic as a mode which can create new realities by circumventing the conceptual in an attempt to integrate body with intellect. Art is autonomous only in the sense that it is a different kind of discourse from the ratiocinative, involving body as well as intellect.
Jameson lists the features of Postmodernism as the death of the subject, the culture of the simulacrum, the proliferation of art, copies without originals, textuality, loss of historicity (as a sense of teleological linear time), pastiche. All these are attempts to deny depth and to embrace surface, but Jameson uses them as a framework supplying precisely that depth without which he could not theoretically contextualize his random list of historical events. Jameson effectively shares the view of the Postmodern as a response to the exhaustion of the Romantic/Modernist claim to aesthetic autonomy and to the realist notion of art mirroring a world outside the text. Postmodernism is a crisis in the belief in the possibility of authentic self-expression or objective representation. Like Postmodern theory, postmodern art tends to mediate a sense of multiplicity, fragmentation, instability of meaning, dissensus, the breakdown of grand theories as either narratives of emancipation or speculation.

Salman Rushdie has said that the 'triple disruption of reality' experienced by migrants, teaches that 'reality is an artefact, that it does not exist until it is made and that, like any other artefact, it can also be made well or badly and that it can also, of course, be unmade'. It is a statement of the positive as well as negative implications for post-colonial people of an aesthetics and politics of Postmodern fictionality. Because it offers no stable condition of identity, however, not even one of critique, it may therefore amount to no more than another demonstration of the postmodern capitulation to performative pragmatism and the easy (frequarket) pluralism of Late Capitalism. It may represent a negative or passive nihilism as much as a positive or
active one. For some critics, therefore, postmodernism represents an irresponsible ethical relativism, for others, an open-minded refusal to impose exclusive dogmas or espouse a naïve rhetoric of liberation. It is possible to offer a negative evaluation of the celebration of artifice, pluralistic narrative voices, self-reflexive narcissism, viewing them as the endorsement of a rapacious capitalism and as another manifestation of the culture of the simulacrum. Alternatively, one could view the postmodern emphasis on the power of language and signs to construct the real, as a positive image of the potential capacity of the human imagination to reshape the ostensibly fixed material world of history in order to reformulate and produce new and more humane identities for the human beings in it. Postmodernism, on the one hand, represents a transformation of the Romantic faith in imagination, and on the other, exists as an ideological weapon of capitalism inuring us to a tawdry world of commercial image.

Whereas modernist techniques foreground questions like 'How do I interpret this world?' Postmodern ones raise questions like 'which world is this?', leading to meditations upon the possible existence of multiple worlds. Postmodernism does not believe in foundation. In its anti-foundationalism, postmodern theory always involves a critique of philosophical mirror theories of truth. One can see postmodern literature engaged in the same process through its refutation or at least re-examination of the epistemological grounds of Realism and its linguistic forms. This is another way of perceiving the connections between Postmodern theory and literature and of approaching the complex issue of value. Realism in literature is normally understood as the expression
of a belief in a commonly experienced phenomenological world. In a realist fiction, a variety of points of view may be expressed, but as part of a controlled pluralism where no single voice is allowed to challenge the authority of omniscience recognized as the voice of commonsense or of the 'sensus communis'. What seems to follow from this presupposition is that the language of Realism must therefore appear 'transparent', a window onto a reality it simply reflects. Contradictory voices must be suppressed or found accommodation within the greater whole. The conventionality of narrative must be disguised so that the projected world appears to be reflected world, an extension of the commonly experienced world outside the text. Language here functions simply as a medium through which reality can be transcribed and re-presented in aesthetic form, and reality, even if only apprehensible in the deep structures of world, transcends any verbal formulation of it. Certainly, much postmodernist fiction ostentatiously explores the limits of realist convention.

Postmodern fictions, like its theories, do play with fictionality in ways which challenge ontological and epistemological certainty. A realist text such as Jane Austen’s novel *Emma* for example, clearly does not. Austen’s textual manipulation which plays off the perspectivism of free indirect discourse against the objectivity of dramatic scene and dialogue, exposes Emma’s ethical and perceptual limitations by establishing a secure foundation from which to judge her behaviour. Throughout the novel, Austen is preoccupied with issues about the difficulty of interpretation and critical judgement: the nature of the connection between social manners and ethical foundations, the social determinants
of class, gender, urban and rural values. And no character sees whole
even Mr. Knightly is prejudiced by feeling and limitations of situation.
But *Emma* is clearly not postmodern: there is a correct way of seeing,
manners appear at times provisional, but are actually the social
expression of permanent and lasting values; consistency of character is
not only desirable as the basis of moral action, but actually attainable if
one works for it through extension of sympathies and resistance to the
attraction of arrogant social presumption. It would be difficult, if not
impossible, to read *Emma* as a postmodern fiction. In this sense, Lodge is
right to see Realism as a concept which is not entirely elastic.

There are many possible constructions of postmodernism,
however, this does not mean that all constructs are equally interesting or
valuable, or that we are unable to choose among them, postmodernism is
a discursive construct. Postmodernist fiction does hold the mirror up to
reality, but that reality now more than ever before, is plural. The
postmodernists fictionalize history, but by doing so they imply that
history itself may be a form of fiction. In postmodernist revisionist
historical fiction, history and fiction exchange places, history becoming
fictional and fiction becoming "true" history – and the real world seems
to get lost in the shuffle. But of course this is precisely the question
postmodernist fiction is designed to raise: real, compared to what?
Postmodernist fiction, if critics such as John Gardner, Gerald Graff, and
Charles Newman are to be believed,\(^{16}\) is morally bad art, and tends to
corrupt its readers. It does so by denying external, objective reality.
There was a time when denying the reality of the outside world could be
seen as a bold gesture of resistance, a refusal to acquiesce in a coercive
"bourgeois" order of things. But that time has passed, and nowadays everything in our culture tends to deny reality and promote unreality, in the interests of maintaining high levels of consumption. It is no longer official reality which is coercive, but official unreality, and postmodernist fiction, instead of resisting this coercive unreality, acquiesces in it, or even celebrates it.

Postmodernist fiction, Gerald Graff tells us, manifests "a consciousness so estranged from objective reality that it does not even recognize its estrangement as such."¹⁷ And, Charles Newman adds, "The vaunted fragmentation of art is no longer an aesthetic choice: it is simply a cultural aspect of the economic and social fabric."¹⁹ According to this view, Postmodernist fiction has become just another part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. These are serious charges, and need to be answered. They are all the more serious for having come from critics sophisticated enough to know not to identify reality simplistically with the conventions of nineteenth century realism.

It is too late in the day, even for those who are most nostalgic for unproblematic mimesis, to recommend a return to the fiction of Austen, Balzac, Tolstoy, George Eliot. Everyone knows now that the conventions of nineteenth-century fiction were just that, conventions, and not a transparent window on reality, and that there are other, equally legitimate means of getting access to the real besides Victorian realism. Or rather, these critics are sophisticated enough not to openly recommend a return to the nineteenth century. However, the more one probes their critical assumptions, the more it appears that Victorian realism is, after all, the norm against which they have measured postmodernist fiction and found
it wanting. Both Graff and Gardner, for example, generously allow the legitimacy of fantastic and non-realistic methods. But there is a catch. Graff writes:

The critical problem - not always attended to by contemporary critics - is to discriminate between anti-realistic works that provide some true understanding of non-reality and those which are merely symptoms of it.\(^\text{19}\)

In practice, this turns out to mean that the only acceptable antirealistic writing is antirealism that implies a nostalgia for a lost order and coherence - for instance, in Borges, Gide or Musil or antirealism in the service of social satire - for instance, in Barthelme. In other words, writing is acceptably antirealistic only if it stands in some fairly explicit and direct relation to a form of realism where this relation becomes more distant or oblique, as in science fiction, Graff withholds his imprimatur.\(^\text{20}\)

There is no denying that "unreal reality" is a recurrent theme and object of representation in postmodernist fiction. It is the theme of postmodernism's revisionist approach to history and historical fiction, and of postmodernism's incorporation of television and cinematic representations as a level interposed between us and reality. But if this were postmodernist fiction's only object of representation, then Graff would be justified in wondering whether this does not make postmodernism as much a symptom of unreality as a representation of it. In fact, the "unreality of reality" is not the only tune that postmodernist fiction can play, and postmodernism is not as fully the creature of the contemporary "crisis of reality" as Graff says it is postmodernist fiction.
may be antirealistic, but antirealism is not its sole object of representation.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2. J. Hillis Miller. “The Figure in the Carpet” in Rice and Waugh (eds.), Modern Literary Theory: A Reader, p. 177.


5. Ibid., p. 233.


10. Ibid., p. 52.


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