
The Real in the Unreal Mimesis and Postmodern American Fiction

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Cognitive literary studies have so far primarily focused on literary functions, meta-theoretical discussions and reader-response tests (see, for example, Veivo et al. 2005). Such approaches disregard many features of literary interpretation. By discussing the concept of mimesis and how it has been understood by literary scholars, especially in relation to postmodern American fiction, I want to contribute to the hermeneutic dimension of cognitive literary studies. This entails establishing mimetic aspects in literary works and, more particularly, reassessing the realist dimension in postmodern American fiction, that is, in some sense, detecting the real in the unreal. I should emphasize that it is not my intention to suggest that genre denominations are non-existent or unhelpful, but that a facile use of them may incur blindness to the complexity inherent in the genres and sub-genres employed in postmodern fiction (which is also often implicitly viewed as a sub-genre of fiction).

Postmodern American Fiction and the American Grain

Despite the fact that so many of the great American novelists and short-story writers are realists of sorts, there is a half a century long tradition in American letters of valuing mythical and symbolic novels more highly than realist ones. This was in some ways corroborated by the division that Richard Chase (1957) made between the novel (meaning the realist novel) and the romance or romance-novel. I have argued elsewhere that the postmodern American fiction is heir to the “mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms” with “symbolic or ideological, rather than realistic, plausibility”, which Chase (1957: 13) found typical of the American romance-novel (see Pettersson 1994: 13). The indigenous romance-novel tradition epitomized by Hawthorne’s and Melville’s novels suggests why postmodern tendencies became so easily rooted in

American fiction since the 1960s. But it also helps to explain why American literary criticism so readily took to postmodern fiction – in fact, so readily that Tony Hilfer (1992/1993: 7) has rightly complained that American letters has continued to value the tradition of the romance-novel, lately in the guise of postmodern fiction, more highly than realist fiction. In a recent paper on Richard Brautigan’s fiction I took my cue from Hilfer, among others, in arguing that critics of postmodern American fiction have tended to focus on its metafictional aspects at the expense of its referential ones (see Pettersson 2004).

I now aim to develop a related argument by considering both postmodern American fiction per se and its criticism. With regard to the former, I would claim that postmodern American fiction has continued the romance-novel tradition, with the important addition that this tradition, like all fiction, always includes referential aspects (see Pettersson 1996). As for the latter, I would suggest that the rather simplistic dichotomy between the (realist) novel and the romance-novel is due in part to the equating of mimesis with ‘imitation’. That is, for much of the late twentieth century in American literary criticism and beyond, the implicit view seems to have been that fiction is *either* realist (and thus for many theoretically-inclined critics, uninteresting, old-fashioned, even naive) *or* symbolic, fantastic and experimental (hence captivating, avant-garde, even revolutionary). Few may have put the case as starkly as Catherine Belsey (1980/1991) in her condemnation of realist fiction and praise for *interrogative* postmodern fiction, but most likely she epitomized a general critical sentiment at the time on both sides of the Atlantic. To be sure, much postmodern fiction was more experimental and at times even more interesting than realist fiction from the 1960s to the 1980s. Nonetheless, I will try to show that postmodern American fiction also includes realist features

and that a broader understanding of mimesis must be part and parcel of its critical reassessment. This in turn has repercussions on how mimetic aspects of realist fiction are viewed.

I should like first to tip my hat to Christine Brooke-Rose and John Barth, two authors and critics who, in their characteristically insightful manner, about a quarter of a century ago saw the real in the unreal from *Thousand and One Nights* and *Don Quijote* to postmodern fiction.

[U]ltimately all fiction is realistic, whether it mimes a mythic idea of heroic deeds or a progressive idea of society, inner psychology or, as now. [*sic*] the non-interpretability [*sic*] of the world, which is our reality as its interpretability once was (and may return). A fantastic realism. (Brooke-Rose 1981/1983: 388)

[N]ot only is all fiction fiction about fiction, but all fiction about fiction is in fact fiction about life. Some of us understood that all along. (Barth, *The Friday Book* [1984], quoted in Polvinen, forthcoming)

In order to understand why most other critics are only now starting to distinguish such aspects in postmodern fiction, we must turn to the checkered history of mimesis.

Reconsidering Mimesis: Discovery and Invention

The notion of mimesis, Stephen Halliwell (2002: 343, 344 quote) shows in his important study *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, started to fade among philosophers and theorists even in the Middle Ages and

in the past two hundred years it has become progressively alien to modern – not to say modernist and postmodernist – accounts of art. As regards both the practice and theory of art [...], we live, it is sometimes alleged, in a “postmimetic” era.

Halliwell, professor of Greek at the University of St Andrews, argues that when the notion was introduced and discussed by the Greeks, especially Plato and Aristotle, it included a spectrum of meanings ranging from discovery or imitation (*world-reflecting*) to invention (*world-simulating*). He detects “a standard and still prevalent view that it was an unqualified rejection of the ‘imitation of nature’ that subsequently characterized romanticism” – a view that neglects the fact that mimesis has “always been in part a concept of expression” (Halliwell 2002: 358). It is precisely this facile

equating of mimesis with the imitation-of-nature view that has been taken for granted in most literary scholarship of the last two centuries. Even Erich Auerbach (1946/1991: 554) in his magisterial, if non-theoretical, treatise *Mimesis* defines the subject of his book as “the interpretation of reality through literary representation or ‘imitation’”. Of course, his rich and diverse chapters on Western literature shows that *imitation* for him can encompass many levels of literary representation. Yet his view of how realism – both medieval and modern, in the visual arts as well as literature – “represent[s] the most everyday phenomena of reality in a serious and significant context” (Auerbach 1946/1991: 555) may well have contributed to the division between world-reflecting and world-simulating views of mimesis in the eyes of critics dealing with postmodern fiction.

Similarly, in one of the most influential studies in American letters of the mid-twentieth century, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M. H. Abrams (1953/1971: 8) defined the “mimetic orientation” as imitation and as “probably the most primitive aesthetic theory” at that. To be sure, he provides a brief history of the concept and further specifications of this *mirror* view of literary representation (as against the preferred *lamp* view introduced by the Romantic poets and philosophers) (Abrams 1953/1971: 8–14, 30–46). But by his stark division and his downgrading of the mimetic orientation Abrams strengthened the world-reflecting view of mimesis and paved the way for the rather strong condemnation of it in late twentieth-century literary scholarship. More recently, Matthew Potolsky (2006: 161) has attempted to relativize the notion of mimesis, but finally concludes that “for Western culture at least, there has been no way out of it”.

Now that I have made the point that mimesis – and by extension realism – was rather readily considered imitative and thus not held in high regard by literary theoreticians and historians by the mid-twentieth century (a tendency later strengthened in rather untenable ways by Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida; see Halliwell 2002: 374–380), let me try to context-

ualize the literary-critical view with a literary-historical one. We should remember that no hard-and-fast distinctions between empirical kinds of fiction (such as realism or naturalism) and fantastic ones (such as romance or science fiction) were in existence before the twentieth century. We may now classify H. G. Wells's "scientific romances" as science fiction, but at the time the genre as such did not exist and his works were published along with works that we would now term realist or naturalist. What happened in twentieth-century fiction – and this has perhaps not been adequately accounted for as yet – was (at least) a three-fold polarization between traditional and experimental fiction (at first modern, then postmodern), between serious or elite (high-brow) and popular (low-brow) fiction, and between realist and fantastic genres. Although there were some ties between some of these polarities – such as between elite and experimental fiction and between popular and fantastic fiction – no absolute lines could be drawn, not even in terms of realism: *Ulysses* is experimental fiction on a realist basis, although it includes fantastic elements, while *The Great Gatsby* represents traditional realist fiction.

What postmodern fiction introduced was a rapprochement on all three accounts. Today, of course, postmodern techniques and genre-blending have been incorporated into fiction at large. Just think of Julian Barnes' *Arthur & George*. By blending a number of genres and sub-genres, such as crime fiction, biography, the historical novel, the romance novel, the realist novel and the (post)colonial novel, it is both traditional and experimental, high-brow and popular, realist and fantastic (see Barnes 2005/2006) – although I for one would view it primarily as a realist novel based on the lives of actual persons but enriched by other genres. That is, despite today's greater generic awareness among authors, publishers and readers, it seems as if literature has in many ways returned to a greater openness to different kinds of genres, often within single works. Ian Gregson (2004: 15) has recently made a related point: "much of the most powerful" recent postmodern literature "focuses on [the] relationship [between the constructed and the real], which requires it to draw upon traditional

realist techniques at the same time as it calls them into question with postmodernist techniques". Hence, this openness to diverse genres and literary techniques has been brought about and is now permeated by postmodern techniques and popular – and to some extent non-literary – genres.

It is my contention that literary scholarship by its thwarted view of mimesis and realism in the late twentieth century was rather blind to the realist dimension of postmodern fiction. Paul Ricoeur's (1977/2003, 1983/1984) attempts to reinstate a broader, Aristotelian view of mimesis and reference in *The Rule of Metaphor* and later in *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*, even though widely read and admired by the literary establishment in the 1970s and 1980s, had little impact on the practical criticism of postmodern fiction. This is also true of other significant works inspired in part by Ricoeur's view of mimesis, such as Monika Fludernik's (1996) cognitive account of narrative and Darío Villanueva's (1997) reader-oriented view of realist fiction.

Hence, Jerry Varsava was something of an odd man out when discussing mimesis at length in relation to postmodern fiction in 1990. His starting-point is a broad, Aristotelian view of representation as both "a miming and a making" (Varsava 1990: 42; cf. 2–6). But influenced by late twentieth-century hermeneutics and reader-response theory, especially Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Wolfgang Iser, he claims that mimesis is "an interpretive project, a *pas de deux* involving text and reader" and that reading is "a contingent process in which an individual 'historical reader' interacts with a literary work" (Varsava 1990: 54). By suggesting that a text can function as agent (in supposedly *interacting* with readers), Varsava – like Iser before him – commits what I have elsewhere termed *the interactional fallacy* (see Pettersson 1999: 49). Thus, his intriguing readings of the mimetic dimension in postmodern fiction as affording "the potential at least of a social function" in the form of "a kind of 'critical realism' that depicts, however paradoxically, foibles of contemporary lives" are hampered by dismissing the intentional and textual aspects of mimesis in literary communication (Varsava 1990: 182).

Apparently unaware of Varsava's work, Richard Walsh (1995) does literary studies a great service in showing that postmodern fiction engages with external reality by what he terms *argument*, which for him encompasses both literary form and substance. However, although he does not make an absolute distinction between realist fiction and innovative (that is, for him, postmodern) fiction, he suggests that the former abides by "the aesthetic law of mimesis" and the latter has "a less deferential attitude towards it" (Walsh 1995: x). There is much truth in such a view – but only if mimesis is understood in the sense of 'imitation'. My point here is that we should go beyond equating mimesis with imitation, since imaginative aspects are also part and parcel of a broad definition of the former.

Now I think we are ready to consider how analyzing the mimetic aspects of postmodern fiction can contribute to a better understanding of mimesis in literary interpretation and of the rather neglected referential aspect in postmodern fiction (American and other) – and ultimately to developing the hermeneutic side of cognitive literary studies.

The Real in Postmodern American Fiction

In the most thorough discussion of mimesis in recent decades, Paul Ricoeur (1983/1984: xi) presents what amounts to a cognitive and hermeneutic account. He distinguishes between three "senses" (or rather, stages) of mimesis. They include

a reference back to the familiar pre-understanding we have of the order of action; an entry into the realm of poetic composition; and finally a new configuration by means of this poetic refiguring of the of the pre-understood order of action. It is through this last sense that the mimetic function of the plot rejoins metaphorical reference.

Indeed, at the very start of his first volume of *Time and Narrative* he notes that this work and *The Rule of Metaphor* "form a pair" and "were conceived together" (Ricoeur 1983/1984: ix). Hence, in explicit contrast to the then fashionable views of literature as non-referential, he reasserts his point that by metaphorical reference "poetic texts, too, speak of the world, even though they may not do so in descriptive fashion" (Ricoeur 1983/1984: 79, 80

quote, emphasis original). At the end of a subchapter termed "A generalized account of denotation", Ricoeur (1977/2003: 283) asserts that "the enigma of metaphorical discourse is that it 'invents' in both senses of the word: what it creates, it discovers; and what it finds, it invents". Thus, in Ricoeur's view, the attempt to establish the mimetic dimension of both fiction and poetry (drama is not discussed) takes place in the form of an interpretive circle (much like the hermeneutic circle), or, rather, spiral, in which discovery and invention are interrelated.

The way the spiral activity of reading reconfigures the reader's pre-understanding may help us recognize the mimetic aspects of postmodern American fiction, where fantastic and realist, metafictional and experimental elements make readers perceive the world they are familiar with in new ways. However, we should note that much criticism has refuted such a view. Most famously perhaps, Tony Tanner (1971/1976), although not altogether unsusceptible to its referential aspects, regarded what we now term postmodern American fiction as a *City of Words*, and Brian McHale (1987: 9–11) claimed that the epistemological dominant of modern fiction was supplanted by an ontological one in postmodern fiction. Similarly, Marguerite Alexander (1990: 17) considered postmodern fiction "non-realist", in a work symptomatically titled *Flights from Realism*. Nevertheless, Brooke-Rose and Barth were not entirely alone in detecting realist features in postmodern fiction in the 1980s. In a psychoanalytically inclined study of fantasy as a genre, with particular focus on postmodern fantasy, Kathryn Hume (1984: 20) asserted that "literature is the product of two impulses", mimesis as well as fantasy. But the majority of critics were prone to regard postmodern fiction, especially postmodern American fiction, as primarily experimental, fantastic and metafictional.

Now let us briefly consider three more or less paradigmatic works of postmodern American fiction in order to establish in what senses it can be regarded as mimetic.

Donald Barthelme's "The Indian Uprising", one of the most widely anthologised short stories

of postmodern American fiction, evidently includes experimental, fantastic and meta-fictional features (see Barthelme 1968/1976: 9–19). The story thematizes a violent battle between cowboys and Indians being fought in conspicuously modern urban surroundings, and the narrator and his girlfriend or wife Sylvia are affected by it. The clashes between the popular genre of the Western and the fragmented story, between strange lists of quotidian possessions and allusions to various arts and military history, make the story patently absurd. However, like so many of Barthelme's stories, "The Indian Uprising" has a more serious side. Since the narrator and his girlfriend or wife are on opposite sides in the battle, it is clear that the battle can be read as a symbolic plot or even as an allegory standing for the break-up of a relationship. Indeed, the rest of the stories in the collection *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* not only corroborate such a reading, but in the last story of the collection "See the Moon?" ("The Indian Uprising" being the first) the narrator has a wife called Sylvia, and his deranged state of mind seems to suggest that the allegorical thematics of "The Indian Uprising" could be viewed in this light. But what is more, the graphic description of the brutal deeds committed by the warring parties in a contemporary setting and the many allusions to military history make American history come alive in ways that implicitly question the Manifest Destiny ideology as well as the Vietnam war raging at the time the story was written.

Similarly, Thomas Pynchon, often considered the most important postmodern American novelist, always includes a socio-critical subtext of contemporary (and, at times, past) American society in his fantastic and playful fiction. However absurd the adventures of Oedipa Maas, the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49*, among strange characters and social institutions, such as the postal system called W.A.S.T.E., they also depict the individual's plight in living in a bewildering nascent information society. Close to the end of the novel Oedipa thinks about her life.

And the voices before and after the dead man's that had phoned at random during the darkest, slowest hours, searching ceaseless among the dial's ten million

possibilities for that magical Other who would reveal herself out of the roar of relays, monotone litanies of insult, filth, fantasy, love whose brute repetition must someday call into being the trigger for the unnameable act, the recognition, the Word. (Pynchon 1966/1974: 137)

Certainly we can see how this sentence lacking a main clause epitomizes Oedipa's longing and futile quest in the fictional world of the novel, just as we can spot allusions, for instance, to Joyce, Beckett, philosophical discourse, and possibly "The Gospel According to John". But surely Pynchon's novel – and postmodern fiction in general – would be rather poor if it stopped at that. As a raging cry – or in Allen Ginsberg's terms, howl – at the dehumanizing forces in society, the novel, as suggested by this one sentence, brings out the real, even socially critical dimension of his fiction. The harrowing aspects of contemporary American life come to the fore in Pynchon's biting satire of a society in which Oedipa only can go on "as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia" (Pynchon 1966/1974: 138).

The techniques of these two paradigmatic writers of postmodern American fiction – as well as those of others – were largely incorporated into American fiction and its popular genres by the 1980s. In Toni Morrison's (1987/1988) *Beloved* the strong realist tendency and moral indignation (based on the actual life story of an ex-slave called Margaret Garner) is combined with the disjointed portrayal of Sethe and the ghost-like Beloved. At this point in American fiction, fragmented narratives and shifts in focalization had become so much a part of American fiction that the editors of *Postmodern American Fiction. An Anthology* can straightforwardly state: "In the history of postmodern American fiction, the publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is a crucial moment" (Geyh, Leebron and Levy 1998: 291). Thus, as postmodern American fiction developed, it was more prone to produce blends of fantasy and realism, experimental and traditional narrative. In *Beloved*, Morrison's literary technique is largely postmodern, but her re-writing of African-American history has pointedly moral and realist aspirations.

In other words, any study of postmodern

American fiction must take into account its development during its heyday between, say, 1960 and 1990. My claim, however, remains: Despite its features of experimental fantasy and playful metafiction, postmodern American fiction has always had significant epistemological or realist aspects, the neglect of which has seriously hampered much of its criticism. However, recent studies of magic realism strongly emphasize the realist dimension in works that are sometimes considered postmodern, thus paving the way for a critical reassessment of postmodern fiction in general (see, for example, Hegerfeldt 2005).

Conclusion

The neglect of the representational dimension of postmodern American fiction, I have argued, is at least in part due to simplistic views of mimesis and realism. Perhaps recent accounts of mimesis have placed too little stress on the complex techniques of literary representation. In Victor Shklovsky's (1917/1965: 12) famous paper "Art as Technique" the focus is on how defamiliarization works by impeding perception, so that literature, like all art, "exists that one may recover the sensation of life". What cognitive literary studies could go on to study is how such techniques are used at the service of mimesis in different kinds of literature. Even my cursory look at three works by Barthelme,

Pynchon and Morrison seems to suggest that postmodern experimentation impedes the act of reading by blending fantastic and realist features as well as genres, symbols and allusions, metafiction and allegory – thus producing a powerful sensation of life. It may well be that such experimental techniques have led to many critics emphasizing the fantastic and metafictional aspects of postmodern fiction rather than its representational ones.

A broader view of mimesis should also be helpful in assessing the complexity inherent in literary representation in general. For instance, acknowledging the breadth of mimetic aspects in fiction could help us to better analyse the multifaceted current modes of realist fiction, the New Weird in science fiction and queer vampire fiction. In particular, I would welcome studies of world-reflecting and world-simulating in literary works of various genres, and of how the different kinds of mimesis affect their reading. That is, just as literary studies in general, and cognitive literary studies in particular, should go on to scrutinize the interrelation of analogy and narrative in literature (see Pettersson 2005), they should also put more effort into exploring the sorts of blends that realism and fantasy and their imaginative and imitative kinds of mimesis form in literature.

Note

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