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Recent Realist Fiction and the Idea of Writing
"After Postmodernism"

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ABSTRACT

The turn away from experimental postmodernism in favor of representational writing during the 1980s and 1990s is often explained, in recent literary historiography, with a narrative of cultural healing and conceptual progress. According to this narrative, the best recent fiction is a new realism "after" postmodernism which recovers the interest in "experience" and "social relevance" that postmodernists had lost, while retaining an awareness of postmodernism's epistemological lessons that "naïve realisms" had supposedly lacked. This essay argues that the complex and contradictory stylistics inherent in the various trends subsumed under the realist revival may be better explained with reference to developments in aesthetic perception, which may have occurred independently of the conceptual stances (modernist, postmodernist, post-postmodernist, etc.) with which they are often authorized. In order to refine the differences between various contemporary realisms and their relations to the postmodernist avant-garde, this essay discusses the experimental use of representational rhetoric by authors such as Raymond Carver, Frederick Barthelme, and Bret Easton Ellis and contrasts them with 1970s Cooveresque fiction and the more recent representational writing of, among others, Philip Roth, Rick Moody, and Jeffrey Eugenides.

The Specter of Rampant Postmodernism

Ethan and Joel Coen's recent neo-noir film *The Man Who Wasn't There* features a defense attorney named Freddie Riedenschneider, who, at first glance, appears to have stepped straight out of a postmodernist novel. Hired to reverse an indictment for murder, he informs his clients that what matters is not what really happened, but whether the story presented to the jury "titillates" (61). Riedenschneider's flippantry remarks are not intended as a cynical critique of the American legal system, as they might be if he were a character out of Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987). On the contrary, the relativity of truth in the court room amuses rather than disquiets Riedenschneider. In fact it fascinates him so much that he tends to neglect the more practical aspects of legal procedure for which he is being paid. Instead of discussing the strategy of the defense, he baffles his despairing clients with lengthy discourses on Werner Heisenberg's discovery of the uncertainty principle (the story is set in 1949):

They got this guy, in Germany. Fritz something-or-other. Or is it. Maybe it's Werner. Anyway, he's got this theory, you wanna test something, you know, scientifically—how the planets go round the sun, what sunspots are made of, why the water comes out of the tap—well, you gotta look at it. But sometimes, you look at it, your looking changes it. Ya can't know the reality of what happened, or what would've happened if you hadden a stuck in your own goddamn schnozz. So there is no 'what happened.' Not in any sense
that we can grasp with our puny minds. Because our minds ... our minds get in the way. Looking at something changes it. They call it the 'Uncertainty Principle.' Sure, it sounds screwy, but even Einstein says the guy is onto something. (Coen 66-67)

Riedenschnieder's fixation on uncertainty recalls the playful skepticism of the metafictional tradition, but in contrast to the heroically self-reflexive philosopher-narrators of classic postmodernism, he is portrayed as moronic, vain, and ultimately feckless. His disqualifying error is the delusion that his knowledge about the uncertainty principle will be empowering and give him a distinct advantage over the judges and the jury. With reference to Heisenberg's discovery, he intends to force an acquittal on the basis of "Reasonable Doubt" simply by demonstrating that, since "the more you look, the less you know" (69), the truth about what happened will remain elusive, and consequently his client's guilt cannot be proven. But as we learn from the main character Ed Crane's retrospective summary of the trial, such reasoning convinces no-one; instead, Riedenschnieder's philosophical excursions weaken the defense and ultimately lead to Ed Crane's undeserved death sentence.¹

Arguably, the comic effect of Riedenschnieder's appearance in *The Man Who Wasn't There* depends on the audience's recognition that he is to be understood as a satirically exaggerated representation of the card-carrying postmodernist. Thus the emergence of a character like Riedenschnieder in a Hollywood movie can be said to reflect the extent to which critical and public opinion has come to regard postmodernism with a feeling of detachment, as a historical phase distant enough for its "essential flaws" to emerge clearly and to serve as easy targets for satirical jibes.

The Narrative of the Realist Revival as "Cultural Healing"

The suspicion that postmodernism's "essential flaws" have to do with a self-defeating epistemology and an escapist moral detachment has been a key theme of the recurring critiques of postmodernist fiction since the 1970s,² as metafictional and fabulist experimentation lost its innovative luster. The Coen brothers' ridicule of postmodernism is indicative of the change in critical climate whose tipping point is often associated with Tom Wolfe's influential 1989 "realist manifesto" in *Harper's Magazine*. Wolfe's main point was that the theory-laden and self-reflexive experiments of literary postmodernism stem from the confusion of a whole generation of writers and critics perplexed by the epistemological skepticism and

¹ As Ed Crane recalls on death row, Riedenschnieder told the jury "to look at me—look at me close. That the closer they looked the less sense it would all make [...]. He told them to look not at the facts but at the meaning of the facts, and then he said the facts had no meaning." But finally the judge "wasn't buying any of this [...] uncertainty stuff [...]. No, he was going by the book, and the book said I got the chair" (100-02).

² The Coen brothers' characterization of Riedenschnieder as a slippery theorist strikingly indifferent to the reality of the court room resonates with the standard accusation that postmodernist authors are, as the novelist John Gardner said in 1978, "jubilant nihilists," "obscenely giggling and gesturing in the wings while the play of life groans on" (55).
sense of cultural entropy of their times. While critics dismissed some of his strategic simplifications (most notably the idea that realism had been extinct before Wolfe sashayed onto the scene) and expressed doubts about his literary example, many agreed with his main thesis: that postmodernist writing reflected an overreaction to the "radical" philosophy of the 1960s, and that a more sober approach would reinstate realism's former cultural authority. Kristiaan Versluys, for instance, locates himself squarely within this critical trend in his introduction to the proceedings of a 1991 conference on neorealism. He contends that as "a spin-off of post-structuralism in its many guises," literary critics had told each other within the last thirty years "that what we always presumed to be the real is nothing but a treacherous trompe l'oeil, an illusory epiphenomenon—a lie to be unmasked by playfulness and invention." According to Versluys, this "strange overturning of common sense" based on "abstruse epistemological underpinnings" had "consequences" for the "less philosophically-inclined consumer of literary goods." Thus Versluys takes post-structuralism's epistemological lapse to have changed the literary scene and caused readers to learn "to accept and appreciate" experimental fiction, "the raucous free-for-all of polysemy and fabulation" typical of "the John Barth[s], Thomas Pynchons and Ronald Sukenicks of this world." The punchline of Versluys' argument, then, is a lesson in epistemology similar to Wolfe's:

Nonetheless, we all know, in those moments we stop being intellectuals and return to life as ordinary human beings, that the real IS real and that, if one kicks a stone, it hurts. [Realism is an] enduring tradition in fiction which takes this bedrock truth as the center of its program. (7)

Versluys expresses the tentative hope, shared by other contributors to the proceedings, that this lesson will increasingly be learned and that it will help to improve the landscape of contemporary American fiction. As Freddie Riedenschiener arrives on the cinema screen a decade later, this hope has given way to a more confident belief that the lesson has indeed been well-taken. Robert Rebin maintains in his 2001 overview of "American Fiction after Postmodernism" that "some sort of revitalization of realism has taken place" (17), and that "Tom Wolfe's prediction that the immediate future of the American novel would be in the realist mode has largely come to pass" (20). The sense of closure in Rebin's verdict reveals his assumption that the virtual disappearance of experimental postmodernism from the literary market since the early 1990s is mainly rooted in an epistemological reorientation: contemporary writers since the 1980s, he argues, have responded to the "question about language and mimesis raised by poststructuralists in the seventies" in a more balanced and mature way than their

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3 They had falsely concluded, Wolfe wrote, that—since "life was chaotic, fragmented, random, discontinuous; in a word, absurd"—it had become so unrepresentable that "the realistic novel was no longer possible" (xvi). Thus Wolfe's "manifesto" intends to teach a deluded literary establishment an epistemological lesson: that the postmodern fragmentation of American society does not render realism obsolete, but "merely makes the task of the writer more difficult" (xx). It necessitates, not anti-realist game-playing, but a new realism "more thorough than any currently being attempted" (xviii).
postmodernist predecessors: they have decided to “accept the mimetic limitations of realism [...] as obvious and move on from there to build what Tom Wolfe insists will be a bigger, better realism” (18-19).

In his critique of postmodernist self-fashioning, Rebein emphasizes the dangers of construing literary development as general artistic progress (cf. 16); his own argument, however, shows how difficult it is to resist the idea that the recent “flourishing of realism” is the result of a conceptual or philosophical advancement. He insists that contemporary realist writers “have not simply gone back” to the naïve realism of former times, but instead “absorbed postmodernism’s most lasting contributions and gone on to forge a new realism,” which is both “reportorial” and “self-conscious about language and the limits of mimesis” (20). One hears in Rebein’s argument the implication of upward movement, as if excessive postmodernism and naïve realism had been aufgehoben to form what one could call a “new-neorealism” whose more mature conceptual framework allows a more astute engagement with contemporary manners.4

“New-Neorealism” and Experimental Postmodernism as Discontinuous Traditions

The idea that realism regained its cultural authority largely because America’s literary Riedenschneiders were exposed as frauds implies that the faultline between experimental postmodernists and new-neorealists is their willingness or refusal to engage with the socio-political worlds outside the text, and that, consequently, the recent predominance of realism indicates the victory of reality represented over reality ignored. If this were true, the main difference between, say, Robert Coover’s historiographic metafiction The Public Burning (1977) and Philip Roth’s new-neorealist The Human Stain (2000) would lie in the extent to which they “wrestle” with American manners “and bring them to terms.” According to this viewpoint, the Coovers of American fiction, despite their apparent interest in American politics and history, were too distracted by self-indulgent questions about the “meaning of meaning” to provide more than fragmentary accounts of contemporary society.5 Writers such as Roth, by contrast, helped to recover in-

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4 The notion that the dialectics of literary progress runs from naïve realism via a postmodernist detour towards an enlightened synthesis is common in the various legitimations of aesthetic programs since the 1980s. It informs Linda Hutcheon’s idea of “historiographic metafiction,” Alan Wilde’s concept of “midfiction,” or Frederick Barthelme’s notion of a “new realism refracted through postmodernism” (Jutta Person—Interview x). The idea that the “efflorescence of the realistic novel” (Dewey 9) is a result of a cultural healing has been the preferred theme of editors of anthologies since the 1980s (cf. Raymond Carver and Tom Jenks’s 1987 introduction to American Short Story Masterpieces as well as Richard Ford’s and Robert Stone’s introductions to The Best American Short Stories series of 1990 and 1992).

5 For the opinion that Coover’s interest in metafiction distorts the novel’s political theme, see, for instance, Mazurek. Critics have rejoined by arguing that Coover does not so much neglect reality as “explode the realistic view of reality and affirm contingency” (Strehle 85). Yet from the
dividual "experience" within the social fabric while at the same time displaying an awareness of the "lessons of postmodernism" that "naïve realists" lacked.  

But surely the most important differences between such texts as The Human Stain and The Public Burning are only tenuously related to their stance on postmodernist epistemologies: Cooveresque fiction stands for a tradition that never intended to produce anything other than avant-garde literature, made to suit the aesthetic habits of highly specialized readers accustomed to the formal difficulty and structural openness of the experimental tradition. The new-neorealism of Philip Roth, Jeffrey Eugenides, Lorrie Moore, or Rick Moody, on the other hand, is of an altogether different structural design, more adaptable to the less habitualized reading postures of non-professional audiences.  

It is true that new-neorealists occasionally use metafictional strategies that can be taken to show their awareness of "the lessons of postmodernism." Thus, for instance, the narrator of Roth's The Human Stain, Nathan Zuckerman, interrupts his account of Coleman Silk for a gloomy, Riedenschneideresque reflection on uncertainty, which undermines his own authority as a narrator:

Because we don't know, do we? [...] How what happens the way it does? What underlies the anarchy of the train of events, the uncertainties, the mishaps, the disunity, the shocking irregularities that define human affairs? [...] What we know is that [...] nobody knows anything. You can't know anything. The things you know you don't know. Inten-

6 The narrative of new-neorealism's move "beyond" postmodernism postulates that old neorealists (e.g. Saul Bellow, Gore Vidal, Bernard Malamud, or John Updike) deal in "conventional realism" lacking "the filter of postmodemism" (Barthelme, Jutta Person—Interview x), while new-neorealism is usually associated with a younger generation (e.g., among a plethora of others, Denis Johnson, Jeffrey Eugenides, Rick Moody, Lorrie Moore, Jane Smiley; cf. Passaro and Rebein). Philip Roth, although often grouped with the older neorealists because of his age, epitomizes the idea of growth implied in the narrative of new-neorealism. His work resists neorealist continuity (cf. Pinsker 3), and his literary biography lends itself to description in terms of development (cf. Cowley 118) from Henry Jamesian beginnings (Letting Go, 1962), via a detour through fabulist and metafictional territory (The Breast, 1972; The Counterlife, 1986), to the tentatively self-reflexive plotting in his recent engagement with post-World-War II American ideologies (American Pastoral, 1997, I Married a Communist, 1998, and The Human Stain, 2000).

7 I do not believe that the degree to which readers are versed in stylistic codes says much about the value of their aesthetic experiences. My distinction between realist and avant-garde readerships does not intend any evaluative undertones (comparable to the undertones one hears in Roland Barthes's readerly/writerly distinction, for instance). I would like to evade dichotomies of the type implied by Mark Shechner, who distinguishes between the naïvely emotional response to realism by non-academic readers (such as his wife) and the inability to respond "from the heart" he sees in his over-theorized academic colleagues (27-28). I would rather believe that a reader's preference for difficult texts results from familiarity with codes, and that the degree of familiarity says little about emotional involvement.
tion? Motive? Consequence? Meaning? All that we don’t know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing. (208-09)

More theoretically minded new-neorealists such as Jeffrey Eugenides or Rick Moody will go to even greater lengths than Roth to demonstrate that despite their use of classic realist rhetoric, they are not guilty of the naïveté that literary theory traditionally sees in realists. As if to pre-empt critical sneers about the traditional structure and openly autobiographical approach of his acclaimed story “Demonology” (2000), Moody closes the moving account of the death of his sister with a full-page list of the things he knows he should have done as an enlightened author:

I should fictionalize it more, I should conceal myself. I should consider the responsibilities of characterization, I should conflate her two children into one, or reverse their genders, or otherwise alter them […]. I should let artifice create an elegant surface. I should make the events orderly. I should wait and write about it later […]. I shouldn’t have to think the unthinkable […] I should have a better ending […]. (305-06)

Jeffrey Eugenides, similarly, in his recent novel *Middlesex* (2002), constantly reminds the reader that he is aware of the pitfalls and risks of interweaving Greek myth and the straightforward factuality of the historical and social realist novel. The narrator of *Middlesex* thus counterpoints the stirring tale of his Greek-immigrant family history and his own problematic sexuality with ironic narratological comments about his penchant for symbolism and poetic diction (“Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times” [4]). In the following representative passage, the narrator describes his grandfather’s disillusionment with the American dream with a tongue-in-cheek reference to his own bending of the truth for the sake of melodramatic effect:

They are […] passing the amusement grounds of Electric Park. It’s foggy out, and late—just past 3 a.m. To be honest, the amusement grounds should be closed at this hour, but, for my own purposes, tonight Electric Park is open all night, and the fog suddenly lifts, all so that my grandfather can look out the window and see a roller coaster streaking down the track. A moment of cheap symbolism only, and then I have to bow to the strict rules of realism, which is to say: they can’t see a thing. Spring fog foams over the ramparts of the newly opened Belle Isle Bridge. (110-11)

Nevertheless, while such occasional metafictional devices may provide comic relief as well as intriguing insights into the fictional process, they do not justify the description of new-neorealism as a continuation of the Cooveresque literary project as if it reflected a progressive “moderation” or adaptation of postmodernist concepts. For surely the main difference between the Coovers and the Roths of recent literary history is a difference in aesthetic register. The metafictional devices in such texts as *The Human Stain*, “Demonology,” or *Middlesex* do not, on the whole, distort our sense of plot coherency as radically as the devices of Cooversque fiction. Indeed, Zuckerman’s skeptical disclaimers do not render his account of Coleman Silk’s tragic demise any less compelling; Eugenides’s playful narrative irony blurs neither his cultural critique nor the emotional appeal of its melancholy plot. What is characteristic about new-neorealist writing, then, is that despite its considerable narrative drive and occasional tongue-in-cheek employment of classic postmodernist devices, narrative closure is sufficiently maintained to guarantee a rela-
tive stylistic accessibility that leaves the reader’s perceptive powers focused on the concepts, propositions, and values inherent in the textual fictional worlds. Whether or not such novels as *The Human Stain* (or *Middlesex*, or *The Ice Storm*, or many others) are perceived as subversive, then, depends on the audience’s reaction to the fictional world portrayed in them, rather than the structural make-up of the narration. Such texts as *The Public Burning*, by contrast, do not as much neglect the real as render their engagement with it less obvious, letting the story retreat behind a structural openness that makes access to the fictional world more difficult. Thus whether or not Cooveresque texts are perceived as subversive depends largely on the audience’s appreciation of formal innovation and difficulty.

From the perspective of many theories of postmodernism, of course, it would seem redundant to point out that Coover is not only a postmodernist but also an avant-garde author dealing in open texts and structural subversion, as such theories tend to consider experimental aesthetics the most worthwhile expression of the postmodern condition. T. S. Eliot’s idea that art, to live up to the premises of modernity, must be difficult, resurfaces in the insistence that contemporary thought can only be rendered by the writerly poetics of anti-realism, because the fragmented narrative structure of experimental postmodernism is seen as the most “authentic” reflection of our Einsteinian universe. In this influential “mirror theory” of art, Coover’s narrative devices are credited with an epistemological or ideological content: they are described as reflecting a poetics of “exploded form” which in turn reflects the “explosion” of traditional (Newtonian, naïve, conservative) concepts of knowledge and being. Ironically, the assumption that our post-

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8 Narrative closure, of course, is an imprecise category whose shape depends on the assumptions of historic reader communities and their perceptions of hierarchy and order. At its most general, it is a textual effect encouraging readers to assume hierarchical order and propositional knowledge in the text, which can be more (as in Tom Wolfe) or less accessible (as in Philip Roth or Denis Johnson). While the term “closure” has been used as a synonym of schematism and conservatism (cf. Belsey 70-84), I do not see why a text’s degree of textual closure should in itself say much about the same text’s relative complexity, the richness of its themes, the subversiveness of its propositions, its aesthetic effects, or about its underlying epistemology or politics.

9 The shock-effect of Coover’s *Public Burning*, arguably, depended on structural subversion, such as the genre-transgressive mixing of fact and fiction. When Coover lets Richard Nixon masturbate over a fantasy of a half-nude Ethel Rosenberg, the audience’s impression of tastelessness has more to do with the violation of genre conventions than with the text’s sexual explicitness. In Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*, the opposite is the case, as the subversion of readerly notions of propriety happens for the most part on the story-level.

10 For the trope of “exploded form,” see Mellard. Brian McHale argues similarly: “postmodernist fiction does hold the mirror up to reality; but that reality, now more than ever, is plural.” And he adds: “postmodernist fiction turns out to be mimetic after all, but this imitation of reality is accomplished not so much at the level of its content, which is often manifestly un- or anti-realistic, as at the level of form” (38-39). As Richard Poirier has argued, this way of thinking already defines the modernist’s self-authorizing insistence that “cultural dislocations peculiar to this century” necessitate “stylistic and structural evidences of dislocation” (97-98) in writing and an analogous degree of difficulty in the act of reading. This idea goes hand in hand with the claim, typical of avant-garde poetics, that a text’s subversiveness is only “authentic” if it is reflected on the level of narrative form. According to this logic, to be sure, *The Human Stain* would be a conservative novel despite its explosive
modern condition expresses itself most authentically in radical art is not only one of postmodernism’s key foundational myths, but its argumentative logic also informs the counter-argument within the narrative of the realist revival, which authorizes the “flowering of realism” as a sign of a new philosophical stage “beyond” the limitations of radical postmodernism.

Our conceptual interpretation of style, however, varies with the contingencies of our aesthetic perceptions. If it is true that our Newtonian universe has been “exploded,” it does not follow that the resulting fragment-universes require “exploded” narratives in order to be expressed. Arguably the “broken forms” and “transgressions” of Cooveresque fiction “reflect” postmodern ideas much less than they indicate the aesthetic needs of its highly specialized audiences. The loss of authority that Cooveresque fiction underwent in the 1980s therefore signals a change of its audiences’ aesthetic preferences rather than an ideological or epistemological paradigm shift. Coover’s audiences did not suddenly flock to new-neorealism fiction, as if they had decided that they wanted to know more about “experience” after all. It rather seems that the metafictional and fabulist devices lost their subversive edge and began to seem less interesting, less “progressive,” because they had been repeated so often that the self-proclaimed “literature of replenishment” began to appear no less trite than the “literature of exhaustion” it had set out to replenish. Consequently, the idea that subversion expresses itself primarily through postmodernist irony became less convincing, and the stylistic markers that authorize a text as “highly literary” or “stylistically intriguing” changed gradually.

**Representation and Experiment in Minimal Realism**

What followed on the heels of Cooveresque fiction, then, was not a general and homogeneous turn to a “mature” new-neorealism, but a new experimentalism that utilized the representationalist narrative surfaces typical of neorealism, without the tendency towards structural closure that defines many traditional neorealisms. As Winfried Fluck points out with regard to Raymond Carver, Walter Abish, and Don DeLillo, such writing achieves its aesthetic effect by means of its reportorial surface “promis[ing] an authenticity and representativeness of experience” that is

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11 Indeed, it is instructive to read William H. Gass’s introduction to the 1998 edition of *The Public Burning*, what Gass seems to remember most vividly from his own reading experience is not the impression of difficulty, dislocation, and epistemological skepticism, but a political message whose left-wing vision of American history is as clear-cut as one would expect from a 1930s social realist novel.

12 Larry McCaffery made this point already in 1986, when he argued that “some of the sense of the decline of experimentalism results from our greater familiarity with the innovative strategies that once seemed so peculiar and difficult,” so that these strategies are “in fact, no longer considered to be experimental at all” (xxvii).
ultimately undermined by the text’s lack of semantic depth (77); the reader is “constantly moving between a promise of representative experience, its subversion, and its subsequent restitution” (78). Fluck also notes that “Abish and DeLillo are more experimentally minded than Carver” (79), which they indeed are if “experimental” implies that their representationalist rhetoric still carries obvious markers of their fabulist roots while Carver’s deadpan narratives do not. But if we proceed from a different definition of “experimental,” one based on how transgressive or baffling a new aesthetics seems to its actual readership, or how it polarizes the literary establishment into opposing camps of acclaim and disapproval, then it could be argued that by the late 1970s and 1980s Carver was the more experimental writer. While it is true that Carver often presented himself, in his interviews and essays on writing, as a simple traditional story-teller fascinated by Chekhov and Hemingway and with no other intention than to tell things the way they are (honestly, authentically, and without the “literary tricks” of the postmodernists, as he claimed), there is a segment in his variegated work that belies his modesty—a more eccentric type of Carver story that pushes the ironic discrepancy between the promise and undermining of reference to almost absurd extremes. It uses, without so much as a trace of irony, the reportorial tone and wealth of empirical detail typical of the more encyclopedic types of classic neorealism of manners, without however leading to the coherency of meaning and narrative closure that this rhetoric implies. In Carver’s early story “What’s in Alaska?” (1976), for instance, the center of the narrative is a lengthy real-time rendition of the anemic chatter at a dinner party:

“I know what would taste good and that’s some cream soda,” Jack said.
Mary and Helen laughed.
“Go ahead and laugh,” Jack said, grinning. “Who wants some cream soda?”
“Some what?” Mary said.
“Some cream soda,” Jack said.
“You stood up like you were going to make a speech,” Mary said.
“I hadn’t thought of that,” Jack said. He shook his head and laughed. He sat down.
“That’s good stuff,” he said.
“We should have got more,” Helen said.
“More what?” Mary said.
“More money,” Jack said.
“No money,” Carl said.
“Did I see some U-No bars in that sack?” Helen said.
“I bought some,” Carl said. “I spotted them the last minute.”
“U-No bars are good,” Jack said.
“They’re creamy,” Mary said. “They melt in your mouth.”
“We have some M and M’s and Popsicles if anybody wants any,” Jack said.
Mary said, “I’ll have a Popsicle. Are you going to the kitchen?”
“Yeah, and I’m going to get the cream soda, too,” Jack said. “I just remembered. You guys want a glass?”
“Just bring it all in and we’ll decide,” Helen said. “The M and M’s too.”
“Might be easier to move the kitchen out here,” Jack said.
“When we lived in the city,” Mary said, “people said you could see who’d turned on the night before by looking at their kitchen in the morning. We had a tiny kitchen when we lived in the city,” she said.
“We had a tiny kitchen too,” Carl said.
"I'm going out to see what I can find," Jack said.
"I'll come with you," Mary said. (84-85)

What makes such passages particularly surprising is that their sustained focus on ordinary detail implies a greater seriousness of realist purpose than we would find in most other experimental realisms—i.e. in those experimental realisms whose fabulist or metafictional signals render their "subversiveness" more easily recognizable than Carver's. Stephen Dixon's "Said," for instance, portrays a situation similar to that in Carver's story, but his characteristic employment of clear markers of irony distance the reader from the particular:

He said, she said.
She left the room, he followed her.
He said, she said.
She locked herself in the bathroom, he slammed the door with his fists.
He said.
She said nothing.
He said.
He slammed the door with his fists, kicked the door bottom.
She said, he said, she said. (469)

Dixon's omissions make clear, very much in the fashion of Donald Barthelme's fabulist minimalism, that the dialogues are too pointless to be represented. The reader is invited to lean back in the knowledge that, in our postmodern world, communication is often so meaningless and predictable that it is more entertaining to ignore its particularities. Yet for readers who have been inculcated with this lesson often enough and have come to recognize metafictional irony as its major medium, Carver's story appears to be more transgressive than Dixon's. His meticulous representationalism implies that the effort of analytic reading is worth the trouble. As a result, one finds oneself rereading Carver's dialogue in an attempt to identify any hidden meanings that would contribute to a thematic pattern, a central conceit towards which the narrative could be said to move. But as the text merely suggests a vague sense of conflict (cf. Gentry and Stull 9), its apparent realism turns out to be a mimetic report of "the human noise,"\(^{13}\) emitted by the characters, without revealing any deeper meaning.

The more controversial side of Carver's so-called "minimalism"—really better described with John Barth's concept of a "long-winded minimalism" (68)\(^{14}\)—shows a family resemblance to the longer prose of Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, and Bobbie Ann Mason, who have been seen as Carver's literary competitors. In their most experimental work, reality often seems to be recorded with the dry empiricist

\(^{13}\) As one of Carver's characters puts it in the 1981 story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" (154).

\(^{14}\) While "minimalism" has become a common label for Carver's poetics, the term has been applied to so many literary schools that it is at best misleading. I propose instead "minimal realism," which signals the difference between Carver's approach and the postmodern minimalisms of Beckett, Donald Barthelme, Stephen Dixon, and others (cf. my Casual Silences 19-24). Carver is difficult to pigeon-hole, as such "long-winded" stories as "What's in Alaska?" differ from his most popular fiction, which is often structurally close to traditional neorealism.
gaze that neorealism inherited from the nineteenth-century naturalist novel. Thus the discrepancy between the extensive representation of realistic detail and the lack of narrative closure becomes even more unusual than in Carver’s most verbose stories. The following excerpts are from Frederick Barthelme’s *Natural Selection* (1990) and *Second Marriage* (1984), but one could find similar passages, almost at random, in the more eccentric texts of Ann Beattie or Bobbie Ann Mason.\(^{15}\) The first describes a middle-aged couple’s perceptions during a car ride through suburbia; the second records a man’s impressions while having a bath:

So we cut down a couple of side streets, half-lit beaded concrete streets with shallow curbs, streets flanked on either side by nondescript tract houses from the fifties, brick houses from design books, doing better every day, until we ran dead-end into the feeder for the highway. At that point we were surrounded on all sides by bushes. You could see the pale blush light over the rise that was directly in front of us, coming up behind the greenery, which was now dark and slick, the light sizzling over this thirty-foot slope. You couldn’t see any of the cars moving up there, just this light, and this sound of the cars going by, the tires running on the wet concrete, the water strewn behind them. We had the windshield wipers going even though the rain was light and it took a few minutes for it to obscure the view. But we had them going, opening those messy arcs on the glass. There wasn’t much to see.

(Barthelme, *Natural Selection* 192)

I went into the bathroom and took a couple of long drinks out of the Pepto Bismol bottle, then ran water for a bath [...]. The tub was full, so I turned off the water, then went out to the kitchen and got a fresh can of Tab, and, coming back, pushed the air-conditioning control to the fan setting. The fan made a nice, steady hum. I got a copy of *Creative Computing* that Rachel had bought and returned to the bathroom, closing the toilet seat to make a table for the magazine and the drink. I climbed into the tub and got comfortable, then thought it would be nice to have the television where I could see it, so I got out, did a quick rubdown with a fresh towel, and got the TV from the bedroom. I brought it in, then didn’t want it there with all the water, so I put it on a chair outside the bathroom door in the hall. I turned on the set but left the sound off, switched to CNN, and got back into the tub. I folded a towel to use as a bolster behind my neck. (Barthelme, *Second Marriage* 200)

These smoothly mimetic descriptions sustain their serious posture despite their obvious failure to contribute to interpretive depth, sustained argument, or narrative closure. The narrators of such fiction pile up lengthy catalogues of superficial details in a perfectly deadpan manner, so that the failure to accrue any deeper meaning appears almost accidental. It is as if the seemingly eager and all-seeing camera-eye simply happens to forget, occasionally, to record crucial elements of plot and character — “forgets” rather than “avoids,” for the resulting textual openings seem so unintended that it is tempting to view them as “mistakes” on the part of inexperienced or careless authors. While this is indeed the opinion of many critics,\(^{16}\) other readers of this new experimentalism have recognized the intentionality of its

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\(^{15}\) Such as, for instance, Beattie’s novels *Chilly Scenes of Winter* (1976) and *Falling in Place* (1980) as well as Mason’s story collections *Shilo* (1982) and *Love Life* (1988).

\(^{16}\) Reviewing the fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason, for instance, Michael Gorra complains that it “comes loaded with detail” without achieving “perspective” or expressing “judgment” (7), which he takes to imply a failed realism. This has been a standard accusation of critics who overlook the texts’ experimentalist edge.
double gesture. Reviewing Barthelme’s *Second Marriage*, Ron Loewinsohn puts his finger on the aesthetic functioning of this technique. Warning his readers that the “laconic, understated focus on quotidian details and disconnected surfaces” of the novel “may encourage you to read quickly, superficially,” he suggests that one should resist this temptation, because “skim-reading” would ruin the novel’s effect (1). Loewinsohn’s reference to the reader’s pace recalls Roland Barthes’s idea of a reading “rhythm.” Traditional realists such as Zola, according to Barthes, differed from experimentalists in that they encourage a fast reading “rhythm” less concerned with “the play of language” than with the “winnowing out of truth,” with the reader going “straight to the articulation of the anecdote.” Barthes’s comparison of the realist reader with “a spectator in a nightclub who climbs onto the stage and speeds up the dancer’s striptease” (10-11) may well capture the expectations of 1980s readers who, faced with Barthelme’s seemingly translucent rhetoric, were tempted to skip the lengthy catalogues and search the text for its *nuda veritas*. The aesthetic effectiveness of Barthelme’s writing, as Loewinsohn well recognizes, rests precisely in its resistance to its readers’ expectations, as it forces them to slow down and perceive the textual material more intensely than its representational form at first suggests. Long-winded minimal realism, then, jumbles the rules of the traditional aesthetic games, juxtaposing representation with silence and dislocating experiment from metafiction.

The subversive effect of this structural code-breaking shows itself more clearly when long-winded minimal realism deals with morally delicate topics, as is the case in Bret Easton Ellis’s serial killer novel *American Psycho*. The public outrage against Ellis expressed itself mostly as a complaint about his subject matter, as if the novel’s shock-value stemmed from the horror of its themes. Ellis was denounced as a misogynist psychopath who, by jotting down his fantasies, had provided manuals for torture and rape. Yet even a superficial overview of the serial killer genre shows that while the events depicted in *American Psycho* are unsettling to the point of being unquotable, they hardly exceed what goes on in comparable books of the genre. The difference, then, is an aesthetic one, and has to do with Ellis’s formal experiment. *American Psycho* makes use of the representationalist rhetoric of the neorealist thriller genre, whose graphicness is pushed to almost unbearable extremes as narrator-character Patrick Bateman’s horrendous acts are shown in high resolution, in the manner of a documentary. At the same time, Ellis entirely subverts the genre-specific emphasis on motivation and psychological depth, going to great lengths in order to fuel the reader’s expectation of closure or resolution with textual “red-herrings.”

17 For the controversial reception of *American Psycho* see Young 85-88.
18 Thus Bateman often appears to embark on a *bildungsroman* type of journey towards self-enlightenment, and there are numerous hints of imminent epiphany or *anagnorisis* that promise the kind of character development which, in the neorealist thriller genre, provides a coherent ethical stance. The same effect is achieved with the sharply detailed camera-eye narration with which Ellis outdoes Frederick Barthelme’s listings of trivia. It results in lengthy, fact-mongering catalogues of Bateman’s empirical surroundings that stretch the reader’s patience, but encourage the positivist hope that the encyclopedic registering of the phenomenal world will enhance the text’s “deeper meaning.”
Recent Realist Fiction and the Idea of Writing "After Postmodernism"

Norman Mailer, in a review of *American Psycho*, instructively grapples with Ellis's structural subversiveness, criticizing him for failing to provide "a murderer with enough inner life for us to comprehend him." Bateman's "murders begin to read like a pornographic description of sex" (220), Mailer says, because one cannot "simply keep piling on more and more acts of machicolated butchery" without providing some insights into the nature of "extreme acts of violence." "The failure of this book," he concludes, "is that by the end we know no more about Bateman's need to dismember others than we know about the inner workings in the mind of a wooden-faced actor who swings a broadax in an exploitation film" (221). Mailer's argument, to be sure, is that of a serious neorealist who does not seem to be overly squeamish about graphic violence himself (he is the author of *The Executioner's Song* [1979]), but who believes that it should serve the end of a better understanding of humanity's darker side. Ellis breaks with this convention, as do other experimental writers whose defamiliarizing devices subvert the psychological coherency of their villains. But Ellis also breaks the rules of traditional experimentalism, presenting Bateman's blankness not with Faulkneresque or Pynchonesque difficulty but with the accessible representationalist rhetoric that implies the neorealist depth Mailer demands. This stylistic twist is at the root of *American Psycho*’s scandal and its perception, by some of its readers, as an “ultimate mismatch of style and subject” (Dickstein 510-11).

**Conclusion**

The ambiguous nature of minimal realism suggests that the idea of literature’s recent move "beyond" the ideological and epistemological currents of postmodernism reduces complex aesthetic developments to one-dimensional conceptual issues. The minimal-realist turn towards representation breaks with Cooveresque metaphictional aesthetic principles as much as it continues postmodernist fiction's experimental outlook. In both cases, the engagement with literary tradition is primarily defined by aesthetic rather than conceptual changes. This does not mean that the minimal-realist stylicility is independent of political, epistemological, and ethical issues (surely they "locate themselves" in a variety of "contesting grounds" and "negotiate" all sorts of "cultural anxieties"). It merely means that the family resemblance between Raymond Carver, Bret Easton Ellis, and Frederick Barthelme is mainly aesthetic, based on structural similarities, and that this family resemblance dissolves if one focuses on the inherent conceptual stances of their work.19

Regarding the often more accessible narrative surfaces of new-neorealist texts, the idea of progress is even less helpful. Since many of the new-neorealists do not share the interest of experimental tradition in structural code-breaking, more or

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19 Criticism on minimal realism has often overlooked the major ideological differences beneath the authors' aesthetic similarities. Consequently, the emergence of the movement has been reduced to a mere reflection of cultural trends, such as a relapse into "literary Republicanism" (Bellamy) and "social retrogression" (Newman), a simple continuation of postmodernity (Herzinger), or a recovery of realism on the basis of postmodernism's lessons (Rebein).
less limiting their code-breaking to the story level, they might simply have ignored rather than reacted against or “moved beyond” the postmodernist avant-garde. Thus the authorization of new-neorealism as an improved continuation of postmodernist fiction is tantamount to heralding apples as the more mature successors of oranges. The relationships between the Carvers, Coovers, and Roths of American fiction may be too ambiguous to be reduced to the oppositional conceptual differences that dominate the postmodernism debate, let alone be pressed into a scheme of dialectical progress from naïve old-neorealism to radical postmodernism to an enlightened new-neorealism.

Perhaps this is one of the more intriguing lessons of Riedenschneider’s appearance in the Coen brothers’ The Man Who Wasn’t There. By ridiculing Riedenschneider’s hope that his reference to Heisenberg’s theory would have “consequences” for the practice of legal procedure, the Coen brothers not only debunk crude versions of postmodernist epistemology, but also problematize simplistic ideas of postmodernism’s “consequences.” The judge, after all, pursues his profession “by the book” (102), and the way he behaves in his world of practice is independent of the philosophical account one may give of these practices. Hence Heisenberg’s theoretical proof that “facts make no sense” does not alter the judge’s process of sense-making. Perhaps the situation of American writers since the 1960s has resembled that of the judge: their aesthetic practices (metafiction, fabulism, minimalism, old- or new- or any other types of realism, etc.) follow premises of taste and aesthetic perception that may function relatively independently of the conceptual stances (modernist, postmodernist, post-postmodernist, etc.) with which or against which their writing is often authorized.

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