

**REALISM
AND POWER**

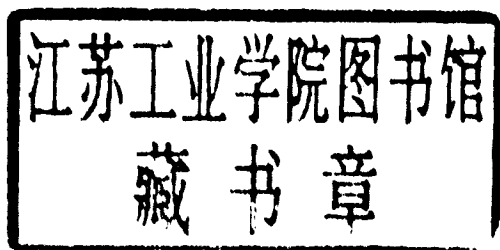
**POSTMODERN
BRITISH FICTION**

Alison Lee

Realism and Power

Postmodern British Fiction

Alison Lee



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Preface

Camel . . . did not seem to be particularly old, but he had been doing his Ph.D. thesis as long as anyone could remember. Its title – “Sanitation in Victorian Fiction” – seemed modest enough; but, as Camel would patiently explain, the absence of references to sanitation was as significant as the presence of the same, and his work thus embraced the entire corpus of Victorian fiction. Further, the Victorian period was best understood as a period of transition in which the comic treatment of human excretion in the eighteenth century was suppressed, or sublimated in terms of social reform, until it re-emerged as a source of literary symbolism in the work of Joyce and other moderns. Camel’s preparatory reading spread out in wider and wider circles, and it often seemed that he was bent on exhausting the entire resources of the Museum library before commencing composition. Some time ago a wild rumour had swept through Bloomsbury to the effect that Camel had written his first chapter, on the hygiene of Neanderthal Man. . . .

David Lodge, *The British Museum is Falling Down*, 1983: 40

Writing about literary movements requires definitions, and trying to define Realism and postmodernism is a task which partakes of similarly wide circles, wild rumors, and ever-receding historical references to the ones Camel encounters above. For the purposes of this study, (Realism, as I discuss in Chapter one, is limited to the literary conventions (and their ideological¹ implications) which were developed in nineteenth-century England and France as a formula for the literal transcription of “reality” into art. The

debate over Realism is one which has existed since Plato and Aristotle, and Realism is, even now, a dominant frame of reference for literary criticism and evaluation. My focus in this study is on the challenge to literary Realism by postmodern techniques and conventions which seek to subvert the assumptions that Realism and its related ideology – what we usually call liberal humanism – have encouraged readers and teachers of literature to think of as “natural,” “normal,” and “neutral.” Common sense and the transparency of language – as well as subjectivity, truth, meaning, and value – are terms and concepts which are still on the syllabus of the academy, and which postmodern novels try to question and draw attention to *as* conventions.

The term “postmodern” has had a troubled and hotly disputed beginning. However, despite the problems with the term itself – its relation to modernism, the meaning of “post,” the periodization implied by the reference to modernism, and its co-opting of the modernism it apparently seeks to transgress – it has nevertheless entered the language, although what it designates is still very much at issue.² In the sense that I am using it throughout this study, postmodern is not a synonym for contemporary. Techniques that I discuss in relation to such novels as John Fowles’ *The Magus* (1966, 1977b), Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), or Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor* (1985), are equally apparent in Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1604, 1614) or Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759–67). However, the frequency of such techniques in novels written since the 1960s has demanded that critical attention should be paid to them. Linda Hutcheon describes the postmodern as the “contradictory phenomenon that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges – be it in literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, television, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics or historiography” (1987: 10). Similarly, Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*, characterizes the postmodern as possessing an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (1984: xxiv), and Craig Owens, in “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” calls it a “crisis of cultural authority, specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions” (1985: 57). It is this

subversive aspect of postmodern techniques that I have chosen as my focus and definition.

In questioning this “cultural authority,” and its apparently eternal and transcendental truths, postmodernism shares concerns with those who, because of class, race, gender, or sexual preference, are “other” than, and have been marginalized by, the dominant tradition. Recent studies, such as Patricia Waugh’s *Feminine Fictions*, have lamented the lack of critical attention paid to feminist postmodern writers who have been marginalized even within a fiction which concerns itself with questioning margins and boundaries valorized by the dominant cultural authority. The literary authors in this text are male, but it is not my purpose here to privilege one gender over another. One of postmodernism’s most important concerns is to decenter the humanist notion of “individuality,” of a coherent essence of self which exists outside ideology. Postmodern texts place the subject firmly within political, social, class, racial, and gender forces acting upon him/her. Linda Hutcheon points out in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* that the “assertion of identity through difference and specificity is a constant in postmodern thought” (1988: 59):

Cultural homogenization too reveals its fissures, but the heterogeneity that is asserted in the face of that totalizing (yet pluralizing) culture does not take the form of many fixed individual subjects . . . but instead is conceived of as a flux of contextualized identities: contextualized by gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, education, social role and so on. (Hutcheon 1988: 59)

Studies in black, gay, native, and women’s literature have taught us, indeed, that identity is produced in and by a system of differences. After all, as Waugh argues,

for those marginalized by the dominant culture, a sense of identity as constructed through impersonal and social relations of power (rather than a sense of identity as the reflection of inner “essence”) has been a major aspect of their self-concept long before post-structuralists and postmodernists began to assemble their cultural concerns.

(Waugh 1989: 3)

Waugh’s point is certainly an important one. The texts in this

study point out repeatedly that *all* subjects are created in ideology, even those who might be considered dominant because male. However, although the literary texts studied here are written by men, there are also marginalized groups within them. Who is to say that Scottish (Alasdair Gray) or Indian (Salman Rushdie) male writers might not also consider themselves as marginal figures?

Both Realism and postmodernism have been examined by critics as period concepts, with specific (though disputed) causes and beginnings. Both have been designated as the products of various stages in the development of capitalism, either caused by its rise, or as evidence of its decline (see, for example: Becker 1980: 8–39; Calinescu 1986: 239–54; Eagleton 1985: 60–73; Jameson 1984: 53–92; Newman 1985). These issues are certainly important ones, but at the risk of a chapter on Realism in Neanderthal man, I have limited my discussion of Realism and postmodernism to *effects* rather than causes.³

The “canon” I have chosen is largely British, with the exception of the final chapter which includes a discussion of popular (Canadian and American) culture and Stephen King’s novel *Misery*. (There, because I wanted to discuss Realism in popular culture, I had to rely on my (North American) experience of it. Stephen King, though American, was chosen as a typical figure.) Not only has a great deal of work been done on the postmodern American novel, or “Surfiction” to use Federman’s term (1975), but recent British postmodern fiction seems to be more closely and more interestingly tied to the Realist tradition. Surfiction such as that of William Gass, Raymond Federman, Ronald Sukenick, or Donald Barthelme plays with the conventions of Realism in a much more overt way. Typographical complexity, as well as obvious and often strident play with the reader, give the Realist conventions much less authority. However, many of the texts in this study firmly install Realist techniques, and in some cases seem at first to *be* Realist texts: Graham Swift’s *Waterland* is a good example. It is clear from these texts that postmodernist techniques challenge Realist conventions from within the very conventions they wish to subvert.

Postmodern fiction, then, plays (seriously) with the structures of authority. It exists in the liminal space between power and subversion, which is the space of exploration of this study. The

structure of these texts seems to acknowledge that Realism still has control over the way in which literature is read, taught, and evaluated. However, postmodern challenges to Realist conventions suggest that this authority and its relation to experience are at least under interrogation.

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Realism and its discontents

Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even Science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars' unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is at Nought. His less accurate grandmother Poetry has always been understood to start in the middle; but on reflection it appears that her proceeding is not very different from his; since Science, too, reckons backwards as well as forwards, divides his unit into billions, and with his clock finger at Nought really sets off *in medias res*. No retrospect will take us to the true beginning; and whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out.

George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 1967: 35

In Julian Barnes' novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, Geoffrey Braithwaite, a Flaubert enthusiast, tries to identify the "real" stuffed parrot which served as Flaubert's inspiration for Loulou in *Un coeur simple*. Finding the true parrot, he feels, would be tantamount to finding the author's true voice and, as Braithwaite discovers, this is a difficult task. Having found one authentic parrot, he is moved to feel he "had almost known the writer" (Barnes 1984: 16). Having found another, he feels rebuked: "The writer's voice – what makes you think it can be located that easily?" (ibid. 22).

Braithwaite is only intermittently self-conscious about his attempt to find the "true" Flaubert through this and other relics of his life, although he is well aware that Flaubert

“forbade posterity to take any personal interest in him” (Barnes 1984: 16). He recognizes that the past is “autobiographical criticism pretending to be parliamentary report” (ibid.: 90), and that the “truth” about Flaubert is as difficult to authenticate as are the various stuffed parrots. Nevertheless, Braithwaite is obsessed by the minutiae of Flaubert’s every movement. He tries to reconstruct the past to the extent that he tries to *be* both Flaubert and Louise Colet, Flaubert’s mistress. His attempt at scrupulous documentation sometimes extends to the ridiculous. Having read that Flaubert “watched the sun go down over the seas and declared that it resembled a large disc of redcurrant jam” (Barnes 1984: 92), Braithwaite writes to the Grocer’s Company to find out if an 1853 pot of Rouennais jam would have been the same color as a modern one. Assured that the color would have been very similar, he writes, if somewhat bashfully, “So at least that’s all right: now we can go ahead and confidently imagine the sunset” (Barnes 1984: 93). While his obsession with documentation is almost maniacal where Flaubert’s life is concerned, Braithwaite derides with confident irony those critics who try to treat fiction as documentary history:

I’ll remember instead another lecture I once attended, some years ago at the Cheltenham Literary Festival. It was given by a professor from Cambridge, Christopher Ricks, and it was a very shiny performance. His bald head was shiny; his black shoes were shiny; and his lecture was very shiny indeed. Its theme was Mistakes in Literature and Whether They Matter. Yevtushenko, for example, apparently made a howler in one of his poems about the American nightingale. Pushkin was quite wrong about the sort of military dress worn at balls. John Wain was wrong about the Hiroshima pilot. Nabokov was wrong – rather surprising this – about the phonetics of the name Lolita. There were other examples: Coleridge, Yeats and Browning were some of those caught out not knowing a hawk from a handsaw, or not even knowing what a handsaw was in the first place.

(Barnes 1984: 76)

The point of this is that if “the factual side of literature

becomes unreliable, then plays such as irony and fantasy become much harder to use" (ibid.: 77). In other words, the literariness of the text is dependent upon the veracity of the facts.

Interestingly, the novel as a whole plays with precisely this notion. Braithwaite accumulates a vast amount of information about Flaubert, but this knowledge only makes him Flaubert's parrot. For Félicité in *Un coeur simple*, the parrot Loulou has mystical, religious connotations. Finding the "real" parrot, however, will not give Braithwaite any mystical insight into either Flaubert or his fiction. The facts do not lead, as he hopes they will, to truth. *Flaubert's Parrot* uses the Realist convention of historical documentation in order to give the novel an illusion of reality. It does, after all, contain references to real people – Gustave Flaubert, Enid Starkie, Christopher Ricks – and places – Rouen, Trouville, Croisset. That these people exist or existed is verifiable in the "Ricksian" sense. However, they exist in the novel not as objective facts, but as determined by the fictional Braithwaite's perception of them. Indeed, they become fictional constructs, both because of this, and because they are framed within the covers of a novel. Through metafictional techniques the novel creates levels of fiction and "reality" and questions the Realist assumption that truth and reality are absolutes. *Flaubert's Parrot* is typical of contemporary metafictional texts in that, while it challenges Realist conventions, it does so, paradoxically, from within precisely those same conventions. Metafiction often contains its own criticism, and the novels which play with Realist codes criticize, as this one does, their own use of them. More generally, they call into question the basic suppositions made popular by nineteenth-century Realism.

(The Realist movement endorsed a particular way of looking at art and life as though there was a direct correspondence between the two. The critical method, then, involved charting the similarities and differences between experiential reality and the artist's transcription of it, assuming, of course, that experiential reality was common to all.) Geoffrey Braithwaite and "Christopher Ricks" in *Flaubert's Parrot* are in this sense Realists. (In fact, however, Realism has little to do with reality. It is, rather, a critical construct which developed in a particular social and ideological context. Nevertheless, some manifestations

of the Realist movement still have currency, particularly, as *Flaubert's Parrot* suggests, the notion that art is a means to truth, because the artist has a privileged insight into a common sense of what constitutes "reality." In a sense, even Geoffrey Braithwaite's touristy enthusiasm is the result of this suspect belief. His example, however, is followed by all those similar enthusiasts who look for Michael Henchard's house in Dorchester or Romeo and Juliet paraphernalia in Verona. Recently, the English National Trust decided to refashion the Suffolk landscape to make it resemble Constable's painting *The Haywain*, and a series of huge timbers found in the River Stour have become news items because they may be from the boat that inspired Constable's *Boat Building Near Flatford Mill*. All of these are examples of a fascination with Realism.

As a literary movement,¹ Realism was first formulated in mid-nineteenth-century France, although it soon gained currency in England and the rest of Europe. The term first appears in France in 1826 when a writer in *Mercure Français* comments that "this literary doctrine, which gains ground every day and will lead to faithful imitation not of the masterworks of art but of the originals offered by nature, could very well be called realism). According to some indications it will be the literature of the 19th century, the literature of the true" (Wellek 1966: vol. 4:1).

There is no formal manifesto of Realism in the way that the prefaces to the 1802 and 1805 editions of the *Lyrical Ballads* set the scope and limits of English Romanticism. However, a conjunction of publications and events in France in the mid-1850s made Realism a topic for often heated debate:

It was in 1855 that the painter Courbet placed the sign "Du Réalisme" over the door of his one man show. In 1856 Edmond Duranty began a short-lived review called *Réalisme*, and in the following year Champfleury, an enthusiastic supporter of Courbet and the new literature, brought out a volume of critical discussions entitled *Le Réalisme*. The term was launched though its meaning was still to be defined.

(Becker 1963: 7)

In England, Thackeray was called "chief of the Realist school" in *Fraser's* in 1851 (Stang 1961: 148), and an 1853 article in *Westminster Review* discussed Balzac in association with Realism

(Becker 1963: 7). The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites volume four of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* as first using the term "realism" in 1856. It is clear, then, that by the mid-1850s Realism had become topical either as a "rallying cry or a term of disparagement" (Hemmings 1974: 162).

The theoretical premise of Realism is that art should eschew the "idealist metaphysics" (Becker 1963: 6) of Romanticism, and portray instead "things as they really are, in the sense of portraying objectively and concretely the observable details of actual life" (Kaminsky 1974: 217). This apparently simple dictate creates such innumerable difficulties that it has become a commonplace that Realism is one of the most problematic of terms. One of the major problems is that the Realists appear to have wanted to create a formula for the literal transcription of reality into art. This very premise is contradictory since, as soon as there exists a frame for reality, anything that is within that frame ceases to be "reality" and becomes artifact. A good example of this problem is illustrated by Magritte's painting *The Human Condition I* (1934). Within the painting is a painting on an easel which overlaps a landscape seen through a window. The painting-within-the-painting is an exact continuation of the view, and so it appears that there are two levels: the "real" view and the painted copy. As Robert Hughes points out in *The Shock of the New*:

the play between image and reality suggests that the real world is only a construction of mind. We know that if we moved the easel, the view through the window would be the same as the one shown on the painting within the painting; but because the whole scene is locked in the immobility and permanence of a larger painting, we cannot know it.

(Hughes 1980: 247)

Because the "real" view is framed within a painting, it ceases to be real and becomes instead an imaginative construct. Even the very medium itself is not transparent, and therefore prevents any possibility of art mirroring reality. (Indeed, Linda Nochlin comments that no matter how objective the artist's vision is, the visible world must be changed in order to translate it on to the flat surface of the canvas: "The artist's perception is therefore inevitably conditioned by the physical properties of paint and

linseed no less than by his knowledge and technique – even by his choice of brush-strokes – in conveying three-dimensional space and form on to a two-dimensional picture plane” (Nochlin 1976: 15).

The nineteenth century, of course, was not the first to concern itself with the relationship of life and art. M. H. Abrams, in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, points out that the “mimetic orientation – the explanation of art as essentially an imitation of aspects in the universe – was probably the most primitive aesthetic theory” (1953: 8). Plato banishes the poet from the Republic (10: 606E), because his art is thrice removed from the truth (10: 595C): “painting and imitation generally carry out their work far from the truth and have to do with that part within us that is remote from the truth, and that the two arts are companions and friends of nothing wholesome or true” (10: 602C). That the poet deals in untruths is further compounded because he imitates things whose essence he knows nothing about, and does so in such a way as to delude (10: 602C) and corrupt good citizens (10: 605A). Plato’s reasons for his mistrust of the poet are social rather than aesthetic, and nineteenth-century Realism tends to be closer to Aristotelian mimesis than Platonic imitation. However, Plato’s mistrust of literature as a form of lying is echoed in the nineteenth century, and is related to the Realist and Naturalist desire to make literature conform to so-called “neutral” scientific laws and “objective” historical documentation.

In *The Function of Mimesis and its Decline*, John D. Boyd, S.J. writes: “What organic union there is in the Western critical tradition of poetry’s needed realism and autonomy is largely derived from Aristotle” (1968: 18). However, Boyd distinguishes between Aristotelian “realism” as a search into human action, and the “vogue since the nineteenth century of applying the word to literature that deals largely with techniques akin to the photographic” (ibid.: 24). As this suggests, for Aristotle, as for Plato, the poet is an imitator. The imitation, however, is, as Aristotle suggests in *Poetics*, of “men who are doing something” (2: 48a1) rather than of shadows of truth. Primarily, for Aristotle, the poet is a creator. He does not merely mirror reality, but instead creates highly structured plots (7: 51a16; 50b21) not about what *has* happened but about “what might happen and what is possible according to probability or