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Fiction
in the
Quantum
Universe

Susan Strehle

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FOR ADAM AND MICHAEL

PREFACE

I began work on this book when a relatively simple problem turned complex: I was exploring the influence that Vladimir Nabokov had on Thomas Pynchon, who took a course from Nabokov at Cornell. But historical reality—the world outside the text that alters the course of fiction when two significant writers meet in a banked lecture hall—has lost ground in the criticism of contemporary fiction. Postmodern narratives appear to many critics to be metafiction: a fiction designed to comment on its own textual and linguistic processes. More generally, critics regard all contemporary writers who have abandoned realism as having abandoned reality at the same stroke. In the prevailing metafictional climate, the world outside of fiction is assumed by some critics of postmodern fiction to be linguistic and textual, by others to be fictive or imaginary, and by virtually all to be beside the point.

In exploring the connections between Nabokov and Pynchon, I found that I needed to redefine the aims and interests of contemporary fiction and to place it in a new context. I had to reconstruct the extraliterary, historical dimension in which similar fictions can make kindred sense, and I needed to supplement the metafictional model with another understanding of current fictional aesthetics. Once I had done so, I could not only complete the project arguing for Pynchon's indebtedness to Nabokov (in a study published in *Contemporary Literature* in 1983), I could also undertake a meaningful study of a community of novelists.

My first premise is that contemporary fiction departs from realism

without losing interest in reality. Reality itself is no longer realistic; it has more energy and mystery, rendering the observer's position more uncertain and more involved, than the solid and rocklike overlook from which the realist surveyed a stable world. In the quantum universe, space and time aren't separate, predictable, and absolute; narratives can't steer by the fixed poles that guided realistic fiction. While many living writers share a well-read fascination with the possibilities inherent in literary form, and while they make allied formal choices to displace realism, they do so in order to think more clearly about what we now understand as real. Their fiction considers twentieth-century history, politics, science, and discourse: in short, the actual world.

Instead of an exclusive focus on the writers' reflections on art, the criticism of contemporary fiction can only gain by recognizing these writers' mixed choices and plural aims: rather than choosing between art and actuality, contemporary novelists pursue both in fiction. A group of the most challenging and ambitious writers, like those collected in this book, can therefore resemble and influence each other in their parallel meditations, not only on the city of words, but also on the state of the nation and the quantum universe.

This book was long in the writing, in part because the novels I chose to discuss are themselves long, complex, and resistant to easy formulations. I'm grateful for various forms of assistance, all of them crucial, I had along the way. I would like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities, the SUNY Research Foundation, and various deans of Arts and Sciences at Binghamton for granting me funding and time in which to write. Nathan W. Dean, vice provost for graduate studies and research, has consistently supported my need for time to complete the manuscript. A canny physicist, he has illuminated some of the scientific concepts on which I draw.

I owe a significant debt to John Kuehl, whose suggestions improved first the Gaddis chapter and then the whole book. Donald J. Greiner also made important contributions to the revision of the book. Astute and generous, both were ideal readers. Arnold Edelstein read and commented helpfully on the Pynchon chapter. My colleagues at Binghamton have offered illuminating suggestions, patient audiences at seminars, kindness, and wonderful collegiality. I'm especially grateful to William Spanos, whose profoundly original readings of postmodern critical theory and of postmodern fiction were liberating. Joe Church, Suzette Henke, Richard

McLain, Phil Rogers, Liz Rosenberg, Bernie Rosenthal, Albert Tricomi, Libby Tucker, and Grant Webster have given me specific advice, insightful readings, and interesting conversations about particular issues and collegial generosity. My students have also contributed meaningfully to this book; I'm especially thankful to Cristina Bacchilega, Giovanna Covi, Alik Dragona, Anne Drolet, Anne Higginbottom, and Madeleine Sorapure, whose dissertations in this field have shown it in new light.

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Charlotte Skuster created the index with skill and sensitivity, and Sue Rosenberg proofread the manuscript carefully.

My parents, Marie Bell, Shirley and Douglas Strehle, have offered encouragement and kindness, for which I'm grateful. Michael Conlon has been a perceptive reader and the best of friends. And, not least, my son Adam—whose eight-year-old life has been lived while I wrote—has kept me joyfully immersed in the actual world.

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IN THE
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ONE

ACTUALISM

FICTION IN THE

QUANTUM UNIVERSE

According to conventional aesthetics, fiction aims either at the realistic representation of life or at the antirealistic exploration of artistic processes. It selectively focuses either on the human reality that is its subject or on the linguistic and formal rendering that constitutes its art. Fictional choices work this way because, for traditional theorists, perception itself functions in either-or fashion; visual and literary readings must choose a single plane of orientation. Authors therefore direct readers to observe either the garden outside the window or the glass through which the garden appears, in the metaphor proposed by Ortega y Gasset.

We have here a very simple optical problem. To see a thing we must adjust our visual apparatus in a certain way. . . . Looking at the garden we adjust our eyes in such a way that the ray of vision travels through the pane. . . . But we can also deliberately disregard the garden and, withdrawing the ray of vision, detain it at the window. We then lose

sight of the garden. . . . Hence to see the garden and to see the windowpane are two incompatible operations which exclude one another because they require different adjustments. Similarly a work of art vanishes from sight for a beholder who seeks in it nothing but the moving fate of [the characters]. . . . The portrayed person and his portrait are two entirely different things; we are interested in either one or the other.¹

Following this binary logic, Ortega y Gasset sees nineteenth-century realistic fiction as pandering to the masses, by reducing the “strictly aesthetic elements to a minimum” and encouraging readers to “revel in the human reality with which the work deals.” Modernism, by contrast, attempts a “purification of art” through the “progressive elimination of the human, all too human, elements.”

We might begin by objecting in principle: surely this is too simple a model of perception. Surely vision can accommodate awareness of both garden and pane; surely reading encompasses interests in both portrayed life and the means of portrayal. Readers have always brought some awareness of aesthetic elements to the reading of fiction, and authors have devoted their own attention to artistic processes even (or perhaps especially) when they sought to make their art invisible. Since poststructuralist and deconstructive theory have sharpened the focus on textual and intertextual issues, postmodern readers can hardly see the most avowedly realistic fiction as a clear transparency through which to study human reality. Its textuality remains always an element of the text before us. At the same time, most fiction neither manages nor even attempts to eliminate the human element, the lived reality expressed in story. Where there is plot and character, even in the most self-consciously aesthetic of modernist and postmodernist texts, there is inevitably also some degree of worldliness to the text. The constricting binary logic of realism and anti-realism has, however, reduced fiction’s rich double interest in both art and life to a single dimension for many readers and critics.

The legacy of these assumptions becomes especially restrictive—even blinding, I would argue—for critics of postmodern fiction. While some writers appeal to realist assumptions about the world and the text (I think of Bellow, Fowles, Heller, Kesey, Oates, Morrison, Roth, Mailer, and Updike), others clearly and even explicitly refuse the realistic tradition in narrative, together with its vision of reality. Writers like Atwood, Barth, Pynchon, Gaddis, Coover, and Barthelme—as well as Hawkes, Didion,

Coetzee, Kundera, Eco, Calvino, Puig, and Nabokov, for example—cannot be described as realistic. They are, therefore, approached as antirealists. Limited to these two exclusive alternatives, critics who have appropriately identified the divergence from realism in postmodern fiction can only place it in the opposite camp, which flies most prominently the banner of metafiction. It has been called other things as well: irrealism, counterrealism, surfiction, disruptive fiction, and parafiction.

Logically, then, criticism has emphasized the antireferential nature of postmodern fiction. It has no relation to the external world, whose “reality” it sees as questionable; instead, it self-reflexively confronts its own status as language, performance, mental construct, city of words. According to this interpretation, postmodern fiction becomes a stained-glass window through which nothing is visible. “Clearly, then, the parafictionist seeks to vaporize our common universe . . . and replace it with another within whose verbal boundaries art would become but one more way to experience the fiction of life.” For another critic, “If the world is absurd, if what passes for reality is distressingly unreal, why spend time representing it?” For another, surfiction “exposes the fictionality of reality.”² Critics approach single authors with these assumptions—various essays place most of the writers I discuss in this book as metafictionists; equally, since Robert Scholes’s definitive essay “Metafiction” (1970), critics bring the metafictional paradigm to bear on groups of contemporary novelists.

Its exclusive self-reflexivity has become, in fact, the most common starting point for critical discussion of contemporary fiction, both by critics who condemn its narcissism and by others who approve its artful stratagems. Even “neutral” reporters on the state of affairs in contemporary letters can by now assume its metafictionalness, so that a broadly introductory survey like Robert Kiernan’s *American Writing since 1945* labels the texts I discuss here metafiction, which is the most “interesting fiction in the postwar period. . . . Stressing the *composed* aspect of fiction, it tends to put in the foreground both language and authorship in an attempt not simply to undercut the illusions of realism but to discover new modes of narrative gamesmanship. Essentially, it is a body of fiction about the making of fictions.”³ Since surveys like Kiernan’s function in part to voice widely accepted premises, Kiernan’s easy assimilation of metafictional assumptions illuminates the pervasive assent to arguments made with thoroughness and rigor by Scholes, McCaffery, Klinkowitz, Alter, Waugh, Christensen, Hutcheon, Imhof, and dozens more.

Metafiction does, of course, exist. It is practiced consciously and adeptly

by Gilbert Sorrentino, Ronald Sukenick, and Raymond Federman. Some of William Gass's texts are explicitly metafictional; William Burroughs's theoretical emphasis on the arbitrariness of narrative ordering makes him describable as a metafictionist. Steve Katz, B. S. Johnson, Ishmael Reed, Russell Banks, and others write fiction of which critics like Jerome Klinkowitz can justly and satisfactorily say that it "does not represent reality. . . . it creates a whole life of its own."⁴ John Barth's story "Autobiography" demonstrates the pure form of the metafictional impulse to foreground language, particularly through wordplay, and to explore theories of fiction-making. Philosophical, linguistic, theoretical in its interests and in its approach, and self-conscious to its core, metafiction is the educated offspring of modernist parents.

But what are we to make of the wealth of historically accurate detail in texts like Coover's *Public Burning* or Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* or Barth's *LETTERS*? How are we to read the prominent commentary on Western culture, urban political economy, sexual and racial issues, and socially constituted forms of power and their abuse in texts like Gaddis's *J R*, Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, and Barthelme's *Paradise*? Far from excluding or "vaporizing" external reality, these texts, while patently not realistic, nonetheless seem impelled to explore, celebrate, criticize, and engage the outer world. These novels differ from the intentionally aesthetic narratives of metafiction.

The authors' statements about their fiction differ, too, from the positions taken by thoroughgoing metafictionists. Ronald Sukenick, for example, writes that "reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist"; and, "As artifice the work of art is a conscious tautology in which there is always an implicit (and sometimes explicit) reference to its own nature as artifact—self-reflexive, not self-reflective. It is not an imitation but a new thing in its own right, an invention."⁵ To see the difference in emphasis, we can turn to Pynchon's introduction to his collection of early stories, *Slow Learner*. Pynchon finds his early work flawed, in part by its false assumption that "one's personal life had nothing to do with fiction, when the truth, as everyone knows, is nearly the direct opposite." The fiction he admires most engages both art and life and makes its artistry "luminous" by expressing human reality. "In fact the fiction . . . that moved and pleased me then as now was precisely that which had been made luminous, undeniably authentic by having been found and taken up, always at a cost, from deeper, more shared levels of the life we all really live."⁶ The authors I discuss in this book have all made similar

statements suggesting not only that reality *does* exist but that art's goal is to engage it.

These writers—Pynchon, Atwood, Barth, Coover, Gaddis, and Barthelme, as well as many others—cannot be described as metafictionists, however broadly one stretches the term, any more than they can be placed as neorealists.⁷ In contrast to the theoreticians of self-reflexivity, they want fiction to comment on a lived reality through the pane of art. In contrast to the neorealists, they believe art cannot efface itself or become pure transparency, unconscious of its status as created language. They affirm *both* art (self-consciously aware of its processes and of aesthetic traditions) *and* the real world (specifically, the postmodern world, with a detailed awareness of its nature and history). Their fiction admits both the garden and the glass.

In the realm of aesthetic theory, the longstanding duality separating art and reality, or the perceiver and the world, has been exploded by modern discoveries about the nature of perception. Thus the argument I'm making about the effort among contemporary novelists to find a position blending some transformed assumptions from realism and antirealism, to create an art about both reality and artistic process, appears in persuasive theoretical terms in Raymond Williams's *The Long Revolution*.

The new facts about perception make it impossible for us to assume that there is any reality experienced by man into which man's own observations and interpretations do not enter. Thus the assumptions of naive realism—seeing the things as they really are, quite apart from our reactions to them—become impossible. Yet equally, the facts of perception in no way lead us to a late form of idealism; they do not require us to suppose that there is no kind of reality outside the human mind; they point rather to the insistence that all human experience is an interpretation of the non-human reality. But this, again, is not the duality of subject and object—the assumption on which almost all theories of art are based. We have to think, rather, of human experience as both objective and subjective, in one inseparable process.⁸

Following Williams's logic, we can understand the group of writers I've identified as radically original: they form a challenging new fiction that is based on the awareness of interpretation as an interactive process. While the neorealists attempt, often in subtle and sophisticated ways, to see things as they really are, and while the metafictionists or neomodernists

bring theoretical intelligence to the late idealism that spins reality out of the mind, these other writers engage the double but undivided nature of art as the human interpretation of a nonhuman reality. Their version of postmodernism does not emerge, as some critics suggest, as a late echo or higher amplification of literary modernism. Rather, their fiction creates its own different aesthetic stance through a process John Barth terms "the synthesis or transcension of these antitheses, which may be summed up as the premodernist and modernist modes of writing. My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents."⁹ Breaking out of the false and restrictive duality between realism and antirealism, these postmodern authors manage an original fusion that transforms both strands of their literary heritage.

Because the language of realism and antirealism carries with it outmoded assumptions about reality and art, we need a new term or aesthetic category for these writers and their texts. As Alan Wilde points out in his important book *Middle Grounds*, "For want of an adequate designation," this "tertium quid of current literature" can only "languish in the outback of current criticism." Wilde proposes to call the "referential but nonmimetic literature" we both admire "midfiction." "Rejecting metafiction's pronounced tilt toward the reflexive . . . and rejecting as well realism's belief in the possibility of simple mimesis, midfiction is intended to suggest neither compromise nor mediation, and still less an inevitable or necessary moderation in its perceptions of the world and in the strategies that variously render them. What it does instead is to stake out a variety of middle grounds on which it tests the assumptions of other fictional forms and, more importantly, defines its own in opposition to them."¹⁰ While I agree with many of Wilde's assumptions and much of his assessment of contemporary fiction, I would fault his term for suggesting a static resting place, a *ground* midway between the poles of the binary dualism we both find so damaging. Intended to suggest broad latitude, range, and what Wilde elegantly terms "the close interanimation of consciousness and world, of perception and creation," "midfiction" connotes too clearly the mean, or average, between extremes, where Wilde himself understands their transcension in a different mode of seeing and writing.

I propose, instead, to call the new mode of fiction *actualism*. I believe it emerges from a widespread change in the way reality is understood by the culture at large, and I see this shift localized usefully in the new physics. To anticipate a discussion I will complete after the necessary background

in physical science, I derive the term “actualism” from a distinction Werner Heisenberg makes between the actual and the real.¹¹ At the subatomic level, he says, reality is not real, but it is active, dynamic, “actual.” Actualistic fiction expresses, then, a literary version of the reality constituted by fundamentally new physical theories in the first half of the twentieth century. Departing from the stable material reality underpinning Newtonian science and realistic fiction, actualism abandons and even subverts the narrative conventions of realism. It does so, however, not to replace reality with the purified aesthetics of self-reflexivity, but rather, self-consciously and theoretically, to renew art’s readiness for its perennial project: the human interpretation of a nonhuman reality.

Actualism and the New Physics

Actualism develops in postmodern fiction because reality has changed. It has changed for thinkers in every field, and the shift has been described and theorized variously in different disciplines. Physics, the science devoted to studying nonliving reality, provides an especially pronounced measure of the change in worldview. While the general importance of the new physics may be known by most of the educated public, the extent to which relativity theory, quantum theory, and wave mechanics revolutionized previous concepts of reality deserves emphasis. In *The Philosophical Impact of Contemporary Physics*, Milič Čapek defines in strong language the “astonishment” generated by the way modern concepts transform classical physics. “There is hardly any similarity between the ‘matter’ of modern physics and the traditional material substance of the classical period, and this is true in varying degrees of other concepts as well. . . . It is true that the effect of [relativity, quantum theory, and wave mechanics] on the imagination of physicists, philosophers, and even laymen was truly shattering; the contrast between the new theories and the appealing clarity of classical concepts was sharp and shocking.”¹² Similar assessments, with a frequent invocation of the term “revolution,” appear throughout studies of the new physics—one of them, revealingly, titled *Dismantling the Universe*.¹³

A skeptic might object here that, however radical the redefinition of reality in new physics, its impact on literature can hardly be immediate or direct—novelists surely don’t read physics journals, nor could they follow the mathematical or theoretical subtleties if they did. Granted: of the

novelists I discuss in this book, only Pynchon has a sound education, undergraduate at that, in physics. But changes in physical theories inspire changes in a culture's general attitudes, and art both responds to and shapes these assumptions. Physics and fiction inhabit the same planet, however divergent their discourses about it may be. Canadian fiction writer Alice Munro describes the way private individuals come to share the most progressive notions afloat in their culture: "It's as if tendencies that seem most deeply rooted in our minds, most private and singular, have come in as spores on the prevailing wind, looking for any likely place to land, any welcome."¹⁴ Writers may, by nature, be a culture's most welcoming grounds for such spores.

Others have suggested that the new physics plays a significant role in changing concepts of the world for fiction. James Mellard, for example, argues that "the novel remained relatively stable through the trends in thought until the [new physics], for as long as it could count upon the changelessness of nature as viewed by empirical science, it had an authority that could counter any combination of the other modes of thought. But when the new science exploded the world, it exploded with it the novel as well."¹⁵ Of growing importance in the study of contemporary fiction, the notion that physics has transformed twentieth-century thought, including philosophy, linguistics, and literature, appears in a number of recent books and essays.¹⁶

To characterize the way reality has changed at the intersection of physics and fiction is inevitably to select and to interpret. It is to construct a paradigm, invent a terminology and a focus. Actualistic fiction and contemporary physics join, I propose, in seeing the external world and the human relation to it as:

discontinuous
statistical
energetic
relative
subjective
uncertain

Each of these terms reflects a major transformation of the assumptions basic to the Newtonian/realistic paradigm. For a follower of Newton, reality was ordered by the presence of absolute space, time, and motion, and science proceeded through an objective methodology to determine the causal laws governing the continuous operations of an essentially