

**REPRESENTING THE UNREALITY OF REALITY:
A STUDY OF THREE AMERICAN POSTMODERNIST
NOVELS (WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS' *NAKED LUNCH*,
THOMAS PYNCHON'S *GRAVITY'S RAINBOW* AND
KURT VONNEGUT, JR.'S *SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE*)**

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STRUCTURES OF REALITY: AN INTRODUCTION

Reality, in Philosophy, designates the totality of things that exist, or what would be included in a complete description of all the facts about the world. However, the concept of reality as a fiction has been theoretically formulated within many disciplines and from many political and philosophical positions. One of the clearest *Sociological* expositions is in Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1971). They set out to show that 'reality' is not something that is simply given. 'Reality' is manufactured. It is produced by the interrelationship of apparently 'objective' facilities in the world with social convention and personal or interpersonal vision. These social forms operate within particular historical structures of power and frameworks of knowledge. Continual shifts in the structures of knowledge and power produce continual resyntheses of the reality model. Contemporary reality, in particular, is continually being reappraised and resynthesized. It is no longer experienced as an ordered and fixed hierarchy, but as a web of interrelating, multiple realities.

Movement through the interconnected zones involves moving from one 'reality' to another. Most of the time, however, we are not conscious of these shifts. Habit, instrumented through social institutions and conventions, normally disguises movement between levels, and confers an apparent homogeneity upon social experience. It is only when a convention is exposed as such that the lacunae between levels are also exposed.

Berger and Luckmann suggest that convention and habit are necessary because human beings need to have their choices narrowed down for significant action to take place. Habit ensures that patterns can be repeated in such a way that the meaning of an action is not retained at the level of consciousness. If this were not so, the action could not be effortlessly performed. (This is also, of course, the basis for realistic fiction. When the conventions regarding fictive time, for example, are undermined in *Tristram Shandy*, the novel never gets under way as an 'historie' but functions only as a self-regarding 'discourse' which never quite manages to get the story told). Habitualization provides for direction and specialization, by freeing our energies for more productive ends. It opens up a 'foreground' for deliberation and 'innovation'¹ Conventions can, however, become oppressive and rigidified, completely naturalized. At this point they need to be re-examined, both in life and in fiction.

Within the psychological discourse realism has been dealt with by Freud, Lacan and others. To Lacan realism, indeed, is the literary equivalent of the 'mirror stage' of human subjectivity. At an early age we see an image of ourselves reflected in a mirror and consequently develop a sense of subject/object, self/other relations. We recognize our mirror self as being different from our true self, although (and crucially) it is only on the basis of seeing ourselves in a mirror that we gain an understanding of a 'true' self-identity in the first place. Our sense of a true self relies, therefore, on our sense of a symbolic self, or on a sense of self-as-other: our true self, in other words, is non-originary. Before entering into selfhood we inhabit the 'imaginary' order of pre-linguistic,

non-dualistic and undifferentiated subject/object relations, since as infants we do not distinguish between notions of the self and others. In entering the symbolic order, however, we pass into a world of prohibitions and restraints organized through and by language, reason and society, all of which are dominated by patriarchal law. On this model it is possible to see the imaginary and symbolic orders as complementary concepts in a set of associated oppositions.

The privileging of a certain order of literary textuality is consistent with Lacan's transcendental celebration of the macrological order of the imaginary, such that the values of romance literature, for example, can be read from a set of terms those constitute the imaginary/symbolic opposition. Hence romance literature is infantile (or childlike), feminine, sensory, intuitive and so on, while realism by contrast is adult, masculine, sensible, rational and so forth. Hence truth depends on 'fiction', which is a proposition that is often attributed to postmodernism as a slogan and used to question its political commitment.

If psychoanalysis hastened the death of man by pathologizing him, structuralism dealt the fatal blow by turning 'man' into a linguistic construct. For structuralism, everyone is born into a particular language community such that anyone's perception of reality is predetermined by the particular 'grammar' through which they come to know the world. What is called 'reality' (by an individual, a culture or an epoch) is structured, therefore, as a language: reality is simply what is able to be classified as such according to a system – structures – or regulations and prohibitions which produce objects, feelings, values and events 'in' the

world. But the very notion of a world is always going to be culturally and historically specific to specific language communities since the structure of structures, as it were, is language, and so the very concept of 'structure' itself is a linguistic metaphor.

This is not to suggest – on the contrary – that the structure of language could have been otherwise. The gap between word and thing (or sign and referent) is a necessary one inasmuch as language can never be identical with what it names, for example, and vice versa. Hence, language must always 'lack' what it names. Lack and division are essential to the structure of language, the very structure in which absent reality is made to function as if it were present. From this it follows that presence (truth, reality, self-identity) is an effect of a system (language) that is constituted by absence and separation. The very lack within language and the very gap between word and thing is what makes reality possible, making it seem present.²

Among the major Postmodernist theorists Jean Baudrillard, deals with realism and its loss in his work *Simulations* (1981, translated in 1983).³ Baudrillard's understanding of the sense of 'the loss of the real', implies a view that in contemporary life the pervasive influence of images from film, TV, and advertising has led to a loss of distinction between the real and the imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth. The result is a culture of 'hyperreality', in which distinctions between these are eroded. His propositions are worked out in his essay 'Simulacra and Simulations'.⁴ He begins by evoking a past era of 'fullness', when a sign was a surface indication of an underlying depth or reality ('an

outward sign of inward grace', to cite the words of the Roman Catholic Catechism). But what, he asks, if a sign is not an index of an underlying reality, but merely of other signs, then, the whole system becomes what he calls a simulacrum. He then substitutes it for representing the notion of simulation.

The sign represents a basic reality. An example of this is the representations of the industrial city of Salford in the work of the twentieth century British artist L. S. Lowry. Mid-century life for working people in such a place was hard, and the paintings have an air of monotony and repetitiveness – cowed, stick-like figures fill the streets, colours are muted, and the horizon filled with grim factory-like buildings. As signs, then, Lowry's paintings seem to represent the basic reality of the place they depict.

More generally, for Postmodernism there are certain ever-present questions and provisos. In this extreme Baudrillardian form, the 'loss of the real' may seem to legitimise a callous indifference to suffering. In a now notorious pronouncement Baudrillard maintained that the Gulf War never happened, that what 'really' took place was a kind of televisual virtual reality. Likewise, if we accept the 'loss of the real' and the collapsing of reality and simulation into a kind of virtual reality, then what of the Holocaust? Could this, too, be part of the reality 'lost' in the image networks? In other words, without a belief in some of the concepts which postmodernism undercuts – history, reality, and truth, for instance – we may well find ourselves in some pretty repulsive company.⁵

In capturing the shifting notions of reality, the genre of fiction is the most productive. The relationship that exists between a work of fiction and its readers has long been a subject of discussion in the theory of fiction. The questions that need to be looked at: (i) Are novels primarily representations of "reality", or are they all "made up"? (ii) How obliged are novelists to make what happens in their works compare with what might have happened had the same events occurred in the "real world?" (iii) Is verisimilitude, for instance, an obligation for a writer?

Lionel Trilling claims in "Manners, Morals, and the Novel"⁶ that realism is the basic drive behind all fictional creations, that the life of individuals in society has been the stuff out of which novels have always been made. Other writers, such as George Levine,⁷ have identified realism more closely with certain periods of history (the nineteenth century) than with others (the twentieth century). But can we think of fictional reality in the same terms we use in thinking about history or about our own lives? Lives in fiction are surely more carefully determined than the lives that are lived by people who read books. However, we often demand that novels and stories should be plausible within the terms of their own fictional world and that such plausibility should not be measured against a truly "represented" world, analogous to our own. Thus there have been attempts to recreate the real world around us in fictions written in the great "age of realism" by novelists like Dickens, Eliot, Stendhal, and Dostoevsky. If not in the 19th century sense of realism, the novels of Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez are realistic works contrived in a manner that represent the other

side of reality. Critics such as Barbara Foley, Linda Hutcheon, and Joanne Frye are concerned with fiction and reality in very different ways.

In the various theoretical speculations that foreground the relationship between 'reality' and the fictional narrative, one of the arguments is that the only reason for the existence of the novel is that it does attempt to represent life. Henry James believes that the novelist must write from his experience, that his "characters must be real and such as might be met with in actual life". The characters, the situation, which strike one as real will be those that touch and interest one most, but the measure of reality is very difficult to fix. The reality of Don Quixote or of Mr. Micawber is a very delicate shade; it is a reality so coloured by the author's vision that, vivid as it may be, one would hesitate to propose it as a model. It goes without saying that we will not write a good novel unless we possess the sense of reality; but it will be difficult to give one a recipe for calling that sense into being. Thus traditionally, the realistic novel is characterized as the fictional attempt to give the effect of realism, by representing complex characters with mixed motives who are rooted in a social class, operate in a highly developed social structure, interact with many other characters, and undergo plausible and everyday modes of experience. This novelistic mode, rooted in such eighteenth century writers as Defoe and Fielding, achieved a high degree of perfection in the hand of the novelists of the nineteenth century, including Jane Austen, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, and William Dean Howells in England and America, Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert in France, and Turgenev and Tolstoy in Russia.

Literary critics, however, differentiate between a realistic fiction and what is called, the romantic fiction. The romance is said to present life as we would have it – more picturesque, fantastic, adventurous, or heroic than actuality; realism, on the other hand, is said to represent life as it really is. This distinction in terms of subject matter, while relevant, is clearly inadequate. Casanova, T. E. Lawrence, and Winston Churchill were people in real life, but their biographies demonstrate that truth can be stranger than literary realism. It is more useful to identify realism in terms of the effect on the reader: realistic fiction is written so as to give the effect that it represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that its characters might in fact exist, and that such things might well happen. To achieve such effects, the novelists we identify as realists may or may not be selective in subject matter – although most of them prefer the common place and the everyday over rarer aspects of life – but they must render their materials in ways that make them seem to their readers the very stuff of ordinary experience. For example, Daniel Defoe in the early eighteenth century dealt with the extraordinary adventures of a shipwrecked mariner named Robinson Crusoe and with the extraordinary misadventures of a woman named Moll Flanders; but he made his novels seem to readers a mirror held up to reality by his reportorial manner of rendering all the events, whether ordinary or extraordinary, in the same circumstantial, matter-of-fact, and seemingly unselective way. Both the fictions of Franz Kafka and the present-day novels of magic realism achieve their effects in large part by exploiting the realistic manner in rendering events that are in themselves fantastic, absurd, or impossible.

One of the arguments that is advanced in the context of realist fiction is that a writer's transactions with reality are verbal, therefore, he must bridge the traditional gap between words (*verba*) and things (*res*).⁸ On the one hand, he may think of language as a kind of lens, and seek out 'transparent' words which designate things-in-the-world as unobtrusively as possible; on the other hand, he may think of language as a kind of body, and pay attention primarily to the shapes, sounds and textures of the words he uses. 'The multitudinous seas incarnadine' (*Macbeth*, II ii 61) is an example of language-as-body, in that the communicative purposes of language-as-lens could be achieved equally well by some such phrase as 'turn the many seas red'. In the case of language-as-body, words are not considered to be images of things, but things in themselves. 'I would endeavour to destroy the old antithesis of words and things', said Coleridge, 'elevating, as it were, words into things, and living things too'.⁹ Whenever this is deemed possible, poems cease to be thought of as mere windows on reality, and become (in Wallace Stevens' phrase) 'part of the *res* itself and not about it'.¹⁰ Some such distinction between language-as-lens and language-as-body is often at the root of arbitrary attempts to differentiate prose from poetry.

Everyday reality is, however, for Berger and Luckmann, 'reality *par excellence*'. It imposes itself massively on consciousness so that, although we may doubt its reality, 'I am obliged to suspend this doubt as I routinely exist in everyday life'.¹¹ Problems that interrupt this flow are seen to be translated into its terms and assimilated: 'Consciousness always returns to the paramount reality from an excursion'. According to

this view, the 'meta' levels of fictional and social discourse might shift our notion of reality slightly but can never totally undermine it.

Berger and Luckmann further argue, however, that language is the main instrument for maintaining this everyday reality: 'Everyday life is above all, life with and by means of language I share with my fellow men [*Sic!*].¹² Thus texts which move towards a breakdown of the language system, presenting reality as a set of equally non-privileged competing discourse, can be seen as resisting assimilation into the terms of the everyday. They attempt, in fact, radically to unsettle our notion of the 'real'. (Doris Lessing's protagonist Anna, for example, in *The Golden Notebook*, loses her precarious hold on this 'everyday life' when she feels 'at a pitch where words mean nothing' (p. 462), because in this novel 'reality par excellence' is represented by the misrepresentational, inauthentic language of 'Free Women' which freezes the everyday – 'British life at its roots' – into a mocking parody of itself).

Berger and Luckmann do not, in fact, give enough attention to the centrality of language in constructing everyday reality. It is this exposure of 'reality' in terms of 'textuality', for example, which has provided the main critique of realism. As Barthes argued:

These facts of language were not perceptible so long as literature pretended to be a transparent expression of their objective calendar time or of psychological subjectivity ... as long as literature maintained a totalitarian ideology of the referent, or more commonly speaking, as long as literature was 'realistic'.¹³

By 'these facts', of course, he means the extent to which language constructs rather than merely reflects everyday life: the extent to which meaning resides in the relations between signs within a literary fictional text, rather than in their reference to objects outside that text.

The notion of reality as a construct, explored through textual self-reference, is now firmly embedded in the contemporary novel, even in those novels that appear to eschew radically experimental forms or techniques. Muriel Spark's work is a good example of this development, for she uses textual strategies of self-reference, yet still maintains a strong 'story' line. This alerts the reader to the condition of the text, to its state of 'absence', just as much as a novel by Sorrentino or Sarraute or any other more obviously post-modernist writer whose embodiment of the paradoxes of fictionality necessitates the total rejection of traditional concepts of plot and character.

Among different literary genres, the novel assimilates a variety of discourses (representations of speech, forms of narrative) – discourses that always to some extent question and relativize each other's authority. Realism, often regarded as the classic fictional mode, paradoxically functions by suppressing this dialogue. The conflict of languages and voices is apparently resolved in realistic fiction through their subordination to the dominant 'voice' of the omniscient, godlike author. Novels which Bakhtin refers to as 'dialogic' resist such resolution. Metafiction displays and rejoices in the impossibility of such a resolution and thus clearly reveals the basic identity of the novel as genre. Metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a

fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion. In other words, the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. The two processes are held together in a formal tension which breaks down the distinctions between 'creation' and 'criticism' and merges them into the concepts of 'interpretation' and 'deconstruction'.

Although this oppositional process is to some extent present in all fictions, and particularly likely to emerge during 'crisis' periods in the literary history of the genre, its prominence in the contemporary novel is unique. The historical period we are living through has been singularly uncertain, insecure, self-questioning and culturally pluralistic. Contemporary fiction clearly reflects this dissatisfaction with, and breakdown of, traditional values. Previously, as in the case of nineteenth century realism, the forms of fiction derived from a firm belief in a commonly experienced, objectively existing world of history. Modernist fiction, written in the earlier part of this century; responded to the initial loss of belief in such a world. Novels like Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* (1927) or James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) signalled the first widespread, overt emergence in the novel of a sense of fictitiousness: 'a sense that any attempt to represent reality could only produce selective perspectives, fictions, that is, epistemological, not merely in the conventional literary sense'.¹⁴

Contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures. The materialist, positivist and empiricist world-view on which realistic fiction is premised no longer exists. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that more and more novelists have come to question and reject the forms that correspond to this ordered reality (the well-made plot, chronological sequence, the authoritative omniscient author, the rational connection between what characters 'do' and what they 'are', the causal connection between 'surface' details and the 'deep', 'scientific laws' of existence).

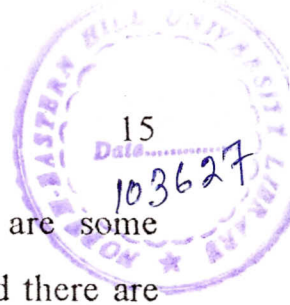
Frame, analysis and play theory are areas of contemporary social investigation which illumine the practice of metafiction and show the sensitivity of its response to cultural change. They are each, however, aspects of a broader shift in thought and practice whereby reality has increasingly come to be seen as a construct. Hegel, in fact, suggested that history be contemplated as a work of art, for in retrospect it 'reads' like a novel: its end is known. Metafiction suggests not only that writing history is a fictional act, ranging events conceptually through language to form a world-model, but that history itself is invested, like fiction, with interrelating plots which appear to interact independently of human design.

The novels of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, Henry James and Sinclair Lewis, which are among the foundations of a literary canon based on the preferred style and

effectively of realist fiction, can therefore be said to comprise of a brief 'experimental' phase in the history of the novel. From this point of view, metafiction defines the tradition against which realism has to be seen as counter-traditional or unorthodox. Over time, that counter-tradition simply ran out of ideas. So because metafiction was back in vogue in the 1960s, Barth was able to proclaim that the realist experiment had arrived at the limits of 'exhaustion'.

For post-structuralism, any attitude of rejection risks becoming what it sets out to make impossible – the possibility of being settling. Hence by rejecting realism, for example, anti-realist theories and practices of literature can easily cohere as a tradition that is no more unsettling, as a tradition, than the one they rejected. Any choice between the traditional and the radical that is based on a rejection of the traditional, then, cannot be a radical choice. Such a choice would be on the contrary settling, because it would reaffirm the very traditional idea that choices are made on the basis of a structure of self-evident difference between self-present alternatives. This is not only a commonsensical view but (in Derrida's terms) a fundamentally metaphysical one also, running through all forms of the speech/writing opposition to include even philosophical decisions about the nature of any concept.

The factor of undecidability inhabits every structure, in other words, does not point to indecision but rather to the ungroundedness on which decisions are based. For example, the choice between realist and postmodern literature is not a choice between two absolutely different forms of writing-in-particular and therefore not quite a straightforward



choice between traditional and radical alternatives. There are some features of realism that postmodernism could never reject, and there are some features of postmodernism that are not 'outside' realist literature.¹⁵ This is because both realism and postmodernism are situated within a tradition of western metaphysics such that any differences between them have to be seen as arising from inside that tradition, as part of that tradition.

In fact, the "unreality of reality" is not the only tune that postmodernist fiction can play, and postmodernism is not as fully the creature of the contemporary "crisis of reality" as Graff says it is. Postmodernist fiction may be antirealistic, but antirealism is not its sole object of representation. Whereas modernism with its ever more refined exploration of the possibilities of the various artistic disciplines and with its concentration on problem-solving as a central artistic activity ignored the problem of representation in favour of art's autonomy (and thus differentiated art and life), postmodern de-differentiation, like the best deconstructionist scenario, shakes our faith in our representational schemes and 'puts chaos, flimsiness, and instability in our experiences of reality itself.'¹⁶ Postmodernism may have given up on experimentation and returned to narrative and figuration, but not to revive a reassuring nineteenth century realism.

Reality alters, to represent it the means of representation must alter too. Nothing arises from nothing; the new springs from the old, but that is just what makes it new. The oppressors do not always appear in the same mask. The masks cannot always be stripped off in the same way. There

are so many tricks for dodging the mirror that is held out. Their military roads are termed motor roads. Their tanks are painted to look like Macduff's bushes. Their agents can show horny hands as if they are workers. Yes: it takes ingenuity to change the hunter into the quarry. What was popular yesterday is no longer so today, for the people of yesterday were not the people as it is today.

One cannot decide if a work is realist or not by finding out whether it resembles to the reality of one's time. In each individual case the picture given of life must be compared, not with another picture, but with the actual life portrayed. And likewise where popularity is concerned there is a wholly formalistic procedure that has to be guarded against. The intelligibility of a work of literature is not ensured exclusively by its being written in exactly the same way as other works which people have understood. These other works too were not invariably written just like the works before them. Something was done towards their understanding. In the same way we must do something for the understanding of the new works. Besides being popular there is such a thing as becoming popular.

Part of the growth of the self-conscious, anti-realistic literature and criticism has surely been the result of a rejection of Victorian conceptions of reality, but the idea that literature should be describing reality or truth is implicitly present still. The most interesting fiction of our day frequently seems to be game-playing, to be enjoying – as in Borges, Barth, and Nabokov – the possibilities of language and pleasures of literary parody. But the games themselves, while suggesting powerfully the writers' consciousness of the way verbal structures intervene between

us and reality, provide for us new possibilities of reality. Reality has become problematic in ways the Victorians could only barely imagine, yet much of the energy of modern fiction comes from sources similar to those which directed earlier realism: from a conscious rejection of the notions of reality implicit in earlier fictions and from a sense of the limits of the power of language to render reality at all.

The method of Robbe-Grillet, as he himself has made clear, is an attempt to get more precise about reality as it is experienced by human consciousness.¹⁷ With this notion of changing realities in mind, we can, moreover, make some sense of Erich Auerbach's treatment of Virginia Woolf as a great culmination of the tradition of literary realism. Most of the confusions about the word 'realism' come from an initial confusion between an historically definable literary method and a more general (perhaps inescapable) attempt to be faithful to the real. Since reality is both inexhaustible and perpetually changing to human consciousness, the word "realism" had no chance of a stable meaning. Despite all its dangers, the word has one virtue of forcing us to wrestle with some of the central problems of criticism and art.

Around 1890s, some novelists dominated American fiction in reputation and influence. All had started their work in or just after the Civil War; all represented different aspects of the realist tradition. James was the most cosmopolitan of the realists, and had moved to realism's fountainhead, in Europe. James' choice of milieu arose from his need for a dense social order that would set art into motion; and his 'romance' was managed through a realist perception refined by contact with Flaubert,

Turgenev, George Eliot. Art's task was not to record but to make life, reality was a constructed, not a recorded, thing; it was in the inherent tension of the novel between empiricism and idealism, realism and romance, naturalism's 'magnificent treadmill of the pigeon-holed and documented' and romance's 'balloon of experience', that the form found itself. By the century's turn, James was ready, in his essay 'The Future of Fiction',¹⁸ to suggest that the novel might reach a new level of self-realization.

A new generation of writers who began to emerge in the 1890s and took on strong character as a generation – partly because they shared aesthetic theories and preoccupations, partly because they shared the tutelage of Howells, partly because most had brief careers and early deaths. Often presented by the critics as strongly American, as Alfred Kazin put it, 'on native grounds',¹⁹ they were in fact much influenced by European theories of naturalism – above all those of Emile Zola, who in 1879 had set down his theory of the naturalist novel in *Le Roman Experimental*. For Zola, the word 'experimental' had scientific analogies; the novelist's task was to undertake a social or scientific study, recording facts, styles and systems of behaviour, living conditions, the workings of institutions, and deducing the underlying processes of environmental, genetic, and historical-evolutionary development. Naturalism was thus realism scientized, systematized, taken finally beyond realist principles of fidelity to common experience or of humanistic exploring of individual lives within the social and moral web of existence. Science, as Adams saw, was growing increasingly relativistic, looking into uncertainty and chaos, assuming that reality was not objectively given but subjectivity

apprehended through consciousness. In America, this view was shared by pragmatism, of which William James, teaching Philosophy and Psychology at Harvard, was an originator. In *Principles of Psychology*²⁰ (1890), he explored the gap between mind and action, noting that reality was not immediately apprehensible, but required to be approached provisionally, through the empirical, or pragmatic, assumption that order is 'gradually won and always in the making'. If reality is not to be known except by being taken in, consciousness must become the crucial question; and so, in Henry James's late work, it does.

It is sometimes argued that the return to realism and naturalism, and above all the move towards 'proletarian literature', was the essential direction of Thirties American writing. The naturalistic reporting of working-class life was one urgent literary task of the Thirties; another was realistic exploration of the disorders of the bourgeois world. These found their best chronicler in John O'Hara, a novelist of, as Lionel Trilling said, 'exacerbated social awareness',²¹ who converted the traditional mode of bourgeois realism into a powerful discourse for Depression Times. During the Thirties, realism and naturalism seemed the 'natural' ways to record a deeply changing society. The term 'postmodernism' still remains vague, but what it describes and attempts to define has been a fundamental challenge to the past realism and naturalism in American fiction, and to previous experimentalism; and it has opened up the novel as experimental ground in a time when many old images of America went into dissolution. Whether or not postmodernism is the dominant or 'appropriate' style of the age may be questionable; what is certain is that formal and epistemological questions crucial to

fiction's nature are being articulated in writers who have extended certain fundamental preoccupations of modernism – notably with fiction as play, game, parody, pastiche, and fantasy – and added new challenges to the notion that art is referential and formally coherent. In their works the stable text disappears; the fiction becomes meta-fictional; the reader is invited into novels in novel ways.

Raymond Federman has seen the emergence of a new 'surfiction' wherein 'all distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between the conscious and the subconscious, between the past and the present, between truth and untruth, will be abolished'.²² Other critics have offered less aesthetic, more historical explanations, seeing the new novel as a reaction against what Tony Tanner calls 'all kinds of conspiracies against spontaneity of consciousness. The phenomenon of postmodernism has been for some predominantly a style or a mannerism, but for others a total, enfolding historical manifestation, the apocalyptic product of a time when the sign has floated free of the signified, authoritative utterance becomes impossible, and only re-naming, re-writing, re-creating can be attempted'.²³ For some a latter-day epistemological impasse, it has been for others a great and open freeing of creation. If postmodernism's nature has been disputed or variously explained, so has its degree of dominance in late-twentieth century American fiction. For the late sixties it appeared, in its synthesizing drive and parodic abundance, a crucial break with previous realism and naturalism and with previous generic and regional tendencies, so that older categories and groupings – 'Southern fiction', 'Jewish-American fiction', 'Black fiction' – appeared increasingly senseless; any style was open to intersection, reformulation,

and parody. By the seventies the creative abundance had hardened towards mannerism and there was already talk of post-postmodernism.

*Representing The Unreality of Reality: A Study of Three American Postmodernist Novels*²⁴ is a study made of the selected novels of the three American Postmodernist novelists – William S. Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. As celebrated writers, they enjoy a unique and outstanding status in the Postmodern American fiction. Though they have to their credit a number of letters, memoirs and diary details, they have mostly been accredited mainly to their novels. Their works, in the fictional representation of reality in its postmodern context, deserves critical attention, admiration and recognition. And this study of mine is a humble endeavour in this direction.

John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Richard Brautigan, William Burroughs, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., William Gass and Donald Barthelme are those novelists who interrogated the concepts; the concepts of reality, truth and accepted belief(s). One can say then, that it is in reaction to the type of false realism that postmodern fiction assumes its disruptive stance. William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. have in their own ways deconstructed the American reality attempting to subvert the so-called official or generally accepted view of the social reality. Realism in literature is normally understood as the expression of a belief in a commonly experienced phenomenological world. Postmodernism in fact subverts this assumption of realism and employs a negative evaluation of it, thereby refuting the epistemological grounds of realism.

The so-called new novel is couched in a theoretical projection of postmodernism that the accepted reality is an illusion. We understand reality as something concrete through which we order our experience. The postmodern view deconstructs this position and asserts that reality is simulated. Therefore, it is a mode of simulacrum. *Naked Lunch*,²⁵ *Slaughterhouse-Five*²⁶ and *Gravity's Rainbow*²⁷ underline a reality that is supposedly unreal for our conventional understanding. It confirms to Michel Foucault's discourse of madness that underlines the fact that madness is constructed socially as prohibitive, tabooed and unsocial. The whole discourse in fact deflects upon the conventional understanding of things and helps us to understand the real-real. The pertinent question here is how does one define the real. The real conventionally has been defined and understood as something concretely available, socially acceptable and manifestly conventional. The postmodern novelists interrogate this position and take us beyond the conventionality to an understanding of things which are self-reflexive and underpin the manifestation of unreal as real and the invisible as visible.

The publication of William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* in 1959, marks the beginning of the postmodern fiction in America. According to him, the postmodern fiction defines itself in terms of "negatives and absence". The novelist as a narrator does not claim his authorship, for he is presumed to be dead, or simply reduced to a "recording instrument"²⁸ that generates narratives and also disrupts them. It is in this sense that Burroughs' statement in *Naked Lunch*: "The word cannot be expressed direct It can perhaps be indicated by mosaic of juxtaposition like articles abandoned in a hotel drawer, defined by negatives and

absence....”²⁹ becomes the very defining principle of what makes of the postmodern narrative. Thus, his understanding of “negatives and absence” becomes the defining principle of the fiction written during the 1960s.

Naked Lunch portrays a reality that is unreal and absent. It proclaims the essential absurdities of life and reduces it to a series of cruel and often pointless charades. Time, place, plot and characters are not important in the narrative except narrative effects – effects which are important for their disruptive traces, and hidden meanings. Burroughs makes no attempt to create artificial situations or to construct an elaborate plot. The text is simply a record of the writer’s consciousness at the precise point of writing, with breaks, mood changes, unpleasant fantasies, mad humor, all described as they flash into his consciousness. Writing thus folds upon itself as consciousness does:

There is only one thing a writer can write about: What is in front of his senses at the moment of writing I am a recording instrument I do not presume to impose “story”, “plot”, “continuity”.... In sofaras I succeed in ‘Direct’ recording of certain areas of psychic process I may have limited function I am not an entertainer....³⁰

Burroughs in this sense joins the ranks of “garrulous” American authors such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos whose literary output adds to map the authors’ consciousness, recorded over a period of years or even decades. It is confessional literature at its absolute, since it can work only if it is completely honest.

Pynchon as a postmodern novelist takes or adopts disorder or chaos or delirium as the way that fiction functions. Thomas Pynchon's novels confront us with every degree of paranoia from the private to the cosmic. Hofstadter has identified in politics, a mentality which assumes "the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish characters."³¹ *The Crying of Lot 49*, *V.*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* all exhibit the habits of language and the view of history which Hofstadter has named the paranoid style:

The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a "vast" or "gigantic" conspiracy as the motive force in historical events. History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms – he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values.³²

Tyron Slothrop, the American whose hapless peregrinations form the bulk of *Gravity's Rainbow*, is beset at every turn by suspicions which he himself describes as paranoid. From infancy onward he has in fact been manipulated by external forces, first by the scientist Laszlo Jamf, subsequently by the Pvalovian Pointsman, and finally, in an anarchic Germany at the close of World War II, by a host of operators ranging from expatriate Africans to Soviet agents to black marketeers. Like Benny Profane in *V.*, he is a Schlemihl, perpetual victim of others' plots.

We see Slothrop's perception of reality as either governed by chance, and therefore meaningless, or else governed by some hidden powers at once "more real" than chance and more ruthless; and the belief that this order, which is felt to lurk behind the debris of the world, is not merely secret, not just passively mysterious like a remote deity, but "systematically hidden from the likes of Slothrop".³³

The essential subverting strategy in *Gravity's Rainbow* effectively hatches plots against the book's own characters. Pynchon deliberately confuses the literary meaning of plot – that is, a connected progress of events – with its psychological meaning – that is, the paranoid's schema of a world conspiring around him. Satiric plots envelop and depersonalize, they impede narrative action in an orgy of contingencies where individuals are inseparable from the "plots" that control them. At one point, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the hopelessly confused Tyrone Slothrop asks, "this is some kind of plot, right?" and Seaman Bodine responds: "Everything is some kind of plot, man".³⁴ Paranoia here is, by its nature, proliferating. When Slothrop loses his character in the multiple plots of *Gravity's Rainbow*, he, as an aggregate of cells, is made into an aggregate of last moments. At the end of the narrative, he has and is nothing. By refusing to close his text, not only in the obviously unresolving ending but throughout the novel, Pynchon places his fiction within its cultural environment.

If the traditional novel describes reality in an attempt to give it a certain moral validity, the postmodern fiction like Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-Five* seeks to show the form rather than the content of

the novel. *Slaughterhouse-Five* offers a nonlinear mode of narration that, in Klinkowitz's words, created "a radical reconnection of the historical and the imaginary; the realistic and the fantastic, the sequential and the simultaneous, the author and the text."³⁵ It bears little resemblance to the traditional novel. There is nothing of the linear movement of the narrative, no intricate plot, crying for resolution. The protagonist, a time-traveller, can by a blink of his eye find himself in fire-bombed Dresden in 1944 and, by another blink, in Ilium, his home town in 1961. Billy Pilgrim was an eye-witness to the fire bombing by the Allies of Dresden during the fag-end of World War II. The experience proves so traumatic that pilgrim becomes "unstuck in time".³⁶ Being "unstuck in time", he does not find it worthwhile to distinguish between past, present and future or, between the living and the dead.

At one point Vonnegut announces: "There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontation, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces."³⁷ Billy is anything but a thin character: he is another illustration of Vonnegut's concept of Protean man. Billy needs to travel back and forth in time not only to understand himself but also to endure himself to become his history. He has many personalities, many selves existing together at once. Vonnegut himself performs multiple roles both as creator and creature, author and character, taking centre stage at the beginning and conclusion and also appearing as a Dresden prisoner of war.

Vonnegut emphasizes on fantasy's importance in trying to make sense of the senseless in his *Slaughterhouse-Five*. To him, fictions are responses to history and horror; 'real' horror forms one essential component of the book, while the process of the fantastic displacement the other. Vonnegut converts himself into Billy pilgrim, a childlike, gentle-natured, but emotionally damaged optometrist from Ilium, New York, who is nonetheless concerned, like his narrator, with the making of 'corrective lenses'. In the 'real' world, Billy suffers the author's experience of a POW imprisoned in the Dresden Slaughterhouse, and survived by chance from the fireball which destroys the city. Vonnegut is at his best in fantasizing his real experiences as a prisoner in World War II. He said, "I felt after I finished *Slaughterhouse-Five* that I didn't have to write at all anymore if I didn't want to. It was the end of some sort of career."³⁸

It is now necessary to introduce these novelists selected for our study. William Seward Burroughs was born on 5 February 1914 in St. Louis, Missouri, into a prominent family. Burroughs's father, Mortimer P. Burroughs, was the son of the man who invented the adding machine and founded the company that bears his name. Burroughs is his paternal grandfather's namesake. Burroughs's mother, Laura Lee Burroughs, was the daughter of a distinguished Methodist minister whose family claimed descent from Robert E. Lee. In the marriage of Burroughs's parents the northern and Southern strains of the American Protestant tradition and its ruling elite were united. Burroughs's paternal grandfather, originally from Auburn, New York, was an example of Yankee ingenuity and commercial success; and his maternal grandfather, James Wideman Lee,

a Methodist Episcopal minister in Atlanta and St. Louis, eloquently preached the Calvinist doctrine that inspired men like William S. Burroughs I. Their grandson inherited both the inventiveness of the one and the verbal skill of the other, and both talents are evident in his work.

Limited factual information about his childhood can be found in his fiction (mainly *Junkie*, *The Wild Boys*, and *Exterminator!*) and in the brief "Literary Autobiography" published in *A Descriptive Catalogue of the William S. Burroughs Archive*. The evil of dullness is embodied in the character of Colonel Greenfield in *The Wild Boys*, a great bore known for his interminable racist jokes. After graduating from Harvard in 1936, Burroughs began receiving an allowance from his parents and was free to do as he pleased. His own description of the following years is one of aimless drifting and boredom. The years of wandering constituted a long apprenticeship to his vocation as a writer, which paralleled his search for a belief to provide the basis for his life. The quest found its end in 1944 when Burroughs became a morphine addict. Addiction ended dilettantism and gave a prophetic vision that enabled Burroughs to turn his life into art.

Burroughs's first novel, *Junkie*, a portrait of the addict underworld of the 1940s, reveals the true source of hipsterism. The year of 1944 was the crucial juncture in Burroughs's life as it was in this year that Burroughs became addicted in New York. For fifteen years Burroughs chose drug addiction as a way of life. Addiction became his spiritual discipline as an artist. *Junkie*, "In Search of Yage", and *Naked Lunch* are accurate reports of drug experiences, and he has written several articles

on the effects of drugs, most notably “Letter from a Master Addict to Dangerous Drugs” and “Points of Distinction Between Sedative and Consciousness – Expanding Drugs”. In fact, Burroughs has denied that anything of worth can be written under the influence of any drug (with the possible exception of marijuana), although drugs may be useful for opening up psychic areas to be written about afterwards.

From 1960 to 1964, Burroughs lived mostly in Paris, where Olympia Press published *The Soft Machine* and *The Ticket That Exploded* soon after bringing out *Naked Lunch*. In fact, his work from *The Wild Boys* (1971) to the present has as its initial inspiration the youth revolt of the 1960s. In 1981, Burroughs published his first long fiction in several years, *Cities of the Red Night*, the chief result of his collaboration with Grauerholz. In 1983, Burroughs was inducted into the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. And he died on 2nd August, 1997, of a heart attack in Lawrence, Kansas. He was 83.

Burroughs’s career as a writer began at the age of thirty-five when he began to record his experiences as an addict. From about 1950 to 1957 he kept notes that included not only observations about the drug world and the effects of drugs on himself, but also records of dreams, memories and fantasy episodes. Often this material was included in letters to his friends. From the beginning Burroughs wrote in fragments, recording all the products of his consciousness, whether fact or fiction, “subjective” or “objective”, and encouraged collaboration with other artists through letters, visits, and the mediation of his publishers. From the selection, editing, and arrangement of the notes came *Junkie*, *The Yage Letters*,

Naked Lunch, *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded* and *Nova Express* – all of which are based on Burroughs's life as a drug addict.

Naked Lunch is Burroughs' first mature work as an artist, the novel that established his reputation as an important writer and the one that still receives the most critical attention. It purports to be a record of a man's addiction to opiates, his apomorphine treatment, and cure. On the literal level the novel can be seen as the disjointed memories and hallucinations of withdrawal. It begins to develop the pop mythology that the later works elaborate and complete. In *Naked Lunch* Burroughs transforms the body's addictive nature into an entity called the "Human Virus" or the "evil virus". The virus lives upon the human host, satisfying its own needs for drugs, sex, or power (the three basic addictions for Burroughs) through demonic possession, which dehumanizes the human being by making him subservient to a physical or psychological need. When addicted/possessed, the human being becomes identical with the virus and regresses to a lower form of life.

Thomas Pynchon Jr. was born to Thomas Ruggles Pynchon Sr. and Katherine Frances Bennett Pynchon on May 8, 1937, in Glen Cove, Long Island, New York. Presently he is living as a recluse. Although it has been reported that Pynchon wrote 'severely loosely connected stories which form a kind of picaresque novel' centering on one Meatball Mulligan only one story in this series was ever published – 'Entropy'.³⁹ He originally planned to make Pig Bodine, a similar figure, central to the story 'Low-Lands' but in the event he was given a secondary role not only in that story but also in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon's

published stories then are individual works using radically different techniques which all move away from realism. Even his first story establishes a realistic narrative on to which Pynchon then superimposes – with varying degrees of success – layers of symbolism. In spite of their varied subjects the stories usually bear, however obliquely, on contemporary American themes – on diplomacy, consumerism, espionage and so on.

Pynchon's first story dates from his undergraduate days at Cornell. He has also written some important novels viz: (1) *V.*, (2) *The Crying of Lot 49* and (3) *Gravity's Rainbow*. Unlike *V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow* offers no impression of orderliness through titled chapters. In his first novel the mock-picaresque chapter-headings – also used by Richard Farina, the dedicatee of *Gravity's Rainbow*, among other American novelists – comically distance the reader from the absurd sequences which they introduce. His *Gravity's Rainbow* establishes him as one of the best contemporary American novelists. This book seems to have been reviewed by everybody. By and large the reviews deferred to the book even when they showed little sign of coming to terms with it. So intensely curious was the response that *Gravity's Rainbow* actually appeared on the best seller list.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. was born on 11th November 1922 in Indianapolis, Indiana to Kurt Vonnegut, Sr. and Lieber. On January 2000, he was hospitalized for smoke inhalation after fire at his home. He is still living. His career has been one of the more interesting ones in American literary history. In the forty years since he published his first short story

in 1950, Vonnegut has experienced a virtual roller coaster ride of literary reputation – from obscurity to international fame to being dismissed by critics as a mere “popular” writer, while regaining some critical respect for his most recent work. Beginning as a science fiction writer, he produced two undistinguished novels in that genre in the 1950s before finding his distinctive voice in four innovative fictions of the 1960s – *Mother Night* (1962), *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), and his masterpiece, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969).

In the middle 1970s, however, two weak novels and a backlash against his enormous popularity led to a reversal in his reputation, at least among “serious” readers. In the 1980s with the publication of *Jailbird* (1979), *Deadeye Dick* (1982), *Galāpagos* (1985), and *Bluebeard* (1987), Vonnegut made a quiet but undeniable comeback with academic readers, while retaining a healthy portion of his popular following. By the age of sixty-five Vonnegut had produced twelve novels, a collection of short stories, a Broadway play, and two collections of essays. Regardless of what he writes in the future or how critics view his other work, *Slaughterhouse-Five* will almost certainly win Vonnegut a permanent place in American literature.

When World War II broke out, Vonnegut was sixteen years old; at the age of twenty he enlisted in the army and was sent to Europe, where he was captured by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge on December 22, 1944. Less than two months later he experienced the event that would profoundly affect the rest of his life: as he puts it, “I was present in the greatest massacre in European history, which was the destruction of

Dresden by fire-bombing".⁴⁰ Vonnegut and a few fellow prisoners and their guards survived only because they were quartered in a meat locker sixty feet below ground. He got out of this world through writing novel called *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

The postmodern novelists like William S. Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. focus primarily on narrative displacement. The linear narrative strategy is replaced with a disjointed and disruptive articulation that underpins the destabilized, uncertain, ponderous subjectivities of the characters. Such a realization has allowed a polyphonic possibility, resulting in a Schizoid representation of the individual and society. The very conceptualization and narrativization of reality has resulted in a playful irrealism. The endeavour of these novelists have been to engage in an antifoundational exercise in articulating human experience in a world of shifting terrains where real is irreal and truth is relativized.

The study is divided into the following chapters:

Chapter I – Structures of Reality: An Introduction

This chapter deals with the shifting terrain and changing concept of reality beginning from its formative stage in the 18th century till date.

Chapter II – Negatives and Absence: A Study of William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*

This chapter deals with the beginning of postmodern fiction defining itself in terms of "negatives and absence".

Chapter III – Logic of Delirium – A Study of Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*

Here an attempt is made to show how there is a logic in delirium or paranoia or madness.

Chapter IV – Fantasizing the Real - A Study of Kurt Vonnegut Jr.’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Here I dwell on the importance of fantasy in dealing with the real experiences of war.

Chapter V – Representing the Unreality of reality – Postmodernism and Narrative Strategy

This chapter takes special care in critically examining the proposition: “representing the unreality of reality” in the context of the works selected for the study.

Chapter VI – Conclusion

Here at the end I endeavour to attempt a summing up of the discussions made in the preceding chapters, and offer a conclusion.

CONCLUSION

As a discourse, postmodernism in its theoretical formation has been constituted in a critique of the foundational assumptions of Enlightened modernity. Such a critique has nullified any transcendental view of the world and held suspect claims of objective truth and authoritative version of the 'real'. With an altered notion of the 'real' postmodern literary representation has followed practices of fragmentation and playful self-reflexivity in underlining a shift in thought and interpretation. The theoretical debate that informs the changing concept of 'reality' has become central to contemporary fictional narratives. Such narratives have explored the contours of alternative realities and have exploded the myth of the objective reality. As McHale maintains: "nowadays every thing in our culture tends to deny reality and promote unreality."¹ It appears that 'unreality of reality' is not only an imaginative construct instead is the very condition of our lives today.

Postmodernist fiction underlines the fact that neither imitation nor mirroring is the possible relation between the fictional world and reality. As a new genre it writes ^{back} home implying that it represents *a* universe, not *the* universe in that it can describe about *any* universe. "In other words, to "do" ontology in this perspective is not necessarily to seek some grounding *for* our universe; it might just as appropriately involve describing *other* universes, including a "possible" or even "impossible" universes – not least of all the other universe, or heterocösm, of fiction."² Taking an antirealist stance, Postmodernist fiction posits its representational ethos in a conceptual frame that is posthumanist. It

interrogates the postulates of the realist fiction that attempts to represent a world in which value has no distinct ontological status, and in which human meaning is perceived to reside in the unending and indissoluble tension between self and society.³

As discussed in the previous chapters, it is clear that the genre of postmodernist fiction performs on the principle that story-telling cannot be eliminated, but it becomes playful and ironic, as if the text itself had lost control in relation to the mirror where life is decided by a kind of technical absurdity, where the characters have no other substance than their fictitious personalities since they exist as verbal beings. The novelists discussed in this dissertation illustrate the fact that reality is but a fraudulent verbal network. As history and the subject are the two faces of an immense force, the postmodernist novelists mock at the official discourse and official images of historical events. The subject himself, that is to say the protagonists of these novels, seem to be searching for a missing coherence in their lives and actions. Thus the crucial question raised by the postmodern fiction is the question of representation, since the line between the real and imaginary has been erased. "In a world where the referential element itself is denounced as a mere electronic image, the question of historical truth, of historical credibility, but also the question of the stability of the real, as well as the psychic depth of the subject, are no longer valid."⁴

Emerging out of such a ferment that dismisses old certitudes about character, plot and events and embraces 'uncertainty' as the central principle of representation, the fictions of William Burrough, Thomas

Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. indeed inaugurate in America the tradition of the untraditional postmodern fiction. William Burroughs writes in *Naked Lunch*: "The word cannot be expressed, it can perhaps be indicated by mosaic of juxtapositions, like objects abandoned in a hotel room, defined by negatives and absence."⁵ Such a perception has shaped his work in that he has incorporated the incongruous and even the incompatible as opposed to the type of fiction based on metaphoric and symbolic representation of reality. Burroughs attempts to subvert the practice of coherence and logic in a narrative strategy that verges upon Schizophrenia. Language in Burroughs' narrative takes the form of antilanguage. Antilanguage is developed through systematic transformation of the standard language and its world view. It creates in effect an "anti-world-view", a counter-reality of its own. In addition to the narrative devices employed, the reader is solicited to be part of the 'unreal' – the hypodiegetic worlds. Among the devices that involves the reader is the device of the missing end-frame: dropping down to an embedded narrative level that breaks down hierarchies and creates an illusion of the real that – dream like or nightmarish.

For Burroughs, the text itself is never innocent. The literary discourse and the words which make that discourse dialectically follow a process of semantization that reduces stories to a semantic series. What Burroughs seeks to achieve in his writing is a new form of catharsis – not in the Aristotelean sense – creating a linguistic illusion. Thus the importance of his work rests in manipulating language, distorting and fragmenting the syntax, and pulverizing the logic of linearity of language and discourse.

Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is one of the paradigmatic texts of postmodernist writing. The novel narrativizes the absurd and the arbitrary in which the fictional machine seems to turn in a void, but not without circling with black humour. At the end of the novel, for the reader there is no real message, no order, no resolution, no moral statement, but only a projected delirium, that is captured in the illogic of language. Like Pynchon's earlier works *Gravity's Rainbow* is not constrained by the limits of modernism, for he freely exploits the artistic possibility of plurality of worlds. He breaks through the dead-end of modernist solipsism by shifting from a modernist poetics of epistemology to a postmodernist poetics of ontology.

One of the devices that Pynchon employs in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the cinematic effect. As McHale maintains, cinematic discourse can be interpreted as a series of metaphors for textual strategies; but it can also be read as the sign of a narrative level interposed between the text and the 'real'.⁶ From one transition from a bedroom scene to a conversation over breakfast, 'bridge music' is specified; elsewhere the narrative acquires a voice-over parodying that of an old-fashioned travelogue. In other words, the extended cinematic trope while being applied to the text becomes its 'tenor' and 'vehicle', while metaphors substitute for the language of novelistic narration and description. This reading is clearly justified in *Gravity's Rainbow* where the presence of the interposed level of the film is revealed on the last page. Such a strategy has substituted the *absent* – literal 'privileged moment' with a metaphorical analogue for that moment. Thus Pynchon develops internal tropes that subverts the *form* and coherence of the literal world of the novel.

One of the constituent thematic dimensions of the postmodernist fiction from America is to mock at the official version of historical events. Most of the writers seem to be revising their position and their views in relation to the historical events they themselves participated. *Slaughterhouse Five* is the most obvious example in which the protagonist (Vonnegut himself) returns to the place where he participated in the war, but not to remember how it was, not to relive what he did, but to rethink and revise his vision of that moment. The author attempts following the genre of science fiction to liberate his characters from the prison-house of the fiction. Using the autobiographical material, Vonnegut is creating worlds on thresholds – real people travelling to worlds of fantasy and transworld identities. Billy could recognize himself at Dresden and also else where, he is the protagonist and also the author: “That was I, that was me. That was the author of this book.”⁷

The narrative thus creates multiple worlds of awareness and collapses those awareness into a world of linguistic sludge. Vonnegut follows the catalogue structure in disengaging the stratum of words from the stratum of worlds. From the ontological point of view catalogues are paradoxical. On the one hand, they can appear to assert full presence of a world and on the other hand, its negation in creating alternative worlds. The facts and realities which defy explanation are brought into the same frame with fictions beyond verification.

The present study, among other things, has attempted to capture the consequence of the postmodernist fiction in America in that it has explored the various formulations and strategies that Burroughs, Pynchon

and Vonnegut have employed in their works. What accounts for the success or failure of these novelists under discussion is their attempts in redefining not only the changing concept of reality, but fictionalizing the same.

The 'unreality of reality' that the postmodernist fiction uses as a central trope hinges on a provisional supposition: "a technique that requires suspension of belief as well as disbelief."⁸ Thus the postmodernist fiction reasons with the theories of "possible worlds" thereby relativises our understanding of the real. It abandons the secure structures of logic and reasoning in a playful self-reflexivity where nothing is 'true' or 'false', every thing is possible and changeable. In interrogating the three fundamental modalities of classical logic – necessity, possibility and impossibility – postmodernist fiction refigures necessity and possibility not as universal norms, but as a provisional, individual requirements. 'Probability' becomes the defining term for postmodernist discursive articulation. Theoretically the postmodernist fiction excludes logical impossibility from the propositions that constitute worlds and thereby create possible worlds, that obey the law of the excluded middle. In fact, Burroughs, Pynchon and Vonnegut refuse to accept full-fledged, self-sustaining worlds and propose that possible worlds are there, for they are made possible in the beliefs, imaginations and convictions of those who create it.