Metaphysically Underdetermined Beliefs

'The death of intelligent writing'

In *The Circus of the Mind in Motion: Postmodernism and the Comic Vision*, Lance Olsen attacks what he calls 'neorealism' – which for him includes fiction published over the last decade or so by such writers as Bobbie Ann Mason, Raymond Carver, and Jayne Anne Phillips – labeling it, following Richard Kostelanetz, 'the death of intelligent writing.' He argues, further, that the 'narrative strategy' of realist fiction is 'conservative' (he attributes its revitalization in the 1980s to the long reigns of Thatcher, Reagan, and Kohl) and that 'such a conservative narrative strategy indicates a conservative metaphysical strategy' (1990: 28):

It believes in a world out there, an empirical world that the reader can smell, see and touch. It believes in logic, chronology and plot. It believes in a stable identity, in a sense of self, in depth psychology. It believes in a universe of communal reality and common sense, where content is privileged over form, language is transparent, style is secondary, and, it is assumed, the word mirrors the world.

Despite the postmodernist rage against 'totalization,' the idea that realist fiction is politically and 'metaphysically' conservative is uncritically propagated by many a theorist of postmodernism, and is typically complemented by an equally reductive (but more tolerant) characterization of the contemporary fiction such theorists label 'postmodernist.' This reductivism appears to derive in part from the idea that metaphysical, epistemological, moral, and political views somehow inhere in the conventions of realist and so-called postmodernist fiction. Olsen's assumption of a 'metaphysical strategy' specific to realist fiction, for instance, seems to be predicated on the
idea that things like plot, setting, and character not only always have metaphysical implications, but also always have the same metaphysical implications from one realist novel to the next. The idea that, in virtue of its conventions, a literary mode necessarily reflects a certain metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and politics is, on the face of it, if not palpably absurd, then at least highly implausible. It is, however, so often assumed to be trivially true by theorists of postmodernism as to warrant an investigation of what accounts for its elevation to the status of self-evident truth. Accordingly, what I will explore here are the ideas from which the reductivism that characterizes many recent accounts of realist and postmodernist fiction seems to derive.

'Out there'

To start, I want to address the notion – often lurking in contemporary critiques of literary realism and explicitly voiced by Olsen in the above – that a belief in a world ‘out there,’ in logic, chronology, and plot, in a sense of self, in a communal reality, and in the idea that the word mirrors the world, are just so many strands of an all-embracing realist philosophy. It is the subscription to such a notion that constitutes the first step, as it were, in the process of the conceptualization of literary realism by theorists of postmodernism that results in the reductive account of it many of them provide; the second step is the assumption that literary realism is perforce grounded in this realist philosophy. Therefore I’ll begin by attempting to explain how the beliefs Olsen identifies as comprising literary realism’s ‘conservative metaphysical strategy’ do not describe some one philosophy, much less a distinctively realist one.

Consider, first of all, Olsen’s claim that literary realism’s ‘conservative metaphysical strategy’ is informed by ‘a belief in a world out there, an empirical world that the reader can smell, see and touch.’ Since Olsen takes this belief to be a distinctive component of a metaphysics specific to literary realism, it may be that he thinks it is tantamount to a belief in metaphysical realism – the thesis, simply put, that reality is mind-independent. But a belief in a world out there is not equivalent to an acceptance of metaphysical realism, nor does a commitment to the former entail a commitment to the latter. That someone professes belief in the existence of a world out there does not, in itself, indicate what her or his commitments might be as to the nature of that world. A belief in a world out