RE-PRESENTING POSTMODERNIST REALISM: SOCIAL COMMITMENT AND NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN RUSSELL BANKS'S LITERARY PROJECT*

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This paper starts by suggesting the existence of a number of American novels where postmodernist values may be validated by means of an apparent realist approach. The notions of realism, metafiction, and reality are then briefly scrutinized in order to suggest a necessary revision of their traditional limits and to comment on the contemporary implementation of a «postmodernist realism.» The paper then progresses to investigate this new mode by means of the analysis of different narrative devices (mostly concerning the use of voice) deployed by Banks in his books *Trailerpark*, *Continental Drift*, *Affliction,* and *Rule of the Bone*, while at the same time enhancing the social commitment present in the writer's literary project.

Readers interested in the recent development of the American novel know that metafictional forms are still employed by many postmodern authors. Pynchon's latest novel *Mason & Dixon* (1997) offers a good example of the validity that this type of technical devices has in order to subvert our current notions on the character of the real (Jackson 1981: chapter 3). However, the fact that we are already living in a time characterized by a new ideological paradigm (Hayles 1991; Derrick 1994; Collado Rodríguez 1994/95) presupposes the critical necessity to investigate how the postmodern condition may have had any influence on our very notion of reality and, furthermore, whether the new paradigm is currently supported by the literary use of specific technical devices. In other words, do we still perceive the existence of the same traditional limits dividing realism from metafictional experimentation?

Some years ago, in *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* Larry McCaffery suggested that in the 1980s American life had experienced a new *revolution* as profound in its ideological implications as was the one of the 1960s, the period that —as it is now widely accepted— brought about the culture of the postmodern (1988: 1166). This alleged cultural shift allows McCaffery to propose the existence of a new type of realism already separated from the radical wave of experimentation that flourished mainly in the 1960s and early 1970s. Experimentation, one seems to perceive in this essay, is almost synonymous with postmodernism, and it is only when this wave of metafictional experimentation is over that the new cultural *revolution* of the 1980s —with its literary corollary, realism— strikes back. The issue is further complicated if we consider some later essays on current American fiction such as Heinz Ickstadt's «Plotting to What End? Doctorow,

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Coover, and the Invention of History» (1991) or Molly Hite's contribution to *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (1991). These authors mention the existence of American novels that are at the center of the postmodernist canon but that are also fundamentally concerned «with the construction of recent American history and ideology» (Hite 1991: 699). Examples of this type of postmodernist but also political fiction would include Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Coover's *The Public Burning*, Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, DeLillo's *Libra*, or Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. However, in this occasion, whereas Hite —coinciding with McCaffery's views— sees the necessity to accept the metafictional quality of this kind of fiction before labeling it as postmodernist, Ickstadt does not seem to be so radical and allows for the possibility of a postmodernist realism whose existence he had already defended some years earlier (Ickstadt 1988). The option of this postmodernist realism —*pace* McCaffery and his 1980s revolution— would in any case clarify the status of some contemporary social and political novels such as Doctorow's *Ragtime* and *The Waterworks*, or Kennedy's *Legs*, books that look postmodernist even if their technical experimentation is not so overt as, let us say, the kind of metafiction one may find in novels written by Barth or Sorrentino. I must confess that in this dialectical argument I prefer to side with the ones who define postmodernist fiction more through its ideological coincidences with poststructuralist thinking (Pfister 1989; Hutcheon 1991) than through the deployment of a set of experimental devices that can also be frequently found in modernist or even in earlier texts. Even when highly metafictional devices are absent from a text, the world that it depicts may correspond to an understanding of life characterized by the rejection of traditional values and by the erosive notion that reality is always mediated by human representation, elements that —as many critics suggest— correspond to the postmodernist cultural shift that since the 1960s started to inform and reform the Western perception of the world (see Hutcheon 1988; Smyth 1991; Hayles 1991; McHale 1992). On the other hand, it also seems clear that we cannot discard the fact that the presentation of a postmodernist reality may demand from the writer the necessity to revise her or his use of technical devices. Ultimately if, within the grounds of poststructuralism, we validate the above mentioned notion that the human being is always mediated by his or her representation of reality, it does not seem farfetched to conclude that all literary devices are metafictional in the sense that their deployment may help the reader to discover the artificiality of written language. Notwithstanding, readers do not frequently have problems to discriminate between a *realist* approach and the use of extremely *metafictional* devices such as the metalepsis or crossing of narrative levels, the use of comical names, or the Borgesian suggestion of infinite regress.

It is in this complex ground that agglutinates the notions of reality, metafiction, and postmodernism where I wish to locate the fictional works produced by Russell Banks, a writer who gradually —and after a sustained literary effort— has started to enter the canon of American letters. Despite the fact that he still defines himself as a humanist and that he rejects the poststructuralist notion of the dissolution of the self (Collado Rodríguez 1996), his realist approach is, as I shall try to prove, subtly informed by the world-view that postmodernism brought about and his works offer a good example of the existence of the already mentioned postmodernist realism that Ickstadt defended a decade ago, an otherwise literary label that refers to the views of the 1960s more in terms of inheritance than of reaction on the part of recent realist writers, as McCaffery had suggested.

Banks's life offers in itself some events that conjure up some of the conditions brought about by the coming of the postmodern. Born in 1940 to a New Hampshire working-class family, he soon had to experience poverty and his parents' divorce, circumstances that became literary motifs in many of the books he has produced up to date. Affected by the res-

tless political conditions of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Banks decides to join Fidel Castros's rebel army in Cuba, goes on to live in a trailerpark in Florida, and subsequently travels to the Mexican Yucatán and to Jamaica. The reader of his works will immediately recognize the effects of those actual experiences in Banks's fictional pages. It is in the early 1980s, after a prolonged period of literary effort combined with odd jobs, that he starts to be recognized as a powerful social writer. Critics soon label him as a naturalist writer whose books abundantly describe the lives of marginalized whites and the effects of poverty, alcoholism, drugs, and woman and child abuse, all reiterative elements in most of his books.

Russell Banks's narratives perfectly fit into the contemporary current of fiction dedicated to subvert the traditionally centralized social roles in favor of the marginal and dispossessed. His social aims could be aligned with those of many recent writers whose works defend the rights of race and gender minorities. Furthermore, within this group of new social writers Banks also seems to coincide at times with those who introduce experimental underpinnings in their fiction (McCaffery 1988: 1171), even if his use of metafictional elements is, from a traditional viewpoint, frequently much more concealed and does not seem to bring about such striking formal results as, let us say, some of the narratives written by Ishmael Reed, Louise Erdrich, or Gordon Henry.

Although we may certainly find literary echoes coming from Dreiser's or even Steinbeck's fiction, Banks's alleged realist and naturalist approach is informed by a sustained attempt to renovate the traditional omniscience that has frequently accompanied realist views since the nineteenth century. Reading his fiction one may infer that traditional realism is not enough to present the problems of a marginalized people forced to live in a world whose values have been substantially shifting for the last three decades. The necessity to denounce social marginalization combines with the analysis of a new kind of post-industrial American life condemned to the internal contradictions brought about by the powerful mass media and by a new technological revolution. This type of life has resulted not only in more and more commodities for the people with money but also in an increased rate of unemployment that is combined with the impossibility for the poor to re-enact the American Dream. In effect, in Bank's pages the latter has become transformed in a nightmare of endless consumerism. Since the 1980s different social circumstances demand different narrative approaches and, in his own literary project, Banks seems to be almost obsessed with finding the appropriate narrative voice that may force his readers to reflect on Western values and on the contradictions that arise in the new American society that sprouted from the postmodern 1960s.

Russell Banks has published very relevant and highly acclaimed books mostly since the beginning of the 1980s and it is my intention now to analyze the different manifestations of the narrative voice in four of them. I belief that notions such as narrative omniscience, realism, metafiction, and a postmodern understanding of reality have become very relevant issues in Bank's project, and the ways in which they are used in these four texts will help us to further the existence of a —paradoxical?— postmodernist realism. The books I have selected seem to be written in a realist —not only naturalist— mood, where the story —and not so much the more metafictional *telling* of the story— seems to be the foregrounded element. As I will try to prove, in Banks's narrative the use of voice along the decade of the 1980s and the early 1990s discovers the necessity to deal with a world of new values —or prejudices— in neo-realist terms. He uses, modifies, or even attempts to create new narrative forms in order to bring about the emergence of a postmodernist realism capable of responding to a type of life now characterized by its uncertainty and by the pervasive notion of the human being as a mere ideological interpreter of it.

The first book I want to refer to is *Trailerpark*, a collection of short stories published in 1981. In this volume Banks *centers* his narratives on a place, a trailerpark in New Hampshire, and not on any particular protagonist or hero, in this way formally displacing the bourgeois-realist importance of the individual to a secondary role. The book itself represents one among many attempts in the history of recent American fiction to blur the limits between the novel and shorter forms of prose fiction[1]; characters appear and reappear frequently from a story into the next but no one becomes more relevant than the others as happened in older examples of the genre (let us remember Hemingway's, for instance). In other words, a reader of this volume may easily conclude that, despite its apparent realism, *Trailerpark* incorporates, at least, the current postmodernist notions of trespassing of literary genres, antitotalization, and decentering of the individual hero (Smyth 1991). However, in favor of a purely realist reading of this text it could also be argued that the narrative voice is —using Genette's terminology (1980: chapter 5)— *heterodiegetic,* that is to say, the narrator is a voice completely external to the story it narrates, not a participant in the events. Furthermore, this voice frequently shows its omniscience; in its role as external focalizer (Bal 1985: 100-14), it comes and goes from one character to another and abundantly uses a device currently deployed by high modernist novelists such as James, Woolf, or Lawrence: I am referring to the use of free indirect discourse, a form of interference between the narrator's text and the character's focalization (*cf.* Bal 1985: 140), but once again Banks does not try to favor any character over the others with the use of this device. In this way, and despite the use of an omniscient narrator inheritor of both the realist tradition and High Modernism, the writer incorporates the narrative voice to more contemporary —postmodernist— roles, subtly but systematically eroding the narrator's own capacity to produce a realist and totalizing view in its report of the events that happened in the trailerpark, but also rejecting the modernist impulse to use —and centralize— a single Jamesian center of consciousness. Early in the book the narrator starts to mix its voice with the different internal focalizations of a multiplicity of characters in each of the stories, the result being a plurality of perspectives on the same issues presented by a voice that, although omniscient, undermines its own power to present anything as objectively true. Let us notice the erosive, antitotalizing effect of the use of *you* in the following fragment, in which the narrator presents, in its own voice, Marcelle's views:

> «Is that Flora over there?» Marcelle asked, her voice suddenly a bit shaky. Things were changing a little too fast for her to keep track of. You don't mind the long-haired hippie kid smoking a little grass and maybe yakking stupidly the way they do when they're stoned with probably the only person in the trailerpark who didn't need to get stoned herself in order to understand him. You don't really mind that. A kid like Bruce Severance, you knew he smoked marijuana, but it was harmless ... (Banks 1981: 25)

The use of free indirect discourse, as the paragraph above shows, brings about an impression of proximity between the reader and the level of the story, as the voice that narrates —the typical link between reader and story— seems to confuse itself with the voice of the character. In this way, the device also undermines —even if only in a deceptive way— the role of the narrator as an omniscient figure. The frequent use of this technique in *Trailerpark*, effected on a plurality of characters, counteracts then the most traditional

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[1] I am referring to books that are neither novels nor collections of traditional short stories that simply share the same protagonists. Examples of this hybrid form are Eric Kraft's *Reservations Recommended* (1990), and *Little Follies* (1992); Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984); or Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982).

approaches of both realism and modernism for the benefit of that centralization of place over character that I referred to above.

However, Banks insists on experimenting with different possibilities for his narrative voice and reaches another remarkable mixture of technical devices in the next book I want to mention, a novel which earned the writer the place of finalist for the Pulitzer Prize: in 1985 he publishes *Continental Drift*, a work with recognizable echoes from Latin-American magical realism but where the reader may perceive again the importance of the naturalist analysis for the understanding of the forces that operate to create and maintain the American nightmare. Once again the novel depicts the misfortunes of some American whites, here mainly represented by Bob Dubois, an oil-burner repairman in New Hampshire who tries to re-enact the American Dream and goes south with his family, down to Florida in search of a new life of plenty. Once there, Dubois shall have to live in a trailer-park, experience a profound psychological crisis, confront his fear of black people, and move on to a new job that proves to be harder and less profitable than his previous one. Dubois's quest is one of decline and fall, in many ways similar to the attempt of re-enacting the American Dream carried out in the 1930s by the Joads in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*; but Dubois's is not the America of the Great Depression any longer, now it is the country of consumerism, drugs, race conflict, and —as happened in Steinbeck's— class discrimination, a country that more than ever sustains the big American paradox of all times: it is the place where the very rich live close to the very poor. In a way readers may also be reminded of Steinbeck's celebrated novel when considering that *Continental Drift* is also divided into two sets of alternate chapters presented by a voice that also changes its register in accordance to the character it is focusing upon. This is made possible because there is a second leading figure in the book, the young Haitian Vanise Dorinville, a black female reflection of Dubois's, as she is also in pursuit of the American Dream in her long journey north from her island to the promised land of Florida, a journey in which she is continuously abused by everybody and which results in her madness and her son's and nephew's assassination. And it is voice again that efficiently helps Banks to construct the parallel stories of the American immigrant and the Haitian emigrant whose lives will touch only at the end of the book to bring about death and madness. The book starts with an *Invocation* in which the author's surrogate voice demands the presence of a *loa* or *mouth-man*, a spiritual being that may bring about «an accounting to occur, not a recounting, and a presentation, not a representation, which is why [the story is] told the way it's told» (1985: 2). Legba, a powerful African-Haitian deity, is in this manner invoked to produce the mirroring narratives of Dubois and Dorinville. But each character's misfortunes are presented not simply in alternate ways but also in different formal manners. Whereas in the telling of Dubois's case the narrator mainly appears as a conventional heterodiegetic voice, corresponding to the Western realist tradition, when the voice relates the misfortunes of Vanise Dorinville it incorporates in its presentation formal aspects that try to evoke primitive culture, the realm of magic and traditional lore, in a way similar to the one used by some contemporary Native and African-American authors like Louise Erdrich or Ntozake Shange. In the *presentation* of Vanise's story, closer to primitive story-telling, the reader may notice, for instance, that the characters' direct speech is never announced by the use of inverted commas. The first shift from Dubois's to Dorinville's story occurs in the third chapter of the book; there the narrative voice starts to talk about the universe, about a metaphorical continental drift that is again happening in the early 1980s, in a planet of pluralism whose surface, however, still has to deal with «smoke and fire, revolution, war and invasion» (1985: 41). Nevertheless, this is a planet now understood by a voice that is far apart from the individualism that characterizes the Western culture of consumerism

in which Dubois is fighting for his family's and his own survival. Now Haitian primitivism produces a mythic intonation where the narrator frequently speaks using the first person plural, a *we* that symbolizes the Earth with a mandalic metaphor recuperated for our culture by Jungian and —again— modernist narratives: «[The planet] ages and dies and is born again, constantly, through motion, creating and recreating its very self, like a uroborous, the snake that devours its tail.» (1985: 40). The universe continuously moves in the interpretation provided by this mythic manifestation of the narrative voice that incorporates in itself old primitivism and new cosmology (*cf.* Hayles 1991), and where the element of magic still plays an important role. Vanise appears, suffers, and disappears as part of a living flux controlled by the loa, the powerful primitive spirits that in Haiti have amalgamated with the Christian pantheon.

One more time and due, to a large extent, to the different uses of the narrative voice, the reader faces a novel that formally incorporates and contrasts values coming from three different ideological sources: the individualism of Western life as manifested in the realist tradition, the inheritance of primitive lore, and —deeply related to this value— a mythic quality of communion that may also remind the reader of some symbolic patterns deployed by many modernist writers. Once again the literary result may be qualified, in general terms, as neo- or postmodernist realism; the ultimate aim of the book is rooted in an external reality whose existence, although complex and uncertain, is always centralized. In this way, Banks's novel can be qualified as another example of the author's project to redefine forms of expression in order to analyze a new type of reality that, furthermore, demands from him the denunciation of the social conditions existing in contemporary American life. As his metafictional *Envoi* affirms at the end of this narrative, «Sabotage and subversion ... are this book's objectives. Go, my book, and help destroy the world as it is.»

Social commitment and a different use of the narrative voice appear once more in the third example I have chosen in order to define Banks's literary perspective as both postmodernist and realist. «This is the story of my older brother's strange criminal behavior and disappearance»: in this way Rolfe Whitehouse starts the narrative of *Affliction*, a novel published by Banks in 1989 in which the narrator's brother Wade is, this time, an absolute protagonist. In the book Wade's protagonist figure also means that Rolfe's role as narrator is a peculiar one: he will try to explain his brother's strange and violent reactions that lead him to kill two men, including his own father. Rolfe is a professor of History and he confesses from the beginning that his account is personal and subjective, and that although he has been investigating and recording conversations with other people living in town, there are gaps and theories that can never be tested. Even so, he starts his story, not exactly to excuse his brother's behavior but to try to reconstruct the truth. He clearly adopts the role of a contemporary —poststructuralist— archeologist of knowledge and builds up a *narrativization* of the events (White 1987: Chapter 1) that forces readers to understand Wade's behavior and to conclude his role as a victim of his upbringing and of his father's violence. Ultimately, the report becomes a denunciation of the living conditions of the white American macho type and of the male violence that is generated by those conditions.

Wade's is certainly the centralized figure in the novel but what could have been his modernist role as center of consciousness is here replaced by his brother's understanding and narrative re-presentation of the events that led him to murder and tragedy. Rolfe's voice does not simply replace his brother's, but incorporates in his apparently realist report a set of values that characterize the postmodernist world-view. Truth, contemporary neohistorians affirm (Lacapra 1985; White 1987), can no longer be considered as something either objective or eternal: life is much more complex than that and all that is left to the historian is interpretation because, as the narrator says,

> ... facts do not make history; facts do not even make events. Without meaning attached, and without understanding of causes and connections, a fact is an isolated particle of experience, is reflected light without a source, planet with no sun, star without constellation, constellation beyond galaxy, galaxy outside the universe-fact is nothing (1989: 339).

In this way, Rolfe overtly confesses from his role as narrator that he is «attaching meaning» to the events that befell his brother, eroding any possible suggestion of objective truth the reader might hold. By means of the apparent realist procedure of presenting a narrator as witness of the events that constitute the story, once more postmodernist values end up underpinning Banks's narrative. Understood in poststructuralist terms, life is a complex and uncertain flux where meaning, as Rolfe affirms, is always being attached to the events which constitute our interpretation of life. Furthermore, this understanding of life unfortunately still demands the existence of a type of fiction committed to the denounce of social injustice.

A similar mixture of literary traits coming from different paradigms reappears in *Rule of the Bone*, a novel that Banks publishes in 1995 and where he comes back to the oldest type of narrative voice used in the English novel: the protagonist as narrator. The autodiegetic voice in the novel is the Bone, formerly known as Chappie Dorset. He is a sixteen-year-old adolescent who was abandoned by his father when only five and who reports the events that befell him when he was only fourteen, events that led him to become the Bone. His is a quest of the monomythical hero (Campbell 1968), and as such it follows the typical structure so abundantly used by modernist writers (see Manganaro 1992: Chapter 4). However, the book also departs from this modernist structural trope thanks to its postmodernist relish for parody. As a hero the Bone is somebody socially marginal, a petty criminal who gets high smoking ganja, a contemporary Huck Finn who was sexually abused by his own father when only seven. His narrative constitutes his understanding of the act of his own maturation in only a few months, of an adventure that starts with his re-naming and the symbolic acquisition of a new self that has to face the values and vices of post-industrial America. Still a child, the Bone lives trapped by drug addiction, witness to a life where hell's angels amalgamate with children abused in porno movies or with American tourists consuming coke without an end or paying whatever price for having pleasure. In his parodic quest of the hero, the Bone will be assisted by a curious prototype of Wise Old Man: I-Man, an illegal Jamaican emigrant who deals in ganja and constantly proclaims his rastafarian philosophy. In his company, the Bone will gradually build up his new self with the help of ganga and will also travel to Jamaica, there meeting his hedonistic and selfish father. After some more *learning* that includes his becoming involved in a gang war, the Bone —parodically again— proceeds to the Campbellian stage of the Meeting With the Goddess by going to bed with his own father's lover and, in overt contradiction with the final answer taught in the adventure of the monomyth, rejects his father and escapes the island in the self-intertextual boat «Belinda Blue» (from *Continental Drift*). The world, Banks suggests in his 1995 novel, is no longer the appropriate place for the modernist monomythical hero to accomplish his task. Social injustice is mostly a matter to be solved by re-inscription and *re-presentation*: within the postmodern context; a modification of political ideology demands a modification of discourse. In other words, the power of language, manifested in the activity of *naming* (what you say and how you say it), has clearly become the cultural dominant of our postmodern era. And that is precisely what the Bone's behavior suggests at the end of the book, echoing Rolfe Whitehouse's narrative of affliction in the earlier novel. Even if still a child, the Bone is already grown-up and his author decides to leave him alone, contemplating the stars and thinking about the names of the old constellations he had to learn at the school,

> There was a bunch of bright stars here and another there and several other bunches that stood out from the zillions of stars in the background. The trouble was, even though finally I could see with my own eyes that there really were such things as constellations up there I couldn't remember any of the names or pictures anymore. I knew there was supposed to be like some guy with a bow and arrow and a chariot and horses and various Greek gods and goddesses but I couldn't tell which was which.
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> So *I tried connecting the dots on my own.* There was this one cluster of stars fairly low in the northern part of the sky and when I connected them they made like a perfect barbell. That's the constellation Bruce, I thought ... (1995: 388-89. Emphasis added.)

In this way, in a typical postmodernist maneuver, the Bone starts *mapping* the heavens again, replacing the old names and forms for the new ones he chooses to dedicate to the departed few friends that accompanied him along his parodied adventure of maturation. His voice may emulate the ones used by the narrators of the first English novels, his quest may recall the adventures of so many modernist heroes, but his environment can only demand of the Bone the necessity to re-name, to de-centralize old values that need to be replaced if the millions of marginalized human beings are ever to better their living conditions. Despite the use of an apparent realist voice, the post-industrial context forces again in Banks's narrative a postmodernist understanding of life where traditional values and names have finally lost their sense of perpetual predominance. Similarly, the textual frontiers between the realist and the postmodern, the descriptive and the metafictional, are again blurred, a sustained invitation for the reader to reflect on the human condition and on the discursive creation of our reality.

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