What Is Irrealism?

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The answer to the question "What is irrealism?" can probably be answered, if not fully, then at least most concisely, by a consideration of the physical laws that underlie the objects and events depicted in the irreal story or piece of art. In a realistic story (and we will be focusing on literature here) we expect all the objects and creatures in the story to manifest themselves in a way consistent with the laws of physics as we currently understand them. Thus, in a story that typifies literary realism such as Ernest Hemingway might have written, we expect all the facets of the story's universe to operate as they do in our own: we certainly would not expect, for example, that Robert Jordan, the protagonist in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls,* would turn into an insect such as Gregor Samsa did in Franz Kafka's irreal story "The Metamorphosis." Nor, given the extent to which Hemingway works to establish with the reader that his story takes place in a real time and place—e.g., in Spain during the Spanish Civil War—could we ever accept such a transformation in his novel.[1]

This doesn't mean, however, that irrealism is therefore simply a story or piece of art where something non-realistic happens. First of all, something that is seen to be impossible in our historical epoch could become quite possible and realistic—thanks to technological and scientific advances—in some future epoch. This is what "hard" science fiction relies on, such that a transformation from human to insect might be presented as being due to some future scientific development in, let's say, genetic engineering. It would be portrayed, in other words, as a possible future reality, not an irreality.

On the opposite side of the spectrum from science fiction is the fantastic literature and art of peoples and cultures that are or were

pre-modern. These forms include legends, myths, and certain folk tales, all of which were assumed by the people telling and listening to them to be—more or less, in someplace or at sometime—true. These people, if they had heard Kafka's story read aloud to them, would most likely assume that the transformation resulted from a spell somebody had placed on him, even though no such spell, or metaphysical world in which such spells happen, is ever described in the story. Believing, as traditional peoples did and do, that such spells were possible, the story would not challenge their sense of reality and thus the irreality of the story—which flows from an irresolvable clash between the "real" and the "unreal"—would be lost.

Though magical realism, a very contemporary genre, also utilizes legend, folk tale and myth, it can be differentiated from these traditional forms in that neither the writer nor the reader of this genre believes that the events being depicted actually happened or likely could happen. Thus it reflects, in the context of the physics of the story, a "willing suspension of disbelief" on the part of contemporary readers, grounded as they are in an empirical, scientific world-view; if they didn't suspend their disbelief they would never be able to get past the thought: "this event is impossible, therefore the whole story is ridiculous" when, for example, in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, "a delicate wind of light" slowly lifts Remedios the Beauty higher and higher into the air until "not even the highest-flying birds of memory could reach her." The demand on the reader to suspend their judgment as to what is possible is also utilized in various other contemporary genres, such as fantasy (e.g., we don't believe that there is such a thing as a Hobbit, nor that certain rings have special powers), contemporary fairy tales (ditto that a wolf would dress up as the grandmother in Angela Carter's "The Company of Wolves") and, of course, the irreal (what happened to Gregor Samsa).

But what is it, it might be asked, that distinguishes irrealism from these other contemporary genres of literature and art that also ask us to accept the impossibility of their physics? One of the key differences is that, in these other genres, there is an internal consistency to the "impossible" physics of the story; that is, once the reader understands and accepts this alternative physics, he or she can assume that the story and the world it describes will be consistent with it. And, to facilitate this transition, this

alternative physics is generally based on some pre-modern physics or the other that is already familiar to the reader, such as the belief in ghosts that Henry James utilized in *The Turn of the Screw*. Thus the author, as soon as he or she has established this alternative set of physical laws, will remain as faithful to them as the realist author is to contemporary physics. In fact, if this alternative physics stops working in the course of the story the author must explain why this is so (as in certain fairy tales where an explanation would have to be offered if, at some point in the story, the carpet *didn't* fly).

In an irreal story, however, not only is the physics underlying the story impossible, as it is in these other genres, but it is also fundamentally and essentially *unpredictable* (in that it is not based on any traditional or scientific conception of physics) and *unexplained*. In a story like "Metamorphosis" there is no physical law, even a fantastic one such as a spell or a curse, which is put forward to explain Gregor Samsa's transformation. It is simply an absurdity that has happened, an absurdity that places itself between him and his goals in life. And while a viable story flows out of this absurdity, in the sense that the characters in the story deal with its implications in a compelling way, his transformation is never incorporated into one of the conventional alternative physics nor, for that matter, is any other theory offered as to why it has happened. The tension the transformation creates, then, is never resolved into a physics that might allow for it to happen via a curse or a spell, or as the functioning of some advanced technology. Put in fictional terms, there is no reason, no *motive* for the strange events occurring in the story nor is there any protagonist—such as a wizard, scientist, god or practical joker—making them happen.

And, in this way, the physics of an irreal story can be said to resemble that of a dream, where events also tend to be unpredictable and unexplained. It is largely for this reason that irreal fiction is often considered to be dream-like in nature, which is a justifiable description so long as we remember that the irreal work is not the *relating* of a dream that we might have had but, rather, the *evoking* of aspects of the dream-state within a work of art. Indeed, it can be argued that much of the emotional resonance that we experience in an irreal work flows from this: we all dream, after all, and often it is our dreams that both most strongly challenge our sense of

reality and also present us with our most emotionally charged moments, sometimes doing both at the same moment (e.g., when we wake up from a nightmare and aren't certain at first whether what we just dreamed actually happened or not).

Any attempt, however, to singularly interpret the events and characters in a irreal story as if they were actually a part of a dream—in other words, symbolically and very probably within a psychoanalytic framework[2]—moves us into another category of non-realistic art that is often confused with irrealism, one which includes allegory, satire and symbolism. The physics of the world underlying these genres is such that they are understood by the reader to be directly shaped by or derived from the thoughts of the author or protagonist. Thus, "Metamorphosis" might be interpreted as an allegory in which, for example, Gregor Samsa's transformation "symbolizes" his feelings of inadequacy; or his having had a nervous breakdown; or society's treatment of the mentally ill. In each case it would be understood that the author has altered the physics of the fictional world in order to better express a particular point or theme that, once the reader understands the particular conceit, is readily graspable. The author is seen and understood in these genres, then, as a kind of illusionist in the sense of Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, who has conjured a strange world into existence, in this case so the author can use the story's strange physics to reflect and symbolize (albeit in exaggerated and/or distorted forms) the author's "take" on various people, ways of thinking, and historical events of the real world. This is why we, in reading *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut, don't think of the substance "ice-nine" as being Vonnegut's prediction of a possible technological development, but rather a literary construct he is using to show human folly. In the same vein, few would attribute any more meaning to Jonathan Swift's creation of the Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians in *Gulliver's Travels* than the author's desire to give us, via the dichotomies created by these creatures' extreme size disparity in relationship to Gulliver, a new perspective on ourselves. An example of this would be when the King of Brobdingnag (standing 72 feet tall) hears about the intrigues of European politics and describes Europeans as "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth."

Indeed, it is not surprising that a reader already familiar with such literature will, when confronted with the physics of an irreal story, attempt to reduce it to such a symbolic or satirical scheme. But for a story to succeed as irreal, this attempt on the part of the reader must ultimately be frustrated, which is where some of the technical skill of writing irreal fiction comes in: the events, characters, and physics of the story must be such that they cannot be satisfactorily reduced to one such interpretation.[3] In a word, there can be no agent, whether it be human or some other consciousness, or the unconscious, that is seen to be causing the unusual events. Wouldn't it, indeed, be a tremendous disappointment if we learned, at the end of Kafka's *The Trial*, that some malevolent government official had been "behind it all." Or that everything we'd been reading had all been a practical joke on the part of Joseph K.'s associates? Or that it had all been a nightmare that he'd been having, a nightmare of the Freudian kind in which the court was a manifestation of his father and his murder a manifestation of his castration anxiety?

The reader of a successfully written irreal work will be confronted with a piece of literature that cannot simply be translated as a fantasy or a satire, or as a symbolist work of one sort or the other. Thus cut off from their familiar mooring in the possible, or the conventionally (and ultimately explainable) impossible, they will be left alone, so to speak, with the absurd. Thus a tension is created in the work, one that the physics of the work will not allow to be resolved (as, indeed, the tensions and anxieties it is reflecting are not resolvable). And it is this irresolvable tension that helps to explain why it is possible to describe works such as Kafka wrote as being, to quote Shimon Sandbank, "so many pointers to an unknown meaning." That there is a considerable amount of anxiety being expressed in *Metamorphosis* is certain, and that it *could* point in any one of the directions mentioned above is certainly possible, as is the fact that it doesn't point in some other directions (it really couldn't be taken, for example, as being a statement for or against war). And yet to reduce it to one or the other of the interpretations is impossible, since there is no explanation for the event that triggers the story. For these same reasons it is also impossible to singularly interpret Kafka's *The Trial* as—to take the most common examples—symbolizing his anxiety about his relationship with his father,

the situation of Jews in early 20th century Europe, or the impersonal nature of large bureaucracies.

If the reader of an irreal story is thereby left with an underlying but palpable anxiety, then the irreal story or piece of art has successfully established the foundation for its unique form of storytelling and representation. And, in so doing, the impossible and unexplainable physics of the irreal has laid the foundation for an art form that can *directly* communicate, by feeling rather than articulation, the uncertainties inherent in human existence or, to put it another way (and there are many ways to put it), the irreconcilability between human aspiration and human reality.

Notes

1. The use of physics to distinguish different genres of fiction was inspired by Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Yale University Press, 1979, pp. 18-20.

2. Upon hearing mention of the "dream-state," adherents of psychoanalytic theory, especially Sigmund Freud's, might be tempted to find the "motive" for what is happening, as well as, in a certain sense, the true protagonist, in the unconscious mind of the writer or narrator of the story. Thus, the strange events are the writer's and/or narrator's various repressed desires and unresolved traumas (since, as Freud wrote, dreams are the "royal road to the unconscious") manifesting themselves in symbolic form. By the proper application of psychoanalytic theory we could, according to this approach, resolve the irreconcilability between the real and the unreal because nothing is "real" in the first place, as it is all a manifestation of the unconscious.

3. But, to establish this tension in the first place, it is necessary to establish a reality to be undermined, which can place limitations on how experimental the narrative of an irreal work can be. In a work like *Finnegan's Wake,* where the reader is not certain what is what, who is speaking, or what the situation is in the first place, it would be hard to establish an irreality. On the other hand, a piece like "semantical studies" by

the Czech writer Jiří Valoch (included in this volume) can establish an irreality because it manages to establish a reality, extremely minimal though it may be, that is then undermined.