Morrison’s Realization: Hermes and the Modernist/Postmodernist Interface

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Abstract

Realization (1996) is part of Madison Morrison’s vast and ongoing cosmological epic sequence. In it the author juxtaposes the moment-to-moment empirical perceptions of a narrative consciousness in the late 20th-century U.S.A. with short passages from the classic sacred texts of India—the Upanishads, Dhammapada and Bhagavad Gita. Here, by focusing on the temporal effects of this juxtaposition, I explore the ways in which Realization combines (interweaves, interplays) modernist and postmodernist techniques. The Indic intertexts, a kind of metaphysical and ethical discourse “spoken” from outside the immediate temporal context or present of the narrative proper, that is, from a position in the remote past which can equally be seen as the remote future, in various ways “put into play” the empirical narrative discourse—reinforcing but simultaneously undermining and putting it in question, laying bare its essential fleetingness, emptiness. Thus while the empirical narrative suggests, imitates, parodies certain high modernist forms, the decentering or destabilizing effect of the Indic intertexts suggests a postmodernist (self-) “distancing” at work on another level. The ironic force of these intertexts is, after all, fundamentally temporal: it distances the grounding (“self-present”) narrative from itself, and thereby forces us—to cite a Jamesonian description of postmodernism—to “see the present historically in an age which has forgotten how to think historically in the first place.”

Keywords

cosmological epic, Hermes (hermetic, hermeneuein), Indic tradition, intertextuality, high modernism, postmodernism, intertemporality, empirical narrative discourse, ironic self-distancing

I

Among the seven stages of the Sentence of the Gods, Morrison’s twenty-six-book cosmological epic, one transcends the others in its ambition and ambiguity. For though SOL and LUNA, the first two stages of the epic, combine with one another in a synthesis known to the alchemist, HERMES, the epic’s fourth stage, in effect partakes of all the other sequences, those that stand both above and below it. (“As above, so below,” in the alchemist’s phrase.) Located, in the snake-like emblem that prefaces
Morrison’s books, at the middle of the *Sentence*, Hermes is attracted by Luna (the moon, his planet in astrological lore) who stands above him, as well as by Aphrodite who lies beneath him. (Hermes and Aphrodite, we recall, were married, and from their union issued the beautiful, volatile Hermaphroditus.) Ascending from the initial “S” of *SEMREH*, the order in which we encounter HERMES as we follow the forward course of the *Sentence*, is ARES; descending from the “H” of HERMES is HERA. Ares and Hermes, like Apollo (Sol) and Artemis (Luna), were children of Zeus, and so the four gods of the first four stages of Morrison’s epic represent a family grouping. In it Hermes is special, for his mother was not Hera but Maia. Unlike Zeus, Hera and Hades, whose principal realms were Heaven, Earth and Hell, Hermes rules over all three realms, communicating freely among them.

Swift of foot and wingèd, Hermes is the psychopomp, the conductor of human souls to Hades and back. In his capacity as messenger he conveys the will of the Olympian gods to men. The god of eloquence and learning, he is also an ithyphallic god who expresses a priapic sexuality, and yet he is frequently represented as epicene. In early Greek tradition he is a shepherd god. In later tradition he merges with Thoth, the Egyptian magus. He carries a magic wand, the caduceus, about which two snakes entwine. A traveler who shuttles from heaven to earth, from earth to hell, he is also constantly in motion on the horizontal plane, marking the byways of the ancient world of Greece with his phallic herms. Later assimilated into the Roman figure of Mercury, he modernizes himself to become the tutelary deity of the commercial traveler. Like Odysseus, his secular counterpart, Hermes represents the compulsive liar, the teller of tales, sprightly and devious. He is also a figure of authority, who shares with the author his ability to construct texts, and with the scholar or priest his ability to construe them. Like Thoth, his Egyptian predecessor, he is said to have invented writing, was known to be a thief, sometimes took the form of a bird, and embodied wisdom.

Since his hermetic wisdom was precisely “embodied,” it is most appropriate that Morrison, in the books of his HERMES sequence, has embodied the wisdom of the ages, East and West. Having culled the wisdom traditions of Homeric Greece, the Biblical Near East and Egypt, in his sequence he joins them to (or juxtaposes them
against) the wisdom traditions of China, India and Southeast Asia. Second, the first book in HERMES, interweaves the text of the Iliad with the author’s first-hand experience of Istanbul. (The modern city is regarded as a displacement of Homer’s Troy, itself perhaps a retrospective displacement of ancient Carthage.) At the end of the Iliadic half of this aggiornamento of Homer, Morrison turns westward to retrace the route of Odysseus on his nostos—doubling the route of Aeneas, then of Virgil as the former continues on to Rome and the latter leaves Greece for his final return to Brindisi, thence (along the Via Appia Antica) to Naples and the grave that awaits him. Every (forthcoming), the second book in the sequence, is set in Israel (which Morrison also visited on his round-the-world tour). This book takes as its principal text the Old Testament and as its most exemplary figure, Moses. At the close of Every, which brings us forward in time from Old to New Testament, from Christ to the Christian diaspora, we travel from Israel to Jordan and on to Lebanon, from the world of the Jews and the Christians to the world of Islam. Magic (2000), the third book in HERMES, recounts the author’s life to the age of 28, sending us backward from anno aetatis fourteen to his conception, forward from anno aetatis fifteen to his entrance into the real world. Its embedded texts are taken from the Egyptian Book of the Dead and a section of the Neoplatonic Corpus, the latter traditionally regarded as derived from Egyptian lore.

The second half of HERMES turns from occidental to oriental wisdom traditions. The “H” of HER, the eponymous book Her (forthcoming), refers us to the engraved texts of Siem Reap, where native and Indic traditions were merged in the medieval Khmer monuments of Angkor. Engendering (2002), the “E” of HER, embodies the wisdom of Confucius and Lao-zi, interweaving the former’s Lun Yu, the latter’s Dao De Jing into the academic texture of an American university town. The “R” of HER, Realization (1996), returns us to the most ancient traditions of Asia, those of India: Morrison draws upon the philosophical wisdom of the Upanishads, the practical ethics found in a Pali text, the Way of Dharma or the Dhammapada, and the spirituality of the Bhagavad Gita, itself a segment of the world’s longest epic, the Mahabharata or tale of great India.
The androgynous Hermes is reflected in the pairings that occur within HER, which includes a “HE” in English and an “ER” in German, both forms of the masculine pronoun. Thus Egypt and India stand at the center of this wisdom sequence, in the diptych Magic Realization, flanked on the one side by traditional Chinese philosophical texts, on the other by the sacred scriptures of the Bible. Reading the Sentence backwards from the “A” of APHRODITE, we encounter three trilogies: All Regarding Exists, Her Engendering Realization, Magic Every Second. Of the three “R”’s that occur in the larger sequence—Regarding, Realization and Revolution—Realization is the central book. Unlike the Regarding of HERA and the Revolution of ARES, the Realization of HERMES is spiritual. Its three journeys represent three quests for a transcendental realization. From a contemporary viewpoint, Realization is multifold, ambiguous and ambitious on several levels, gathering into itself the tendencies of modernist and post-modernist ideologies and looking beyond them, through their synthesis, to a new goal. It is this aspect of the book to which I now wish to devote my analysis.

II

Intrinsically persuasive, and with a will to dehistoricize, the text of *Realization* commences, here toward the end of a journey to Houston, by both denouncing and embracing the temporal and the spatial, the textual and the “extra”-textual (with implications of a “beyondness”), and, most essentially, the material and the metaphysical. It teems with possibilities of the infinite, which also, for obvious and pragmatic reasons, control its direction and harness its narrative. This brings into the picture the text and the temporal, the one impinging upon the other. Thus they grow in a symbiotic relationship but yield nonetheless the essence of an individual presence. The existence of history (or some form of precedence) gets negated, and one enters Lukačs’s strain of thought as he ponders a hero “without personal history” (Lodge 477). Indeed, the author’s presence in *Realization* appears to be without personal history. Instead the book seemingly develops through a narrative unencumbered with authorial intention, as though *Realization* were a self-perpetuating phenomenon. As in the passage quoted, the text seems to be controlled by other forces, by Pushan, by Surya, by Prajapati. These solar figures remind us that the “R” of *Realization* in the *Sentence of the Gods* stands beneath SOL, the Sun.

In the reading of Morrison’s text that follows I attempt not only to examine issues pertaining to the temporal but also to address its ambivalently modernist/postmodernist stance. Its content and action fuse with a meticulously guarded temporality that moves in a consistently linear mode. The most conspicuous feature of the narrative lies in its use of separate, widely disparate contexts juxtaposed with one another. This juxtaposition is a rhetorical one; every line of the narrative describing the minutiae of action and event in an American locale alternates with a contextually meaningful excerpt from a religious or philosophical text drawn from Indic tradition. (In the passage above the text has been drawn from the *Upanishads*.) These have been scrupulously chosen, giving the entire narrative a dual yet homogeneous texture. I quote from a passage that occurs near the end of *Realization*, one in which the text itself seems to comment upon the fragmentation so characteristic of modernist art, its awareness of “separate existences apart,” as in the collage technique of the early Cubists and their contemporaries, the Dada poets. (In this instance the “intertext” is
drawn from the *Bhagavad Gita.* This fragmentary method extends to the representation of a “primary” reality, here expressed in terms of the American landscape. The author is traveling a road outside Amarillo, Texas in search of the site of a contemporary earthwork sculpture still under construction. He has stopped alongside the dirt road to rest, leaving his car door open against the heat.


It is important to note at this stage that, though the text may have its roots in modernism, it develops as the expression of a postmodernist exercise. What begins as a realist, impressionist, modernist scene of nature as art culminates as a postmodernist scene of art in nature, the “Floating Mesa” in question an earthwork constructed by an English sculptor in the American landscape.

Unlike modernist work, with its deliberate isolation from the world in a realm of art, postmodernist work is inseparable from that world. It is born of nature itself, born of a patience that assimilates nature to the work of art, art to the work of nature.

Terry Eagleton embarks on an exposition of the postmodern by calling it “the cynical belated revenge wreaked by bourgeois culture upon its revolutionary antagonists, whose utopian desire for a fusion of art and social praxis is seized, distorted and jeeringly turned back upon them as dystopian reality” (Lodge 385). It has also come to be seen as an expression of the “contemporary crisis of culture” (Huyssen 169). The temporal once again looms into view, as Eagleton explains that “Utopia” cannot belong to the future, since the latter, in the form of technology, exists here and now, “synchronous with the present.”

“The present in Morrison’s Realization is a studied constant with no slipping into the past or ducking into the future. The nature of the present that is constantly under focus is far from any elitist formulations of the artistic. Instead it is heavy with the description and detailing of the commonplace, of what is most immediate in the physical environment. Consider these further examples, both from Part II of the text: “2:55 p.m. Double blue glare-light, aimed at entrance, Metropolitan Museum, single light in yellow-brown” (67), or: “Two Hispanic girls with identical hairdos passing downtown. A mother and her daughter walking uptown. Jewish man, orange-headed wife park cream-colored Ford in front of me” (54). This proven attention to quotidian details everywhere places the text of Realization in a postmodernist light.
Postmodernism then has come to embrace “mass culture,” the “repressed other of elitist modernist art” (Kershner 74). The opposition in terms of modernism/mass culture has proven to be unexpectedly resilient. One is led to conclude that neither can do without the other and that their “mutual exclusiveness” is really a sign of their “secret interdependence.” Mass culture yearns for the respect that serious culture has earned for itself and which appears to have eluded it. Jameson points to the postmodern fascination with the landscape of TV show and Readers’ Digest culture. “The commercial culture is […] incorporated directly into postmodern art” (Selden and Widdowson 186). Thus we find the absence of hierarchy, of any ranking of high and popular culture in a movement that features “the information explosion”: global TV, rock and pop fashion styles. John Barth, in his essay “The Literature of Replenishment,” remarks: “My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his 20th century modernist parents or his 19th century premodernist grandparents. He has the first half of the century under his belt, but not on his back” (qtd. in Kershner 74). It also becomes necessary to note that not every work of art that fails to conform to “canonized notions of quality” is “Kitsch,” and, as a matter of fact, weaving Kitsch into art can yield high or quality works.

Two extended treatments of high art, to be found in consecutive paragraphs of Realization, may be worth consideration. Both occur in the Houston section, in Part I of the text. The first describes the author’s experience of viewing works of early modernist art. He begins by noting the capitalist status of these works in an ambience of wealthy patronage and selects examples that include images of the reader:

John A. and Audrey Jones Beck Collection. Caillebotte garden. And in it that small ether. “There’s a Mary Cassatt down there that’s beautiful.” Bulbified tree receptacles. Now what exists within that small ether. Ill-formed man reading a letter. That is to be sought. Oriental woman (Thai? Burmese? Laotian?), large black glasses on end of her nose, contour of sole visible through black silk stockings. To be understood. Stops to examine Renoir “Liseuse.” And if they should say to him. Caillebotte entitled “The Artist’s Brother in His Garden.” “Now with regard to that city of Brahman.” 1878. “And the palace in it.” Glass catching light from skylight above, as do polished beige tassel loafers of middle-aged Hispanic viewer (Caracas? Sevilla? La Cuidad de Mexico?). His
wife has joined him, wine-colored pants over tiny derrière, greige Hermès bag pendant from shoulder. “I.e., the small lotus of the heart.” As she views the Renoir (“Girl Reading” [pastel], 1890), her heavy-lidded, full-lipped face reflects in my direction off Caillebotte glass. “And the small ether.” Liseuse lovely; better from middle distance. “Within the heart.” Up steps black; split-pocket jeans, red leather jacket, untrimmed beard; checks Cassatt, studies Morisot. Caillebotte brother, Renoir girl continue to read. “What is there that deserves to be sought for?” Two black women take a seat, back to me, opposite end of bench. “What exists to be understood?” (22)

In a self-encapsulated, modernist way this three-voiced passage explores the museum’s intercultural context, its variety of international visitors, its deliberately eclectic collection, its variously personal, neutral and objective works. All the while, of course, Morrison continues to interweave the high siren-sound of Upanishadic text, which opens a heavenly realm above the earthy realm of art, a subtext of social reality beneath the physical realm. The final sentence in normal font then introduces an explicitly urban drama, all the more sociological for its brevity and lack of stationing. Seated on the bench, the author overhears a poignant conversation between two black residents of Houston as they inadvertently describe a desperate situation.

“The police have him in custody.” Then he should say: “As large as this ether is.” “She stabbed several times on steps.” “So large is that ether within the heart.” Inaudible mumble. “Heaven and earth are contained within it.” “See, he talk to ambulance, to ambulance man.” “Fire and air, sun and moon, lightning and stars.” “You jes’ know he stolen it!” Whatever of him there is in this world.” “Yeah.” “Whatever of him is not.” Jongkind, Gullaumin, Boudin. “Wouldn’t have been big enough to get it.” “All that is contained within it.” Three landscapes: Dutch, Parisian, imaginary. (22-23)

In the preceding quotation Morrison had noted someone carrying a Hermès bag, perhaps an indication that Hermes is secretly at work in the passage, pilfering the modernist view of art, hermetically sealing it, isolating it from society. In postmodernist ideology art must be viewed within a larger social context. The two figures of readers in the Renoir and Caillebotte paintings seem in the first quoted paragraph to suggest that one may remain isolated from social concern. In the second
paragraph Hermes again makes an appearance, this time in the guise of a thief, perhaps spiriting off the modernist luxury. At any rate, an emphasis upon the art context now gives way to an emphasis upon the social context of crime and punishment.

Theorists of the postmodern usually dwell upon the grounding role in the postmodern aesthetic of chance or some arbitrary principle in the structuring of art. At times Morrison’s art seems almost relentlessly devoted to randomness. Such theorists also imply that a work is postmodern if there is a reasonably radical “breaking of the frame,” as when the author appears in the pages of his or her fiction. Morrison refers frequently to the presence of the author in the course of his descriptions. The postmodernist author may also break the frame in a multifariously ironic way, so that standing outside it becomes indistinguishable from standing within it. In a passage that both practices and parodies art criticism, MM, during his days in Houston, makes another outing, this time to view the Rothko chapel, whose walls are covered with icons of High Modernism. He begins by situating them within another spiritual context, that of the temporal and non-temporal Brahman, the regnant principle of the universe. Again, the temporal and the spatial are both embraced and denounced in this theological strategy:

There are two forms of Brahman, time and non-time. The Rothko Chapel. That which was before the existence of the sun is non-time and has no parts. That which had its beginning from the sun is time and has parts. Of that which has parts, the year is the form, and from the year all creatures are born; when produced by the year, they grow; they go again to rest in the year. Therefore the year is Prajapati, time, food, the Self, the nest of Brahman. (32)

From theology Morrison moves to aesthetics, suggesting in his choice of details other Asiatic traditions. By the end of the second paragraph we have returned through postmodernist concerns to a modernist sense of Self.

The central panel of the northern triptych has a slightly off-center, slightly irregular square, defined in calligraphic strokes. The panel to the left is marked by a light, diagonal streak on the right-hand side of its upper third. The right panel is characterized by horizontal strokes and a central, illusionistic void. Time ripens, dissolving all beings in
the Great Self; but he who knows that which time itself is dissolved in, he knows the Veda.

(32)

In these passages religious text and aesthetic experience for the most part reinforce one another. Often in Realization, however, the most quotidian and physical of events, persons and actions are placed in deliberate contrast with statements of profound philosophical content. Thus played against the modernist conjunction of art and spirituality we find the postmodernist strategy of contrasting realms of art and spirituality.

Stonington Boat Works, 1:45 p.m., Stonington, Connecticut, November 15, 1979. To the end of the dock: author scares off gulls, they reluctant to move. “For I have conquered all.” Gulls hovering, strong incoming wind: veer, one settling on nearby pier. “And I know all.” Sun bellowing straight at author, who holds down page against wind, hair a flap in his face. “In all conditions of life.” Blinding sun-glint off water, wave following wave. “And am free from taint.” Chicly black-hulled, solitary dinghy, red water-line, white mast. “Have left all.” Single feather on dock, stuck in gull excrement. “And through the destruction of thirst am free.” Wind continues to blow, hard. (83)

Details of quotidian reality are here interwoven with passages of the most ambiguous sorts of philosophical generalization. Morrison’s practice, with its relentless juxtapositions, has often suggested to me the technique of the early seventeenth-century English Metaphysical Poets, since in both “heterogeneous ideas are […] yoked together,” sometimes even “violently” (Samuel Johnson). Thus at some rather conspicuous moments in the book the reader is shocked into an assimilation of the text. Sometimes one feels this shock in the confrontation of Upanishad (literally “Holy Text”) with ordinary reality, sometimes in the relation of the Buddhist Dhammapada to the trivial. Here it is the words of Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita as he addresses Krishna, words that illustrate the ironic effect of juxtaposition. Nonetheless, on reflection, we often see that the contrasted worlds are somehow linked to one another:

Arjuna: Berkeley Rose Garden. “Who is that Brahma?” Berkeley, California. “What that Soul of Souls (the Adhyatman)?” Japanese tourist family commentating roses, 12:00

“What, thou Best of All!” Aunt in blue sleeveless pantsuit, red long-sleeved sweater.

“Thy work, the Karma?” “Century Two,” “Spanish Sun,” “Rose of Freedom.” (126)

This sense of semblance in the face of difference may perhaps be attributed to the fact that both discourses have issued from a revolutionary stance, emerging as unorthodox, unconventional and entirely new forms of representation. Both are also religious in their goal. As Donne, Herbert or Crashaw lead us toward various Protestant and Catholic versions of God, so Krishna leads Arjuna to the Adyatman.

There is also in Morrison’s text a detailed cataloguing (shades of epic and high modernism) that makes the narrative purpose more explicit. For instance:


Nothing may be achieved in art without devotion to the world of actuality. In Morrison, as in Whitman before him, the act of cataloguing often assumes a kind of religious intensity of devotion. In this the two poets are linked perhaps by their concern with Indic traditions of attention to the ordinary world. Appropriately the scene of observation in the following passage, as in much of Whitman, is New York City:

Red-bearded man in blue fedora, blue shirt, blue pants scratches his beard, looks tentatively at author. Beautiful, long-haired Hispanic girl in white pants, red parka, catches me as I study her; continues conversation with two older black women. Negroses, ethnic whites, Hispanics stream uptown. A black girl in a bright pink blazer. An Hispanic girl in a turquoise shirt, light purple jacket. Broadway/South Ferry bus heads south, revving, moaning, intoning brakes. Cars, a van, follow in its wake. People stream uptown, jaywalk across the street. Hispanic girl in elegantly-braided pigtail pauses by the right side of my car, as she and girlfriend wait for opening to cross. Lights in all the bigger buildings now, varied in intensity. (54-55)
Governed as the passage is by the larger context of *Realization II*, which incorporates the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, the descriptions suggest those of Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” where ordinary people at the day’s end are returning home from work. Morrison continues his minute observation of the life of the multi-ethnic, democratic metropolis, dwelling with an equal affection upon all that meets his gaze.

Tailor in apron, yarmulka, emerges from K. Trimming/Buttons, accompanied by younger man, also in yarmulka. Street emptying; pedestrians thinning; several cars have left. Studious, suited Caucasian, glasses perched on nose, forces his 30-year-old frame uptown, tie loosened. Man returns to car with friend, finds ticket on windshield; remonstrates. Two green lights at cross street discernible, yellow/red of sign beyond. Black man with bottle in paper sack walks uptown. Artificial light strong on recto page of notebook, as author writes on verso. *Stop the stream valiantly, drive away the desires, O Brahmana!* Interior of car becoming cooler. *When you have understood the destruction of all that was made, then will you understand that which was not made.* (55)

A statement from the scriptures of philosophical or religious thought follows another that is purely and exclusively mundane. The distinctive aspect of this, however, is that such statements fuse into each other, resulting in a refinement, particularly of the physical. Elsewhere, in his description of Stonington, Connecticut, Morrison writes: “Blinding sun-glint off water, wave following wave. *‘And am free from taint’*” (Note here the water washing off all taint). “Chicly black-hulled, solitary dinghy, red waterline, white mast. *‘Have left all.’*” A fusion is also very marked in the following description of San Francisco: “Three-masted tour-boat docking, American flag in stiff breeze atop middle mast. *‘No other Maker!’*” “Cable car #23 arrives: author boarding. *‘All these hang on me’*” (122). We might here pause to witness the cross-cultural encounter. The text, couched in an American setting with its corresponding space and time structures, is almost perfectly at home with Morrison’s concomitant forages into Buddhist and Hindu scriptures. The two emerge, not as a hybrid species, but as an untiringly amalgamated quest for reconciliation.

Although a postmodernist construct, the text attends rather keenly to the order of chronological time: it represents a detailed recording of the month, day and precise
hour. Not only does this provide a temporal setting, it also lends an added dimension to the context of individual passages. One may venture to suggest that *Realization* lives in an eternal present. It takes cognizance of the immediate and the physical, in passages that quite often either precede or follow the spiritual or philosophical intertexts. One notices the above conjunction in the following: “*It is the wise student who will find the Dhammapada.* Ahead to Mollusks/Mankind. *The path of perfection*” (57). The occasional author-presence in the narrative imparts authenticity to what is observed and recorded. This form of the stream-of-consciousness technique, specifically termed “interior monologue,” works toward an exact presentation of what is sharply conscious. It would be well to compare the use of this technique, so characteristic of modernist writing, in two passages. The first is from *Realization I*:

9:36. “WAREHOUSE.” Pigpen on incline. Approaching Purcell. Quarter horses grazing the tundra; behind them a quarter-mile oval. *Though a man may wish to live a hundred years performing works, it will be thus with him.* 10:00 a.m. *But not in any other way.* Paul’s Valley. *Work will not cling to a man.* Water tower: “PVA.” Station pale yellow. “Royal Theater.” (9)

The next is from Joyce’s *Ulysses*:

Pineapple rock, lemon platt, butterscotch. A sugar-sticky girl shoveling scoopfuls of creams for a Christian brother. Some school great. Bad for their tummies. Lozenge and comfit manufacturer to His Majesty the King. God. Save Our. Sitting on his throne, sucking red jujubes white. (124)

Such a handling of the narrative yields a perception of both the now and corporeal and the remote or beyond. The latter becomes divested of its remoteness for, as if in keeping with the title, “realization” is either at hand or at least not beyond one’s reach. In fact it might serve as a revelation that excerpts (in italics) from the religious texts form an un-broken, constant backdrop to the author’s ongoing observation of external events, of that which belongs to the purely physical world. Thus *Realization* as a text, from start to finish, may be seen as a single block of time, of unlabored, ceaseless, uninterrupted devotion—virtually a spiritual experience. Borrowing a metaphor from
music, one is able to observe this single, ever-flowing stream of extra-mundane meditation as a supremely relevant refrain, to which the author returns consistently after experimenting in the octave. Thus Realization becomes synonymous with the undying cosmic note of the “Onkar,” the infinite “Parabrahm” of the Bhagavad Gita. The physicality of the locale and/or the universe becomes transported to the rarer regions. The entire postmodernist exercise attempts to articulate reality. In an erudite assessment J.N. Sharma, in his review of the book, refers to Morrison’s experiment as a “spiritual travelogue” in search of a meaning for the cosmos.

Presumably the author is seeking to find his bearings, as he juxtaposes the local and American with the wise and true embodied in Oriental philosophical thought. A similar strain is heard in “Arjuna: ‘Yes, Thou art indeed Parabrahm!’ Sermon, Ogden radio. ‘The High Abode!’” “So God waits for you.” (136). Even more striking (in its abrupt move to self-reflexivity) is the following: “Truck on highway (inaudible). ‘Of Arrogance, impatience.’ Heat, wind-mollified, still intense. ‘Anger, pride.’ Hand, pen shadowing page. ‘Freed from surroundings’” (154).

III

The emergence of something called “postmodernism” and the subsequent categorization of works of art as “postmodernist” has been consistently questioned and debated. Fredric Jameson refers to the “play of historical allusion and stylistic pastiche” (Lodge 375) as a prominent feature of postmodernism; he also defines this “movement” as the “attempt to think the present historically in an age which has forgotten how to think historically in the first place.” In 1971 Ihab Hassan established a “tradition” of the postmodern and moved to define the postmodernist aesthetic; he contrasted the modernist “dehumanisation of Art” with the postmodernist sense of the “dehumanisation of the planet and the end of Man.” While the modernist remains
tragically heroic (Eliot’s “Prufrock”), the postmodernist expresses exhaustion, bringing into focus the void (the tramps of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*). He rejects the traditional aesthetics of “Beauty” and “Uniqueness” for the entire corpus of the artistic and literary, which now blends the popular with “rituals of the masses,” rituals that are in effect “against interpretation,” in Susan Sontag’s phrase. While Pieterse (1991) claims that “in the west developmentalism is being challenged by new social movements and, in theoretical terms, by postmodernism […]” (Lowy 604), Jameson argues that the postmodern may be viewed as a “mere dialectical intensification of the old modernist impulse towards innovation” (Lodge 378). Indeed Lyotard, in a trope of renewal that combines change with stasis, refers to contemporary postmodernism as a “promise of the return and the re-invention, the triumphant reappearance, of some new high modernism endowed with all its older power and with fresh life” (Lodge 379).

In the light of such postulates Morrison’s *Realization* might, then, be regarded as a highly consummate piece of modernist writing, however much it elsewhere appears postmodernist, moving through a mode of representation that defines the “principle in structuring art” as an “experimental formal principle” that is constantly reinventing itself. This state of apparent symbiosis is perhaps congruent with Theodor W. Adorno’s insight that modernism, and the return to it, are essentially a critique of modern mass culture. An extremely subjective version of the postmodernist attributes of *Realization* appears in the graphic representation of a scene at the end of Section II. As if in a vision that encapsulates the entire corpus of the text that precedes (and follows) it, the figure is impregnated with a sense of the consummation, fulfillment and transcendence that section II predicts and section III achieves. This figure, which follows the caption: “I-35, Emporia, Kansas, 6:00 p.m., November 21,” is not an illustration but rather an integral part of the text:
The linear strokes seem to represent our mundane, quotidian life, the small circle in the center a connection with the higher, larger circle above it, the rarer region of the cosmos, the ultimate zone of truth and cosmic definition of all existence. Here the pattern of verbal inter-textuality becomes graphic, and the interplay of physical and spiritual domains connotes the immediate concerns of the protagonist—that small circle in the center. More literally considered, the late fall scene returns us to Morrison’s planetary scheme, for between Moon and Earth rides Venus (Aphrodite) in her early evening appearance as the Evening Star. Though Hermes is not literally present, he cannot, we feel, be far away, for the Evening Star is Aphrodite, his mythical consort. In the context of the constant voyage, Hermes is the traveler himself. But the graphic design here, indeed the whole motif of visual art in *Realization*, also reminds us that postmodern architecture serves as mode for the definitively postmodernist technique of “citation” of older forms or even of particular classic works. This is perhaps the most obvious sense, after all, in which Morrison’s use of Oriental religious texts as intertexts, to provide a necessary extra dimension to his narrative, makes of him a postmodernist.

Altus turnoff, I-40, Sayre, Oklahoma, 4:00 p.m., June 13, 1980. *Ranged thus for battle on the sacred plain.* Parked purple souped-up van. *Then, at the aged king’s signal,* blaring like to the lions roar, *the trumpeter blew upon the great conch.* Black Goodyear
racing tires. And at the noise of it trumpet and drum, cymbal and gong, burst into sudden clamor. Quality Inn sunburst (red on yellow). Like the blast of a loosened tempest. Red dust; orange VW; yellow-flower-bespeckled bank. Then appeared a car of gold, white-steed-driven. White sign, black letters: “Chinese American Food.” And upon it, Krishna the God. Interstate System sign. With Arjuna at his side. (White on green.) Krishna, his locks knotted, blowing upon the great conch, carved of the giant’s bone. White red-mud-bespattered service truck. Arjuna blowing upon another, Indra’s loud gift. Yellow directional lines on motel asphalt. Bhima the terrible, wolf-bellied Bhima, blowing upon the reed conch. Ending, electric orange concrete parking stanchion. Yudhisthira, Kunti’s blameless son, winding his mighty shell. (95)

Although we may wish to characterize this magnificent passage as either modernist or postmodernist, few writers, John Barth has pointed out, are any one thing at any given moment and a fortiori not in totality. “Joyce Carol Oates writes all over the aesthetical map,” he observes. “My own novels seem to have both modernist and postmodernist attributes […]” (Kershner 77). In his description of Sayre, Oklahoma, at the outset of Realization III, Morrison blends the religious reverence for exotic cultures so characteristic of the modernists with many of the features of postmodernism that we have already noted: its self-effacement, its sense of randomness, its carefully guarded temporality.

And, speaking of temporality, Realization sets the trail ablaze with futuristic possibilities. Like Morrison’s earlier works, it not only records the shock of a ruthless interplay of perceptions, thoughts and images, as it relentlessly constructs a consciousness of the present—it is also pregnant with elements of a foreseeable future. Indeed there is ample evidence of a subconscious effort here to seize at an infinity. Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodern culture does not “renounce historical representation altogether but [rather] questions its status […]” (PMLA 983). Might we not say that Morrison in Realization, with its intense moment-to-moment narration, represents an empirically perceived present that is (always already) both a subjective past and, simultaneously, that heavier past of a larger cross-cultural “tradition”? But the weighty words of Indic texts speaking to us (quite arbitrarily, as it may seem) from
“above” and from across centuries, also shake the foundations of a present conceived historically (Jameson) from the perspective of an indefinitely deferred future.

Whether or not Hermes recognizes himself amidst contemporary hermeneutical discussions, remains, I suppose, an open question. That he presides over Morrison’s uncanny conjunction of past, present and future is, however, clear. For this god of the road always has and always will be a time-traveler. In the figure of Wisdom he embraces the prewritten text, the written text and the text construed, all forms of eloquence. This is also his intercultural mode or function, for to travel from Heaven to Earth, from Earth to Hell and back again, bearing messages and “announcing” them (Heidegger calls Hermes the “announcing” god, hence *hermeneuein*) is also to be the translator of each realm to the others. Morrison’s inter-cultural, inter-temporal, inter-cosmic messenger is not only Egyptian (Thoth), Greek (Hermes) and Roman (Mercury), but Asian as well, for the gods of the *Sentence* are universally conceived. Accordingly, just as this fleet-footed god presides over Chinese and Southeast Asian configurations in the final two books of the HERMES sequence, so in *Realization*, he assimilates himself to Indic tradition.

**Works Cited**


**About the Author**

Manjushree S. Kumar has received her Ph.D from Jai Naraan Vyas University in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, India. She teaches English Literature at this university; her specialty is postcolonial literature and the literature of South Asia. “Discovering the ‘other’,” she says, “is of special interest to me in multicultural communities.” Prof. Kumar also writes, edits and presents cultural programs for Doordarshan, the national Indian television channel. She has plans to publish a collection of essays and conference papers on Commonwealth Literature; she has also written a series of essays about South Asian Literature.

[Received 24 September 2001; accepted December 20 2001; revised December 26 2001]
Modernism vs Postmodernism

Modernism and Postmodernism are two kinds of movements that show certain differences between them. They are two kinds of m. It is interesting to note that both of them are different periods starting from the 19th and the 20th centuries. These movements came into being as a result of the thinking patterns of the people during those times. Different causes made them think in different ways than they were thinking. A consequence of achieved modernism is what postmodernists might refer to as de-realization. De-realization affects both the subject and the objects of experience, such that their sense of identity, constancy, and substance is upset or dissolved. Important precursors to this notion are found in Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche. Kierkegaard, for example, describes modern society as a network of relations in which individuals are leveled into an abstract phantom known as “the public” (Kierkegaard 1846, 59). In Postmodernist Fiction (1987), Brian McHale details the shift from modernism to postmodernism, arguing that the former is characterized by an epistemological dominant and that postmodern works have developed out of modernism and are primarily concerned with questions of ontology. McHale’s second book, Constructing Postmodernism (1992), provides readings of postmodern fiction and some contemporary writers who go. In short, the art world will never revive until postmodernism fades away. Postmodernism is a plague upon the mind and the heart.