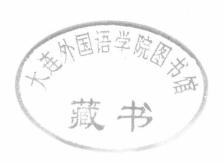Bran Nicol

The Cambridge **Introduction** to

Postmodern Fiction

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BRAN NICOL

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ray Ryan of Cambridge University Press for his enthusiasm and patience, colleagues in the English department and in the Centre for European and International Studies Research at the University of Portsmouth for their support, and my wife and our boys for their laughter and love.

Preface: reading postmodern fiction

> The commonest complaint about the narratives of Beckett or Burroughs is that they are hard to read, they are 'boring'. But the charge of boredom is really hypocritical. There is, in a sense, no such thing as boredom. Boredom is only another name for a certain species of frustration. And the new languages which the interesting art of our time speaks are frustrating to the sensibilities of most educated people.
>
>   Susan Sontag, 'One Culture and the New Sensibility' (1965)

> Sometimes I suspect that good readers are even blacker and rarer swans than good writers. . . . Reading, obviously, is an activity which comes after that of writing; it is more modest, more unobtrusive, more intellectual.
>
>   Jorge Luis Borges, Preface to *A Universal History of Infamy* (1935) (trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni, 1972)

In an essay about postmodern fiction a student once declared that Beckett's writing 'doesn't go down easily'. As I was the marker, I had to point out that this phrase was not exactly appropriate academic discourse. But I could also see her point. If reading Jane Austen is like having a nice Sunday lunch, and *The Da Vinci Code* is the equivalent of a McDonald's, then reading Beckett is, for some, like being asked to complete the 'Bushtucker Trial' in the TV show *I'm A Celebrity . . . Get Me Out Of Here*.

Besides the parallel between literature and food, her statement implied a definition of fiction. A novel should be something accessible, easy to read. Literature should be *digestible*. But why is this? Why shouldn't literature be a *challenge* to the reader? Who said reading a novel has to be easy? After all, we accept more readily the fact that modern art, the kind we are confronted with in the Tate Modern or the Turner Prize, does not communicate straightforwardly, that we have to work to interpret it. Even poetry, part of the staple diet on university literature courses, is something we accept from the outset is not going to give its meaning over to us without a struggle.

If asked why they read, most people (including myself) would say that they read fiction for pleasure. It is hard, though, to determine exactly what the pleasure of reading a novel or a short story is. It may be the pleasure of escapism, of experiencing what it would be like to be another person, indulging one's fantasy-life, or exercizing the intellect. If asked why they choose to study literature at university, most students reply that it is because they enjoy reading fiction. (For the kind of reasons just mentioned.) But very quickly they realize that 'reading' literature at university is not simply about enjoying reading. In fact, for some students, it turns out to be the exact opposite. Many students feel that the process of studying literature empties reading of the enjoyment that caused them to study literature in the first place. Why do we have to ask so many questions about a book? Can't we just accept that an author wrote something because he or she felt like it, or wanted to make money?

Postmodern fiction presents a challenge to the reader. This is true even though most of it is actually not as hard to comprehend as Beckett, and many of the authors labelled as postmodern (and examined in this book) are among the most popular, acclaimed, and, I think, enjoyable, writers in contemporary fiction: Thomas Pynchon, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, William Gibson, Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, Bret Easton Ellis.

But postmodern writing challenges us because it requires its reader to be an active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive consumer. More than this, it challenges its readers to interrogate the commonsense and commonplace assumptions about literature which prevail in our culture. Though it is a product of the latter half of the twentieth century, studying postmodern fiction can deepen our knowledge about literature on a wider scale. To read postmodern fiction is to be invited to ask: what *is* fiction? What does reading it involve? Why do we read? Why, for that matter, do novelists write? Why do they create innovative, experimental forms rather than just stick to traditional ones?

Postmodernisms

This book is an introduction to postmodern fiction, offering accounts of its various 'waves' in a period stretching mainly from the 1950s to the 1990s and providing in-depth readings of texts which have been consistently associated with postmodernism by literary critics and theorists.

Though the term 'postmodern' is still an important one in a number of academic disciplines and remains essential in the literary-studies lexicon, the topic of postmodernism is no longer hotly debated in academic journals and research monographs. Linda Hutcheon, one of the major theorists of postmodern

fiction, has suggested that postmodernism is now, in the twenty-first century, 'a thing of the past' because it has become 'fully institutionalized, it has its canonized texts, its anthologies, primers and readers, its dictionaries and its histories' (Hutcheon, 2002, 165).

This is not quite true, since the conditions of 'postmodernity' (as detailed in the Introduction) still seem to shape the contemporary world, and much aesthetic and cultural production (novels, film, TV, etc.) still clearly deploys strategies and generates effects which have been defined as postmodern. And while it is no longer the subject of cutting-edge academic debate, postmodernism is now more than ever a fixture on literature courses in universities around the world, and studying it remains one of the most valuable ways of making sense of contemporary writing.

But there is an advantage to thinking of postmodern fiction as something effectively in the past, like modernism, something we can treat as a more or less 'complete' historical movement with its own set of core texts (though this 'teleological' idea is entirely against the spirit of postmodernism). Now, in other words, a welcome sense of retrospectivity is possible in relation to the postmodernism debate.

This book does not seek to produce an exhaustive, exact chronological survey, taking in every significant writer who has been labelled 'postmodern', but tries to isolate and examine the main varieties of postmodern fiction. My strategy has been to divide postmodern fiction into groups of authors who deal with similar questions and favour similar formal techniques. Depending upon the particular theme, some chapters consider specific authors and offer readings of one or two or their key works, while others focus on specific representative texts. The order in which the book considers these varieties of fiction preserves a loose sense of chronology, though the book is not intended as a literary history.

The book concentrates mainly on Anglo-American fiction. This means that some of the non-English-speaking writers who have been convincingly co-opted into the postmodern 'canon' over the years, such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Carlos Fuentes, Italo Calvino and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, are largely absent from the discussion. This is partly due to spatial constraints, but it is also because postmodernism has always chiefly been a phenomenon in theory and criticism produced in England and America and on university literature courses taught in these countries.

The book, then, attempts to determine what postmodern fiction is – or *was* – by looking back at key examples. Its aim is not to provide a final definition of an entity named 'the postmodern novel'. This book treats 'postmodern fiction' as a category which contains a number of different kinds of postmodern fiction,

a range of *postmodernisms*, in fact, rather than alternative ways of expressing a single, unified postmodernism.

Postmodern fiction is far too diverse in style to be a genre. Nor is it a historical label, like 'Victorian fiction', as to speak of the late twentieth century as the postmodern 'period' would be to misrepresent a great many contemporary writers whose work cannot usefully be related to postmodernism. I would prefer to think of postmodern fiction as a particular 'aesthetic' – a sensibility, a set of principles, or a value-system which unites specific currents in the writing of the latter half of the twentieth century.

To explain this, it is useful to follow the example of Brian McHale (another major theorist of the postmodern novel) in his approach to defining postmodern fiction, and use the Russian Formalist theorist Roman Jakobson's concept of 'the dominant': 'the focusing component of a work of art' which 'rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components [and] guarantees the "integrity" of the structure' and which shifts over literary history (McHale 1987, 6).

Identifying postmodern texts is a matter of determining which elements within them are especially dominant, in this sense. In my view, the most important features found in postmodern texts are:

(1) a self-reflexive acknowledgement of a text's own status as constructed, aesthetic artefact
(2) an implicit (or sometimes explicit) critique of realist approaches both to narrative and to representing a fictional 'world'
(3) a tendency to draw the reader's attention to his or her own process of interpretation as s/he reads the text

The reason why the concept of the dominant is useful is that none of these features are exclusive to postmodern fiction. Self-reflexivity is common in the eighteenth-century novel, modernist fiction rejects nineteenth-century realist techniques, and a great many novels from all periods invite the reader to interrogate the reading process. The question is really one of degree. It is also important to consider how these dominant features correspond to the specific historical context of postmodernism – in other words, how certain social and cultural factors have *caused* them to be more dominant than they are in, say, modernism.

I should point out that this book contains less about modernism than perhaps one would expect from an introduction to postmodern fiction. This is not to deny that postmodernism – as its name clearly indicates – bears a close relationship to modernism. Many of the most important definitions of postmodernism, such as those by McHale and Hutcheon, Jameson, Jencks,

and Eco, are founded upon a comparison with modernist values and aesthetic techniques. In fact, the precepts of modernism will figure in the Introduction and in Chapters 1 and 2. However, my view is that the starting-point for understanding postmodern fiction is to compare it chiefly to realism – or at least the kind of 'ideal', 'straw-target' version of the nineteenth-century realist novel, which may not always resemble more complex actual examples of literary realism but nevertheless has figured as an antagonistic force in the development of postmodern writing.

Distinguishing between modernism and postmodernism is again a question of the postmodern 'dominant'. Patricia Waugh has argued that where modernism is preoccupied by *consciousness*, showing how the workings of the mind reveal individuals to be much less stable and unified than realist psychology would have us believe, postmodernism is much more interested in *fictionality* (Waugh, 1984, 14). Fictionality refers to the condition of being fictional, that is to say, the condition of being constructed, narrated, mediated. Fiction is always all of these things, which means that the represented world is always framed, presented to us from the perspective of another. In particular, fictionality involves a concern with the relationship between the language and represented world of fiction with the real world outside. This is what especially interests postmodern writers (though an interest is visible in some modernist texts too) and the reason why they position their writing against realism rather than modernism is because, in realism, the question of fictionality is generally ignored or suppressed.

To try and isolate what is effectively a 'canon' of postmodern fiction might naturally lead to disagreement about which authors or texts have or have not been included. Yet my method is more conservative than it might seem: I have not tried to incorporate any novelists or texts into the postmodern tradition who have not seriously been identified as postmodern already by theorists and critics over the last few decades. To try to keep the discussion accessible I have offered my own readings of these writers and texts, supported by relevant theory and criticism, but without being overloaded by references to the readings of others.

This brings us back to the question of reading. I hope my analyses will be useful to you in *your* reading of the postmodern fiction discussed in this book. I believe the twenty-four novelists it examines are not only twenty-four of the most important postmodern writers but twenty-four of the most remarkable novelists in twentieth-century writing as a whole. I hope this book will enhance your enjoyment of them, making their writing go down a little bit more easily.

Contents

Postmodernism and postmodernity

There is an episode of *The Simpsons* in which the barman, Moe Szyslak, tries to transform his dingy bar into somewhere 'cool' and futuristic, decorating it with randomly chosen objects such as suspended rabbits and eyeballs. His regulars don't get it. Faced with their non-comprehending stares, Moe explains: 'It's po-mo! . . . Post-modern! . . . Yeah, all right – weird for the sake of weird' ('Homer the Moe', *Simpsons Archive*).

The Simpsons is widely considered one of the most exemplary postmodern texts because of its self-reflexive irony and intertextuality. But postmodernism is not weird for the sake of being weird. Nor is it simply 'the contemporary' or 'the experimental'. It *may* be 'avant-garde' (though many critics, myself included, think it isn't), or it may be a continuation of the values and techniques of modernism (but then again it may just as plausibly be a break with modernism). It may be an empty practice of recycling previous artistic styles . . . or a valid form of political critique.

Postmodernism is a notoriously slippery and indefinable term. It was originally coined in the 1940s to identify a reaction against the Modern movement in architecture. However, it first began to be widely used in the 1960s by American cultural critics and commentators such as Susan Sontag and Leslie Fiedler who sought to describe a 'new sensibility' in literature which either rejected modernist attitudes and techniques or adapted or extended them. In the following decades the term began to figure in academic disciplines besides literary criticism and architecture – such as social theory, cultural and media studies, visual arts, philosophy, and history. Such wide-ranging usage meant that the term became overloaded with meaning, chiefly because it was being used to describe characteristics of the social and political landscape as well as a whole range of different examples of cultural production.

This begs the question: why has an obviously problematic term continued to be used? I think the reason is that there has been a genuine feeling amongst theorists, cultural commentators, artists and writers that our age, has, since the 1950s and 1960s onward (opinions vary as to when exactly), been shaped by significant alterations in society as a result of technology, economics and the

media; that this has led to significant shifts in cultural and aesthetic production as a result, perhaps even (though these are even more difficult to measure) changes in the way people who exist in these changed conditions live, think, and feel. To try to capture this sense of change, vague and multi-faceted though it may be, is why the term postmodernism has been invented, adopted, defined and redefined.

More precisely, one of the key questions behind the postmodern debate is how the particular conditions of postmodernity differ from or have arisen from those of *modernity*. Theorists have tended to portray modernity (i.e. from early to mid-twentieth century) as increasingly industrialized, mechanized, urban, and bureaucratic, while postmodernity is the era of the 'space age', of consumerism, late capitalism, and, most recently, the dominance of the virtual and the digital. Such generalized portraits of modern and postmodern society have been paralleled by similar comparisons of the specific aesthetic styles which have dominated in these periods. Where modernist art forms privilege formalism, rationality, authenticity, depth, originality, etc., postmodernism, the argument goes, favours bricolage or pastiche to original production, the mixing of styles and genres, and the juxtaposition of 'low' with high culture. Where modernism is sincere or earnest, postmodernism is playful and ironic.

The discussion in this book aims to move beyond such generalizations (and, in any case, after this chapter, will concentrate on prose fiction), but it is important to acknowledge that the question of how postmodernism relates to modernism remains a highly contentious one, not least because the term itself – 'post-modern' – implies, confusingly, that modernism has either been superseded or has entered a new phase.

The problems with the term postmodernism are complicated further because when reading about it we are actually dealing with three derivatives – not just 'postmodernity', but also 'postmodernism' and 'postmodern'. This latter term gives this book its title and is favoured throughout. 'Postmodern' is an adjective that refers both to a particular period in literary and perhaps cultural history (though this book is more interested in the former than the latter) which begins in the 1950s and continues until the 1990s (though inevitably there is disagreement about this too, as some would argue we are still in the postmodern period now), and to a set of aesthetic styles and principles which characterize literary production in this period and which are shaped by the context of postmodernism and postmodernity. Where 'postmodernity' refers to the way the world has changed in this period, due to developments in the political, social, economic, and media spheres, 'postmodernism' (and the related adjective 'postmodernist') refers to a set of ideas developed from philosophy and theory and related to aesthetic production. To provide a context

for the discussion in the rest of the book, this chapter will now turn to a more in-depth consideration of prominent theoretical uses of these latter two terms.

Postmodernity and 'late capitalism'

Postmodernity can be described most usefully in terms of the political and socio-economic systems which develop in what the Marxist thinker Ernest Mandel called the 'third stage' of capitalist expansion (Mandel, 1975).

In the period following the Second World War, the first two stages of capitalism, 'market capitalism' and 'monopoly (or imperialist) capitalism', were superseded by 'postindustrial' or 'late' capitalism. In effect late capitalism sees the accumulative logic of capitalism extend into every possible area of society, and into every corner of the globe, eliminating any remaining pockets of 'precapitalism'. It means that areas of society which were previously unaffected by the logic of the market, such as the media, the arts, or education became subject to the laws of capitalism (i.e. requiring growth, profits, and business models) and the advance of what we now call the 'globalization' of consumerism. The result of this is a cultural eclecticism, as summarized in a much-quoted sentence from the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard: 'one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and "retro" clothes in Hong Kong' (Lyotard, 1984, 76).

The key factor behind this expansion, as Larry McCaffrey has argued, is the rise of technology. As competition is so intense amongst multinational organisations, it follows that the most important resource of all – more than actual materials or products – is information which can be used for marketing, research, and production purposes. Ever more sophisticated means of gathering and analysing information, McCaffrey suggests, has meant that postmodern society has become increasingly 'high-tech', saturated by products such as medical supplies, weaponry, and surveillance technology (which protects the interests of multinational corporations) and consumer goods such as mobile phones, computers, plasma screen TVs, high-spec cars, etc.

McCaffrey argues that even more significant than these high-tech products are 'the rapid proliferation of technologically mass-produced "products" that are essentially *reproductions* or *abstractions* – images, advertising, information, memories, styles, simulated experiences' (McCaffrey, 1991b, 4) and which rely upon other technologically engineered products such as computers, televisions, digital music, etc. to package and transmit them to consumers. These

are much cheaper to produce and consume than more tangible products, and are the speciality of the advertising, information, and the media/cultural industries.

The consequence of living in a postindustrial, information-driven, media/ culture-saturated world, according to theorists of postmodernity, is that we have become alienated from those aspects of life we might consider authentic or *real*. While our working lives are still 'real' (we go to work and pay the bills) they are not as real as, say, farming or building a ship. Instead we spend most of our time at our desks in front of a computer screen processing 'information' of one kind or another, engaging with symbolic representations rather than real, tangible objects. Much of our leisure time is spent engaging in simulated experiences or consuming more information. Existence has become more 'virtual' than real.

Baudrillard and simulation

We tend to think of 'virtual reality' in a 'sci-fi' sense as an experience to be available in the near future, once computers are sophisticated enough to enable us literally to inhabit a fake version of the world but interact with it as if it were real. It is conventionally imagined (curiously in terms of sado-masochistic fantasy) as a situation in which we don gloves, a helmet, or a suit and then interact with our real body in a fictional world. But as the postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard has argued, we don't need to wait for these devices to be possible: virtual reality is already here, and we all live in it almost every moment of our lives (Baudrillard, 1994a). We 'experience' the world through TV news or 'reality TV' shows, engage with other people we have never met (in internet chatrooms, or in our fascination with celebrities), use e-mail to communicate virtually to real people.

Central to Baudrillard's theory is the idea that we have entered a new phase of history, though he develops this thesis in a different and rather idiosyncratic way from Marxist thinkers like Mandel. What characterizes our world is that the last traces of the 'symbolic structure' that reigned in the pre-industrial world are disappearing. Baudrillard here draws on the economic theory of Marcel Mauss. Mauss's famous work *The Gift* (1953) explores the way primitive society was founded upon the logic of the gift-exchange rather than commodity-exchange. Where commodity-exchange is a system that works according to the exchange of goods for money, gift-exchange involves a threeway system of obligation: the gift must be given, received, and reciprocated. Most importantly, reciprocation means effectively giving back more than is received, in order to avoid the

receiver being placed in an inferior position to the giver and to ensure that the triangular pattern of exchange may continue (Mauss, 2001).

In early societies this logic underscored every aspect of life, from harvest festivals to military service to weddings, and meant that even people could be gifts. Where Mauss believed that remnants of this economy still operate in our own money economy (e.g. weddings, dinner parties), though they have largely been replaced by a formalized notion of commodity-exchange, for Baudrillard this form of symbolic exchange has died out completely. Now there is only the endless and meaningless exchange of *signs*, which are even less 'real' and more ambiguous than commodities or currency (often they are images or words): everything can be exchanged for everything else, every sign is potentially interchangeable, reversible. There is no surplus element as there was in symbolic exchange.

Baudrillard's term for this overall interchangeability of signs is 'the code'. Its function is to 'codify' reality according to the 'law of value'. In other words it establishes a system of signs which provides (or tries to provide) everything with a meaning and a value relative to other things. It establishes the binary oppositions upon which Western culture is founded (life over death, good over evil, cause over effect) and produces an apparent stability in essences, identity, difference, and meaning. In this way the code actually *produces* reality: we experience the world through the sign-system of values set down in its underlying metaphysic.

The special ability of the code is to duplicate things so that the copy is indistinguishable from and indeed replaces the original. It is visible in science (in biology or DNA) and in computer and information technology which enables perfect reproduction (e.g. of biological tissue or of a photographic image). Previously, copying something that is real resulted in a version of the real thing which was still recognizable as a copy. Yet because the code can produce an exact replica, the difference between the original and the copy is eliminated. This effect is a typical one in contemporary culture which is characterized by a process of reproduction Baudrillard terms simulation. He points to numerous instances in the contemporary world in which the ability to distinguish between the real and representation is compromised: for example, Disneyland, opinion polls, President Nixon, Michael Jackson. Perhaps the most powerful example is the way that the actual events of twentieth-century warfare have become replaced by their representations: we 'consume' the representations as if they are real. The Vietnam War, the Gulf War, even, retrospectively, the Holocaust, are visible only in simulated form: with Vietnam, Baudrillard argues, 'the war became film, the film becomes war, the two are joined by their common haemorrhage into technology' (Baudrillard, 1994b, 59).