Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction

Edited by
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Contents

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Introduction

Edmund Smyth

1

It has become fashionable to apply the word 'postmodernism' indiscriminately to a variety of cultural, intellectual and social practices. Several critics in various fields have of course attempted to provide definitions, yet no single definition has gained widespread currency or acceptance. It is evident that no consensus exists regarding either the parameters of postmodernism or the precise meaning of the term.

However, it is possible to identify broadly two distinct ways in which 'postmodernism' has come to be used: first, to designate either negatively or positively the contemporary cultural condition as a whole in all its complexity; or, second, to describe a specific set of textual characteristics which can be gleaned from an analysis of selected literary, dramatic or cinematographic works. In this second sense, it has been applied to a style or a sensibility manifesting itself in cultural productions as varied as fiction (in the work of, for example, John Barth, Salman Rushdie, John Fowles, Alasdair Gray, Alain Robbe-Grillet and the French *nouveau roman*, Umberto Eco, Italo Calvino and Gabriel García Márquez), film (*Providence*, *Blue Velvet*, the work of Godard or Peter Greenaway), drama (Dennis Potter's BBC TV series *The Singing Detective* and *Blackeyes*) – in short, in any creative endeavour which exhibits some element of self-consciousness and reflexivity. Fragmentation, discontinuity, indeterminacy, plurality, metafictionality, heterogeneity, intertextuality, decentring, dislocation, ludism: these are the common features such widely differing aesthetic practices are said to display. In distinguishing between what is or is not 'postmodernist', those works betraying such properties have been labelled as postmodern. However, from common usage it is clear that 'postmodernism' has been adopted by many commentators as a means of describing the contemporary novel in general, whether individual texts exhibit these characteristics or not. Thus, it has come to be regarded as synonymous with the contemporary literary 'period' as a whole, in addition to being used as a synonym for avant-garde experimental writing.

From a literary-historical perspective, it is as a periodizing description that the word has been gaining widespread acceptance. In literary terms, the majority of accounts of the 'development' of postmodernism is couched in historical language: postmodernism is seen both as a

continuation of modernism and even, by some, as a rejection of modernism. Frank Kermode (1958) preferred the term 'Neo-Modernism'. Several of postmodernism's literary historians have asserted that postmodernism differs from modernist aesthetics principally in its abandonment of subjectivity; the representation of consciousness is alleged to have been forsaken with the emphasis on the fragmentation of the subject. That the self can no longer be considered a unified and stable entity has become axiomatic in the light of poststructuralism. Also, in distinction from the allegedly 'élitist' dimension of the so-called 'high' modernism of the first half of the twentieth century, it has frequently been stated that such works have absorbed popular cultural forms to a greater extent. Parody, pastiche, quotation and self-quotation have been considered as characteristic features of postmodern textual practice. Brian McHale argues strongly in favour of the 'change of dominant' thesis and speaks in terms of a 'transition from modernist to postmodernist poetics' (McHale 1987: 12). This is even applied to individual texts: William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is claimed to contain evidence of just this transformation within its own boundaries. McHale has examined the relationship between postmodernism and modernism as a 'logical and historical *consequence* rather than sheer temporal *posteriority*' (5). Postmodernism is considered to be ontological in the sense that it has abandoned the modernist assumption of the possibility of contact with a reality of some kind: postmodernist fiction therefore foregrounds 'post-cognitive' questions. McHale charts this 'change of dominant' in transitional works by Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Fuentes, Nabokov, Coover and Pynchon. For Hans Bertens, it is precisely this ontological uncertainty which is central to postmodernism: 'It is the awareness of the absence of centres, of privileged languages, higher discourses, that is . . . the most striking difference with Modernism' (Bertens 1986: 46). Every discussion of postmodernism involves above all the transformation of critic into literary historian. This applies not only to academic critics but to postmodernist 'practitioners' as well: both Robbe-Grillet and John Barth, for example, have had recourse to a narrative of literary history on several occasions when seeking to chart the evolution of avant-garde narrative forms. All accounts of postmodernism become narratives in their own right; this would seem paradoxical in view of Jean-François Lyotard's assertion that what principally characterizes postmodernism is the subversion of totalizing metanarratives of any kind. It may seem curious that commentators have not always been sufficiently conscious of the historicizing nature of their attempts to 'map' the postmodern.

The historicizing impulse of such critics, therefore, must be regarded with some suspicion. It would be false to the pluralizing impulse of postmodernist writing to establish a homogenizing metanarrative of the 'development' of postmodernism as a movement: literary history is a far more problematic area of enquiry than many of these critics

suppose. It should always be remembered that literary history is itself a critical discourse fraught with dangers of various kinds, the principal of which must be the establishment of a canon. It is evident from a great deal of recent theory that a postmodernist pseudo-pantheon is in the process of being constructed, however reluctantly. Again, this too may seem contradictory in the light of the caution concerning the establishment of both the realist and modernist canons. As more than one commentator has observed, the evaluative criteria for deciding upon the admission of a work into this postmodernist canon can be applied to almost any literary work from any given 'period': thus, *Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Gargantua* et al. can all be demonstrated to contain postmodern features if one decides to apply a grid of interpretation which privileges well-defined postmodern criteria. A concern with fictionality and self-consciousness has of course been a feature of the novel since its very inception. If these criteria can indeed be applied to such an array of literary works, it becomes necessary to question the nature of the discourse of literary history itself. Clearly, these qualities and characteristics are not exclusive to contemporary experimental fiction. Perhaps not sufficiently recognized is the extent to which postmodernism is an effect of reading: there can be no absolute definition of what constitutes radical textuality. Any discussion of the cultural practice of postmodernism is tied up with the direction of reader response. This should be evident following Barthes's *S/Z* in which he demonstrates how even the apparently most *lisible* texts can be shown to contain those inconsistencies and *aporia* normally considered axiomatic of modern writerly textuality. Postmodernism must be recognized, therefore, as a condition of reading.

In *History and Value* (1988), Frank Kermode confronts this central question of how value is attributed to certain texts and addresses himself to the formation of a canon. His analysis of a passage from Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* shows a concern in this modernist work for the supposedly supreme postmodernist 'value' of fragmentation. Clearly, other characteristics of the postmodern can be demonstrated to exist in a variety of texts from different 'periods', as Umberto Eco and others have pointed out. Ihab Hassan's schematic 'eleven traits' of postmodernism (Hassan 1987) can be found in several texts not confined to the postmodern period. Postmodernism is a construction of reading rather than a self-contained literary period: it is what the literary institution has chosen to call Postmodernism.

It becomes necessary to examine the role of periodization as a culturally imposed activity dictated by the academy and the dominant ideology. It may well be the case that the endorsement of postmodernism as a cultural process may neutralize and recuperate the radical and subversive impact which postmodern writing can have in contesting and demythologizing the codes of signification which otherwise imprison us. The liberating feature of radical textuality is the extent to which such texts make us confront the ways in which we

make sense of the world and how we organize our knowledge of reality. Of course, this interpretative strategy can also apply to what is described as 'classic realist' fiction. It is in fact this supposedly 'liberating' aspect of postmodernism which has been challenged, principally by Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Hal Foster (in addition to Gerald Graff, Charles Newman and John Gardner), who have been suspicious of the ahistorical nature of postmodern writing and the links with eclectic 'consumerist' popular culture and mass media. It is increasingly evident that they are in danger of occupying the position once held by George Lukács, who was dismissive of modernist writing for its failure to reflect social reality. It is true that postmodern writing can be absorbed, in institutional terms, by the syllabus without any serious threat to the dominant ideology. Although justifiably suspicious of the canon and the means by which it is established, Eagleton and Jameson nevertheless would seem, implicitly at least, to have set up a notional 'approved' canon of their own as an alternative to the 'commodified' and multicultural productions of postmodernism. A whole generation of writers cannot, however, be dismissed in this way. Arguably, they are themselves drawing up a map of literary history and distinguishing between 'positive' and 'negative' writing. As Charles Newman has observed, 'The vaunted fragmentation of art is no longer an aesthetic choice; it is simply a cultural aspect of the economic and social fabric' (Newman 1985: 183). Linda Hutcheon, however, provides a convincing demonstration of the politically liberating effects of postmodern writing as a counterblast to the Eagleton/Jameson position. For her, postmodernism is 'resolutely historical, and inescapably political' (Hutcheon 1988: 4): her postmodernist sub-category of 'historiographic metafiction' encompasses oppositional texts which are both self-reflexive and historical, problematizing the dominant ideology. Hutcheon shows how postmodern writing can challenge the commodification process from within by the parodic use of pluralizing popular forms.

The work of Jean-François Lyotard has been crucial in the elaboration of postmodernism as a means of describing the wider cultural and intellectual condition: the contemporary experience is characterized by epistemological and ontological uncertainty. According to Lyotard, the master and metanarratives which have sustained Western society and discourse since the Enlightenment are no longer considered legitimate and authoritative. What is being challenged are the rationalist and humanist assumptions of our culture. This has led several commentators to suggest that the plural nature of social discourse is, in a sense, reflected in the aleatory forms of postmodernist fiction. It is interesting to note the extent to which several critics have come to rely on this reflectionist and even formal realist argument as a means of explaining the connection between postmodern textual practice and what is supposed to characterize the wider cultural condition. Fredric Jameson, for example, proposes a homology

between the cultural form of postmodernism and its economic base. In these versions, the fragmentation and discontinuity of the contemporary experience of reality is deemed to be *reflected* in the plural and mobile structures of postmodern writing. Thus, for Brian McHale and others, epistemological and ontological doubt is conveyed through disjointed formal structures in a work of postmodern fiction. However tempting this view may appear, it is still a totalizing perspective in that it remains predicated on a reflectionist (not to say reductive) description of the complexity of the language of fiction and its relationship to 'reality'. This perspective in fact involves little more than an updating of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* repackaged to encompass the postmodern episteme.

It is evident from several accounts of 'postmodernist fiction' that this can be an all-encompassing term which includes several types of writing, from 'minimalism' through to 'fabulism' and 'magic realism': Beckett can thus be made to rub shoulders with García Márquez and Salman Rushdie. This frequently involves making international links: for example, at a conference on the *nouveau roman* held in New York in 1982, several leading American postmodernist writers were invited in order to discuss the penetration of postmodernism as an 'international' literary style. Much of the debate concerned the viability or otherwise of admitting certain writers (notably Saul Bellow) to the house of postmodernist fiction (see Oppenheim 1986: 195–209). Depending on which definition one is using, several kinds of work have come under the postmodernist heading. Alasdair Gray's novels use both text and illustration as part of the production and subversion of meaning. In terms of syntactical structures, many postmodernist novels have been formally conventional (Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*) or disruptive (Claude Simon's *Histoire*). While it may be common practice to ridicule the discussion of 'influences' in the postmodernist novel, many of the novelists themselves have conceded the influence on their style of previous generations: for example, Claude Simon's writing is immediately evocative of both Faulkner and Proust. In Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* and *1982 Janine*, the author enumerates the intertexts of both these novels. This can also be seen in John Berger's *G.* and John Banville's *Doctor Copernicus*. The question of referentiality is central to any discussion of postmodern aesthetics: the *nouveau roman* has been particularly alert to this theoretical difficulty. We find both the abandonment of the authorial mode and a reinsertion of the author constructed as a discursive entity (as in the work of Martin Amis and Milan Kundera). Postmodernism can include self-reflexive, meta-fictional novels or more disparate literary forms like the non-fiction novel, essay, autobiography and combinations of realism and fantasy. As metafiction, a novel such as Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* dramatizes the processes of reading in an explicit way; however, many of these novels will contain implicit allegories of reading and writing. Several postmodern novels manipulate the

discourses and registers belonging to previous literary periods (John Fowles's *A Maggot*, Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*). Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison de Rendez-vous* is unmistakably plural in its incorporation of stereotypical representations of Hong Kong in Western culture. The popular form of the detective novel has been used in several manifestations of postmodern writing. Intertextuality is another feature of postmodern aesthetics which seems to illustrate the erosion of 'originality' as a literary value. A novel like William Kennedy's *Legs* invokes both *The Great Gatsby* and *Gargantua* in its construction of the personality of the historical character Jack 'Legs' Diamond. Narrative perspective becomes dispersed and self-consciously unreliable, as in D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*. Postmodern writing moves to the very boundaries of fiction: this is apparent in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*. History and autobiography meet in Claude Simon's *Les Géorgiques*, and in recent pseudo-autobiography such as Robbe-Grillet's *Le Miroir qui revient* or Philippe Sollers's recent fiction. The evidence of the *nouveau roman* would suggest a dissatisfaction with the formalist Utopian view of the text as pure reflexivity. The 'decentring' impulse of postmodern writing has allowed greater space for marginal and ex-centric discourses. Perhaps the greatest 'liberating' feature of postmodern writing, however, has been the mixing of writings and intertextual referencing: the multivocal, heterogeneous and heteroglossic nature of postmodern writing has broadened the scope of contemporary fiction. The borders between genres have become much more fluid. As Lyotard has commented:

> A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. (Lyotard 1984: 81)

The text becomes a site of conflicting and intersecting discourses. John Barth's idea of 'the literature of replenishment' (1980b) seems particularly appropriate here.

Such novels may well enter the pseudo-pantheon of postmodern writing in the sense that it is they which most frequently occur in critical works on postmodernist fiction. It is inevitable that a canon will emerge as one begins to discuss which texts are deemed to be most 'representative' of postmodern textuality. Again, the crucial danger is that one can very quickly establish a homogenizing description of postmodernist fiction which is discursively totalizing and totalitarian. As Roland Barthes has warned, a new *doxa* is always in danger of being constructed. Critics are inevitably caught in a kind of double bind when the analysis of postmodernism takes place: in providing a version of postmodernism which rightly emphasizes plurality, multiplicity and

mobility, one is valorizing certain critical concepts at the expense of others. As a critical discourse, writing about postmodernism is therefore extremely problematic.

What is abundantly clear is that 'postmodernism' as a description of both the current literary period and the wider cultural and social condition is probably irreversible. In this respect, as a critical term it will remain ill-defined and all-pervasive, despite the numerous attempts which will continue to be made to theorize the concept in a more satisfactory way. 'Postmodernism' and 'postmodernity' will continue to be interchangeable concepts. The discussion will continue to proliferate in several directions. As Ihab Hassan has indicated, 'the question of Postmodernism remains complex and moot' (Hassan 1983: 25) and it is indeed likely to remain so. More 'precise' terms (like Raymond Federman's 'Surfiction' or Jerome Klinkowitz's 'Post-Contemporary Fiction') have not gained wide currency. By studying how postmodernism has been constructed as a cultural and intellectual practice, we are engaged in the process of making sense of our culture.

2

This book provides a comprehensive account of some of the main issues in the debate surrounding the relationship between postmodernism and contemporary fiction. In Part One ('Centres of Postmodernism'), aspects of the contemporary novel in Britain, the USA, France, Italy and Latin America are examined in the context of the evolution of those new fictional forms which have been described as postmodernist. These chapters are not intended to provide an exhaustive analysis of the fiction produced in these countries, nor should it be considered that an international 'movement' of some kind has been identified. The purpose is rather to discuss some of the principal manifestations of postmodern writing without in any way proposing either to establish or to draw from a canon. All the contributors to this section are at pains to emphasize the diversity and multiplicity of writings which exist within distinct cultural configurations.

In Part Two ('The Critical Agenda'), many of the recurring controversies and preoccupations of postmodernism in the wider cultural and intellectual field are examined: the contributors address themselves to those 'common' features of critical thinking on post-modernism which have given rise to intense discussion in a number of related areas. In harmony with the non-totalizing impetus of post-modern writing generally, the reader will not be able to extract from this volume a homogeneous account of postmodernism; but he/she is invited to sample the rich diversity of postmodern writing through which cultural, social and political discourses are articulated.

Part One
Centres of Postmodernism

1 Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction in Britain

Randall Stevenson

I want to emphasize the element of logical and historical
consequence *rather than sheer temporal* posteriority.
Postmodernism follows from *modernism, in some sense, more than
it follows* after *modernism.* (Brian McHale)

So many novelists still write as though the revolution that was
Ulysses *had never happened . . . Nathalie Sarraute once described
literature as a relay race, the baton of innovation passing from one
generation to another. The vast majority of British novelists has
dropped the baton, stood still, turned back, or not even realised that
there is a race.* (B. S. Johnson)

'The first impulse of every critic of postmodernism'. Ihab Hassan recently suggested. 'is still to relate it to the semanteme it contains: namely, modernism' (Hassan 1987a: 214). As Hassan's comment half-implies, it may in some areas be time for criticism to move on from the task of defining postmodernism in relation to its antecedents. Yet in the British context such a move is probably still premature. The negative views B. S. Johnson expresses above are fairly widely shared: Malcolm Bradbury points to the existence of a general critical assumption that after the work of the modernists, the 'experimental tradition' in Britain may simply have lapsed (Bradbury 1973: 86). This critical assumption, and its origins, are worth examining further. The 'first impulse' Hassan defines. however. remains an essential one. Any study of post-modernism in Britain must first of all establish that there really is something to study: that a literature does exist in Britain which can be seen. in Brian McHale's terms, as the 'logical and historical' conse-quence of the earlier initiatives of modernism.

For the purposes of tracing their later consequences, these initiatives can be usefully separated into three areas. Firstly, modernist fiction's most obvious and celebrated innovation lies in its focalization of the novel in the minds or private narratives of its characters. Stream of consciousness and a variety of other devices are used to transcribe an inner mental world at the expense of the external social experience most often favoured in the conventional. realistic forms of earlier fiction. Virginia Woolf's demand. in her essay 'Modern Fiction', that the novel should 'look within' and examine the mind thus becomes one of the summary slogans of modernism. In the same essay. Woolf

suggests that the movement within consciousness shows life as something other than 'a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged' (Woolf 1919 and 1966: 106): a second distinctive feature of modernist fiction is its abandonment of serial, chronological conventions of arrangement. The extended histories of Victorian fiction are replaced in *Ulysses* (1922) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) by concentration within a single day of consciousness: random memories incorporate the past, rarely chronologically. Time itself becomes inconceivable in terms of clocks and calendars. Shredding and slicing life, in Woolf's view, menacing it with monotony and madness, in Lawrence's, clocks provide for modernist fiction more of a threat than a sense of order and regularity.

A more general sense of difficulty in sustaining order and regularity in the early twentieth century underlies Lily Briscoe's comments in *To the Lighthouse* when she remarks that an artist's brush may be the 'one dependable thing in a world of strife, ruin, chaos' (Woolf 1927 and 1973: 170). Lily's painting also works in the novel as a figurative analogue for the conduct and conclusion of Woolf's own narrative processes, her own imposing of order on chaos. Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr* (1918), and Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27) portray more directly and obviously the life and artistic commitments of their authors. As these works illustrate, a third distinguishing feature of modernism is an interest in the nature and form of art which occasionally extends, self-reflexively, towards the novel's scrutiny of its own strategies.

This third aspect of modernist innovation is the one whose 'logical and historical' consequences are clearest and easiest to trace in later writing. B. S. Johnson's wish to see the baton of innovation initiated by *Ulysses* carried forward can actually be satisfied, in this area, by looking no further than developments Joyce made himself. Even in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce's semi-autobiographical hero wonders whether he may not love 'words better than their associations' (Joyce 1916 and 1973: 167). Competition between love of words and of the world they seek to represent expands in *Ulysses*. In one way, the novel is a final triumph of realism, representing character more inwardly and intimately than ever previously. In another way, *Ulysses* is at least partly an autotelic novel, its hugely extended parodies raising as much interest in its own means of representation – and in the linguistic resources of fiction generally – as in anything which they may represent. The balance shifts very much further in favour of the latter area of interest in the 'Work in Progress', with which Joyce followed *Ulysses*. Its constant, playful, inventive forging of a self-contained language can be summed up by the novel's own phrase, 'say mangraphique, may say nay por daguerre!'. 'Work in Progress' is primarily 'graphique,' not 'por daguerre': it is writing, writing for itself, not as daguerrotype or any other semi-photographic attempt to represent reality. In *Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (1929), Eugene Jolas comments:

The epoch when the writer photographed the life about him with the mechanics of words redolent of the daguerrotype, is happily drawing to its close. The new artist of the word has recognised the autonomy of language. (in Beckett 1929 and 1972: 79)

The eventual publication of 'Work in Progress', as *Finnegans Wake* in 1939, provides a convenient date – if not for the success of the novel itself, too abstract and esoteric to sustain much attention during the war years which followed – at least for critics and literary historians. Many have followed Jolas in seeing Joyce's 'autonomy of language' and 'new art of the word' as marking a decisive break with earlier epochs of fiction, initiating a postmodernist writing which extends, but into markedly new areas, the initiatives of its predecessor. Ihab Hassan talks of *Finnegans Wake* as 'a "monstrous prophecy of our postmodernity" . . . both augur and theory of a certain kind of literature' (Hassan 1975a: xiii–xiv). Christopher Butler takes *After the Wake* (1980) as the title of his 'Essay on the Contemporary Avant Garde'. Joyce's development towards *Finnegans Wake* also helps confirm the general distinction Brian McHale establishes in *Postmodernist Fiction* between modernism, dominated by epistemological concerns, and postmodernism, focused around ontological ones. Stephen Dedalus's uncertainty about the relations which can be sustained between word and world shows, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the epistemological concerns of modernism. In *Finnegans Wake*, the breach between word and world is no longer a matter of doubt or negotiation, but of some certainty, even celebration. As McHale suggests, any 'stable world' the text projects is at best fragmentary, and is generally 'overwhelmed by the competing reality of language (McHale 1987: 234). The 'autonomy' of this language establishes *Finnegans Wake* as an almost purely linguistic domain, a self-contained world, ontologically disjunct.

If such developments in *Finnegans Wake* were an augur and a prophecy, what did they prophesy; which literature did they inaugurate? Which authors relayed the baton of innovation that Joyce himself carried forward from *Ulysses* through 'Work in Progress' into *Finnegans Wake*? Two other Irish writers served as intermediaries between Joyce and later developments within Britain. Aware of Joyce's work throughout its progress, Samuel Becket was naturally one of the first to recognize the significance of its 'autonomy of language'. Beckett remarks in *Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, that Joyce's work is 'not *about* something: it is *that something itself*' (Beckett 1929 and 1972: 14), and he goes on in the central part of his oeuvre, the trilogy *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (1950–2), to create a kind of autonomy of his own – as the Unnamable remarks, 'it all boils down to a question of words . . . all words, there's nothing else' (1959 and 1979: 308). Each of the trilogy's aging narrators compensates for failing powers by the endless

spinning of evasive artifice in words, yet each anxiously foregrounds and negotiates with the inadequacies of the linguistic medium he employs. Language and the nature of narrative imagination thus become central subjects of the trilogy. Any 'stable world' it presents is further overwhelmed by the progressive revelation that each narrator exists only as an imaginative device of a subsequent one, in a succession of evasions leading towards the unnamable author and the depths of an impulse to articulate, which can neither rest nor ever consummate its desires.

Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) follows comparably in the wake of Joyce. Its narrator finds Joyce 'indispensable', and the novel in which he appears is partly a pastiche of 'Work in Progress'. Joyce's material supposedly unfolds in the dreaming mind of a Dublin publican; the story O'Brien's narrator tells concerns a publican who operates his imagination altogether more systematically, locking up his fictional characters 'so that he can keep an eye on them and see that there is no boozing' (O'Brien 1939 and 1975: 35). Unfortunately for his system, they break free while he sleeps and take over his story themselves. Like Beckett's trilogy, though in much lighter vein, *At Swim-Two-Birds* thus becomes a story about a man telling a story about storytelling. Each work extends the 'augury' of *Finnegans Wake*: each work is a postmodernist paradigm, a prophecy of the self-reflexive foregrounding of language and fiction-making which has become a central, distinguishing characteristic of postmodernism.

This is a characteristic which has appeared increasingly widely in post-war British fiction. In *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957–60), for example, Lawrence Durrell's narrator Darley sets up and discusses aesthetic paradoxes, including ones affecting the text in which he figures, quite often enough to justify Durrell's view that, as a whole, 'the novel is only half secretly about art, the great subject of modern artists' (in Cowley 1963: 231). Anna Wulf, Doris Lessing's narrator in *The Golden Notebook* (1962), highlights and demonstrates the problems of writing, dividing the transcription of her experience into various notebooks and commenting frequently on the nature and validity of each. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), John Fowles (or a version of him) intrudes famously – or notoriously – into chapter thirteen to discuss his tactics and emphasize that 'this story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind'. Similar intrusions by authors commenting on their own practice and proceedings, or enacting in their texts problematic relations between language, fiction and reality, also appear in the work of Christine Brook-Rose, Muriel Spark, Giles Gordon, Rayner Hepenstall, David Caute, John Berger, B.S. Johnson, Alasdair Gray, Julian Barnes and others. Alain Robbe-Grillet, admired in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as a mentor of Fowles's own tactics, once suggested:

> After Joyce . . . it seems that we are more and more moving towards an age of fiction in which . . . invention and imagination may finally become the subject of the book. (Robbe-Grillet 1965: 63)

There is evidence that in Britain this epoch has now arrived. A certain self-reflexiveness even finds its way into otherwise realistic novels, such as Anthony Burgess's *Earthly Powers*, as if no contemporary novel could quite be complete without at least a moment of creative hesitation and self-examination.

This proliferating self-examination, however, has often been seen as an unlikeable, irresponsible tendency in contemporary literature. As Linda Hutcheon suggests, there are now too many critics to list who find postmodernist writing 'a form of solipsistic navel-gazing and empty ludic game playing' (Hutcheon 1988: 206). To such critics, postmodernism's self-reflexiveness seems a renunciation, in favour of a sterile narcissism, of the novel's potential to shape and assimilate the world for its readers. It is sometimes suggested not only that postmodernism scarcely exists in Britain, but that it would not be a good thing if it did: like structuralism, it is seen as a form of literary rabies, to be confined to the Continent for as long as possible. Postmodernism's self-reflexiveness can be defended, even on the grounds of responsibility upon which dismissals of it are usually based. A fuller reply to negative criticism of postmodernism, however, can be made with the further evidence of a brief survey of ways in which postmodernism has followed from modernism's second area of innovation–chronology and structure.

In 1926 Thomas Hardy remarked forlornly of contemporary modernist writing: 'They've changed everything now . . . We used to think there was a beginning and a middle and an end' (in Woolf 1953: 94). Beginnings, middles and ends have become still more problematic, even suspect, in recent fiction. For William Golding, for example, in *Pincher Martin* (1956), they become in a sense almost simultaneous. *Pincher Martin* performs an extreme form of modernism's abbreviation of the span of narrative into single days, reflecting the whole life of its protagonist supposedly within the single moment of his death. Lawrence Durrell sustains in his own way what he calls his 'challenge to the serial form of the modern novel': in *The Alexandria Quartet*, he presents successively three different views of the same set of events, creating a novel 'not travelling from a to b but standing above time' (Durrell 1957 and 1983: 198). Rayner Heppenstall, in *The Connecting Door* (1962), establishes two different eras in which his characters exist simultaneously, and, in a later novel, *Two Moons* (1977), concurrently sustains stories set in two different months, one appearing on all the left-hand pages of the novel, the other on the right. A similar double-narrative tactic is employed in Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* (1969), and something comparable is undertaken by Peter Ackroyd in *Hawksmoor* (1985), which sets alternate chapters in contemporary and in early

eighteenth-century London. Two fairly distinct narratives also appear in Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, whose individual books are presented in the order 3,1,2,4. Somewhere in the middle of the fourth book, Gray includes an Epilogue in which he invites readers to follow the text in one order but think about it in another. Like Gray's protagonist, readers of *Lanark* – readers of postmodernist fiction generally – are likely to get lost in an 'Intercalendrical Zone'. Strange, unstable orders of reading are perhaps most startlingly introduced by B.S. Johnson. His *Albert Angelo* (1964) has holes cut in its pages so that readers may see into the future, while his celebrated novel-in-a-box *The Unfortunates* (1964) is made up of loose-leaf sheets, intended, as a note on the box explains, 'to be read in random order'.

Such random or non-serial ordering thoroughly fragments the middles of some recent fiction: equal irreverence for convention appears, sometimes explicitly, in its beginnings and endings. Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett once again appear as transitional figures in this postmodernist direction. Beckett's *Molloy* expresses it, for example, when he remarks, 'I began at the beginning, like an old ballocks, can you imagine that?' (Beckett 1959 and 1979: 9), while Flann O'Brien's narrator comments, 'one beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with' and goes on to offer 'three openings entirely dissimilar' (O'Brien 1939 and 1975: 9). John Fowles, in his turn, invites readers to choose between three different endings to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. In *G.* (1972), John Berger shuns defining endings, and defining order in fiction generally, remarking that 'the writer's desire to finish is fatal to the truth. The End unifies. Unity must be established in another way' (Berger 1973: 88).

Berger's views relate to a specifically political motivation, variously apparent throughout the novel. The whole text has a fragmentary, indefinite quality. Its vague story is juxtaposed with much historical, even statistical, documentation, in paragraphs whose scant narrative connections are further exposed by their widely separate layout on the printed page. This disjunctive, unfinished quality challenges readers to establish an order which the text does not entirely provide for them. Far from finding, as in conventional fiction, a coherent, structured refuge from the shapelessness of life, readers of *G.* are – as if at a Brecht play – bereft of secure containment within illusion, and forced to take responsibility, conceptually at least, for the reshaping of reality beyond the page. Through the gaping openings between the novel's paragraphs, they are disturbingly re-inserted into the processes of history and power.

G., in this way, helps refute some of the opponents of postmodernism. One of its most powerful adversaries is Fredric Jameson who suggests postmodernism is 'an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history' (in Foster 1983: 117). *G.*, on the contrary, seems anything but reluctant to deal with time and history, using postmodernism's freedom to challenge literary forms and structures as a means of integrating into

the text a much wider challenge to institutionalized forms and structures of power within society at large. Such politically engaged postmodernism is rarer in Britain than elsewhere. Comparable tactics, however, are used by David Caute in *The Occupation* (1971) and in a novel Caute admired as a 'landmark' in 'coherent social comment' (Caute 1972: 252), *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Fowles takes from Marx his epigraph about emancipation, and, like Berger, uses textual strategies to enforce upon readers an unusually direct engagement with this wider theme in the novel. Separate endings impose, by formal means, a need for freedom and responsible choice, also learned painfully, in personal and social terms, by Fowles's protagonist.

Not all the novels mentioned above are as concerned with political or social comment as *G.* or *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, but few are only empty, ludic or disjunct from history. Fractured, non-serial forms in the texts mentioned suggest a concurrence with conditions of contemporary history, summed up in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1982) which remarks that:

> . . . the dimension of time has been shattered, we cannot love or think except in fragments of time each of which goes off along its own trajectory and immediately disappears. We can rediscover the continuity of time only in the novels of that period when time no longer seemed stopped and did not yet seem to have exploded.
> (Calvino 1982: 13)

Calvino's comments help connect the history of twentieth-century narrative with the wider history of the century itself. Time, for the Victorian age, did not seem stopped, but – for writers such as Wells at least – purposively and positively progressive, a feeling reflected in the chronological continuity, firm resolution and frequent *Bildungsroman* form of their narratives. For the modernists, on the other hand, history seemed not progress but nightmare, and the clock itself a threat. More recent events and technologies have expanded this sense of fragmentation and discontinuity, contributing to a fractured, accelerated, plural life within a wayward, even apocalyptic history. These conditions postmodernist art is often held to reflect. It may not, however, do so as automatically and unhealthily as Jameson's idea of postmodernism as a 'pathological symptom' suggests. Modernism attempted to contain the dark energies of historical nightmare within subtle structures and complex chronologies: that is, by radicalizing form. Postmodernism not only radicalizes forms, but also satirizes them, exposing their incapacities to connect with reality and the possibilities for distortion which result. In one way, as Jameson suggests, this can be seen as evasive, a negation of art's potential to confront the challenges of life and history. In another way, however, it can be seen as responsibly encouraging readers to challenge for themselves cultural codes and established patterns of thought, including some of those which make contemporary history so intractable. An

age of consumerism, and of powerful manipulation by mass media, creates the need for what Nathalie Sarraute calls an 'Age of Suspicion'; for scepticism about the means and motives by which the world is constructed and communicated. Postmodernism serves such scepticism. B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, for example, could scarcely go further in the creation of what Roland Barthes calls *scriptible* fiction. Readers can hardly remain passive consumers, or be seduced by the covert ideologies, of a text they have literally had to piece together, page by page, for themselves. Without going as far as *The Unfortunates*, the forms of all the novels mentioned introduce a comparable questioning of conventional patterns and expectations, often heightened by the novelists' explicit commentary on their own activity. Easily as such writing can, on occasion, include the narcissistic or the vacuously ludic, it has at least the capacity to be seriously – or wittily – challenging, an enabling enhancement of its readers' vision and decisiveness.

This sort of challenge is, in some ways, further extended by developments of the third area of modernism's initiatives, its internalization of narrative perspectives. Joyce's use of stream of consciousness was often thought at the time to be an achievement so outstanding as to deter imitation: Ezra Pound, for example, suggested, '*Ulysses* is, presumably . . . unrepeatable . . . you cannot duplicate it' (Pound 1922: 625). Some of the authors who have dared adopt Joyce's methods, have done so neither by duplicating nor by radically reshaping them, but by adapting them to reflect heightened or malfunctioning consciousnesses rather than relatively normal ones. The atmosphere of the 'Nighttown', 'Circe' section of *Ulysses* extends further into recent writing than that of, say, Molly's soliloquy in 'Penelope', emphasizing in several novels the warping, unreliable way reality is represented within the mind. Readers of Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947), for example, are introduced to a herd of buffaloes which quickly turn out to be merely the phantoms of a drink-sodden mind. Beckett's failing narrators manage in their torrents of words only unstably to sustain an existence on a strange edge of death and silence, adrift in 'who knows what profounds of mind' (Beckett 1984: 288). Jean Rhys, in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), transcribes a mind strangely unstrung by loneliness, through a mixture of thoughts and memories recorded in a variety of tenses and stream-of-consciousness and interior-monologue styles. Though her technique clearly derives from the modernists, it is adapted into a unique, subtle form of her own. Later novelists have continued to stretch the stream of consciousness in similar directions. Christine Brooke-Rose's *Such* (1966), for example, like some of Beckett's narrative, follows movements in a mind of weirdly diminished vitality, transcribing a whirling chaos of images which invade consciousness at the point of death. B. S. Johnson's *House Mother Normal* (1971) uses the contents of eight minds at, or close to, this point, and one 'normal' perspective, to

express a multi-faceted range of interpretative possibilities created by a single event in an old people's home. The impairment of faculties suffered by its inmates is carefully, even graphically, represented by the text – for example, one character who dies, or perhaps falls asleep, leaves only blank pages to represent the extinction of her consciousness.

Though Pound found *Ulysses* 'unrepeatable', he suggests that 'it does add definitely to the international store of literary technique' (Pound 1922: 625). Many later novelists have benefited from this store, and from other forms of modernist facility in rendering individual consciousness. The example of Virginia Woolf's interior monologue has been at least as useful, in this way, as Joyce's or Dorothy Richardson's stream of consciousness, most immediately to Rosamond Lehmann and Elizabeth Bowen in the 1930s, as well as to later writers, women perhaps especially, such as Anita Brookner. It is important, however, to distinguish this work from the fiction of, say, B. S. Johnson and Christine Brooke-Rose. Neither Rosamond Lehmann nor Anita Brookner, for example, should really be called postmodernist, since they follow *after* modernism, adopting something of its idiom and methods, without, as McHale suggests, following on *from* the work of the modernists by not only *adopting* their idiom, but *adapting* it into recognizably new and separate extensions of their own. It is worth trying to retain, in the ways McHale suggests, limits to the meaning of the term postmodernism. Umberto Eco complains, 'Unfortunately, "postmodern" . . . is applied today to anything the user happens to like' (in Hutcheon 1988: 42): as he suggests, the term is increasingly used in the media to signify little more than vague approval of what is new and striking in contemporary culture. Understanding of the nature and variety of this culture is better served by more careful engagement with the 'semanteme' postmodernism contains; by fuller investigation of the 'logical and historical' sources of certain innovations and new fashions. As the survey above suggests, some of the developments in recent British writing can be traced not only generally, but quite specifically, each major area of modernist initiative carried forward through intermediary writers in the 1930s into particular phases of continuing experiment.

The original point of the survey, however, was not, or not only, to suggest how specifically and illuminatingly the term 'postmodernism' can be applied to the British context, but simply as an answer to B. S. Johnson's fear that the baton of innovation had been dropped altogether. On the evidence of the range of writers discussed, this is not the case. Yet such a conclusion may raise more questions than it answers. If postmodernism does exist in Britain, how strongly and significantly does it exist, and why has it often been overlooked? How and why has British writing acquired its 'no experiments, please' reputation? What origins, and what final justice, can be found for the critical assumption that, as Bradbury expresses it, 'the experimental

tradition did shift or lapse' in Britain after modernism (Bradbury 1973: 86)?

Bradbury goes on to explain that this 'shift or lapse' is 'usually identified with the thirties, when realism and politics came back' (86). This view of the decade is now very widely accepted, and with reason: political and other stresses at the time did encourage in many quarters a rejection of modernism in favour of documentary, realistic forms more obviously attuned to the contemporary crisis. Nevertheless, several of the experimental novelists mentioned above actually began their careers in the 1930s; Samuel Beckett, Lawrence Durrell, Malcolm Lowry, Flann O'Brien and Jean Rhys each having published at least a first novel by the time *Finnegans Wake* appeared in 1939. The emergence in the 1930s of such writers, in touch with and impressed by the modernists, suggests that any lapse in the experimental tradition at the time was not a complete one. With the partial exception of Durrell, however, none of the writers mentioned carried forward an energy for experiment into a later age by working in Britain. Lowry wrote in Mexico and Canada, hardly completing a novel after *Under the Volcano*, begun in the late 1930s. Beckett mostly ceased writing in English after *Watt*, completed in the early 1940s. Jean Rhys virtually disappeared as an author between 1939 and 1966, and Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* passed similarly through a penumbra of neglect between first publication in 1939 and a popular reissue in 1960.

The various shifts or lapses in their careers may be the symptoms, or results, of an indifference towards experimental writing within Britain, perhaps understandable enough, during the war and the immediately post-war years. An indifference of this kind is clearer in the 1950s, and can even be seen to have been deliberately fostered. The title of Rubin Rabinovitz's study, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel, 1950–1960* (1967), sums up part of the mood of the decade. 'Realism and politics' (or at least social issues) came back almost as strongly as in the 1930s, in the work of writers who often dropped the baton of innovation like a hot potato, vehemently rejecting modernism and experiment. William Cooper, for example, suggested that for his contemporaries, 'the Experimental Novel had got to be brushed out of the way before we could get a proper hearing' (in Rabinovitz 1967: 7), and C. P. Snow explained in 1958 that:

> . . . one cannot begin to understand a number of contemporary
> English novelists unless one realises that to them Joyce's way is at
> best a cul-de-sac. (Snow 1958: iii)

These views reflect what has since been recognized as a 'prevailing ideology' in 'the British literary-journalistic establishment' of the 1950s – in which Snow's influence as a reviewer played a considerable part. In his essay 'The Presence of Postmodernism in British Fiction', Richard Todd adds that, although this literary-journalistic establishment emphasized certain quite genuine characteristics in the writing of the

time, it conveniently ignored others. Passing over more innovative authors such as Lawrence Durrell or William Golding, it helped establish a sort of myth of the 1950s, to the effect that the complexities and indulgences of modernism had been sensibly rejected in favour of a thoroughgoing return to traditional, realist style, and to the true subject of the novel, class and social relations. Todd points out how limiting this myth, and the literature it supported, have been. As a result of the 1950s' return to:

> . . . naive social realism in a minor key . . . a potentially crippling
> form . . . it still remains the case that present-day discussion of
> British fiction is strongly influenced by a widely-held conviction
> that we are dealing with a literature in decline. (in Fokkema
> and Bertens 1986: 100)

Though the next decade quickly reversed the conservatism of the 1950s, the notion that British fiction lacks experimental energy, or even just quality, still survives; a partially accurate picture, based upon a lapse in the experimental tradition less complete than suggested at the time.

An important form in which the experimental tradition did survive, during the 1950s and since, is indicated by Todd when he discusses the 'employment within realistic narrative of metafictional or intertextual devices' (in Fokkema and Bertens 1986: 102). Many other critics have noticed this sort of combination. Malcolm Bradbury, for example, points to the existence of:

> . . . a generation of writers the best of whom have taken the
> British novel off into a variety of experimental directions . . .
> which have challenged and reconstituted the mimetic constituents
> of fiction while not dismissing its realistic sources. (Bradbury 1973:
> 86)

Many members of the current generation of British writers, including older, established authors whose careers began in the 1950s, show, in single novels or at various points of their careers, an attraction towards experiment as well as tradition and realism. The linguistic inventiveness of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), for example, highlights an admiration for Joyce which its author shows less clearly elsewhere in his work. Much of Iris Murdoch's fiction seems informed by her view that the nineteenth century is 'the great era of the novel' (in Bradbury 1977: 27), yet *The Black Prince* (1973) exhibits a thoroughly postmodernist concern with the process and validity of imaginative writing, its own included. *The Sea, the Sea* (1978) similarly broods upon the capacity of its own language and structure to contain a reality which can be obscured as much as illumined by the illusions of art. Angus Wilson's *No Laughing Matter* (1967) presents a huge family saga much in the manner of Galsworthy or the Victorians, yet it also contains alternating narrators, dramatic interludes, sustained parodies, and

frequent reflections on its own narrative technique and difficulties. In *Rites of Passage* (1980), William Golding creates a comparable combination. Though the narrative is broadly realistic, it parodies eighteenth-century styles in ways which extend into a self-reflexive, postmodernist scrutiny of the power and validity of writing itself. Combinations of this sort continue to appear in the work of a younger generation of British novelists. Martin Amis, for example, remarks:

> I can imagine a novel that is as tricksy, as alienated and as writerly as those of, say, Alain Robbe-Grillet while also providing the staid satisfactions of pace, plot and humour with which we associate, say, Jane Austen. In a way, I imagine that this is what I myself am trying to do. (Amis 1978: 18)

Amis's *Other People* (1981) demonstrates the possibilities he outlines. Firmly, satirically based in contemporary London, it also has a fractured time-scheme and an indecipherable, detective story plot which recalls Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman*. In *Shuttlecock* (1981), Graham Swift provides a further example of realistic narrative which also sustains postmodernist anxieties and examinations of the relation between writing and reality.

All these combinations, recent and current, suggest the continuing validity of the picture of British fiction David Lodge presented in 1971. In his essay 'The Novelist at the Crossroads', Lodge sees most British authors hesitating between, or combining in a variety of ways, the possibilities of a main road of tradition – 'the realist novel . . . coming down through the Victorians and Edwardians' – and alternatives offered by modernism and the developments that have followed it (Lodge 1971: 18). This may seem a reassuring picture, a balm to B. S. Johnson's fears. Modernist innovation and the revolution that was *Ulysses*, far from being ignored, continue to expand the range of possibilities for British writers, encouraging new forms and combinations to sophisticate and diversify conventional resources. On the other hand, there are ways in which such a picture is much less than wholly reassuring. Rather than being sustained by a vibrant, developing, experimental tradition, the revolutions of modernism may simply have been absorbed by an engrained, infrangible, realist tradition which rarely does more than appropriate a few of the more alluring additions Joyce and others made to 'the international store of literary technique'. Indirectly, Todd emphasizes this latter possibility by presenting postmodernism as a 'presence', as something amalgamated with more realistic modes in British writing, rather than as a fully autonomous force in itself. This view is developed in a way which partly reduplicates the misleading tactics he identifies at work in the 1950s. Critics at that time excluded authors inconvenient for their picture of a general return to tradition: Todd himself has little to say about authors such as B. S. Johnson and Christine Brooke-Rose, mostly on the grounds that they belong to a counter-cultural avant-garde never identified with the

mainstream of British writing. On the whole, this approach is unhelpful. Although they do lie outside the mainstream – indeed, *because* they lie outside it – authors such as B. S. Johnson have at the very least an important exemplary function, keeping open a wide spectrum of possibility, even for authors who may not always wish to go so far in such radical directions themselves.

Nevertheless, although it is not a reason to pass over them as Todd does, a limiting factor in the work of experimental novelists in Britain does seem, as he suggests, to be that they are consistently assigned to marginal rather than mainstream positions. Many of those mentioned above – Rayner Heppenstall, David Caute, Giles Gordon, as well as B. S. Johnson and Christine Brooke-Rose – exercise a very tenuous hold over the attention of the British public. It is only occasionally, as in the case of Fowles or Durrell, for example, that postmodernism has generated the kind of respect and popularity enjoyed by authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Italo Calvino and Gabriel García Márquez. The success of such authors has probably contributed to the view that the inspiration for postmodernism in Britain has often had to come from foreign models rather than a native tradition of this form of writing, or even much of a disposition towards it. The baton of innovation, in this view, may not have been altogether dropped, but sometimes has to be carried by another team before the British outfit can continue its own rather erratic course down the tracks of literary history. The other team in question – the main one, anyway – is that of the French, whose new philosophies and related experiments in fiction have often helped sustain the initiatives of modernism since the Second World War. The example of Alain Robbe-Grillet, who acknowledges a debt to Joyce as well as to Sartre and Gide, offered from the late 1950s onwards a renewed incentive to experiment, at a moment when British writers might have felt themselves particularly distanced from modernism. In John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), Jimmy Porter may indicate a real feature of the contemporary scene when he complains that his Sunday newspaper contains 'three whole columns on the English Novel. Half of it's in French'. Since the 1950s there has been a fifth column of British writers who demonstrate and often acknowledge their admiration for French writing, Alain Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman* in particular. John Fowles, a student of French literature while at university, talks in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* of 'the lessons of existentialist philosophy' (Fowles 1969 and 1977: 63) and of working in 'the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes . . . the theoreticians of the *nouveau roman*' (p. 185). Christine Brooke-Rose, a bilingual teacher of English at the University of Paris, translated some of Robbe-Grillet's fiction into English and attempted in some of her early novels – *Out* (1964) and *Such* (1966), for example – to transfer into English writing some of the characteristics of the *nouveau roman*. This attempt also informs the work of Rayner Heppenstall, an acquaintance of Michel Butor and Nathalie Sarraute,