

NO EXPERIMENTS PLEASE, WE'RE BRITISH:
POSTMODERNISM AND CONTEMPORARY FICTION
IN BRITAIN

Randall STEVENSON
University of Edinburgh

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, *Postmodernist Fiction*)

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, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*)

"The first impulse of every critic of postmodernism," Ihab Hassan recently suggested, "is still to relate it to the semanteme in contains: namely, modernism" (1987: 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 postmodernism 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" consequence 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 focalisation of the novel within 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" (1919), 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 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* (1927) when she remarks that an artist's brush may be the "one dependable thing in a world of strife, ruin, chaos" (Woolf 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 *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27) more directly and obviously portray the life and artistic commitments of their authors. As these works emphasise, 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 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. On the other hand, *Ulysses* is at least partly an autotelic novel, its hugely extended parodies raising as much interest in its own means of representation as 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!" (Joyce 1971: 339). "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. (Jolas 1972: 79).

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' 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 1987: xiii-iv). Christopher Butler takes *After the Wake* (1980) as the title of his "Essay on the Contemporary avant Garde." Joyce's development toward *Finnegans Wake* also helps confirm the general distinction Brian McHale establishes in *Postmodernist Fiction* between modernism, dominated by epistemological concerns, and postmodernism, focussed around ontological ones. Stephen Dedalus's uncertainty about the relations which can be sustained between word and world

show 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 generally "overwhelmed by the competing reality of language." The "autonomy" of this language establishes *Finnegans Wake* as an almost purely linguistic domain, a self-contained world, ontologically disjunct (McHale 1987: 234).

If such developments in *Finnegans Wake* were an augur and a prophecy, what did they prophecy; what literature did they inaugurate? What authors relayed the baton of innovation 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 Beckett was naturally one of the first to recognise 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 1972: 14) and he goes on in the central part of his oeuvre, the trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable* (1950-52) 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" (Beckett 1979: 308, 381). Each of the trilogy's aging narrators compensates for failing powers by 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 of each narrator as only 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 1975: 11, 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."¹ Anna Wulf, Doris Lessing's narrator in *The Golden Notebook* (1962), highlights and demonstrates the problems of writing, dividing 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 emphasise 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 Brooke-Rose, Muriel Spark, Giles Gordon, Rayner Heppenstall, 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 that "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 1975: 46-7, 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 least a moment of creative hesitation and self-examination.

This proliferating self-examination, however, has often been seen as 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 these 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 even 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, in 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" (qtd. 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," presenting the same set of events successively from three different points of view in *The Alexandria Quartet* to create a novel "not travelling from a to b but standing above time."³ 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 by 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 *Alberto 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 transitional figures in this postmodernist direction. Beckett's Molloy expresses it, for example, when he remarks "I began at the beginning, like and old ballocks, can you imagine that?" (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" (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 "the writer's desire to finish is fatal to the truth. The End unifies. Unity must be established in another way" (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, reader 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" (Jameson 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 institutionalised forms and structures of power within society at large. Such politically-engaged postmodernisms 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," *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. (Caute 1972: 252-3). 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* (1980), 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 immedia-

tely 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 radicalising form. Postmodernism not only radicalises forms but almost satirises 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 through 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 each of the novels mentioned introduce a comparable questioning of conventional patterns and expectations, often heightened by novelists' explicit commentary of 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 reader's vision and decisiveness.

This sort of challenge is in some ways further extended by developments of the third area of modernism's initiatives, its internalisation of narrative perspectives. Joyce's use of stream of consciousness was often thought at the time

an achievement so outstanding as to deter imitation: Ezra Pound, for example, suggested "*Ulysses* is, presumably... unrepeatable... you cannot duplicate it" (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," emphasising 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 to sustain only unstably 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 ustrung by loneliness, in 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 narratives, 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" (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 or Dorothy Richardson's stream of consciousness, most immediately to Rosamond Lehmann and Elizabeth Bowen in the thirties, 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 recognisably 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" (Qtd. 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; with 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 thirties 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 goes on to explain that this "shift or lapse" is "usually identified with the thirties, when realism and politics came back" (1973: 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 contemporary crisis. Nevertheless, several of the experimental novelists mentioned above actually began their careers in the thirties; 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 thirties of such writers, in touch with and impressed by the modernists, suggests 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 thirties. Beckett mostly ceased writing in English after *Watt*, completed in the early forties. Jean Rhys virtually disappea-

red as an author between 1939 and 1966, and Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* similarly passed through a penumbra of neglect between first publication in 1939 and a popular re-issue in 1960.

The various shifts or lapses in their careers may be the symptoms, or results, of an indifference toward experimental writing within Britain, perhaps understandable enough during the war and immediately post-war years. An indifference of this kind is clearer in the fifties, and can even be seen to have been deliberately fostered at the time. 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 thirties, 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" (qtd. in Rabinovitz 1967: 6-7) 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 recognised as a "prevailing ideology" in "the British literary-journalistic establishment" of the fifties—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 emphasised 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 fifties, to the effect that the complexities and indulgences of modernism had been sensibly rejected in favour of 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 fifties' return to

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

Though the next decade quickly reversed the conservatism of the fifties, 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 fifties and since, is indicated by Todd when he discusses the "employment within realistic narrative of metafictional or intertextual devices" (1986: 102). Many other critics have noticed this sort of combination: Malcolm Bradbury, for example, pointing 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. (1973: 229)

Many members of the current generation of British writers, including older, established authors whose careers began in the fifties, show in single novels or at various points in 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" (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 reality which can be obscured as much as illuminated 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 tricky, 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. (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 *Shutlecock* (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 emphasises this latter possibility by presenting postmodernism as a "presence," as something amalgamated with more realistic modes in British writing, rather than 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 fifties. 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 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, that they are consistently consigned to marginal rather than mainstream positions. Many of those mentioned above—Rayner Heppenstal, 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 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 fifties 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" (Osborne 1978: 10). Since the fifties 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" and of working in "the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes... the theoreticians of the *nouveau roman*" (Fowles 1977: 63, 105). 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 who employs in *The Connecting Door* the *chosisme* and frustration of conventional orders and expectations of plot which feature generally in the *nouveau roman*. Several other writers have been attracted by it, in the sixties and seventies: Douglas Oliver, in *The Harmless Building* (1973), for example; Muriel Spark, at several stages in her fiction, and Giles Gordon, who follows the second-person narrative of Michel Butor in *La Modification* (1957), making "you" the protagonist of his *Girl with red hair* (1974). David Caute also records – and shows in *The Occupation* – an admiration for French writing, though his fiction reveals a further strain of influence from postmodernist United States fiction. This also appears widely in the work of other authors: in Thomas Hinde's spaced-out metafiction *High* (1968); in Andrew Sinclair's road-novel *Gog* (1967); even in some of the more conventional writing of David Lodge and Malcolm Bradbury.

At least until recently, however, France has remained the principal external influence on postmodernist fiction in Britain. Even the French language seems to exercise a kind of ownership over the terminology of experiment.

Though there is no real reason not to talk of "the new novel," the term *nouveau roman* has always been retained, perhaps for a certain alluring foreign *frisson*. Similarly, English has never chosen to find an equivalent term for *avant-garde*. There may in this be some covert assumption that postmodernist writing, like cooking – or rather *cuisine* – is something best left to the French. There may even be an emblematic quality in the image which Fowles records as the inspiration for *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; of Sarah Woodruff poised on an extreme southerly edge of England, staring across the Channel toward an imaginary lover. Her desires might be seen as figurative of more general feelings among postmodernist British authors, seeking inspiration and affection less often to be found within their own shores.

This tendency to look abroad for inspiration is not new, of course. It is no more a feature of postmodernism than of the modernism which preceded it, very often the work of exiles or displaced persons. Centred around the work of an Irishman living in Trieste, Zurich and Paris, modernist fiction – through strongly an anglophone phenomenon – had fairly few significant practitioners of British nationality and domicile apart from Virginia Woolf. In one way, this contributes to a view that, even before shifts and lapses in the thirties and fifties, Britain has *always* had an impoverished experimental tradition, repeatedly requiring to borrow from France, Ireland, the United States or wherever, to compensate for a bankruptcy of energies in the domestic context. This, however, may be to perceive only as a weakness within the British scene something which may more interestingly be considered an incentive, even a necessary condition of modernist and postmodernist writing generally. Like many other aspects of twentieth-century thought and culture, both modernism and postmodernism negotiate with the problem that "we can know the real," as Linda Hutcheon puts it, "only through signs," and, based on arbitrary relations between signifier and signified, language and sign may sheer away from the reality they seek to represent (Hutcheon 1988: 230). In Brian McHale's model, an epistemologic anxiety results for modernism, which seeks new forms to engage with a problematic, fugitive, but still reachable external reality. Ontologically-centred postmodernism largely abandons this quest, highlighting the inadequacies of systems of representation which assume the possibility of valid contact with an ulterior reality. In *either* case, modernist or postmodernist, underlying strains, epistemologic or ontologic, are likely to be particularly focussed by experience of foreign language or culture. Immersion in a foreign language environment, confrontation with an alien yet apparently self-consistent, effective system of words, confirms the sense of arbitrariness in the relation of signifier and signified, encouraging the nature of language and representation to install themselves, self-reflexively, as subjects of enquiry within fiction. More straightforwardly,

awareness of another nation's literature helps to create for authors a sense of the particular character and limitations of their own, encouraging the pursuit of alternatives and possibilities for innovation and change. If experimental novelists metaphorically stare across the Channel, it is not only because they hope some valuable contraband—fresh styles from France—may be smuggled through English literary customs. It is because aspects of foreignness itself, of vision focussed by contact with other nations and languages, may be a crucial encouragement to the sort of writing they produce.

A peculiarity of the British context—and possible strength for its future—is that this sort of encouragement may be found without even looking across the English Channel, though generally by looking away from England. A look across the Irish Sea finds Stephen Dedalus defining a particular sort of foreignness in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when he meets an English priest and reflects that

His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (Joyce 1973: 189)

The result of this “fretting” against the English language and its accepted forms—a continuing experience during Joyce's time in Trieste, Zurich and Paris—appears in the range of parodies in *Ulysses* and the revolutionary linguistic of *Finnegans Wake*. The outstanding inventiveness of Irish literature may be owed in part to a continuing sense of existence in the shadow of an English language and culture authors may wish to adapt rather than accept. Writers from areas within Britain are likely to experience comparable feelings. Particularly while the affluent, Conservative-dominated South-East grows increasingly apart from the rest of the country, yet retains control over the language and ideology of most of its media, a sense of separateness and of the need for separate forms is likely to result elsewhere. This is especially likely in Scotland, for example, where strong feelings of cultural, linguistic and political autonomy have always existed. Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* gives evidence of the evolution of forms which may be the result. Around a core of traditional urban realism, Gray projects a series of fantasies and fractures of convention, as a means of confronting Glasgow's chronic deprivation, economic and imaginative. Ron Butlin's brilliant second-person narrative, *The Sound of my Voice* (1987) suggests Scottish writing may continue to develop a postmodernist idiom. Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) shows the appropriateness of this idiom even within the South-East of England, providing a setting can be found remote enough to establish the “contesting of centralisation of culture through the valuing of the local and peripheral” which Linda Hutcheon considers an important constituent of postmodernism (Hutcheon 1988: 61).

Another sort of foreign or peripheral experience may exist for British writers even within London itself. Virginia Woolf in her Bloomsbury circle could hardly have been closer to the metropolitan heart of England, yet she, too, found a foreignness within it, deliberately defining herself as an alien. She remarks in *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

If one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilisation, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical. (Woolf 1977: 93)

“Splitting off of consciousness” and the alien, critical attitudes which result help to account for departures from convention particularly marked in women's writing at many points throughout the twentieth century, and continuing as a strong area of postmodernist development. *The Golden Notebook* offers a kind of paradigm or anatomy of inclination to innovation created by the particularity, the foreignness, of women's experience. Alternatives to male discourse, particular forms of expression, are sought throughout, and the formal consequences of “splitting off of consciousness” repeatedly enacted and discussed. Many women authors extend the sort of metafictional self-scrutiny which *The Golden Notebook* so extensively sustains, Eva Figes's novels, for example, often raising self-referential questioning of their own representational validity, and Muriel Spark teasing several of her heroines with unsettling awareness of the process of their own creation. Doris Lessing's later transition into science fiction writing indicates another complete alternative to realistic conventions, fantasy offering a strategy for escaping altogether the obligation to express a male-dominated world. Fantasy has continued to interest several other contemporary women writers, such as Emma Tennant and Angela Carter, in this way.

Fantasy is also an important component in the work of other writers who occasionally employ a postmodernist idiom—Brian Aldiss in his Joycean *Barefoot in the Head* (1969) or the *nouveau roman* *Report on Probability A* (1968); J. G. Ballard in *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979); Christopher Priest in *The Affirmation* (1981); even D. M. Thomas in *The White Hotel* (1981). Fantasy also figures centrally in the work of Salman Rushdie, its interfusion with more prosaic material demonstrating Rushdie's incorporation into the novel in English of the exuberant magic realism developed by South Americans such as Gabriel García Márquez. Rushdie's background and career also indicate a further area of foreignness, and of promise, for postmodernist fiction in Britain. Largely as a legacy of empire, the English language has spread very widely across the world. For many of its current speakers—some, like Rushdie, immigrants to Britain—it remains a language foreign as well as familiar, and the

culture and conventions it sustains consequently matters for challenge and reformulation. Culturally and linguistically, Britain offers a nexus of increasingly plural possibilities, a promising ground for a postmodernism which may in the future develop more strongly in Britain than it has hitherto. Increasing cultural complexities suggest Lodge's image of the crossroads might even be brought up to date—and given, appropriately, a faintly foreign flavour—by suggesting that post-imperial Britain may become increasingly a sort of spaghetti junction, heterogeneous styles and registers meeting, intertwining, competing or coalescing.

The potential of such a situation is expressed in a different way by Brian McHale through reference to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin traces the polyphonic nature of the novel—the “system of languages” which compete within it—back to the practice of popular carnival. McHale sees the parodic, convention-breaking form of postmodernism as the particular heir of such practice; as an essentially “carnivalised literature.”³ Not every critic shares this confidence in the carnivalesque capacities and subversive energies of postmodernism. A. Walton Litz, for example, relates the term postmodernism to the semanteme it contains in a particularly pessimistic way, suggesting that “like post-mortem or post-coital,” it implies that “the fun is over” (1986: 1142). In Britain, it may not be. Temporary, partial scleroses in the fifties encouraged gloomy prognoses, but the British novel is neither dead nor as indisposed to innovation as its critics have sometimes supposed. Mixing the familiar and the foreign, new and potentially productive connections may be taking place in a number of areas. Much of the fun of postmodernism may be still to come. A new race of novelists may result, making it possible to refute with more confidence than hitherto B. S. Johnson's fear that the British novel has never fulfilled the huge potential created by the irruption of modernism upon the literature of the twentieth century.

For their help in writing this essay, I am very grateful to my colleagues Tony Lopez and Sarah Carpenter.

NOTES

1. A view Durrell accepts in his interview in Cowley 1963: 231.
2. Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957-60); preface and p. 198.
3. Bakhtin suggests that “The language of the novel is a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other” (1981: 47), an idea further explained throughout *The Dialogic Imagination*. McHale 1987: 172.

REFERENCES

- AMIS, Martin. 1978. “The State of the Fiction: A Symposium”. *The New Review*. Summer.
- BAKHTIN, Mikhail. 1981. “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse”. In M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P.
- BECKETT, Samuel. 1972. “Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . . Joyce.” In Beckett *et al.*
- . 1979. *The Beckett Trilogy*. 1959. London: Picador.
- . 1984. *Ohio Impromptu*. Rpt. in Samuel Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*. London: Faber.
- *et al.* 1972. *Our Examination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*. 1929. Rpt. London: Faber.
- BERGER, John. 1983. *G.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.
- BRADBURY, Malcolm. 1973. *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel*. London: Oxford UP.
- CALVINO, Italo. 1982. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. London: Picador.
- CAUTE, David. 1971. *The Illusion*. 1971. London: Panther.
- COWLEY, Malcolm. *Writers at Work: The 'Paris Review' Interviews*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1963. 2nd series.
- DURRELL, Lawrence. 1983. *The Alexandria Quartet*. 1957-60. London: Faber.
- FOWLES, John. 1977. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. 1969. London: Panther.
- HASSAN, Ihab. 1987. *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*. Ohio: Ohio State UP.
- HUTCHEON, Linda. 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- JAMESON, Fredric. “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”. In Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Washington: Bay Press, 1983.
- JOHNSON, B. S. 1973. *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* London: Hutchinson.
- JOLAS, Eugene. 1972. “The Revolution of Language and James Joyce”. In Samuel Beckett *et al.*
- JOYCE, James. 1973. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. 1916. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- . 1971. *Finnegans Wake*. 1939. London: Faber.
- LITZ, A. Walton. 1986. “Modernist Making and Self-Making”. *Times Literary Supplement*. 10 October. 1142.
- LODGE, David. 1971. *The Novelist at the Crossroads and Other Essays on Fiction and Criticism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- MCHALE, Brian. 1987. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Methuen.
- MURDOCH, Iris. 1977. “Against Dryness”. 1961. Rpt. in Malcolm Bradbury, ed., *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*. Glasgow: Fontana.
- OSBORNE, John. 1978. *Look Back in Anger*. 1957. London: Faber.

- O'BRIEN, Flann. 1975. *At Swim-Two-Birds*. 1939. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- POUND, Ezra. 1922. "Paris Letter". *The Dial*. June.
- RABINOVITZ, Rubin. 1967. *The Reaction against Experiment in the English Novel 1950-1960*. New York: Columbia UP.
- ROBBE-GRILLET, Alain. 1965. *Snapshots and Towards a New Novel*. Trans. Barbara Wright. London: Calder and Boyars.
- SNOW, C.P. 1958. "Challenge to the Intellect". *Times Literary Supplement*. 15 August. iii.
- TODD, Richard. 1986. "The Presence of Postmodernism in British Fiction: Aspects of Style and Selfhood". In D. W. FOKKEMA and Hans BERTENS, eds., *Approaching Postmodernism*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- WOOLF, Virginia. 1959. *A Writer's Diary*. Ed. L. Woolf. London: Hogarth Press.
- . 1966. "Modern Fiction". 1919. Rpt. in V. Woolf, *Collected Essays*. London: Hogarth Press.
- . 1973. *To the Lighthouse*. 1927. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- . 1977. *A Room of One's Own*. 1929. St. Alban's: Panther.

INDICE

M. Carmen Africa VIDAL CLARAMONTE	
"Reflexiones sobre la Etnopoesía"	5
María Antonia ALVAREZ	
"Use of metaphor in Angela Carter's "Bloody Chamber" as a strategy for radical feminism"	19
María Luisa DOÑABEITIA	
"Strawberry nose: what can a translator do with names like this one? Some considerations related to the translation into spanish of <i>The Unicorn</i> "	33
María Teresa GIBERT	
"El proceso metafórico en <i>Oscar and Lucinda</i> , de Peter Carey" .	57
José Manuel GONZALEZ	
"Tragedia, confusión y fracaso en <i>The Jew of Malta</i> "	69
Carlos INCHAURRALDE BESGA	
"Las dimensiones textuales y el proceso de lectura"	83
María Nieves GUALLAR ABADIA	
"La estructura informativa en la doble codificación del lenguaje publicitario"	103
Randall STEWENSON	
"No experiments please, we're british: Postmodernism and Contemporary fiction in Britain"	123