(Post)Modernist Levels of Authority in Reflexive Fiction

Steluța Stan*

Abstract: *Most postmodernist novels cease to even pretend they believe in the direct mirroring in the text of a purely linguistic construction of reality. In metafictional writings, the focus is on the plurality of meaning due to the inherent plurality of language, effect of a plural reality, the negociation being made between the text and the reader, the (re)producer of meaning. Fictionalising the world via the media makes the "realistic" attitude of postmodernist writers presuppose acknowledgment and assumation of the constructed character of reality; thus, however paradoxical it may seem, postmodernist prose becomes mimetic but in a completely different way than the realistic prose of the 19th century.*
Keywords: *authority, layers of fictionality, multiple identity, ontology, self-reflexive writing*

Résumé: *La majorité des romans postmodernistes ne prétendent même plus qu'ils croient à la mise directe de la réalité dans le texte, la réalité devenant une construction purement linguistique. Dans les écritures métafictionnelles, l'accent est mis sur la pluralité de sens due à la pluralité inhérente à la langue, effet de la pluralité de la réalité. La négociation est faite alors entre le texte et le lecteur, le (re)créateur du sens. La fictionnalisation du monde par les médias remoule l'attitude «réaliste» des écrivains postmodernes qui parvient à reconnaître et assumer le caractère construit de la réalité. La prose postmoderniste devient, de la sorte, quelque paradoxale que cela puisse paraître, mimétique, mais dans un sens complétement différent de la prose réaliste du XIXe siècle.*
Mots-clés: *autorité, couches de fiction, identités multiples, ontologie, écriture réflexive*

Introduction

Before going into the analysis proper of the way in which the metafictional text articulates, we consider it necessary to mention that, in our opinion there are at least two types of postmodernism that differ from one another both through organization of the narrative material and their vision: a *playful*, *self-ironical* and *parodic* postmodernism, the features of which are narrative discontinuity, open, even ostentatious, display of the narrative strategies and the compositional procedures, parody of the literary conventions and the challenging of the reader (as in Barth, Pynchon, Vonnegut or Barthelme); on the other hand, there is a second postmodernism, one that Carmen Muşat (2002) labels as *imaginative*/ *anthropocentric*, concentrating on the human being, in an attempt at recovering the symbolic imagination and visions (as in Fowles, Murdoch or Styron).

Heterogeneity being one of the characteristics of postmodernism, most often than not the two types contaminate each other, so that none of the writers mentioned for either of the types is unfamiliar with the devices used by their "co-workers" in the other category. The distinction is necessary only if we consider the *dominant* of the text, the author's preference for one series of devices or the other.

Metafictional novels are the ones to overtly reveal their fictionality and reflect on their own status and narrative procedures. Within this self-reflective category, Linda Hutcheon distinguishes between *overt*, *diegetic*, metafiction that takes as a main theme its own status, rules and the very process of narration, and *covert*, *linguistic*, metafiction that suggests through language games, parody and intertextual references, the inability of language to function as a means of communication or, even more important than this, its ability to create other worlds, alternative to and more meaningful than the "real"one (Hutcheon, 1980).

This second category of novels, of a bewildering type, unlike the traditional realistic one, breaks the illusion that what it tells about is an objective reality, truthfully reflected in language; instead, its purpose is to raise questions and pose problems, to tease the readers out of their easy acceptance of the traditional and pre-established modes of thinking, to invite them to take part in *the literary game*. As the area that explores the relationship between fiction and reality is concerned, however vigorous the post-structuralist insistence to see fiction (as well as literature, in general) as a free game of signifiers with no signifieds, the metafictional novel makes an open invitation at finding answers for a set of unexpected and startling questions:

* Associate Professor, PhD, "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati

> Is there a reality ontologically separate and different from our linguistic consciousness? And if there is, can we know it without altering it by our knowledge? And if we can, can we 'render' it in language? And if we can, does this rendering correspond to or give a truthful view of that ontologically different reality that we have assumed to exist? Or are we fooling ourselves in believing that there is such a reality, when in reality we are locked up in the prison-house of language, in the reading gaol?
>
> (Kums in Bignami and Patey, 1996: 151)

The borders become even more fluid and obscured due to the juxtaposition of a number of possible worlds: the real, the fictitious, the fictionalised fictitious and metafiction itself, all of which seeming to fall on Baudrillard's well-known four phases of the image. Ultimately, the central and most relevant issue, intimately and necessarily linked to this set of questions, remains that of *truth*.

Own-tail-chasing fiction

Saying that metafiction is fiction about fiction adds nothing new to our cognitive thesaurus. Neither is saying that metafictional novels and short stories draw attention upon their own fictional status and compositional techniques, in the same funny but ever fascinating manner as own-tail-chasing dogs. Metafiction itself is not exactly a baby since it has an 18th century grandfather, Sterne's *magnus opus*, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1760-70), where the narrator's dialogues with imaginary readers are just one of the many ways an author, in his desire to force real readers to give up preconceived literary assumptions, uses to foreground the gap between art and life that conventional realism tries to veil. Sterne was the first to insist on the the author's full right to do as s/he pleases, but also on the readers' to reject predestined formulas and thus accept their complicity.

Consequently, metafiction is not a modern (let alone postmodern) invention; nevertheless, what it certainly always has been is a narrative mode, particularly attractive for many contemporary writers under the pressure of their awareness that everything has probably already been said by others, their bloomian anxiety of influence that determines them to permanently try something new.

From Henry James or Joseph Conrad on, metafiction has become a space writers use to theorize their literary techniques. As Barthes said, metafictional writing "[i]s both an alibi by means of which the writer can occasionally escape the constraints of traditional realism but also a central preoccupation and source of inspiration" (qtd in Lodge, 1992: 89). The postmodern author, on the other hand, is, in Vattimo's terms, a 'weak' one, re-entering the stage unexpectedly and in force, many times in most unusual hypostheses. The target reader of such a writer writing such a text must be up-to-date (and updated), alert, ready and willing to be attacked by and invited to play with experiments in mode or narrative technique – multiple layers of fictional worlds, fluctuant identities of the character's or even the author's.

Warren Beach's *Exit Author* (1932), might be the modernist slogan coined to express what various innovators, such as Flaubert, James, Joyce, claimed all the time for their literary practices that the visible, 'nosy' authorial voice in (to take only some examples) Balzac's, Thackeray's or Trollope's works had been supressed; that starting with them, the author would be invisible, allowed to exist only beyond but not in the text.

Modernists always tried to efface the tracks of their presence from the surface of the text and, to this goal, they either exploited and developed different forms of texts lacking a narrator, mainly based on direct dialogues (Hemingway) or free indirect discourse (Joyce, Woolf, Dos Passos), or blurred their own subjectivity behind the subjectivity of a first person narrative or of an interior monologue. Paradoxically (or maybe not), the harder they tried, the more obvious their presence. Effacing strategies, though obliterating the author's surface tracks, foreground him/her as the strategist. Thus, self-effacement proves, in fact, a form of self-promotion of a re-surfaced author.

The analogy between the author and God is not a novel idea, also. However, postmodernist writers seem to be obsessed with it, or at least so preoccupied that they are ready to sacrifice the realist illusion in order to affirm their authority in the most elementary way, their power on the fictional universe, and/or their ontological superiority as authors. The postmodernist author wants for himself the same powers that gods always claimed they had: omnipotence and omniscience. After twelve chapters of flirtation with the historical fact anchored in the real world, of creating the

illusion of life only to dismantle it, John Fowles's extra-diegetic narrator in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* confronts us with an indisputable fact in a different manner: the author's voice cuts into the text with the very intent to declare its fictionality. Fowles creates here a paradoxical situation that refers both to a reality outside the text and to the process by which that reality is fictionally constructed.

In the as renowned chapter 61, the last in the novel, the author enters the world of the text in the person of an impresario the physical features of whom are not particularly pleasant, a caricature of the real John Fowles. The cycle of metafictional frame breaking is double: at the level of the fictional world and that of the author, himself proven a fiction. Through this gesture, the illusory reality of the fictional world is destroyed and instead we are offered, if not the real world, at least a possible one. The postmodern ontology sets in place. After all, what is real in the ontological structure of the novel if not the author constructing that world? He occupies an ontological level superior to that of his world; breaking the frame, the author foregrounds his own reality (existence). The metafictional gesture of breaking the frame is, in other words, a form of surrealism [1]. Meant to re-establish an absolute level of reality, this technique paradoxically relativizes reality; meant to offer an ontologically dependable fulcrum, it destabilizes ontology even more because sacrificing some illusory reality to the "more real" one of the author creates a precedent: why could not this gesture be repeated? What makes impossible the treatment of the author's reality as an illusion to be shattered? Absolutely nothing, probably. This way, the alleged absolute reality of the author becomes yet another level of fiction, whereas the real world withdraws even more. As a matter of fact, unveiling the author's presence inside the ontological structure does not mean that he is introduced into fiction; far from eliminating the frame, this strategy only enlarges it to include the author as fictional character. He and the reader become accomplices, aware that it is not a "slice of life" they deal with but an artifact of them both.

Factual or fictional

Regarding the distinction between *factual* and *fictional* discourse, Peter Lamarque offers the following solution for the existence or inexistence of reference and truth: we either admit that the objects in fiction match the existence of objects in the real world, or consider that the only objects that exist are those of the real world, thus denying any existence to the ones in fiction. Therefore, the very ground for the distinction between fictional and factual discourse disappears: "Fiction is whatever is man-made (conceptually or linguistically). Truth is man-made (conceptually or linguistically). Therefore, truth is just a species of fiction" (Lamarque in Nash, 1994: 137).

In an interview, Fowles claims that "all novelists are liars because fiction is the business of telling falsehoods about people who do not even exist" (Fowles in Ciugureanu and Vlad, 1998: 73). Through lies, stories born sometimes from the desire to embellish a monotonous, thus boring, reality, another world is born, different from the existing one, the same as Bagdhad (before the war that brought a sad fame upon it), meant the city of the "one thousand and one nights", or, as Barth puts it in *Chimera* (1972), some fictions were so much more valuable than fact that in rare instances their beauty made them real.

Bringing to focus the gap between art and life that conventional realism tries to conceal, metafictional discourse appears in the work of English novelists in the form of asides (from prefaces and mottoes to direct, authorially intrusive, passages) in novels primarily concentrated on traditional means of conveying the message, portraying character and describing action; such passages are considered manipulative as they use the conventions of realism and, in the same time, acknowledge their artificiality even as they employ them; they disarm criticism by anticipating it; they flatter the reader considering them their intellectual equal, a reader sophisticated enough to be familiar with the conventional fictional representation, the intricacies of weaving a text, and aware that the work of fiction is a verbal construction rather than a "slice of life". As to metafictional writers, Lodge said that they have "a sneaky habit of incorporating potential criticism into their text and thus 'fictionalize' it" (Lodge, 1992: 208).

From the logical point of view, fictional discourse is defined in terms of zero denotation [2]: the linguistic constituents that, in factual discourse, have a denotative function (proper names, deictics, demonstratives etc.) lack any denotation proper. The fictional statement has a meaning without having a referent. If we are to think how much, for example, we care if Ulysses existed or

not, we would realize that, beyond the issue of the presence or absence of the denotation of fiction in the real world, a special attention deserves the cognitive richness that fiction offers. A statement that lacks denotation because it is read literally can become *true* (can denote) if read metaphorically. Don Quixote never existed but his name applies metaphorically to a certain category of people. Therefore, the intrinsically literary characteristics as well as the expressive qualities of writing are part of the referential structure of both the symbolic system and the denotative one: if a piece of writing does not denote because it is fictional, it does not necessarily lose its referential dimension. With metafiction, what is non-denoted, but real-ised, is fiction itself. This way, the discussion about the construction of the text becomes the content itself. On the other hand, the same as we move in everyday life from a kind of world to another, fiction allows us free access to different and successive worlds, parallel to the ones the human being is aware of historically and socially; consequently, the structure of fiction should be understood as resembling to the one of a ladder on which, more or less *real* and more or less *fictional* worlds define human reality by inter-action and inter-reflection: "Strangely enough, […] when using the term 'world' one is using a space term […] But narrative fiction calls our attention to time and a sequence in time […] Literature is generally to be classed as a time-art (in distinction from painting and sculpture, space-arts)" (Wellek and Warren, 1993: 147).

As a result, the world of a novel is a structure or a complex organism made up of a wide range of constitutive elements, combined to create the illusion of reality; this illusion depends on the effect it has on the reader to be assimilated as the reality of a work of fiction. It is the task of narratology to analyse these elements and establish the manner in which they contribute to the presentation of the events.

The wave of metafictional novels in the '60s and '70s may have lost its force in the '80s, but it did not disappear as its critics, who used to see in this kind of writing just a futile attempt of the novel at postponing its own death, heralded. Those who attacked metafiction accused it of "self-flattering narcissism" (a term that Hutcheon transforms in her 1980 essay in grounds for pride), of elitism (novelists talking to themselves and to one another about how great and how utterly important their writing practices are), of narrowness, circularity and repetitivity (resembling dogs chasing their own tail as if it were the most important thing in the world). From this perspective, metafictional novels are those in which the epic respiration gives way to the self-anihilating experiment.

Beyond all these accusations lies the assumption that the novel should tell about people and reality, taking over the tradition of social realism, in a clear message. Thus, metafiction becomes, to use Barth's words in a somehow distorted interpretation, a *literature of exhaustion*, the last stage before its death. The reaction of rejection towards this type of literature is also triggered by its labeling, without any further distinctions, as *postmodernist*, even *deconstructivist*. Consequently, the latter's critics transferred their accusations upon metafiction: the lack of a final, stable meaning of the text[3], its refusal of any forms of closure, the ignoring of literary tradition and of the cannon; as in the case of deconstructivism, the critics of metafiction consider it to "sin" by taking pleasure in ambiguity and contradiction, by incorporating heterogenous material (fantasy, fairytale, documents, fiction, journalism)[4], and this way, erasing the boundaries between the genres, by incorporating its own criticism and reading instructions, by toying with the printing conventions etc. In short, the novel (by the judgment of its dissenters) tends to become an unrecognizable category, downgraded to a kind of jumbled and jangled text.

The exaggerations taken out, one cannot ignore such reactions, at least because they exist, even if coming from conservative positions, resistant to change.

Mimesis* or *diegesis

It is true that, although metafiction and deconstructivism are not the same (the latter being a critical attitude, a practice of approaching any linguistic expression, literature included), what they have in common is a certain, permanent, self-search and self-questioning, and the refusal to accept existing forms and hierarchies as such and for ever.

Among the critics who embarked upon offering counter-arguments, mention must be made of Patricia Waugh (*Metafiction*, 1984), Linda Hutcheon (*Narcissistic Narrative*, 1980), Steven Kellman (*The Self-Begetting Novel*, 1980). They showed that self-questioning in fiction is not a

symptom of exhaustion but a necessary and very important stage in the development of the analysis, and that the value of metafictional literature resides exactly in this self-scrutiny, sometimes playful, some other times painful.

It would be absurd to suppose that metafiction sets as its goal to demonstrate its own futility and irrelevance; the "message" it carries is, nevertheless, different from that of the traditional realist novel, because, unlike this one, metafictive writings do not want to preserve the illusion that they reflect reality objectively and truthfully. However deep this undermined the fictional conventions, and however confusing the avoidance of the final meaning, the metafictional novel always has an implicit intention (even explicit many times): to challenge the reader into giving up their final formulations, and accepting that posing questions with no easy, even impossible, answers, is beneficial. As for the question about the possibility to represent the world into the literary fiction, the metafictional novel has a negative answer: "what can be represented is the discourse of that" (Waugh, 1984: 3).

If the novel uses language, either to *represent* a world or even *create* it, then it becomes very clear that the fundamental theme of metafiction is the linguistic paradox: novelists are permanently confronted with the inability of language to express the richness of their visions; in consequence, they fight a constant battle with the limits/prison of language in order to achieve appropriate expressiveness. Despite all this, by the very means of this language, poor as it may be, they create the most coherent and spectacular fictional worlds and completely expose their transparency as "worlds of words", not worlds haunted by the stubborn and rejecting resistance of reality: "What is to be acknowledged is that there are two poles of metafiction: one that finally accepts a substantial real world whose significance is not entirely composed of relationships within language; and one that suggests that there can never be an escape from the prison-house of language and either delights or dispairs in this" (Waugh, *op. cit.*: 53).

Here is Lodge's novelist at a crossroads! In what the British one is concerned, he chooses, most of the times, the road of the realist novel, the road to the compromise between the fictional and the empirical modes of writing, although admitting that the pressure of skepticism on the esthetic and epistemological premises of traditional realism is so intense that many novelists feel confronted with a choice, the one mentioned above, between the non-fictional novel and *fabulation*, as Robert Scholes names it, giving as examples Günter Grass, William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon etc. What Lodge recommends, himself with a leg in the boat of criticism and one in that of literary creation, is that writers take at least the time of hesitation, or, as many already did, build that hesitation within the *écriture* itself, to which he attaches the following label:

> [t]he novel-about-itself, the trick-novel, the game-novel, the puzzle-novel, the novel that leads the reader (who wishes, naïvely, only to be told what to believe) through a fairground of illusions and deceptions, distorting mirrors and trap-doors that open disconcertingly under his feet, leaving him ultimately not with any simple or reassuring message or meaning but with a paradox about the relation of art to life.
>
> (Lodge, 1971: 105)

Not exactly the same thing happens across the Atlantic. American novelists repeatedly approach the issue of the words as a unique system for the translation of reality into fiction in their novels, primarily in the self-reflective ones. The process of the trespassing of ontological barriers is summarized by Bellerophon in Barth's *Chimera*: "Loosed at last from mortal speech, he turned into written words: Bellerophonic letters afloat between two worlds, forever betraying, in combinations and re-combinations, the man they forever represent" (Barth in Toma, 2004: 80).

This growing fascination with words is part of the similar growing introversion of the postmodernist novel, being yet another mark of the fact that this one is aware of it being an *invented reality*, opposed to the *real reality*. This attitude towards language, its use to attract attention upon itself, not upon external reality, expresses, as we could expect, the refusal of the literature of our times to immortalize the symbols of reality, the loss of confidence in its stable values and the transformation of this loss into a supreme faith. Todd Andrews, the barthian character in *The Floating Opera* (1956), offers the only possible solution:

> So, reader, should you ever find yourself writing about the world, take care not to nibble at the many tempting symbols she sets squarely in your path, or you'll be baited into saying things you don't mean and offending the people you want most to entertain. Develop, if you can, the technique of the pall-bearer and myself: smile, but walk on and say nothing, as though you hadn't noticed.
>
> (Barth in *op. cit.*: 85)

The focus on fictionality becomes essential in the attempt to playfully order the (seemingly) random, the accidental, attach some significance to it or ironically ignore it. Even if sometimes and only for a while the illusion of reference to the real world is maintained, the reader is permanently "brutalised" with passages that violate the code of realism. Lodge mentions in this respect Joseph Heller's novel *Good as Gold* (1979), where one of the numbered chapters begins like this:

> Once again Gold found himself preparing to lunch with someone [...] and the thought arose that he was spending an awful lot of time in this book eating and talking. [...] Certainly he would soon meet a schoolteacher with four children with whom he would fall madly in love, and I would shortly hold out to him the tantalizing promise of becoming the country's first Jewish Secretary of State, a promise I did not intend to keep.
>
> (Heller in Lodge, 1992: 42)

The above-mentioned trespassing is achieved in two ways: on the one hand, admitting that Gold is a character in a book, not someone in the real world; on the other, underlining the fact that he has no autonomy whatsoever, being, simply and completely, at the disposal of a creator who is not sure what to do with him. About the same thing happens in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, an intrusion like "This was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" being a usual one. Such "gestures" are labelled as "breaking the frame" or "revealing the device" or, more simply, "metafiction". By itself, the procedure is not new at all and similar examples of exposure of the fictionality of fiction can be easily found in Cervantes, Fielding, Sterne, Thackeray or Trollope, but not in the modernist ones, because such a foregrounding of the author's existence, the very source of *diegesis*, is contrary to the modernist principle of impersonality and the *mimesis* of consciousness. Quite paradoxically, metafictional devices might appear as a way to continue the exploration and exploitation of the sources of realism, simultaneously to the admittance of their conventionality.

The more the authors reveal themselves in such texts, the more they become a *voice*, function of their own fiction, a rhetorical construct; not privileged authority, but object to interpretation. A possible conclusion is that postmodernist literature re-affirms *diegesis*; not harmoniously interweaved with *mimesis* (as in the classic realist text), not subordinate (as in the modernist one), but foregrounded, through contrast, by *mimesis*:

> The stream of consciousness has turned into a stream of narration – which would be one way of summarizing the difference between the greatest modernist novelist, Joyce, and the greatest postmodernist, Beckett. When the Unnamable says to himself, 'You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on', he means, on one level at least, that he must go on narrating.
>
> (Lodge, 1992: 44)

Also in reference to the British writers and their relationship with postmodernism (especially some of its attributes such as the questioning of metanarrative, the decentring of cultural authority, and the ironic disruption of the self-contained fictional world), Dominic Head (2002) agrees that their novels also convey a conviction about the moral and emotional function of narrative fiction, and its ability to make readers re-engage with the world they know. In this way, the writers offer a re-working of the realist contract, involving the reader's willing acceptance that the text provides a bridge to reality. Much the same as Lodge, Head considers that the British authors are not postmodernist in the meaning of "experimentalist" only, but their writings should be viewed as the expression of a mode of writing capable of generating an emotional response, beyond the distractions of self-conscious trickiness; this understanding of postmodernism, as a hybrid form of expression that renegociates tradition, is the one that could make a case for British Postmodernism, and that could account for the work of practitioners such as Margaret Drabble, Martin Amis, Graham Swift,

Peter Ackroyd, Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis or Angela Carter. As about the metafictional writing, the self-conscious fiction that underlines its own fictionality, Head says:

> This degree of playfullness is self-deprecating in the sense that it has the effect of devaluing the role and function of 'literature'. No longer capable of high seriousness, the literary object colludes in its own debunking, participating in the cultural logic that blurs the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture. The consequence of this is a culture of pastiche, with no vantage point from which value can be assigned with authority. [...] It is this kind of ludic postmodernism that has failed to gain a purchase in British literary culture.
>
> (Head, 2002: 229)

A further consequence, in Head's oppinion, is a "waning of affect", the production of self-conscious culture in which powerful emotion can no longer be communicated without mediation, qualification, or reservation. This kind of ludic postmodernism seems to have failed to gain a purchase in British literary culture, unlike in the American one.

Notes

[1] Gabriel Josipovici writes about novelists who, the same as Fowles, break this frame: "First, they persuade us to take the 'image' as 'reality', consolidating our habits in order to suddenly have our attentiond attracted to the very pair of glases we are looking through and thus be forced to admit that what we took for 'reality' was only imposture" (1971: 297, translation mine).

[2] Roland Barthes expresses in *Writing Degree Zero* (1967) the hope that language can be used in an utopic way and that there are cultural codes that can be trespassed. At the beginning of the '70s, he began to see language, the same as Derrida, as a space the metaphoric character of which remains unknown. In *Empire of Signs* (1970), Barthes gives up any claim to describe or analyze reality., mixing cultural forms of an extreme diversity, from haikus to different machines, pieces of a sort of anti-utopic landscape in which everything is surface, nothing is form. Writing becomes a goal in itself. In his last text, *Barthes by Barthes*, concepts do not count for their validity or invalidity, but for their efficiency as a writing tactic.

[3] The two alternative endings in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are an excellent illustration of the 'forking paths technique' that McHale (1987: 106-10) considers to be postmodernist *par excellence*.

[4] Arguing in favour of the metafictional novel and referring to its connections and affinities with other genres, Guido Kums says: "It is also evident that these novels all to a greater or lesser extent display this magpie tendency to collect other genres of writing: they all contain letters, diaries, documents with political, philosophical or sociological discourse, and they all parody various styles and fashions of writing" (Kums in Bignami, 1996: 153).

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