

# THE POSTMODERN IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH NARRATIVE

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After several decades of the postmodern age, a clear-cut definition of postmodernity is still claimed to remain elusive. Nevertheless there are several features that undoubtedly participate in the spirit of the times throughout contemporary culture. Among them is the omnipresent sense of multiplicity, erosion of authority and the accompanying sense of relativity and permeability of all kinds of boundaries. Despite all the declared vagueness, some consensus has also emerged as to what constitutes the postmodern characteristics of late twentieth-century prose that resonate with the *zeitgeist*. The paper will argue that the attractions of fragmentation, temporal disorder, pastiche, myth and fantasy or the mixing of genres are all part of the essential postmodern playfulness which is present in texts ranging from experimental to seemingly traditionally realistic. It will seek to show the use of pastiche and metafiction in A. S. Byatt, the disruption of linearity and fragmentation in Jeanette Winterson, Michele Roberts and Jane Gardam, the blending of history and fantasy in Rose Tremain and the repositioning of myth and fairy tale in Marina Warner.

In *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (1998) Mark Currie parallels what he calls the postmodern narrative at large with fictional narratives and concludes that they are organised around the same poles „one being realistic, transparent and aiming to disguise the codes and conventions that mark its textuality while the other is overtly artificial declaring its textuality by exposing its codes and conventions” (Currie, 100). A. S. Byatt’s use of pastiche and other metafictional devices in a predominantly realistic text or in conjunction with it oscillates between precisely those poles. Her tetralogy written over more than two decades, starting with *The Virgin in the Garden* in 1978 and finishing with *A Whistling Woman* in 2002, presents a realistic family saga told against the backdrop of the British 1950s and 60s, richly clothed in a multi-layered dress of literary experiment and polemics with postmodern trends and concepts. Although Byatt is herself

also a literary scholar and literary critic, she clearly disagrees with the modern critical theories that disregard the author, whether theories influenced by Wimsatt's structuralist intentional fallacy or Barthes's poststructuralist *Death of the Author* (Byatt, „Reading“, 7). In Byatt's view, a writer is not a mindless machine producing an intertext in an intertext, but just on the contrary has in his/her text an indispensable role to play. To drive this home she not only shows in her frequent themes about writing how many experiences of a poet's or a novelist's life find expression in his/her text, but she also enters her own texts directly with an intrusive authorial voice to allow the reader a glimpse of the behind-the-scenes secrets of the creative process. In *Still Life* (1985), the second novel of the tetralogy, the third person omniscient narrator suddenly turns metafictional: "I had the idea that this novel could be written innocently, without recourse or reference to other people's thoughts, without, as far as possible, recourse to simile or metaphor" (108). A similar dilemma is confided to the reader by the author's voice at the beginning of *Babel Tower* (1996) when it experiments with three possibilities of how to start the novel: in a mystical mode, with a mossy stone inscribed with runes on which for centuries thrushes have been feeding on snails; or in a realistic contemporary story or in a hazy, dystopic past. As is typical of Byatt, all three suggested layers are eventually not only there, playfully connected, but interwoven with a number of other layers. Interconnecting the various layers of dense novel plots into a focused discourse is Byatt's special kind of intertextuality achieved through a polyphony of voices and a mosaic of quotations and references to the European literary and cultural heritage. In her rich writing, pastiche however hardly signifies the postmodern notion of exhaustion of ideas and originality, but rather a creative impulse which she eloquently develops: in *Still Life* there are short quotations from Vincent van Gogh's letter to his brother Theo that serve as some kind of chapter mottoes underpinning a discussion about language and art; in *Babel Tower* there are passages from an alleged novel called *Babbletower* written in the style of postmodern dystopic fantasy full of sado-masochism, brutal sex and violence; in the Booker-Prize winning *Possesston* (1990) the pastiche of nineteenth-century poetry composed by Byatt follows the models of Robert Browning and Emily Dickinson, also created by Byatt there are then fashionable personal diaries and long letters. Not pastiche for pastiche's sake, all these varied uses of it are part of Byatt's literary tapestry.

The postmodern rejection of linearity in narration goes hand in hand with the general sense of fragmentation. Mark Currie speaks of „a kind of impatience to relegate contemporary events to the past, and [...] an

impatience to resurrect them and reinstall them in the present" (100). In Jeanette Winterson's view „in new work the past is restated and thereby reclaimed" (Winterson, *Art Objects*, 12), moreover, her writing is constructed around the notion of layered, fragmented and simultaneously continuous time. Her two early novels *The Passion* (1987) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) share a threefold sense of time: the chronological story time, historical time and fabular time, all of them merging seamlessly into a sense of timelessness. This is visualised in *Sexing the Cherry* by a fairy tale image of a silver city where everybody lives in a state of weightlessness, the houses have no floors or ceilings and the inhabitants float through them freely. There is another image of time in *Gut Symmetries* (1997): „What is it that you contain? The Dead. Time. Light patterns of millennia. The expanding universe opening in your gut" (2) – time both endless and contained, ungraspable realistically. Michele Roberts, too, travels in her novels effortlessly across temporal, cultural and class boundaries. In *the Red Kitchen* (1990) she takes us from Egyptian hieroglyphs through a pastiche of Victorian letters to fashionable contemporary cookery books produced by a young Londoner, alongside a number of other narratives in the same novel. Roberts's treatment of time is part of the smorgasbord in her writing of everyday objects, food, women's activities, beliefs and dreams, all of it participating in her feminist aim to create some kind of *écriture féminine* unburdened by patriarchal models of writing.

In contrast to Winterson's and Roberts's decidedly experimental writing, Jane Gardam fragmented her largely realistic novel *Old Filth* (2004) along both retrospective and anticipatory lines as if to make it resonate with a significant thought whose meaning for his life the main hero Old Filth ponders: „Without memory and desire life is pointless" (Gardam, 226). Knit together in delightful cultural shorthand, the story moves back and forth between the hero's birth in Malaya, his growing up and schooling as a Raj Orphan in England and the last few years of his retirement in England again with glimpses of his judicial career in Honk Kong. Between these fragments of Old Filth's life story more remains untold than is disclosed.

Contemporary writers of historical fiction seem to endorse the New Historicist claim that „history and literature are discourses which construct rather than reflect, invent rather than discover, the past" (Currie, 88). Thus Rose Tremain, after her much acclaimed *Restoration* (1989) „invented" and „constructed" another semi-historical novel *Music and Silence* (1999). In it King Christian IV and his wife Kirsten Munk in seventeenth-century Denmark are historical figures surrounded with a host of wholly fictional

characters. The lives of the principle protagonists, their emotions, experiences and decisions are constructed on the metaphor of music and silence betraying the author's awareness of the postmodern/poststructuralist language debates. Tremain's retelling of history through modern narrative methods is a fascinating amalgam of reliable historical facts and contemporary attitudes in social and literary thought and not least the feminist debate.

Just as well as concerning distant and recent history, the postmodern penchant for recycling and recontextualisation (Currie, 99-100) encompasses the primal forms of myths and fairy tales. This is also where the predilection for the playful and the fantastic comes to the fore. Marina Warner has both studied myths and fairy tales from historical point of view and employed their structures and other elements in her novel writing. She appreciates the collective effort that had created them and finds intriguing their ambiguity of values, their ability to be both traditional and subversive at the same time (Warner, *The Beauty*, 412). In her view the heroic optimism of fairy tales is liberating, because often „the forbidden door opens on to *terra nova*” (ibid., 415) and allows the readers to dream their utopias. Besides exploiting European fairy tale motifs and patterns and the role of the female tale teller in the novels *The Lost Father* (1988) and *Indigo: or Mapping the Waters* (1992), Warner retells and recontextualises the classical mythological tale of Leto in *The Leto Bundle* (2001). The story of Titaness Leto, raped by Zeus, banished to die, but saved with her newborn twins by a she-wolf in wilderness is retold and also relived by different women across the ages to the present days. With the topicality of the theme of exile, migration and asylum, Warner has attempted a poetics of hypertextuality – a non-linear composition of various registers from inscriptions on antique graves, magic words on mummy cloth, pastiche of chronicle records, monastery annals and archeological catalogues to modern pop lyrics, web pages and e-mail correspondence. All these texts, though thousands of years apart, are linked by references to numerous other mythological, fairy tale and biblical stories which, in Warner's imagination, „open gaps in time” (Warner, *The Leto Bundle*, 328) and speak to us through the mishmash of pagan and Christian traditions, facts and fantasy that are very much our own.

The above narrative devices testify that far from suffering from postmodern imaginative exhaustion, the British novel of the postmodern age employs and experiments with a variety of means and approaches which have resulted in a rich poetics in tune with the times.

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