

THE BRITISH NOVEL IN THE 80s: Historiographic Metafiction, The Way Ahead?

Susana ONEGA
University of Zaragoza

Now that we are entering the decade of the nineties it seems appropriate to look back at the novels published in the eighties in Britain in an attempt to find general characteristics, common traits, recurrent tendencies with which to impose order over chaos, unity over variety, thus paying due homage to the most deeply rooted myth of Western civilization, our unflinching faith in the power of rationality to pin down, arrange and classify the otherwise chaotic flood of phenomena of all kind, incessantly taking place in the universe.

Perhaps the best way to approach the novels written in the 1980s would be to listen to what the writers have to say about themselves. We can, then, attempt a first approximation by synthesizing the classification of contemporary British fiction recently carried out by a living writer, Maureen Duffy, novelist, poet, playwright and critic, who gave a lecture on «New Trends in British Fiction» during the 12th National Conference of The Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies, that took place in Alicante in December 1988.

Maureen Duffy distinguished first between British writing, which she described as the combination of the English «centre» plus the «Celtic fringe», and Post Colonial writing, including writers like Salman Rushdie, Peter Carey, and Nadine Gordimer, and described the former group as situated in a «position of particular difficulty» brought about by ten years «of radical right wing government with an opposition still seeming in disarray [and finding themselves] in many ways marginalised, and only able to be heard by competing in what has become the «leisure industry» for the attention of the media». «All this», she concluded, «makes them interesting in a world of «serious money, of fashion and consumerism, and the cultivation of a spurious individualism at the expense of any sense of community or compassion [while from the social point of view] they now find themselves identified with an opposition struggling to thrash out new concepts and find a new voice.»

The British writers of the 80s, then, feel marginalised, politically identified with the opposition and struggling to find a new voice in a world more and more heavily conditioned by the mass media and the leisure industry, which is fostering in them the cultivation of a spurious individualism.

We can compare this description of contemporary British writing to that given by the professional critic and reviewer, Valentine Cunningham, in the course of a lecture he gave in April 1990 on «The Englishness of English Fiction» during the 5th Oxford Conference of Literature Teaching Overseas. Like Maureen Duffy, Cunningham pictured English writers as marginalised and struggling to define and assert their own concept of Englishness, at a moment when this concept appears to be increasingly problematic. Drawing a parallel with Irish writers like Sterne, Beckett and Flann O'Brien, who gave vent to the pressure exerted on their Irishness by British culture by resorting to irony and satire, Cunningham sees contemporary English writers «on their small island», resisting with the same ironic weapons the pressures that appear to come from the outside, and «offering jokiness as a way of undercutting horror». For Valentine Cunningham, then, contemporary English fiction is characterised as «very enclosed» depicting a self-referential world into which the non-English reader tries to enter. So, where the Modernist writer seriously tried to fight his mythical struggle with God, Cunningham says, the contemporary English novelist prefers to «depict a little schoolboy being naughty».

Cunningham's choice example of this kind of fiction was David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1988), a novel that very ironically and amusingly confronts the man in the street with contemporary structuralist theory, and that manages to defend and to undermine the theory simultaneously. Together with *Nice Work* Cunningham mentioned William Golding's trilogy of the eighties and the novels of Iris Murdoch *en bloc*, which he described as variations on the disciple-master relationship, and which, in his own words, «still advocate the continuation of old fashioned realism». Cunningham placed at the other extreme of the spectrum novelists reacting against the patriarchal stereotype, like the feminists Fay Weldon, Angela Carter and Jeannette Winterson and also like Martin Amis, in whose novel *Money* (1984), «antipatriarchal reaction has turned into antipatriotism and sheer hostility against man».

So, according to Valentine Cunningham, the decade of the 80s is characterised by two tendencies, one more realistic in temper would mockingly defend its «little Englandism» while advocating the continuation of the old moral values, and another, much more ironic and satiric, would try to subvert in one way or another, the patriarchal system by different means.

Valentine Cunningham's reference to «antipatriarchal reaction» echoes what Lyotard (1984) has expressed as a loss of faith in the centralized and totalizing impulse of humanist thought, which, according to the Marxist critics' general belief, is the result of some complex change of sensibility

in the Western hemisphere, traceable, as Julia Kristeva (1969) has explained, to the decade of the sixties, with its demands for engagement and relevance, expressed in the students' revolt of May 1968 in France and in the anti-Vietnam War and Civil Rights protests, in Black and Feminist activism and in the appearance of the New Left in America. The sixties were marked also, paradoxically, by the international recognition of the French Nouveau Roman, whose roots go back, as Raymond Federman (1981) has explained, to Sartrean Existentialism. Cunningham's second group of feminist and fringe writers, then, would be seen as stemming from this generalised reaction against the «humanist cultural dominant» (Jameson 1984: 56).

Although following totally different criteria, Maureen Duffy also arranged contemporary writers into two basic groups. In all, she selected two kinds of novels as representative of very recent British fiction. The first kind, which included *Nice Work* (1988) by David Lodge and *The Radiant Way* (1987) by Margaret Drabble, she mentioned as examples of what she called «the resurgence of middle class realism». What Duffy calls a revival is perhaps, like Valentine Cunningham's first group, better described as a continuation of the old realistic trend traceable to the Amis-Larkin-Wain troika in the late forties and fifties and even going further back to the Varsity novel of the 1930s. Although the ascription of Lodge and Murdoch to this neo-realistic trend would be somewhat problematic, and much more so in the case of William Golding, we may agree with Maureen Duffy that Margaret Drabble occupies here a central position.

The other novels she mentioned, written by novelists belonging to a more recent generation, were Bruce Chatwin's *The Song Lines*, Jeannette Winterson's *The Passion*, Jim Crace's, *A Gift of Stones* and the novels of Peter Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton*. For Maureen Duffy these were the best examples of what she called «the most notable current in recent English fiction», characterised in general terms by the «retreat into history», a retreat, however, which, as she explained, is not carried out «in order to illuminate the present, but to dazzle, like entering a kind of Aladdin's cave of glittering objects».

Maureen Duffy's description of this new kind of dazzling historical novel as the most important trend in recent British fiction is really striking, for it reaches in one intuitive stroke the same conclusion that Linda Hutcheon reached by much more erudite and sophisticated means in her book, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, first published in 1988.

Throughout the 268 pages of her book, Linda Hutcheon very insistently argues that the specific poetics of postmodernism is exclusively realized in a particular kind of novel she calls «historiographic metafiction», which she describes as «those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages» (1988: 5).

According to Hutcheon, the unique combination of history and fiction that takes place in «historiographic metafiction» perfectly expresses what is for her the defining characteristic of the Postmodernist ethos: its basic contradictory nature, for

«it does not deny [the liberal humanist dominant], as some have asserted (Newman 1985, 42; Palmer 1977, 364). Instead, it contests it from within its own assumptions. [...] What this means is that the familiar humanist separation of art and life (or human imagination and order *versus* chaos and disorder) no longer holds. Postmodernist contradictory art still installs that order, but it then uses it to demystify our everyday processes of structuring chaos, of imparting or assigning meaning (1988: 6-7).

How new and how important is this new historical trend? What are its basic characteristics? It is my purpose in the rest of this lecture to try and answer these basic questions. The first one, «how new is this trend?», I will try to answer obliquely by relating an anecdote.

In 1983 I wrote a letter to David Lodge in which I asked him for his advice and help in carrying out a research project on such pseudo-historical novels as *The Go Between* and *The French Lieutenant Woman*. The project, which I was just starting, was to analyse novels of this sort, in order to establish the points of divergence between real Victorian novels and these modern imitations. David Lodge's answer ran as follows: «If you are interested specifically in deliberate anachronism of narrative technique and verbal allusion in a modern novel about the Victorian age, then *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is the only text I can think of that does this very elaborately» (Letter to S. Onega, 12th Oct. 1983). Of course, Lodge's answer referred only to imitations of a concrete historical period, the Victorian era, and not to historical novels in general, but I think this does not invalidate Lodge's implicit acknowledgement that the historical novel was an extreme rarity in British fiction as late as October 1983. What is more, the reason why I was interested in imitations of Victorian fiction and not in imitations of other periods, was not that I was particularly keen on the 19th century, but simply that these were the first historical parodies that had come to my notice.

Today, the panorama has completely changed. Maureen Duffy herself, has written one historical novel, *Capital* (1975). Other historiographic metafiction include John Fowles' *A Maggot* (1986) William Golding's trilogy: *Rites of Passage* (1980), *Close Quarters* (1987) and *Fire Down Below* (1989); Lawrence Durrell's *Avignon Quintet*: [*Monsieur* (1974), *Livia* (1978), *Constance* (1982), *Sebastian, or Ruling Passions* (1983) and *Quinx, or The Ripper's Tale* (1985)], Graham Swift's *Shuttlecock* (1981) and *Waterland* (1983), Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *Staring at the Sun* (1986) and *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (1989), Peter Ackroyd's *The Great Fire of London* (1982), *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), *Hawksmoor* (1985), *Chatterton* (1987) and *First Light*

(1989), Rose Tremain's *Restoration* (1989), A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), and Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (1989), besides Jeannete Winterson's *The Passion* (1987), Jim Crace's *A Gift of Stones* (1988) and Bruce Chatwin's *The Song Lines* (1987) mentioned by Duffy and the «science» tetralogy by the Irish John Banville: *Dr. Copernicus* (1976), *Kepler* (1981), *The Newton Letter* (1983) and *Mefisto* (1986).

A first distinction we may draw is that, broadly speaking, these writers belong to two literary generations. The older one, including Golding, Fowles, Durrell and Byatt, goes back to the fifties and sixties and provides the link between Modernism and Postmodernism. The younger generation can be divided into two: those novelists whose literary careers started in the sixties or seventies with Maureen Duffy, John Banville, Jim Crace and Bruce Chatwin, and the generation of the 80s *stricto sensu*, with Graham Swift, Jeannete Winterson, Julian Barnes, Peter Ackroyd, Rose Tremain, and Charles Palliser.

If we concentrate on these last mentioned ones, we will find that their biographies have interesting crisscrossings: all of them were born after the end of the Second World War. Peter Ackroyd, who was born in 1949, has studied at Oxford and Yale and combines his literary career with those of literary editor of *The Spectator* and chief reviewer for *The Times*. He is an expert in Modernist literature and has published two outstanding biographies, one of T.S. Eliot (1985), the other of Dickens (1990). Graham Swift, also born in 1949, studied English at Cambridge and began a Ph. D. dissertation on Dickens at York. He lives at present in London, where he combines writing with teaching. Julian Barnes was born in 1946 and educated in London and Oxford. He worked as a lexicographer on the *Oxford English Dictionary* and as a journalist in *The New Statesman* and *The Sunday Times* and has been television critic of *The Observer*. Rose Tremain, besides having performed numerous TV and radio plays, works as teacher of creative writing at the University of East Anglia, and as literary critic, reviewing regularly for the radio. Although Jeannete Winterson, born in 1959, is younger and has a somewhat different background (she was brought up as a strict Pentecostal Evangelist, and seems to have drifted from manual job to manual job for a time). She also has a University training, for she eventually went to Oxford to read English before working in the theatre and becoming a full-time writer. Charles Palliser is likewise an Oxford graduate who teaches twentieth-century fiction and poetry at Strathclyde University.

It seems then, that the novelists of the 1980s interestingly combine in themselves artistic creativity with the critical awareness provided by University trainings in Oxford or Cambridge and, with the only exception of Jeannete Winterson, by their experience as literary critics.

They have therefore, a thorough, specialist, knowledge of the literary tradition to which they belong, but also of literary theory. They have all

won several prizes and awards and seem to conform very well to Maureen Duffy's description of the successful novelist fighting in the «leisure industry» for recognition by the media. The novels they write are very different in range, scope, interest and sensibility and yet all of them share what Cunningham described as a «relish in irony and paradox», besides what Duffy defined as a dazzling «retreat into history».

Why this eclosion of the historical novel in the late 70s and 80s? Where are we to place the beginning of this development and what are the basic ideas underlying this kind of fiction? Is this, as Linda Hutcheon maintains, the only kind of fiction that fulfills the poetics of Postmodernism? These are the basic questions we should ask ourselves when confronted with this phenomenon. In order to answer them I will have to go back to the point where David Lodge's letter left the discussion.

When *The French Lieutenant's Woman* appeared in 1969 it was welcomed by its first reviewers as an extraordinary example of the revival of the historical novel in England, while at the same time they completely misunderstood Fowles' aim in writing it. Critics like Walter Allen (1970: 66) and Prescott Evarts, Jr. (1972: 57) implicitly accused John Fowles of openly and shamelessly imitating old conventions, and of trying to cheat us into accepting them as new, insisting on viewing *The French Lieutenant's Woman* primarily as a historical novel on which futile attempts at experimentation had been made at random.

Analysing the games of frame breaks in the novel, however, it is easy to see that Fowles' real aim in writing it was not so much to write a Victorian novel out of time, but rather, in line with contemporary metafictional practice, to build an illusion only to destroy it, to show us its provisionality, its intrinsic fictional character, thus making us reflect on the Victorian literary convention of realism and recognize it for what it is: a provisional frame created by the combined work of the author and the «willing suspension of disbelief» of the reader.

Similarly, when Fowles blurs the boundaries between the narrative levels within which the narrator and the characters respectively move, and between these and the level of the flesh-and-blood writer, he is pointing to a basic deconstructive contention: the advisability of seeing everyday reality as a construction similar to that of fiction, and as such, similarly «written» and «writable».

This contention that reality is subjective and polymorphous, is taken up and developed seriously in *Daniel Martin* (1977) and in a wild satiric vein in *Mantissa* (1982), where we find Miles Green, a ludicrously naïve contemporary writer, boastfully and chauvinistically trying to assert omniscient control over his Muse and over his created world, only to find himself secluded in the domed and quilted room of his own brain and exhausted and trapped within the monothematic sexist world of his own imagination.

If there is one common feature shared by the writers of historiographic metafiction it may be said to be precisely the concern to transcend the *cul de sac* in which Miles Green finds himself, incapable as he is of getting out of the prisonhouse of his own brain, where he has been locked up since existentialism and deconstruction took the Modernist contention of the split of world and self to its logical consequences. The solution, as Daniel Martin intuits, is to write a literature capable of telling the «real». But in order to do so, concepts like «reality» and «truth», and the position of man in the universe would have to be redefined.

Contemporary fiction writers have responded to Miles Green's cry for help in two related ways. If, as the Modernists believed, the self cannot transcend the barriers of its own imagination, one way out of the absurd, monomaniacal, rewriting of endless variations of nothingness in which Miles Green was trapped is to stretch and develop the resources of the mind, by having recourse to fantasy. This is what, broadly speaking, writers like Angela Carter, Julian Barnes and Jeannette Winterson have done. In novels like *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* (1972), *Nights at the Circus* (1984), *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) and *The Passion* (1987) the metafictional relish in the story-telling aspect of fiction is combined with parody, pastiche, travesty and all possible kinds of transtextual games in an attempt to overcome the Modernist contention that the individual work of art, like the mind that created it, is unique and self-sufficient and so, incapable of transcendence.

Still, although these novels powerfully assert the validity of the imaginative world as an alternative to external reality, they do not truly bridge the gap between self and world: they simply expand, enrich and make communal the unreal reality of the human imagination.

A more radical solution, therefore, is the one proposed by historiographic metafiction, which is to attempt to negotiate the intrusion of the world upon the self by redefining the relative positions of fiction and history, according to the contentions of both poststructuralist theory and the New Historicism.

Traditionally, art has been seen as autonomous and unrelated to the truth of external reality, art creating its own reality, within which beautiful or ugly are all important, false or true negligible. History, on the other hand, has traditionally been defined as an empirical search for external truths, so that, in Aristotle's terms (1982, 1, 451 a-b), the historian could speak only of what has happened, while the poet spoke of what could or might happen according to the laws of probability and possibility, not truth.

New Historicists like Hayden White and Paul Veyne, however, are now ready to question the capacity of history to reveal absolute truths, so that, in Jacques Ehrman's extreme formulation, «history and literature have no existence in and of themselves. It is we who constitute them as the objects of our understanding» (in Hutcheon, 1988: 111).

By reducing history to the category of human construct, the postmodernist creative writer can now incorporate history to his/her fiction. But the incorporation of history as a structuring device necessarily involves an ironic effect as in, Linda Hutcheon's words (1981:124-5), it signals «a longing for the return to the traditional relish in story telling while simultaneously underlining the fact that this return is problematic». Linda Hutcheon summarises the effects of this paradoxical endeavour:

In the wake of recent assaults by literary and philosophical theory on modernist formalist closure, postmodern fiction has certainly sought to open itself up to history, to what Edward Said (1983) calls the «world». But it seems to have found that it can no longer do so in any remotely innocent way, and so those un-innocent paradoxical historiographic metafiction situate themselves within historical discourse, while refusing to surrender their autonomy as fiction. And it is a kind of *seriously ironic parody* that often enables this contradictory doubleness: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the «world» and literature (1988: 124) (my underlining).

Qua metafiction, then, historiographic metafiction deliberately undercuts the link between fiction and reality, underlining its discursive and fictional nature, its self-sufficiency and autonomy, while *qua* history, historiographic metafiction simultaneously asserts the interrelation of fiction to the historical past.

By depriving history of its pretensions to absolute truth, the New Historicists and the postmodernist creative writers after them have negotiated the reunification of self and world, but have apparently simultaneously deprived this reunification of ultimate significance. Levelled to the plane of human construct, history, like literature, appears in principle incapable of offering ultimate answers about the basic human questions. However, before we decide that historiographic metafiction does not really bridge the Modernist gap between world and self but rather deepens it by adding history to the list of subjective human constructs, we should bear Linda Hutcheon's warning in mind that historiographic metafiction, like all postmodernist art, is «a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges» (1988: 4).

In order to grasp the import of this statement we should suspend our judgement for a moment in order to turn our attention to *A Maggot*, John Fowles' latest novel to date and his most powerful historiographic metafiction.

A Maggot was published in 1986, seven years after *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The plot is situated in 1736, that is, in the England of Swift, Pope, and Walpole. Paid by an anonymous Duke, a cunning and efficient barrister called Henry Ayscough has accumulated all kinds of evidence about the journey from London to Devon undertaken by the Duke's son, called Mr. B., in the company of four other travellers, a middle aged «uncle», a Sergeant, a manservant, and a maid, which ended in the disappearance of

the Duke's son and the death of the manservant, called Dick Thurlow. As the novel progresses Henry Ayscough discovers that none of the travellers is what he seems to be, they all use false names and Mr. B. has put about different versions with regard to the purpose of their journey. According to one version, Mr. B. has thought out a way of disobeying his father and eloping with the woman he loves. According to another, Mr. B. is going to see his wealthy aunt in Bideford, in order to secure his inheritance. A third version presents Mr. B. as suffering from impotence and the purpose of the journey is to try some miraculous water reputed to cure this kind of ailment. A fourth version presents Mr. B. obsessed with esoteric knowledge. According to this version, Mr. B. is travelling to the mythic circle of Stonehenge in order to recover by means of some obscure calculation the long-lost power of the ancients to communicate with other-worldly beings, whether fiendish, celestial, or simply extraterrestrial. On top of that, when Rebecca, the maid, and David Jones, the Sergeant, are questioned by Ayscough about what really happened both at the neolithic circle of Stonehenge and in the cave where Mr. B. disappeared, each gives a contradictory version, Jones describing them as satanic experiences, Rebecca as encounters with celestial beings.

Confronted with this fog of alternative names, plots and interpretations, critics like Julian Moynahan (1985) and Katherine Tarbox (1988) would typically lament the novel's «evasiveness» (Moynahan, *ibid.*, p. 47) and absence of «controlling plot», «consistent protagonist» or «narrative focus» (Tarbox, *ibid.*, p. 136), concluding that «Ayscough never does reach truth incontestable, nor does the reader» (Tarbox, *ibid.*, p. 138, my underlining). For Tarbox the novel has no structure or coherent significance: «Nearly all the characters are actual historical personages, and Fowles uses them to demonstrate that human lives do not necessarily have definite beginnings and ends» (p. 143), while Moynahan becomes «convinced that Fowles has failed to write a serious book. As he says, it is a maggot» (*ibid.*, p. 49).

However, although these versions seem logically contradictory, once it is realized that both the versions about the real aim of the journey and about Mr. B's identity are simply more or less fanciful literary «variations» on one unique theme —some form of disobedience or frustration— it is possible to interpret the journey in psychological terms, as a hero's quest for individuation that, as I have shown elsewhere (Onega, 1989: 137-163), neatly follows Jung's scheme of the quaternity (Jung, 1981 b: 175).

Once and again, in widely different cultures, under widely different forms, the myth of the quest for individuation of the self reappears with its striking homogeneous stages. The hero and his horse undertake a heroic quest towards the sacred wood where the maternal womb is encountered in the form of a mysterious cave. Invariably, the rider stands for the conscious. The horse, symbol as he is of the unconscious, often represents, as does Dick Thurlow, the *concupiscencia effrenata* (Jung, 1981 a: 280), the most

violent sexual appetites. But he is also endowed with the numinous instinctual power to lead the way to the *locus amoenus* that encloses the *anima*.

The archetypal interpretation of the journey undertaken by Mr. B. and his fellow-travellers helps us to understand why Mr. B. needed Rebecca for the journey and also why she has a paradoxical double nature, for Rebecca's oxymoron qualities are those of the *anima*. Alternatively presented as virgin and whore, she represents yet another split of the hero's personality, simultaneously repressed by Mr. B, the ego's conscious side, and lusted after by Dick, the ego's *shadow* or instinctual half.

Thus, from a psychological perspective, the journey becomes a hero's quest for a new totality of the self, which must be achieved through Mr. B.'s acceptance of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the reconciliation of his conscious, his *shadow* and his *anima* potentialities in the global perception of the self as such. Similarly, from a psychological point of view, the contradictory versions given by Rebecca and David Jones about the events that took place at Stonehenge and in the cave acquire overall meaning, for, as Walter Miller Jr. unfailingly detects, «the equivalence of the infernal and the celestial versions of the scene in the cave conform to Jung's psychology, and both versions of the cave scene are true» (1985: 11).

At the same time, however, the novel offers another, strikingly opposed, interpretation. Literally, Mr. B. selected two players and a prostitute reputed for her acting ability, removed them from the London theatre and the brothel where they respectively worked, and hired them to interpret the roles of uncle, body-guard and maid during the journey. After that Mr. B. once and again tested the credulity of his fellow travellers by telling them a series of tales about the real aim of the journey, insisting that he had been offered «a part in a history and is not forgiven for refusing to play it» and that he, like the rest, is made of imperfect words and ideas, and to serve other ends» (p 150).

The fact that Mr. B. is capable of creating these literary variations himself while at the same time he sees himself and his fellow travellers as hired actors interpreting their allotted roles in the *comoedia vitae* (p. 22) qualifies the previous interpretations of his journey, adding to them a further perspective, according to which the revolt of the Son against the Father becomes the character's refusal to play the role allotted to him by the author. No matter whether we consider Mr. B. as the son of a Duke who has disappeared, or as a Cambridge scholar involved in alchemical research, or as a mythical hero undertaking his heroic quest, or as a psychologically split ego who must cure his neurosis and find a new totality of the self —what he primarily is, is a literary character who has been asked to play all these roles within a fictional universe and who, for all the apparent freedom he seemed to have in devising the roles of the other characters, was conscious at heart of his radical bondage and of the fact that, for all his rebelliousness, he must comply and «serve other ends», John Fowles' ends, no doubt.

From the early Greek philosophers to the era of Newton, Western man has tried to reject what he considered to be the obscurantist forces of irrational mythologizing, proposing instead a rational explanation of the world that relies on the presumption that scientific analysis has greater epistemological validity than any other analytical mode. The rational European has fought therefore a centuries-long battle to conjure up the symbolic world, a world in which the harsh realities of existence were represented and dealt with on the level of abstractions, in order to construct a cosmovision based on observation, classification and categorization of the experience of the past and on its reduction to formulae capable of predicting similar phenomena in the future.

However, as Robert Nadeau explains in *Readings from the New Book on Nature* (1981), when Quantum and relativity physicists understood that matter is nothing but a manifestation of energy, they were forced to call into question the classical notion of self and world best synthesized in Aristotle's either-or principle or the «law of the excluded middle» which presented man in dialectic relation to a physical world made up of those fixed immutable things, the Substances. The discovery that matter is not made up of invariable substances but, simply, of quite unstable bundles of energy, conveys the strong suggestion that the particular collection of atoms which constitutes a human being is not a definitive something, separate and distinct from all other things and so, as Nadeau explains (1982:19), «If I am one with the cosmos, a mere pulse of energy wed like a wave in a river to the vast space-time continuum, then I, as a discrete and definable something, would not appear to exist at all».

The dissolution of material reality into seemingly vast reaches of nothingness inhabited by tiny activities of somethingness called subatomic particles, endlessly interacting in energetic fields, subscribed by Quantum and relativity theories has obliged both scientists and artists alike to reconsider the Aristotelian assumptions about man and the world, bringing to the fore the often suppressed awareness that the traditional vision of world and self developed by neoclassical, rationalist thought is based on a dualistic metaphysics shared both by the ancient Greek and the Judeo-Christian cosmogony. Although Greek philosophers like Plato and Pythagoras are credited with scientific discoveries like deductive reasoning, geometry and mathematics, yet, as Robert Nadeau (1981:21) explained, «their method of developing these conceptual tools was not scientific, they reasoned deductively from what appeared self-evident, and not inductively from what had been observed. *In fact the impulse which fueled the act of imagination that led to these formulations is comparable to that of mystics in any culture —it was the quest to uncover the essence of metaphysical reality»* (my underlining).

Taking to its logical consequences the Modernist split of self and world, Fowles reached an absurdist *cul de sac* in *Mantissa* unable as he was to free Miles Green from the prisonhouse of his own mind. After this, in

A Maggot, Fowles intuitively responded to his need for transcendence in terms comparable to the reconsideration of Western rationalist assumptions carried out by Quantum and relativity physicists, that is by a return to dualistic thinking.

So, In *A Maggot*, Fowles creates a maze-like set of false tracks that as far as Henry Ayscough and the rationalist reader alike are concerned, lead nowhere, while he simultaneously offers the more intuitive reader a perfectly coherent reading, following the kind of dualistic, archetypal symbolism that Jung presented as the contemporary alternative to pre-rationalist myth and religion.

The archetypal quality of Mr. B.'s journey is what confers on him his representative character. Mr. B.'s essential transformation is applicable to every man, and so may be interpreted as evidence that Man has finally achieved his reunification with the universe in the figure of Cosmic Man. However, as the interpretation that reduces Mr. B. to an unfree literary character paradoxically indicates, this reunification of Man and Cosmos is only temporarily achieved within the boundaries of the paper walls of Fowles' novel. So, in accordance with the puzzling contradictory nature of historiographic metafiction, Fowles simultaneously affirms and negates the validity of this reunification.

In *A Maggot*, Ayscough's rationality and logic are set in opposition to Mr. B.'s white magic which he has acquired at Cambridge, has a numerologic and alchemical origin, and is related to the ancestral pre-rationalist rituals of Stonehenge.

In Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* a basic dual opposition is likewise set between the antagonistic and yet complementary beliefs of the rationalist architect and member of The Royal Society, Sir Christopher Wren, and those of his assistant, architect Nicholas Dyer, a convinced black magician and satanist. This basic duality is expressed at every possible level. Structurally, in the fact that two different plots are simultaneously developed: one appears in the odd chapters, is set in the eighteenth century, and narrates the story of Nicholas Dyer, who was commissioned to build seven churches in the City of London and Westminster after the Great Fire of 1666; the other, narrated in the even chapters, is set in contemporary England, and deals with the story of detective Nicholas Hawksmoor, who was commissioned to investigate a series of murders committed near the churches built by Dyer. But the odd and even chapters are structurally and thematically interrelated with each other: the last words of each odd chapter are also the opening words of the next chapter and the cases Hawksmoor investigates are in fact Nicholas Dyer's murders.

Furthermore, detective and architect share a striking complementarity, so striking that, from a Jungian point of view they can be seen as split facets of a single individual, the conscious and unconscious aspects of the flesh-and-blood Augustan architect, Nicholas Hawksmoor, who worked for Sir Christopher Wren in the historical past.

Unlike Henry Ayscough, and unlike the rationalists of The Royal Society, architect Nicholas Dyer believes, like Mr. B., that the world cannot be explained by rational means and that true knowledge does not lie in logical deduction but rather in the acquisition of forbidden knowledge through occult practices. Dyer believes in the Hermetic Principle of Correspondence synthesised in the dictum «as below, so above». So, he reproduces with his seven churches the pattern cast by the Seven Orders of the seven planets in heaven, a magic Septilateral Figure, through which he eventually puts an end to his successive reincarnations and brings about the reunification of himself with detective Hawksmoor, thus transcending mortality and achieving, like Mr. B. in *A Maggot*, his sought-for essential transformation into the *Anthropos*, Cosmic man (Jung, 1980: 113-47).

The Augustan Age, with its well-known polarities of reason and passion, order and chaos, logic and magic, expresses like no other the age's specific contradiction between the official culture of rationalism and Enlightenment and actual taste that, as *A Maggot* and *Hawksmoor* suggest, was much more ancestral, oscurantist and irrational. Indeed the basic dualism that suffuses the age of The Enlightenment, expressed, for example, in the co-existence of the sentimental novel and the Gothic romance, helps explain the attraction that the Augustan Age, and also the Restoration and the early nineteenth century seem to have for writers of historiographic metafiction like Rose Tremain, Peter Ackroyd, Charles Palliser, John Banville and John Fowles.

Describing recent British historiographic metafiction, Maureen Duffy said that these historical novels retreated into the past, but not «in order to illuminate the present, but to dazzle, like entering a kind of Aladdin's cave of glittering objects» and it is true that in novels like Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* and *First Light*, John Banville's *Dr. Copernicus*, *Kepler*, *The Newton Letter* and *Mefisto*, Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx*, or John Fowles' *A Maggot* the attempt to recreate a concrete historical period in traditional terms is only a pretext for a much more interesting and disturbing aim, which is to enter the tunnel of time in order to recover the other, suppressed, half of Western civilization and history: the mythical, esoteric, hermetic, gnostic and cabbalistic elements which once formed an inextricable unity with reason and logic, and which have been progressively repressed and muffled since the Middle Ages by the mainstream of rationalism.

By so doing these writers hope to find alternative patterns of meaning capable of giving sense to the human condition. Incapable of reconciling self and world by rational means, they try to transcend the limits of the self in symbolic and archetypal terms. Mr. B. in *A Maggot*, as we have seen, achieves his individuation by using his occult knowledge to guide him along the stages of his hero's quest, reproducing with his hired actors and servant the archetypal figure of the *quaternario*. Likewise, in Peter Ackroyd's novel, Nicholas Dyer uses his black magic in order to transcend his

human condition, creating with his Septilateral Figure a ladder that literally opens the gates of heaven for him.

With their painful and prolonged studies of the occult Mr. B. and Nicholas Dyer are trying to recover, like archaeologist Mark Clare in Ackroyd's *First Light*, something the Mint family had always managed to preserve: the lost wisdom of their neolithic forefathers, prior to the Aristotelian either-or dichotomy best symbolized in the mythic circle of Stonehenge.

Mr. B.'s *quaternario*, like Dyer's Septilateral Figure and like the *quincunx* in Lawrence Durrell's *Avignon Quintet* or, explicitly, in Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx*, or again like the elliptical circle of white stones enclosing the ancient tumulus in Dorset that appears in *First Light*, and which strikingly recalls the New Physicists' concept of the parabolic curve on whose vertex opposites are integrated, are all archetypal figurations of mandalic totality, and they express the achievement of the symbolic reconciliation of world and self in the figure of Cosmic Man, memorably drawn by Leonardo da Vinci as a star-man with arms and legs outstretched. Even if, as often happens in these novels, this reunification is shown as fictional and ephemeral, the comfort its achievement conveys is the knowledge that, in Mark Clare's words:

[...] nothing really dies. Just because we are trapped in time, we assume that there is only one direction to go. But when we are dead, when we are out of time, everything returns [...] our bodies are made out of dead stars. We carry their light inside us. So everything goes back. Everything is part of the pattern. We carry our origin within us, and we can never rest until we have returned.» (Ackroyd, 1989: 318)

In 1981 Robert Nadeau convincingly argued for the existence of a close cause-effect relationship between contemporary fiction and the collapse of Western rationalism in terms of the discoveries of the New Science, and he used as examples of this the writings of John Barth, John Updike, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Thomas Pynchon, Tom Robbins, Don DeLillo and John Fowles. Nadeau's book then, concentrates on American writers and presents John Fowles as a somewhat isolated case in the general panorama of contemporary British fiction.

We have seen how this panorama has now completely changed. Although Valentine Cunningham, like other realism-biased Oxbridge scholars still insists on speaking about «the Englishness of English Fiction» and on picturing contemporary creative writing as «very enclosed» and «resisting with ironic weapons the pressures that appear to come from the outside» the truth is that the eclosion of British historiographic metafiction in the 1980s shows British novelists catching up with a world-wide phenomenon, which goes back not only to North-American experimental «fabulation» but also to Spanish-American «magic-realism» and to Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges in particular. García Márquez' *Cien Años de Soledad*

(1967) may be seen as one of the first historiographic metafiction in which fantasy, myth and archetype are consistently used as a richer alternative to realistic rationalism for the means of recovering a people's lost identity, while Borges' well-known interest in the development of Spanish-Jewish thought foreshadows recent North-American interest in the Cabbala of which Harold Bloom's *Cabbala and Criticism* (1975) is a case in point.

We can, then, visualise the eclosion of historiographic metafiction in Britain in the nineteen-eighties as part of a world-wide development related to Spanish-American «magic realism» and North-American «fabulation» that includes writers from all over the world, like Milan Kundera, Heinrich Böll, Christa Wolf, Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, E. L. Doctorov, Ian Watson, William Kennedy, Susan Daitch, Chris Scott, Rudy Wiebe, Timothy Findley, Margaret Atwood, J. Michael Coetzee and Salman Rushdie.

Even if we refuse to accept Linda Hutcheon's contention that historiographic metafiction is *the only kind* of fiction that really fulfills the poetics of postmodernism we would have to admit that this trend very richly and powerfully catches and expresses the deepest concerns of contemporary man.

Bibliography

- ACKROYD, Peter, 1989 *First Light* London: Abacus.
- ALLEN, Walter, 1970. «The Achievement of John Fowles» *Encounter* XXV2 (August): 64-67.
- ARISTOTLE, 1982 *Poetics*, trans. James Hutton, London & New York: Norton.
- BARTHES, Roland, 1975 (1973) *The Pleasure of the Text* trans. by Richard Miller, New York: Hill & Wang.
- CUNNINGHAM, Valentine, 1990 «The Englishness of English Fiction» 5th Oxford Conference of Literature Teaching Overseas (April) [unpublished conference].
- DUFFY, Maureen 1988 «New Trends in British Fiction» Proceedings of the 12th National Conference of AEDEAN, University of Alicante (December) [forthcoming].
- EVARTS, Prescott, Jr., 1972 «Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as Tragedy» *Critique* XIII, n.º. 3, 57-69.
- FEDERMAN, Raymond 1975 *Surfiction: Fiction Now... and Tomorrow*, Chicago, III: Chicago University Press.
- FOWLES, John (1969) 1983 *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Bungay, Suffolk: Triad/Grananda.
- 1977 Daniel MARTIN London: Jonathan Cape.
- 1982 MANTISSA London: Jonathan Cape.
- 1986 A. MAGGOT London: Jonathan Cape.
- GARDNER, John, 1977 «In Defense of the Real», *Saturday Review* (1 October): 22-24.

- HUTCHEON, Linda, 1988, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* New York & London: Routledge.
- JAMESON, Fredric, 1984 «Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism» *New Left Review* 146: 53-92.
- JUNG, Carl G. (1959) 1980 «Concerning Rebirth» in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. The Collected Works* Vol. IX (part I). Sir Herbert Read et al., eds. London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 113-47. trans. by R.F.C. Hull from «Über Wiedergeburt» *Gestaltungen des Unbewussten* (1950).
- (1956) 1981 a «The Battle for Deliverance from the Mother» in *Symbols of Transformation. The Collected Works* Vol. V. Sir Herbert Read et al., eds. London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 274-305. Trans. by R.F.C. Hull from *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido* (1912).
- (1958) 1981 b «A Psychological Approach to the Dogma of the Trinity» in *Psychology and Religion: West and East. The Collected Works* Vol. XI Sir Herbert Read et al., eds. London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 107-200. Transl. by R. F. Hull from «Versuch zu einer psychologischen Deutung des Trinitätsdogmas,» *Symbolik des Geistes* (1948).
- KRISTEVA, Julia, 1969 *Semeiotike: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* Paris: Seuil.
- LYOTARD, Jean-François, 1984 *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* trans. by Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- MC SWEENEY, Kerry 1987 «Withering into the Truth: John Fowles and Daniel Martin» *Critical Quarterly* Vol. 20, n.º 4 (Winter): 31-38.
- MILLER, Walter, Jr., 1985 «Chariots or Goddesses, or What?» *The New York Times Book Review* (8 September): 11.
- MOYNAHAN, Julian 1985 «Fly Casting» *New Republic* 193 (7 October): 47-49.
- NADEAU, Robert, 1981 *Readings from the New Book on Nature* Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.
- ONEGA, Susana, 1989 *Form and Meaning in the Novels of John Fowles* Ann Arbor & London: U.M.I. Research Press.
- SAGE, Lorna, 1974 «John Fowles» Profile 7 *The New Review* London Vol. 1, n.º 7 (October): 321-37.
- TARBOX, Katherine, 1988 *The Art of John Fowles* Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press.
- WAUGH, Patricia, 1984 *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* London & New York: Methuen.