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Late Modernism, Postmodernism, and After

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Postmodernism and Nationalism

To write of 'postmodernism' is both to skate on thin ice and to tread familiar ground. Almost every piece of scholarship that uses this classification must begin, by convention it seems, with a lengthy tract on what precisely is meant by 'the postmodern'. It is precarious 'thin ice' because these definitions are not always aligned with one another and are sometimes delicate. For instance, many of the tropes that one might call 'postmodern' and to which I will shortly turn are clearly exhibited in Romantic-era writing or in the epic of Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). Such definitional work is 'familiar ground', though, because the procedure has become so routinised as to appear mundane.

I am afraid that this chapter will not be the exception to the rule. For the structural grouping of this piece under the section 'Genres and Movements' poses some initial problems. This is because, when postmodernism is couched in terms of a progression from 'late modernism', through 'postmodernism', to 'after', there is the ever-present temptation to consider it solely as a periodising movement as opposed to a set of stylistic techniques that have merely received additional emphasis in recent years. Yet the 'post' prefix here can be considered within multiple frames: it can mean 'after' modernism or it can mean 'a mutated continuation of'

modernism. It could even mean ‘an intensification of’ modernism. Furthermore, the term postmodernism is also used to refer discretely to the set of cultural, economic, and political conditions that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century. In Jean-François Lyotard’s famous tract, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, he described this socio-cultural phase as an ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’.¹ In other words, the totalising logic of positivism that fuelled the early twentieth century gave way to a ‘postmodern’ ethos: in physics through quantum mechanics, in politics through the collapse of the British Empire, and in literary production through a proliferation of destabilising narratological techniques. Certainly, the continued destabilisation of economic certainties along Marxist lines and the protracted unveiling of structured subconsciouses through psychoanalytic tools also played a role. But this literary postmodernism is at once woven between broader globalised shifts in cultural postmodernism while also possessing its own specificities.

The other side of the ‘postmodern’ definition that we must never neglect, though, is the fact that a straightforward claim of a progression from modernism to postmodernism to ‘something-after-postmodernism’ also holds within it the possibility of a domineering or totalising chronology that neglects the vast quantity of fiction writing that falls outside of such a

1 See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

scheme. For instance, modernism and postmodernism never *replaced* literary realism, they merely supplemented it. Furthermore, a range of genre forms, explored more ably by Caroline Edwards in this volume, have been and continue to be read by a larger number of readers than postmodernism ever reached. Indeed, we should be cautious about our framing of postmodernism as a dominant literary narrative from the 1980s. Certainly, a strand of highbrow literary fiction can be classed under such a rubric. However, the degree to which postmodernism is often hailed as the *major* literary descriptor for this period is perhaps overegged.

That said and now turning to the geographical specificities of the term, literary postmodernism is often considered a predominantly Northern American phenomenon. Indeed, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Donald Barthelme, Kurt Vonnegut, Bret Easton Ellis, Richard Powers, Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Joseph Heller, Hunter S. Thompson, Vladimir Nabokov, William Gaddis, Philip Roth, William Burroughs, Kathy Aker, and the early works of David Foster Wallace, among many others, might be considered exemplary of this national postmodern focus on the USA. We also see a marked dominance in this space by the ethnographic portrait that Wallace once summed up as, for the most part, ‘the Great [white]Male Narcissists’.²

2 David Foster Wallace, ‘John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One; Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?’, *Observer*, 1997
 <<http://observer.com/1997/10/john-updike-champion-literary-phallocrat-drops-one-is->

The literary traits that can be found within this group of American novelists can be concisely, albeit reductively and far from completely, summarised as: a focus on narrative indeterminacy; fragmentation and temporal distortion; a degree of irony and/or playfulness; a referential or intertextual structure; a destruction of the distinction between creative and critical practice; a post-secularism; a wariness about technology; pastiche; metafictional elements (that is, a narrative focus on the text's own textuality or the act of writing); magical realism; historiographic remarks; and a tendency towards either maximalist or minimalist writing. Furthermore, in one of the most prominent definitions of the American postmodern scene, Brian McHale has distinguished between modern and postmodern writing through reference to a 'change in dominant' from a focus on epistemology (knowledge) in the former to a centrality of ontology (being) in the latter.³ For McHale, the central difference is that modernism poses (solvable) epistemological questions of the reader: for instance, 'what are the limits of readerly knowledge'? On the other hand, in McHale's account, postmodern writing becomes about the limits of the world: 'which world and whose reality?'

The British scene of postmodern writing since the 1980s exhibits

3 this-finally-the-end-for-magnificent-narcissists/> [accessed 27 December 2016].
3 Brian McHale, 'Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing', *Approaching Postmodernism*, Utrecht Publications in General and Comparative Literature, 21 (1986), 53–79.

almost all of the aforementioned traits, albeit with some given more space at the expense of others. For while the continued prominence in the twenty-first century of writers such as Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro, Pat Barker and Zadie Smith might suggest that there is an underlying connection between British writing and some kind of realism, that British writers are at their best when writing in a form that has its roots in the realism of Thomas Hardy and George Eliot, there is also a marked development of what might be called a postmodern aesthetic in British writing, that is sometimes entangled with British realism, but often diverts from it.

From Late Modernism to Postmodernism

In order to understand British postmodernism, it is first necessary to have some grasp of the transformations in late modernism that sculpted the immediately preceding era (despite the warnings above regarding this chronology). The term 'late modernism' is conventionally used to refer to works that exhibit modernist traits published after the 1930s. Among such figures, the most overshadowing, although not British, author was Samuel Beckett, whose shift in prose style is instructive for understanding British postmodern fiction since the 1980s.

Beckett is, of course, best known for his trilogy of novels, *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951), and *The Unnamable* (1953) and for his plays *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and

Happy Days (1962). Certainly, Beckett's drama always exhibited a minimalist quality. Sparse barren landscapes or bare rooms with few characters are the hallmarks of these works. By contrast, though, the prose of *The Unnamable* overflows in its exhaustive oscillation between the narrator's self-obliteration and self-construction.

By any account, however, both Beckett's prose and his drama take a decisively minimalist turn towards the extreme end of his career (what Edward Said might term his 'late style').⁴ The late prose piece 'Worstward Ho' (1983) for example is written in short staccato sentence blasts, although still maintaining the absence of setting pioneered in the earlier novels: 'On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on', for just one example.⁵ Likewise, the drama from around 1966 onwards becomes more contracted even than in Beckett's previously minimalist structures. *Come and Go* (1966) marks the ascent of this style (although *Not I* (1969) is verbose in its speech if not its setting) that works towards the culminating duologue playlet of *Ohio Impromptu* (1981) and the monologue of *Rockaby* (1981).

Such a minimalist style – even while noting that a precise definition of literary style that does not rely upon a crude form/content divide remains elusive – seems to generate a degree of backlash from certain British literary

4 Edward W. Said, *On Late Style* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

5 Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (London: John Calder, 1983).

quarters. While Beckett's late prose and drama (and subsequent rigorous oversight by his estate) veer towards a desire for tight and precise control, or even the excision, of voice, several works of British postmodern literary fiction exhibit the counter-tendency of an anarchic openness.

Perhaps the foremost example of this diametrically opposite take on style is best seen in John Fowles's 1969 novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. This text features many of the classic tropes of postmodern fiction that will appear in mutated form in the British novels of the 1980s, most notably: metatextual authorial interventions; a historical setting and a focus on historiographic techniques; intertextual references; and a plurality of endings. Indeed, throughout the novel the 'narrator' frequently intervenes, citing scholarship and Darwinian science from the Victorian period.⁶ The text is set in the Victorian age yet is uncomfortable with any claim to accurately represent the period from a position of retrospection (a historiographic mode where the focus is upon how history is constructed, rather than the history itself). The novel also makes reference to works of literary theory, such as those by Roland Barthes and Alain Robbe-Grillet.⁷ Most famously, the ending of the novel splits into three divergent narrative paths, with different outcomes permuted between the romantic attachments between Charles, Sarah, and Ernestina.

6 See, for example, John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 53.

7 Fowles, p. 95.

The broad sense of proliferation that is conveyed in Fowles's novel – with its overloading of narratives, histories, and voices – stands in stark contrast to those of Beckett. It is as though there is a chiasmic (cross-shaped) structure at work here in which, as Beckett and others contract, a second group of writers are seeking a type of maximalism in the very opposite fashion. This fits neatly with the theorisation yielded by John Barth of a 'literature of exhaustion'; an attempt to embody 'an age of ultimacies' in which the realist form is collapsed and we head towards an omega point.⁸ Whether Barth was historically correct is not really beyond debate: he was wrong and the persistence of the realist form continues unabated. But it is of note that this thinking was 'in the air' in the late 1960s. As a counterpoint, though, it is also of interest that several of the classic American postmodernists, such as Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, have moved, Beckett-like, towards a contracted late phase in their own writing. There is a sense, then, in which the maximalist proliferation that spins out of late 1960s postmodern is a phase. What I will turn to now, with this crude background sketch fleshed out, is how these contrasting movements found their way into the contexts that have informed some British fiction since the 1980s.

⁸ John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', in *Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 62–76 (p. 67).

Postmodernism in the 1980s

Joe Brooker has written, amid the paradoxical and contrasting contexts for the fiction of the 1980s, that the political environment was shaped by Margaret Thatcher but that the pop group Duran Duran was exemplary of at least part of a cultural scene manufactured to reproduce a 'glossy sound' that held 'loose connotations of cultural Thatcherism' embodied in a 'lifestyle of high consumption and excess'.⁹ This is also twinned, though, as Brooker notes, with a paradoxical counter-movement that can be seen in various politicised forms of art that embody a more critical (or perhaps just liberal/left-wing) approach.

Of the novels in the 1980s that exhibit postmodern tendencies but that also have the Duran Duran-factor of glossy Thatcherite complicity, Martin Amis's *Money*(1984) stands out as the foremost representation. Narrated by John Self – whose name is at least part of Amis's nod towards postmodern narratorial intrusion but whose presence is complicated by the appearance of another writer within the text called 'Martin Amis' – *Money* is a 400-page-long *tour de force* of ostentious literary over-writing.¹⁰ It is also, though, a difficult text to place politically. Amis has never been known as the most progressive writer of gender politics, yet gender and sex are key

9 Joseph Brooker, *Literature of the 1980s: After the Watershed* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 19.

10 See Joseph Brooker, 'Introduction: Listen to Money Singing', *Textual Practice*, 26.1 (2012), 1–10 (pp. 2–4) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2012.638759>>.

to this text, which is saturated with similar questions: ‘Got laid recently?’¹¹

Given the transatlantic context for postmodernism that I have been tracing, it should come as no surprise to find that *Money* is a novel that deals with and that has been influenced by America. For instance, Finn Fordham has traced the ways in which, in particular, the shadow of Nabokov (but also Bellow) hangs over the road to Amis’s text, even if the novel does eventually hit a limit in its Nabokovian tropes. Indeed, reading the novel through Amis’s famous assertion that ‘style is morality’, Fordham adeptly traces how *Money* can be read as a text about the relationships between ‘readers, writers, and their characters’.¹² As the character Martin Amis within the text asks: ‘is there a moral philosophy of fiction?’¹³

Despite this self-referentiality, though, and the fact that a range of critics have distinctly read the text as postmodern, not everyone shares this view.¹⁴ David James, for example, points towards the fact that the ostentatious metafictional devices within the novel may deter us from viewing it instead as ‘one in which inventiveness and traditionalism coexist in important ways that have often been sidelined’; that is, tradition and the individual talent, as T. S. Eliot put it – a modernism rather than a

11 Martin Amis, *Money: A Suicide Note* (London: Vintage, 2005), p. 73.

12 Finn Fordham, ‘Nabokov on the Road to Money’, *Textual Practice*, 26.1 (2012), 43–62 (p. 60) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2012.638762>>.

13 Amis, p. 260.

14 For just one such postmodern reading, see James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, 2nd New edition edition (Columbia: University South Carolina Pr, 2004).

postmodernism.¹⁵ Notwithstanding the fact that, for James, there is a politics of style that runs through *Money* that is not just postmodern, James's eventual claim that 'what Amis tries to do is take our aesthetic infatuation, the pleasures of witnessing his virtuosity, and align it with the more puerile infatuations that Self indulges' does nonetheless sound somewhat metafictional.¹⁶

Despite the stylistic range of the novel, perhaps where we might most class *Money* as a postmodern text, however, is in its relationship to ethics. Critics such as Jane Flax, but also others, have noted that there has been a consistent 'association of postmodernism and amorality' in the critical literature, centred around purported claims for moral relativism.¹⁷ *Money*, though, is a novel that satirises consumer culture and ultimately (morally) rails against it; including the disparaging of an environment that Amis feels possesses 'moral unease without moral energy'.¹⁸ Yet the way in which this plays out is through a glossy stylistic framework that, in many

15 David James, '“Style Is Morality”? Aesthetics and Politics in the Amis Era', *Textual Practice*, 26.1 (2012), 11–25 (p. 12) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2012.638760>>; Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt, 1975), pp. 37–44.

16 James, '“Style Is Morality”?', p. 23.

17 Jane Flax, 'Soul Service: Foucault's 'Care of the Self' as Politics and Ethics', in *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, by Neil Brooks (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 79–98 (p. 80); see also David James, *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 10; and Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. ix.

18 Jon Begley, 'Satirizing the Carnival of Postmodern Capitalism: The Transatlantic and Dialogic Structure of Martin Amis's *Money*', *Contemporary Literature*, 45.1 (2004), 79 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3593556>> citing Amis.

ways, embodies the consumer-capitalist dynamic that Amis seems to satirise. Certainly, *Money* is a complex text when it comes to an ethical stance.

Yet other works of postmodern British fiction of the 1980s are more clear-cut when it comes to ethics and morality, intersecting with the strong post-colonial movement in force at that time. At the forefront of this movement – at least in the popular imagination in Britain – sat Salman Rushdie, who has continued to publish even as the discourse of postcolonialism may, in more recent days, be seen as giving way to a paradigm of ‘world literature’.¹⁹ In particular, Rushdie’s novels *Midnight’s Children* (1981) and the controversial *The Satanic Verses* (1988) can be said to represent an intersection between postmodern stylistics and postcolonial concerns.

Midnight’s Children, for instance, explicitly deals with the aftermath of the British Empire in India and the partitioning of the newly decolonised space into India and Pakistan. Indeed, the character Saleem is born at midnight on the 15th August 1947, the precise moment at which the partition came into effect. It soon becomes apparent, though, within the novel’s plot, that all such ‘midnight’s children’ possess extraordinary magical powers, such as telepathy, that vary in intensity the closer to midnight that they were

19 See Elleke Boehmer, ‘The World and the Postcolonial’, *European Review*, 22.2 (2014), 299–308 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279871400012X>>.

born.

The magical realism of this complex and dense novel, which begins by playfully questioning the fairytale premise of ‘once upon a time’ while also yoking the primary characters in a mysterious ‘handcuff[ing] to history’, is one of the many instances wherein British postmodernism becomes linked to postcolonialism.²⁰ For, although it might seem that what could be needed in the aftermath of the British Empire is a strong, coherent, and unified identity for the former colonies – one that perhaps should be supplied by British realism instead of by ‘open sesame’ and ‘a magic spell’ – the entanglement of linear storytelling with a British history that led to empire complicates such a relationship.²¹ It is not enough for Rushdie to re-appropriate a narrative style from British literary history, but instead he seeks to pluralise identity through postmodern stylistics of overload and historical re-writing. In Rushdie’s writing it is, instead, the case that ‘[r]eality is a question of perspective’ and, as his narrator metatextually remarks, one has the feeling that he is ‘somehow creating a world’.²²

Such a stance was also present in the most contentious of Rushdie’s novels, *The Satanic Verses*. Although this work received high critical acclaim in Britain and was a Booker Prize finalist while also winning the

20 Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* (London: Picador, 1981), p. 3.

21 Rushdie, p. 629.

22 Rushdie, pp. 229, 241.

Whitbread Award, it also came at a high personal cost to Rushdie, who was subjected to a fatwa issued by Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of Iran, calling for Rushdie's murder. The book begins aboard a hijacked, exploding airliner, from which the novel's two protagonists are miraculously saved and re-incarnated respectively as an archangel and a devil. A series of dream narratives (including the controversial re-telling of the life of Mohammed) are then narrated amid a range of 'cinematic' storytelling techniques that add up to a disorientating swirl that represents the immigrant experience.²³

Rushdie's fourth novel trades, though, in aesthetic currencies of modernist (or, at least, Poundist) 'newness'. At least one critic has noted that Rushdie's forms of 'making it new' are of a different postcolonial variety in which a 'postcolonial hybridity' of 'hotpotch' is what, now, we call 'the new'.²⁴ This postmodern aesthetic technique of assemblage or *bricolage*, especially when cycling around its contentious politico-religious subject matter, cries for an answer as to the boundaries between the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane. In many ways, as with much postmodern literature and postmodern culture more generally (such as

23 H. Ramachandran, 'Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*: Hearing the Postcolonial Cinematic Novel', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 40.3 (2005), 102–17 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989405056976>>.

24 Neil ten Kortenaar, 'Fearful Symmetry: Salman Rushdie and Prophetic Newness', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 54.3 (2008), 339–61 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/0041462X-2008-4005>>.

the sociological field of science and technology studies), it is a straining at the boundaries of the enlightenment, calling on us to ask which boundaries of rationality and art it is possible to transgress.

Such political postmodernisms, though, had also been emerging just before the 1980s in Britain in other contexts, such as feminism, which can be seen clearly in the later writings of Angela Carter.²⁵ These political, feminist strains can be seen both in Carter's short story writings (such as *The Bloody Chamber* (1979)) but also in her penultimate novel, *Nights at the Circus* (1984). The former of these works is a collection of reworkings, or 'extractions of latent content', as Carter preferred to term them, of fairytales.²⁶ Indeed, this framing here poses, I contend, a core definition of postmodern fiction, in Britain and elsewhere, that often goes unremarked upon. That is: a blurring of the boundaries between creative and critical practice.

If, as Carter claims, her stories are *extractions* of the *latent content* of fairytales, then what, we must ask, is the difference between literary criticism and literature itself? For how else would we define the procedures of much hermeneutic literary criticism but as 'extractions of latent content'? This merging of literature with literary studies, as with Fowles's citation of

25 Although it is important to note here that 'feminism' is not a unified, single phenomenon.

26 *Novelists in Interview*, ed. by John Haffenden (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 80.

literary theory, was certainly also pronounced in the surge of author-critics (Woolf, Eliot, Lawrence, Pound etc.) in the modernist period.²⁷ It is, though, in the postmodern 'era' that this slippage has most thoroughly progressed, leading Peter Boxall to remark that 'the distinction between creative and critical writing is becoming harder to sustain'.²⁸ Alternatively, as Mark Currie has put it, '[t]he postmodern context is not one divided neatly between fictional texts and their critical readings, but a monistic world of representations in which the boundaries between art and life, language and metalanguage, and fiction and criticism are under philosophical attack'.²⁹ As a result, I have argued, we 'should expect to see, in such a limited space, conflicts of legitimation, often played out through metafictional devices, where literary texts jostle with the academy for the authority to comment upon fiction'.³⁰

And, in truth, it was Carter's own critical work translating the fairytale collection of Charles Perrault that led to her creative-critical feminist reworkings of the classic stories in *The Bloody Chamber*, including the well-known female rescue scene of the titular story. Yet, if *The Bloody Chamber* holds out this creative-critical paradigm, in a feminist tradition,

27 Ronan McDonald, *The Death of the Critic* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 81.

28 Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 5.

29 Mark Currie, 'Introduction', in *Metafiction*, ed. by Mark Currie (London: Longman, 1995), pp. 17–18.

30 Martin Paul Eve, *Literature Against Criticism: University English and Contemporary Fiction in Conflict* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), p. 35.

then it is in *Nights at the Circus* in which Carter's postmodern sensibilities are most prominently articulated.

This novel wheels around the character Sophie Fevvers, an *aerialiste* (trapeze artist), who claims to have been hatched from an egg and to have sprouted wings at puberty. On top of this magic realism, the narrative possesses many of the common aesthetic traits of postmodern writing: the novel is extremely disorientating, with timings and truths rendered indeterminate throughout. For instance, we are told that 'Big Ben', on the same night, 'once again struck midnight'.³¹ Perhaps one of the most curious features of the text, though, is its early intersection with a movement that is now termed 'post-secularism'.³²

Indeed, the embrace of a partial spirituality, or post-enlightenment sensibility, that sits at odds with a purely rationalist approach and that was born in the postmodern period is tied closely to magical realism. However, in Carter's novel this relationship between enlightenment, secularity, and faith/the supernatural/the magical is also explicitly articulated when the narrator remarks (of Fevvers's claiming that her wings are real, even while the public believes them to be fake) that 'in a secular age, an authentic miracle must purport to be a hoax, in order to gain credit in the world'.³³

31 Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 2006), p. 53.

32 See John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

33 Carter, p. 17.

This statement – at once apt for the way in which our current era of ‘Brexit’ and Donald Trump, at the time of writing, has been deemed ‘post-factual’ – is also, though, a metafictional riff. For what is fiction, itself, but a self-purported hoax in which, by some aesthetic miracle, we might see a clearer truth of reality through its dark glass? Of these glasses, though, few come as dark as the works of J.G. Ballard, the final British ‘postmodernist’ to whom I will now briefly turn.

Ballard made his name with a series of dark, transgressive fictions such as the experimental short-story cycle *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), the novel *Crash* (1973), focusing on automotive accident fetishisation (a symphorophilia), and earlier science/speculative fiction novels such as *The Drowned World* (1962). From the 1980s onwards, though, Ballard’s oeuvre follows a generically unstable path through the quasi-autobiographical novels, *Empire of the Sun* (1984) and its sequel *The Kindness of Women* (1991), novels about dystopian elite social enclaves and their psychological dark secrets such as *Cocaine Nights* (1996) and *Super-Cannes* (2000), and fictions that are broadly concerned with the possibilities of resistance/rebellion within late capitalist paradigms, such as *Millennium People* (2003) and *Kingdom Come* (2006).

Ballard’s work has always had an experimental quality, both aesthetically and politically. Indeed, the short story ‘Why I Want to Fuck

Ronald Reagan', later incorporated into *The Atrocity Exhibition*, led to the prosecution of the publisher, Bill Butler, for obscenity.³⁴ Yet, as with other writers of the British postmodern period, these political sensibilities are woven within a tapestry of disorientating prose and extreme metaphor. Indeed, it would be fair to say, at the level of Ballard's career, that his works exhibit that very 'resistance to metanarratives' that runs through so much postmodern theory; it is simply difficult to place his writings within any one single history.

... and After

When charged with asking what has succeeded 'postmodernism' as a term to describe a particular brand of British literary fiction, we are left with many of the same problems as defining the 'genre' or 'period' itself. Has postmodernism gone anywhere? Did it ever really exist? (A most postmodern question.) Certainly for some critics, such as Charles Altieri as far back as 1998, the tropes, styles, and even the name of postmodernism had faded or even become an embarrassment.³⁵ Yet, for Robert Eaglestone, a term such as post-postmodernism, popularised by Jeffrey Nealon, is potentially 'silly'.³⁶

34 For more on the general culture of obscenity trials during the postmodern period, see Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger, *Gravity's Rainbow, Domination, and Freedom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), pp. 52–60.

35 Charles Altieri, *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts, Literature and Philosophy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

36 Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time*

So, what has happened? In the first place, even while postmodernism continued to grow as a critical currency, a proliferation of generic suffixes of the ‘-modernisms’ variety has spread far and wide, beyond a mere post-modernism. For we have had altermodernism, metamodernism, neomodernism, hypermodernism, remodelnism and transmodernism, among others, to describe more recent literary fictions. For my own part, I have become unconvinced that such generic labels are actually helpful to describe any specific literary practice given that the underlying definition of modernism is itself plural and polyvalent. It also seems strange that a literary sensibility of modernism that is, in its high form, inflected by Pound’s famous cry of ‘make it new’ should find its own critical terminologies and vocabularies so constantly reworked and recycled.

Yet, despite these modernist futures, as David James has referred to them, postmodern stylistics and themes never faded. Even throughout the late 1990s and 2000s writers such as Will Self, Russell Hoban, Ali Smith, Zadie Smith, Tom McCarthy, David Mitchell, and James Kelman, among others, could be said to continue in the traditions of postmodern writing.

The arguments, however, continue to rage, both in and out of the printed page. David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004) for example both signals

Capitalism (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Robert Eaglestone, ‘Contemporary Fiction in the Academy: Towards a Manifesto’, *Textual Practice*, 27.7 (2013), 1089–1101 (p. 1099) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2013.840113>>.

its own generic placement within a postmodern frame while also situating the form as a historical relic when it speaks of ‘backflashes’ to the ‘1980s with MAs in Postmodernism and and Chaos Theory’.³⁷ Tom McCarthy’s *C* (2010) is, likewise, a novel that possesses many traits that one would expect from postmodern literature – a ludic mode, proleptic and disorientating narrative structures, clever game playing, a critical stance towards technology – but has also been described as a ‘forensic’ excavation of ‘modernism’, not postmodernism.³⁸ This may be unsurprising since, for Lyotard, ‘the postmodern is undoubtedly part of the modern’.³⁹ It does, however, raise questions about what we mean by an ‘after’ to postmodernism.

The list goes on. Ali Smith’s *The Accidental* (2005) opens with a epigraph citation of the centre-left author and journalist Nick Cohen, who writes that ‘[s]hallow uniformity is not an accident but a consequence of what Marxists optimistically call late capitalism’.⁴⁰ In this way, Smith not only straddles the creative-critical divide (in addition to the fact that she was previously a lecturer of Scottish, English and American literature at the

37 David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (Sceptre, 2008), p. 152.

38 See Martin Paul Eve, ‘Structures, Signposts and Plays: Modernist Anxieties and Postmodern Influences in Tom McCarthy’s *C*’, in *Tom McCarthy: Critical Essays*, ed. by Dennis Duncan (London: Gylphi, 2016), pp. 183–203; and Justus Nieland, ‘Dirty Media: Tom McCarthy and the Afterlife of Modernism’, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 58.3 (2012), 569–99 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2012.0058>>.

39 Lyotard, p. 79.

40 Ali Smith, *The Accidental* (London: Penguin Books, 2006); Nick Cohen, *Cruel Britannia: Reports on the Sinister and the Preposterous* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 126.

University of Strathclyde) but also yields a novel that focuses on the nature of narrative and representation itself.⁴¹Indeed, whether in the work of Ian McEwan, which has often had an air of postmodern historiography about its practices (most strongly pronounced in the 2001 novel *Atonement*), or in Will Self's language and time -bending *The Book of Dave* (2006) and his gender-twisting *Cock and Bull* (1992), postmodernism continues to live on, even while some authors, such as the Irish writer Eimar McBride in *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013), seek a return to the contracted prose style of some late modernism.

The question that I believe we now face, though, is slightly different to where this chapter began. It is possible, as I have done here, to chart the ascent of postmodern stylistics as emerging from late modernist practices and persisting to the current day. The problem is, though, that so much literary fiction is now indebted to this historical movement that the vocabulary of postmodernism – and, even, modernism – begins to lose much of its critical force. That is: the effect of labelling contemporary fiction as falling within a postmodern or modern frame does not seem particularly helpful as either a generic or period classification. That is why, I suggest, we need to redefine our critical lexicon and taxonomies of contemporary fiction, British and worldwide. Perhaps what we need most is

41 Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2007), p. 72.

a call to stop. A call for 'no more -modernisms'.

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