Remapping the Present: The Master Narrative of Modern Literary History and the Lost Forms of Twentieth-Century Fiction

BRIAN RICHARDSON

For the most part, modern literary history—particularly the history of twentieth-century fiction—is regularly abbreviated to an all-too-simple tale of dynastic successions: Realism, the crowning achievement of nineteenth-century narrative, was supplanted by modernism, its inevitable successor, which, due to its own inherent limitations, in turn gave way to postmodernism. Despite our thoroughgoing suspicion of origins, we can assign plausible dates for the inauguration of each movement; more dialectically, we can point to the internal deviations and contradictions that mark the transformation from one movement to the other: Edwardian writers Ford, Conrad, and Forster, accompanied by the earlier D. H. Lawrence, provide the fulcrum that impels literature from one mode to the next. On the other end of modernism, Brian McHale has designated the very moments in Beckett’s trilogy that demarcate the transition from modernism to postmodernism (Postmodernist Fiction 12–13).¹

This narrative of modern literary history is of course limited to British and Irish writers. In any number of national literatures, the individual names vary while the general pattern remains the same. Realists like the Goncourt, Tolstoy, Galdos, Mann, Tagore, and Tanizaki are succeeded by the modernists Proust, Biely, Cela, Broch, Rao, and Kawabata, who in their turn become displaced by the postmodernists Robbe-Grillet, Kundera, Rios, Grass, Rushdie, and Banana Yoshimoto. In what follows, I will focus my investigation on the British version of this suggested historical progression,
though my critique is intended to be applicable on a much wider scale. It might also be pointed out that the target of this paper is not so much actual histories of modern literature, a number of which pay close attention to their subject’s nuances, as what I suggest is a near ubiquitous idée reçue that circulates unchallenged throughout the profession. The main problem with the standard narrative of modern literary history is precisely its narrative features: a distinct origin, a series of causally connected events in a linear sequence, a teleological progression culminating in the present, the absence of unconnected or distracting subplots, the unspoken but uncontested male domination of narrative agency, and the unproblematic closure implied by this version of history. There is also the inevitable moral that this structure lends itself to, that postmodernism is a superior representation of human experience, more recent and therefore more appropriate, if not also more ideologically responsible.

Each of these aspects of the standard account of modern literary history derives more from the conventional structure of traditional narratives than from a careful assessment of the radical heterogeneity and "untimeliness" of twentieth-century literary practice. A hard look at both the texts and the histories that purport to circumscribe them can quickly reveal just how misleading streamlined conceptions of literary history can be.

There is of course another master narrative of modern literary dealings that is even more stark, uncompromising, and relentlessly teleological than the one I have just outlined, and that is the history of modern critical theory. The irreversible sequence humanism > formalism > poststructuralism has become so entrenched as to be virtually unassailable, and this entrenchment probably seems so inevitable in part because of associations between each literary theory and a corresponding type of narrative practice. Humanism, perhaps most prestigiously in the form of Lukács’s Marxist humanism, became the spokesman for and beneficiary of the achievements of the major texts of realism. Formalism, on the other hand, was to a large extent invented by the original practitioners of modernism (along with their early advocates) in order to explain its aims, aesthetics, and distinctive accomplishments. Postmodernism has in turn found a happy union with poststructuralism; it is no accident that Derrida valorizes authors like Blanchot and the tel quel novelists.

These narratives themselves merge into a larger cultural master text. Recent philosophers of art routinely use the term neo-dada to refer to many artistic productions since the 1960s in painting, music, and literature. It is nevertheless obvious why academic scholars of nontraditional literature since World War II prefer to use the different term postmodernism to describe the subject they pursue. Not only does the latter term sound more significant, exciting, au courant, mysterious, and fashionable—even at the expense of obscuring their subject’s history and antecedents—it also fits quite nicely into the cultural imperative of "what is newer, is therefore better": a dictum that in advanced capitalist societies guides most advertising and production, whether of detergents, automobiles, or new members of the professoriat. (If you were a department chair, which position would you prefer to convince your dean to fund, neo-dada studies or postmodernism?) As Ihab Hassan has observed in this context, "there is a will to power in nomenclature, as well as in people or texts. A new term opens for its proponents a new space in language" (148).

This confluence of master narratives has a number of deleterious consequences. Unlike comparable histories of modern music, drama, or art, it leaves no place for the rich tradition of expressionist fiction. It obscures the origins and antecedents of the type of fiction we now call postmodern. It tends to marginalize hybrid, idiosyncratic, and "minor" forms in its efforts to construct and maintain a totalizing narrative history, and then ignores the contributions that fail to fit the pattern. Just as expressionism remains a conspicuous absence in narrative history in part because it lacked a prestigious counterpart in critical theory, so has the impressive work of the Chicago school of criticism fallen back from the front lines of theory in part because it often focused on nineteenth-century fiction and seemed for some time to have little new to say about the more exciting developments of modern fiction—even as its theoretical range allowed it to transcend some of the self-imposed limitations of humanism, formalism, and poststructuralism.

I would like to offer an alternative model, focusing on the history of British fiction in the twentieth century. I will suggest that it can more accurately and effectively be viewed as the site of continuous contestation between at least four principal competing narrative poetics—realism, postmodernism, expressionism, and high modernism—each one stretching in fact from the beginning to the end of the century. (In addition, a fifth type, the romance, will be seen to be present at either end of the century.) Such a model not only allows us to retrieve otherwise lost narrative traditions and significant interweavings of different historical strands, it also invites us to look for previously unsought practitioners of the various types in each decade—an especially important act since, as we will see, it enables us to situate contemporary women realist writers as something other than a curious anachronism and leads as well to the partially female origins of "postmodernism" at the beginning of this century. British fiction has often been thought of as somewhat anomalous since modernism never fully displaced realism the way it did in France and much of the rest of the Conti-
nent. But I will argue that this apparent oddity is instead a typical and even exemplary facet of the prolonged contention between rival narrative paradigms that regularly fail to die or be born "on time."

Of the four main poetic devices that persistently inform twentieth-century British fiction, realism and high modernism are the best known and least contested, though the period during which each is allowed to have flourished varies widely from critic to critic, usually for fairly obvious reasons. I suggest instead that realism runs uninterrupted from Arnold Bennett to Evelyn Waugh to Barbara Pym to Margaret Drabble to Helen Simpson. Similarly, high modernism should not be limited to the works of a handful of writers working between 1914 and 1939; instead, it stretches continuously from the last phase of Henry James to fiction of Elizabeth Bowen, Anthony Powell, and Elizabeth Howard to the latest novels of Graham Swift, Kazuo Ishiguro, and (if we are generous geographically) Nadine Gordimer.

That is, we may readily identify an unbroken succession of major authors animated by the basic compositional principles and techniques characteristic of high modernism. By this I mean innovative, complexly structured narratives that foreground their own composition by attenuating or ignoring the conventional methods of traditional prose fiction. Looking at paradigmatic examples of high modernism such as Ulysses, Proust's Recherche, To the Lighthouse, The Sound and the Fury, or Molloy, we observe how plotting ceases to be dramatic, characters are no longer stable subjects, the omniscient narrator is replaced by multiple or fallible ones, chronology is insistently nonlinear, closure becomes problematic, poetic description and symbolic figures abound (including self-referential images like the works of art in Proust), aesthetics supersedes reference, and the goal of creating an organic, artistic unity replaces that of depicting the structure of social relations. Woolf's essay "Modern Fiction" remains the locus classicus of this aesthetic. Rather more pithily, John Hawkes has this summary: "I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, setting, character, and theme, and ... totality of vision or structure was really all that remained" (149).

In Europe, the kind of literature now called postmodern was appearing simultaneously with or even preceding the major texts of modernism. Jarry's Ubu Roi (1896) is as resolutely postmodern as anything written by Kathy Acker, and Gertrude Stein opens up narrative spaces that would later be occupied by writers like John Cage. A number of works by Pirandello, Roussel, Wikipewicz, Bulgakov, and even Unamuno, if they had been written 50 to 80 years later, might be hailed as the latest wave of a new postmodern avant-garde. In these works, the alternative patternings invented by high modernists were rejected, as all orders or boundaries, whether traditional or original, became suspect. The resurgence of aleatory writing practices in the 1970s openly acknowledged its surrealist inheritance, and plays like Stoppard's Travesties and Artist Descending a Staircase further demarcate a dada-pomo continuum. Early specimens of British postmodernism should include rather obviously Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds (1939) and, perhaps only slightly less obviously, Ronald Firbank's novellas, Virginia Woolf's Orlando, Joyce's Finnegans Wake, and Malcolm Lowry's Through the Panama. These works all possess the ontological instability that McHale argues (correctly, I believe) to be the dominant characteristic of postmodernist fiction, and contain as well the emphases on parody, reflexivity, textuality, artifice, transgression, hybridization, and a conflation of history and fiction that other theorists have suggested are central to the postmodern aesthetic.

At this point, one is tempted to reconsider the literary historical positioning of the work of Dorothy Richardson, whose multivolume novel Pilgrimage has generally eluded conventional histories. And there are good reasons why this has been the case. She considered her work to be realistic, but with a difference—specifically, as "a feminine equivalent of the current masculine realism" (9). With a single focalizer whose thoughts and perceptions we are continuously informed of, the work has seemed too insistently subject to reside under the rubric of realism. On the other hand, its resistance to formal pattern made it anathema to the more severe modernists. Virginia Woolf was disappointed by the insufficient "unity, significance, or design" of The Tunnel (190). Katherine Mansfield, in a review of The Tunnel and Interim, objected to the novels' refusal to foreground or hierarchize. These are books devoid of what Jakobson would call "the dominant"; each event, she complains, is equally important as every other event. "Until these things are judged and given each its appointed place in the whole scheme, they have no meaning in the world of art" she pronounced (cit. in Scott 309–10). It is of course exactly these qualities, along with an indifference to the claims of art, that typifies much postmodern practice. Ironically, if someone were now to write, word for word, Richardson's novels, she would probably find a very different reception than the dismissal that was accorded to Borges's Pierre Menard. Instead of languishing within a polite though confused indifference, such writing might well be praised for its resistance to the modernist fetish for form. It might even be considered the cutting edge of postmodernism, a super- or photorealism that is all the more realistic for its abjuration of modernist compositional symmetries. Woolf observed that "there is no word, such as romance or realism, to cover even roughly the works of Miss Dorothy Richardson. Their chief characteristic... is one for which we still seek a name" (191). We may now attempt to utter...
that name, the ugly-sounding but uncannily accurate name of “proto-
postmodernism.”

Expressionism is an indispensable category in the history of virtually
every twentieth-century cultural medium other than the novel—an anomaly
that so far has occasioned surprisingly little comment. We speak comfort-
ably and accurately of expressionist painting, music, drama, sculpture,
dance, film, poetry, and even architecture. In the case of fiction, the
tendency has been to lump all prewar non- or antirealist aesthetics together
under the bulky rubric of modernism. This practice helps to explain why
modernism is notoriously difficult to define and, more importantly, obscures
the radical differences between rival literary programs that had little or noth-
ing in common other than their rejection of the conventions of realism.
Expressionism can be roughly defined as a systematically skewed mode of
narrative representation, in which resolutely subjective and emotionally
charged perceptions distort or replace familiar, standardized patterns of
experience. As Peter Nicholls states, “the Expressionists were interested in
arriving at unfamiliar images of the world through calculated modes of
distortion,” and their “emphasis was always on an intensity of perception
secured by infusing the world with violent emotion” (142). Unlike realism,
which purports to reproduce typical features of the social world (or high
modernism, which reassembles these features into alternative aesthetic
designs), expressionist fiction seeks to reproduce emotionally extreme or
dreamlike sequences and events, as the typical, routine, and the conven-
tional are supplanted by the onetic, the hallucinatory, and the archetypal.

For an example of expressionist prose we may turn to May Sinclair’s
undervalued 1919 novel Mary Olivier.

Tip-fingering backwards that way you got into the grey lane where
the prickly stones were and the hedge of the little biting trees.
When the door in the hedge opened you saw the man in the night-
shirt. He had only half a face. From his nose and his cheek-bones
downwards his beard hung straight like a dark cloth. You opened
your mouth but before you could scream you were back in the cot;
the room was light; the green knob winked and grinned at you
from the railing . . . (3-4)

This passage (which incidentally contains one of the earliest specimens of
second-person narration) reproduces the confused perceptions of a very
small girl with a weak understanding of causality. After moving open the
illustrated curtain in front of her cot, the child sees a frightening face in
profile, apparently that of her father—though it just might be a two-dimen-
sional image. Her field of vision then changes, and as new images appear
the older ones are forgotten. By faithfully transcribing the girl’s mis-
perceptions, Sinclair recreates a series of emotionally charged, subjective
distortions of diurnal experiences that are simultaneously unmediated and
distancing, experimental and realistic, bizarre and strangely familiar.

We may better appreciate the expressionist difference by contrasting it
to other types of antirealist writing. There is a world of difference between
Proust’s Marcelle painting his madeleine and Celine’s Bardamu struggling and
cursing through several continents, or the characters plotting against their
author in At Swim-Two-Birds. The postmodern continuum from Gertrude
Stein and Tristan Tzara to John Cage and Kathy Acker strives to collapse,
viole, or deny all-orders, patterns, oppositions, and hierarchies. The high
modernists from James to Figures construct elaborate aesthetic unities out of
the detritus of modern bourgeois existence in direct opposition to the pre-
dictable ordering patterns of natural narrative, as universal demands for
plot, character, moral, and a definitive closure are provocatively replaced
by exclusively aesthetic orderings, parallel figures, amoral motifs, and the-
matic resolutions that generally leave the characters’ lives uncomfortably in
medias res. Expressionism by contrast follows the stark logic of the emotions;
its pattern is both as familiar and as unpredictable as a nightmare. Its order-
ing principle is primal and mythic. Instead of the geometrical symmetries
of high modernism, it prefers the vicious circles of obsession and repeti-
tion.

Concerning innovations in narrative temporality, long considered a
defining feature of the modern, we see three different nonrealist strategies
at work. Realism, it will be observed, is largely (but only largely) linear, with
frequent flashbacks, occasional foreshadowings, and numerous pauses while
simultaneous events are sequentially narrated. In high modernism, an alter-
native chronology of presentation tends to overwhelm the mere tempo-
ral succession of events. In such texts we find the greatest degree of opposi-
tion between fabula and syuzhet or histoire and récit—terms formulated to ex-
plain this distinctive practice of the high modernists. By contrast,
postmodernism collapses, ignores, or destroys temporality; in the superb
phrase of Diane Elam, “postmodernism is the recognition of the specifi-
cally temporal irony within narrative” (“Postmodern Romance,” 217). We see
this difference clearly expressed in Robbe-Grillet’s remarks on the self-con-
tradictory chronology of La Jalousie:

it was absurd to suppose that in the novel . . . there existed a clear
and unambiguous order of events, one which was not that of the
sentences of the book, as if I had diverted myself by mixing up a
pre-established calendar the way one shuffles a deck of cards. The
narrative was on the contrary made in such a way that any attempt to reconstruct an external chronology would lead, sooner or later, to a series of contradictions, hence to an impasse. (154)

Robbe-Grillet’s novel is not, that is, constructed like The Sound and the Fury (which includes just such a reassembled chronology of its fabula in an appendix), and cannot be recuperated by the methods necessary for interpreting the story of the Compsons—such an approach is in fact designed to lead a critical impasse.

The temporality of expressionist fiction, on the other hand, is usually both relentlessly linear and deliberately vague. Measurable chronometric units, whether minutes, weeks, or years, are rarely mentioned. These are replaced by more primal indicators such as light and darkness or heat and cold that serve to reflect the protagonist’s subjectivity and reveal its dislocations. Furthermore, the protagonists of such works rarely have much of a personal history antecedent to the events recounted on the book’s first page; their lives are rather coextensive with the narratives told about them.

The list of international novelists whose works may be effectively described as expressionist is substantial: Hamsun, Kafka, Celine, Canetti, Cela, Lagerkvist, Djuna Barnes, Ralph Ellison, Juan Rufo, Maurice Blanchot, Ernesto Sabato, and Bessie Head are among the most obvious names. The number of British works that ask for the same appellation is equally impressive: Wyndham Lewis’s Enemy of the Stars, Jean Rhys’s Good Morning, Midnight, Charles Williams’s Descent into Hell, Anna Kavan’s Asylum Piece, Malcolm Lowry’s Under the Volcano, some of Beckett’s stories from the 1950s (“The Expelled,” “The End”), Nicholas Mosley’s Accident, Ian McEwan’s The Comfort of Strangers, Martin Amis’s Other People, and much of Angela Carter’s The Passion of New Eve and D. M. Thomas’s The White Hotel. It is time that this movement, which is perhaps stronger now among British writers that at any earlier period, is finally acknowledged and given the recognition it deserves.

Contemporary British fiction has also seen the revival of an older, often maligned form of fiction: the romance. David Lodge’s Small World, Angela Carter’s Wise Children, and A. S. Byatt’s Possession are typical but by no means isolated examples of the return of the romance, albeit with a postmodern inflection. According to the lines of analysis that inform this study, we should be surprised if we are unable to uncover a hidden genealogy, however intermittent or obscured. Indeed, we can find a convenient point of departure in the works of Robert Louis Stevenson, followed by the experiments of Conrad, Ford, and W. H. Hudson with a more cynical, realistic, and unpredictable kind of romance. But here the trail seems to end—at least concerning “literary” fiction.

The romance goes underground for much of the twentieth century, residing in low-brow costume goths, in addition to, as Pamela A. Fox has recently documented, working-class romances that can function as complex political narratives that contest hegemonic conventions. This state of affairs is mulled over by the narrator of Atwood’s Lady Oracle (1976), who is a writer of the Harlequin-type romances condemned by her socialist husband, Arthur:

The truth was that I dealt in hope, I offered a vision of a better world, however preposterous. Was that so terrible? I couldn’t see that it was much different from the visions Arthur and his friends offered, and it was just as realistic. So you’re interested in the people, the workers, I would say to him during my solitary midnight justifications. Well that’s what the people and the workers read, the female ones anyway, when they have time to read at all and they can’t face the social realism of True Confessions. They read my books. Figure that out. (35)

This passage points to some of the reasons for romance’s long eclipse as well as for its enduring appeal. Whenever a realist aesthetic predominates, the romance is necessarily devalued (realism, from Cervantes to Flaubert, defines itself as the negation of the romance). However, it is precisely its nonrealistic, utopian invention of a superior, more-fluid society that has been, since its origin in Hellenistic Greece, the romance’s most desired effect.

By looking at modern literary history as a testing site or battleground where several continuous, competing poetics struggle for supremacy, we can better appreciate otherwise inexplicable aesthetic shifts and curiously retrograde motions, as well as recognize historical false starts and dead ends. Christopher Isherwood’s transition from high modernism to realism, like Iris Murdoch’s comparable progression a generation later, should not seem any more unusual than the opposite shift that occurs in the novels of Angus Wilson. We can better understand how Woolf is able to sandwich her postmodern Orlando between the high modernist To the Lighthouse and the ultramodernist The Waves. Similarly, one could read some prominent contemporary works (John Fowles’s The French Lieutenant’s Woman, Muriel Spark’s Not to Disturb, Fay Weldon’s The Cloning of Joanna May, Julian Barnes’s Flaubert’s Parrot, Lawrence Norfolk’s Lempriere’s Dictionary) as ingenious attempts to conjoin the otherwise opposed poetics of realism and postmodernism. Indeed, the creation of such a “postmodern realism” may turn out to be a substantial and distinctively British contribution to the development of fiction.
This perspective also encourages a fuller appreciation of interesting subgenres that may have been created in part to fuse the strengths and avoid the limitations of existing narrative models. A ready example is the so-called "dialogue novel," reinvented in the twentieth century by Ivy Compton-Burnett and later developed by Henry Green, which combines the concerns of realism with the technical experiments of modernism. These texts, it might be added, go far beyond the conversational "drawing room novels" of Norman Douglas or the early Aldous Huxley, and point instead toward the more radical deployments of dialogue in Leduc, Duras, and Sarratue.

We are also able to identify abandoned traditions. I am thinking here in particular of the subgenre of the "intellectual fable" that enjoyed a certain vogue in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth. This cluster includes well-known works like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, and James's "The Jolly Corner," as well as the less-well-remembered supernatural allegories of Kipling, Chesterton (The Man Who Was Thursday), and Vita Sackville-West's "Seducers in Ecuador." This kind of narrative, which directly descends from the conte philosophique of writers like Voltaire, does not seem to have engendered any identifiable progeny in Britain, though it certainly provided inspiration to three authors who straddle the modernist/postmodern divide: Borges, Nabokov, and Calvino. In all probability, future British followers of these three fabulators will bring this lost mode back to Albion—unless, of course, the process has already begun. A. S. Byatt's Angels and Insects (1992) may justly be the latest work in a newly reconstructed tradition, one that makes us scrutinize the recent past again and find, unexpectedly, a new predecessor—the early Iris Murdoch.

The revisionary map of modern literature I have set forth will no doubt fail to please many working scholars. This is not only because it upsets the agreed-upon if dubious historical sequences currently in favor, but also because it presupposes a kind of parity between antithetical and competing aesthetic programs that were designed to critique and supplant each other. There are few people equally open to traditional rivals like romance and realism, modernism and postmodernism, realism and modernism. Being a modernist nearly always implied having a healthy contempt for romance and realism. No one is startled by the fact that Joyce was dismissive of the works of Zola, Tzara, and Walter Scott, though many are surprised to learn of Kafka's affection for Dickens or Butor's praise of Balzac—precisely because these affiliations transgress more customary parameters. Such is the oppositional nature of many of these programs that it is perhaps only now, in the final years of the twentieth century, that we are able to imagine such a catholic position.

The most serious objection to the account presented here is that it contests part of the very foundation of literary history as it is usually conceived. As David Perkins notes, the concept of literary history has been based on the premises that "literary works are formed by their historical context; [and] that change in literature takes place developmentally..." (1). The more enduring a mode is, the more resistant it is to the vagaries of history. If postmodernism has been around since at least the 1890s, then it cannot simply be a reflection, image, or embodiment of the postindustrial world that only recently came into being—though its current popularity (and its rather sudden narratability) are surely rooted in a particular historical moment. If the model I am proposing is accurate, claims concerning literature's historical grounding may have to be refined or scaled back. Instead of explaining literature, in the last analysis, by history, or subsuming literary discourse within the matrix of contemporary social discourses, we need to examine as well the transgenerational compositional forms that persist over decades, centuries, and even millennia. In short, the requirements of literary history must be mediated by the equally pressing claims of the history of literature.

Other consequences of utilizing this perspective are potentially far reaching. First, it denies the long-established but internally contradictory category of the modern, insisting instead on a plurality of distinct and incompatible antirealist poetics. In particular, it calls for an archeology of postmodernism that restores its history and names its many female progenitors. Contemporary practitioners of realism should no longer be perceived as unusual atavisms; this is especially true of female authors seeking a wide audience for revolutionary views. As Gayle Greene reminds us, "[a]ccessibility is a sine qua non for any writing concerned with social change, which is why realism is the mode of feminist writers—as it has been the mode of women, writers in the past" (3–4). It is equally important that other, contestatory modernisms are able to be accommodated. As Carlos J. Alonso affirms, "both literature and cultural discourse in Spanish America exist as a simultaneous rejection and affirmation of the modern"; that is, its "cultural rhetoric proceeds from its identification with modernity to a surreptitious turning away from it" (232). In addition, Third World and postcolonial literatures should not be judged against a "progressive" trajectory of narrative forms that turns out to be a fabrication. Salman Rushdie's postmodernism is not more advanced or developed than the modernism of Anita Desai and Michelle Cliff, the expressionism of Bessie Head, or the realism of Chinua Achebe or Ama Ata Aidoo. These authors, like their coun-
has long been merely one of several prominent narrative modes, then we
should be careful not to overvalue its more recent specimens and, more
importantly, to reassess superior authors working in less-attention-getting
or reemergent forms.

We might begin our reassessment by attempting to reconfigure the
international traditions evoked in the second paragraph of this essay. In
narratives written in German in the 1920s, we find the realism of the brothers
Mann, the high modernism of Broch and Musil, the expressionism of Kafka
and Benn, and the early postmodernism of Yvan Colli. In Britain one
observes, in or around 1999, major works of realism by Graham Greene,
modernism by Elizabeth Bowen, expressionism by Jean Rhys, and
postmodernism by Flann O’Brien. The same cluster recurs in France in the
years following the end of World War II: Now the opposite figures are Sartre,
Sarraute, Celine, and Queneau. Latin American novelists writing from the
late 1950s to the mid-70s are often lumped together under the mildly
exotic rubric of magic realism. The alternative map I am offering here will
enable us to differentiate between Onetti’s realistic work, the high
modernism of Carpentier, Sabato’s expressionism, and the postmodernism of
Cabrera Infante. Many other comparable groupings suggest themselves,
which readers will be able to identify. I will limit myself to drawing attention
to just one more: Among contemporary writers born in India, Vikram Seth,
Anita Desai, Sunetra Gupta, and Salman Rushdie work respectively within
the four poetics. Admittedly, not all of these authors are as well known (or
well placed) as those who fit more nicely within the reigning paradigm.
Nevertheless, it is instructive to discern just what may be found when one is
determined to look from a different perspective.

I am well aware that my account of twentieth-century narrative does
not itself make a very good story. There are more characters than can be
conveniently managed in the space allowed, and some of the outlines may
appear a bit fuzzy. The settings will be thought by some to be too malleable,
and the near-endless proliferation of dubiously connected subplots will
annoy/still others. There is no closure, no teleology, no forecasting the future,
and no riding the crest of the wave of the future. It is not even exclusionary;
there are still other types that might plausibly be added (one could easily
imagine a strong case being made for a distinct postcolonial poetics), and
naturally there are still other stories that could be told about the texts
conglomerated above.

One particularly seductive tale that cuts across the categories I have care-
fully tried to distinguish is what may be called the écriture féminine story. This
account would originate with Dorothy Richardson’s attempt to create a
distinctive female style that more effectively represents female experience; con-
TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE continues through Woolf, Sinclair, Rhys, Mansfield (according to Kaplan), and Joyce (according to Cixous); and culminate perhaps in the writings of Angela Carter, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Jeanette Winterson. Such a construction, clearly possessing explanatory value and revealing important lines of affiliation, ultimately serves to show yet again the importance of, if not creating one's precursors, at least imagining alternative ones—or better yet, the need to replace storytelling, which always tends to reduce complexity, with the notion of mapping, which can simultaneously demarcate any number of features, especially if multiple transparencies are superimposed on each other.

To conclude, I feel that the standard master narrative of modern literary history is so limited and so flawed that it should be extensively augmented or abandoned altogether as an explanatory construct. Twentieth-century narrative is too diverse, multiform, and overdetermined to be reduced to a simple formula within a chronological sequence. The realism/modernism/postmodernism progression simply does not correctly describe literary practice in this century. A more accurate, rhizomatic model shows instead five distinct, significant narrative poetics—realism, modernism, high modernism, expressionism, and romance—that continuously fluctuate, battle against, merge with, and interanimate each other dialogically every decade.

The urge toward teleology, one that cannot be resisted by literary polemists and authors of manifestoes, must be regularly contested by literary historians. No one believes anymore that science steadily progresses toward an unchanging goal, or that historical events can adequately be contained within the form of a single linear narrative. Why then would we ever assume that comparable narrative structures are able to embrace modern literature or critical theory? The rich mass of narrative fiction of this century demands a more capacious, flexible, and open-ended account. I hope the model I have presented here suggests a more useful and accurate—if also necessarily provisional—way of conceptualizing it in all its messy heterogeneity.

NOTES

1 I do not mean to denigrate McHale's admirable analysis but rather to complain about its unidirectionality. His account of Beckett's transition to postmodernism is wonderful, but he does not attempt to describe Beckett's subsequent return to modernism in Company (1980). In his more recent Constructing Postmodernism, McHale acknowledges that Christine Brooke-Rose's alternating use of modernist and postmodern poetics compels us to see the two as "equally 'innovative' or 'advanced' alternatives which our historical situation makes available to contemporary writers" (12). Nevertheless, he continues to describe "the successive phases in the development of the poetics of the novel" as "realist, modernist, (perhaps) postmodernist" (188).

2 I should also add that my primary focus is narrative fiction, though most of my claims apply with equal force to drama, and many can be predicated of poetry, particularly in its narrative and dramatic forms. Lyric poetry oftentimes seems to be a rather different beast, and is most effectively analyzed on its own terms.

3 Most historical accounts nevertheless project a teleological pattern, and a large number reinscribe the progression outlined above, often in an abbreviated, binary form. A notable exception is Matei Calinescu's Five Faces of Modernity, another more recent is Peter Nicholls's Modernism: A Literary Guide, which was written to contain recent accounts that provide a simplistic, caricatured version of modernism (vii).

4 Among the recent works that attempt to recover modernism's female origins are Sidney Janet Kaplan's Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction, and The Gender of Modernism, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott. One of the goals of my essay is to add to this important project of recovering forgotten or suppressed women writers and to suggest alternative configurations that will more accurately reflect women's contributions.

5 For an excellent general discussion of the relation between narrative form and the writing of literary history, see David Perkins, esp. 29-51.

6 There may also be at the university level additional, pedagogical problems. Much expressionist fiction can be said to suffer from a paucity of ambiguity; the subjective distortions and emotional extremities of its protagonists are usually quite obvious. Often there is rather little to explain or interpret, though there is a great deal to admire.

7 I am attempting to adapt and expand Marjorie Perloff's important distinction between the high modernist tradition that includes Mallarmé, Yeats, Eliot, Stevens, and Berryman and a different poetics, grounded in undecidability, present in Rimbaud, "Gertrude Stein, in Pound and Williams, as well as in the short prose of Beckett's later years, an undecidability that has become even more marked in the poetry of the last decades" (Perloff, Poetics 4). For a more recent statement of her position, see Perloff's The Futurist Moment. On Stein as an early postmodernist, see Ellen E. Berry's impressive study.

8 As Calinescu observes, "Taking the term avant-garde in its Continental acception, we can argue that what Jhab [Hassan] calls postmodernism is mostly an extension and diversification of the pre-World War II avant-garde" (142-43). Similarly, David Galef, in an article interrogating the modernist-postmodern divide, observes that many of the defining "stylistic traits antedate the era with which they are most closely associated, making for a confused etiology and a difficult diachronic analysis" (83). He goes on to note that, "in a curious historical inversion, Dadaism antedates Surrealism and so reverses the modernist-postmodernist slide" (66). Finally, Szegedy-Maszak offers what is perhaps the most compelling evidence for the claim that "it is almost impossible to draw the line between [postmodernism] and its antecedents" (42).

9 For engaging speculations on postmodernism avant la lettre, see Postmodernism Across the Ages, eds. Bill Readings and Bemnej Schaber. Gregory W. Bredrick's piece, "The Postmodernist and the Homosexual" (254-59), which
argues that "postmodernism is always already homosexual" (255), is especially useful for thinking about Firbank. On this topic, see also the essays in Laura Doan's stimulating anthology, The Lesbian Postmodern.

One of the only sustained accounts of this work is Sherrill E. Grace's excellentRegression and Apocalypse.

This definition elaborates on Peter Szondi's description of the stylistic principle of expressionism as "the 'subjective distortion' of the objective" (64). This general position is discussed by Grace 20-22. One might further differentiate between a "standard" and a more "radical" type of expressionism. The former, as we will see shortly, invites the reader to determine in large part the actual experiences which is being distorted. The other follows more the logic of dreams (e.g., Kafka), and is not reducible to an event and its misprision. Naturally, many expressionist authors move continuously between these two poles (Celine, Blanchot).

For an insightful overview of this phenomenon, see Diane Elam, Romancing the Postmodern, esp. 1-25.

See Pamela A. Fox's article "The 'Revolt of the Gentle'". The standard work on the modern, low-brow, gothic romance is Janice A. Radway's Reading the Romance. For an excellent account of key moments in the historical trajectory of the romance in Western literature, see Patricia Parker's Inescapable Romance.

This relation is most fully and cunningly explored by Fredric Jameson in The Political Unconscious.

For a perceptive, concise account of the development of Isherwood's fiction, see A. S. Byatt provides an astute survey of the various movements of Murdoch and Wilson in her essay "People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to 'Realism' and 'Experiment' in English Post-war Fiction" (147-68).

For an impressive overview of specifically female experiments with dialogue fiction, see Janice Berkowitz Gross’ "A Telling Side of Narration."

Robert Rawdon Wilson has recently distinguished between theories that use postmodernism to designate a historical period (Jameson, Lyotard, Eagleton) and those that use the term to indicate a particular aesthetic, genre, or style (Hassan, Hutcheon, Thiefer). I suggest that the gap between these two postmodernist movements may turn out to be too vast to be bridged. Indeed, many theorists insist that the notion of a distinct postindustrial society has yet to be conclusively demonstrated; see Peter Burger on this point (29-47).

Simon Gikandi has made similar claims for Caribbean literature. He states that because "modernity and modernism pose a set of questions different from that raised in an Anglo-American context," Caribbean "literature is both haunted and sustained by modernism and modernity" (4).

For a sustained critique of the distortions that this master narrative, in the hands of Fredric Jameson, imposes on the history of modern Chinese literature, see Rey Chow.

For a powerful African-American response to constructions of modernism by one who fails to share the modernists' "fawning reliance on an array of images and assumptions bequeathed by a civilization that, in its prototypical form, is exclusively Western, preeminently bourgeois, and optically white" (6), see Houston A. Baker, Jr., Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.

21 For a vivid attempt to analyze modernism beyond its customary parameters, see Morton P. Levitt's Modernist Survivors.

22 Many might wish to move the first example of high modernism forward to Joyce or back to Flaubert (or even Mérième). I select the later James because it is here that formal concerns supersede (and not merely accompany) those of the representational practices of realism. I fully appreciate the complexities of establishing such a point of origin, and wish that comparable investigation was routinely given to the other aesthetics.

23 One can furthermore trace the most thorough genealogy for the most neglected type: expressionism. Working backward from Kafka and Ben, we can find Rilke's Malte Laurids Brigge, Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Flaubert's Temptation of St. Anthony, Lautréamont's Maladrour, Dostoievsky's Notes from Underground, Nerval's Sylvie, Gogol's "Diary of a Madman," Buchner's Woyzeck, numerous tales of Poe and Hoffmann, and Blake's "The Mental Traveler." Other romantic instances of postmodern practices include Ludwig Tieck's play Pass in Boots, and Charles Nodier's rather Barthesian-like fairy tales. See also Charles Caramello's discussion of Moby Dick, "the great American precursor of postmodern American fiction" (54), in his book Silverless Mirrors (54-93).

24 On the Romantic origins of key aesthetic concepts employed by postmodern writers, see Waugh 19-24.

Such a category would raise a number of potentially difficult issues, since in many cases it would be crucial to replace the aesthetic programs already in play. That is, we would find postcolonial and non-postcolonial examples of realism, postmodernism, etc. At the same time, it is unlikely that all writers from countries that recently gained independence share a common aesthetic. It is not clear to me that Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy or most of Upadhyay's novels have the oppositional poeticism more obviously present in other Indian and Indian diasporic authors, from Bankimchandra Chatterjee to Raja Rao to Salim Rushdie. To lump them all together in a single, rigid poeticism is, as Jameson was bluntly informed, to do violence to them. Finally, we might also observe that Ulysses, the canonical text of postcolonial modernism, is also a foundational anticolonial narrative. For these reasons I have not included postcolonial as a separate type in this analysis.

25 Such a construction would nevertheless need to address the concerns raised by various commentators on écriture féminine, the most pressing of which are set forth in Rita Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics (19-50).

I wish to thank Sangeeta Ray for many helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

WORKS CITED


TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE


MODERN LITERARY HISTORY