

**POSTMODERN AVATARS OF THE HISTORICAL NOVEL:
A DIALOGUE OF THEORETICAL APPROACHES**

Anca TOMUŞ, Assistant, PhD, "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu

Abstract: The present paper explores the various ways in which the postmodern historical novel departs from the paradigm established by nineteenth-century realism, and examines the main theoretical contributions to the definition of the genre. In a diversity of descriptions, whether that of "fabulative history" (Robert Scholes) or "palimpsest history" (Christine Brooke-Rose), "magical realism" or "historical fantasy" (Brian McHale), "problematic novel" (David Lodge) or "revisionist historical novel" (Brian McHale), "autoreferential fabulation" (Fredric Jameson) or "historiographic metafiction" (Linda Hutcheon), these theorists and critics of the genre managed to capture the novelty, the complexity, and the refreshing potential of the postmodern historical novel. The paper concludes with a few remarks on the more involved attitude and the kind of ethical and ideological experience that postmodernist fiction requires from the reader, suggesting that the delights and rewards we may derive from such readings are dependent on our understanding of a range of concepts central to postmodern thought, and our close familiarization with the postmodernist practice of writing.

Keywords: postmodernism, historical novel, fabulation, metafiction, magic realism, decentering.

What I want to call postmodernism in fiction paradoxically uses and abuses the conventions of both realism and modernism, and does so in order to challenge their transparency, in order to prevent glossing over the contradictions that make the postmodern what it is: historical and metafictional, contextual and self-reflexive, ever aware of its status as discourse, as a human construct.

(Hutcheon 52-53)

Postmodern sensibility, characterized as it is by a sense of relentless interrogation, intellectual unrest, and the irreconcilable tension between the inexhaustible will to knowledge on the one hand, and the exhausting unavailability of knowledge, on the other, is central to postmodernist fiction, particularly to one dominant sub-genre, variously defined and labelled by its theorists. This strand is almost unanimously traced back to the classic historical novel, from which it departs in several respects, or which it consciously deconstructs by constant questioning or subtle undermining of traditional conventions. In what follows, I propose an overview of the main theoretical contributions to the study of postmodernist fiction, especially in its more specific manifestations, which I have generically called "avatars of the historical novel."

In order to view this new novelistic mode in relation with its ancestor and to pinpoint its various departures from it, we must look back to the classic paradigm of the historical novel and try to delineate some of its constitutive features. By common consent, the history of the genre begins in the early nineteenth century, and Sir Walter Scott was its father. He set the standard of the historical novel for subsequent writers, who accepted his formula, and applied it to their otherwise highly personal visions of history. The first requirement for the historical

novelist of the period was that the setting within which they developed the dramatic plot be “based upon diligent research into actual events, locations, characters, as well as cultural customs, costume, and speech” (*The Literary Encyclopaedia*). However, as the name itself suggested, the historical novel was perceived from the very beginning as a hybrid genre, featuring a medley of accurate historical detail and pure invention. Scott himself was often criticized for “taking liberty with historical fact” (Lee 31), for “intermingling fiction with truth” and thus “polluting the well of history with modern inventions” (Scott qtd. in Lee 32). Scott defended himself against such charges in prefaces or dedicatory letters to his novels, where he repeatedly made a case for the necessity to “fictionalise rather than mirror events of the past” and pleaded in favour of a creative “reconstruction of history” (Scott qtd. in Lee 32).

However free and flexible his version of the historical novel may have seemed to his contemporaries, Scott’s “reconstructions” were still working within the framework of realistic conventions, aspiring to “bring history to life” by connecting the experience of imagined characters with “real,” historical situations and using specific literary devices – detailed descriptions of everyday concerns of the time, the “framing of one story within another, the fictional editor, endnotes, etc” (Lukàcs, in Rivkin and Ryan 290) – in order to give the illusion of reality. This “mimetic quality” of Scott’s fiction was exactly what Georg Lukàcs – the theorist who left us probably the most complete and seminal study of the historical novel – praised him for.

For Georg Lukàcs (*The Historical Novel*, 1936-37), the virtue of Scott’s novels, the novelty they bring into the realm of historical fiction, is “precisely the specifically historical, that is, the derivation of the individuality of character from the historical peculiarity of the age” (Lukàcs, in Rivkin and Ryan 292). The “broad, objective, epic form” he developed is the artistic expression of a “newly awakened historical feeling” in the aftermath of the “French Revolution, the revolutionary wars, and the rise and fall of Napoleon, which for the first time made history a *mass experience*.” The conception of history that underlies this novelistic form is that of an “uninterrupted process of changes” that has “a direct effect upon the life of every individual” (290). Therefore, the events unfold and succeed one another in a coherent and progressive sequence that observes the logic of cause and effect and are reflected by their impact on the private lives of fictional characters.

Scott perceives history as a “‘middle course’, asserting itself through the struggle of extremes” (293); thus, his principal figures are always “middle-of-the-road heroes,” mediocre middle-class English gentlemen, fairly (but not exceptionally) clever, yet endowed with moral strength and honesty to the point of self-sacrifice. Moreover, most characters represent human and social types of the time, with supposedly typical desires, concerns, appetites and ambitions, that find themselves caught up in conflicts or trying circumstances of historical importance, but also in love entanglements. Scott never creates eccentric figures, whose psychology does not fit in with the general sensibilities (i.e. thoughts and feelings) of the age. The protagonists of Scott’s novels are always non-historical or only half-historical characters, while the great figures of history necessarily remain in the background and “grow out of the being of the age” (293).

Time and again throughout his study, Lukàcs calls attention to various aspects regarding the kinship between the realistic historical novel (as represented by Scott) and the ancient epic. In his contrastive description of the novel and the epic (“Epic and Novel: toward

a Methodology for the Study of the Novel”) Mihail Bakhtin focuses on one particular aspect of this kinship, namely the position of both author and reader in relation to the past “reality” that each of these two genres aims (or claims) to represent. The attitude that characterizes the epic, Bakhtin notes, is “the reverence of a descendant” speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible, “impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate” (in Holquist 15). The epic past is an “absolute past,” “walled off...from all subsequent times, and above all from those times in which the singer and the listener are located” (17). The “world of the heroes” remains far removed from those who contemplate it, “on an utterly different and inaccessible time-and-value plane, separated by epic distance” (15). In this respect, the historical novel as represented by Scott does come close to the epic, as he “very seldom speaks of the present” and “does not raise the social questions of contemporary England in his novels” (Lucàks in Rivkin and Ryan 292). The novel, as Bakhtin defines it – fluid, developing, dialogic, heteroglot, polyphonic – opens up new possibilities for the portrayal of the past, by retaining “contemporary reality with its new experiences...as a way of seeing” (Bakhtin in Holquist 29-30), by working in a “zone of maximal contact with the present in all its openedness” (11). Therefore, we feel tempted to place the realistic historical novel as typified by Scott and theorized by Lukàcs somewhere in between the monologic, fixed and canonical form of the epic and the ever developing, free-flowing, anticanonical, dialogic mode of the novel in the Bakhtinian sense.

For all its faults, the classic historical novel seems to have achieved what Scholes and Kellog (*The Nature of Narrative*, 1966) call a “synthesis of empirical and fictional modes,” mingling history, *mimesis*, romance (there is always a couple in the foreground) and allegory (it declaredly aims to instruct). This “precarious synthesis” (Lodge in Bradbury 1990: 89) maintained by the aesthetic of realism and vulnerable to the “various cultural pressures,” dissolves “in the experiments of modern narrative writers and the advent of new media” (87-88). If in 1966 Scholes and Kellog were announcing the disintegration of the novel synthesis, which “should be associated with a radical undermining of realism as a literary mode” (89), eleven years later, in *The Fabulators* (revised in 1980 as *Fabulation and Metafiction*), Robert Scholes proposes an inquiry into the “fabulative movement,” persuasively arguing that “fiction must abandon its attempt to ‘represent reality’ and rely more on the power of words to stimulate the imagination” (90).

Borrowing a concept from Peirce’s philosophical writings, Scholes refers to the postmodern intellectual position – somewhere in between the awareness that the ultimate, definitive truth is unattainable and the refusal to settle for a comfortable belief in what cannot be known for certain – as “fallibilism,” which is, in his view, the only appropriate attitude towards a “reality” that constantly thwarts our efforts and aspirations to attain absolute certainties. The new kind of narrative, which he calls “fabulation,” grows out precisely of this attitude, “just as nineteenth-century realism grew out of an attitude called positivism,” and foregrounds its own “fallibilism,” its own “inability to reach all the way to the real,” while continuing to “look toward reality” (Scholes 8). In Scholes’s view then, “fabulation” is not to be mistaken for “mythomania” or “outright tall tales,” as Fredric Jameson has suggested, in his typically disparaging manner, diagnosing its emergence as a “symptom of social and historical impotence” that leaves us no choice but to substitute the “making up of unreal history” for the “making of the real kind” (Jameson 369).

While Jameson seems, once more, too ready to dismiss the new novel as “short-lived” (367) and, in some sense, escapist – he regards it as a sort of compensatory, yet passive and ineffectual pastime, “free play with the past” (368) that should make up for the lack of active, meaningful involvement – Scholes, at the opposite pole, shows too much enthusiasm and eagerness to exalt this movement away from realism and towards the purely fictional modes, which for him is “itself a guarantee of value” (Lodge in Bradbury 1990: 91). Nevertheless, Scholes acknowledges the uniqueness, among “fabulations,” of those novels that “mix fact with fantasy,” that is, of those fabulative writings that are hooked on the historical past: “The fabulative impulse has achieved its most impressive results when it has worked most closely with the raw material of history” (Scholes 206). He calls them “fabulative histories” and underlines their distinctiveness from both pure fabulation and the “worn-out form of the historical novel” as it was popularised in the nineteenth century, pointing out that “these works bristle with facts and smell of research of the most painstaking kind. Yet, they deliberately challenge the notion that history may be retrieved by objective investigation of fact” (206). Using a highly suggestive metaphor – “the rape of history by imagination” – Scholes seems to be describing a narrative mode that will soon make the object of more thorough, in-depth study of what is now a familiar phrase among postmodern readers: magic realism. That is to say Scholes’s prediction that these books, which are “marvellous monsters, like leviathans and pachyderms,” will not last long because “the environment grows more hostile to them every day” (209), has been contradicted by subsequent (and still continuing) developments of this narrative mode.

The now popular term “magic realism” was coined by Franz Roh in 1925 “to describe a form of art that portrayed scenes of fantasy and imagination through the use of clear-cut, ‘documentary’ painting techniques.” Today it is “almost exclusively associated with literature” (Sim 310), with a particular kind of fiction, “where elements of history and magic merge, dream and magic feebly penetrate realistic narrative” (Bradbury 2001: 432) and whose earliest manifestations are to be found in Latin-American writing (Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Octavio Paz). This kind of fiction, which combines historical events and people with magic and fantasy, which brings together the extraordinary and the mundane, has ever since been embraced by writers in North America (Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover etc.), in Britain (Salman Rushdie, Graham Swift, Angela Carter etc.) and especially in the “troubled areas” of Europe – those psychologically (and otherwise) affected by the outcome of World War Two (Germany – Gunter Grass; Italy – Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco) or those under communist rule (former Czechoslovakia – Milan Kundera; Serbia – Milorad Pavic). The pervasiveness of magic realism in these “troubled areas” is significant in that it links the technique with an impulse to invent alternative histories or to re-read/rewrite history in a creative way that should give the reader a sense of the incomprehensibility of reality, but also lift the nightmarish spectre of recent history through the gratifying act of playing with the past, of infusing it with fantasy and magic, thus making it seem less real. The importance of magic realism lies precisely in this ability to “transform” historical and political realities, as Milan Kundera argues, by looking at them with a “special humour: a humour capable of seeing history as grotesque” (qtd. in Bradbury 2001: 459).

The English novelist Christine Brooke-Rose proposes a more interesting phrase to name this fictional genre: “palimpsest history.” This “innovative genre,” she enthusiastically

asserts, “mingling realism with history, fantasy with spiritual revelation, has renewed the life of the novel” (qtd. in Bradbury 2001: 394). The dictionary definition indicates two senses of the word “palimpsest”: “1. a very old document that writing was removed from and the surface written on again; sometimes the older writing can still be read; 2. something that has many obvious stages or levels of meaning, development, or history” (*Macmillan English Dictionary* 1023). As both meanings suggest, this kind of historical fiction, without completely effacing the past as it has been recorded and transmitted to us, successfully manages to re-write history in a creative and often complex and intricate way. As Brooke-Rose perceptively remarks, it does not operate with alternative worlds, but with “alternative histories” (Brooke-Rose 120), and just as other novelistic sub-genres (the science fiction novel, for instance) model their “universes apart” (McHale 28) or fictional worlds “more or less after the world we know, with the obvious departures required and accepted by those genres” (Brooke-Rose 119), “palimpsest histories” aim at recovering a historical period or event that we are familiar with, by a highly effective process of poetic, re-creative reading. Brooke-Rose identifies several types of “palimpsest history,” variously combining realism with magic, history with “entirely imagined stories,” fantasy with philosophical, theological or literary reference, and each of them, to a certain extent, achieving the ultimate effect of “pushing our intellectual, spiritual and imaginative horizons to extremes,” which is, in her view, the “novel’s duty” (125).

The same idea of world-building or “possible worlds theory” makes the starting point for Brian McHale’s extensive study of postmodernist fiction, where magic realism (or “historical fantasy,” in McHale’s terms) is defined as “a kind of miscegenation between the historical and the fantastic” and regarded as one of the strategies used by the postmodern novelist to “foreground ontology”: “Integration of the historical and the fantastic, especially integration within a single character, exacerbates the ontological hesitation which is the principle of all fantastic fiction, for here the hesitation is not between the supernatural and the realistic, but between the supernatural and the historically real” (McHale 95). Other two strategies typical of the “revisionist historical novel” are “apocryphal history” – by which the narrative “visibly contradicts the public record of ‘official’ history,” what it tells us about historical figures and events – and “creative anachronism” – by which the narrative constantly flaunts its own incongruities with what “official” history tells us about “the entire material culture and *Weltanschauung* of a period” (88). As McHale points out, these strategies are doubly subversive:

The postmodernist historical novel is revisionist in two senses. First, it revises the content of the historical record, reinterpreting the historical record, often demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of the past. Secondly, it revises, indeed transforms, the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself. (90)

It is precisely to the purpose of revealing and explaining the ways in which postmodernist historical fiction departs from the traditional paradigm or utterly violates the constraints on the classical historical novel, that McHale uses the “possible worlds theory” and its concepts. The trouble with historical fiction in general is that it “incorporates” individuals, places and ideas that “have existed in the real world” within its own

“heterocosm” (i.e. the fictional worlds it projects). Therefore, the relation between the two “fields of reference” – the internal “world constructed in and by the text itself” and the external one, to which it turns constantly, the “objective world, the body of historical fact or scientific theory, an ideology, or philosophy, other texts, and so on” – is no longer simply one of “imitation or mirroring,” but one of “overlap or interpenetration” (29). According to McHale, the appearance of historical figures or people, the reference to places and events that, by our common knowledge, have existed “in the real world,” “constitute enclaves of ontological difference within the otherwise ontologically homogeneous fictional heterocosm” (29). McHale calls these entities – whose presence has always been a defining feature of the historical novel, and which are not “real-world things-in-themselves, things in the raw,” but “semioticized things” – “historical realemies” (86). The realistic historical novel observes three major constraints that govern the insertion of historical realemies: the restriction within the so-called “dark areas” of the novelist’s “freedom to improvise actions and properties of historical figures,” the constraint on anachronism (which requires consistency with what the “official” record tells us about the whole culture of the period) and the insistence on a realistic projection of the fictional world (which means that “the logic and physics of the fictional world must be compatible with those of reality”) (87). Using the three strategies mentioned earlier, the postmodernist historical novel systematically rejects or violates each of these constraints: “apocryphal history” deviously appears to operate within the “dark areas of history” (i.e. those aspects about which the “official” record has nothing to report), but actually “parodying them” (90), or flagrantly breaks this constraint, displacing the historical record altogether, to offer an alternative and sometimes “radically dissimilar version” of history. As McHale observes, “one form of apocryphal history responds to the impulse to restore ‘lost’ groups to the historical record,” to “redress the balance” by offering “histories of the excluded” (90-91).

The constraint on anachronism was difficult to observe even by the most scrupulous realistic novelists; but if these always sought to disguise their not infrequent failures in this respect, postmodernist writers of historical fiction choose to flaunt their own inability to achieve an accurate reflection of the culture, world-view and ideology of a past epoch. In the same creative way, the “revisionist historical novel” undermines the third constraint, by interspersing a more or less realistically depicted “heterocosm” with elements of magic and fantasy. This undoubtedly unsettles the readers, arousing in them “a sense of suspicion in respect to [their] common beliefs”; it produces a “sense of logical uneasiness and of narrative discomfort” by “undermining the world of their encyclopaedia” (Eco qtd. in McHale 33). Postmodernist historical fiction, whatever we may call it – “fabulative history,” “magic realism,” “palimpsest history,” “fantastic history” or “revisionist historical fiction” – assumes its special condition of being “in between, amphibious” (McHale 33), and therefore requires from the reader a special intellectual attitude, one characterized, as the novelist Ronald Sukenick has put it, by a “suspension of belief as well as of disbelief” (qtd. in McHale 33).

The same aspect of postmodernist fiction, its “in-betweenness,” is contained in David Lodge’s metaphor of the crossroads, the main road being that of realistic fiction, which branches off in two opposite directions: one that leads to fabulation and the other to a narrative mode that “straddles the conventional boundary between fiction and reportage” (Lodge in Bradbury 1990: 94), the non-fiction novel. Coming up the main road, the novelist

who arrives at this crossroads and “has any kind of self-awareness must at least hesitate” before taking one or the other of the two routes. As Lodge points out, American writers have tended to take up fabulation, while English novelists, being “peculiarly committed to realism,” have generally favoured the non-fiction alternative. However, the more percipient and subtle-minded ones, whether English or American, “have chosen as a solution to this dilemma to build their hesitation into the novel itself” (109). Thus, we can speak of a third alternative to realistic fiction, which Lodge calls the “problematic novel” and describes as follows:

the novel which exploits more than one of these modes without fully committing itself to any, the novel-about-itself, the trick-novel, the game-novel, the puzzle-novel, the novel that leads the reader (who wishes, naively, only to be told what to believe) through a fairground of illusions and deceptions, distorting mirrors and trap-doors that open disconcertingly under his feet, leaving him ultimately not with any simple or reassuring message or meaning but with a paradox about the relation of art to life. (110)

The “problematic novel” thus described seems to have “affinities with both the non-fiction novel and fabulation,” while remaining distinct from either, “precisely because it brings both into play” (110). The famous prototype of this kind of fiction is Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, which must have sent shockwaves through its eighteenth-century audience by its unprecedented eccentricity in dealing with moral matters and its irreverent attitude towards novelistic conventions, which were “exposed and undermined by the narrator himself” (111).

Within the framework of contemporary fiction, Lodge’s “problematic novel” seems to come close to what Scholes describes in the last chapter of his study (*Fabulation and Metafiction*) as “self-reflexive fiction,” “one dimension of fabulation” which “has become too self-involved” (Scholes 218). However, he does not regard it with the same confidence as Lodge does, as for him “self-reflection is a narcissistic way of avoiding the great task” of fiction, which is to “generate, in literature and in life, systems that bring human desires in closer harmony with the systems operating in the whole cosmos” (217). In order to achieve this, Scholes argues, one needs a “cosmic imagination,” not this “masturbatory revelling in self-scrutiny” (218).

Scholes’s view that “self-reflection in fiction is essentially a short-termed trend which is nearing its end” (212) somehow reiterates the sceptical attitude manifested by Fredric Jameson towards the “tedious autoreferential fabulations of the short-lived Anglo-American ‘new novel’” (Jameson 367). However perceptive and otherwise insightful both these theorists may be, their respective predictions about the self-reflexive novel have proved to be wrong, as the genre has never ceased to develop and self-consciousness still remains, as Patricia Waugh argues, “the dominant characteristic of the contemporary novel as a whole” (Waugh 68).

Scholes and Waugh seem to be at variance in respect to what each of them calls “metafiction” – a term coined by William Gass in 1970. For Scholes, metafiction is “one of the special and important features of the fabulative movement” (Scholes 4), complex, sophisticated, over-elaborate and highly experimental, but he does not equate it with self-reflexive writing. Waugh regards it not as a sub-genre of the novel but rather as “a tendency within the novel, which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions

inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion” (Waugh 14). She devotes an entire book (*Metafiction*, 1996) to the exploration of this kind of fictional writing “which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact” and begins by pointing out some of its distinctive features:

a celebration of the power of the creative imagination together with an uncertainty about the validity of its representations; an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing fictions; a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality; a parodic, playful, excessive or deceptively naïve style of writing. (2)

The practice, she argues, is “as old as the novel itself” (5) and its roots are to be found (once more) in the eighteenth-century novel *Tristram Shandy*, which Viktor Shklovsky regarded as “the most typical novel,” metafictionally subversive in that it tells about “the transformation of its ‘story’ into ‘plot’” (70). Its self-conscious and self-mocking narrator, while relating his story, constantly reflects upon the very act of telling, exposing in his famous conversational and jocular manner the conventions that govern his, or any other narrative undertaking. Moreover, apart from self-reflection, by which metafictional writing “explicitly and overtly lays bare its own condition of artifice” (4), Sterne’s novel (as well as its descendants) bases its subversion on the eschewing of “the most fundamental set of all narrative conventions: those concerning the representation of time” (70). Throughout this novel, which has no beginning, middle or end, and opens with a hero that is not yet born, chronological sequence is distorted, normal causal relationship between episodes is displaced; instead of these, we are faced with “an amorphous mass of inconsequential incidents ... jokes, musings, reminiscences and countless hilarious digressions into side issues of the vaguest tangential relevance” (“Introduction” *i*). It also subverts the convention on the centrality of the hero (the first-person narrator), who actually appears as a secondary character in the story.

In a similar, but more experimental fashion, contemporary metafiction systematically undermines or “deconstructs” the conventions of realism, not simply by ignoring or abandoning such conventions, but on the contrary, by inscribing them in order to contest them. Patricia Waugh refers to this deconstructive method as “an alternation of frame and frame-break,” that is, “the construction of an illusion through the imperceptibility of the frame and the shattering of illusion through the constant exposure of the frame” (Waugh 31). The frame (i.e. the essential substructure or established system by which something is organized and perceived) here is made up of the realistic narrative conventions, which “supply the ‘control’ in metafictional texts, the norm or background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves” and provide the necessary “level of readerly familiarity” (18), without which the whole experimental and deconstructive undertaking might be meaningless. Thus, metafictional texts use the conventions of realism to “establish a common language” that should meet the reader’s expectations, but at the same time self-consciously works to undermine them by “*laying bare the device* in order to achieve *defamiliarization*.” As Waugh cogently explains, “in metafiction, it is precisely the fulfilment

as well as the non-fulfilment of generic expectations that provides both familiarity and the starting point for innovation” (64-65).

A special sub-category of metafiction achieves what we might call a “double defamiliarization” – using and then breaking both the frame of realistic narrative conventions and that of historiography. Its name brilliantly captures the two aspects and it owes its renown as the dominant postmodern novelistic mode to Linda Hutcheon’s seminal study, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). What Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction” is actually the reflection, in novelistic form, of the paradoxes and contradictions that lie at the heart of postmodernism, which she describes throughout her study as “a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts the very concepts it challenges” (Hutcheon 3). In historiographic metafiction, the main focus of attention is the issue of narrativity, that is the “translation of knowing into telling,” the process by which we impose “meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of events” (121). The conventions it “uses and abuses” are those governing the narrative in both fiction and historiography, and the way it chooses to subvert them is by working within these conventions, while always preserving a “questioning stance” (106) towards them. This is achieved through its overt metafictional self-reflexivity, its parodic play and, more effectively, by internalising the whole range of postmodern theories and cultural tendencies and translating them into its own thematic and structural configuration.

Linda Hutcheon points out that this kind of fiction, apart from being “self-reflexively metafictional and parodic,” also “makes a claim to some kind of (newly problematized) historical reference” (40). However, while it still roots itself into the historical world, historiographic metafiction does not naively pretend to mirror it, but recognizes its inability to “know the ‘ultimate objects’ of the past” (24). In other words, “while still teasing us with the existence of the past as real,” historiographic metafiction “also suggests that there is no direct access to that real which would be unmediated by the structures of our various discourses about it” (146). It maintains and plays upon the “double identity” of history – as real past, with events that have happened and figures that have existed, and as discourse, as textual reconstruction of that past, “upon which fiction draws as easily as it does upon other texts of literature” (142). Thus, history itself becomes an intertext, among the multitude of discourses from which the novel derives its meaning.

By one of Roland Barthes’s definitions, the intertext is “the impossibility of living outside the infinite text” (128); historiographic metafiction accepts this notion and self-consciously assumes its status as a “node within a network” (Foucault qtd. in Hutcheon 127) of discourses, permanently and inevitably referring to other texts, other sentences, other books. This view obviously complicates the issue of reference in a typically postmodernist manner, that is, by multiplication, by making it plural; there are, according to Hutcheon, “at least five directions of reference” in historiographic metafiction. These directions are: intra-textual reference (the novel refers first and foremost to its own fictional universe), self-reference (the text constantly refers to itself as a linguistic and narrative construction), intertextual reference (the fictional discourse integrates and partakes of other discourses, both literary and historiographic), textualized extratextual reference (the fictional account of past events necessarily refers to a historical “reality,” but one that is textual), and hermeneutic reference (the only way in which the text actually “hooks onto the world” is by directly

addressing the reader) (Hutcheon 154-156). By “locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network” (129), historiographic metafiction questions the authority of any written version of the past, be it official or alternative, public or private, macroscopic or microcosmic, allegedly objective or admittedly subjective. The effect is again one of indiscriminate plurality, because, as Steven Connor explains, “when the authority of history is exploded, the result is an explosion of histories and authorities” (Connor 136).

Historiographic metafiction assimilates the Foucauldian notion of continuity as permanently “pretended” and responds in various ways to Foucault’s urge to “unmask the continuities that are taken for granted in the western narrative tradition” (Hutcheon 98). One important aspect of this challenge to continuity is the de-centring and dispersion of subjectivity. In order to put into question the notion of a coherent, unified bourgeois subject, historiographic metafiction “simultaneously creates and subverts the Realist convention of an unproblematically constituted individual ‘subject’ who is the prime mover of events and from whom essential meaning emanates” (Lee 55). Absorbing the structuralist and post-structuralist theories of subjectivity as a “fundamental property of language” (Hutcheon 168) and therefore “not a fixed...essence, but an open *process*” (Lee 55), postmodernist novels explicitly challenge the humanist notion of the individual as “free, unified, coherent and consistent,” Hutcheon suggests, by investigating “how, in all discourses, the subject of history is the subject in history, subject to history and to his story” (177).

To view subjectivity as linguistically and discursively constructed does not, however, mean to deny the subject; as Derrida famously insists, the subject “is absolutely indispensable. I don’t destroy the subject; I situate it” (qtd. in Hutcheon 159). This points to the other sense of “de-centring,” for “to situate,” Hutcheon explains, means also to “recognize differences – of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on” (159). To “de-centre” is not only to reveal the subject as fragmented, dispersed and discontinuous, but also to contest the notion of “centre” by giving voice and significance to the marginal or the “ex-centric.” Exposing the centre as a construct, a fiction, or in Derrida’s terms, “a function, not a being” (qtd. in Lentricchia 271), postmodernism rejects the simplistic opposition centre/margin and the old notion of the “other” breaks down, giving way to the “plurality of the ‘different’” (Hutcheon 196). Historiographic metafiction gives special attention to the historical discourses of the previously silent groups, to the local, regional, private versions of the past, to what we conventionally regard as peripheral, ex-centric (or eccentric) figures (lunatics, idiots, cripples, homosexuals, halfwits, exiles, migrants or social outcasts).

Against this loss of confidence in easy, unproblematic forms of continuity we may set the representation of history as “splintered,” full of “gaps, absences and enigmas” (Connor 134), in a narrative that abandons the linear sequence and the smooth, steady unfolding of a chronological succession of episodes, and revels in disruptions, random juxtaposition of events, unexpected leaps forward and sudden flashbacks, “spatialisation” and internalisation of time. The narrator, who is supposed to be the controlling agency in charge of the narrative process, putting together bits and pieces of memory and making up a coherent, comprehensible whole, is himself/herself de-centred and dispersed. Linda Hutcheon distinguishes between two modes of narration privileged by historiographic metafiction: “multiple points of view” and “an overtly controlling narrator,” but “in neither,” she

continues, “do we find a subject confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty” (117). This “rethinking of the past in non-developmental, non-continuous terms” (118) produces an all-encompassing instability which shatters even the psychological (and often physical) unity of this supposedly sovereign agency, rendering it unreliable and self-doubting.

In the light of all these, how is the contemporary reader to respond to this kind of historical fiction? Since Roland Barthes heralded the “birth of the reader” by the emergence of the “writerly text” the act of reading has acquired greater significance and has been regarded (and assumed) with much more responsibility. The reader is no longer the passive, uninvolved receiver of a ready-made literary product that resolves its own mysteries and fulfils his/her expectations, but becomes “an acknowledged fully active player in...a collective creation” (Waugh 43). The novelist is now dependant on the reader, not only for “identity and sympathy,” as Waugh has suggested, nor just for the sense of relief the writer might feel by transferring his/her anxiety over the “problematic nature of his[her] undertaking” onto the reader, as David Lodge has put it (in Bradbury 1990: 112), but for the very success of his/her achievement. In fact, not many readers are likely to sympathize with someone who seems to take pleasure in constantly shattering their notions of reality and frustrating their expectations, who relishes the trickiness of his/her art and whose main goal seems to be “the bewilderment of the reader” (Rushdie qtd. in Bradbury 2001: 506). I believe that a truly passionate reader of postmodernist historical fiction must either be completely innocent, ignorant of any common notions about the world and of any literary conventions – which is a logical impossibility – or already have reached a certain level of familiarity with experimental writing, acquired some theoretical understanding of the entire cultural phenomenon and, most importantly, accepted the “postmodern condition” in all its bewildering complexity.

Bibliography

Bradbury, Malcolm (ed.). *The Novel Today. Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*. New Edition. London: Fontana Press, 1990.

Bradbury, Malcolm. *The Modern British Novel: 1878-2001*. Revised edition. London: Penguin Books, 2001.

Brooke-Rose, Christine. “Istorie în palimpsest” in Umberto Eco, *Interpretare și suprainterpretare. O dezbateră cu Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler și Christine Brooke-Rose*. Traducere de Ștefania Mincu. Constanța: Editura Pontica, 2004.

Connor, Steven. *The English Novel in History. 1950-1995*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Holquist, Michael (ed.). *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000.

“Historical Novel” in *The Literary Encyclopaedia*. www.LitEncyc.com Web.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988.

“Introduction” to *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1996.

- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Lee, Alison. *Realism and Power – Postmodern British Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Lentricchia, Frank. *After the New Criticism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Lukacs, Georg. “The Historical Novel” in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.). *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.
- Macmillan English Dictionary*. Oxford: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 2002.
- Mc Hale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Scholes, Robert. *Fabulation and Metafiction*. University of Illinois Press, 1980.
- Sim, Stuart (ed.). *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*. Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd., 1998.
- Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.