

THE WAR NOVEL, A MODERNIST AND POSTMODERNIST REPRESENTATION BASED ON HISTORY AND FICTION

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Abstract: Linking a number of modernist and postmodernist literary texts and the attending cultural contexts in which they were produced, the present article starts from the assumption that fiction is somehow involved in modernist texts featuring crisis, conflicts and war situations, as well as in postmodernist literary works.

Critics have tried to demonstrate that the war novel has always been a mixture of parody and history, metafiction and politics, sometimes shocking even for the critics and it seems that it has always been both fictional and worldly in its engagement with realistic representation of the present and of the historical past.

Referring to books such as Joseph Heller's "Catch-22", Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse-Five" or Brian McHale's "Postmodernist Fiction", the hereby article comes to highlight the boundaries between postmodernist and modernist aspects as well as between fact and fiction.

Keywords: fiction, metafiction, modernism, postmodernism, war novel

Fiction, like photography, has been firmly rooted in realist representation. However, since fiction's reinterpretation in modernist formalist terms, both fiction and photography are now in a position to confront both their documentary and formal impulses in various ways. As far as war fiction of a postmodernist denomination is concerned, this will become one major preoccupation: how can a text be obviously self-reflexive and at the same time engage in a challenging manner with the power of the real and the authentic? A good artistic illustration of this might be Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which combines in special ways actual war experience and highly metafictional postmodernist experimentation, involving at the same time a reconsideration of such cultural landmarks as the hero, history, war and war narratives. Documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody, creating special effects and requiring special responses from various audiences, not necessarily contemporary with the initial publication of the text, or with the fictional world depicted within it. At this stage in the development of war fiction, a study of representation becomes, not so much a study of mimetic mirroring, but an exploration of the way in which narratives and images shape how readers see themselves and how they construct their notions of their own identity in relation to the grim realities, and fictions, of whatever war stands for.

How do the countercultural audiences of the 1960s, for example, define themselves in relation to heroism and war narratives by their response to such books as Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* or the above-mentioned *Slaughterhouse-Five*? The documentary value of such wildly postmodernist war novels as Heller's *Catch-22* or Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (one should not forget the fact that both authors saw action in WWII in special, peculiar ways) challenges the ideological underpinnings of both the high-art documentary feature of modernist photography and the mass (advertising, newspapers, magazines) and popular (snapshots) cultural photographic forms surrounding them in the culture in which they reached their readers. That quality moves out of the hermeticism and narcissism that is always possible in postmodernist metafiction and into the cultural and social world, a world which was bombarded daily with photographic images of the Korean War, for Heller as he was writing his novel, with the Vietnam War, as Vonnegut was slowly, painstakingly completing his anti-war narrative. In postmodernist war/anti-war fiction, too, the documentary impulse of realism meets the problematizing of reference seen earlier in self-reflexive, metafictional modernism. Postmodern narrative is filtered through the history of both, bringing together the question of representation and its politics, to come back to Linda Hutcheon's theory of the politics of postmodernism in her seminal 1989 book.

In his book, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale points out that every critic 'constructs' postmodernism in his or her own way from different perspectives, none more right or wrong than the others. The point is that all are 'finally fictions.' He goes on to say:

Thus, there is John Barth's postmodernism, the literature of replenishment; Charles Newman's postmodernism, the literature of an inflationary economy; Jean-François Lyotard's postmodernism, a general condition of knowledge in the contemporary informational régime; Ihab Hassan's postmodernism, a stage on the road to the spiritual unification of humankind; and so on. There is even Kermodé's construction of postmodernism, which in effect constructs it right out of existence.¹

To this, one could add McHale's ontological "dominant" in reaction to the epistemological 'dominant' of modernism, as well as the above-mentioned version of Fredric Jameson's postmodernism, the cultural logic of late capitalism. Linda Hutcheon adds to the list Jean Baudrillard's postmodernism, in which the simulacrum rejoices over the body of the deceased referent; Kroker and Cook's (related) hyperreal dark side of postmodernism; Sloterdijk's postmodernism of cynicism or 'enlightened false consciousness'; and Alan Wilde's literary 'middle grounds' of the postmodern.²

As Hutcheon states further on, postmodernism aims to be accessible through its clear and self-conscious parodic, historical, and reflexive forms, being in this way an effective force in the contemporary culture that she considers. Its special, complicitious critique places the postmodern within both economic capitalism and cultural humanism – two of the major dominants of much of the western world, in her opinion.³

The same sort of questions about the complicity that accompanies the challenges of postmodern art has been asked of postmodern theory. Are Derrida's, Lacan's, Lyotard's, Foucault's theories entangled in their own de-doxifying logic? Each of these theoretical perspectives can be argued to be deeply – and knowingly – implicated in that notion of center they attempt to subvert (power for Foucault or writing for Derrida). It is this paradox that

¹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, New York: Routledge: 1987, p. 4.

² Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd edition, New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

makes them postmodern. Teresa de Lauretis has put the case of the feminist version of this paradox in terms of the ‘subject of feminism,’ as it is being constructed in feminist discourse today, being both inside and outside the ideology of gender – and aware of the double pull.⁴

Narrative representation – fictive and historical – comes under similar subversive scrutiny in the paradoxical postmodern form which Hutcheon calls ‘historiographic metafiction.’ Perhaps, as Lennard Davis has stated in his book stressing the importance of ideology in fiction,⁵ the novel has been inherently ambivalent since its inception: it has always been both fictional and worldly in its engagement with realistic representation of the present and of the historical past.

If this is considered to be like this, then postmodern historiographic metafiction merely foregrounds this inherent paradox by having its historical and socio-political grounding sit alongside its self-reflexivity. Postmodern critics have also noticed a mixture of parody and history, metafiction and politics, sometimes shocking even for the critics (see the reception by some of Vonnegut’s *Mother Night*). This particular combination is probably historically determined by postmodernism’s conflictual response to literary modernism.

On the one hand, Huyssen thinks, the postmodern obviously was made possible by the self-referentiality, irony, ambiguity, and parody that define much modernist art, as well as its explorations of language and its challenges to the classic realist system of representation; on the other hand. Also, postmodern fiction has come to contest the modernist ideology of artistic autonomy, individual expression, and the deliberate separation of art from mass culture and everyday life.⁶

Dealing with the political ambivalence of the postmodern, Hal Foster identifies two kinds: one, a postmodernism of resistance, and the other, of reaction, one poststructuralist and the other neoconservative.⁷ The postmodern project actually includes both Foster’s types: it is a critique both of the view of representation as reflective of reality and of the accepted idea of ‘man’ as the centered subject of representation; but it is also an exploitation of those same challenged foundations of representation. Linda Hutcheon mentions a certain postmodern representational paradox: postmodern texts point to the “opaque nature of their representational strategies and at the same time to their complicity with the notion of the transparency of representation – a complicity shared, of course, by anyone who pretends even to describe their “de-doxifying’ tactics”.⁸

To Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction represents not just a world of fiction, however self-consciously presented as a constructed one, but also a world of public experience. The difference between this and the realist logic of reference is that here that public world is rendered specifically as discourse. ‘How do we know the past today?’, Hutcheon continues her interrogation of narrative representation, which also applies to the postmodernist anti-war texts under discussion in this dissertation. We know the past through its discourses, through its texts, through the traces of its historical events: the archival materials, the documents, the narratives of witnesses...and historians. Postmodern fiction

⁴ Teresa DeLauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 10.

⁵ Lennard Davies, *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction*, Methuen, Inc., 1987, p. 225.

⁶ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great: Divide Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 53-54.

⁷ Hal Foster, *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto Press, 1985, p. 121.

⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd edition, New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 17.

contributes to this knowledge, making overt the processes of narrative representation, of the real or the fictive and of their interrelations.⁹

This is not considered to be a blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction, but more a hybrid, where the borders are kept clear, even if they are frequently crossed. Vonnegut's impact did not lose from its hybrid nature; its metafictionality only increased its appeal, in addition to the 'documentary iceberg' lurking beneath its postmodernist surface. Should one use Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction to apply to such novels as *Mother Night* or *Slaughterhouse-Five*?

In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale has noted that both modernist and postmodernist fiction show an affinity for cinematic models. But historiographic metafiction, obsessed with the question of how we can come to know the past today, also shows an attraction to photographic models – and to photographs – either as physically present (in Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*) or as the narrativized trappings of the historical archive (in Timothy Findley's *The Wars* or Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*). In raising and problematizing the issue of photographic representation, postmodern fiction points to the related issue of narrative representation – its powers and its limitations.

Among the consequences of the postmodern desire to denaturalize history (a good example lies beyond the scope of this dissertation in another novel by Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan*), there is a new self-consciousness about the distinction between the brute *events* of the past and the historical *facts* we construct out of them, a distinction that Hutcheon discusses in her book on the politics of postmodernism. Facts are events to which we have given meaning. Different historical perspectives therefore derive different facts from the same events.¹⁰ In postmodernist anti-war fiction, we may add, facts are events which the author renders as utterly meaningless, hence the avowed failure of a novel written by a pillar of salt, as Vonnegut says about his anti-war novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* in its first, autobiographical section.

There are important parallels between the processes of history-writing and fiction-writing and among the most problematic of these are their common assumptions about narrative and about the nature of mimetic representation. The postmodern situation is, claims Barbara Foley, that a 'truth is being told, with "facts" to back it up, but a teller constructs that truth and chooses those facts.'¹¹ In fact, that teller – of story or history – also constructs those very facts by giving a particular meaning to events. Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole, and sometimes gaps and absences (see *Slaughterhouse-Five*) or hyperbolic constructions of the absurd (see *Catch-22*) make the difference. Neither of the above-mentioned novels are to be read as documentary fiction telling the truth, although both of them are largely based on their authors' personal war experience.

However, if we consider what the fictional editor of Vonnegut's *Mother Night* (actually, Kurt Vonnegut himself, posing as the editor of Howard Campbell's "true" memoir) says, "lies told for the sake of artistic effect – in the theater, for instance, and in Campbell's confessions, perhaps – can be, in a higher sense, the most beguiling forms of truth."¹² Therefore, both modernist and postmodernist accounts of wars and heroes, however

⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

¹¹ Barbara Foley, *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York and London: 1986, p. 67.

¹² Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night* (1961), New York: Dell, 1974, p. ix.

innovative, metafictional or parodic they may be, can be read as beguiling, puzzling, difficult forms of truth, leaving the individual readers (or the interpretive communities as more or less homogeneous groups) to piece together the challenging messages that the texts offer. War literature has gone beyond the more or less “measurable” limits of the battlefields to encompass “the creative expressions (whatever their rhetorical context or ideological orientation) of anyone, soldier or civilian, man or woman, who struggled to interpret the unthinkable.”¹³

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¹³ Quinn, Patrick J., and Steven Trout, eds., *The Literature of the Great War Reconsidered: Beyond Modern Memory*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, p. 1.