
Literary History: A Systematic Approach

Lecture 12: Postmodernism (c. 1945/1968/1989? - ...)

1) The Evolution of Modern Fiction

2) Postmodernism

3) The Novelist at the Crossroads

4) Recent Developments in British Fiction

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1) The Evolution of Modern Fiction

Franz K. Stanzel, *Theorie des Erzählens* (1979)

1st person internal perspective teller	vs. vs. vs.	3rd person external perspective reflector	
1st person narr. sit. narrating I ▼		authorial narr. sit. overt narrator ▼	
experiencing I ▼▼		covert narrator ▼▼	telling ▼▲
interior monologue ↳ stream of consciousness-techniques ↵		figural narr. sit.	showing

Periods of Modern Fiction and Orientations of Meaning

[U ↔ S]

1) The Rise of the Novel	<u>obj.</u>	(subj.)	(lit.).
2) Sentiment/Sensibility; Gothic Fiction etc.	(obj.)	<u>subj.</u>	lit.
3) Realism	<u>obj.</u>	subj.	(lit.)
3) Modernism	(obj.)	subj.	<u>lit.</u>
[a] Aestheticism	(obj.)	(subj.)	<u>lit.]</u>
[b] Avantgarde	obj.	(subj.)	(lit.)]

(cf. Reinfandt 1997, 225)

The Evolution of Modern Fiction in terms of telling vs. showing (diegesis vs. mimesis)

18th/19th Century:	m ↔ d	realism
early 20th Century:	m (d)	modernism
late 20th Century:	(m) d	postmodernism

(Lodge 1990)

> “**Postism**”

> “**How does newness come into the world? How is it born?**

Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?”

(Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* 8)

Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988)

'To be born again.' sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, 'first you have to die. Ho ji! HO ji! To land upon the bosomy earth, first one needs to fly. Tat-taa! Taka-thun! How to ever smile again, if first you won't cry? How to win the darling's love, mister, without a sigh? Baba, if you want to get born again...' Just before dawn one winter's morning, New Year's Day or thereabouts, two real, full-grown, living men fell from a great height, twenty-nine thousand and two feet, towards the English Channel, without benefit of parachutes or wings, out of a clear sky.

[...]

'Proper London, bhai! Here we come! Those bastards down there won't know what hit them. Meteor or lightning or vengeance of God. Out of thin air, baby. *Dharrraamm!* Wham, na? What an entrance, yaar. I swear: splat.' (3)

Out of thin air: a big bang, followed by falling stars. A universal beginning, a miniature echo of the birth of time . . . the jumbo jet *Bostan*, Flight AI-420, blew apart without any warning, high above the great, rotting, beautiful, snow-white, illuminated city, Mahagonny, Babylon, Alphaville. But Gibreel has already named it, I mustn't interfere: Proper London, capital of Vilayet, winked, blinked, nodded in the night. While at Himalayan height a brief and premature sun burst into the powdery January air, a blip vanished from radar screens, and the thin air was full of bodies, descending from the Everest of the catastrophe to the milky paleness of the sea.

Who am I?

Who else is there? (4)

I know the truth, obviously. I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and – potence, I'm making no claims at present, but I can manage this much, I hope. Chamcha willed it and Farishta did what was willed.

Which was the miracle worker?

Of what type – angelic, satanic – was Farishta's song?

Who am I?

Let's put it this way: who has the best tunes? (10)

Questions in *The Satanic Verses*:

- How does newness come into the world?
- What kind of idea are you?
- What happens when you win?

"Question: What is the opposite of faith? Not disbelief. Too final, certain, closed. Itself a kind of belief. Doubt." (92)

2) Postmodernism

“Postmodernism is not post modern, whatever that might mean, but post *modernism*; it does not come *after the present* [...], but after the *modernist movement*.”

(McHale 1987, 5)

Postmodernism is characterized by, on the one hand,

“a continuation, sometimes carried to the extreme, of the counter-traditional experiments of modernism”/“a continuation of more radical aspects of modernism”

or by, on the other hand,

“diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional, as well as to overthrow the elitism of ‘high art’ by recourse to the models of mass culture”/ “a rupture with such things as modernist a-historicism or yearning for closure.”

(M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*/
Irena R. Makaryk, ed., *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*)

Hallmarks of Postmodernism:

- increased explicit self-reflexivity
- eclecticism, pluralism of forms
- shift from epistemological to ontological concerns (McHale)
- shift from suffering to playfulness

3) The Novelist at the Crossroads

realism ➔ 1) fabulation
 ➔ 2) “a modest affirmation of faith”
 ➔ 3) non-fictional narrative

+ integrative element: metafiction

1. esp. U.S., post-colonial writing
2. esp. GB
3. esp. US (doc.), later GB (travel)

4) Recent Developments in British Fiction

“The End of the English Novel”

... was announced in *Granta* 3 (1980) drawing on assessments by Gore Vidal (“middle class novels for middle class readers with middle class problems”), John Sutherland and Bernard Bergonzi (“the novel is no longer novel”, “The Ideology of Being English”), Chris Bigsby (“The Uneasy Middleground of British Fiction”), and Frederick Bowers (“An Irrelevant Parochialism”)

A sense of crisis with regard to

- a) Englishness
- b) the specifically English brand of writing novels
- c) the genre of the novel or even literature at large and/or literary publishing

Reactions:

a) *The Last of England?* (cf. Stevenson 2004)

- Britishness, but a sense of crisis prevails (cf. *Granta* 56 [1996]: What Happened to Us? Britain’s Valedictory Realism)
- *The Internationalization of English Literature* (cf. King 2004) (the end of Imperial England and the emergence of a multiracial/multiethnic/multicultural England/Britain, cf. Tew 2004: Ch. 2 “Contemporary Britishness: Who, What, Why and When?”, Ch. 6: “Multiplicities and Hybridity”)
- cultural benefits vs. political crisis (9/11, the 2005 London bombings) (cf. Eckstein et al. 2008)

b) a call for “Taking Risks” (James Gordin) and openness towards external influence (Lorna Sage, “Invasion from Outsiders”) and formal experiment (Christine Brooke-Rose, “Where Do We Go from Here?”)

- excerpts from Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* and from forthcoming books by Angela Carter, Desmond Hogan, Alan Sillitoe and Emma Tennant
- impulses reflected in *Granta*’s listings of the Best of Young British Novelists and in list of Booker Prize winners

c) the “Current Crisis in Publishing” diagnosed in 1980 is still with us (cf. Clee 2006):

quantity vs. quality

market vs. idealism

salability vs. literariness

bestsellers vs. normal sellers

(Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*/J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels: more than 4 million copies; novels endorsed by TV or winners of prominent prizes: 200,000 to 300,000 copies; all other novels: a figure below 1,000 copies is common)

→ What is the cultural position of 'literary fiction' today?

(competition from other media/'eccentricity')

Some Coordinates for Recent Fiction:

[T]he novel, if it climbs into an ivory tower, will find no audience except those with ivory towers of their own. I used to think that the outlook of the novel was poor [...] 'Story', of course, is a different matter. We like to hear of a succession of events and, as an inspection of our press will demonstrate, have only a marginal interest in whether the succession of events is minutely true or not [...] Story will always be with us. But story in a physical book [...] what the West means by a 'novel' – what of that? Certainly, if the form fails, let it go. We have enough complications in life, in art, in literature without preserving dead forms fossilized [...] But what goes with it? Surely something of profound importance for the human spirit! A novel ensures that we can look before and after, take action at whatever pace we choose, read again and again, skip and go back. The story in a book is humble and serviceable, available, friendly, is not switched on and off but taken up and put down, lasts a lifetime.

Put simply, the novel stands between us and the hardening concept of statistical man. There is no other medium in which we can live so long and so intimately with a character. That is the service a novel renders. It performs no less an act than the rescue and the preservation of the individuality and dignity of the single being, be it man, woman or child. No other art, I claim, can so thread in and out of a single mind and body, so live another life. It does ensure that at the very least a human being shall be seen to be more than just one billionth of one billion.

William Golding, “Nobel Lecture” (Stockholm, 7 Dec 1983). *A Moving Target*. London/Boston: Faber, 1984: 203-214, 208-210.

Certainly, the novel is not in decline in publishing terms; indeed, it is in a boom period. The number of works of fiction published each year doubled between 1950 and 1990; currently, about 100 new British novels are released each week. Approximately 130 works of fiction are submitted for the Booker Prize, while around 7000 novels eligible for the prize are published in Britain and the Commonwealth annually.

(Childs 2005, 3)

To argue that the 'state of the nation novel' no longer provides a viable template for contemporary fiction and that the past has often proved more amenable to fictional analysis than the present is not, of course, to argue that the best novels of the last two decades have turned away from social and political questions entirely. (Such a retreat would not be possible, in any case. Novels necessarily reflect the society in which they are written. Even the most apparently uncomplicated fantasy fiction has some kind of disguised relationship with social reality.)

(Rennison 2005, x)

Might it not simply be that a new novel is emerging, a postcolonial novel, a de-centred, transnational, inter-lingual, crosscultural novel; and that in this new world order, or disorder, we find a better explanation of the contemporary novel's health than [in the] somewhat patronizingly Hegelian view that the reason for the creativity of the 'far rim' is that these are areas 'which are in an earlier stage of the bourgeois culture, which are in an earlier, rougher, more problematic form' [George Steiner]. [...] There is, in my view, no crisis in the art of the novel. The novel is precisely that hybrid form for which Prof. Steiner yearns. It is part social enquiry, part fantasy, part confessional. It crosses frontiers of knowledge as well as topographical boundaries. [...] I am [...] less worried [...] about the threat posed to the novel by [...] newer, high-tech forms. It is perhaps the low-tech nature of the act of writing that will save it [...] what one writer can make in the solitude of one room is something no power can easily destroy. [...]

[However,] [t]he pressure of monopoly and bureaucracy, of corporatism and conservatism, limiting and narrowing the range and quality of what gets published, are known to every working writer. Of the pressures of intolerance and censorship, I personally have in these past years gained perhaps too much knowledge. There are many such struggles taking place in the world today [...] [and] [e]ven in Europe and the United States, the stormtroopers of various 'sensitivities' seek to limit our freedom of speech. It has never been more important to continue to defend those values which make the art of literature possible. [...] What George Steiner beautifully calls the 'wonderful vainglory' of literature still fires us, even if, as he suggests, we are too embarrassed to say so in public.

Salman Rushdie, "In Defence of the Novel, Yet Again" [2000]. *Step Across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction 1992-2002*. London: Cape, 2002: 54-63.

Literature thinks.

Literature is where ideas are investigated, lived out, explored in all their messy complexity. Sometimes these ideas look quite simple: What if you fell in love with someone who seems quite unsuitable for you? What happens if there is a traitor in your spy network? Sometimes they might appear more complicated: How can I reconstruct my memory of an event I can't recall? Perhaps, too, 'think' is not the right word: 'think' is too limiting a description of the range of what a novel can do with ideas. In any event, the way literature thinks is bound up with what it's like to be us, to be human. Literature is how we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves. And contemporary fiction matters because it is how we work out who we are, today.

I believe the novel is the best way of doing this. Of all the arts, the novel is the most thoughtful, the closest, most personal.

(Eaglestone 2013, 1)

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Granta: The Magazine of New Writing

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| Vol. 3 (1980): | The End of the English Novel |
| Vol. 7 (1983): | Best of Young British Novelists 1 |
| Vol. 43 (1993): | Best of Young British Novelists 2 |
| Vol. 81 (2003): | Best of Young British Novelists 2003 |
| Vol. 56 (1996): | What Happened to Us? Britain's Valedictory
Realism |
| Vol. 123 (2013): | Best of Young British Novelists 2013 |