The postmodern text in recent American fiction[1]

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Summary

This article explores the relationship between American meta-fiction of the 1960's and 1970's and postmodernist theoretical discourse. It is the contention of the author that a reader's response to postmodern American fiction is assisted by recent theories of authorship and readership, and also that the problems raised by postmodernist meta-fiction have a bearing on postmodernist discourse itself. Using illustrations from meta-fictional and theoretical discourses, a link is suggested between the two: both resist 'the hegemony of representational truth', undermine authority in all its forms and threaten the reader's sense of security.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel gaan die verhouding na tussen die Amerikaanse metafiksie van die sestiger- en sewentigerjare en die teoretiese diskoers van die postmodernisme. Die skryfster se uitgangspunt is dat resente teorieë oor outeurskap en lesers lig werp op die resepsie van postmoderne Amerikaanse fiksie en dat vraagstukke geopper vanuit die postmoderne metafiksie juis iets te sê het vir postmodernistiese diskoers. Aan die hand van illustrasiemateriaal uit sowel metafiktiewe as teroretiese diskoers word 'n verband tussen die twee strominge aangedui: albei verwerp 'hegemonie van representatiewe waarheid', ondermyn alle vorme van gesag en bedreig die sekuriteitsgevoel van die leser.

> It has been customary of late with literary critics to use the term 'Post-Modernism' ostensively, as though there exists between the term and what it indicates a non-problematic one-to-one relationship i.e. a relationship governed by a perfect form-content coincidence. Such confident uses of the term seem to suggest (a) that there is a Post-Modernist essence that precedes postmodern practice, and (b) that the term 'Post-Modernism' is a transparent and self-effacing signifier that adumbrates the Post-Modernist essence by way of its own lack of materiality.
>
> (R. Radhakrishnan)

> Another story about a writer writing a story. Another *regressus in infinitum.* Who doesn't prefer art that at least overtly imitates something other than its own processes?
>
> (John Barth)

The above two quotations encapsulate my aims in writing about the post modern text. The first is from a theoretical article entitled 'The Post-Modern Event and the End of Logocentrism' (1983) in which the author sets out to show that 'the post-modern event ... does and will make a difference in the arena of worldly practices ...' (1983:34); the second is a meta-critical comment from a work of metafiction written by an American novelist in the 1960's. Both writers are describing what Lyotard calls 'the postmodern condition' (1979) but ostensibly from different perspectives: the one is describing postmodernism as a condition characterized by self-consciousness, 'by metadiscursive pondering on catastrophe and change' (Hutcheon, 1983:33); the other is involved in the self-conscious act itself. That Barth encloses his statement about *his own* writing within something we still think of as 'fiction', and Radhakrishnan discourses within a 'theoretical' framework, would seem to make a difference to the reader's response, yet it is precisely the intention of postmodernist thinkers to dissolve the boundaries between old categories such as 'fiction' and 'criticism'.

Based on the assumption that, even before I begin, the task is problematical, it is my aim in this article to describe the way a reader's response to those fictional texts which are called 'postmodern' is assisted by recent theories of authorship and readership, and also to suggest that the problems raised by postmodernist metafiction have a bearing on postmodernist discourse itself. I therefore maintain that there is a connection between the term 'Post-Modernism' and 'what it indicates' (Radhakrishnan, 1983:33) although the connection is in no way rigorous. In describing this connection, my focus will be on a specific group of texts written by American 'fiction' writers in the 60's and 70's which came to be known as postmodernist.

In 1973, Gerald Graff defined postmodernism as follows:

> In its exclusively literary sense, postmodernism may be defined as that movement within contemporary literature and criticism which calls into question the claims of literature and art to truth and human value. (1973:385)

Since then, Paul Bové has taken issue with those critics of the postmodern who 'have tended to treat literature abstractly as an "object" in its own right, of *literary critical* investigation...' (1983). I realize that, by setting apart a discrete group of texts called 'post-modern American fiction', and then describing those texts as if they were 'objects' of something called 'literary criticism', I am reifying those texts and therefore engaging in an apparently reactionary activity. However, while I see 'the need to break out of the formalist paradigm and to "situate" both theory and art, first, within the enunciative act itself...' (Hutcheon, 1983:34), I must retain former categories for the sake of clarity, without necessarily indulging in outmoded critical practices.

Postmodernist American fiction has also earned the labels 'innovative fiction', 'surfiction', 'the new fiction', 'metafiction', 'narcissistic fiction', and even 'midfiction'. These fictions seemed deliberately to defy traditional forms of narration, and were therefore considered to be radical departures from the accepted norms of the novel and the short story as practised by such established authors as Henry James, William Faulkner, and more recently, Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud. The writers who could be included within the ranks of the 'new' were, amongst others, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, and, moving along a progressively innovatory line, William Gass, Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan and Robert Coover, to the more radical figures, Ronald Sukenick, Ralph Wurlitzer, and William Gaddis.[2]

The quotation by John Barth at the beginning of this article aptly describes the irritation[3] of many readers on encountering a postmodernist text for the first time, and also succinctly sums up the most distinctive feature of this type of fiction, its supreme self-consciousness. However, there are other interesting components of such self-reflexive fiction that show a correlation with recent theories of authorship and readership.

In 'Theory of the Text', for instance, Roland Barthes makes a distinction between 'work' and 'text' and between the 'classical' text and the 'non-classical' text:

> The classical sign is a sealed unit, whose closure arrests meaning, prevents it from trembling or becoming double, or wandering. The same goes for the classical text: it closes the work, chains it to its letter, and rivets it to its signified (1981:33).

By inference, the postmodernist text is the opposite of a classical text. It is a text which 'trembles' and 'wanders' and is capable of doubleness, even of duplicity. It is a text of playful uncertainties. This is clearly as significant for fiction studies as the self-reflexiveness for which postmodernist texts are so infamous, because while self-reflexiveness is chiefly a technique whereby an author can avoid the problem of worn-out plots and outmoded ways of narration, a 'wandering' text has implications for the concept and activity of reception, especially when approached by way of post-structuralist theories of reading.

Texts which are based on a flexible system of signification are 'open' as opposed to 'closed' texts. These are texts which are capable of generating meaning which 'can not only be freely interpreted but also cooperatively generated by the addressee...' (Eco, 1979:3). An open text is therefore designated by the generative functions it performs for *both* writer and reader. Barthes speaks of such a text as a 'writerly' text, 'because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text' (1981:34).

The reader who approaches a postmodernist fiction as a consumer, that is, having the same expectations with which she/he would confront a 'classical' text, will be confounded and bewildered. She/he will not find a coherent, unified and recoverable meaning emanating from such a text, nor will she/he find a conventional plot or stable characterization. Instead, she/he will find a fiction which is plural and playful, one which denies its reader the satisfaction of a total meaning. For example, Ronald Sukenick states:

> I don't believe in characterization in the old sense. A lot of my characterizations tend to take the form of a cartoon or sketch, or the characters tend to be very fluid. (1982:130).

Readers who use traditional methods of close analysis are accustomed to viewing the work of art as 'an object endowed with precise properties, that must be analytically isolated... an object which, once created, (has) the stiffness – so to speak – of a crystal' (Eco, 1979:41). Both Barthes, in his distinction between classical and modern (or readerly and writerly) texts, and Eco, in his description of closed and open texts, are making important points about the properties of such works, and also about notions of readership. There would seem to be two ways of looking at a work of art. One views the work of art as an object with boundaries or an edge. Such an object has a stable meaning and a single interpretation which decodes signs as if they were fixed denotations reflecting a known reality. This approach will not work with a postmodernist text, which refuses to be an object, and demands a new way of reading, one which is more sympathetic to its tenuous and 'trembling' mode of existence. Philip Stevick, for instance, insists that:

> ... what we do not need is criticism of new fiction as pure technique, disengaged from its cultural ambiance, 'read', explicated, exhausted, like a metaphysical lyric (1973:331).

The second way of looking is one which sees the work of art not as an object but as a fabric or tissue. The reader approaching such a text seeks to encounter in the texture of the fabric the intermeshing of its signifiers, 'in the midst of which the subject places himself and is undone, like a spider that comes to dissolve itself into its own web' (Barthes, 1981:39) Barthes here eloquently describes the reader's active participation in the text and also his/her helpless but inevitable submersion in the text's tissues. Interestingly, J. Hillis Miller uses much the same metaphors to describe the process of criticism:

> Criticism is the production of more thread to embroider the texture or textile already there. This thread is like the filament of ink which flows from the pen of the writer, keeping him in the web but suspending him also over the chasm, the blank page that thin line hides... Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. Its apparently solid ground is no rock but thin air. (1976:337,341)

It is a further characteristic of postmodernist fiction writers to admit of a fundamental uncertainty about the status of 'reality' in their texts, and to refuse to engage in what postmodernist discourse calls the hegemony of representational truth. Larry McCaffery rightly points out that this refusal also affects the reader's response to the text:

> Unable to feel any longer that they could accurately depict the 'true status' of affairs in the world, postmodern metafictionists decided to turn inward, to focus not on reality but on the imagination's response to reality – a response which was judged to be the only aspect of 'reality' (now always appearing within quotation marks) which could be analysed or discussed. Thus, a sort of bleak, absurdist epistemological stance is implied in much postmodern fiction; but, at the same time, their playful manipulations of language and literary conventions invite the reader to similarly demystify or deconstruct his own systems... (1980:77).

Indeed, some of postmodernism's chief exponents go so far as to claim that the postmodernist text is itself a reality:

> Fiction cannot be a representation of reality, or an imitation, or even a recreation of reality, it can only be a reality. (Federman, 1973:427).

Thus in addition to its self-reflexiveness, and its generative playfulness, another central feature of postmodernist fiction is its rejection of conventional mimetic representation. This rejection is also inherent in its formal qualities, for example, the absence of traditional plot and linearity, the often frustrating lack of characterization, and the deliberate replacement of form with chaos, as is evident in Kurt Vonnegut, Jr's comment in *Breakfast of Champions*:

> There is no order in the world around us... we must adapt ourselves to the requirements of chaos instead.
> It is hard to adapt to chaos, but it can be done. I am living proof of that: it can be done. (1975:210)

The postmodernist text is also a fiction of surfaces. Stevick, in his presentation of the aesthetics of New Fiction dwells at length on the difference between the surface features of postmodernist texts and the aesthetic and philosophical depth of modernist texts:

> ... it is the single quality that most firmly unites such otherwise quite different writers as Lawrence, Mann, Broch, Silone, Malcolm Lowry, their intention to use those techniques that permit the greatest possible resonance and amplitude of signification and that insist at every point on the existence of unstated levels of 'depth' that the surface of the fiction figures forth. (1973:359)

Stevick also quotes from Willie Sypher's *Literature and Technology: The Alien Vision* in support of his view that recent fiction, in contrast to the modernist writers just cited, deliberately rejects such 'depth':

> Like the recent scientist the contemporary novelist or painter detects that the ordinary, the commonplace, the superficial, the quotidian, is the very mystery most inaccessible to reason and explanation and method. The immediate occasion is sufficient unto itself, and this recognition has led to a new humility, as well as to a new frustration. If the significance lies on the surface, then the need for depth explanation has gone, and the contingent, the everyday happening, is more authentic than the ultimate or absolute... (1968:24)

It is interesting that Flaubert describes much the same wish for non-representation and a concentration on the ordinary in a letter to Louise Colet in 1852:

> What seems to be ideal, what I should like to do, is to write a book about nothing, a book with no reference to anything outside itself, which would stand on its own by the inner strength of its style, just as the earth holds itself without support in space, a book which would have almost no subject or at least where the subject should be almost imperceptible, if that were possible. (1980:154)

Sypher's comment that the 'need for depth explanation has gone' illuminates the problems postmodernist writers pose for critical readers accustomed to seeing 'significance' in art, but the act of critical reading is made even more difficult when it has to take into account the playfulness of postmodernist fiction.

The notion of the game in fictional discourse was explained in 1971 by Alain Robbe-Grillet in his discussion of the *nouveau roman*, when he pointed to the loss of the serious in art. Robbe-Grillet conceived of a model to incorporate the notion of the 'jeu' in contemporary fiction. We are given an art of surfaces, for behind the game there is nothing, no depth, no profundity, no seriousness:

> (It) is all surface, like a game of cards in which each card has no meaning in itself. However, the player organises his cards into a 'hand' and, within the context of the game's code or rules, gives them their significance. (Hutcheon, 1980:82)

The emphasis here is on the freedom or prerogative of the writer to invent his own rules according to the game he is playing. It is up to the reader to learn the rules, as in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, where the reader joins Oedipa Maas in her confusing 'game'. Robert Coover uses the idea of the game as the thematic content of his fictions and as a metafictional comment on the creative process in *The Universal Baseball Association*. Similarly, in the middle of *Snow White* Donald Barthelme interrupts the narrative to ask the reader a string of questions:

1. Do you like the story so far? Yes ( ) No ( ).
2. Does Snow White resemble the Snow White you remember? Yes ( ) No ( ).
3. Have you understood, in reading to this point, that Paul is the prince-figure? Yes ( ) No ( ).
4. Is there too much 'blague' in the narration? ( ), Not enough 'blague'? ( )

(1967:82)

In Robert Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants*, the story 'The Magic Poker' is interrupted with an elaborate parody of the role of author as inventor:

> A Love Letter! Wait a minute, this is getting out of hand! What happened to that poker, I was doing much better with the poker, I had something going there, archetypal and even maybe beautiful, a blend of eros and wisdom, sex and sensibility, music and myth. (1969:30)

Later, Coover plays a game with the authorial voice:

> I am disappearing. You have no doubt noticed. Yes, and by some no doubt calculable formula of event and pagination. (1969:40)

Both Coover and Barthelme are engaged in demystifying traditional notions of the hidden author and the passive reader. Such a stance on the part of the author ensures that the fiction he is engaged in writing is itself its own critical commentary. John Barth uses this kind of metafictional commentary in many of his fictions in which the 'rules' of fiction-making become the overt subject-matter of the story. Such problems as the ontological status of the protagonist or the author, the beginning and ending of a story, point of view, and so on, are made an integral part of his fiction. In his 'Seven Additional Notes to *Lost in the Funhouse*' Barth explains that the idea linking the stories is that of turning as many aspects of the storytelling as possible – 'the structure, the narrative viewpoint, the means of presentation, in some instances, the process of composition and/or recitation as well as of reading or listening – into dramatically relevant emblems of the theme'. (1969:3)

It is perhaps this usurpation of the role of the critic by the postmodern novelist which might explain the silence of most critics about the status and function of metafictional texts in postmodern discourse. It is the tendency of metafictions to render redundant the critic's role:

> ... postmodernist metafiction tends to play with the *possibilities* of meaning (from degree zero to plurisignification) and of form (from minimalist narrative to galloping diegesis), and it does so so self-consciously as to begin to subvert the critic's role: the text contains its own first interpretive context, and its parodic intertextuality even situates it in literary history for us. (Hutcheon, 1983:35)

As Hutcheon suggests, the final effect of postmodernist metafiction is to dislodge both reader, critic, and author as individual and historical agents, in order to focus on the process of discourse itself. Thus, closely linked with self-conscious game-playing are the games played with language, perhaps the most 'serious' issue in postmodernist fiction. The two aspects of non-mimetic function and self-conscious game-playing come together, and are most evident, in the language of these metafictions. As Linda Hutcheon rightly comments:

> Some redefinition of novelistic mimesis would seem to be in order if critical theory is to deal adequately with the new forms of the genre that have developed. This redefinition would necessarily entail a reconsideration of the nature of novelistic language; in all fiction, language is representational, but of a fictional 'other' world, a complete and coherent 'heterocosm' created by the fictive referents of the signs. In metafiction, however, this fact is made explicit and, while he reads, the reader lives in a world which he is forced to acknowledge as fictional. However, paradoxically the text also demands that he participate, that he engage himself intellectually, imaginatively, and affectively in its co-creation. (1980:35)

Hutcheon, in her introduction, defines the term 'metafiction' to mean 'fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity' (1980:1). However, within this definition are included two modes running in parallel fashion. In the first mode the text is overtly[4] narrative, having characters and plot, suspense, and in some cases, such as 'The Magic Poker', obvious parody of well-known myths or fairy tales. But while the reader is enjoying the comfort of this first narrative mode, the second, 'meta-narrative' mode is already in operation, displaying the very tools with which the first mode was constructed. In the following example the reader is brought almost forcibly into the text and made aware of the fictiveness, the pure invention, of the text he/she is reading:

> ... perhaps tomorrow I will invent Chicago and Jesus Christ and the history of the moon. Just as I have invented you, dear reader, while lying here in the afternoon sun. (Coover, 1969:4)

In similar vein, Gore Vidal's Myra Breckenridge narrates the beginning of her/his own book:

> I shall not begin at the beginning since there is no beginning, only a middle into which you, fortunate reader, have just strayed, still uncertain as to what will be done to you in the course of our common voyage to my interior. No, to *our* interior, for we are, at least in the act of this creation, as one, each trapped in time: you later, I now, carefully, thoughtfully forming letters to make words to make sentences (1969:9).

Barthelme's preoccupation with words is even more self-conscious:

> 'Oh, I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear' Snow White exlaimed loudly.

Here, Snow White captures the exasperation of knowing the inadequacies of language. In *The Dead Father*, Barthelme's language is reminiscent of Joyce, but also suggests, in its interminable listing of junk, the accumulating 'trash' of his environment:

> We spent many nights together all roaratorious and filled with furious joy, I fathered upon her in those nights the poker chip, the cash register, the juice extractor, the kazoo, the rubber pretzel, the cuckoo clock, the key chain, the dimebank, the pantograph, the bubble pipe, the punching bag both light and heavy, the inkblot, the nose drop, the midget Bible, the slot-machine slug, and many other useful and humane cultural artifacts, as well as some thousands of children of the ordinary sort (1976:36).

The role of the reader in such metafictional texts is to share with the author the process of creation, the construction of language, and the nature of inventiveness. Texts which are overtly metafictional will force the reader into the process by active and emphatic encouragement:

> Reader... we have roles to play, thou and I: you are the doctor (washing your hands between hours), and I, I am, I think, the nervous dreary patient. I am freely associating, brilliantly, brilliantly, to put you into the problem. Or for fear of boring you: which? (Barthelme, 1964:4).

In this passage, Barthelme is again expressing the tentative nature of linguistic creation by an audacious reversal of the psychologist-patient situation.

Those texts which have a *covert* metafictional status assume that the reader knows his/her role. Such a text is *Gravity's Rainbow* in which Thomas Pynchon gives the reader no guidance through the difficult maze of the narrative.

Similarly, in *The Crying of Lot 49,* the theme of the book is the paranoia attached to plotmaking, and the reader is implicitly involved in the search for the missing postal horn, along with the protagonist, Oedipa Maas. As in all of Pynchon's work to date, the reader's attempt to unravel the mysteries of his plots, or to apply even the most elementary form of New Critical analysis to his texts, is mocked and thwarted by the invisible author. As Tony Tanner has pointed out, even the protagonist's name in *The Crying of Lot 49* defies the kind of interpretation we are accustomed to give the names in conventional fiction. The name Oedipa Maas has been construed in many different ways: as the female Oedipus in search of the answer to the riddle; as the corruption of 'mass' as in Isaac Newton's second law of thermodynamics and so signifying inertia; as a version of 'Oedipa my ass' suggesting that she is no Oedipus as she solves nothing, or finally that the name itself is a joke on the reader who insists on taking on the task of problem solving or name interpretation. A much 'worse' case is *Gravity's Rainbow*, previously mentioned, a book which, it is generally agreed, defies interpretation or summary: there are over 400 characters, or rather names, as the word 'character' is misleading in many postmodernist fictions; there are many plots which intersect or diverge seemingly at whim; there is an impressive amount of technological reference ranging from entropy in physics, to aviation technique and modern film theory. All this makes the book a 'difficult' reading experience.

Both 'literary' and 'theoretical' texts (the distinction is again necessary) have shown a self-conscious and indeed obsessive concern with the notion of discourse and the act of signification. In their self-consciousness, metafictional writers like Barthelme pose immense problems for critics and readers who find the task of unravelling the text perplexing. As Maurice Couturier and Regis Durand point out in their recent study of Barthelme, critics are usually embarrassed at having to 'make sense' of this writer, or at the very least to accommodate him into already existing categories of fiction. The authors disarmingly present their intention in writing their critical study in the following manner:

> How can anyone write cogently about such ambiguous, non-linear, cacophonous fictions, complex art-objects? Every new attempt threatens to sound like the uninspired metafiction of an unimaginative hack writer. Faced with this embarrassment, we decided to focus our attention upon the embarrassment Barthelme induces in all his readers. (1982:10)

Couturier and Durand focus on the effect Barthelme produces, instead of (vainly, in this case) trying to understand his 'purpose or his unconscious motivations'.

It would not be going too far to say that Barthelme has placed himself 'in the centre of modern consciousness' as William Gass notes in his essay 'The Leading Edge of the Trash Phenomenon'. Gass suggests, as do many other critics, that Barthelme's principal materials are 'dreck', trash and stuffing. By rendering everything as meaningless as it appears in everyday life, in other words, by putting the trash back into fiction, Barthelme does not allow the reader to look for 'significance':

> He constructs a single plane of truth, of relevance, of style, of value – flatland junkyard . . . (1970:101).

This does not only apply to the content of Barthelme's fiction, but also to his language. 'Fragments are the only form I trust' says one of the voices in his stories, and it would appear that his fictions are composed of fragments of discourse, resulting in a non-discursive fictional language largely unintelligible to a reader expecting a fiction to display its own meaning through its language. The strangeness of Barthelme's language is, to return to an earlier point made in this article, its lack of referential grounding. When we read, we can recognise the lexical components of the language, but are prevented from positioning the words into familiar structures of discourse. It is interesting to compare Vonnegut's use of junk in his novels, in particular, *Breakfast of Champions*, which seems to function as an act of mental spring cleaning. Tired of the trash in his environment, Vonnegut tries to put back into his book some of the junk of American life, so that with the decontextualizing of these 'signs' of America, he achieves a kind of liberation from their effects. Similarly, John Gardner's Grendel sees the world as 'waste'. However, in both these books, the language is unaffected by the subject matter – it is only Barthelme who deliberately makes his language into waste.

What we have then is a language that is utterly defamiliarised:

> Whereas traditional fiction tried to study the functionings of human discourse and to evolve intellectual statements about the products of intuition, perception and imagination, this kind of fiction strives to reverse the trend: its appealing nonsense, which flouts all our learned discourse, cannot be reduced to tame structures. (Couturier and Durand, 1982:23)

Barthelme thus produces a fragmented and displaced language. In *Snow White* the central concern is the trashiness of language. Dan, one of the dwarfs, is given the following long digression on the nature of language:

> You know, Klipschorn was right I think when he spoke of the 'blanketing' effect of ordinary language, referring, as I recall, to the part that sort of, you know, 'fills in' between the other parts. That part, the 'filling' you might say, of which the expression 'you might say' is a good example, is to me the most interesting part, and of course it might also be called the 'stuffing' I suppose, and there is probably also, in addition, some other word that would do as well, to describe it, or maybe a number of them . . . The 'endless' aspect of 'stuffing' is that it goes on and on, in fact, our exchanges are in larger measure even, perhaps than they are composed of that is not 'stuffing'. (1967:96)

Many writers have been concerned in their fiction to revitalize the word, for example Gass and Brautigan, but Barthelme seeks to incorporate the *disintegrated* word into his text. The collage method used by Barthelme reflects also his preoccupation with fragments and allows him to imbibe into his text a complexity of these fragments from folk tales, advertising, newspapers, as well as the commonplace events of everyday life. Larry McCaffery calls this 'verbal trash (which) does not contribute to any verisimilar design but communicates a sense of what it is like to be alive at a given moment'. McCaffery goes on to suggest that Barthelme's use of myth in *Snow White* is predominantly and self-consciously comic, and so must at once be distinguished from Joyce's serious concern in *Ulysses,* and may even be seen as a 'deliberate mocking of Joyce's painstaking efforts at creating mythic parallels (1980:21). For example, Snow White, letting down her hair, in a confusion with Rapunzel, communicates the literary significance of this action:

> This motif, the long hair streaming from the high window, is a very ancient one I believe, found in many cultures, in various forms. Now I recapitulate it, for the astonishment of the vulgar and the refreshment of my venereal life. (1967:80)

Like Barthelme, Brautigan poses problems for critical readers. Brautigan devotees admire him unashamedly, while critics do not know how to respond. As Marc Chenetier explains in a recent study:

> ...criticism retells the matter of his work but loses sight of its essential spirit; no explanations are offered of the unique blend of inventions and devices that gives his fictions their particular and extraordinary flavour. (1983:17)

Like Barthelme and Coover, Brautigan works with allusions and parodies of myths, but allows them no fixed reference, 'effectively debunking the role their original creators have taken up in popular discourse... such allusions are brought into a new system of reference, used as foils and as indicators of the arbitrariness of all 'literary references'. (1983:33) As Chenetier goes on to point out, such foregrounding of allusions 'destabilizes the authority of all such references' (1983:34). This 'destabilization' is most evident in *Trout Fishing in America,* which by its very title suggests an immediate similarity with such pastoral works as Thoreau's *Walden,* Walton's *The Compleat Angler* and more recently Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek.* Yet as Chenetier suggests, the pastoral theme is demythologized in a manner which places the novel within the category of postmodernist fiction rather than with its literary antecedents. Notice, for example, the apparent similarities between the following two texts:

> One spring afternoon as a child in the strange town of Portland, I walked down to a different street corner, and saw a row of old houses, huddled together like seals on a rock. There was a long field that came sloping down off a hill. The field was covered with green grass and bushes. On top of the hill there was a grove of tall, dark trees. At a distance I saw a waterfall come pouring off the hill. It was long and white and I could almost feel its cold spray. There must be a creek there, I thought, and it probably has trout in it. (Brautigan, 1972:4)
>
> I come to this island every month of the year. I walk around it, stopping and staring, or I straddle the sycamore log over the creek, curling my legs out of the water in winter, trying to read. Today I sit on dry grass at the end of the island by the slower side of the creek. I'm drawn to this spot. I come to it as to an oracle; I return to it as a man years later will seek out the battlefield where he lost a leg or an arm. (Dillard, 1976:18)

The two passages seem to have a basic similarity, if not in their tone, then at least in their subject matter. Except for the strangely out of place simile 'like seals on a rock' in the Brautigan piece, the prose appears to be conventionally straightforward, although the clipped sentences might be cause for suspicion. However, a few lines later in the chapter the scene is debunked, as it were:

> Finally I got close enough to see what the trouble was. The waterfall was just a flight of white wooden stairs leading up to a house in the trees. I stood there for a long time, looking up and looking down, following the stairs with my eyes, having trouble believing. Then I knocked on my creek and heard the sound of wood. (1972:5)

Brautigan does similar 'strange' things with language. The most obvious Brautigan oddity is his bizarre use of metaphors and similes: 'his eyes were like the shoelaces of a harpsichord'; 'the sun was like a huge fifty-cent piece that someone had poured kerosene on and then had lit with a match and said, "Here, hold this while I go get a newspaper," and put the coin in my hand, but never came back' (1972:26;6). Chenetier rightly claims that these metaphors fail 'to generate text beyond their own length... they simply wrench the reader's attention away from the apparent subject and destabilize the system of reference' (1983:43). Chenetier goes on to establish that the book's unity is established by linkages between metaphors, thus establishing a verbal rather than a referential plot, and draws attention to Brautigan's use of signs, thus forging a link, in my view, with Barthelme's use of 'Dreck', and Vonnegut's use of the signposts of America in his *Breakfast of Champions*:

> ... such decentrings, occurring everywhere in the book, imply that reality can in the end lie only in the autonomous world of signs... supporting the view that America is 'often only a place in the mind' (and that) the America of the title is now emptied of all reliable content. (1983:50)

Simiarly, Neil Schmitz concludes that *Trout Fishing in America* is a

> ... semiological system, a mode of signification which appropriates the meaning of primary language and deforms it to serve a concept. (1973:121)

William Gass uses language to similar effect:

> The sun looks through the mist, like a plum on the tree of heaven, or a bruise on the slope of your belly. Which? (1977:196)

Here, Gass in his equivocation between two similes, suggests the central concern of his art, to remind the reader that he is reading words, and at the same time showing the process behind the making of an image. A little later in the same paragraph Gass's narrator says:

> We meet on this window, the world and I, inelegantly, swimmers of the glass, and swung wrong way round to one another, the world seems in. (1977:196)

Gass suggests that representation of the world by words is a falsehood, because it seems that the world may also be the signifier instead of the 'thing' signified; also, that attempts at signification are arbitrary actions of the artist who is forced to meet the world head-on at the window. The old idea of art being the mirror to Nature is turned on its head, for, as Gass states, the world may already be inside. Less metaphorically, Gass states the same idea in 'Fiction and the Figures of Life':

> It seems a country-headed thing to say: that literature is language, that stories and the places and the people in them are merely made of words as chairs are made of smoothed sticks and sometimes of cloth or metal tubes... That novels should be made of words, and merely words, is shocking really. It's as though you had discovered that your wife were made of rubber: the bliss of all those years, the fears... from sponge. (1970:27)

In Gass's most radically metafictional text, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, the wife of the title, Babs, is language itself. Babs narrates the novel from the point of view of the woman who is constantly disappointed by her unimaginative lover. Through this device Gass is implying a relationship between eros and logos, eroticism and the word. The lover is the writer who performs his sexual/writing act so unimaginatively. He is also the reader who is beckoned enticingly into the pages of the book, lured by the front cover showing the naked torso of a woman. The reader as lover must therefore accept Babs's criticism of his performance:

> He made nothing, I swear. Empty I began, and empty I remained. (White Section, 4)[5]

Babs concludes with a plea for the sort of language which will 'make' her:

> Then let us have a language worthy of our world, a democratic style where rich and wellborn nouns can roister with some sluttish verb yet find themselves content and uncomplained of... Experimental and expansive... it will give new glasses to new eyes, and put those plots and patterns down we find our modern lot in. Metaphor must be its god now gods are metaphors. (1968: White Section, 4)[6]

Gass's eloquent rendering of the problems of our 'modern lot' concludes this article. I have tried to show in what ways postmodernist American metafiction joins hands with postmodernist theory in an act of rebellion and disruption. By undermining themselves, postmodernist discourses also undermine authority, hegemony, and the reader's sense of security. They challenge the reader to accept openness not closure; uncertainty, not 'truth'. I have also tried to show that the critic is similarly dislodged from a previously privileged position in the act of criticism. As Radhakrishnan says:

> ... literary utterances have this radical capacity to question themselves and thereby open up pluralistic criticism... (1983:59)

To this I would add that postmodernist literary utterances do not merely 'open up' a new and more flexible reading process, but move beyond the constraints of existing categories into a new freedom.

Notes

1. The research for this article was facilitated by a post-master's bursary from the Human Sciences Research Council. I am grateful to the Council for this assistance.
2. Many other examples of postmodernist metafiction can be cited, for example, from Italy, Italo Calvino; from South Africa, J. M. Coetzee; from England, John Fowles and D. M. Thomas; a case could also be made for Borges and Beckett, and indeed James Joyce. I have, however, deliberately confined my study to a specific country and a specific time.
3. See Charles Newman: 'Over the last decade, our writers have become increasingly characterized by the extent of their brain damage – no accident that Barthelme is the Salinger of the sixties – and fiction writing itself has been described as a kind of self-indulgence in an increasingly non-verbal society, the last gasp of privatism and individualism in a world which can be saved only by destroying the last links to language, by a collective sensory experience beyond sign and symbol.' (1973:3–4).
4. The terms 'overt' and 'covert' narration are Hutcheon's.
5. The novel has unnumbered pages, and is divided into different coloured sections.
6. It is of interest that Gass wrote his doctoral dissertation on 'A Philosophical Investigation of Metaphor'.

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