The political potential of postmodernist narrative strategies – the case of D.M. Thomas's *Ararat*

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Summary

By means of a reading of D.M. Thomas's *Ararat*, this paper takes issue with the common assumption that postmodernist writing is divorced from social and political concerns. It is argued that the reflexive narrative strategies which characterize this text and form the basis of its introverted aspect, are not simply examples of formalist game-playing but are actually deployed to engage with political history. The paper is divided into two parts, the first of these deals with the reflexive purposes of the metafictional devices used in *Ararat*, and the second discusses the enlistment of these strategies in the text's critique of political history.

Opsomming

By wyse van 'n verklaring van D.M. Thomas se *Ararat*, verwerp hierdie artikel die beskouing dat postmodernistiese skrywe geskei is van sosiale en politieke aangeleenthede. Daar word aangevoer dat die selfbesinnende narratiewe strategieë wat hierdie teks karakteriseer en die basis van sy selfbespieëlende aard vorm, nie slegs as voorbeeld van formalistiese spel bestempel kan word nie, maar dat hulle deel uitmaak van sy sosiale en politieke kritiek. Die artikel is in twee verdeel: die eerste deel handel oor die refleksiewe doel van die metafiktiewe tegnieke wat in *Ararat* gebruik word, terwyl die tweede deel hul gebruik in die teks se politieke kritiek verken.

> There are only two or three human stories and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before.
>
> (Willa Cather)

Introduction

D.M. Thomas's *Ararat* (1984) exhibits a number of postmodernist narrative strategies which situate it well within the postmodernist mode outlined by critics such as Fokkema (1984: 43–48) and McHale (1987), amongst others.[1] In discussing these strategies, however, the aim of this paper is not simply to gain *Ararat* admission to a postmodernist canon by demonstrating its postmodernist character, but rather to show that such techniques are used in the novel to engage with political realities. The paper therefore enters the debate on whether or not postmodernist texts are divorced from social and political concerns, and takes issue with the assumption, widespread among detractors of postmodernism, that the postmodernist writer makes use of reflexive devices simply to, as Mary F. Robertson contends, "playfully incorporate facts on the same plane of significance as fictional details into a work whose *raison d'être* is its own self-admiring game-playing rather than traditional objects of representation" (1984: 453).[2] Robertson maintains further that "whatever satirical force and social resonance" such an enterprise might produce "is secondary to the self-reflexive purpose," and concludes, in reduc-

tive fashion, by claiming that postmodernist writing is simply "an extension of modernism's aestheticist escapism" (Robertson, 1984: 453). Such conclusions are nurtured by the view that postmodernism refuses to engage in explanations of "reality," a view which has rapidly been elevated to a distinctive feature of this mode by its analysts. Fokkema, for example, claims that "with respect to the relation between text and social context, the Modernist rejected any law-like explanation of 'reality,' but the Postmodernist, much like Wittgenstein suggested, has completely given up the attempt at explaining" (1984: 45). This theory possibly holds some accuracy when applied to the more aleatory forms of postmodernism, such as Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa* (1974) (although, even here, as Leonard Orr maintains, the effect, if not provably the motive, of the foregrounding of language is to cause readers to "re-cognize," that is, to re-examine their received and conventional notions of "reality" (1984: 214)), but, as this paper hopes to demonstrate, it proves invalid when tested against less aleatory, but despite this no less postmodernist, texts such as D.M. Thomas's *Ararat*.[3]

The view that this mode of writing abandons all attempts at explaining or engaging with reality seems to rest on the rather shaky premise that a rejection of conventional mimesis is automatically accompanied by a retreat into mere aestheticism, fictional game-playing behind which "there is nothing, no depth, no profundity, no seriousness" (Ryan, 1985: 43). However, the rejection of mimetic representation in postmodernist fiction is largely a function of the reflexive narrative strategies deployed in such texts and, as this paper argues, such strategies do not necessarily lead to self-preening textual onanism, but can actually provide the basis for an incisive exploration of political realities. As Said contends, "texts are worldly ... and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course, the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted" (1983: 4). The first part of this paper, then, identifies postmodernist techniques and explores their reflexive purposes in *Ararat*, and the second part demonstrates the way in which Thomas incorporates these techniques into a broader social and political perspective.

1 The Text

In *Ararat* the character Surkov undergoes a number of metamorphoses into the Russian poets Pushkin (pp. 46–48; 79–122), Pasternak (pp. 24–25; 27; 42) and Blok (pp. 32–34). Following one of his metamorphoses into Pushkin, he completes *Egyptian Nights*, Pushkin's unfinished narrative fragment which is embedded in the novel, by having Charsky, the protagonist, learn of the historically verifiable death of his author in a duel against a French guardsman named d'Anthes (pp. 50; 155). The ending of this embedded story, with its skilful blending of fiction and history, uses the "death of the author" concept – a topos of postmodernist fiction (McHale, 1987: 197–215) – as a device for exploring authorial authority and the relation of fiction to "reality". The issue of authorial intention is further emphasized by Surkov/Pushkin's shocked response to this ending: "No this can't be! This isn't what I'd

intended!" (my italics, p. 15). This protestation also foregrounds the act of writing and forces the reader to recognize the reality of the reading situation, a recognition which is heightened when Surkov/Pushkin effaces his narrative: "I run back through the pages of my notebook, frenziedly striking lines through the pages. I will start afresh, get the story a dozen years earlier, and manage the affair differently..." (p. 116). This "strategy of erasure," another standard postmodernist device (McHale, 1987: 99–111), compels the reader to acknowledge the physical presence of the book, its ontological status as a material object – s/he realizes with a shock that the text of *Egyptian Nights* rebels against its author's intention since the pages which Surkov/Pushkin attempts to delete are those which s/he has just read. As a result the reader is confronted with rival versions of *Egyptian Nights*: the original version, which was supposedly cancelled, and the new and ostensibly different one. Initially the reader is left hesitating between these apparently mutually exclusive narrative sequences. However, after reading the ending of the second version, s/he realizes that Surkov/Pushkin's authorial intention is further thwarted, because it is largely a repetition of the first. As in the first version, a poet is killed by a soldier – in this case, the poet is an Italian *improvisatore* and the soldier a Russian guardsman – and in both versions a beautiful lady is involved: Natalya, Pushkin's mistress, in the one; Countess Agrippina in the other. This textual repetition thus further dramatizes the escape of the story from its author's intention.

It might be argued that Surkov is merely a character who is subject to the dictates of Thomas and not to those of *Egyptian Nights*, a position which can be justified since Surkov *is* a character, he is simply an author-surrogate on the hypo-hypodiegetic level of the text.[4] However, the strategy of textual repetition which generates the illusion that *Egyptian Nights* (the hypo-hypo-hypodiegetic level) escapes the intention of Surkov/Pushkin, also serves as a *mise en abyme*[5] which reflects the operation of the principle of repetition on the other narrative levels of the novel's "recursive structure" (McHale, 1987: 112–119) and, in so doing, implies that all texts escape the intentions of their authors. For example, the hypo-hypodiegetic level ends with Surkov in bed, about to make love to his mistress, after relating to her the story which the reader has just read. It then jumps to the hypodiegetic level, which reveals Surkov to be a character in a recording of an improvisation by Khandjian, an Armenian *improvisatore*. Apart from their respective claims to authorship, the descriptions of the authorial situations of the two levels are remarkably similar: Khandjian, having completed his narrative, goes to bed with Mariam, an American Armenian writer. Furthermore, echoing Surkov's attempted effacement of *Egyptian Nights*, Khandjian tries to erase the tapes of his improvisation (p. 179). However, the text, rebelling against his intention, then jumps to the diegetic level, which serves as the novel's frame and which presents the lower levels as an improvisation by a Russian poet named Rozanov. The description of the authorial situation of this level is virtually identical to those of the lower levels: Rozanov is in bed with his mistress, Olga. Moreover, the failed strategy of erasure recurs when Rozanov claims that his text has vanished: "The text of last night does not exist" (p. 189). The

various narrative levels are thus virtually identical, despite superficial differences.

The widespread nature of this textual repetition, together with the hierarchy of narrative levels, problematizes and relativizes a logocentric search for a unified source of the novel, since it complicates what McHale refers to as "the ontological horizon of the fiction" (1987: 112). The reader is whirled vertiginously from one narrative level to another, which is supposedly real and occupied by the actual author, but which is subsequently exposed as being merely virtual by the revelation of a higher level occupied by a meta-author. This process of infinite regress confronts the reader with McHale's question: "why not a meta-meta-author on a meta-meta-level, and so on?" (1987: 115), and suggests the possibility that Thomas, too, is simply a character on another narrative level and therefore that the text of *Ararat* escapes his intention. Indeed, this possibility is realized when the diegetic level, which appears to halt the movement to infinite regress by framing the novel, collapses in *Swallow* (1985), the sequel to *Ararat*.[6] This metaleptic movement thus results in the text questioning Thomas's ontological reality and his authorial authority. McHale provides a succinct explanation of the general impact of this process in postmodernist literature:

> Frame-breaking is a risky business. Intended to establish an absolute level of reality, it paradoxically *relativizes* reality; intended to provide an ontologically stable foothold, it only destabilizes ontology further. For the metafictional gesture of sacrificing an illusory reality to a higher, 'realer' reality, that of the author, sets a precedent: why should this gesture not be *repeatable*? What prevents the author's reality from being treated in its turn as an illusion to be shattered? Nothing whatsoever, and so the supposedly absolute reality of the author becomes just another level of fiction, and the *real* world retreats to a further remove. (1987: 197)

By questioning the author's reality, the text foregrounds its independent authority as text, an authority which is further asserted by the operation of the principle of repetition on the various narrative levels. The repetition of the failed strategy of erasure, for example, dramatizes the lack of authority over the text of the author-surrogates and renders the reader acutely aware of the text's independent existence as text. Moreover, the interchangeability of the author-surrogates and the authorial situations of the various narrative levels, together with the palimpsestic nature of the text of *Egyptian Nights*, constitutes a critique of the author's assumed unitary identity, originality and originary role. Elsewhere in the novel, Surkov articulates this critique in his response to the accusation of plagiarism levelled at Sholokhov: "Well, I don't think Sholokhov plagiarized. But of course he, in a way, didn't write it alone... Merely because all art is collaboration, a translation if you like" (p. 140). What is suggested here is close to Kristeva's concept of intertextuality, which designates the inescapable relation of any one literary text to others and which, by extension, questions the originary role of the author, implying that literary texts are controlled by literary codes and conventions (Coward and Ellis, 1977: 51–52). The form of intertextuality which emerges in *Ararat*,

however, varies from standard conceptions of the process in that it is conceived of as being rigorously deterministic. Both the duplication of narrative levels and the repetition of the text of *Egyptian Nights* – variations of the strategy of the palimpsest – posit a monolithic and inflexible process of intertextual repetition without change. As Fokkema explains, the notion of the palimpsest and intertextuality are closely related: "[The term 'palimpsest'] has become popular, not only in relation to Postmodernism but also with reference to intertextuality in general" (1984: 46). In *Ararat*, this affinity is stressed to suggest that the authority formerly invested in the author has been displaced to a tyrannical intertext and that now, in Said's words, the "writer thinks less of writing originally, and more of rewriting. The image for writing changes from original *inscription* to parallel script" (1983: 135).

2 The Context

In addition to mirroring critical theory and the novel's own processes of production, the postmodernist narrative strategies which have been discussed above have a broader social and political relevance, that is, they demonstrate that the deterministic process of intertextual repetition which operates in art applies equally to life on both the levels of personal relations and political history – the implication being that "reality" is a text and therefore also subject to intertextual repetition. The reader's attention is drawn to the operation of the principle of repetition in life by Thomas's use of the palimpsest motif and by his sustained blending of fiction and history in the novel. For example, biographical data are interwoven with fiction and the palimpsest is used as a metaphor when Surkov, metamorphosed as Pasternak, expresses his relief at escaping from a love triangle which involves his wife and mistress: "The beauty of it is that Zina and Olga are left behind, and *my life is a blank page*" (my italics, p. 27). The link between life and text established by this metaphor initially seems to suggest that Surkov/Pasternak, as the author of his life, can erase his past and rewrite the text of his life. This possibility is negated, however, by the use of the palimpsest as a metaphor, since it refers the reader to the palimpsestic strategy of erasure in the interpolated text of *Egyptian Nights*. As this example of failed erasure shows, there is no new beginning, only repetition. Given the equation of life and text in Surkov/Pasternak's words, the textual repetition in the novel implies that life, like a text, is subject to the principle of repetition. In addition, the radical critique of the notion of author, initiated by the strategy of erasure, questions the existentialist belief, implicit in Surkov/Pasternak's statement, that individuals are the authors of their lives (Barrett, 1962: 244) – like texts, lives are governed by codes and conventions and consequently escape the intentions of their "authors". As such, lives are as interchangeable and repetitive as texts are. This notion informs the presentation of character in *Ararat*: Surkov's continual merging of identities with Pushkin, Blok and Pasternak demonstrates that the characters in the text are as exchangeable as its narrative levels. Such equivalence of character denies what the concept "author" af-

firms, namely the uniqueness and subjectivity of the individual (Heath, 1972: 36).

The conspicuous equivalence of these characters can also be perceived in the duplication of their romantic problems. For example, Pasternak's love triangle is transposable with Surkov's, as is stressed by the recurrence of the palimpsest as a metaphor in the following passage, which deals with Surkov's reflections on his relationship with his wife, Vera, and his mistress, Tanya:

> If Tanya should decide to quit, he reflected, can I survive? Well, I'll have to. *If I could simply wipe the slate clean, as by a Biblical flood* – then I'm sure we could make a go of it; but as things are... It would have to be with someone completely new, and young, on another continent... (my italics, pp. 170–171).

Here, as in the passage on Pasternak's love triangle, the palimpsest metaphor refers the reader to the failed strategy of erasure in the text of *Egyptian Nights* and thus emphasizes the impossibility of a new beginning. Moreover, it also draws the reader's attention to the fact that Surkov/Pushkin's artistic failure to erase the original version of *Egyptian Nights* and "manage the affair differently" (p. 116) is matched by his existential failure to "wipe the slate clean" (p. 170) and in so doing "start afresh" (p. 116). The hypodiegetic level in fact does end with Surkov in bed "with someone completely new, and young, on another continent" (p. 171). Rather than being a new beginning, however, this relationship is simply a repetition of his past ones – he has previously had three wife/mistress relationships. The parallel here between Surkov's art and his affairs emphasizes the operation of the principle of repetition in both art and life.

Surkov's use of the palimpsest metaphor, "If I could simply wipe the slate clean, as by a Biblical flood" (p. 170), indicates that repetition in life is not simply confined to the level of personal relationships, but that it is also a cosmic principle. In terms of this manifestation of the palimpsest motif – foregrounded by the title of the novel – the world is cast as a text which is erased by the Deluge in preparation for rewriting. The purpose of the Deluge was spiritually to cleanse the world and thereby enable humankind to start afresh, the symbol of this renewal being Mount Ararat. However, in the same way that the text of *Egyptian Nights* escapes the intention of its author, namely Surkov/Pushkin, the world as text escapes the intention of its author, namely God. The course of Biblical history testifies to the failure of the Deluge to spiritually rejuvenate the world – like *Egyptian Nights*, the world as text repeats itself.

Fokkema's contention that the postmodernist writer "is convinced that the social context consists of words, and that each new text is written over an older one" (1984: 46) is accurate with respect to Thomas's treatment of the political context in *Ararat*. In the novel, the purpose of the Deluge links it to the Russian Revolution, referred to by Blok in his poetry of the time as a "purifying blizzard cleansing the world" (Kohn, 1957: 79). Blok's vision of the Revolution is alluded to in the novel by Surkov, metamorphosed as this poet: "I needed the coming Revolution to cleanse my spirit" (p. 33). Moreover, in

keeping with the palimpsest motif, the Revolution is referred to as a "new beginning" (p. 119) by Charsky in Surkov/Pushkin's second version of *Egyptian Nights*. In terms of these associations, Russia is seen as a text and the Revolution is cast as the strategy whereby this text is erased in preparation for a "new beginning," that is, a rewriting of Russia's political history. The possibility of this strategy of erasure achieving political renewal, however, is denied by the paradigm in the novel of the tyrannical intertext repeating itself. It soon emerges that this paradigm also applies to the text of Russia. The interchangeability of Surkov and Pushkin, indicated by the one's metamorphoses into the other, implies that the political ideologies of their historical periods, namely Sovietism and Czarism, are equally interchangeable. Indeed, as the constant references to, on the one hand, the Soviet dissidents who oppose Soviet tyranny (pp. 15; 141; 189), and, on the other hand, the Decembrists who opposed Czarist tyranny (pp. 14; 120; 137), indicate, political dissent is a major theme in the novel and it characterizes both historical periods, in this way suggesting their transposability. The Bolshevik Revolution, instead of erasing the text of Czarist oppression and in this way fulfilling the Decembrists' wish for a "new beginning," simply rewrites it. The novel then establishes the idea that the political text, like the literary text, repeats itself.

The principle of repetition in evidence here, however, does not simply confine itself in the novel to one particular state, but transcends all national boundaries as well as historical periods. This becomes clear in the course of conversations between Surkov and Finn in which the latter claims to have been present at and responsible for most of the killing fields of this century, such as Armenia (pp. 37–41), Babi Yar (p. 41), Yugoslavia (p. 41), Dachau (p. 123), Birkenau (p. 123), Belsen (p. 123), Auschwitz (p. 123), Sobibor (p. 123), Maidanek (p. 123), Treblinka (p. 123), India (p. 42), Africa (p. 42), Indo-China (p. 42), the Ukraine (p. 48), Moscow (p. 48) and Leningrad (p. 48). The political atrocities Finn catalogues are as interchangeable as the versions of *Egyptian Nights*, that is, they are repetitions of the same political text. Moreover, they escape the intention of any specific "author", the suggestion being that their "author"/perpetrator, the ubiquitous, stateless and ageless Finn – a soldier "involved in international politics" (p. 36) who has "never truly retired" (p. 42) – embodies the historical intertext.

By means of metafictional strategies such as the death of the author, the strategy of erasure, the device of the palimpsest and the fusion of fact and fiction, the novel thus not only mirrors its own processes of production but also those of the historical text. In so doing it skilfully generates an analogy between the way in which the soldier-politician's enterprise is determined by the historical intertext and the way in which the artist's enterprise is determined by the literary intertext. This analogy is also hinted at by the proliferation of love triangles in the novel, which often consist of a poet and a soldier competing for the favours of a beautiful woman. In addition to those which have already been mentioned, another such triangle is found in the prologue and involves Sergei Rozanov, a poet, his mistress, Sonia, and Kolasky, a major general (p. 14). This triangle anticipates the inclusion in the novel of an

historically verifiable *ménage à trois*, namely that of Pushkin, Anna Petrovna Kern, and her husband, General Kern (pp. 69–70). A similar configuration is also found in "Cleopatra and Her Lovers," a poem embedded in *Egyptian Nights*. In Pushkin's poem a soldier and a poet, Flavius and Kriton, number amongst Cleopatra's lovers (pp. 67–68; 81–84) and mirror a similar liaison on the narrative level of *Egyptian Nights* itself: Count O--'s mother – nicknamed "Cleopatra" in her youth (p. 107) – is said to have once been "the mistress of a soldier and a poet" (p. 107), that is, Kutuzov and Derzhavin respectively. As with the triangle involving Pushkin, this last one is authentic. All of these configurations serve to draw the reader's attention to the symbolic significance of the triangular relationships of Surkov and Finn to Anna and Nayirie respectively – relationships through which Thomas extends the analogy between codal determinism in art and history.

Surkov's relationship with Anna is dealt with directly in the novel. He seduces and then deserts her, an apparently insignificant sexual fling which, however, is placed in a political context later in the novel by a question directed at Surkov: "What are your views on Poland? Do you think the Soviet Union will intervene?" (p. 146). This reference to the political situation of Poland in the early eighties politicizes Surkov's relationship with Anna, whose affinities with Poland – she is a Pole (p. 27); her surname is Polanski (p. 70); she represented Poland at the Moscow Olympics of 1980 (p. 27) – cast her as a representative of this country. Anna's representative status explains the nature of her relationship with the soldier Finn, which is not overtly delineated in the novel. Instead, the reader is directed beyond the novel to Poland's contemporary history by Surkov's remark: "by the end of the year Poland will be under military rule. Solidarity will be crushed" (p. 163). This device effectively ousts the reader from the text into the contemporary political realities of the global village, forcing him/her to bring his/her knowledge of these realities to bear on the text in order to make sense of it. Surkov's remark refers the reader to December 1981, when General Jaruzelski established martial law in Poland and suspended Solidarity's activities, arresting Lech Walesa and other leaders.[7] The institution of martial law in Poland effectively exposes the power-political nature of the relation of Finn, the soldier-figure, to Anna, the representative of Poland, in the novel.

This triangular relationship is duplicated by Finn and Surkov's relationship with Nayirie. Whereas Anna is associated with Poland, Nayirie is associated with Turkey – she represented Turkey at the Moscow Olympics. Surkov's relationship with Nayirie simply repeats his relationship with Anna and is also dealt with directly in the novel. Finn's affiliation with Nayirie, however, is revealed extra-textually by the political situation in Turkey. The only bond that can be traced between them in the novel is the comment that Turkey is under military rule (pp. 162–163), which, however, again serves to oust the reader from the text back into the arena of contemporary politics, where, in 1982, General Kenan Evren was named president of Turkey until 1989. Finn's relation to Nayirie is thus indistinguishable from his relation to Anna – like the versions of *Egyptian Nights*, the text of military domination repeats itself.

The strategy of ellipsis found in the treatment of Finn's relationships in the

novel prevents the reader from focusing on the text in an exclusively formalist fashion and in this way retreating from political realities. Indeed, in orthodox postmodernist fashion, it compels him/her to complete the construction of the text (Ryan, 1985: 40–41; 45). This, as has been seen, is accomplished by intercalating episodes of contemporary history into the fiction which require the reader to erase the boundaries between story and history and, in so doing, to place him- or herself in a relation of reader to both, thereby forcibly impressing on him/her that the political text is subject to a process of intertextual repetition which is identical to that found in the literary text. This important subversion of the distinction between text and context is confirmed when it is dramatized in the portrayal of Surkov wearing a Castro hat (p. 129), an image which fuses together the figures of poet and soldier-politician or, alternatively, the discourses of literature and history.

The text's extreme view of literary and historical discourse as intertextual duplication deconstructs the ideal of historical and socio-political progress, which is, as G. Olivier points out, "one of the most sustaining metanarratives of Western culture" (1986: 54). It could therefore be said that *Ararat*, by means of postmodernist narrative strategies, offers a perspective on history which, in Lyotard's terms, is postmodern in "its incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984: XXIV), in its view of history as perpetuating the structures of political domination rather than progressing towards a just ethico-political order, that is, a new beginning or "Ararat".

Conclusion

The sceptical view of historical progress which emerges in the novel is the direct result of the analogy, developed into full equivalence, between the codal determinism of text and context. If, as has been argued, this analogy in turn stems from the postmodernist strategies deployed in the novel, then its reflexive features, rather than being instances of frivolous game-playing, are used to potent effect in a critique of the discourse of history. Thomas's novel thus indisputably demonstrates the political potential of postmodernist narrative strategies. In conclusion, it seems fitting to point out that Thomas is hardly original in his use of reflexive features for political purposes. Critics who claim that postmodernism is divorced from social and political concerns conveniently ignore or disregard the use of postmodernist narrative strategies for political dissent in "the allegories of power" (Zamora, 1986) of East European, Latin American, Canadian and South African writers such as Milan Kundera, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Julio Cortazar, Carlos Fuentes, Manuel Puig, Hubert Aquin and J.M. Coetzee. In the light of the geographical diversity and sociological commitment of these writers, Fokkema's contention that postmodernism "clearly has its geographical and sociological limitations" (1984: 56) fails to convince.

Notes

1. See also Ihab Hassan (1975: 53–59) and David Lodge (1977:229–245).

2. See Gerald Graff (1979: 31–62; 63–101); and, for a brief history of the view that such texts sever the life-art connection, see Brian McHale (1987: 219–222).
3. My reading of *Ararat* and my ideas on the political potential of reflexive devices have been influenced by two excellent attempts at situating less aleatory forms of postmodernism in a political context – namely, Linda Hutcheon's readings of Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* and Hubert Aquin's *Prochain Episode* (1984: 155–162); and Theo D'Haen's reading of Julio Cortazar's *A Manual for Manuel* (1983: 69–94).
4. The terminology for narrative levels adopted in this paper was originally formulated by Genette, but appears here in Mieke Bal's slightly adapted form, as used by Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 91–95) and McHale (1987: 112–114; 245).
5. The device of *mise en abyme*, stock-in-trade of postmodernist writers, is discussed at length by Hutcheon (1984: 53–56) and McHale (1987: 124–128).
6. Thomas actually crosses the ontological divide between text and context when he appears as a character on one of the narrative levels in *Swallow* (1985: 179). It is worth mentioning here that *Ararat* is only the first in a sequence of four novels: each new beginning thus defers the ending of the previous novel in the sequence. This results in continual shifts in the hierarchy of narrative levels in the overall structure of the sequence, and in ontological boundary-violations as, for example, when characters who inhabit one narrative level appear and interact with characters on another narrative level.
7. The novel was published in 1983, and therefore directly enlisted its earliest readers' knowledge of current political events: Jaruzelski's government suspended martial law in December 1982 and, in 1983, Pope John Paul II visited Poland and Lech Walesa won the Nobel Peace Prize – events which all stimulated world interest in Polish politics.

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