The Modern Novel
A Short Introduction

Jesse Matz

Blackwell
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CHAPTER 7

Postmodern Replenishments?

The new energy of "commonwealth" fiction made an ironic contrast with what was otherwise often considered a moment of literary "exhaustion." In the commonwealth, writers were vigorously beginning to make their experiences the source for innovative new kinds of writing – writing which, in turn, would aid good cultural change. Elsewhere, however, writers were facing a sense that the purpose of literature had been exhausted, and that as a result, innovation had become purposeless.

John Barth described this situation in his essay on "The literature of exhaustion" (1967). He noted that modern experimentation, which had once made fiction both exciting and important, now went on for no clear reason, with no good effects. Writers had started simply playing around, or showing off; there were plenty of new tricks, but these seemed to be little more than tricks, just experimentation for the sake of shock, surprise, or cleverness. And then on the other hand there were writers writing as if modernism had never happened – just offering up traditional descriptions of traditional situations, and failing entirely even to enter the twentieth century. Things had devolved mostly into a "literature of exhausted possibility", of "used-upness," a "tradition of rebelling against tradition." Where were the writers who could purposefully experiment, who could really entertain people with innovation, and find the right path between "exhausted" trickery and traditional writing?[1]

Ultimately, Barth would find them: over a decade after writing about "The literature of exhaustion," he would write about "The literature of replenishment," declaring that fiction had revitalized its

experimental mission and begun again to advance the cause of the modern novel. In the meantime, however, the fate of the modern novel was uncertain. These were the years of the "postmodern": postmodernism introduced into fiction a new, extreme kind of experimentation, a skeptical outlook far more severe than that of the modernists, and a stunning challenge to the notion that fiction or art of any kind could have redemptive effects. At first, postmodernism seemed to mean the end of the modern novel, but ultimately it was a "replenishment"; at first, it threatened an end to any faith in "representation," but ultimately it would turn out to solve many of the problems left unsolved by the modern novel in its first phases.

What were the signs of the "exhaustion" that seemed to characterize postmodernism in its first moments? What were its causes, and how did its effects jeopardize the modern novel? How could postmodernism have "replenished" modern fiction – if, as its name indicates, it succeeds the modern?

Recall that the modern novel began in a special set of mixed feelings. In the face of modernity, it was wary but also welcoming – sure, in any case, that fiction ought to try to deal with modernity by dramatizing its new freedoms and pleasures, or criticizing its problems, or even redeeming what modernity seemed likely to destroy. Writers believed that fiction could change the way people thought, that as "the one bright book of life" it could revitalize them, spread sympathy, and help return aesthetic and ethical complexity to worlds going cold with technology, rationality, materialism. There was skepticism, but it too worked in the service of this kind of idealism. All this changed – gradually, as we have seen, in the political fervor of the 1930s and in the aftermath of the war, but finally with the advent of postmodernism.

Postmodernism happened when people lost faith in this idealism, and other idealisms like it. Faith, of course, had been on its way out for a long time, but now all structures of positive thinking seemed to collapse; principles gave way to paradigms, any remaining certainties gave way to total relativism. The causes were many, but we might generalize by saying that they were all the bad things about "modernity" redoubled and ruthless: technology now was the atomic bomb; materialism now was a consumer culture of insidious influence; alienation now was the very plan of suburbia; "civilization," largely discredited after World War I, was now a total lie, a pretense masking only a lust

for power. And what had been good about modernity seemed good no longer. Its freedoms and its controls both now seemed too total. They seemed to mean now that there was nothing beneath it all – no traditional substance upon which to rest beliefs, true emotions, or valid aspirations. This loss of "foundations" mainly meant an "incredulity toward metanarratives" – a now total loss of faith in the larger stories by which people had tended to think, live, work, feel, and write.[2]

Gone were the *grand narratives* people had lived by and the foundations upon which their values had rested. If you felt this way, as many writers and thinkers did, what kind of fiction could you or should you write? With the guiding narratives and stable foundations gone, could you any longer do what the modern novelists had done? That is, could you believe that there was any point to trying for something new in the hope of making a difference, if even the myth of "making a difference" had been debunked?

And could you really believe that there could be anything "new" at all? "Exhaustion" also meant everything had already been done, that art was out of options. Everything seemed tired, predictable, played out. Originality was a naive, romantic dream. Or worse, it sounded like an aesthetic pretense, meant not to create something new but to show off, to exert power. For art itself was another thing debunked by postmodern skepticism. Its aspirations toward beauty, meaning, and wisdom now seemed to be false cover for something else: aristocratic or political privilege. Rather than beauty, art seemed to be after a way to make people believe that those in charge of culture deserved to be in charge, because they had special kinds of taste, creativity, and knowledge.

Truth, too, seemed exhausted. The modern writers had wanted always to question it – to see things from different perspectives, to doubt the conventional wisdom, and even to suggest that truth lay beyond our powers of perception and knowledge. But even at their most skeptical, modern writers had always thought it worthwhile to try for truth. And their whole enterprise rested on the faith that improved powers of "representation" would mean improved chances for getting truth right. But now modern skepticism got pushed further – further enough to undermine totally the possibility of "representation." The modernists had wanted immediacy; postmodernism seemed to prove that we could only get "mediation," since there was no reality beyond the reach of thought and language. Postmodernism only "put

forward the unpresentable in presentation itself," and denied "the solace of good forms" that had been the point of modern writing.[3] All it could do was "dramatize the theme of the world's non-interpretability."[4]

What was left for modern fiction? Without faith in originality, art, representation, goodness, without the solace of good forms – in its exhaustion, what could it become?

Could the novel now only express total, negative skepticism? If there were no sure meaning in the world, maybe it would be best just to think of the world as a big game. If you could not truly represent anything, why not make that failure your subject? If art had been falsely aristocratic, why not force it down to earth? And if there were no longer any way to be original, maybe it would be best just to spoof what there already was. These were four ways fiction could respond to the postmodern condition. Play, parody, reflexivity, and deflation seemed to be what was left to the "literature of exhaustion." Fiction would become fiction about the failures of fiction; it would be fun, but finally empty, and it would aim above all to deflate any pretensions to meaning, faith, and truth.

Take for example B. S. Johnson's *Book in a Box* (1969). Here was a book out to mock the very possibility of a book, by breaking up its parts, undoing its typical form, and making it a random kind of game in which chapters might be chosen purposelessly in any order. The point was to become self-conscious about the expectations we bring to books, even before we get on to reading them. And the reading procedure – now random, totally in question, as you picked your way through – was meant to mirror the randomness of a world without foundations. Not to represent anything (there could be no sure connections between what was in a book and the outside world) but to throw you back on your expectations about reading, and show you how they must fail. Or take *Pale Fire* (1962), another book by Vladimir Nabokov, which is less a novel than a parodic game of interpretation. The subject of the novel is a famous poet's long poem, and the effort to interpret it made by a scholar with a deranged obsession. The poem, it seems, is simple enough, but the scholar believes it contains a vast and historically crucial secret allegory: he believes the poem is about him, and the history of the nation of which he is the exiled king. *Pale Fire* is consequently a parody of the effort to find meaning in literature. We get, in other words, a novel not after some true reality, but

all about the doomed process of producing and interpreting fiction itself. We get the sense that there is no truth behind fiction, that fiction is really just all about its own falsity. "Life itself" is just "commentary to an abstruse unfinished poem," and the idealistic aims of the modern novel are tantamount to paranoid delusions of grandeur.

These are excellent books, and not what John Barth deplored, but they are nevertheless examples of what made him worry about the exhaustion of fiction. Postmodernism, it seemed, dead-ended the modern novel, by taking away its basic premises. Modern fiction could not work without two beliefs: first, that "representation" was worth the effort (that it might be hard, and even doomed to fail, but must be tried); and second, that the effort could result in some good effect, whether it be beauty, truth, solidarity, perceptivity, justice, or the vitalization of language. Postmodernism debunked these two beliefs, leaving only one aspect of modern fiction. All that was left was the desire to try something new. Without those two other beliefs, however, experimentation became a very different thing. Now, it became a game, and a game all about its own uselessness.

But this is far too bleak a picture of the effect postmodernism had on fiction. Barth soon abandoned his concerns about the "exhaustion" of the novel, finding proof that postmodernism had heralded a "replenishment." For him, the postmodern meant a "synthesis or a transcension" of the antitheses of modernist and pre-modernist modes of writing, in which "the ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and 'contentism,' pure and committed literature," to combine all the most vital aspects of all the novels of the past.[5] Barth discovered early what turned out to be true: all those tendencies that seemed to mean the death of the modern novel (as well as an end to much of faith and meaning) actually meant its enrichment. The extreme skepticism, the tendency toward parody and play, the distrust of grand narratives, the reflexivity: all of these things became marvelous resources for modern fiction, and ultimately widened the range of its powers to make sense of the modern world. In some purely technical sense, postmodernism may have marked an end to the modern impulse in fiction, but in effect it made for a new beginning.

What follows here is an account of what postmodernism did for modern fiction. This account aims mainly to define the postmodern approach to fiction and to give examples of it. But it will also do two

things to emphasize the ways postmodernism advanced modern fiction: it will stress how postmodernism reinvigorated the key styles and features of the modern novel (defamiliarization, consciousness, fragmentation, etc.); and it will also stress how postmodernism solved many of the modern novel's key problems. Earlier, we saw that people came to criticize the modern novel for a number of things: for example, its naive hope of "immediacy," the limits on its perspectives, its disengagement, and its persistent traditionalism. Once postmodernism came into play, these problems got addressed, and in what follows here we will see how.

The first generation of modern novelists had worked hard to "match word and vision." More than anything else they wanted to make language a better, more self-consciously adept register of immediate reality. Of course they knew there were limits, and often they let on in their fiction that these limits worried them (at the end of *The Good Soldier*, for example, when the novel's narrator laments the fact that he just can't speak the truth). Nevertheless they pushed on, for what defines modern fiction more than anything else is the idealistic pursuit of new words that might match new visions of new worlds. But by the moment of postmodernism, the match seemed impossible. The world seemed too wild – and experimental language seemed to feeble, or too strong. This failure of reference, this end to representation, made some writers so skeptical that their fiction just enacted failure: it presented language in crisis, stressing its pointlessness, playing with disaster. To other writers, however, the failure of reference presented a new opportunity to enrich the language of fiction.

To these writers, the failure of immediacy meant new interest in *mediation*. In other words, it meant marvelous new interest in the medium of language itself, in the act of representation, as a thing of its own. If, as the modernists had discovered, language no longer catered to reality – if it's function was no longer only to be a transparent window on what it showed – did this not make it free? Did this not mean that language could now become even more of a focus of experiment, of innovation, of excitement? Many writers took this failure of language as an opportunity to pay far more attention to it, to make language abstract – truly to discover its powers and properties and much more creatively to play with its possibilities. What Joyce had done with the abstract wordplay of *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*,

novelists would now do in fictions of all kinds. So what was for some just a crisis was to others – to those who yet felt the modern impulse to try productively for something new – a chance to make the language of fiction a fantastic new world of its own, and "the jubilation which result[s] from the invention of new rules of the game."[6]

The medium becomes the playful message in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). The novel is a dystopia: like *1984*, it presents us with a nightmarish future world, in this case one in which lawlessness has taken over. Also like *1984*, Burgess's novel worries about a lawless future. Soviet control seems to be a large part of the problem, for the novel's lawless characters speak a Russianized English, a language called NADSAT. We might be reminded of *1984*'s Newspeak – except for the fact that NADSAT is a much more dominant aspect of the novel and a lot more fun.

The title of the novel refers to the way excessive social planning – the welfare state, for example – reduces humanity to machinery. A "clockwork orange" is a mechanical life, made that way by a combination of technological modernity and technocratic government: the title refers to "the attempt to impose upon man, a creature of growth and capable of sweetness . . . laws and conditions appropriate to a mechanical creation." Critical of this dehumanizing social "improvement," Burgess bases the novel on one of the key postmodern ideas: that the "grand narratives" of social progress are in fact oppressive, dangerous distortions. The specific clockwork orange in question here is Alex, the novel's protagonist. At first a juvenile delinquent, he is made into a model citizen by a medical process (the "Ludovico Technique") that makes him incapable of violence. It also makes him unable to appreciate art; it also makes him inhuman, because incapable of *choice*, and we therefore see that the allegedly civilizing efforts of modern society must utterly fail. But along with this dark message we get an exuberant medium: Alex's language, NADSAT, is itself an important and dynamic subject of the novel.

Here is an example of it, from the beginning of the novel:

> There was me, that is Alex, and my three droogs . . . Our pockets were full of deng, so there was no real need from the point of view of crasting any more pretty polly to tolchock some old veck in an alley and viddy him swim in his blood while we counted the takings and divided by four, nor to do the ultra-violent on some shivering starry grey-haired

> ptitsa in a shop and go smecking off with the till's guts. But as they say, money isn't everything.

Here Burgess's postmodernism has led him to bring language fantastically to life, but to a life of its own; not to imitate reality, but to express its own complications. Or even to obscure reality: Burgess claims to have invented NADSAT in order to put distance between his readers and his "pornographic" subject-matter: "Nadsat, a Russified version of English, was meant to muffle the raw response we expect from pornography. It turned the book into a linguistic adventure."[7] So the problematics of language becomes the issue, both to make us value the distance between words and things, and to make us enjoy the arts of which language is capable once it is no longer so directly responsible for "reality." We might best appreciate the benefits here by recalling what modern writers had wanted to do with defamiliarization. Whereas earlier modern novelists had used words to defamiliarize things, a writer like Burgess defamiliarizes the words themselves, making us more conscious of the true matter of meaning.

This consciousness of fiction itself – this attention to the way the language of fiction comes in between us and reality – is the main change postmodernism brought to the modern novel. Not only does the problematics of language become the subject of fiction. Storytelling itself becomes an issue. Whereas before, modern writers had tried to efface their narrators, going directly into consciousness and getting rid of any intrusive omniscience, now they found it important to do the opposite. Narration became a theme within the novel. Now, writers felt it necessary to write about writing, to tell about the telling of stories, because the whole possibility of fiction had been thrown into question. Fiction became *metafiction* – stories about stories, fiction about fiction, novels within novels.

Metafiction typically gives us narrators who constantly think about the ways they are telling their stories. Sometimes, such narrators may be writers themselves, trying to write a work of fiction and meditating constantly on the problems they face in doing so. In its most experimental forms, metafiction can involve a deep questioning of the possibility of truth in fiction, or an obsession with the power fiction has over our lives. Whatever the form of its preoccupation, metafiction shifts the focus back from *showing* to *telling*. The first modern novelists had shifted things in the other direction, leaving behind the

conventional plots of storytelling in favor of radical immediacy; their priority, as we have seen, is *mimesis*. Now, however, there was a total self-consciousness about what telling entails, a deliberate exploration of *diegesis*. David Lodge makes the difference between mimesis and diegesis a helpful way to know the difference between modernist and postmodernist priorities:

> The classic realist text, we may say, was characterized by a balanced and harmonized combination of mimesis and diegesis, reported speech and reporting context, authorial speech and represented speech. The modern novel evolved through an increasing dominance of mimesis over diegesis. Narrative was focalized through character with extensive use of "pictorial" reported speech or delegated to narrators with mimetically objectified styles . . . what we see happening in postmodernist fiction is a revival of diegesis: not smoothly dovetailed with mimesis as in the classic realist text, and not subordinated to mimesis as in the modernist text, but foregrounded against mimesis. The stream of consciousness has turned to a stream of narration.[8]

This last difference is key: whereas the modern writer wanted to "mime" consciousness, as if fiction were a transparent window into it, the postmodern writer focuses on the intervention of narration itself.

Metafiction's return to diegesis produced John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Set in 1867, the novel tells the story of a man who gives up his conventional, respectable life in order to pursue a "fallen" woman – a woman who seems to have a scandalous past. The details of the lives they lead richly explore Victorian culture and its presumptions about decency, sexuality, and love. And this exploration is made explicit by an intrusive narrator, who fills in all the historical and social detail. Nothing unusual, and nothing apparently postmodern, until it becomes clear that this apparently conventional narrator is not conventional at all. As much as he is master of the historical facts of the story, he is undone by the variety of possible ways he might present them. He is persistently conscious of the fact that everything depends upon his choices – how the different options open to him might frame things fictionally in different ways. At one key moment, the narrator asks about his mysterious heroine, "Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?," and then answers,

> I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and "voice" of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word.

Fowles implies that a "modern" novel would never extend to this degree of self-questioning, denying the existence of the contents of the story, calling it all a pretense. Modern writers were aware that writing was a matter of conventions; but a postmodern writer like Fowles makes those conventions his explicit concern, so that the story is as much about how a story might be told as it is about the particular events in question. This is the essence of metafiction – this creative uncertainty about the means of storytelling itself, this self-conscious exploration of fiction-making, this questioning not just of reality but of fiction's power to imagine. It made fiction so much a matter of inquiry that it became a "borderline discourse between fiction and criticism."[9]

But doesn't this excess of questioning defeat the purpose of fiction? If fiction is all about itself, and no longer about mimesis, how can it effectively capture the outside world, or interest those of us who aren't writers ourselves? Fowles might have answered that his self-conscious questioning was a very powerful *assertion* of the power of fiction. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is not just about the different choices a novelist might make in setting up a story. It is also about the fact that any reality, any historical event, is a product of fiction. Fowles noted that "One cannot describe reality; only give metaphors that indicate it. All human modes of description . . . are metaphorical. Even the most precise scientific description of an object or movement is a tissue of metaphors."[10] The point is not that everything we think is really just all made up. Rather, the point is that we always see reality through fictional frameworks. There is always some metaphor, some style of plotting, some style of description and characterization, at work in any view we take of the world. So when modern novels become metafic-

tions, they aren't only playing games. They are also exploring the way we make up our worlds. Experimenting with fictions about fictions, metafictional novels also explore the very basis of our realities.

The first modern novelists had been interested in the subjective view of reality, and they had therefore turned inward, to discover the workings of the individual consciousness. Now, novelists pushed the subjective even further – to the point where reality itself became a fiction. And this meant there was more to do when it came to the exploration of individual consciousness, for now the activities of consciousness became reality's source. There is a reversal here: consciousness is no longer what responds to reality, but what produces it. There is no reality before states of mind frame it, process it, make it into stories. Far from undermining the power of fiction, this reversal puts fiction first, and gives it a lot more to do. It even puts fiction before history. In this way of thinking, history too becomes a product of fiction – of the way stories put a reality that really cannot be said to exist before stories make it up. The category of "historical fiction" changes dramatically, for now history is a fiction, or is something wholly subject to the imagination.

This new dominance of fiction over history is a basis for E. L. Doctorow's approach to US history in *Ragtime* (1975), a "historical novel" about the exuberance and villainy of early twentieth-century America. Doctorow takes extreme liberties with historical fact, putting real historical figures into fictional situations, arranging encounters that never happened, in order to make history itself more meaningful. That is, Doctorow stresses the fictionality of great historical figures, to stress the fact that they are always really mainly products of the cultural imagination; it is no violation to make them up, since they are really fictions anyway. When, for example, Doctorow fictionalizes an encounter between J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford, he does not have to worry about the truth, for these men are not in history as real people:

> Morgan brought [Ford] to the great West Room of the Library. Here they took chairs on opposite sides of a fireplace that was as tall as a man. It was a good day for a fire, Morgan said. Ford agreed. Cigars were offered. Ford refused. He noticed that the ceiling was gilded . . . Morgan let him take it all in.

Here we have made-up facts about real people stated as if true, not because Doctorow thinks for sure that they happened, but because he knows that such imaginings are all we really have of truth even about real-historical figures. Moreover, we have an impressionistic style of description, which had been developed to get at "life itself," but now sketches out deliberate fictions.

This focus on fiction itself could also make writers want to rewrite the fictions of the past. Rather than create something entirely new, some writers thought it more important to rework something old, partially out of a sense of "exhaustion," but mainly out of a sense that our present realities are really made up of the fictions of the past. It seemed less important simply to take on current events and problems than to take on the whole cultural imagination as developed in the world's old stories. The most famous example here is Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Here, Rhys rewrote the story of *Jane Eyre* (1847), with a particular interest in exploring the very influential fiction of ideal womanhood promoted in the Victorian novel. Knowing that this ideal still had influence, Rhys decided to rewrite it, from another point of view.

In *Jane Eyre*, the heroine is haunted by a "madwoman in the attic": a governess soon to marry her wealthy employer, Jane Eyre hears insane howling from the darker parts of the house soon to be her own, and finds it occupied already by her lover's first wife, a crazy woman hidden away and unknown to the world. The contrast between the two women could not be stronger, and for a time it seems that female madness might win out over female virtue. Ultimately, however, the madwoman dies, Jane's goodness triumphs, and women readers are taught a lesson. That lesson is what Jean Rhys set out to revise. *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells the story from the "madwoman's" point of view: we see her from childhood, menaced by life in colonial Antigua, and exploited by the man who would become the hero of *Jane Eyre*. We see that what makes a madwoman is not her womanhood, but sexism, imperialism, and other forms of injustice and inhumanity. And we see this because Rhys knows the powers of fiction. She knows that *Jane Eyre* has long determined the way people think about Creole women, and so she writes to remake the fictional norm, and to give culture another way to imagine Creole women's lives.

If originality ceases to matter to these postmodern writers, it is not because they have given up on the modern impulse toward innova-

tion and change. Rather, it is because they have taken a new approach to it, in which making up new things is less important than exploring the very processes of making up. More often than not this means returning to prior scenes of invention, as Rhys returned to the scene of madness in *Jane Eyre* to turn it into a different kind of story.

Nevertheless it is true that the postmodern influence on fiction meant less earnest engagement with new realities. Parody was more the norm, for so many writers had decided to give up on any sincere and serious effort at aesthetic redemption. The angst with which the first modern writers faced the world, the intensity they brought to bear on modern problems, gave way to something very different: dark irony gave way to light, sincerity gave way to cynicism, angst went more blasé, and in general fiction became a forum for more playful ways of dealing with the problems of the world. As Gerald Graff puts it, "the tragic quest for meaning and justification, for transcendence, gives way to a glorification of *energy*."[11] And in the place of novels in search of the meaning of "life itself," we get "the game-novel, the puzzle-novel, the novel that leads the reader . . . through a fairground of illusions and deceptions, distorting mirrors and trap-doors that open disconcertingly under his feet, leaving him ultimately not with any simple or reassuring message or meaning but with a paradox about the relation of art to life."[12] But playful parody did not really mean taking things less seriously, or taking them more lightly. It meant finding a different way to question reality – not in earnest, now, but in travesty, farce, and a more total kind of doubt.

One master of postmodern play is Thomas Pynchon, whose novels suggest something crucial about this form of unseriousness: that it may after all be the best measure of modernity, and at the same time the best source of formal ingenuity. *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) is an absurd treatment of a deeply serious problem. The problem is the feeling people had, in the Cold-War and consumerist cultures of the day, that all was controlled by nameless, unknown powers, that strange governments and conspiring corporations were constantly doing secret and evil things to enhance their hold on the world. The problem, in other words, is that of realistic paranoia – the justified but unprovable and therefore insane sense that individuals have lost control of their lives to secret evil systems. As the novel's unlikely heroine Oedipa Maas discovers, "Tristero's Empire" is a massive, centuries-old conspiracy, controlling everything, and its "legacy was America"; freedom

is an illusion, for every innocuous place or person around her turns out to be in Tristero's control. Or are they? She thinks she has discovered the conspiracy – but it might *just* be paranoia, and what then?

> For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia.

We never find out the "truth" – the novel ends before Oedipa's questions are answered – and so we are left in what Pynchon implies is the postmodern condition: both sure and unsure that our lives are not our own, continuing as if freedom does and does not exist. The absurdity here is in the way Pynchon presents the problem – not as a serious concern, but as the crazy possibility, obsessed over by an ordinary woman, that a vast conspiracy composed of postal workers, playwrights, and big business has infiltrated every aspect of life. An unserious approach to a serious problem, it would seem, and no useful critique of modernity – until you see that Pynchon has perfectly captured the absurdity of modern paranoia. He not only gets the best measure of this key symptom of modernity, he find a fantastic new source of formal ingenuity, because paranoia turns out to be a maker of the wildest descriptions and the strangest leaps of thought. In the paranoid imagination, we get more intense versions of the defamiliarization and fragmentation we have seen in prior writers, but with a difference: here, they connect better than ever, if unseriously, to real-world problems.

The kind of fragmentation common in modern fiction here changes, as do the other things modern novelists had done to experiment with the composition and organization of words, phrases, and sentences. Mainly, experimentation on this level becomes more playful. Modernist deformations had been meant to reflect negatively the fragmentation of the world, or to try to remake language so that it could be a better register of real chaotic experience or essentially plural truth. Fiction written under the influence of postmodernism, however, deforms prose more for its own sake and for the fun of it. For example, this fiction shows a marked tendency toward digression. Narrators go off at tangents, breaking the flow of the story, and introducing new

elements that fail to cohere together. Whereas before such digression would have been a symptom of madness, or a reflection of life's incoherence, here it goes on in enjoyment of storytelling's extreme complexity. Again we have exploration and expansion of the resources of storytelling itself. What had been a function of modernist mimesis becomes an expansion of postmodern diegesis. Unserious, the practice is nevertheless purposeful, for the way it maps out the real tendencies within our habits of telling the world into being.

How else did postmodernism expand the inventive capacities of the modern novel? Think, first of all, about character. In the modern novel, we have had a tendency to make characters anti-heroical, dispersed, and solipsistic; now, we get an even more total negation of all that had seemed to make characters integrally human. Some novels written under the influence of postmodernism would not even give their characters full names; limiting them to initials only (*G.*, *V.*) became a way to reflect the fact that there was no longer any basis for identity, and that in its place there was now only a random and utterly changeable set of characteristics. Also more utterly undermined was the sense of time. In the modern novel, time went subjective; in defiance of clock-time, modern writers stressed the vagaries of personal time, the unlinear tricks of memory. Postmodern novels took things further by seeing unlinearity everywhere: now, not only personal time but public time melted into flux, as writers stressed the ways that it, too, had no basis in reality. And finally, when it comes to styles of narration, postmodernism turned modern flexibility into fully free play. Recall that the modernists had run up and down the scale of narrative possibility, choosing whatever forms were necessary to convey subjective, psychological truths. Postmodernism put a new twist on the scale: now that narration had become self-conscious, and all about itself, the difference between the "interior" and the "exterior" could no longer hold tight. Just who spoke and why therefore became a matter of boundless speculation.

But postmodern play also brings experimental fiction down to earth. It takes pains to include within its hybrid mixtures of different forms of mediation those that might have been considered beneath the modernist writers. Very often, modernist form excluded popular forms – deliberately, in order to make fiction a kind of refuge from the cheaper entertainments and low plots of the new kinds of writing perpetually turning up on the modern scene. Modernist fiction, that is, would

become a realm of high art, to protect culture against the debasement of "mass culture." Postmodernism, on the other hand, tended to deny the distinction between high and low culture. Its refutation of the grand aspirations of western culture included refutation of aesthetic distinction, as "art has come to be seen as a form of complicity, another manifestation of the lies and hypocrisy through which the bourgeoisie has maintained its power."[13] As we have seen, this could mean a distressing kind of end to art – a capitulation to consumer culture's trivia. But it could also mean a democratization of art, in which the valid appeals and energies of allegedly lower forms of culture could make their way into great literature. It would mean that the modern novel could now more happily follow the example of new forms of writing and entertainment – that it could, for example, pattern itself after cinema, or television, or journalism, and that it wouldn't have to do so with the sort of cynical irony that might have accompanied reference to these things in earlier fiction.

A good example of a novel open to mass media is Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985). Here we have a book utterly caught up in the postmodern condition. Everything comes mediated to the Gladney family, who get by on images and products, on shopping and television, and live lives determined by a consumerist society. Not entirely at ease with it all, they nevertheless find what comfort they can take in shopping and television preferable to the anxieties that would otherwise consume them. For such things are all that is available, now, to make sense of the world and to distract attention from the big problems of death and disaster. When those problems assert themselves, however, DeLillo's characters must put new pressures on their mediated realities. And then DeLillo pays compelling attention to the way mass culture determines modern life. Whereas we might expect disgust with it – whereas we might expect a novel like this one to present television and shopping as decadent and degrading – instead we get a fascination with the mysterious, almost religious appeal of products and advertisements and radio voices. At one moment, Jack Gladney's sleeping child says the words, "*Toyota Celica*," and Jack thinks,

> The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these

> near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice . . . Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence.

DeLillo understands that such TV words somehow link up to transcendence, and so he takes them seriously throughout *White Noise*. The result is a more balanced, inclusive, and sympathetic vision of the whole of culture – not just admiration for and preservation of the higher forms of art and culture, but appreciation for the lower forms that fill the white-noise background to modern life. This appreciation does not extend to any fully postmodern play – DeLillo wants something more for his characters and for us – but here we see the modern novel letting in the low, at least to take on some of its strange power.

Giving up on purely high aesthetics also meant that fiction could once again include fantasy, the supernatural, the unreal. For a long time, the focus on essential and immediate realism in the modern novel had ruled these things out. Magic, ghosts, fantastic worlds: these things are nowhere in the modernist novel, mainly because writers like Woolf, Faulkner, and Joyce wanted so exclusively to make fiction a heightened register of everyday reality. But now fiction could once again accommodate the unreal, and it did so for any number of good reasons. The main reason, once again, was to explore the powers of fictionality. Whatever the mind could make up, whatever its storytelling capacities could imagine, was now fair game, because writers wanted to trace the furthest edges of fiction's capabilities. Also, they wanted to see reality, too, from a different perspective. They now wanted to stress the fact that because reality had become so astonishing, no realism could really reckon with it effectively. This is a paradox, but a vital one: realism could no longer reflect reality, because reality had become unreal, and so it was necessary to fantasize in order to evoke the feelings and problems the modern world now created.

Fantasy captures reality in *The White Hotel* (1981) by D. M. Thomas. The novel begins with a made-up exchange of letters between the psychoanalysts Freud and Ferenczi about the case of "Anna G.," a woman Freud has allegedly cured of hysteria. She had suffered from hysterical pains in her breast and abdomen; exploring her psyche and her past, Freud discovers why, and accomplishes the "release of repressed

ideas into consciousness." The cause is discovered, and the symptoms are largely cured. But it ultimately becomes clear that this novel is not a psychological one after all; it is about history. Years after her analysis, "Anna G." is murdered at Babi Yar, the notorious site of one of the Holocaust's worst mass killings. Her mortal injuries there are to her breast and abdomen – so that those "hysterical" pains turn out not to have been psychic symptoms, but symptoms of history. They come not from the psychological past, but from the historical future; they speak not of personal problems, but of historical disaster. Trading psychology for history, and doing so through this fantasy of clairvoyance, *The White Hotel* shows how postmodern "unreality" might improve upon the modern novel's power to tell the truth. It implies that psychology – the modern novel's main preoccupation – cannot be true to history, unless postmodern fantasy broadens its horizons. Its leaps are not merely playful, as Thomas's narrator finally tells us:

> The soul of man is a far country, which cannot be approached or explored. Most of the dead were poor and illiterate. But every single one of them had dreamed dreams, seen visions and had amazing experiences . . . If a Sigmund Freud had been listening and taking notes from the time of Adam, he would still not fully have explored even a single group, even a single person.

To explore so many lives and histories, Thomas implies, the novel needs resources beyond the psychological, and it needs fantasy in order to get to the far country of the soul of man.

So under the aegis of postmodernism, respectable fiction could once again be fantastic (and had to be, in order to get at the truths formerly sought only realistically). And it could, once again, just tell a good story. Perhaps the most crucial change that happens in the modern novel as a result of the postmodern influence is a return to plot. This might seem unlikely, given what we have learned about postmodern parody and play, but stress on diegesis, while often very extreme, just as often meant the return of an old-fashioned kind of plot. It would go along with ironies, tricks, and complications of all kinds, but nevertheless plot could once again give the modern novel the feel of the fiction against which it had rebelled. Perhaps it is best to think about this as a sort of reconciliation. The modernists had rejected plot because of the way it forced fiction into artificial conventions. They

had disliked the way plot compelled writers to falsify reality. But once postmodernism took its new view of conventions – deciding to ridicule them through exaggeration, rather than rejection – those conventions could return. Plot could return to the modern novel now not as an agent of convention, but a way to break convention after all. For the reader, this return has meant an ever fuller range of pleasures: now, in the modern novel we get all the pleasures of radical experimentation along with the pleasures of a good story.

These postmodern changes: do they mark the end of the modern novel? Diegesis, unseriousness, fantasy, mediation, plotting – are these signs of the end of a form of literature that had, after all, aimed at mimesis, earnest redress, reality, plotlessness, immediacy? Some say yes, and therefore define the postmodern as something opposite to the modern impulse. If they are right, the modern novel lasts from 1900 or so until no later than 1965, when postmodernism becomes the dominant sensibility in literary fiction. But in our examples of less extreme forms of postmodern writing we have seen signs that the modern impulse has not been killed but replenished – not ended but reformed or even advanced, so that the modern novel does not end around 1965, but continues as an ongoing project into subsequent decades.