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The undead phoenix. An insight into John Fowles' literary postmodernism and its legacy

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CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism. Never has such a simple word caused a greater mayhem and quake in the intellectual world. From the absolute deniers of its meaningfulness to the celebrators of its absolute emancipatory power, passing through any kind of milder criticism, the postmodernist phenomenon is still the object of a seemingly endless and harsh debate, starting from its very nature. Is it concretely possible to provide a universally acceptable definition of postmodernism and its ambitions? Are we supposedly resigned to face a manifold range of definitions, each confuting and contradicting the other, or is it likely to find an atom-like model, where the core of the postmodernist essence is orbited by the electrons of the concepts, ideas and theories connected to it? It would seem that each scholar and commentator of postmodernism has found him/herself forced to choose between these two approaches, with the only alternative to seek a possible balance between them. The writer of the present paper has opted for the aforementioned atom-like model, in the sense that the postmodern phenomenon will be accepted as having one or more fundamental features which the different historiographical, social and literary theories of the quoted scholars and authors attempt to explain, each according to its specific criteria.

As indicated in the title, the prime source of interest for this work lies in the literary aspect of postmodernism, with a special reference to what has been termed 'the postmodern novel'. The explication of the main characteristics of this literary form must be here anticipated by an apparently self-contradictory assessment: postmodern novels seem to share, whether unconsciously or not, a common struggle to impose themselves as *The Last Novel*, the last piece of fiction writable and conceivable. This happens because literary postmodernism

actively seeks to destroy the barrier separating life from art, striving to show the inexistence of a definite, absolute separation between the two domains: art is part of life and life is supposed to be lived in the guise of a work of art. If this definition is to be accepted, the novel itself should be understood not as a mere textual repository, but as a sort of living creature, an object full of characters, actions and motives sharing the same truthfulness of the reader's daily existence. This bidirectional feedback and correspondence between art and life may be defined as the aestheticisation of the novel, which, having seemingly exhausted its traditional potential, now turns against itself, striving to go beyond the mere confinements of form and thus affirming itself as the last fictional form possible. Fictional aesthetics becomes an aesthetics of the limit.

This tension towards finality seems to be linkable to Francis Fukuyama's controversial theory of *The End of History and The Last Man*, from his eponymous 1992 book. The concept of a potential end to historical development is traced back to Hegel and Marx, who respectively saw in the national state and in communism the culminating, final point of such development (xii). On the other side, Fukuyama argues in favour of liberal democracy as the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution" (xi), since this form of government, allied with free-market economy and technological advancement, has basically managed to impose themselves as the only conceivable guarantee for historical, social and economic peace and prosperity: "there would be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions, because all of the really big questions had been settled" (xii). The simple realization that injustices and abuses are still traceable within liberal regimes does not seem to affect Fukuyama's argument, for, if the tendency or ambition to evil and wrongdoing cannot be fully extirpated even in a liberal democracy, this last does not have to change the premises on which

it bases itself in order to oppose criminal and unjust behaviour: it simply has to continue evolving and improving in order to guarantee justice and equality to a larger and larger amount of citizens. The concrete problem, therefore, lies only in an “incomplete implementation of the twin principles of liberty and equality, on which modern democracy is founded” (xi).

The correlate of this vision is The Last Man, a conceptual borrowing from Nietzsche and his masterwork, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. The last man is the product of nineteenth-century middle-class triumph, a self-content, self-satisfied individual who is not even remotely interested in pursuing great, historical deeds so as to prove his value or meaningfulness (312). This man is a product of both democracy and Christianity, for Nietzsche sees the two as sides of the same coin: democracy is the apotheosis of the herd, where no one is ruled and no one rules, the final political and cultural stage to which the domination of the weak over the strong actively pursued by Christianity has finally led (301). The same last man is to be found also in end-of-twentieth-century democracies, although in a slightly altered version shaped by modern education and what Fukuyama sees as its inevitable relativistic breakdown: the modern man has been educated to perceive his own horizon as one among many others, so that he “has been jaded by the experience of history, and disabused of the possibility of direct experience of values” (306). The lust for struggle and recognition felt by those individuals aspiring to be more than simply ‘last men’, more than mere sedated individuals, could paradoxically lead to liberal society revolting against itself (330), so that liberal democracy is left with no choice but to preserve the last man from relapsing into bloody, gory historical massacres by allowing him a certain space for recognising himself superior to the mass. To use Fukuyama’s ancient Greek vocabulary, the grade of security and stability derived from

equality of disposition (*isothymia*) must be counterbalanced by “some degree of safe and domesticated *megalothymia*, even if this runs contrary to the principles they profess to believe in” (337). The growing public awareness of the better solutions offered by liberal democracy may eventually lead to its triumph throughout the world and its overcoming of the relativistic modern danger of falling back into the traps of History (338).

One may detect both in postmodern novels and Fukuyama’s thesis a similar aspiration to come to terms with the concept of ‘end’. While the postmodern novel has tried to establish itself as the final fictional form of expression, even at the cost of obliterating itself in the process, the American scholar has emphasised the dissolution of human history into the final stage of liberal democracy. In Fukuyama’s case, it is politics, in its liberal and democratic application, which enters the process of aestheticisation: his “domesticated *megalothymia*” is the political space where the demands of aesthetics seem to invade the traditional territory of ethics, demands all the more powerful given both the self-contentment of the last man and the apparently inexhaustible ability of a liberal, free-market economy to satisfy these demands.

A further confirmation of the inseparability of postmodernism from its double nature of both finality and reaction against finality may be lying in its verbal origins, in the discovery of the first user or coiner of the term. Although the use of it may sound like a habit of the present age or of the last decades of the twentieth century, it could be surprisingly shocking to discover that its first known meaning simply indicated an attempt at pictorial revival: the British painter John Watkins Chapman called for a postmodern reaction against French Impressionism in the 1870s-1880s (Hassan, 1987, 12). In Chapman’s view, Impressionism may have been considered the peak, the ending stage of modern art, against which his much more realistic style could be the starting point for an artistic reaction. With the world entering the twentieth

century, the term was recuperated by J. M. Thompson to signify the reaction against religious modernism, another usage which would not enter the bigger debate (Thompson, 1914), but which bears further witness to the emblematically ambiguous nature of postmodernism. 1939 witnessed the publishing of Arnold J. Toynbee's fifth volume of his celebrated *A study of History*, where the historian connected the state of living in an end-of-modernity age with the full-scale destruction of WWI: "Our own Post-Modern Age has been inaugurated by the general war of 1914–1918" (Toynbee, 43). Once more, the end of something, a historical phase in Toynbee's reasoning, is the premise for a new beginning, for a historical reaction to warfare disaster. Toynbee's could also arguably be deemed as the first usage of the term as it would be accepted in the later discussion, thereby marking postmodernism and postmodernity as cultural and historical phases after modernism and modernity. However, when the term managed to enter the intellectual arena in the 1960s-1970s, modernism and modernity began to be reevaluated as the embryonic state of postmodernism and postmodernity, which therefore still carried distinct traces and signs of their ancestral past within them. The arguably indissoluble bond and reciprocal influence between all which can be called modern and all which can be termed postmodern offers another eloquent insight into the finality/reaction against finality dialectics. It would appear that postmodernism cannot or refuses to completely break the bond between itself and preceding ideologies: a trace, a mark of what was left behind will continue to live inside of it, though only as a reminder of the past or as an idea ready to be reused and reconceptualised. Metaphorically speaking, the bridges will not be burned.

Our present work will thus be characterised as an exploration of this both explicit and implicit stress on finality by postmodernism, which will be consequently linked to and analysed through its literary and philosophical applications. The approach chosen for this analysis

derives both from literary theory and historiography, the postmodern viewpoint being that no kind of literature or philosophy is completely separable from its historical background and conditioning. Not surprisingly, the countertheories and contrasting approaches to postmodernism appearing in this paper will base their opposite standpoints on the same viewpoint mentioned above, only to dismiss and counterattack it.

As such, the second chapter will offer a long insight into the historically situated premises for the birth of postmodernity and the subsequent rise of postmodernism, both interpreted as a parting from and a continuation of modernity and modernism, the theoretical basis being American anthropologist and geographer David Harvey's critical interpretation of the modern age and its subsequent end. The third chapter will display the different stances of five different thinkers (namely, Lyotard, Vattimo, Rorty, Baudrillard and Gadamer) who approached the issues of postmodernism from a distinctly philosophical standpoint, with their views counterbalanced by the direct oppositions of three detractors of postmodernism (Jameson, Eagleton and Habermas) in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter will constitute the core section of this paper, where Linda Hutcheon's literary theory of postmodernism and John Fowles' 1969 postmodern novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* will be joined in a dialogue between the main features of postmodern literature and its reception into the academic discourse. Hutcheon's key concepts of narcissistic literature and historiographic metafiction will be utilised as the main framework for explaining and appreciating the value of Fowles' bestseller in the field of literature, both postmodern and not. This dialogue will become more fruitful by drawing a first comparison between Fowles' work and the postmodernist thinkers of the second chapter, in an attempt to emphasise the reciprocal influence between postmodern philosophy and postmodern literature. In the sixth chapter, particular emphasis will be put on

the purportedly unexpected connection between the Great Tradition of English literature and Fowles' debt to its main features and topoi as developed in Thomas Hardy's and D. H. Lawrence's poetics. These preliminary paragraphs will constitute the ideal introduction to a second comparison involving Fowles' bestseller and the critics of postmodernism, with a small appendix concerning the non-postmodern, realistic techniques chosen by Fowles for his masterpiece. Finally, the seventh chapter will strive to understand the true nature of postmodernism at the present time in history by focusing both on its intellectual legacy and the contemporary theories constructed in reaction to the postmodernist agenda. The prominence of such legacy will be clarified by focusing on the continuity of postmodernism in the contemporary literary field, as expressed by three present-day authors (Palahniuk, Easton Ellis and Markson) in three different novels, *Fight Club*, *Lunar Park*, *The Last Novel*. The assessed relevance of these fictional works will constitute the principal contents of our personal conclusion, where postmodernism, in spite of its ideological collapse, will be characterised as still alive and thriving in the realm of literature.

CHAPTER 2

MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY: THE HISTORICAL BASIS FOR MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

David Harvey's work *The Condition of Postmodernity* has been chosen as the core text of analysis for uncovering the social, historical and also cultural foundations of what shall be described as 'postmodernism'. Although Harvey's perspective is clearly inspired by a Marxist outlook, it is nevertheless useful for our current purpose of framing postmodernism within as specific as possible criteria of historical assessment. To oppose his views, Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism* will be used as a constructive counterargument for illustrating how difficult it is (and has been) to coin a unitary definition of the postmodern phenomenon.

2.1. Modernity and modernism

If any artistic definition should be accepted as the starting point for speculation, then Baudelaire's quote from his essay *The Painter of Modern Life* may seem quite appropriate: "Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable" (qtd. in Harvey, 10). The modern condition, not simply from an artistic viewpoint, is thus described as a wavering between two constants of Western thought, between the passing of time (contingency) and the tension towards absolute, unchanging ideas or facts (idealness). More than a century later, Berman would confirm Baudelaire's assertion in the light of another Marxist review of modernity:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world- and, at the same, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are (qtd. in Harvey, 10).

If a simple paraphrase might summarise the passage above, one could define modernity as the age when both individuals and groups had the possibility to become everything or to become

nothing. The lust for absolute freedom and emancipation was deeply contrasted by a diffuse sense of instability, a kind of groundlessness permeating every sector of daily private and public life.

However, the modern age, whose birth is commonly associated with the rise of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, was initially characterised by quite a different approach to human issues and problems. This approach, later deemed by Habermas (see 4.3) as the ‘project’ of modernity, is described by Harvey as it follows:

- Free and emancipated individuals would all engage themselves into gathering useful and enriching knowledge;
- The scientific power of controlling nature and bending it to human desires would result in freedom from famines, drought, natural disasters and calamities in general;
- Tradition, religion and authority would be progressively stripped of their dogmatic and iron-fist control over society, which would be organized rationally for the greater good of all its members, regardless of their original class or status (Harvey, 12).

It should be noted that, with deep hindsight, such ideals were slowly both put into practice and contradicted, given the characteristics most commonly associated with modernity:

- Economy was based on an industrial capitalist model, where specific sums of money (capitals) are deployed for the production and distribution of goods in specialized working sites, so that capitals be shared through the layers of society. This model presupposes the possibility and capacity both for the individual and the group to increase the possession of money, the amount of which is directly linked to the social position occupied, therefore making one’s social class synonym with one’s economic capacity. The monetary and economic gap between classes would eventually lead Marx

to broadly dividing them into the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, designed as the core antagonising forces of modern society (Harvey, 103-104).

- The concentration of work and jobs into industrial sites near large urban agglomerates forces countless workers from the countryside to move to cities along with their own families, so that urban areas witness a massive expansion. However, together with degradation of the worker to a mere clog in the wheel or a merely useful “hand” rather than a person (Dickens, qtd. in Harvey, 104), the dependence of industrial production on increasing machinery innovation contributed to establishing a climate of “uncertainty and instability”, which is often concomitant with the periodic crises of capitalism (106).
- The administration of daily, public life is assigned to a central government, working through its public institutions and legitimizing itself through the advocated privilege of public social control and the use of violence when necessary (108). To reinforce the governmental intervention in public life, there slowly emerged the category of bureaucrats, a new, intermediary class of administrators who became the living expression of a “purposive-instrumental rationality” imprisoning and caging the individuals in a net of trammels and quibbles (Bernstein, qtd. in Harvey, 15).
- Scientific enquiry and examination on a materialist basis slowly lead to a more secular than religious worldview. When science became allied with technology, progress and emancipation seemed to be inextricably connected, leading to the view that the only way to end the world’s evils and issues is the never-ending expansion of civilization as the only guarantee of progress itself. What was at stake in such a situation, states Harvey, was always the risk of a fetishizing of the market which propelled and fuelled

such innovations (110).

The sheer, albeit self-contradictory, optimism and eagerness of such premises would be shattered to pieces by the advancing of history in quite the opposite direction: the horrors of two world wars, Nazism, decolonization conflicts, genocides and atomic bombing, often promptly fuelled by scientific advancements (the Manhattan Project) and theoretically free-willed individuals (dictators' supporters), are often strong cases against the effectively emancipatory power of modernity. To add insult to injury, such a project was also deemed to be innately doomed to fail from its beginning by a growing number of scholars, including Horkheimer's and Adorno's Frankfurt School, who saw in the Enlightenment desire for nature domination and rational social organization a mere pretext and lust for human enslavement and control (Adorno, Horkheimer, 1972). The previous historical considerations appear to have confirmed Baudelaire's thesis, since, in the face of absolute and righteous aspirations to a better existence, the modern age would seem to have had a radical preference for the ephemeral and the transient, at least judging from the merciless simplicity with which humans have been able to oppress and slaughter each other in the course of the past century. The artistic reaction to the slow downfall of emancipatory hopes, but also the artistic longing for recuperating such hopes, is now commonly termed as 'modernism', to whose discussion it is now necessary to turn.

We have seen that the original project of modernity basically consisted in the creation of a whole new world, finally freed from oppression, tyranny and authoritarianism. These ones had been the dominant features of the West up until the French Revolution, a decisive moment which serves as a paradigm both for historical and artistic elucidation. A revolution is a radical, violent break from the past, that is an act of force which *de facto* destroys the past, so

as to pave the way anew for the future. Here precisely lies the key for understanding both modernity and modernism: “How could a new world be created, after all, without destroying much that had gone before?” (Harvey, 16), where the expression “a new world” signifies both a new phase of history and a new kind of artistic expression. Therefore, both modernity and modernists had no choice but to opt for the destruction of their own obstacles for the sake of creating a completely different kind of life and art able to concretise their respective longing for absolutes. This thirst, anyway, proved to be unquenchable, and the reason is found in Harvey’s words:

The only way to represent eternal truths is through a process of destruction that is liable, in the end, to be itself destructive of those truths. Yet we are forced, if we strive for the eternal and immutable, to try and put our stamp upon the chaotic, the ephemeral, and the fragmentary (16-17).

Hence, if the stamp had to be put upon that which is ungovernable and ever-changing, new forms and styles of expression had to be discovered and cultivated. It is no chance that the crisis of naturalism and realism in art were concomitant with the crisis of the modern project, since none of them were proper artistic means anymore to voice the incurable friction between chaos and lost or sought-after order. The only solutions envisaged by modernists consisted either in a radicalisation/personalisation of language (Joyce, Proust, Eliot, etc.) or in crafting creations where the eternal was permanently fixed, a sort of “freezing time and all its fleeting qualities” (21), as in the case of modernist architecture. Strange as it may seem, it was the field of architecture which would signal the most visible break from modernity and the entrance into the age of postmodernity/postmodernism.

The modernist idea of architecture, which reached its acme in the post-WWII climate of reconstruction and rebuilding from the ashes of conflict, was largely based on “large-scale,

metropolitan-wide, technologically rational and efficient urban plans” (66), a definition which is usually summarised as ‘functionalism’. Modernist buildings would be built and developed strictly following the social function which they were designed to have from the beginning, plus following a rational organization of both interiors and exteriors. The ideal effect of such practise, as hinted before, was to develop new town areas or attempt to renew old constructions according to modernist principles, all of this in an often-rising spirit of welfare-bringing and improvement of the material conditions of society (69-70). According to Harvey, these goals were only partially achieved: if, on one hand, modernist architecture may be granted the merit of having given the impoverished and war-distressed a roof to live under; on the other hand, a number of issues concerning the cultural consequences of this kind of architecture were soon to arise.

Firstly, modernism is seen as having fallen into the trap of land speculation and property development, two of the major drawbacks of post-war reconstruction years. Since land could be rented at cheap, when not the cheapest, prices for building and constructing, corporate capital soon entered the arena and appropriated the modernist style for the erection not of publicly useful edifices, but of monuments symbolising its own power and influence (70-71): the Chicago Tribune building and the Rockefeller Center are only two eloquent examples of such mindset. On a second level, as Jane Jacob had previously noted in her 1961 essay *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, modernist architecture, for all its pretensions to uniformity and invariability, seemed to result in buildings which appeared “dull” (qtd. in Harvey, 72), sterile, obnoxiously repetitive. Jacob argues that such behaviour on the part of city planners is explainable through their fear of “chaos and complexity”, both of which are by nature set against order and rationality, and also fear of cities’ “self-diversification” (72),

which could be described as the natural tendency of urban buildings to develop differently. Harvey defines this unpleasant trait of modernist architecture as “its subterranean celebration of corporate bureaucratic power and rationality” (36), which we have seen highlighted at the beginning of the paragraph: such beliefs led to the development of another characteristically modernist feature, the rejection and demonization of ornaments and decoration. Their refusal often led to perplexing, disconcerting decisions. An infamous case in point is Le Corbusier’s Pavillon Suisse, whose tenants were not allowed to open the blinds during summer due to the French architect’s aesthetic refusal (36). All of these flaws would ultimately lead to the reaction against modernism, postmodernism.

2.2. Postmodernity and postmodernism

July 15, 1972, 3.32 p.m., St. Louis, Missouri: the Pruitt-Igoe house development, a symbol of modernist architecture, crumbles to the ground after being declared uninhabitable for its residents. That was the day, stated Charles Jencks (1984, 9), when modern architecture died, and consequentially the dawn of postmodernism. We shall therefore begin our analysis of postmodernity by looking at the changes in the architectural field and then expanding our discourse to the wider socio-cultural and historical context.

Harvey joins Jencks in posing two determining factors for the shift towards a postmodern conception of architecture:

- 1) Contemporary communications breaking down the limits of space and time, allowing for a “new internationalism” (intercontinental, global exchange of information) and “internal differentiations” (different groups and individuals within the same society with different interests) (Harvey, 75).

- 2) Transport technologies permitting a faster and wider circulation of goods and materials throughout the world (75).

Architecture, then, found itself finally able to design and construct urban forms in a spatial context highly differing from the post-war scenario: the dispersion and decentralisation of urban agglomerates from the 1970s onwards was not deemed a social catastrophe anymore, since the centralising modernist impulse was slowly fading. Plus, the advent of new technologies, while still embedded within mass production, freed the architect from repeating his works on the same mass, large scale, so that different customers with different habits and tastes could see their needs and desires met in a mix of different styles within the same building, far from uniformization (76). It feels necessary to provide some examples supporting these claims.

Jencks traced the end of modernism to 1972, but the year 1963 should be instead preferred as the starting point for the postmodern revolution in architecture: in Philadelphia, Robert Venturi managed to complete the Guild House, a building which, through the mix of humble, everyday materials such as red bricks, double-hung windows and chain-link fence, deeply contrasted modernist presumptions of aesthetical purity, as well as engaging itself with the surrounding, local environment. Venturi's call to arms, so to say, became even clearer in his 1966 essay, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, where he demanded a new style openly accepting the use of hybrid materials for buildings not sheltered from the influences of the places where they belonged, giving way to "a richness of meaning rather than clarity of meaning" (Venturi, 16). Combination and variety were soon to establish themselves as the keywords of postmodernism, far beyond the reach of architecture.

Venturi's theses slowly proved to have touched a sensitive nerve, although in a more positive

sense. 1978 saw the grand opening of Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans. This square was the expression of his creator's ideas of a more 'inclusive' architecture, a new style aptly created for and potentially enjoyable by everyone: a central fountain surrounded by colonnades, arches and a bell tower in modern materials, all three brightly coloured, following the classical orders and bathed in neon light during night hours. The various openings into the plaza contribute to give the visitor a deeper sense of its circularity and structure. The whole is intended as a joyful dedication to the Italian community of New Orleans, therefore connecting the square to the concretely historical course of the city. Both the classical and the present are here reunited and playfully merged.

A further step into the attention-gaining of postmodern architecture was marked by its meeting with daily governmental needs in 1982, with the inauguration of the well-known Portland Building, in Portland, Oregon, by Michael Graves. This building sees abstracted classical elements- columns, impediments and frieze-like decorative band- mingling with small square windows set into a grid, while the entrance is surmounted by a podium featuring the sculpture of a woman named 'Portlandia', also in the classical style. This featuring of both past elements and commonplace ones served as the working space for public functions, therefore leading postmodern architecture into the arena of politics.

With such a radical break away from modernism, as indicated in the previous examples, it should be quite understandable that postmodern architecture underwent a serious hailstorm of criticism since its inception. Once again, Harvey's first remonstrance springs from economic consideration: if postmodern architecture claims to be populist in the sense of meeting and encouraging the tastes of all people, it seems to fail to realise how many subgroups and categories the people are divided in, mainly because of the lack of "well-knit

and cohesive urban communities” (77), from which a truly egalitarian architecture could be born. Moreover, since the different tastes and styles are so deeply connected and immersed into the market logic, the postmodern claim to emancipation through hybridity sounds quite paradoxical, as it cannot escape the worldview of the capital (77). The very appropriation of historically different styles, as seen in Moore’s Piazza d’Italia, seems to disclose a sense and conception of history as a mere “archive” (85), fully available for arbitrary use or quotation on the part of the architect. The result, according to Harvey and Hewison, is both a depthless understanding of historical processes and events, now merely turned into “costume drama and enactment” (qtd. in Harvey, 87), and eclecticism for the sake of eclecticism. Jencks explains it thus: “Why, if one can afford to live in different ages and cultures, restrict oneself to the present, the locale? Eclecticism is the natural evolution of a culture with choice” (Jencks, qtd. in Harvey, 87). More of this issue will be shown and engaged with in the third and fourth chapter of this paper.

In sharp contrast to this devaluing and disparaging standpoint of postmodern architecture, we find Linda Hutcheon’s refreshing counterview, which will be further expanded for our literary discourse in the core chapter. Broadly speaking, Hutcheon challenges the views of anti-postmodern critics by affirming quite the contrary aspect of what they claim: from what Harvey and his quoted authors have stated, postmodern architecture may be defined as “pluralist and historicist” (Hutcheon, 2002, 12), that is embracing a plural range of styles undercover of a worldview which deems these styles and everything else as historical, transient, valueless products. This, argues Hutcheon, is quite false, since postmodern architecture is “plural and historical”, hence not disregarding the vast and wide legacy of the past, while putting it into question at the same time:

It uses the reappropriated forms of the past to speak to a society from within the values and history of that society, while still questioning it. It is in this way that its historical representations, however parodic, get politicized (12).

There can be no radical desensitised detachment from one's own cultural reality, which does not absolutely mean incapability to criticise it. If both modernism and postmodernism fail to completely disengage themselves from a capital-dominated logic, as Harvey previously indicated, postmodernism, at least, is aware of it, argues Hutcheon: Charles Moore may have used contemporary materials for creating his Piazza d'Italia and the overall result may appear kitsch or "trendy" (12) in hindsight, but the political message of his work was quite clearly the celebration of the Italian community in New Orleans. If such work was really detached from history, there would have been no celebratory intention.

What many detractors fail to see in this double nature of postmodernism may be its underlying irony: postmodern architecture does keep a connection with the past, but this appropriation of it should instead be termed 're-appropriation', since the past elements "need to adapt to changing formal demands and social conditions through an ironic contesting of the authority of that same continuity" (103). Postmodernism cannot escape, as modernism would strive to do, from its own historical conditioning, but it aspires to the subversion and demystification of the former. Hence, the double meaning of the prefix 'post-': both 'after modernism' and 'a continuation, a further exploration of modernism'. This double nature is the door through which we finally enter the domain of postmodernity, of the age which produced such strong contrasts with the project of modernity.

Harvey's historical model is based on an understanding of Western history as a slow, but inevitable transition from organised forms of capitalism (Fordism for the modern age) to what he calls "flexible accumulation" (147), that is the accumulation of capital and profits linked

to an over-emphasised and over-practised flexibility in the areas of labour markets, commodities and good consumption. This is joined by the emergence of the new third sector, the services' sector, and an ever-increasing process of technological/scientific innovation in every field of economics. Therefore, since extreme flexibility is merged with extremely fast-paced consumption and innovation, "an intense phase of time-space compression" will be the overall result of a world economically and technologically more connected and interrelated than ever, and it takes simply a look around to see that Harvey's description suits our own present situation. These are the fundamentals of the postmodern age, which now deserve closer scrutiny.

Starting from the issue of consumption, the postmodern times witness a rise in mass markets providing a wider range not only of fashion-linked objects (clothes, ornaments and the like), but also of lifestyles and hobbies, all ready and made for instant leisure. Given that all these are made possible and sellable by the new sector of services, it is no surprise to witness how services themselves are turned into objects of consumption, with special attention paid to "entertainments, spectacles, happenings, and distractions" (285). The dramatic consequence of such acceleration in taste availability and consumption has doubled in effect:

- the stressing of "volatility and ephemerality" both of products and of production technologies: a classic example is found in the computer, whose endless updates both in hardware and software are signalled by the slow transition from home PCs to laptops and smartphones,
- "ideas and ideologies, values and established practices" are also caught in this process of being rendered both unfashionable, unappealing and old-fashioned, relics of a dead and gone period which may be only the last year (285).

The transient of Baudelaire's quotation seems to have found its own domain in the postmodern age. The very concept of stability seems to have faded, replaced by the "virtues of instantaneity (...) and of disposability" so commonly seen in take-away and junk-food cafés, but also in the widespread utilisation of single-use cutlery and tissues (286). To complicate matters, since economy influences and shapes the human psyche, all those bonds with individuals or things which were deemed to be long-term and stable seem to be subjugated to breaking down and collapse (286). An overabundance of stimuli from the outer world, where our body and mind are constantly coaxed to interpret messages and codes of the most diverse and various products, materialises into a sensory and informational overload, which in turns empties "any long-term planning" of its significance: the only chance left is either maximum flexibility to the constant wavering of the market or the management of the volatility (286-287).

On this last point, argues Harvey, a strong role is played by the advertisement industry, which is conceived as the real mastermind behind the "manipulation of taste and opinion" characteristic of the postmodern age. The capital apparently has no choice but to distort and even create new feelings, new desires, new cravings to satisfy the demands imposed unto itself by its global diffusion. It is all a matter of serving the right image at the right time to the right target (more on this by Baudrillard in the following chapter); such a practice eventually finds its counterpart in the arena of politics, where the image is shaped so as to provide a sense both of reliability and plasticity:

The production and marketing of such images of permanence and power require considerable sophistication, because the continuity and stability of the image have to be retained while stressing the adaptability, flexibility and dynamism of whoever or whatever is being imagined (288).

To misquote a popular saying, the imperative of the present age might be summarised in this manner: “You *should* judge by appearances”. Such appearances are promptly generated by the whole new industry of entertainment, on one side, and by the “cultural mass” (Bell, qtd. in Harvey, 290), that is the large group of individuals whose daily job consists in the selection and transmission of culture to the wider mass audience possible: publishers, magazine writers and editors, media and museum employees are fine examples of such an attitude (290).

In the face of such fleeting and contingent images of self-representation and identity, we also witness a deep, almost tacit longing for absolute truths and ideas, a sort of rebirth of modernist aspirations in the middle of postmodernity itself. The phenomenon known as “religious revival” and the rise in nationalistic or localist politics for the preservation of local, small-scale identities (292) both represent such a psychological reaction to the fragmentation and chaos of the present world, a search for a safe haven in a sea of turmoil. The very preservation of objects connected to a special occasion or person (photograph *in primis*) or the remembrance of special events generate “a sense of self that lies outside the sensory overloading of consumerist culture and fashion” (292). Not surprisingly enough, all of this takes place in a hyper-connected global space where spatial barriers are annihilated to the point that each and every event recorded by a mediatic device, for the very reason of being mediatised, becomes a mere ‘event’ witnessed and watched nearly everywhere (293). The very act of experiencing the world variety of cultures and geographies seems to have become an act of “vicarious participation” (301), in the sense that the tourist and traveller interact with a different reality often on the basis of their own preconceptions or pre-formulated images of such a reality, or they may also decide to go to places carefully and strategically arranged to

attract their own attention, as in the case of a medieval weekend in a medieval castle, but without the hardships of concrete medieval life: it is one again the triumph of images.

Tradition itself comes to be considered as the final resting place of a permanent sense of history and continuity, but it cannot escape the logic of ephemeral commodification. The so-called “search for roots” (303) is often compromised with the high risk of providing a purified and uncontaminated façade of the past, where the ruin, the trace and the monument are presented without any reference to the broader social and cultural context, especially when that context was fraught with friction, upheavals and restlessness. This kind of “museum culture” (303) is the label with which the heritage industry in Britain has often been stigmatised with (86).

The collapse of spatial barriers also means a deep change in the organization of the dominating economic system: since the capital is nowadays flowing from one region of the Earth to another thanks to the increased technological applications for development and innovation, a stronger mobility of both workers and employers, together with the decentralisation of many first and second sector enterprises, is the outcome of a system constantly demanding new profits from new markets, so that global brands may manufacture their own goods in non-Western countries before selling them “in almost every serially produced shopping mall in the advanced capitalist world” (295) . The birth of “world-cities” (295), that is urban agglomerates with strong communication and financial/business hubs (e.g. airports, the City of London), is another spontaneous response to the need for concentrating and spreading valuable business data and information throughout the globe.

Such a grim picture of the present is counterpointed by Harvey with a cautious hope for the future. Postmodernism, in all its ambiguous and double-coding features, is firstly compared

to a mirror, a reflection of the present historical conditions which in turns reflects all the images produced by the afore-mentioned conditions: Reagan's public-image building of a charismatic leader succeeding in preserving his own reputation under any legal charges or circumstances is directly linked to the postmodernist ability to picture a reality where aesthetics seems to prevail on ethics, with the result that the gloomy landscapes of poverty and social turmoil are degraded to a *Blade-Runner*-like "quaint and swirling backdrop upon which no social commentary is to be made" (336). They are simply conceived as another attribute of the contemporary society, another aesthetical trait of the urban landscape.

Nevertheless, cracks in this mirror are beginning to show, and they are argued to be manifesting not only in the intellectual reaction to postmodernism, whose refusal of universals and absolutes is itself an absolute, but also in the growing resistance to advanced capitalism by trade union coalitions, labour strikes by different workers in different world areas and finally the rise in both ecological awareness and the fight against racial discrimination (357-358). For Harvey, this is clear evidence that "the condition of postmodernity is undergoing a subtle evolution, perhaps reaching a point of self-dissolution into something different" (358). To what exactly does this something amount? To a restoration of the project of modernity in the light of historical materialism, since the latter will permit to see and judge postmodernism for its undeniable historicity, while at the same reinforcing a logic of emancipation not unaware of what the postmodernist framework and its emphasis on images, aesthetics and otherness have signified. In other terms, the Enlightenment ambitions to human liberation would not be abstract and ideal this time, but clearly grounded in history, with all its causes and effects, and able to learn from past mistakes. Poggioli's quotation is the final seal to

Harvey's vision: " ... For the moderns, the present is ... the forge of history in continued metamorphosis, seen as a permanent spiritual revolution" (qtd. in Harvey, 359).

Harvey's analysis seems to bring about a question which Hutcheon has openly stated in her work: is postmodernism "neoconservatively nostalgic or ... radically revolutionary?" (Hutcheon, 2002, 12). It is by no means a rhetorical question. Judging from the previous paragraphs, one is left to wonder whether postmodernism goes hand in hand with financial, advanced capitalism or it subtly, almost secretly tries to develop a counter-discourse to it, as it could be inferred from its break away from modernist thought. Hutcheon's answer is that postmodernism occupies an in-between position: "it sits on the fence between a need (often ironic) to recall the past of our lived cultural environment and a desire (often ironized too) to change its present" (12). This quote illustrates the crucial difference between two scholars like Harvey and Hutcheon: the former, as clearly argued before, sees postmodernism as the brainchild of an age devoted to flagrant, self-indulging hedonism and consumerism, voided of any interest or attachment to effective political or ethical action; the latter never ceases to offer examples of the inescapably political nature of postmodernism, in spite of all its ambiguity and situatedness in the capitalist context (2). As the next chapters will attempt to explain, the concrete difference seems to lie between those who accept postmodernist ambiguity and complicity with the system, while underlying its potentialities for socio-cultural unchaining, and those who refuse such an in-between state in the name of a more comprehensive, more clearly defined and less compromised philosophical stand.

CHAPTER 3

BEYOND THE ABSOLUTE: PHILOSOPHERS AND POSTMODERNISM

As a cultural phenomenon, postmodernism soon captured the interest of philosophers, who realized that a new paradigm of thinking and inquiry had become necessary to reflect on and possibly understand the rapid shifts away from tradition and modernity in the various areas of human experience. Four thinkers in particular have slowly established their reputation as heralds of postmodern philosophy, all of them trying to analyse the unfolding of new material, social and political conditions in the global village and to eventually reach positive or negative conclusions on its status. These four thinkers have been chosen not simply on the criterion of academic influence, but also because of the impact which their ideas and proposals have had on the mainstream reception of postmodernism.

3.1. JEAN-FRANCOIS LYOTARD

The dawning of the philosophical inquiry into the postmodern phenomenon is traceable to the work of the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, whose essay *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* came to be regarded as the standard text for early postmodern criticism.

The main aim of Lyotard's reflections is openly to describe "the condition of knowledge" (xxiii), that is the epistemological status, of high developed societies in what is deemed the new "postindustrial age" (xxiii). Before the emergence of the abovementioned phenomenon since the late 1950s, such status was largely legitimized by what Lyotard chooses to define as "a metanarrative" (xxiii), a metanarrative being an all-explaining, all-encircling discourse which actively tries to support himself in order to prevail and be accepted. As such, there came into being multiple metanarratives in the history of the West, each of them offering a

universal worldview able to explain, give meaning and eventually change the human course of events.

Three eloquent examples of this tendency are the Enlightenment, Idealism and Marxism:

- a. The core of **the Enlightenment** lies in the belief that Reason is a faculty shared by all members of the human race and this “possible unanimity of rational minds” establishes a narrative whose ultimate end is nothing less than “universal peace” (xxiii). Reason is therefore the beacon of light leading mankind away from the shadows of oppression and ignorance towards a future of emancipation, as Harvey had previously delineated in his analysis of the origins of modernity.
- b. **Idealism**, on the other side, poses the Spirit as the subject of a universal history where, since Spirit coincides with Life, Life itself “is its own self-presentation and formulation in the ordered knowledge of all of its forms contained in the empirical sciences” (34). In other words, the speculative knowledge which the Spirit/Life acquires of itself is the ultimate legitimation of the knowing task, socially established in the institution of University.
- c. As a sort of compromise between the two abovementioned narratives, **Marxism** becomes both an emancipatory theory-practice for the subdued and the exploited of capitalism and a reduction of sciences to mere references or “citations” (37) of the socialist metanarrative. In Lyotard’s own words, “The Party takes the place of the University, the proletariat that of the people or of humanity, dialectical materialism that of speculative idealism, etc.” (36-37).

As opposed to these self-legitimizing discourses, the very essence of postmodernism lies in its “incredulity towards metanarratives” (xxiv). Lyotard argues that such incredulity is to be inferred from the incredible progress of sciences in the last two centuries, since the scientific power of explanation would have drained metanarratives not only of their own credibility, but also of their own capacity for effective, concrete world change. The very crisis of legitimation has ultimately led to a crisis of those institutions embodying the aspirations and objectives of the metanarratives, so that their function “is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal” (xxiv). With the decline of metanarratives and the powers behind them, the visible outcome has been a fragmentation of society into different “language games” (xxiv), a definition borrowed from Wittgenstein: since there appears to be a new plurality of narratives opposed to the grand discourses of the past, each of these micronarratives will have a different kind of argument or discourse to put forward and defend against the other. Institutions are left “in patches”, disseminated through the local and forced to re-establish their own authority, if not their very survival, through the criterion of performance efficiency: to quote Lyotard’s own harsh definition, “be operational or disappear” (xxiv).

Knowledge itself cannot overcome this destabilizing phase of postmodernity unscathed, since its very nature undergoes radical change. The rise of information technologies has forced both the fostering of knowing (research) and its teaching (the transmission of accumulated notions) to adapt a new kind of *operability*: either knowledge can be “translated into quantities of information” or is doomed to “be abandoned” (4). As a consequence, it is reduced to a sort of informational commodity not quite distinct from consumer goods, caught in an endless circle of production and distribution:

Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorised in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be and end in itself, it loses its “use-value”. (4-5)

Such commodification of knowledge is said to have a deep impact on the role of the nation-State, which, ever since its birth, has always advocated the ultimate privilege in controlling and distributing what is and what is not to be learned. The counter-argument slowly effacing the state authority in such matters openly derives from the very society of the postmodern era: since the social world has become fragmented into a magma of language games each competing with the other, the only chance left for its progress is the circulation of rich and easy-to-decode information. Hence comes the tentative adoption of a so-called “performativity criterion” for the legitimation of knowledge (47): the more efficient and practical learning is shown to be, the more it must be valorised and appreciated.

However, performativity as such does not result satisfactory enough, since postmodern knowledge, born of the techno-social miniaturization of the West, is open to acknowledge both “differences” and to endure the weight of what Lyotard deems “the incommensurable” (xxv), that is the unknown, the not-yet-confirmed. Therefore, the new potential criterion for legitimation is discovered in “the inventor’s paralogy” (xxv), which allows for a local, temporary consensus between the players of the various postmodern language games. Paralogy simply functions as “a multiplicity of finite meta-arguments, by which I mean argumentation that concerns metaprescriptives and is limited in space and time” (66).

Such a limitative approach to knowledge is mirrored in the social practice, where we witness the increase of a “temporary contract” (66) in all spheres of interaction and confrontation. As a result, there emerges a correspondence and affinity between the two opposite worlds which departs completely from the pretensions to overwhelming totality of the modern era.

3.2. GIANNI VATTIMO

Vattimo's so-called *pensiero debole* (*weak thought*) appears to be what could be defined both a more detailed study of and a positive, more optimistic outlook on postmodernism after the end of the *grand recits* of modernity.

Out of all the potential meanings which have been assigned to the prefix *post* in postmodernism, Vattimo opts for a radical interpretation of the term: modernity as an era with specific connotations has ended, so that we find ourselves to inhabit a completely new period following its demise, which might be simply identified as *postmodern* in the absence of a more proper term. The reasons traced by Vattimo for the end of modernity are argued to be the following:

- a. **The end of History.** History both as a discipline and an idea used to be a unitary concept, therefore engulfing all of human beings and cultures into one all-including narrative of past, present and future events. The postmodern era openly defies such generalization in the light of the modern-day mediatization of society, as foreseen by Lyotard: the means of communication are mass media in the sense that “sono mezzi non per la massa o al servizio della massa ... ma sono mezzi della massa”¹ (Vattimo, 1985, 63) and they have led to an informational explosion, so that “la storia non è più un filo unitario conduttore, è invece una quantità di informazioni, di cronache, di televisori che abbiamo in casa, molti televisori in una casa (1990, 17)².

¹ They are not means for the mass or at the service of the mass ... but they are means of the mass. (my translation)

² History is no longer one unitary, common thread. Instead, it is a quantity of information, chronicles, television sets that we have at home, maybe many home television sets. (my translation)

The multiplying of both information technologies and information itself has subsequently led to a larger variety of worldviews, lifestyles, cultures being granted wider media exposure and hence deeper socio-cultural weight. The overall result of this cultural identity expansion is summarized as “liberazione delle differenze, degli elementi locali, di ciò che potremmo chiamare, complessivamente, il dialetto” (1989, 17)³.

Consequentially, replacing the too generalizing and singular History of modern times, come the diversifying and plural ‘histories’ of postmodernity.

b. The end of metaphysics. The Western philosophy had largely based itself on a foundational perspective, that is, the grounds for proper reasoning and speculation were set on categories which were deemed to be beyond the physical, material world, e.g. the Idea, the Subject, the World, etc. The result was that everything which exists (ontology) was related to and foregrounded on non-physical concepts (metaphysics). On the other side, two philosophers, from the 19th and the 20th century respectively, actively pursued the “distruzione dell’ontologia”, “destruction of ontology” (1985, 20): Nietzsche and Heidegger. Nietzsche, while proclaiming the death of God, also determined the modern crisis of humanism, since ‘God’ was the synthesis of humanistic metaphysical foundations, which are then no more after his demise⁴. In

³ Liberation of differences, of local elements, of all we could generally define as the local dialect. (my translation)

⁴ See Ansell-Pearson, K. “The gay science.” *A companion to Friedrich Nietzsche: Life and works*, edited by P. Bishop, Camden House, 2012, pp. 167-192.

addition to this, Heidegger saw the culmination and eventual collapse of metaphysics in the worldwide spread and triumph of technology, as technology calls humanism to a *Verwindung*, a German term which conveys a twofold meaning of both moving beyond and recovering from something (1985, 49). As such, while going beyond the metaphysics of the Western past, the postmodern individual is enabled to recover from it by making a new use of what is left of this past, that is technology itself. This new use, as stated in the previous paragraph, has a deep potential for emancipation.

- c. **Nihilism.** Traditionally speaking, nihilism denotes the absolute negation of any value or foundation: nothing is or becomes worthy from any perspective of analysis, since all is emptied of significance. Vanity hence permeates everything. This strictly negative concept of nihilism is turned by Vattimo into a much more optimistic philosophical tool: since nihilism is born out of the ashes of modernity and its metaphysically totalizing thought, the real postmodern nihilist accepts the disappearance of ultimate foundations with a light heart, as if a burden had been dropped off his shoulders. The nihilist individual of the present will therefore recognise him/herself as a time-limited, history-driven and immanent human being, free from the tempting reassurances of universality and able to operate in a more relative, yet less pressing historical environment. In Vattimo's own terms, "oggi non siamo a disagio perché siamo nichilisti, ma piuttosto perché siamo ancora troppo poco nichilisti" (1990, 26)⁵.

⁵ Today we do not feel at ease because we are nihilists, but because we are still not enough nihilists. (my translation)

3.3. RICHARD RORTY

Richard Rorty's philosophy is a continuation of the postmodern enterprise to refute absolute, universal truths or approaches in favour of a mind-set keener on the relative and the local.

In his *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature*, Rorty draws a basic distinction between the philosophers inscribable in either the first or the second of the abovementioned approaches. According to this division, there are "systematic philosophers" (369-370) with a keen propensity to construct systems supposed to last for all eternity, in the same way as certain equally systematic scientists try to build all-explaining models for nature mechanisms, whereas "edifying philosophers" (369-370) tend to argue through the use of "satires, parodies, aphorisms" (369-370), since they realize how historically contingent and peripheral their work and contribution is. These philosophers are described as active destroyers for the sake of their own generation, in order to leave the possibility for the new and the unexpected intact. Their dismantling of preconceived, suffocating systematizations of reality manages to create new spaces for free enquiry, all based on the serious doubt that everything knowable has already been known. As such, they function as a true model for postmodern thinkers by enhancing a non-foundational, historicist perspective.

This last point is emphasized and expanded by Rorty in another work, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. As the common basis for understanding humanity, the American philosopher argues that "socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down- ... there is nothing "beneath" socialization or prior to history which is definatory of the human" (xiii).

History forces humans to socialize, to interact and therefore to establish varying degrees or layers of meaning to their ideas and activities: there is no metahistorical or god-like viewpoint through which humanity can be understood, analysed or judged. Contingency, as exemplified

in human history, is the irrevocable condition of our species and therefore the philosophical paradigm to be assumed is historicism.

As a consequence of acquiring a historicist outlook and of acknowledging individual and collective contingency, there rises a deep sense of irony, that is an ironic awareness of the limited perspective and spatiotemporal frame human beings are granted. The so-called “ironists” are those individuals “never quite able to take themselves seriously because ... always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves” (73-74). Irony is for Rorty a liberating force, a breath of fresh air reinvigorating thought from excessive self-indulgence and generalization.

Contingency eventually also leads to an increased sense of solidarity, as it empties any presumption of superiority or indifference: if everything and everyone is dethroned from any given stance of predominance or untouchability, it is unjustifiable to feign indifference towards the suffering of other humans, as peculiar, far or different as they may appear at first sight. In other terms, suffering gives birth to a human fellowship and must be opposed through “an increased sensitivity” (xvi) to the vicissitudes of those who usually see their pride and dignity denied because of their distant or different existential status.

3.4. JEAN BAUDRILLARD

Contrarily both to Lyotard’s cautious hope for and to Vattimo’s and Rorty’s buoyant faith in the changing potential of postmodernism, French sociologist Jean Baudrillard formulated a markedly more pessimistic theory of the postmodern age, whose repercussions have been felt in the very domain of philosophy as well.

According to this thinker, reality as it was experienced before the slowly unstoppable mediatisation of society has been completely obnubilated by the *simulacrum*, that is a perfect reproduction of reality through one or different media acting as the substitution of the concrete world. However, the simulacrum appears to be only the culminating point of a much more detailed process of image degeneration.

Baudrillard argues that every mental representation, every image formed of the real world follows a specific pattern of phases which increasingly blur the distinction between the image and its referent. The four phases are described as it follows:

- a. **The image is the reflection of a basic reality.** This would be the starting point of mental differentiation and is linked to the “order of sacrament” (qtd. in Rivkin, Ryan, 368): the object is separated from reality and turned into a concept, e.g. the real-life lion is distinguished from our mental image of the lion itself.
- b. **The image masks and perverts a basic reality.** The second phase is connected to “malefice” (368), since the image is a perverse distortion of reality.
- c. **The image masks the absence of a basic reality.** In the third phase, the image is basically conjured up as a façade concealing what is not out there, hence its connection to “sorcery” (368).
- d. **The image bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own and pure simulacrum.** The fourth phase has been reached in the postmodern era: the image simulates reality in all its complexity. Reality is the simulacrum.

The very act of simulation stands out as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (365), so that the hyperreal imposes itself over the real and simulacra replace the concrete objects of all human experience. This act of replacing is defined as “the

precession of simulacra” (366) and its radicalness is equalled with the end of metaphysics, since the distinction between the thing itself and its representation, between the concrete ‘outer’ object and our conceptualization of it has now become irrelevant, thus marking the beginning of a non-metaphysical, postmodern world having all the connotations of a desert: “the desert of the real itself” (366).

Baudrillard also carefully specifies the conditions for generating simulations and seems to identify them in a “genetic miniaturization” (366) of reality. By genetic miniaturization, he is referring to the fragmentation of the social and cultural world of postmodernity operated by those very devices or media which sustain its existence: “matrices, memory banks and command models” (366) have become the means of hyperreal reproduction, with simulation subsequently blurring and eventually erasing the edge between what is real and what is not.

Power itself has no chance left to escape the overwhelming simulation of the contemporary world. Since power is also caught in the spiral of the hyperreal, the consequent psychological compensation for this upsetting condition is the “the hysteria of production and reproduction of the real” (374): present-day consumerism is desperate for restoring the lost real, but fools itself into believing that it can be restored through the infinite chain of good production, surplus and distribution.

In addition to the faltering of power, the danger caused by such endless simulation is the phenomenon called “precession of the model” (372). To illustrate such deviance from reality, Baudrillard recalls the brutality of the bloody Years of Lead in 1970s-1980s Italy, which spawned escalating acts of political unrest and terrorism:

Is any given bombing in Italy the work of leftist extremists; or of extreme right-wing provocation; or staged by centrists to bring every terrorist extreme into disrepute and to shore up its own failing power; or again, is it a police-inspired scenario in order to appeal to calls

for public security? All this is equally true, and the search for proof - indeed the objectivity of the fact - does not check this vertigo of interpretation. (371)

Since models have come to precede and substitute reality, the central importance of what really happened (facts) is diminished or completely subsided by the explanation of those facts through one or more of the simulating models. The hyperreal has prevailed to the point that even law violations and crimes are now experienced in an emphatically media-guided and media-manipulated way, so that Baudrillard may go further to assert that the Gulf War did not take place, in the sense that the conflict was perceived by media audiences as if it had been nothing more than a television production or replica of a real-world war, all the more 'realistic' because of its depiction on camera (Baudrillard, 1995).

3.5. HANS-GEORG GADAMER

Although not a self-declared exponent of the postmodernist critical approach, the German thinker Hans-Georg Gadamer produced a theory of interpretation which many literary works concerned with postmodernism have implicitly adopted. The interpretative tool deployed by such works is the so-called "hermeneutic circle", whose broader discussion shall be part of the core of the present thesis.

The notion of hermeneutic circle was first conceived by the Romantic philosopher and scholar Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose primary aim was to establish the appropriate code for interpreting a text. Schleiermacher argued the importance of understanding the text before beginning to advance any interpretation, but the task of understanding involved for him a series of circular movements from the single parts of the text to the whole of it and vice versa. It is a sort of double-check process: the understanding of one or more parts validates the overall comprehension of the complete studied text, which in turn acts as a positive feedback

for understanding the single parts themselves. The relationship between the reader and the text thus created brings the act of the interpretation to its final stage or movement, namely the historical context where the reader firstly and the text secondly are situated, so that both contexts must be taken into account for a correct interpretation. Wilhelm Dilthey will further emphasise the importance of the interpreter's context in his historicist approach (Malpas, "Hans-Georg Gadamer")

The real conceptual revolution of the hermeneutic circle, however, came into being with Martin Heidegger: if the circle had previously been imagined as the parts and the whole forming an interdependent structure giving birth to meaning, Heidegger transforms this circle into a completely different tool. According to him, the circularity of hermeneutics derives from the fact that understanding a text (be it a book, a picture, a sculpture, etc.) already presupposes a prior kind of understanding, an already existing set of interpretative codes in us, without which no interpretation could ever follow. A simple example will clear the matter: "If we wish to understand some particular artwork, we already need to have some prior understanding of that work (even if only as a set of paint marks on canvas), otherwise it cannot even be seen as something to be understood" (Malpas, "Hans-Georg Gadamer").

In other words, there must be a fundamental ontological relationship between the interpreter and the interpreted, a connection between the two of them in the world as such. In addition, if the interpreter comes first with his rules of decodification already set, then the hermeneutic act will consist in the exposing or exhibiting the very structure of interpretation preceding interpretation itself.

Gadamer joins Heidegger's debate by further analysing his new conception of hermeneutic circle:

A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there (Gadamer, 269).

Nevertheless, the interpreter may be faced with contending and contradictory projects of meaning, which are often not expected to emerge from the things themselves before him. It is thus necessary to purge the hermeneutic circle of inappropriate projects, in a constant refining of our interpretative efforts. Here lies the key difference between Heidegger's approach and Gadamer's: Gadamer openly discourages any direct hermeneutic approach to the text, since such a task would be biased by the fore-meaning that the interpreter has already in mind. In contrast to this, the validity of the fore-meaning must be tested and confirmed before extrapolating any meaning (270). However, Gadamer seems quick to add that even the validated fore-meaning might turn out to be invalid when the text "brings us up short" (270), when it openly contradicts our interpreting expectations about it.

As it will be seen in the core chapters of the present work, it is precisely the validity of this fore-meaning that interpreters assign to the text which is being argued or even ridiculed by postmodernist literature: how can a generally valid fore-meaning exist, if every reader approaches any text with his/her own presuppositions, prejudices and biases? What could happen if, all of a sudden, the meaning assigned to the text is destroyed or overturned by the narrator?

As shown, the philosophical speculation on postmodernism has spawned three basic conclusions: postmodernism is either seen as a cautious improvement of the modes of knowledge, creation and expansion in a no-longer unitary or metanarrative-driven social

world (Lyotard), or as a powerful tool to overcome the Western philosophical tradition in a new liberating direction from its absolutizing tendencies (Vattimo and Rorty), or as a quasi-nightmarish state of being where reality has been obliterated by the media reproducing it (Baudrillard). To these conclusions, it seemed appropriate to add Gadamer's reconceptualising of the hermeneutic circle in the light of postmodernist literature. These last two considerations provide a starting point for the next chapter of negative responses to postmodernism and its artistic applications.

CHAPTER 4

DISSIDENT VOICES: CRITICS OF POSTMODERNISM

The polemic and often table-turning nature of postmodernist philosophy, as analysed in the previous chapter, has triggered quite a large number of reactions by those scholars and critics not willing to depart, Lyotardianly speaking, from a macronarrative standpoint of thinking or refusing to repudiate the legacy of traditional Western thought as completely biased and prejudiced. To the first category is ascribable Fredric Jameson's and Terry Eagleton's dismissal of postmodernism, and to the second Jürgen Habermas' renewal of the Enlightenment project.

4.1. FREDRIC JAMESON

4.1.1. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991)*

Fredric Jameson is one of the fiercest opponents of postmodernism, openly drawing on his Marxist formation to claim postmodernism to be a mere product of the remorseless logic of advanced capitalism. His critique stems from a preliminary consideration: modernism, in spite of all its revolutionary charge and pathos, still believed in the existence of "some residual zones of 'nature' or 'being,' of the old, the older, the archaic" (ix), so that concrete change could be enhanced in order to "do something to that nature and work at transforming that 'referent'" (ix). A definite, if not definitive shift away from the past towards a better tomorrow was still conceived as an achievable objective. On the other side, postmodernism, claiming the impossibility of escaping cultural conditioning and imprisonment, has *de facto*

pronounced the death of any distinction between the real, outer world and culture as such: all is reduced to the singular interpretation which every human culture constructs of itself and the surrounding environment. To add further complication, the cultural output of a capitalist system being the commodity *per se*, postmodernism stands out as “the consumption of sheer commodification as a process” (x), hence as the hedonistic enjoyment of a reality reduced and degraded to its mere market value, commodified. To Jameson’s eyes, such process confirms postmodernism as the true logic behind late capitalism.

The perversity of such logic should be judged from the practical outcomes to which it has led, the first being a new sense of historical deafness: since postmodernists do not expect truth to reside outside of any ideological or textual conditioning and decoding, the sense of history as a past-present-future link of chains has faded away, as capitalism has trapped postmodern individuals in a never-ending, all-inclusive “experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (27). Jameson’s critique here finds its complement in Harvey’s prior denunciation of human history degraded to a worthless archive of quotations (see 2.2). Every single aspect or characteristic which could remind us of history is rendered dull and sterile through its continuous relationship with the present moment, commodified and reified for its mere consumption by schizophrenic human agents.

The degradation of all things historical to the dullness of the present translates as a typically postmodern fascination for

this whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader's Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called para-literature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel (...) (3).

High culture and mass culture are no longer divided by any clear boundaries, but simply merge one with the other in a chaotic, meaningless riot. Mainstream culture swarms with camp productions and novelties, in which Jameson also includes what could be termed 'travelling literature' or 'soft literature', all cultural mass-produced expressions deprived of any real meaning or significance.

The postmodern horizon is also dominated by a literal flatness: two dimensional screens, flat skyscrapers full of reflecting windows and the like populate everyday scenarios, in a maze of "multiple surfaces" (12). One result is "that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time" (16), all of which constitutes another mental reflection of the flat environment imposed all around. Besides, since surface is quite synonymic with image, the emotional impact is one of uniformity and smoothness, which might be concealing a whole different of reality behind itself. Another worrying consequence of this often subliminally perceived flatness is the "waning of affect" (10). Our human ability to express and understand subjective or collective emotions is slowly fading, leading to two opposite behavioural extremes: when flatness results in meaninglessness and existential tedium, "anxiety and loss of reality" pervade and haunt our consciousness, given our inability to find a sense in our way of life, but only to be replaced by "euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity" as a compensatory mechanism of fleeting, temporary rejoicing (28-29).

New technologies themselves, far from being Vattimo's privileged carriers of emancipation and differentiation, are perceived as a mere "figure for a whole new economic world system"

(6), restlessly reproducing goods for a gluttonous consumer society. Jameson's approach is here quite in line with his Marxist background: since the dominant economic system has not changed, and since capitalism is highly susceptible to adapting to different contexts, the only evident depart from the past are the mechanisms employed for its expansion and evolution.

4.1.2. The critique to postmodern art

Pastiche is, as the first chapter's section on architecture has underlined, a favourite feature of postmodern artistic enterprises, being a collage, a mix of different, often opposite styles, techniques and means of expression. The real divide, however, is between those critics who seem in favour of the inherently subversive, although still compromised, potential of such architecture and those who fail to see such potential. Jameson clearly stands in the last category, deeming postmodern parody to be nothing but "blank parody". Such blankness is argued to reside in the absence of any definite criticism against the reality which is being parodied: postmodern parody simply appropriates modernist styles (and others) for the mere sake of it, so that the overall impression leaves the spectator and engager with "a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm" (17). This sort of parody verges on a kind of parasitic "cannibalization of all the styles of the past" (18), pure appropriation without argumentation.

Once again, the Marxist scholar is careful to underline the connection between postmodernism and ahistoricism, a connection already emphasised by Harvey's use of the Baudrillardian concept of the "simulacrum", which Jameson appropriates (18): if history becomes literature and nothing else but literature, since texts are the only referents for a

postmodern knowledge of the past, then the past itself is reduced to the mere historical archive, becoming only a collection or database of texts, genres or styles ready for immediate, yet thoughtless re-utilization. This is argued to be the artistic consequence of the aforementioned historical deafness. In other terms, postmodern architecture seems to enter the very same logic of cannibalization abovementioned, since it openly and shamelessly exhibits a chaos of historically different styles, with the result that, Jameson claims, the viewer or interactor of such buildings will be faced with “overstimulating ensembles” (19), hence returning to the abnormal state of euphoria linked to the waning of affect of the postmodern era. What seems to deeply disturb Jameson and other critics of postmodernism is the apparent lack of any engagement with and critique of past discourses, a sort of depthlessness (5) permeating and invading every aspect of contemporary life in the advanced capitalist world.

4.2. TERRY EAGLETON

4.2.1. *The contradictions of postmodernism (1997)*

As opposed to Jameson, Terry Eagleton advocates a socialist outlook and praxis against the issues of global capitalism, yet without denying himself the connection between the former and postmodernism. Out of the many orientations of postmodernism, Eagleton is particularly sceptical of the one he classifies with the term “culturalism”, that is the idea that everything is cultural, reducible to a cultural explanatory framework. Such framework, which is linkable to Jameson’s, is noticeable not only in the advanced capitalist West, but appears to have been imported also in emergent societies (1). This overgeneralization, Eagleton argues, hides a deep, historical oblivion: culturalists refuse to involve nature in their philosophical discourse

due to their own unwillingness to naturalize, to turn certain traits or aspects of existence into natural, unchanging, although the Enlightenment, paradoxically enough, saw Nature as the common human background shared by all members of our species.

The negation of the natural side of humanity unlocks the gates to the postmodernist mantra of diversity and plurality as concrete sites for radical change, since nothing appears to exist outside of the cultural, malleable domain. Eagleton openly admits to the ambivalence of such a position, specifically in the area of left criticism:

The idea that plurality or otherness or multiplicity is inherently subversive reveals similar left illusions. Some forms of plurality are radical, whereas others are as native to the free market as violence is to the United States. All of these beliefs betray an empty formalism, void of concrete historical content. Culturalism is sometimes on the side of the given system, and sometimes not; and my contention in this essay is that, in its postmodern guise, it is both at once (2).

The real question, then, is how postmodernism can be on both the sides of the coin at the same time, and the answer seems to lie in the commodification of culture. In pre-modern times, the artist had a strong public function as a medium of ideological power. With the advent of modernity, he loses this kind of function and becomes separated from political and economic institutions. Art enters the domain of the market, yet enabling the artist to criticise the system more openly. However, economic powers tend to wane the impact of such critique, since they appropriate the art object and transform it into a commodity. Exchange value prevails over use value.

On the other side, culture stands out as a focal issue of present social and political movements, especially “revolutionary nationalism, sexual politics, and ethnic struggle” (3). We are faced,

once again, with a controversial situation: on one side, culture is reified and turned into simply another consumer good; on the other, its relevance to the political debate seems to be uncontested. Postmodernism, quite understandably, does not share the idea of culture as “disinterested reconciliation” (4), since it rejects any foundational, non-ideological perspective. The trouble is that the capitalist system, from which postmodernism was born, does not agree with such a view at all. The system needs an agenda filled with absolute-value propaganda, while at the same time destroying and effacing its very foundations.

Here is the tragic contradiction at the heart of postmodernism: it is both radical and conservative at the same time, promoting radical diversity, difference and fluidity while being utterly unable to attack or reject the superstructures of the system. A photographic screenshot from Beijing is quite eloquent: “At one end of Tiananmen Square, an outsized portrait of Mao Zedong still peers expressionlessly down, while just opposite, the luminous arches of the McDonald's logo scale the evening sky” (5). Eagleton adds another salacious statement: the irony about postmodern irony, so to say, is that it promotes difference as a liberating force, whereas such mentality is the underground philosophy of global capitalist uniformization. In the end, the act of cloaking the different issues between the various areas of the world as ‘cultural’ is a mere “mystification”, and the only advocated solution seems to be found in socialism (7).

4.2.2. *The Illusions of Postmodernism (1996)*

In this earlier work, Eagleton had already argued his case against postmodernism, a case which, on one hand, could be linked to Jameson’s account of postmodernism as the brainchild

of advanced capitalism and, on the other, tries to confirm the apparently inescapable contradictions at the heart of the postmodernist enterprise. Before proceeding to the analysis of this book, it should have been quite clarified by now how both Eagleton and Jameson are not able or willing to see the contradictory nature of postmodernism as a site for revolution or critique. The following paragraphs shall attach the definite seal to their reasoning.

Firstly, Eagleton joins arms with Harvey in identifying postmodernity as the new economic era dominated by finance, service industries and information technology, all of which seem to cooperate in order to establish a more fluid, decentred system where the word of the day is consumerism and the logic behind it always capitalism (vii). The global spread and power of such a system has led to assumptions of it being unbroachable and unattackable, so that, in such a pessimistic and gloomy atmosphere, postmodernism slowly became the *forma mentis* of the new period, simultaneously arguing against the system and acknowledging the impossibility of escaping from it:

If the system is deemed all-powerful, a view which overlooks the fact that it is at once formidably resourceful and spectacularly unsuccessful, then the sources of opposition can only be found outside it. But if it is really all-powerful then there can by definition be nothing outside it (7)

This first incongruity is simply the source of an endless series of paradoxes, which betray what Eagleton believes to be postmodernism's central fault: its debunking opposite theories and narratives without fearing of debunking itself. It is therefore necessary to examine these paradoxes for the sake of a deeper understanding:

- While removing seriousness from modernism and its claims to superiority by using

parody, postmodernism has turned art into a commodity, thereby “reinforcing the rather more crippling austerities generated by the marketplace.” Jameson’s accusation returns here in full style: if art is refused, or deemed to refuse, any ambition to be a tool for social or cultural critique, then the generalized view of it will tend to turn art into a depthless, throwaway experience located in the here and now. It is an “aping” of the production system under which postmodernists found themselves to be and live.

- The local, after being granted a far greater dignity of status as opposed to all totalities, but also as a source of endemic resistance to panoptical systems of power and repression, has ended up becoming the core vindication of single or group autonomy worldwide, so that it is arguable that the local has been globally regularized.
- The postmodernist suspicion towards metaphysical conceptions of Truth and Reality has turned both concepts into powerful commercial tools for “business executives” and the “advertising agency)”, since both attempt to exploit such concepts to increase financial earning. A simple look at contemporary commercial posters may be quite effective in discerning the validity of Eagleton’s assertion that “neither financiers nor semioticians are greatly enamoured of material referents”.
- The Law undergoes deep deconstruction under the blades of postmodernism, especially when it is exposed as the legitimation of the socially, culturally, economically dominant. Nevertheless, it is still the foundation without which the deviant or transgressive behaviour quite praised by postmodernism would be utterly impossible.

- Relativism is preached as the liberator of hybridity, difference and plurality, but this championing of it could be also viewed as another form of universalism, since the age-old anti-relativistic argument seems to have not lost its validity: ‘All is relative’ is an absolute. Postmodernism itself is unable not to prescribe universally applicable moral norms and values, yet deprecating such behaviour “as an oppressive hangover of Enlightenment”.
- In spite of being anti-realist, postmodernism cannot refuse the task of describing reality. The only theoretically consequential solution would be to opt for solipsism, that is to deem individually constructed reality as the only knowable reality, but such an act would imply the negation of difference and combination, which is irrefutable from the postmodernist viewpoint.
- The human subject is degraded to the mere product of forces beyond its control, and yet celebrated for his thirst for absolute emancipation. Postmodernism seems to waver between the two extremes of determinism and indeterminism, striving for a compromise which, in Eagleton’s view, is yet to come.
- Style and pleasure are praised for the sake of themselves in postmodernist art, a fact which has not prevented the last one from littering the art scenario with kitsch or, as far as literature is concerned, “texts which might have been composed by, rather than on, a computer” (28-29). This is another typical feature of anti-postmodern criticism: the indecipherability or incomprehensibility of the postmodern work of art leads to a

labelling of it as camp or a series of non-sense, pointless black signs and dots on a piece of paper.

All of the aforementioned contradictions are simply a mirroring of what the Western world has become under the stronger and stronger influence of a capitalism-driven impulse. As it could be inferred from above, postmodernism seems to follow a sort of perversely binary logic which, at the same time, champions a radical plurality of ideas, lifestyles and choices, and condemns those who appear in favour of those ideas, lifestyles and choices dismissed as non-postmodern, totalizing and absolute. The flaw in postmodernism is, argues Eagleton, the flaw in First World societies, whose notable characteristic is “that they are both libertarian and authoritarian, hedonistic and repressive, multiple and monolithic” (132).

4.3. JÜRGEN HABERMAS

In contrast to Jameson’s Marxist examination and Eagleton’s socialist approach, Jürgen Habermas utilizes rational inquiry to contrast postmodernism’s aims at deconstruction and unmasking what he calls “the unfinished project of modernity”.

Lyotard’s incredulity towards metanarratives may still be meaningful as long as one standard for rational argumentation is preserved from incredulity itself, otherwise philosophy would be degraded to a "totalizing self-referential critique", voided of its core possibility of criticising the existing reality (1982, 29). Rational discussion becomes Habermas’ solution to step beyond Lyotard’s advocated postmodern local determinisms (see the previous chapter), to increase the power of common confrontation outside the limitations and poverty of local

language games. Reason, however, undergoes a deeper scrutiny in Habermas' thought and is divided into two different traditionally philosophical outlooks:

- Reason as substance and spirit of the Real, that is the founding subject of everything which is deemed to be real. This is the Hegelian position inferred from Kant's construction of the thinking subject: what is rational is real; and what is real is rational.
- Reason as an idle instrument serving another purpose which must be brought to light and dismissed, a conceptual turnaround investigated first by Nietzsche and secondly by his twentieth-century followers, such as Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault.

Both assertions are partially agreed upon and criticised: Habermas does not believe in a metaphysical, otherworldly Reason governing reality, since the complexities of the present world openly reject the possibility of unifying it into an all-inclusive, Hegelian system; in spite of this, he cannot possibly accept the idea of rejecting Reason altogether from the philosophical tool case, since no other human faculty can bring together and conciliate the dispersive worldviews of our time (Zoeller, 153-154). Were this latter case his own, he would be confined to the same mistake of Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault, who never managed to see how their subjective anti-totalizing speculations were totalizing by all means: Heidegger never loosened the grip on the importance of Being (Habermas, 1987, 160), Derrida could not find anything lying outside of the text (210), and Foucault failed to see in his own analysis of power micro- and macro-relations discourse as another discourse itself (286).

From this compromise, a hybrid concept of reason is forged, one which both locates itself in the concrete, outer world, without devoting itself or surrendering to relativism or nihilism.

Habermas' reason is then the background from which three arguments against postmodernism are advanced:

- 1) The classic anti-sceptic argument: even if everything is called into question and, so to speak, put into brackets, this very act of questioning cannot be discussed or doubted, therefore invalidating the argument itself.
- 2) The Kantian distinction between genesis and validity: the origin of a factual claim has nothing to do with the claim being tested or judged to be true or false.
- 3) The deliberately postmodern blurring of distinctions between the cognitive, the moral and the aesthetic sphere of human life: each of the mentioned spheres covers a specific field of research and enquiry, so that each of them reserves itself a judgement or statement which cannot be addressed to the other. In other words, one thing is judging the "factual correctness" in the cognitive area, another is pronouncing a moral sentence on the facts themselves. (Zoeller, 154)

As such, reason is preserved as the minimum standard required for interactive communication and confrontation. Such a universal standard provides Habermas with a definitive criterion for defending the aspirations of modernity dismantled by postmodernists, who expect Reason to be a purely instrumental and therefore alienating, degrading force. It is this vision of theirs, as illustrated by Harvey in the second chapter, which has led to the birth of postmodernism as a reaction against modernity vices and evils, therefore deliberately obscuring the potential of the communicative aspect of Reason and its force to open dialogues between the disparate language games of the present world.

The Habermasian rehabilitation of rationality also derives from a double-layered concept of society itself. The German thinker divides human society into two different realms:

- The lifeworld, consisting in a shared set of values, mores and assumptions allowing individuals to interact and shape their own existence;
- The system, symbolised by those institutions (the government) or impersonal forces (the economy) which are supposed to organise and administrate the social world.

The former domain is said to be complementary with the latter, but they largely differ in the way they work, since the lifeworld is the realm of communication, whereas the system sustains itself by means of monetary and political, military power. To complicate matters, while the lifeworld is characterised by an endless striving to give human life and actions a purpose and meaning, the system is solely based on the criterion of efficiency and performance, as Lyotard had previously demonstrated, so that it pushes individuals to seek their own fortune. The resulting dichotomy opposes the *communicative action/reason* to the *strategic action/reason* (Habermas, 1984, 340).

With the transformation of the Western society into a modern kind of society, that is, with the prevailing of the systemic mechanisms over the lifeworld,

the sacred domain has largely disintegrated, or at least has lost its structure-forming significance. At the level of completely differentiated validity spheres, art sheds its cultic background, just as morality and law detach themselves from their religions and metaphysical background (1987, 196).

The consequence has been the fragmentation of the various cultural spheres and their growing separation from one another, so that their own primary function of symbolic reproduction has been put in peril, a process which Habermas does not hesitate to call “colonization” (1987,

196).

The colonising preying of the system on the lifeworld is the source of the modern “discontent”, further aggravated by the postmodern suspicion towards the self-defined liberating narrative of the Enlightenment:

Partisans of the Enlightenment like Condorcet could still entertain the extravagant expectation that the arts and sciences would not merely promote the control of the forces of nature, but also further the understanding of self and world, the progress of morality, justice in social institutions, and even human happiness (1997, 45).

Hence, the necessity arises to use communicative reason as an antidote to what Habermas defines the “neoconservatism” of postmodernists, since, after refusing the project of modernity and consequently accepting the fragmentation of the cultural spheres, they are left with no choice but fill the void of modernity with past, yet unjustified traditions (1997, 54).

CHAPTER 5

FOWLES, HUTCHEON AND POSTMODERN THOUGHT

All great fiction, to a large extent, is a reflection on itself rather than a reflection of reality.

Raymond Federman

5.1. LINDA HUTCHEON

5.1.1. Narcissism meets literature

Narcissistic narrative is a definition coined by Canadian scholar Linda Hutcheon in her eponymous book in reference to a particular genre of literary fiction. How are we to understand this broad concept? Hutcheon claims that this kind of fiction began to achieve high popularity “in the 1960s” (1984, 1), before being defined as “metafiction”. By this term, the following is meant: “fiction about fiction- that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (1).

Hence, metafiction is self-criticizing, self-defining, deconstructive fiction. But why ‘narcissistic’? The term is allegedly descriptive, not derogatory, and it is intended for the text, not for the author (1). Hutcheon further deploys a vast range of synonyms: “self-reflective, self-informing, self-reflexive, auto-referential, auto-representational” (1-2). The first three of them will be adopted in the next paragraphs of the present analysis.

For our present purpose, we are interested in knowing whether this literary genre can be inscribed into postmodernism, a question which Hutcheon answers in a personal manner. ‘Postmodernism’ was the term which was first used in 1979 by the novelist John Barth in his address to the Modern Language Association, and then in an article, *The Literature of*

Replenishment: Postmodernist fiction, on the Atlantic in the January issue of the following year. However, Hutcheon does not use this definition in the book, given that the term 'postmodernism' seems to be "a very limiting label" for metafiction (2). The term must be applied, for her, to a very specific literary category: the post of postmodernism, again, does not mean after modernism, so much as an extension of modernism and a reaction to it (2).

For these reasons, the myth of Narcissus is chosen as an alternative explaining framework.

Hutcheon immediately highlights the most relevant features of this critical operation:

- Narcissism is not pathological deviance, but the original condition of the novel as a genre (8).
- Narcissus' self-obsession leads to his self-destruction, but he lives on, both in the underworld and as the eponymous flower. Ovid, the naiads and dryads are metaphorically turned by Hutcheon in "those critics who lament the death of the novel-refusing to accept that the form of fiction might just have changed" (8).

In fact, the self-consciousness of the novel is not, metaphorically speaking, a stillborn baby of metafiction. Alongside with Richardson and Defoe, two champions of traditionally mimetic novels, one finds Sterne and his *Tristram Shandy*, not to mention Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, works which testify to the early self-parodic ambitions of the novel. Why, however, did this happen so early? Hutcheon argues that it all sprang from "the parodic intent of the novel itself, in the unmasking of dead conventions by a mirroring of them- minus the "proper" motivation." (10) This is because, from its inception, the novel "has always nurtured a self-love, a tendency toward self-obsession". It is "both the storytelling and the story being told" (10).

The Greek myth continues with the entering of Echo, who, in spite of her inability to remain silent and quiet, cannot be a creative entity. Echo simply repeats, but can never forge anything new. Hutcheon compares her tragic fate to that of the novelistic language, since “it too cannot be silenced, for it exists independently of its artistic function. Yet it cannot operate completely autonomously, for it is also referential as well as being a vehicle for connotations outside of its willed control” (10).

This means that Narcissus (the novel) refused to give power to Echo (the novel’s language) or his consideration of her amounted to nothing, when the novelistic canon was established within the domain of formal realism: “character, action, morality, representation of reality- not words- were its conscious concerns. Language was merely a means, never an end” (11). As a result of this, the importance of carefully crafting the novel’s language slowly perished, soon reaching the stage of a merely conventional instrument ready for use. Unawares, the novel did not mind its verbal component and flourished, until the Romantic age, when it suddenly became interested or “intrigued with its own reflection” (11). This time, the novelist and the novel became literary subjects, as evinced from the development of the *Künstlerroman* and the psychological novel, with unity of personality in the stead of unity of action.

From the novelist and the novel, it was a quick step towards the phenomenon of journal and epistolary novels: the writer reminds the reader of the activity of writing within the novel itself. In Hutcheon’s words, “Narcissus had always been self-aware; he merely became more physically conscious of his own existence and charm” (13). Narcissus, therefore, slowly begins to pine away: the novel slowly becomes more and more self-reflexive, thereby voicing the fear of those critics who deplore the loss of realistic/mimetic quality in novels. However, his death is not absolute: he lives on. And so does the novel.

The phenomenology of self-reflexivity is thus described by Hutcheon: the novelist realizes that, while writing and producing his work, has been “the unconscious producer of a synchronic model or sign-system; then perhaps he decides to do so consciously and self-consciously” (14). More of this will be explored during the case study analysed later in this chapter. Parallely to this, the reader turns from a simple, passive consumer to an active participant in the novel’s plot: his activity is “one of learning and constructing a new sign-system, a new set of verbal relations” (14).

Therefore, if the novel has died, like some critics claim, “there is still the fact that no proof can really be found.” Where is the corpse? Nowhere. Has anyone seen it? No. The simple reason is that “the form has just slipped into another world, in a very similar shape and attitude” (16). The final diagnosis should not be one of certified death, but of metamorphosis and metempsychosis, of a well-defined reshaping of both novelistic structure/style and expression/meaning, to whose elucidation the following section shall be dedicated.

5.1.2. Form and style of narcissism

Art is, and has always been, an illusion, although not always aware of this. The same goes for that kind of art which is literature: it “has always been an ordered fictive construct in language” (18). This means that self-informing, self-reflective novels are not a sign of insensitivity, critical overwork or mental exhaustion: “if self-awareness is a sign of the genre’s disintegration, then the novel began its decline at birth, as the ironic reading of the Ovid in the Introduction suggested” (18).

Then, why all the spite and hostility towards metafiction? According to Hutcheon, it is due to metafiction being more explicit and straightforward in its self-critique. The radicalization could be an effect either of:

- A change in the concept of language (Foucault),
- The modern man's lack of a sense of a transcendent, stabilising order,
- Art being conceived as more problematic and less easily consolatory (19).

A realistic novel has a well-crafted, whole plot which can communicate a sense of satisfaction and order to our everyday experience, hence it is more consolatory. However, it may also underline the contrast between real-life chaos and artistic order, giving the impression that only art can provide meaning and stability. The metafictional, modern novel, on the other hand, could be a sort of curious game, where the literary order is first established, then openly admitted and analysed in a most playful way (18-19).

Hutcheon further argues for two possible categories of metafictional works:

- 1) Texts which are diegetically self-aware, that is conscious of their own narrative processes, and texts which are linguistically self-reflective, demonstrating their awareness of both the limits and the powers of their own language. In the first case, the text presents itself as diegesis, as narrative; in the second, it is "unobfuscated text", language and language only (23).
- 2) Overt narcissistic texts, where self-consciousness and self-reflection are explicit, overt, and covert narcissistic texts, where the process of laying bare the fictiveness of the text is hidden, "internalized" in the structure of the text itself (23).

The diegetically self-aware and overtly narcissistic text we have chosen for our paper is a celebrated novel from 1969, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

5.2. Case study: Linda Hutcheon and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.⁶

A common mistake by reviewers and readers of Fowles' novel is that they mistake the narrator for Fowles himself. That is not so. For Hutcheon, "here we are dealing with a number of worlds within worlds" (57). Firstly, we have the core universe of the fictional characters, then, outside of it but surrounding it at the same time, we enter the narrator's personae, as the narrator is personified by the man in the train and the impresario. Then again, outside of this second world, we have the diegetic one of the narrator's voice. It is not over: we still have John Fowles, the mastermind behind it all! In each universe, moreover, we have a creator-like figure: Sarah, the personae, the narrator. Outside of the last one, we still find Fowles.

The first concern of this metafictional/postmodern novel is the problem of the real vs the imaginary. The narrator sets the game in the mind-provoking chapter 13: like him and Sarah, the reader is a constant fictionalizing machine, so to say. Making fictions is a natural, deep-buried need of men. Novelists, who live off fiction, also "wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is" (58). But a world, according to this narrator, is an organism, a living thing, not a merely deterministic machine, if such a world is said to be a genuine creation. So, in order to become alive, characters and events of this world must begin to disobey their very creators. All of this is of great consequence: the creation of a novelistic world possesses a certain "inner logic or motivation", which presses the novelist "to abandon any plans conceived before putting pen to paper" (58).

Then, one could claim, the narrator is being quite artificial and false, but he insists that world-creation in fiction is quite natural, for everyone. He claims not to have broken the illusion,

⁶ All quotations in this section, including the ones from Fowles' book, are taken from Hutcheon's book. Starting from the section "FOWLES, HUTCHEON AND THE POSTMODERN THINKERS", all Fowles' quotations will be taken directly from my edition of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

that is the illusion of realism while reading a novel, although anyone could actually say the opposite: yes, the illusion has indeed been broken! Now the reader knows that all of this is simply fiction, whereas, before knowing it, s/he had been drawn into a beautiful illusion. Yet, the narrator maintains that his characters still exist, that they are still part of another reality, by which it is implied that this new reality, where they still exist, is the reader's new illusion! This new reality/illusion is made concrete and clear by Sarah's refusal to disclose her state of mind to the narrator, who is forced to obey her.

What Fowles is attempting to do here is to establish a new relationship between art and life, where the novel is not simply a novel once again, a product of imagination which creates a dichotomy between fiction and the outer world, but a vector of "a different moral and human connection" (59). How can it be achieved? He deploys Victorian plot mechanisms into a parody of Victorian styles and points them out both in the narration and in the character's thought patterns: Charles thinks of Emma Bovary when looking at Sarah. This intertextuality breeding parody allows Fowles not only to make the reader see what happens, but also how it happens, what mechanisms are functioning in the plot-making. After all, he lives in the age of the nouveau roman, the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes: "while retaining all the moral and social concerns of James and the English novel tradition, he knows that a new, equally "vital" form must emerge from its antiquated conventions" (59). The same concept is illustrated by Fowles in his short story collection, *The Ebony Tower*: "Behind the modernity of so many of the surface elements there stood both a homage and a kind of thumbed nose to a very old tradition" (60). Arguably, this quote is the summary of the postmodernist literary enterprise.

And now we turn to the moral and social concerns of the novel, which again fall into the deconstructive scheme of it. The narrator is quite clear in underlining the distance of the present from the Victorian age, but the reader is also told that s/he could not be very different from the Victorians: “we are dealing with a human constant: the difference is a vocabulary, a degree of metaphor” (60). Historical change does not necessarily mean improvement: postmodern parody here finally assumes a moral function in forcing the reader to question his human status in relation to the past, since the reader’s present merges with the novel’s past.

This moral function must be linked to the theme of existential freedom. Existentialism is argued to be “the only view possible for a modern individualist, who will see Sarah as Sarah, and not as the French Lieutenant’s Whore.” (61) This underlines the deep connection felt by Fowles between the present age and the Victorian one, that is their deeply existentialist status, so that existentialism is inseparable from the novel’s aesthetic and moral concerns. Freedom is inherent in the best art and in the best science, according to Fowles (61). There is no severing between aesthetics and politics. As Hutcheon would put it,

Narrative itself could be seen, then, as a natural mental act, as much a part of life as art. We do not, it is true, take leave of fiction-making when we abandon fairy tales and childhood games. We always tell stories- to escape, to remake, to alter our past and our future (89).

This is the postmodernist outlook on our common human experience: a tangle, a web, a net of different existential fictions through which the ‘outer world’, itself a fiction, is given meaning and sense. Ironically and postmodernly speaking, fiction-writing is the supreme mode of expression of the thinking and speaking mammal. There is no correspondence between language and reality, because language is reality and vice versa.

In the core world of the novel, Mr. Freeman and his daughter are the ironic obstacles to Charles’ search for freedom. Moreover, even if Charles begins to suspect and distrust

“possession as the purpose of life” (62), he still wants to possess Sarah sexually, by also bonding her in marriage. Sarah, in the name of freedom, rejects such possibility: “I wish to be what I am.” (62) It should not be forgotten that Fowles saw in the novel the highest expression of literary freedom: “This is its downfall and its glory; and explains why it has been so often used to establish freedom in other fields, social and political.” (62) If we add to this Fowles’ other remark that both the writer and the reader share “the right, the power and the need to exercise the individual imagination” (63), then it is no surprise to find a moral allegation in Sarah’s own fiction-making. Her creating herself as the loose woman who has lost her virginity sleeping with a foreigner marks her difference as an individual and a woman: “to live is to create; to create is to be free” (114).

There are, however, further implications to the process of fiction making. Once again, it is the narrator who throws the stone in the water, by claiming that “we are all poets (...); and so are we all novelists, that is, we have a habit of writing fictional futures for ourselves” (63). According to Hutcheon, such a statement recalls Aristotle’s observation in the *Poetics* of art as a source of moral temper and instruction. Mimesis, the supreme characteristic of art for the Greek philosopher, has the function of shaping and creating man’s personality, so that the narrative act constitutes a moral act: all of this is taken and overtly exposed in Fowles’ novel. Now, exposing the mechanisms behind fiction-making has always been a privilege self-asserted by the novelist, but the narrator of Fowles’ work takes this privilege to the extreme:

By using these conventional novelistic devices which are usually employed to authenticate the core universe, the narrator manages to achieve opposite results, validating instead his wider universe. The voice of the narrator is not an exterior authenticating authorial one; it is the voice of a character (63).

The narrator has become another character caught in the web of the plot, a web which, as we have seen, he openly disentangles starting from chapter 13 onwards. A further exploration of the irony operating behind this narrator-character figure and his apparently contradictory status will be found in the section concerning Fowles' novelistic irony in the next chapter.

The real problem behind this concept of fiction as freedom-making is the slowness with which the male protagonist, Charles, manages to realise it. Charles' behaviour in the novel is redundant with a god-like disposition and ambition to control, to possess, to deny people (especially Sarah) their own freedom. Only until the end of the book, when he still fantasizes about a possible marriage with Sarah, will Charles realize the full potential behind the act of fiction making, a potential which Sarah herself has already fully used and again uses in rejecting Charles' imposing demands. However, the narrator's impresario, his first persona in the novel, also denies such equation of freedom and moral integrity. When the man on the train appears, the narrator describes this persona of his with the same features of an all-powerful deity, but "one of a distinctly mean and dubious (as the theoreticians of the nouveau roman have pointed out) moral quality" (64): this strange, puzzling figure suspended between the narrator's own world and the characters' universe openly breaks the spell of mimesis "by decompartmentalizing what was traditionally considered to be a simple relationship of author to reality" (64).

It should be clear by now that Sarah and the narrator are each other's counterparts: they both exist only within the fictive world and they both set out on a quest to free their interlocutors (Charles and the reader, respectively) from illusion. Charles is freed from illusion by Sarah's fiction-making, whereas the reader is freed from his own illusions about fiction-making. Once again, Hutcheon explains: "the novelist is a creating god-figure, but freedom, not authority,

dominates his image. It is this freedom that Sarah too has, and in order to retain it, she too must give her creature [Charles] his freedom” (67).

Such an explanation leads us to the consideration of the two endings for the novel. Why is it so? The reason is a kind of a paradox: if this story was life-like, there would be potentially infinite alternatives and closures, but fiction has specific demands which cannot be dismissed so easily. It is what the narrator calls “the tyranny of the last chapter” (69): the reader not only expects, but almost craves for a clear-set, definite conclusion. In this novel, however, the reader has been faced with two main protagonists, Charles and Sarah: if Charles were the hero of a conventional Victorian novel, the first clichéd happy ending would certainly be possible, but “even then violence would needs be done to the text” (69), always due to the tyranny of the last chapter. Anyway, Sarah gives the book its own title and the second ending, less pleasant but more open to a modern concept of freedom, appears most likely and probable, since Charles also finds himself benefiting from this kind of freedom: “life is not a symbol, is not one riddle and one failure to guess it ... but is to be, however inadequately, emptily, hopelessly into the city’s iron heart, endured. And out again, upon the unplumb’d, salt, estranging sea” (70). The last quote, from Arnold’s poem *To Marguerite*, sums up the inevitable, yet likely painful nature of freedom and its reaffirmation.

As discussed above, self-reflexive fiction, far from being a mere and pointless critique of itself, has the ability to disclose new horizons for a connection between art and life: the freedom game exposed in Fowles’ novel echoes the freedom game which the concrete, fleshy readers of the outer world must play in life. The value of the novel, both aesthetic and moral, is thus preserved and strengthened: “self-reflective fiction ... does not mean the death of the novel as a mimetic genre, but perhaps rather its salvation” (70).

5.3. Historiographic metafiction

A discussion of Hutcheon's view on postmodernism would be incomplete without adding her widely used concept of 'historiographic metafiction'. The two terms of the definition provide the critic with a preliminary meaning: 'historiographic' refers to historiography, which is writing about and on history, and 'metafiction' is used in the sense delineated in the previous paragraphs, which is fiction about fiction in a postmodern way.

Hutcheon begins her argument with a little insight into the separation of the disciplines of history and literature: if the nineteenth century initially saw no issues rising between these two branches of human knowledge, since they could both be studied for the elevation and moral guidance of men, the rise of a more scientific approach to history (von Ranke) gave way to the disciplines' compartmentalizing, a fact which historiographic metafiction openly desires to challenge (1988, 105).

Historiography is said to be usually preoccupied with the discovery and analysis of Truth, which amounts to the sum of real events happened in the past. However, it is not improbable that specific events or human categories be excluded from historiographic discourse: "where are the women in the traditional histories of the eighteenth century?", asks Hutcheon (107). Moreover, since the present cannot relate itself directly to the past, but only through the remains of it (archives, books, ruins, etc.), the act of writing on history has been described more as a search for verisimilitude than truth, as a quest for recreating a vision of the past as close to Truth as possible. The very narrative form of historiography appears to be deeply set within rigid conventions in the same way as traditional fiction is, thus leading to a questioning of its own transparency; in addition, the realm of literature and the one of history writing seem to share and have shared a strong intercommunicative/intertextual relationship: "Macaulay's

debt to Scott was an overt one, as was Dickens's to Carlyle in *A Tale of Two Cities*" (105-106). Is it really possible, then, to argue for an absolute separation between the two disciplines in the name of the old truth-vs-falsity argument? The sceptical answer to this question is the foreground for historiographic metafiction: there are only truths, and falseness may simply be others' truths (109).

Starting from this premise, historiographic metafiction arms itself with a wide range of literary tools. Firstly, there are two modes of narration aimed at deconstructing the notion of a literary/historical subject: "multiple points of view or an overtly controlling narrator" (117). The key point here is the unreliability of these narrators for concrete, factual (hi)storytelling. The subject of narration cannot escape the fragmentation and destabilisation deriving from "the rethinking of the past in non-developmental, non-continuous terms" (118): the postmodern narrative will typically install the notion of a stable subject, rooted in history and the plot, only in order to subvert and eradicate it. This is clear in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, where the whole mind-body unity of the protagonist is shattered through a dispersive narration mirroring the dispersiveness of history.

Connected to the narrative modes, historiographic metafiction may deploy parody to stress the fine line between fact and fiction. John Fowles' *A Maggot* is flooded with extracts and references to eighteenth-century magazines and fiction which highly contribute to give the plot of the novel a 'factual' consistency. Parody therefore leads to intertextuality, or a special kind of intertextuality, where the power of allusion to the past is inscribed in another game of irony: it is a postmodern rewriting of the past. The referent of this parodic, intertextual language always remains the textual remain or trace of the past, since there is no other means of connecting it to the present experience. Hutcheon also stresses the importance of not

mistaking this postmodern tactic for an emptying of linguistic significance: “the text still communicates ... [but] there is a loss of faith in our ability to (unproblematically) know that reality, and therefore to be able to represent it in language” (119).

The fourth mode of historiographic metafiction, drawing on the previous three ones, situates itself in the debate on ideology. Postmodernism once again applies a paradoxical logic:

- Since it is embedded in ideological discourses, it cannot presume to reject them.
- Conversely, it can subvert and therefore criticize those discourses without calling itself completely outside of or alien to them (120).

Hence, the double nature of historiographic metafiction: it both inscribes the ideology of historical traces of the past and disrupts them for the sake of problematizing our vision of things once happened. The text, the discourse of the ideology hiding behind history, any kind of history, cannot be completely escaped or dismissed, since each and every human being is also a product of history. Metafiction will content itself with accepting the ideological conditioning for the mere sake of destabilising and contrasting its influence.

Now, let us attempt to apply historiographic metafiction to John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. The reader of this work is constantly faced with the Victorian past, which only survives through the quotations from Victorian literary personalities and the parodic adoption of their style in the structuring of the plot: the narrator, following the postmodernist demand, sets the historical context by using only what is left of the past, specifically its traces and remnants in literature. Writing about Victorian history mingles with the more explicit metafictional aim of the text, without losing the didactic purpose:

The past is always placed critically—and not nostalgically—in relation with the present. The questions of sexuality, of social inequality and responsibility, of science and religion, and of

the relation of art to the world are all raised and directed both at the modern reader and the social and literary conventions of the last century (Hutcheon, 45).

An illuminating case in point would be Fowles' treatment of Thomas Hardy's early life in Chapter 35. A couple of paragraphs before mentioning the Victorian novelist, the narrator's denouncing of the twentieth-century biases on Victorian sexuality reaches its climax in a quote summarising the historiographic and metafictional nature of this chapter: "The vast majority of witnesses and reporters, in every age, belong to the educated class; and this has produced, throughout history, a kind of minority distortion of reality" (Fowles, 2004, 272). The reader is faced with postmodernism once more, since the comment not only ascribes itself to Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, but also acquires a certain degree of irony when considering that also Fowles, the real-life man behind the scenes, is a member of the British educated class. The game of Chinese boxes, out of metaphor, is then played also on Hardy's murky relationship with Tryphena Sparks, with whom he broke the engagement after allegedly discovering her identity as his niece. This unspeakable family secret was historically concealed behind a wall of silence, and only the 1950s saw the first scholarly investigation into it (273), all of which bears further evidence to the narrator's previous claim on the partiality of historical recounting. Moreover, when the reader learns of Hardy's likely references to Tryphena in his last two novels, metafiction appropriates the mode of intertextuality to emphasise its peculiarly historiographic nature, since Hardy's case becomes "the perfect emblem of his age's greatest mystery" (275), a man ready to rewrite the fiction of his own life and historicity. Only the revisionism of postmodern metafiction could produce the unearthing of such rewriting: history has once more been revised through fiction by the latter's overcoming its traditional limits.

5.4. FOWLES, HUTCHEON AND THE POSTMODERN THINKERS

The core concepts of Hutcheon's analysis of postmodernism (narcissistic narrative, metafiction, historiographic metafiction) have been crucial to the examination of a classic of postmodern literature, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. This novel openly embraces the three abovementioned categories in the creation of its plot: the narrative openly reflects on itself through the viewpoint of an unconventional, 'liberated' narrator inseparable from the plot itself. Plus, the Victorian setting for Charles' and Sarah's adventures admits the entrance of historiography into the plot, thereby providing the narrator for framing his metafictional purpose within a specific historical context, a context which, given the problematizing nature of metafiction, is never closed up, but open to a face-to-face critique with modernity.

Starting from this, it would be interesting and enriching to complete Hutcheon's analysis by scrutinising Fowles' literary work in the light of the postmodern thinkers already discussed in the third chapter. Not only would such scrutiny deepen the reader's insight into the problematics of Fowles' novel, but it would also highlight the deep interconnection existing between different and diverse exponents of postmodernism.

5.4.1. LYOTARD

Lyotard's rejection of metanarratives and his embracing of micronarratives in their stead could be seen reflected in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Beginning the book, the reader is faced with the false impression of reading another novel written in the Victorian style about Victorian characters, possibly ending with a typically Victorian clear-cut closure. However, as soon as the infamous Chapter 13 is reached, the 'sweet delusion' is broken down, as the narrator shamelessly proclaims: "I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination.

These characters I create never existed outside my own mind” (Fowles, 95). If by metanarrative in literature one intends the presence of an omnipotent, controlling, Thackeray-like narrator with a precise aim in his mind for the developing of the plot, then this simple quotation marks the coming down of such an idea: what we readers are faced with now is a self-asserted product of someone else’s imagination.

Is this supposed to imply the abrupt, sudden ending of the novel, given the self-exposure of the narrator? Not at all, he argues: “we [narrators] are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority” (97). Since, in Lyotardian terms, a metanarrative presupposes a direct, quasi-tyrannical pressure towards one and only one goal (the author inexorably proceeding towards a specific resolution or climax), then, since the narrator is deprived of such authority, the only solution left is to opt for a multitude of micronarratives, that is for a set of free choices and decisions for each of the novel’s characters. But freedom is also part of the narrator’s existential status, so one might argue that postmodernism here assumes a sort of Chinese-box structure, where the characters’ micronarrative is within the narrator’s micronarrative: “in other words, to be free myself, I must give him, and Tina, and Sarah, even the abominable Mrs. Poulteney, their freedom as well” (97). This is what the “incredulity towards metanarratives” has bred in the field of literature, that is a suspicious attitude towards the reliability of the narrator and an innovative text where characters are suddenly rendered free and self-determining.

On another level, this incredulity also breeds a more critical approach by the narrator and consequently the reader to the concrete socio-historical conditions of the Victorian age. The most common stereotype about this period is the highly popular assumption of a repressed

sexuality, an assumption which is disrupted in the course of Chapter 35. The narrator addresses this cliché in quite an ironic way, although the social implication of his critique seems to leave a bitter taste behind: “they [the Victorians] were quite as highly sexed as our own century--and, in spite of the fact that we have sex thrown at us night and day (as the Victorians had religion), far more preoccupied with it than we really are” (269). Sex was therefore not denied or emptied of significance, but remained a worry in Victorian minds, a worry concealed and confined in the private sphere of life, rather than publicised, as a consequence of it being treated seriously. The only real difference between modernity and the Victorian age was a matter of convention: “The fact behind them remains constant” (270).

The critique goes even further with the narrator’s shattering the opposite cliché of enhanced sexual pleasure derived from more frequent sexual intercourse, as it happens in the modern Western world. His argument is quite straightforward: “the desire is conditioned by the frequency it is evoked: our world spends a vast amount of its time inviting us to copulate, while our reality is as busy in frustrating us” (271). Conversely, the Victorians were not as deep in being obsessed with sex due to their different handling of the matter, all of which resulted in a more intense, because rarer, sexual enjoyment. The modern society, having de facto liberalised sex in all of its aspects and to a far higher degree, has deprived it of “so much of the mystery, the difficulty, the aura of the forbidden, destroyed also a great deal of the pleasure” (271), to the point that the narrator charges his present century with the pejorative sense of the term ‘Victorian’. Here lies the lesson learned from Lyotard’s philosophy: Progress, the metanarrative which sees human history as an unstoppable, relentless race towards improvement, does not (and maybe will not) face the possibility that certain areas,

certain fields of human experience and life remain far from change or, as in the case of the narrator's argument, might even undergo a process of continuous degradation.

5.4.2. VATTIMO/RORTY

If Lyotard's argumentations seem to be in close touch with Fowles' poetics, the positions of Vattimo are likely to further emphasise Fowles' debt to postmodernism. Vattimo openly claimed the end of History after modernity's failure to keep its promises and the subsequent breaking of History into a multiplicity of different histories, all of them intersecting and influencing each other. This theoretical framework is largely applicable to Fowles' book in a twofold manner.

Firstly, the narrator is the ultimate focaliser of the novel's plot, as far as both characters and Victorian history are concerned. Through him and his eyes, the reader will not see History as such: he will experience the narrator's view on history, with a special emphasis on the Victorian period. Only the narratorial voice is the means through which History can be experienced, but, given both the narrator's and the reader's limited, contingent perspective, the final result will simply be a fiction of History, the narratorial fiction:

You [reader] do not even think of your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it ... fictionalize it, in a word, and put it away on a shelf - your book, your romanced autobiography. We are all in flight from the real reality. That is a basic definition of Homo sapiens (97).

Secondly, in a novel where freedom is granted to every character as a consequence of a truly free act of narrating, the characters themselves are caught in the logic of creating their own histories, their own realities. These facts are not challenged by the absence of modern mass media (strongly present in Vattimo's postmodernism) in the text: while the narrator uses the age-old medium of the book, his characters are floating in the realm of the most powerful

human medium of expression, imagination. The one character who fully exploits this medium is, of course, Sarah.

Sarah stands out as the supreme Maker of fiction (as the epigraph to Chapter 13 indicates): from the very title of the novel, the reader is left to ponder who is labelled as the French Lieutenant's woman, and by the time Chapter 20 is reached, Sarah's self-revelation of her identity, notwithstanding her direct preference for the term 'whore', appear to confirm the reader's expectations: Sarah was indeed seduced and then abandoned by a foreigner, after which she suffers from social stigmatisation. Only the post-coital discovery of Sarah's virginity in Chapter 47 discloses the truth behind Sarah's fiction-making: she was not a whore. To Charles, and arguably to some readers, Sarah's behaviour appears to be nothing short of manipulative deception, since her waving a fake micronarrative around herself has resulted in her having an affair with Charles. There is, however, a key word in Sarah's apparently confusing justification which will eventually lead the reader back to the theme of freedom: 'love'. Sarah cannot deny her love for Charles. More than that, it is precisely because of love that she has tried, through her fiction, to liberate Charles from his own existential prison: she saw in him a slave to Victorian conventions, a man promised to another woman for mere financial gain, and her personal pretension at being a whore actually forced Charles to see beyond social labelling, to see Sarah as Sarah.

As previously indicated, postmodernism in Fowles' novel also serves to indicate a profound similarity, rather than radical dichotomy, between the Victorian age and the narrator's present cosmos. The irony behind this unexpected comparison first introduced the reader to a radical reconsideration of Victorian sexuality, as demonstrated in the previous paragraphs, and now leads him to what the narrator frames as historical "schizophrenia" (371): the

characteristically Victorian possession of two minds, of being in two minds about every aspect of life and existence, all resulting in “the endless tug-of-war between Liberty and Restraint, Excess and Moderation, Propriety and Conviction, between the principled man's cry for Universal Education and his terror of Universal Suffrage” (372). Such a deeply buried conflict was conventionally concealed, as the former analysis of sexual repression showed, but once again it is a kind of conflict which appears not so distant and old-fashioned to the novel's reader, as the capitalized initials of the human ideals quoted above may prompt him to believe. Vattimo's philosophy could here be joined by Rorty's to explain such narrative operation: no absolute, foundational approach to history is able to distinguish the façade from the concrete world, otherwise the Victorian pretensions should be mistaken for the actual historical reality. Irony, then, comes out as a powerful, reinvigorating watershed for viewing the past in a more critical and open-minded manner, refusing to encapsulate it in this or that ideological framework.

5.4.3. BAUDRILLARD

The Baudrillardian concept of the simulacrum might prove itself useful for reconceptualising the theme of metafiction in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The whole plot of this book could be argued to be a simulacrum, an alternative world replacing and substituting the outer one, but whose degree of concreteness, whose substance is never lower or diminished: “my characters still exist, and in a reality no less, or no more, real than the one I have just broken. Fiction is woven into all, as a Greek observed some two and a half thousand years ago. I find this new reality (or unreality) more valid” (97). Fiction is equalled with the simulacrum by the term “unreality”, and it is only our brain's habit of turning literary unreality into its opposite which has prevented us from realizing the unreal nature of fiction. Metafiction, it

could be argued, is a self-effacing, self-exposing simulacrum: its 'fictiousness' is debunked for all to see.

Drawing on the Chinese-box structure of fiction within fiction, one could also speak of simulacrum within simulacrum when comparing the novel's general metafiction with Sarah's fiction as well. However, there is another kind of fiction in the novel which deserves to be called a simulacrum far more than Sarah's: Charles' life. Charles leads an existence which, were it not for his deep interest in science and scientific inquiry, would be the epitome of convenience, and convenience is simply another social tool for creating what the narrator already called "a world as real as, but other than, the real world is" (96). The paring of simulacrum and convenience is clearly exemplified in the first ending of the novel, the clichéd, romanticised reunion of Charles with Ernestina at the expense of Sarah and freedom:

It was simple: one lived by irony and sentiment, one observed convention. What might have been was one more subject for detached and ironic observation; as was what might be. One surrendered, in other words; one learned to be what one was (339).

The reader is then left to wonder if any escape from this panoptical, all-covering fictionalisation is conceivable, particularly in the light of the narratorial claim to grant his characters freedom. The answer is both negative and positive in the two endings of the book.

The second ending, although it presents the reader with an atmosphere of increasing reconciliation and resolution, still retains certain traces of the simulacrum: Charles rediscovers Sarah and the child born out of their affair, the two of them embracing potentially suggests another possibility for spending the rest of their lives together. Yet, all of this seems to contrast with the already mentioned appeal for freedom: if Charles and Sarah end up together, would the reader actually call such resolution freedom? Would this not be simply a happier, more peaceful version of the first stereotypical Victorian ending with Charles

marrying Ernestina? Given that the narrator finally intervenes to offer us a third ending, a discussion of it will provide a proper answer to these questions.

The third ending, the modern ending as Hutcheon would define it (Hutcheon, 1984, 69), is the exit out of the simulacrum spell. The intervention of the narrator's persona and the turning back of the clock act like a trigger which activates the mechanism of freedom: Charles refuses Sarah's last attempt at building a relationship, however platonic, and reemerges out of the Rossetti's residence as a reborn individual, although only dimly aware of it. His palingenesis is described in progressively philosophical terms: "only life as we have, within our hazard-given abilities, made it ourselves, life as Marx defined it - the actions of men (and of women) in pursuit of their ends" (Fowles, 469), this kind of life only, uprooted from absolutist and categorising aspirations, can transform and improve subjective and collective status. The only secret ingredient to add is Arnold's piety, or, in more existentialistic terms, "humanity", "authenticity" (469). Had it not been for Sarah's liberating, humanising fiction-making and for the narrator's final intervention, Charles' freedom would have remained a façade freedom, caged in a web of social and cultural conditioning: Sarah slowly made him realise what a different, free human being he could be and the narrator, the simulacrum maker, allows for a final chance for Charles to explore and taste this freedom. It is all up to him, the sea of life awaits ahead: "he walks towards an imminent, self-given death? I think not; for he has at last found an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness, on which to build" (470).

5.4.4. GADAMER

Gadamer's reworking of Heidegger's interpretation of the hermeneutic circle is the final standpoint through which Fowles' work will have been demonstrated to fulfil the premises and conditions of postmodern narrative.

If the reader approaches every text with pre-formed mental schemata of interpretation, the subsequent question raised by Gadamer is whether any correct interpretative act is actually possible: it would be only in case that the assumed fore-meaning were validated, that is cleansed of any possible biases. Postmodern novelists like Fowles playfully contend with such a notion in their characteristically ironic/parodic way: Chapter 13 emerges as the ultimate destruction of the reader's expectations and projects of fore-meaning assigned to the text. In hindsight, moreover, the previous chapters were sparsely filled with clues to the doubtfully Victorian nature and style of the narrator:

- The statement in Chapter 3 that "one of the commonest symptoms of wealth today is destructive neurosis; in his [Charles'] century it was tranquil boredom" (13) could scarcely be attributed to a Victorian book writer;
- Ernestina being said to outlive her generation until her death on the day of Nazi Germany invasion of Poland (28) might have cast a shadow on the narrator's belonging to an age which historians traditionally pronounce dead in the year 1901.

Paradoxically, some of the most acute readers might have detected such clues when first turning the pages of Fowles' work, but their possible reaction might have consisted in dismissing them as inconsistencies: since the narrator is aware of Hitler and Nazism, s/he must be writing in the style of a Victorian novelist, without belonging to that age, but his/her omniscience of the character's minds and lives still goes unquestioned. Truly enough, Chapter 13 shows this reasoning to be a half-truth in the postmodern sense:

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 (95).

The invalidation of the validated fore-meaning continues in another manner through the appearances of the narrator's personae into the plot. Chapter 55 witnesses the appearance of the impresario on the same train compartment as Charles', a sudden breaking of the rule of non-interference with the plot by the narrator. What is postmodern about this is the narrator's resolute refusal to take part in the further development and closure of the plot: "the only way I [the narrator] can take no part in the fight is to show two versions of it" (409), and all it takes him to decide which version will come first is a simple flick of the coin. No Victorian novelist would have ever dared to split the ending of his creation into two separate alternatives, but the reader of Fowles' book, while having forced himself to accept the rules of postmodern narrative, might have been hopeful to expect a traditional ending: he had projected, in Gadamer's terms, another fore-meaning to the text, which is emptied in the name of plot freedom. The reader has no choice but to accept both the characters' and the narrator's freedom: the only interpretation available is the one that s/he can form while reading and not before it, having to play and partake in the game of postmodernism.

The two endings of the novel mark the very impossibility of a close hermeneutics for Fowles' book. In the third to the last paragraph of the novel, the narrator uses a word which summarises the gist of our analysis: "plausible" (469). Both closures are hence deemed to be probable, creditable, likely to happen, all of which demonstrates and testifies to the indeterminacy of such a postmodern work of literature: there can be no single ending, no "fight-fixing" (409) because of the freedom accorded to the plot. No radical, final resolution can be possible or imagined in a novel where fiction reigns supreme in the name of the absence of authority and the consequent presence of freedom. The reader, who partook in this game at least since

Chapter 13, is left to choose which closure s/he finds more suitable: this is the mechanism of postmodern narrative.

CHAPTER 6

FOWLES AS A NOVELIST AND THE CRITICS OF POSTMODERNISM

It seems inevitable, after reaching this point, to subject Fowles' work to the criticism of Jameson, Eagleton and Habermas, the deniers and detractors of the postmodernist project. Not only will the following insight provide a useful comparison with the opposite philosophical approach, but it will also help us realise and understand the reasons why a good number of readers and critics have dismissed or patently disliked the postmodernist style of writing. However, before beginning this task, it feels necessary to discuss John Fowles' own opinion on the art of writing, with a special reference to his stylistic influences.

6.1. THE ART OF WRITING NOVELS

Being a novel set in the Victorian period, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* reflects the marked interest of its narrator in rendering the prose and style as close as possible to the nineteenth-century prose-writing procedures. The metafictional nature of the novel does not alter this fundamental quality, since the reader slowly experiences a descent into the cultural world of both countryside and urban Victorian England: however strongly the modern narrator may claim to be trying to break the illusions of fiction in the name of a greater freedom for himself and the plot's characters, the cultural landscape and its echoes on the reader's mind cannot pass unnoticed. Arguably, this seems to call for a stronger attachment to realism and the Great Tradition of novel-writing than the reading of the previous paper paragraphs may have induced to believe, an assumption which the following analysis shall prove to be quite close to Fowles' ideas on himself as a writer and a novelist.

In a 1977 BBC interview with Melvyn Bragg, Fowles attempted an explanation of his own view of the novelist's figure. From his standpoint, the human being choosing or having chosen

to write novels is afflicted by a deep “sense of loss” (“A BBC interview”), a feeling of having been deprived of certain qualities or features which are doomed not to come back. This “lost world” deeply buried in the novelist’s unconscious would eventually emerge with the very act of writing, which Fowles sees as a sort of refuging himself in the fiction of “unreal worlds” (“A BBC interview”). Counterbalancing this purely creative surge, Fowles does not refrain himself from strongly advising not excessively stressing jobs for future novelists, given the compelling and overwhelming nature of writing. In addition to this, a novel writer is also argued to communicate and express himself through feelings, seen as the primary elements for establishing the varying degrees of truth with which the reader will be faced: the natural, gut-feeling truth will be sustained and accompanied by the more socially committed truth. For the first kind, Fowles openly sees in Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence his major influences, whereas the social and cultural critique of his novels, including *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, is deemed to derive from Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*, a novel which has apparently always captivated his attention and fantasy (“A BBC interview”). As far as narrative is concerned, Daniel Defoe is quoted as being his “grandfather in English fiction” for his sheer ability in crafting a narratorial composition which seems impossible to stop reading, thus giving birth to what are popularly called ‘page-turners’. It should not be surprising, therefore, to find in Fowles a passionate defender of the art of writing against the inexorable advancement of cinematic technology in storytelling: the English narrator seems to show no remorse in labelling the camera as “a fascist thing”, a third-person-controlled device enslaving the viewer to its own limited vision, whereas the novel’s endless source of interest may be lying precisely in every reader’s different approach to it, so that every new reading is a re-creation of its fictional world (“A BBC interview”).

All of the abovementioned definitions are to be understood as a further development of previous theses enounced in a 1964 essay, *I write therefore I am*. At the beginning of this work, Fowles makes what one could term a shocking statement, by claiming that he had never had the serious intention of becoming a novelist. This insecurity seems to have derived from his assumption that it is quite impossible to guess “a ‘novelist’'s ever saying what he actually means or feels- one can hardly even imagine his meaning or feeling” (1998, 5), so that the novel writer is reduced to a sort of indecipherable liar. However, Fowles immediately acknowledges his utter inability to be something more than a writer, a fact which proves to be otherwise consolatory, since writing allows him to concretise his very first ambition, that is “to alter the society” where he must live (5): writing assumes an emancipatory aspect, all the more evident in the case of the novel which the present paper has been dissecting and analysing. This lust for a life-changing aspect of the novel form is linked to a conception of writing which treats it as something under the external influence of other factors. Fowles directly compares himself to a telepathist when it comes to inspiration, thereby rejecting any strictly materialistic approach to the art of writing (6).

In another essay specifically concerning the crafting of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles embraces Hutcheon's concept of narcissism, but in a wholly different manner. Fowles' narcissism implies constant love, attention and dedication to his own characters, so that they are treated like “children or lovers” (14). The possessive power of such creations holds such a strong grip on their author that this feeling of being possessed is argued to start a long time before the mere process of writing. There is a magical element in this occupation which Fowles seems quite eager to underline again (14). On the other side of such a radiant picture of the writing act, comes the inevitable obsession with editing and re-working, starting

from the task of getting “the right ‘voice’ for [the] material” (18), that is the proper way for the writer to communicate his ideas and feelings towards the reader. In a novel like *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, where irony appears so natural and direct, it is quite revealing to realise the difficulty experienced by Fowles in finding this mocking tone: however powerful the irony of the celebrated nineteenth-century English novelists may be or have been, the century in which the Dorset narrator finds himself to live is said to feel a certain dislike for the necessary superiority of an ironic writer’s viewpoint, either accusable of priggishness or omniscience (18). Fowles’ novel, as we have seen, attacks such assumptions in a dual manner, either by using irony under the pretence of the traditional omniscient narrator of Victorian novels or by turning the ironic device into a metafictional device for the narrator to admit his ignorance of his characters’ motives and reasons. The real torment of novel craftsmanship, however, is traced by Fowles in the ever-increasing amount of self-inflicted criticisms on the part of the author, whose obsessive and manipulative nature as creator of fictions never stops haunting him. A work is always seen in the light of its inevitable imperfections and flaws, no matter how long it is polished and refurnished: “the nightmare of the writer is that all his or her worst private fears and self-criticisms will be made public” (22).

The same essay also contains a self-telling confession of admiration for Thomas Hardy’s poetics, whose “shadow” is not minded by Fowles in the writing of his novel. An interesting coincidence is reported in the same paragraph: 1867 is both the year in which Fowles’ fiction is set and the year in which Hardy began his literary career. The Victorian narrator is also praised by Fowles for his ahead-of-his-time depiction of sexual intercourse in his novels, in spite of the apparent patina of respectability that his works might have had, to the point that

Fowles deems the love scene between Charles and Sarah as nothing less than “science fiction” (17), an excerpt which no Victorian novelist would have ever dared to put into words. The praise for Hardy’s storytelling continues in the next essay, *Hardy and the Hag*, originally published in 1977 for a memorial anthology, fifty years after Hardy’s death. The work begins with another, more direct and straightforward, definition of the novel, which is basically rendered as a sort of mental masturbation riddled with transgressive ambitions, “an onanistic and taboo-laden pursuit” (136) challenging both social and moral conformity. The specific reason why English literature has become so successful in producing such a dubious and controversial form of art is said to be lying in the simple contrast between the individual and the public spheres of life, a kind of friction whose offspring is the novel itself, embedded as it is both with the writer’s personal ideas and his necessary confrontation with the social environment. Literary creativity is also linked by Fowles to the aforementioned sense of a deep loss, so that the novelist and the human child find themselves connected in their common move away from illusions while stepping into reality, with the only difference that a fiction-maker like the novelist is forced to try to recuperate those very rejected illusions into his own work. Hardy’s novel chosen for the essay, *The Well-Beloved*, is quite an eloquent example: from Fowles’ viewpoint, both the book’s author and main character slowly realized their growing incapability to create a proper work of art, so that Hardy’s final discarding of the novel form in favour of poetry is the real-life parallel of Pierston’s inability to mould a perfect sculptural model of the ideal well-beloved. Fiction, argues Fowles in a mocking of H. G. Wells’ final work, seems to have come to “the end of its tether”, a dilemma fated to haunt the consciousness of twentieth-century novelists far more than Hardy could have predicted (138-139).

As a further exploration and confirmation of his theses, Fowles quotes a theory previously advanced by clinical psychiatry Yale professor Gilbert J. Rose about the origins and pre-conditions of the artist's mind. Rose claims that some children undergo a deeper, more marked experience of separation from the unity with their mother to the acceptance of an outer world and objective reality. The mark left upon them from this dissociation is expressed in terms of a deep, "polymorphic" (139) pleasure of being one with the motherly figure, a kind of indulgence which the child, once s/he reaches the adult stage, will try to recollect and enjoy in surrogate artistic forms. In other terms, the artist was once "a magician with a wand" (139) and he will never stop being one, no matter how unconscious the original childhood sensation may become. Here comes again the sense of a lost magical world resulting in a deep dislike of the adult, outer reality and in the fictional plunge into parallel worlds of stronger significance, a process which Hardy himself deemed "metempsychosis" (qtd. in Fowles, 1998, 140). Moreover, Fowles chooses to combine this myth of magic being lost and recovered with the myth which every novelist has to shape of himself/herself, that is the magical feeling of being "possessed" (140) before and in the very process of writing, all the more difficult to describe and define because of his uniquely individual nature. All that a novelist may say about it is when it is felt, how deeply, how much and long it varies in intensity, not to mention that such a childlike state of mind is always countered by the more adult work of revising, "the elimination of the childish from the childlike" (141). The overwhelming nature of such a feeling is rightly comparable to Hardy's figure of the Well-Beloved: the more a text approaches its end and conclusion, the more tiring and reluctant the fiction-maker will be feeling, so that every return to reality will always happen with an increased sense of loss.

One final element in Hardy's prose which strongly influenced Fowles' writing is to be found in the recurrent preference accorded to the unhappy ending by the Victorian novelist. Fowles' theory is that the happy ending, no matter what kind of text contains it, is a sort of denial and destruction of the Well-Beloved, of the always amendable and improvable artistic qualities necessary for artistic creation. In other words, the Well-Beloved stands as the supreme, yet unattainable ideal of the masterpiece, the work not necessitating any further refurnishing, editing or betterment. This means that any happy ending, although it tries to re-establish a happy communion between the "hero-author and heroine-mother" in the light of Rose's thesis, is still doomed to quench the writer's thirst for more stories, as if it were the very cause for the much-feared writer's block. The sad ending, instead, forces the artist to continue his journey in search for the perfect creation, freeing him/her from the cage of a completed plot: the sad ending is therefore "both releasing and therapeutic" (144). *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a splendid case in point: Fowles openly chose to opt for two different endings (three, counting the stereotypically Victorian one), the first suggesting a happy future for Charles and Sarah and the second ending on a more bitter note, both of which seemed entirely plausible and also acted as a sort of inspirational nudge for the writer's career: "it had seemed more fertile and onward to my whole being as a writer" (145).

Now we must turn to the second big influence on John Fowles' writing career: D. H. Lawrence. In a commentarial essay on Lawrence's final complete work, *The Man Who Died*, Fowles openly inserts the modernist writer on the list of those artists who were able to "speak" to him (230), to establish a deep spiritual connection with another man born in the swamp of middle-class fake respectability and conformity. The main characteristic of both Lawrence's life and works which seems to have fascinated and encourage Fowles is to be found in his

“ability to feel and venerate the *existingness* in things” (234), that is an aware feeling of profound reverence for reality, a joyful celebration of the simple fact of being an alive creature among all other existing entities. Fowles openly remarks how this acute perception of existence seems to be the direct opposite of what Sartre or Camus felt in their lives: although Fowles’ admiration for existentialism seems to have never faltered or disappeared, he still could not bring himself to feel nauseated or numbed by the realisation that everything does exist. Neither Sartre’s disgust towards the brutal nakedness of life, nor Camus’ shocking recognition of the world’s absurdity seem to have penetrated into Fowles’ chords (235). On the other side, Lawrence’s lust for existingness may be also acquired and cultivated positively, especially in the face of the patently oblivion of existence which modern society seems to have perpetrated on the individual by masking the simple facts of life and death with cultural facades and patinas (235-236). Nature, as opposed to these high-culture artefacts, stands as the supreme realm of existingness, as we shall now try to demonstrate.

Fowles’ mystical connection to nature and the subsequent feeling of Lawrencian existingness clearly emerges in another essay, *The Nature of Nature*, where the very same concept is rendered with the synonym of *beingness*. This intense feeling, given its intrinsic contradictoriness, must be described in paradoxical terms: its transience and ungraspability lead to a double experience of “oneness” and “separateness”, of both complete mind-and-body fusion with nature and isolation from everything else (355-356). An excerpt from Fowles’ 1969 novel seems to be highly indicative of this mystical communion with and separation from Nature: Chapter 29 sees Charles entering the Undercliff, where a marvellous spectacle soon reaches his sight. A wren is singing at top of his shrill voice, an innocent bird claiming its own place in the sea of existence without any shame or concern, so that “the

appalling ennui of human reality lay cleft to the core; and the heart of all life pulsed there in the wren's triumphant throat" (Fowles, 2004, 242). Eco-criticist Thomas M. Wilson traces in this passage the prevailing of pure, concrete existence over its opposite, over the void and nothingness so acutely perceived by many 1900s philosophies and worldviews, the triumph of Being over a Sartre-reminiscent *nauseè* and also an overall echo of Lawrence's scathing poetic attack on the reification of nature by 'grey successful men/ So hideous and corpse-like, utterly sunless,/ like gross successful slaves mechanically waddling' (qtd. in Wilson, 2006, 255).

The inebriating celebration of Oneness and the deriving isolation from the transient qualities of space-time constitute the common denominator of Fowles' and Lawrence's poetics, ultimately expressed in the latter's panegyric:

For man, the vast marvel is to be alive. For man, as for flower and beast and bird, the supreme triumph is to be most vividly, most perfectly alive. Whatever the unborn and dead may know, they cannot know the beauty, the marvel of being alive in the flesh. The dead may look after the afterwards. But the magnificent here and now of life in the flesh is ours, and ours alone, and ours only for a time. We ought to dance with rapture that we should be alive and in the flesh, and part of the living, incarnate cosmos (qtd. in Wilson, 2006, 256).

The coming to terms with the natural realm as an endless source of inspiration for narrative emerges in quite a stronger manner in Fowles' 1979 pamphlet *The Tree*, the first homage paid to the non-human world by the narrator of Lyme Regis. In this short work, Fowles explicitly links prose fiction to the nature of trees, in the sense that the secluded protection and solitude offered by trees is retraceable in the novelist's act of retreating from the businesses of daily life and convention into the realm of writing, the realm of "a 'wild', or ordinarily repressed and socially hidden, self" (Fowles, 2010). This second self is described as the most precious and treasurable core of our identity, for its value lies in being directly in contact with the

essence of existence, with the aforementioned existingness: “It is our passage, our mystery alone, however miserable the account that is brought out for the world to see or hear or read at second-hand” (Fowles, 2010).

6.2. IRONY IN HARDY AND FOWLES

Hardy’s tragic irony has become a widely recognised landmark of his literary works, a trait which he seems to share with Fowles’ postmodernist narrative. In both cases, irony is deployed to unleash a powerful attack on the social biases and hypocrisies of the novel’s settings and environment, with a peculiar focus on the misadventures or misfortunes of one single character in the plot. To further prove this point, we have chosen to adopt the three categories of literary irony designated in Saxena’s and Dixit’s analysis of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* for an insightful comparison between the two different narrators and their ironic attitude.

6.2.1. Cosmic irony.

Cosmic irony literally embraces the whole cosmos by turning it into a sort of stage where the play of life seems to be manipulated and manoeuvred by an external, transcending force directly opposite to the ambitions of a specific character. The end of Chapter XI in *Tess* portraying the rape scene confronts the reader with the bitter narratorial accusation towards the indifference of Providence:

But, might some say, where was Tess's guardian angel? where was the providence of her simple faith? Perhaps, like that other god of whom the ironical Tishbite spoke, he was talking, or he was pursuing, or he was in a journey, or he was sleeping and not to be awaked (qtd. in Saxena, Dixit, 183).

Chapter XV only brings further evidence to the obliviousness of the apparently divine order of the universe: “She—and how many more—might have ironically said to God with Saint Augustine: “Thou hast counselled a better course than Thou hast permitted”” (183).

6.2.2. Irony of structure/circumstances.

When the structure and the settings of a novel deliberately contradict the premises or the action developing before the reader’s eyes, there emerges another specific kind of irony. Hardy’s work is quite indicative of this second type from its very subtitle: “A Pure Woman”. As the flickering through the pages will inevitably demonstrate, Tess is slowly stripped of her own purity through seduction, self-neglection and lastly murder (183-184). Another reading of the adjective ‘pure’ may also discover Hardy’s irony in the contrast between Tess and the other characters: when compared to Alec’s opportunism and Angel’s double standards in the matter of sexual misconduct, Tess’s overall integrity may be deemed as purity. The very initial circumstances of the novel only deepen this kind of irony: the two surviving branches of the D’Urbervilles could not possibly be more different one from another in their lifestyles and opinions, but a simple dialogue between a parson and a peasant at the novel’s beginning is sufficient to set the domino effect into motion (184).

6.2.3. Verbal irony.

Words are the raw material of every work of literature, and their infinite malleability also lends itself to quite ironic effects. In *Tess*, such tragic verbal irony is achieved through the narrator’s taking advantage of the oblivion surrounding the heroine’s past. As such, Angel’s innocently terming Tess as “a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature” (185) deeply contrasts with the reader’s awareness of the milkmaid’s unwilling seduction, which is also re-awakened by Angel’s mother’s good-willed dedication of the biblical Proverbs to Tess herself:

My dear son, your father has decided to read us the chapter in Proverbs in praise of a virtuous wife. We shall not need to be reminded to apply the words to the absent one. May Heaven shield her in all her ways! (185).

6.2.4. The irony in Fowles' novel.

The French Lieutenant's Woman may be said to offer both an appropriation and a radicalisation of Hardy's narratorial use of irony. The introducing paragraphs to this section have tried to demonstrate Fowles' debt to Hardy's poetics and vision of literature, so that our analysis would be incomplete without considering Fowles' alternative utilisation of the ironic tool in his own narrative. Given the complexity and multi-layered nature of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, it would not be startling to notice the manifold ways in which the narrator chooses to be ironic, as the following section will show.

Fowles' narrator's irony is primarily focused on the main character, Charles Smithson, who is supposed to act according to his class' dictates of a Victorian aristocrat indulging in aristocratic pastimes. However, Charles openly defies such a restricted and elite vision by choosing palaeontology as his hobby (Fowles, 2004, 16-17). This choice may be seen as an indicator of both circumstantial and cosmic irony, since the historical circumstances and pressures are both opposed by Charles and his own grandfather seems to see in his nephew's rejection of traditional aristocratic pastimes such as fox-hunting nothing less than a collapse of the entire noble class' cosmos (17). An additional proof of this perceived rupture with Charles' origins is to be found in Charles' ambiguity towards politics, a field in which he seems to waver between disengagement and a mild, secret preference for the champion of liberalism, Gladstone, indelibly marked as "the arch-traitor, the unmentionable" by his uncle's conservatism (17).

However, the first key difference between Hardy and Fowles seems to lie in Fowles' narrator's not complete dismissiveness of Victorian manners and attitude: Charles may behave in an eccentric, bizarre manner; yet, his aristocratic status cannot be fully escaped or ignored. His being a man of his age is testified by his general "adagio" attitude towards existence (13), all the more reflected in his "tranquil boredom" (13) and "laziness" (17) as features of wealthy Victorian personalities, free from the burden of work and therefore left to ponder how to profitably spend their own leisure time. This friction between the upper class' exponent and the disinterested aesthete produces an ironic effect, arguably what might be termed 'historical irony', which the furthering of the plot only seems to exacerbate.

Once again, palaeontology is the operative field of such exacerbation. On page 47, Charles is once more characterised as a man with a lot of free time on his hands, devoting it to the socially reprobable and not very agreeable pastime of discovering fossils. The narrator calls him "a man with time to fill, a born amateur" and his interest in the rare *Echinodermia* fossil "a familiar justification for spending too much time in too small a field". The situational irony cuts deeper in presenting Charles improperly dressed for his extravagant activity, a trigger for hilarity to our (post)modern eyes, but an act absolutely necessary for Victorian standards: a man's duty was to always appear respectable (48). The narrator takes advantage of this in order to melt the aesthete and the aristocrat into the same figure again: Charles may call himself a Darwinist, but he fails to grasp the concept of extinction when applied to a whole species. To him and his contemporaries, personal death and disappearance was undeniable, but not "general extinction" (51). The geological strata analysed on the shore are to Charles further proof of a hidden order in the universe: despite change, despite contingency and evolution, the cosmic laws exist to guarantee the survival of the fittest and best, of which a

fine example is to be found in Charles himself! The cosmic and the historical irony here have met in the disenchanting dissection of the Victorian psyche by the narratorial voice, in opposition to Tess's realization of a tragically deterministic world, which Hardy's heroine painfully accepts to the very extreme.

There are, however, certain passages in the book where a malignant fate quite similar to Tess's seems to be operating against Charles, which of course causes the narrator to inflict further irony, so to say, on his character. When seeking redemption in church after making love to Sarah, the contrast between Duty and Freedom could not be more evident in the discrepancies between Charles' social self and his more intimate self. The very act of praying is called into question: is Charles really talking to the man on the cross or is he interiorly struggling with himself? (363). In both cases, the battle of wits is rendered in an ironic standoff where the verbal and the situational irony collide and melt with each other: the contempt envisaged by Charles in Sarah's eyes is turned into a mocking nickname, Contempt, for Sarah herself; when Charles affirms to be rendering unto Caesar what he must render, Caesar becomes Mr. Freeman, Ernestina's father. In a preceding scene, the verbal irony had been further deepened by the historical in the case of the prostitute revealing herself to be eponymous with Charles' forbidden love: both the coincidence of the two women sharing the same name and the distinct sexual tension cause Charles to vomit, a reaction quite understandable in tragic terms, since Charles abhors pre-marital intercourse as a man of an age of repression (318).

Nevertheless, a truly postmodern irony on the narrator's part is expressed in Chapter 55, during the unexpected encounter between Charles and a mysteriously looking passenger in the same train wagon. This passenger is reported to be gazing at Mr. Smithson with quite an investigating look in his eyes, almost "cannibalistic" and "leechlike" in its intensity (408), so

that the reader may be suspecting of a simple voyeur or spy. Suddenly, two simple, direct questions about using and how using Charles force the mask to come off: the passenger is none other than the narrator himself, now entering the stage as a full-formed, living character. The irony in this passage seems to cut deeper due to the narrator's face sharing the same look of that omnipotent god openly and fiercely despised in Chapter 13. What ever happened to the spirit of granting one's own characters freedom of choice and action? The justification chosen by the narratorial voice is highly filled with dense irony: since both Charles and Sarah are nothing more than products of his own imagination, mere brainchildren of fiction, the writer is necessarily left with no choice but to "fix the fight" (409), to let one side prevail to the detriment of the other. It is a typical demonstration of postmodern ambiguity, since even a freedom-granting narrator is inevitably slave to the rules of traditional fiction-making. Gods are apparently immortal, both in theology and in prose.

The reader's interest is thus raised in the narrator's following course of action: how will an omnipotent, however reluctantly, deity choose to behave? How is the fight to be fixed? The answer is provocatively postmodern once more, since the narrator fails to "see a reason" for a classical resolution and openly admits the possibility of a double alternative, in which he either contents himself with telling the events or remains on both Charles' and Sarah's side (409). However, the incongruity of this quandary soon reveals itself: choosing to take no part in the fight inevitably implies splitting the final climax of the plot into two different versions, always with the risk of the reader interpreting the second one as "the final, the 'real' version" (409). A flick of a florin decides the match, the novel will have no definitive ending. Irony on the part of the narrator has managed to preserve the freedom of his characters: the fictional god now emerges as both omnipotent and benign.

At this point, it would be useful to draw a final comparison between Hardy's and Fowles' approach to irony: the former chooses this literary device to consolidate his deterministic outlook and its tragic consequences on the individual caught in the clogs of this reckless machinery; the latter, writing in a historical phase beyond Victorian England, exploits irony as a useful tool to highlight the inevitable double-faced nature of the Victorians himself, with Charles as the fictional embodiment and catalyst of this friction. The distance from Charles' historical period becomes the ironic, disenchanted distance of the narrator, whose voice thus manages to preserve irony both in the tragic and the comical aspects of his own novel's setting.

6.3. JAMESON

The fourth chapter clearly highlighted Jameson's suspicion and rejection of postmodernism, beginning from his not accepting the postmodern reduction of everything to culture, interpretation and human schemata. The tiny seed of doubt that the whole of human understanding and knowledge could be reduced to an act of perpetual writing and re-writing, to an endless fiction, could perhaps be the indicator of what Jameson and his like would not tolerate from postmodernism. The narrator of Fowles' novel could not be more explicit on such a matter: "... hypocrite lecteur, I can only smile. You do not even think of your own past as quite real; you ... fictionalise it, in a word, and put it away on a shelf- your book, your romanced autobiography" (97).

To Jameson's eyes, it is passages like the one above who openly reflect the commodification of the past operated by postmodernism. Human life is debased to a mere work of fiction, constantly revised and sugar-coated for mere convention, an act which testifies to an intense desire of flight from reality (97), which a Marxist perspective simply will not approve of.

On the other side, the use of history as a collective archive of disposable and reusable quotations, anecdotes and information about the past has been another landmark in anti-postmodern scholarship, including Jameson. Chapter 35 of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* could be a case in point, for this is where the narrator openly displays his knowledge of the Victorian era and its quite baffling methods of sexual containment and contraception, while relating both to the fictional characters of Sam and Mary having pre-marital intercourse. Once again, it is the interpretation of such passages which strongly separates defenders of postmodernist fiction such as Hutcheon and its attackers like Jameson: Hutcheon sees in this ironic/parodic exposure of Victorian sexual biases and their comparison with the modern approach to sexuality a catalyst for political and historical awareness (see 5.2), whereas Jameson cannot seem to isolate such attempts at historical irony from a sense of sterility, of simple parody for parody's sake (see 4.1.2). It could be argued that Hutcheon's so-to-say 'responsive parody' clashes with Jameson's "blank parody", which castigates the stylistic heterogeneity of postmodern novels as a stylistic, literary act of cannibalism without critical purpose (see 4.1.2).

Arguably, another passage from Fowles' novel could work as an indicator of such discrepancies in critical judgement. In Chapter 3, Charles is seen alone in his room at the White Lion inn, pondering and meditating on how to spend the afternoon ahead of him. His dilemma provides the narrator with an excellent opportunity to contrast this Victorian man's momentary absence of hobbies and pastimes with the acute sense of lacking time of the modern world, which has forcefully reduced "such a huge proportion and ingenuity of our societies to finding faster ways of doing things" (Fowles, 2004, 13). The overall pressure to ultrafast solutions to daily issues and trouble, argues the narrator, seems to mask the longing

for approaching “a perfect lightning flash” instead of “a perfect humanity” (13). Such subtle irony is, as we have seen, the ultimate postmodernist device for planting the seed of doubt into the reader’s mind for criticising his present socio-cultural conditions, a feature which detractors like Jameson seem to misinterpret as a groundless attack on the modern world which fails to see the concrete reasons behind its current predicaments. Metaphorically speaking, Fowles’ narrator, being postmodern, does not offer solutions, but simple food for thought, whereas Jameson openly strives for achieving those solutions.

Finally, the notion of ‘nostalgic conservatism’ which Jameson has often applied to postmodernism must be taken into account. Arguably, such nostalgia derives from an altered perception of the past, one which could be deemed to largely bathe in melancholia or regret, and this is where the narrator, being a self-declared “heretic” (131), enters the stage: he claims the distance experienced by the Victorians due to the absence of modern-day communication systems to have been a source of greater individual freedom and deeper interest in fellow human beings who were absolute strangers. Whether such affirmations are ironic or serious, as far as postmodernism is concerned, is once again left to the reader to decide, but Jameson may be tempted to disqualify them as a mere lure to see the past through rose-tingled glasses.

6.4. EAGLETON

As a strong believer in the cause of socialism, Eagleton has been depicted not to sympathise with the deconstructive approach of postmodernism, especially of its culturalist fringe. A certain tendency to see nothing beyond the relative cultural text (and context) may be detected also in Fowles’ book, given its incorporating of both the Victorian and the modern period. In an illuminating paragraph from Chapter 10, moreover, both of the two abovementioned periods are joined by and linked to the Renaissance age in what we could term a typically

postmodern move: the breath-taking scenery of Lyme Bay is painted by the narrator as if belonging to a masterwork of Botticelli, with all the trademarks of a Renaissance deep affection for beauty and good. However, a quirk postmodernist remark is added to the description:

It does not matter what that cultural revolution's conscious aims and purposes, its cruelties and failures were; in essence the Renaissance was simply the green end of one of civilization's hardest winters. It was an end to chains, bounds and frontiers. Its device was the only device: What is, is good (68).

Arguably, critics like Eagleton would find this paragraph quite paradoxical. Firstly, the open dismissal of the incongruities and contradictions of the Renaissance in the name of an all-excusing, all-generalising device seems in high contrast to the postmodernist appreciation of pluralities and alternative, subterranean histories: are we to infer that the only label to classify the Renaissance period is the one reading 'What is, is good'? The whole operation sounds redundant of universalism, as Eagleton had argued in 4.2.2. In the second instance, when Fowles' narrator deems Charles to be a man prisoner of his own age and culture, so that he could possibly not escape his frame of mind by applying existentialist philosophy to it (2004, 69), the charge of culturalism seems to resurface prepotently. If we also add Eagleton's and Jameson's suspicion that the chaotic ensemble of different cultural periods inside postmodern works like Fowles' simply mask a capitalist commodification of ready-made, instant knowledge, then *The French Lieutenant's Woman* becoming a bestseller might perfectly suit their logic.

Another paragraph might be suitable for highlighting the gap between a postmodernist writer like Fowles and Eagleton's realistic mindset. On page 79 of Fowles' novel, a strong denouncement of the establishing of plutocracy within British society is set in the context of

mid-century Victorian culture: “good money and good brains”, capitalism and entrepreneurialism, are exposed as an excellent escape road from birth- and blood-connected rights and privileges, both of which could now be obtained through economic means. Ernestina’s grandfather and father both belong to this new social class of parvenus, as the narrator clearly shows in detailing their respective past of economic ascendancy. Eagleton’s potential rebuttal to such social critique could reside in both its contradicting the relativizing spirit of postmodernism and in its failure to be radical enough: if the effects of plutocracy have been underlined through the ‘case study’ of Ernestina’s relatives, why should it be impossible for the narrator (and arguably for Fowles himself) to unearth the causes (namely capitalism) which made plutocracy such a harsh reality?

The aforementioned gap between postmodernism and socialist realism seems to widen before a third extract from the novel that we have been considering. Chapter 19 contains an open excursus on the appalling conditions of poverty from which many low-class individuals had to distance themselves to achieve a more decent economic status. Among these individuals, the novel includes the character of Millie, an employee of Mrs Poulteney’s, born in a small, dismal cottage sentimentalised in Victorian propagandistic paintings and recently converted into a luxurious holiday residence. The narrator is quick to underline his own disgust and hatred towards the direct effacing of the “horrors” (159) which happened during Millie’s time, a feeling exacerbated by his realizing that “each age, each guilty age, builds high walls round its Versailles”, also by taking advantage of artistic inspiration (159). It might be speculated, once again, that Eagleton would strongly agree with such vitriolic attacks on social oppression, but, in the meantime, he would also be interested in retrieving the causes of such

oppression and in asking how postmodernism can attempt such descriptions of reality while being anti-realist at its core (4.2.2).

6.5. HABERMAS

The Habermasian critique of postmodernism and rehabilitation of human reason remains a valid topic for discussion also in the literary domain. It should be remembered that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* presents two characters, Charles and Dr Grogan, with a formidable appetite for scientific and rational discussion or enquiry, which is the basis for their amiable chatting in Chapter 19. Such dialogue prompts the narrator to write a little bit of invective against the modern conception of science, in which he deplores “the tyranny of specialization” and warns the reader against mistaking “progress with happiness” (152). Habermas might be in two minds when faced with such quotations. On one side, the German scholar would agree with the tyrannical, despotic nature of specialisation, since this phenomenon is the direct consequence of the overcoming of the lifeworld by the system and its fragmentation into differentiated areas of fields of knowledge (4.3.). On the other, Habermas, being a herald of the project of modernity, would not be in favour of the separation of progress from happiness, since progress is viewed by him in the light of Enlightenment emancipation and therefore stands as a provider of a certain degree of happiness (4.3.).

The fact that Habermas has always reprimanded postmodernists for their altered, reworked vision of modernity and their subsequent dismissal of its ambitions re-emerges in another paragraph by Fowles. Chapter 31 provides a short critique of the Victorian age as a non-Hegelian period, troubled with the constant anxiety to shun conflicts and incongruities through “positive, all-explaining theories, carefully studied and studiously applied”, while actively contributing to the establishment of absolute, granitic truths, the very same which the

furious iconoclasm of the narrator's modern age has demolished, so that "now erection seems as ephemeral an activity as bubble-blowing" (250). Here, Habermas' philosophy may find itself in the same reprimanding position as mentioned above. Its rejection of a capital Reason governing and constituting reality at the same time has been the central point of departure from Hegel, so that Habermas may reply to Fowles' narrator by claiming that no historical age could be possibly be conceived as a thesis-antithesis-synthesis process. Nevertheless, the German philosopher maintains his belief in the liberating force of the modern project, so that, if postmodernists may find the erection of truths vain or evanescent, it is because of their failure to see the incompleteness of the emancipatory project and the urge to bring it to its conclusion (4.3.).

A third case in point should be added to emphasise the urge for completing the modern project, as stated in the previous sentence. In Chapter 48, Fowles' narrator directs his critique at the mercilessness of nowadays social oppression, plainly exposing charity as a sort of protective, full-fledged barrier between "the cruelties of our own age and our guilt", in contrast to which the Victorians, however stratified their society might have been, were forced to be in closer contact with misery and exploitation, so that "the intelligent and sensitive felt far more personally responsible" (362). To Habermas' eyes, this remark appears debatable from two different viewpoints. Firstly, it may be seen as another hint at the neoconservatism with which postmodernism has often been charged, possibly with a touch of nostalgia for a past period when the proximity of human baseness, although often unresolved, appeared to haunt one's moral conscience in a stronger manner. Secondly, the fact of the system organising and administering social care and aid stands for Habermas as another proof of the colonisation (4.3.) of the lifeworld, where the human single is slowly deprived of its dignity

and turned into a sort of indigent parasite of which society must take care. Postmodernism, for all its denouncing and deploring such issues, still seems at a loss for answers and solutions to them, a void which Habermas fill with communicative reason.

6.6. Appendix: Harvey and Fowles' make-believe realism.

Throughout the novel that we have been examining, John Fowles' narrator maintains a deceptively realistic behaviour in the manner of other prominent Victorian novelists (Hardy, Thackeray, etc.), which is nevertheless stained and compromised by the shocking revelations of Chapter 13, where the postmodernist style of writing suddenly allows the characters their own freedom and empties the narrator of any omniscient faculty which he might have possessed. Here lies the heart of the paradox: although the reader is now faced with an unknowing narrator and self-determining characters, s/he is still reading the book as if through the filter of the typically omniscient narrator of realistic fiction. The mind habit of allowing writers reliability and credibility proves hard to shake off, and all the more due to the frequent digressions on the Victorian era which permeate the chapters, giving a sense of historically accurate accounts. What we would like to show here, is how Harvey's analysis of modernity and postmodernity in the second chapter of our paper may be linked to Fowles' strategies of make-believe historical realism.

If we return to the denunciation of the present-day lack of time in *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* Chapter 3 (12-13), it seems quite striking to notice a certain connection between Fowles' narrative and Harvey's historical analysis. Postmodernity had been previously visualised as the new phase of intensified, accelerated communication on an international, global scale, the first factor of what Harvey chose to term "time-space compression" (2.2). Such compression inevitably resulted in an acute sense, both individually and collectively, of

having less time at disposal for daily activities, consequentially causing an acceleration also in problem-solving techniques and mechanisms, or, in Fowles' words, "finding faster ways of doing things" (13). There is no reason whatsoever to doubt the historical situatedness or context of the narratorial complaint, since a later confirmation of both instances will appear in Chapter 13: "I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes" (95), words which render the writer a true inhabitant of the postmodern age. However, this writer is clever enough to disguise himself as a member of the Victorian society, which emerges from the comparison between the modern reaction to time-space compression and the Victorian attitude summarised in the musical term "adagio" (13). Charles' unagitated behaviour at the beginning of Chapter 3 epitomises the daily Victorian middle-class problem of finding the right hobby or activity to indulge in during leisure hours. The restriction of such behaviour to the middle class is not casual at all, since the narrator openly identifies such "tranquil boredom" (13) as one of the modern symptoms of richness, although the 1860s are described in terms of a decade quite more thriving for every step of the social ladder than the rest of the Victorian era. All of this coincides with Harvey's Marxist analysis of modern economy (2.1), where the capitalist portion of society exploits the power of money also for recreational purposes and the structural uncertainty of the system often gives birth to sudden rises in economic or monetary power even among the labouring strata.

As evinced from above, Fowles' novel provides the reader with a narratorial voice with a deep insight into the cultural matrix of the Victorian age, all in order to set the stage for the illusory sense of omniscience typically associated with a nineteenth-century novel. This feeling of authorial reliability stemming from his knowledge of past events is further developed in Chapter 8, within a short digression on the condition of the scientist in the

nineteenth century. Here, the inadequacy of traditional theories for the explanation of life mysteries and the longing for pushing the limits of knowledge beyond such theoretical boundaries are both expressed in the desire to discover, because “the discovery was of the utmost importance for the future of man” (49). It is precisely this optimistic tendency to conceive science as the panacea for world issues which had been signalled by Harvey as a characteristic trait of the modern age (2.1), the same age in which the narrator has so far pretended to be writing in. The illusion of omniscience is furtherly exacerbated by psychological descriptions such as the one appearing in Chapter 10, where Charles’ displeasure with his finitude and contingency (“I cannot possess this for ever, and therefore am sad”, (69)) could be erroneously seen as evidence of the narrator’s all-knowing capacities. It is also instructive for our present purpose to notice the strong similarity between Charles’ self-reproval and Harvey’s quoting Baudelaire at the beginning of his analysis: the transient and the fleeting of the French *poète maudit* find a deep echo in Charles’ own words (2.1).

All of the examples previously quoted derive from what might be deemed as the “modern” section of Fowles’ novel, that is all of the chapters written before the self-unmasking, postmodern revelation of Chapter 13. Are we then to understand that, after this chapter, the historicity of the novel is completely shattered and lost? The answer might be both positive and negative: it is undeniable that, since the narrator has stripped of his god-like authority, the reader cannot entirely trust the narratorial claims to factual authenticity, given also that postmodernism has a penchant for parody and metafiction; however, historical digressions still abound in the following chapters of the book, so that a strong sensation of reading a Victorian novel still remains, in spite of the writing mechanisms being laid bare. We shall hence attempt to prove this contradictory nature through more examples.

On page 115, the narrator seizes the chance for a recognition of the Victorian premises for female emancipation, openly situating the beginning of such emancipation on March 30th, 1867, when John Stuart Mill proposed a memorable motion for equal access to voting rights. Once again, Harvey's analysis of the emancipatory ideals of modernity may be recalled here as to certify the veritable status of the narrator's assertions, so that the reader knows to be faced with a real motion concretely proposed in the Victorian age. However, the historical reference is also a pretext for the postmodernist hindsight irony to kick in: no sooner has Stuart Mill's motion rejection been mentioned than Disraeli is labelled "the old fox" (115) and the *Punch* magazine cartoon is greeted with a non-equivocal "haw, haw, haw" (115). History is still the frame of the novel's plot, but spiced, as we might say, with ironic comments by a writer who does not belong to the Victorian age and therefore allows himself to vent his own sarcasm in a manner which we would never expect from Jane Austen.

On the other side, we have witnessed Harvey's strong criticism against consumerism and the degradation of history to a sort of museum culture in the second chapter of our paper, both of which have been highlighted as eloquent tracts of the postmodern age of the triumph of ephemerality. Quite interestingly for a postmodern novel like Fowles', the same accusation is to be found in Chapter 19, in the paragraph where the sentimentalisation or effacing of past hardships is severely rebuked. Here, the brief account of historical misery on Millie's side encounters the chastising of "Hollywood films of 'real' life" (159) as unadulterated falsification, so that the 'realistic' background of the Victorian age is still maintained, although the postmodern self-reflecting and self-exposing voice will not accept to be silenced. The contradiction reaches its climax in Chapter 35, during the whole course of which considerations on the true nature of Victorian infamous sexual repression are interspersed

with salacious considerations on the true effects of sexual liberation. In a reversal of viewpoints typical of postmodern prose, the narrator goes so far as to claim that “we are the more Victorian ... century” (271), since we have deprived sex of its enigmatic, ambiguous status.

The time has come for a reflection on the value of our work so far. All of the chapters of the present work have sought to establish a dialectic between the pros and cons of postmodernism, in the light of the considerations of both its praisers and detractors: the liberating aspirations inherent in the postmodernist enterprise have been underlined, so as to be balanced against its inherent contradictions, which, in Linda Hutcheon’s scholarship, have not only not been denied, but admittedly incorporated into the postmodernist project. The fact of such project having reached a wider and wider public than expected, as clearly indicated by the canonization of postmodernist architecture and the publishing success of John Fowles’ work, testifies to the deep interest provoked by postmodernist ideas, however bitter or harsh the reaction to them may have proved. It is undeniable, however, that the emergence of new theoretical approaches from the 1990s onward, such as New Historicism, Eco-criticism and queer theory, has resulted in a sort of red shift in new critical directions departing largely, if not completely, from the basics of postmodernism. The question, therefore, seems inevitable to arise: is postmodernism still relevant? We shall dedicate the last two chapters to the search for an answer.

CHAPTER 7

TO BE OR NOT TO BE? POSTMODERNISM TODAY

Wanted: dead or alive. To use a Western movie cliché, this simple statement might summarise the status of postmodernism in the twenty-first century. The situation is somewhat paradoxical: from Harvey's historical analysis, it was deduced that the present world is the ultimate embodiment of postmodernity, whose main philosophy and lifestyle is described as postmodernism. Why, then, are we here to decide the fate of such philosophy, as if it had been put on trial for its crimes? Are scholars so keen, so eager to dismiss postmodernism entirely as nothing more than a passing fad, or could its lessons still prove valuable and instructive? The seventh chapter of this paper will show the impossibility to find a sole answer for these dilemmas, but will also attempt to sketch the premise of a personal, however limited, conclusion based on the overall analysis of the postmodern phenomenon.

7.1. Linda Hutcheon

From the extensive use of Hutcheon's critical insight into postmodernism throughout this paper, one would be tempted to view her work as a tirelessly defence of postmodernist relevance for today's theory. Such an answer would correspond only to a partial truth, since Hutcheon has openly acknowledged the end of postmodernism as an effective critical tool, yet without completely rejecting it as a simple twentieth-century infatuation.

The key to understand the slow exhaustion of postmodernist critique as a theoretical framework seems to be found in its becoming part of the academic institutional programmes. Hutcheon defines such institutionalisation "a generalization of postmodernism into a kind of generic counter-discourse" (qtd. in Gulimari, 16), which is to be seen as detrimental to the deconstructive and subversive potential of such philosophy: paradoxically enough, what was

born and developed as the critique of all critiques, the destruction of all ideologies was suddenly turning into the ideology *par excellence*. The Canadian scholar's final response to the issue of postmodernism thus seemed unambiguous: in her 2002 work *The Politics of Postmodernism*, she had already conceded that the phenomenon known as postmodernism was over (Hutcheon, 166).

Secondly, a growing number of critics seemed to have grown tired of or annoyed by the lack of effectiveness on the postmodernist part as a powerful instrument for concrete, historical change: in other terms, postmodernism was charged with a serious deficiency of pragmatic value. Hutcheon seems to agree and disagree with such positions at the same time: whereas postmodernism did not provide an empirical ground for social or cultural reformation, its contribution to the awareness and acknowledgment of plural histories, differences and lifestyles might still be praised for its intellectual potential (17).

7.2. Ihab Hassan

Hassan's work in the academic domain of postmodernist critique has been often viewed as pioneering and illuminating, although Hassan has always maintained that he could not provide a definitive definition of postmodernism himself. This assumption also forms the basis of his analysis into the status of postmodernism today.

Hassan begins with quite a direct approach: "What was postmodernism in the first place? I am not at all certain, for I know less about it today than I did some thirty years ago" (qtd. in Stierstorfer, 199). At first, this acknowledgment may lead the reader to despair of finding a meaningful framework in Hassan's article, but this presumption is soon dismantled, for Hassan provides four different examples of what postmodernism may be about:

- Postmodernist architecture, as already explained in chapter 2, delights in playful pastiche and parody, all the more evincible from Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, McDougall's Storey Hall in Melbourne and Isozaki's Tsukuba Center in the eponymous Japanese city.
- John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio* encyclical heartily endorses its readers against the evils of postmodernism, the latter being equalled with manifold expressions of relativism.
- Some cultural studies theorists condemn the use of the term 'postmodernism' due to its lack of political resonance and applicability, while opting for the more apt word 'postcolonialism'.
- Pop art and culture products ranging from Warhol's creations to the parodic teasing of Leonardo's Mona Lisa and Michelangelo's David openly embrace pastiche as their foundational tenets (200).

All of these examples, argues Hassan, seem to deliver us from uncertainty with a plethora of good definitions for postmodernism: "fragments, hybridity, relativism, play, parody, pastiche, an ironic, sophisticated stance, an ethos bordering on kitsch and camp" (200). However, the very act of attempting a definition appears sterile in the light of postmodernist suspicion towards absolute definitions. The overall atmosphere of nowadays is depicted as being far from trusting and confident: the search for identity, especially self-identity, has degenerated into a sort of anxious, obsessive reflexivity, permeated with a deep sense of distrust and scepticism, all of which are deemed to be the legacy of a typically postmodernist mentality. Hassan seems quite fast to summarise it in the following words: "Perhaps postmodernism can be defined, after all, as a continuous exercise in self-definition. Or perhaps we can simply call it the equivocal autobiography of an age" (202), an age which has already been thoroughly

delineated and described by Harvey in the second chapter. Metaphorically speaking, one might argue that postmodernism is the daily diary written and kept by the second half of the twentieth century.

To further prove the strong influence exercised by postmodernist on Western mentality, Hassan recalls both the origins and the consequences of the aforementioned crisis of identity in First World cultures. From his viewpoint, postmodernity slowly deteriorated into a new kind of “genocidal postmodernity” (204), witnessed by the liberating anti-colonial struggles and cold war conflicts of the past century, whereas cultural postmodernism, with all its remarked features of hybridity and cultural transcoding, lead to the triumph of camp and kitsch, “jokey, dead-end games” on one side “or sheer media hype” on the other (204): under the pressure of so diverse and so overwhelming socio-cultural and historical factors, it should be no wonder that, concomitantly with postmodernism, Western philosophy witnessed the rise of poststructuralism and postcolonialism, both interpretable as strong, harsh reactions to the situation mentioned above. None of them, however, seem to provide an effective answer to Hassan, since poststructuralist theories are dismissed as mere “evasions” from a judicious understanding of reality and postcolonialism charged with an excess of self-righteous “pieties” (205).

Where should we look for solutions to this impasse, then? Surprisingly enough, Hassan manages to find them in two concepts discredited by postmodernism, truth and trust. The absence of a capital initial, however, is by no means a mere chance: both concepts are related to their outer, immanent meaning, to what they signify in the world which our minds interpret and judge, so that their transcendental qualities are nullified without the concepts losing their meaning. Truth, for example, should be neither rejected nor abhorred as totalitarian or

absolute, since “it is repugnant to pretend that the atrophy of transcendent truths licenses self-deception or justifies tendentiousness” (207). A substantial number of truths are to be found and recalled in the multifaceted domain of human experience, ranging from myth and tradition to science and daily experience. It should be thus inferred that the pervasiveness of truth, along with the longing for it, is to be linked to what the American psychologist William James had disclosed in his *Will to believe*, namely the inextricable bond between non-falsity and trust (James, 1956, 9). The psychological mechanism behind this is quite simple to verify: if the mind of an individual is not disposed to yield this or that point to another individual mind in the name of trust, truth shall result utterly inconceivable. No human is an all-knowing, all-understanding deity, from which arises the necessity to show confidence and belief in the Other. In Hassan’s own words, “trust depends on self-abnegation, self-emptying, something akin to kenosis. It requires dispassion, empathy, attention to others and to the created world, to something not in ourselves. But, ultimately, it demands self-dispossession” (208).

The combination of truth and trust gives birth to a new kind of realism, one which, far from falling to the temptation of new dogmata, has learned the lesson of postmodernism. To illustrate his point, Hassan recalls another renowned figure of the American cultural landscape, Emily Dickinson, a poem of whose recalls the menacing profile of Nothingness, another name for the nihilism with which postmodernism has often been charged. The awareness of being faced with the void, with the emptying of significance of value, is however assuaged by the preference for trust and truth: this forms the foundations of Hassan’s peculiar realism. It is therefore a matter of faith, a matter of according trust and truth a renewed kind of faith, one which enforces a vision of the spirit maintaining both its light and dark sides. Having been himself a scholar of postmodernism, Hassan does not intend to offer an

absolutely consolatory view of the spirit, since he is aware that “spirit is exigent; it has its harshness, its clouds of unknowing, its dark nights of the soul. It may begin in agnosticism and end in despair” (209), the same despair which seems to transpire from postmodernist irony and disbelief. In order to avoid both of them, a new realism is demanded and advocated, a “fiduciary realism” (209), able to activate its potential for discovering and defending truth and trust while facing “the authority of the Void” (209). In the midst of nihilism and from the ashes of postmodernism, a new kind of phoenix is ready to rise.

7.3. Alan Kirby

In 2006, the British scholar Alan Kirby published quite a caustic article, *The Death of Postmodernism And Beyond*, in which he led a devastating attack on both postmodernism and its supposed heir, what he termed “pseudo-modernism”.

The author’s intentions are clear from the very start of his contribution, where, judging from the module description of an university course on postmodernist fiction, he invites the reader to pay closer attention to the goals of the module, which proposes to establish the relationship between postmodernist fiction and contemporary fiction: since these two kinds of literature are made opposite to each other, and not complementary, Kirby seizes the chance to claim his own thesis, that postmodernism is “dead and buried” (Kirby).

This pronouncement of death, however, does not seem to apply to the academic field, where irreducible heralds of postmodernism, which is once again equalled with ironic self-awareness in the artistic field, are still said to be thriving. The real paradox detected by Kirby lies not only in this attachment to an old-fashioned way of thinking, but also in presenting a literature course module filled with books which are deemed incapable to relate to the students’ actual, millennial life. Postmodern works like Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s*

Woman, Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* and so on are texts which leave no access or opening spaces neither to the digital revolution witnessed and experienced by current students on a daily basis, nor to a cultural market where postmodernism itself seems to have been erased from memory or confined to animated cartoon gags. The generational gap between those cultural artefacts and present life only seems to widen and dilate (Kirby).

It would seem quite natural to wonder who or what is to be held responsible for such a sudden change in the history of ideas, and Kirby seems to identify the potential culprit (not liberator, as we shall see) in new technologies and media, which are charged with a new fetishism of "the recipient of the text", that is the reader, viewer or listener (Kirby). Here lies, according to the article's author, the key difference between postmodernism and pseudo-modernism: while the former questioned reality and its nature in the light of the recipient's impotence and helplessness (a view which, however, contrasts with our analysis of Fowles' novel), the latter has turned this recipient into an all-powerful, interactive, intrusive agent, whose freedom to change the cultural text in front of him is clearly expressed in the case of *Big Brother* shows. Were it not for the recipient's ability to intervene into the show by voting or expressing his opinion, the whole show would not even exist. The viewer/listener is, metaphorically speaking, the centre of the pseudo-modern cultural universe, "whose content and dynamics are invented or directed" by him in person (Kirby).

However, this new kind of interactivity is deemed to be a mere illusion. The example of tv news simultaneously being commented is quite clear: the individual watches the news, comments it through instant messages or e-mails, only to return to passivity immediately after performing such an act. The Internet, not surprisingly, is defined "as the pseudo-modern

cultural phenomenon par excellence” (Kirby), due to the almost absolute power of the Web-surfer to create, shape and re-invents the sites and pages which he visits, yet without realising the illusory nature of the concrete power which he has over the contents of the Internet: his power remains limited to a fugal, momentary interaction. The same artificiality is traced in the heavier and heavier use of CGI technologies for cinematic scenarios and backgrounds, which is argued to reduce movies to a mere duplicate of computer games. Reality TV is the other cultural form of pseudo-modernism: its absolute situatedness into the present moment makes it impossible to duplicate, thereby enhancing its intrinsic ephemerality and vacuity. The origins of such new cultural forms suddenly based on non-reproducing, temporary expressions, are argued to be located in the birth of dance music and industrial pornography during the hegemonic period of postmodernism. The 1970s and 1980s decades saw the rise of these new cultural fields, whose product, however different, was first conceived and meant to be used, exploited: one was (and is still) supposed to dance to disco music in the same manner as pornography watchers are instigated to utilize the available material for pleasure. The overall effect of such pseudo-modern practices has been that of an increasing obsolescence of their cultural products and means: “these are cultural actions in the present moment with no sense of either past or future” (Kirby).

Kirby also wishes to delineate a profound difference between postmodernism and pseudo-modernism in the assertion of their own identity: whereas the former is said to have preferred traditional, pre-digital means of communication, the latter is termed as the ultimate champion of new technologies for cultural expression. The labelling of postmodernism as analogue and pseudo-modernism as digital would seem to summarise the author’s point of view. There would be no questioning, no doubting the nature of reality for a pseudo-modernist, but a

continuous, relentless, fake interaction with the texts of reality, all revolving and spinning round the ego, the individual as the centre of the universe. We would be quite tempted to use the definition of ‘digital solipsism’ as a synonym for Kirby’s pseudo-modernism. Such solipsism is also linked to the overwhelming presence of market economics and its dictations in the present world: in a final tirade, quite reminiscent of Jameson and Harvey, the author laments the long-gone postmodernist attempt to teach the existence of plural “ideologies, worldviews and voices” (Kirby), all the more vane in the light of an economic system demanding absolute control on every conceivable sphere of human life. Academies themselves are said to have surrendered to the logic of advanced capitalism, to the point that the potential offspring of postmodernist thought, such as feminism and postcolonialism, occupy a narrower space than expected.

Kirby’s pessimistic outlook reaches its climax in considering the characteristics of the pseudo-modern world, which he sees dominated by a sad intermingling of “ignorance, fanaticism and anxiety” (Kirby) replacing the humorous self-questioning of postmodernism and its connections to the historical and cultural spheres. The ignorance of many nation and world leaders, highly concomitant with the ignorance of the masses governed by them, leads to the proliferation of disparate forms of fanaticism fighting each other (9/11 is depicted as the grave of postmodernism), with the general and personal result of a deep sense of anxiety generated by such insecurity and directionlessness. The regression to a psychic state of infantility is hence perfectly explainable as a wishful return to the maternal womb’s protection, to a state of suspension and trance which pseudo-modern culture actively perpetuates: “You click, you punch the keys, you are ‘involved’, engulfed, deciding. You are

the text, there is no-one else, no ‘author’; there is nowhere else, no other time or place. You are free: you are the text: the text is superseded” (Kirby).

7.4. Stanley Fish and the 9/11 debate

In the previous paragraph, the tragic events of September 11, 2001 were reported and transformed into the symbolical death of postmodernism. Truth be told, the collapse of the World Trade Center was perceived and conceptualised by many commentators and opinionmakers as the end of a philosophical position which, as our analysis has indicated, had always advocated a strong preference for a plural, often hybridised interpretation of facts, one which suddenly appeared no more tolerable when facing the debris and devastation of the attack. Therefore, we would like to use the facts of 9/11 as the second starting point for illustrating the debate on the end of postmodernism. The first case in point was made by the American theorist and scholar Stanley Fish.

In a 2002 article, Fish saw in the condemnation of postmodernism a sort of moral and intellectual retaliation for the massacre at Ground Zero: the postmodernist argument claiming the fragmentation of reality into Lyotardian language games and competing fictions was argued to have been shattered by the undeniable evidence, recorded and broadcast everywhere, of the terroristic attack. Furthermore, a charge was increasingly being made that postmodern relativism had acted as a trigger of complete laxity, thereby enervating America’s moral fibre. Fish was forced to defend the tenets of postmodernism by using two different reasonings:

- A postmodernist would not deny the utter possibility of describing the events of 9/11, but s/he would potentially deny the likelihood that a universal, incontrovertible language for the explanation of what happened could ever be found (28).

- Secondly, Fish's answer to critics caustically deploring postmodernism as the intellectual quibble for not condemning the terrorist attack, lies in that "the historical reality of the way of life, our way of life, that was the target of a massive assault" emerges as the perfect basis for decrying such acts (28).

It is precisely in the name of such historical awareness, argues Fish, that relativism, postmodernism's much criticised brainchild, should be preserved as a useful critical tool. The pointlessness in blaming fake universals such as "Evil", "madmen", "International Terrorism" for the 2001 bloodbath lies in the depersonalising of the true culprits into an amorphous, generalised entity, whose only mentioning provokes fear and helplessness: "we conjure up a shape-shifting demon, a wildcard moral anarchist beyond our comprehension and therefore beyond the reach of any counter-strategies we might devise" (29).

In Fish's view, therefore, a postmodernist approach to historical reality is by far more fruitful due to the deeper insight that it provides in unearthing one's concrete opponents' motives and goals, even to the point of stopping or counterattacking them when violence and mercilessness begin to show. The blame that some critics have laid on postmodernists is, in his eyes, a striking surge of self-righteousness leading nowhere (31). The preference for historical relativism as a powerful instrument of understanding, and not justifying, the 9/11 attacks can be also traced in Susan Sontag's contribution to a *New Yorker* special issue published shortly after the events. In her article, the American journalist did not mention the word 'postmodernism', but openly dismissed the plethora of government and media lamentations on a "'cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or "humanity" or "the free world"' (Sontag) as substantially nothing less or more than a revisionist lie. The crumbling of the Twin Towers was deemed a result of a specific web of political associations and alliances

forged by the American government and a subsequent aggressive foreign policy during the previous years, so that the decrying of the attacks as a sort of unforeseen menace or sudden nightmare come true was viewed as quite hypocritical (Sontag).

Both Fish's and Sontag's allegations, as it might have been supposed, generated an escalating storm of counteraccusations by those commentators and opinionmakers who either failed in appreciating the value of the former's relativistic outlook or openly condemned it as pure sophistication or mystification of the attacks. Julia Keller, writing for the *Chicago Tribune* more than three weeks after the tragedy of the United Airlines 93 plane crash, admitted to seeing in the 9/11 events a historic turning point in collective attitude and mentality, for the simple reason that the whole world had been able to finally witness "the end of postmodernism and its chokehold on the late 20th-Century cultural imagination" (Keller). The attempt on Fish's and Sontag's part to put the attacks in the right perspective appears as an inexcusable overflow of anti-realistic behaviour, almost a direct refusal to accept the shift in our judgemental schemata in the face of a new, however harsh, reality: "A new world, a world suffused with meaning, requires a great deal more of us. We can't live our lives or furnish our culture the same old ways ... " (Keller).

A further variation on Keller's critical theme of a return to a realistic perspective was developed by another American columnist, Edward Rothstein, who engaged Fish in a fierce battle of wits over the meaning and consequences of that day in September 2001. Rothstein's first argument is an invalidation of Fish's openly admitting to the postmodernist inability to find a universally valid language for describing the outer world: what is actually at stake in Fish's reasoning does not seem to be credence or not in the existence of truth, but the sheer incompetence of postmodernism in providing effective criteria for assessing truth, or some

“reliable standard for proving it to an opponent” (Rothstein). The absence of a universal language for the establishment of what is false and what is not seems to lead to relativism as an inevitable consequence, but the kind of relativism envisaged by Fish seems to propose a set of distinctions between a terrorist and its opponent with a penchant for their potential similarities or symmetries, hence failing to distinguish them for their real worth (Rothstein). Moreover, Fish’s advocated postmodernism is supposed not to have particular pragmatic consequences, but, since truth is reduced either to an acceptance of “power, reward or rhetoric” (Rothstein), such diminishing of truth value may induce reckless and even violent behaviour for the concrete assertion of one’s truth assumptions, all of which found its iconic representation in the collapse of the Twin Towers. Lastly, Rothstein joins arms with the anti-postmodernist critique in dismissing Fish’s and his like’s positions as an autophagous system, which, after accepting the liberation of the Other through scientific and liberalistic tenets, revolts against itself in denouncing those same tenets and worldviews which made its own perspectivism possible. It should be added that Rothstein does not hold postmodernism either directly or indirectly responsible for 9/11, as Fish seemed to have understood, but openly demands a self-critique from its defenders in the light of the magnitude of the incident.

7.5. NEW HORIZONS: OVERCOMING POSTMODERNISM

From the arguments so far proposed, it should be likely to infer that a growing perception of the inadequacy of postmodernism as a theoretical framework or method of historical analysis was the act of birth of alternative theories and approaches to the issues of the present moment. Such deduction would result quite correct and also require a further appreciation of the academic work having been published in the effort to overcome postmodernism. As such, we

have chosen three different scholars to illustrate the passing of the baton from the philosophy of radical difference and plurality to its successors.

7.5.1. Lipovetsky's hypermodernity

Gilles Lipovetsky openly argues for a new vision of twenty-first-century reality which he terms as “hypermodernity”, the heir to postmodernity. The first step to be taken consists in defining the prefix of postmodernity, an act which, as the previous chapters have indicated, summarises the single author’s approach to postmodernist ideas. Lipovetsky chooses to see the key to postmodernism’s rise to success in its radical shift from modernism: his argument joins Vattimo’s one, in that the ‘post-‘ signifies a radical, decisive break away from the modern age, whose demise opened the gates to a new kind of freedom based on ideological, political and social scepticism (see 3.2.). This age has nowadays reached its end, all in the wake of a new kind of modernity taken to its extreme, to its exasperation: hypermodernity, “a modernity raised to the nth power” (qtd. in Rudrum and Stavris, 157).

If postmodernity is thus reduced to a sort of in-between phase, the real task is to establish the connection between superseded modernity and its hypermodern brainchild, to unearth the logic of transformation from the former into the latter. In Lipovetsky’s view, modernity amounted to a sort of precarious weight-counterweight balance, where the weight seems to be identified in the logic of emancipation/liberation illustrated by Harvey and the counterweight in the number of socio-cultural forces of resistance which still managed to absorb and metabolise the alienating effects of the modern project. It should be noted how such forces thrived both on the traditional side (cultural heritage, the Church, the State, nationalism) and on the revolutionary one (communism, radicalism): both sides paradoxically shared a desire to contain and limit the negative consequences or excesses of modernity. Such

excesses are precisely the meaning of the new prefix 'hyper-', which Lipovetsky chooses for the present situation: "Hypercapitalism, hyperclass, hyperpower, hyperterrorism, hyperindividualism, hypermarket, hypertext - is there anything that isn't 'hyper'?" (157). This overwhelming radicalisation of life is the direct result of the radicalisation of modernity, whose final outcome has consisted in global liberalism, lifestyle commodification and the abnormal surge of individualism, all products of "the exploitation 'to death' of instrumental reason" (157).

This Adornoian dystopia, now encountering no concrete or structural site of resistance or opposition, is unleashing its power on a worldwide scale, taking advantage of what Lipovetsky deems to be its "axiomatic elements":

- A market-regulated economy, where competition, stock exchanges and the power of finance determine every single process of individual and collective life;
 - The cult of efficiency achieved through the ceaseless update and improvement of technology;
 - The over-arching, undisputed value of individuality as the *primum mobile* of society.
- (158).

To this last characteristic of hypermodernity, Lipovetsky devotes a consistent part of his analysis, insisting on the double nature of such hyperindividualism: whereas the hypermodern single agent may appear simply as the ultimate maximiser of economic gains and profits, a sort of self-made entrepreneur engaged in the accumulation of more money power; the other, dark side of individualism portrays a sadder picture, where the single person shows a psychopathological behaviour ranging from obsessions, addictions and a lust for extreme activities or experiences (159). However, if the individual behaviour seems to be connotated

by such unbridled compulsions, such behaviour is to be linked directly to the surrounding environment, which is depicted as far from being uninfluencing: the collapse of state and economy barriers has led to extreme privatization of every economic sector, thereby radicalising competition and the domino effect of global market crashes; the pseudo-idolatry of the manager figure is corroborated by discourses centred on change and reform without any concrete roots in the historical or cultural reality which they promise to transform. Both kinds of phenomenon are deemed as the offspring of a mentality of restlessness, of a constant crave for innovation, mobility and adaptation ironically bracketed as 'evolution'. The final aim goes unchanged: "more profitability, more performance, more flexibility, more innovation" (160). Finally, Lipovetsky seems to share Jameson's accusation of cultural past commodification operated by advanced capitalism, but finds the culprit in hypermodernity instead of postmodernity, which, in the light of the previous paragraphs, has also fallen victim to this commercialising logic: "postmodernity will have been merely a transitional stage, a short-lived moment. It is no longer ours" (160).

7.5.2. Nealon's post-postmodernism

Nealon chooses and deploys the term 'post-postmodernism' as an intensification of postmodernism, thereby reversing Lipovetsky's argument explained before: the cultural and economic status of today's reality is not to be considered so much as a return to modernity and its subsequent extremization, but rather as a prolonging, an exacerbation of postmodernism. Nealon's analysis is also a further expansion of Jameson's arguments.

Advanced capitalism remains an undeniable reality also in Nealon's argument: if Jameson could argue against a so-called form of late capitalism historically situated in the cold-war context, the rush towards a more liberal and deregulated conception of capitalism becomes

the basis for disserting on post-postmodernism (x-xi). Such a discourse would then begin as a “genealogy of the recent economic past” (14), a quasi-Nietzschean descent into the texture and matter of the dominant economic structures of the 1980s, a decade which is chosen for quite particular reasons, as it will be shown. This decade is briefly recounted as a period of economic and technological confusion, what with the American recession being increased by Japanese economy’s empowerment, the new impasse between the two world superpowers and the emergence of information technology in its embryonic phase. The development of these phenomena into a globalized economy centred around the power of fast communication technology does not prevent the author from speaking of a sort of 1980s “fallout” (15), in the sense that nowadays liberalism is to be considered the offspring of Jameson’s late capitalism. The actual difference between these two modes of capitalist economy lies in a different degree of intensity, a term which Nealon borrows from Deleuze’s and Guattari’s 1972 *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Intense experiences appear to be the foundations of the present consumeristic lifestyle generated and promoted by advanced capitalism, all of which is best summarised in the mind-numbing atmosphere of Las Vegas gambling culture: “the thrills of winning, the aches of losing, the awe of the spectacle, weddings and divorces” (Nealon, 27). These endless throes of emotion are to be viewed as both actual and virtual, as Deleuze would claim, since the concrete pleasure of gambling and attending shows may be also anticipated and experienced as a mental state, as a mere ideal situation which, nonetheless, still holds the individual or the group in the grip of glee and rapture (27). The Caesar’s Palace, with its posh homage paid to ancient European mythology, is the epitome of such behaviour: the fake sense of self-determination and freedom which both the gambler or the simple visitor may feel when interacting with the building and its interiors is simply another name for mere consumerist

self-satisfaction, all the more appalling because what is being experienced is not new or peculiar in any sense, but a simple re-proposing of what has already been faced and lived: “What do you get for a crowd that has already experienced everything? The answer: more of the same” (30).

This is therefore the cultural logic of post-postmodernism: the demise of the cold-war logic of material, political and cultural accumulation and integration within the system has led to another logic of endless, merciless expansion, where the absence of any new zones for conquest inevitably determines the consummation and exploitation of the pre-existing supplies, both in the financial and the cultural areas of living. Such “homology” (32) between these areas amounts to the forceful task of advanced capitalism of discovering newer and newer methods for obtaining money from rapidly exhausting resources, among which Nealon mentions “derivatives, swaps, futures, currency trading, arbitrage” (32), all financial operations where the value of the money involved is never to be taken for definitive, thereby enforcing the risk logic explained above.

7.5.3. Nicolas Bourriaud's altermodernism

The French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud is the coiner of the term ‘altermodern’, another definition which might seem quite suitable for the break away from postmodernism, first deployed in the manifesto for the Tate Triennial 2009 exhibition.

Bourriaud openly recognizes the concrete necessity to come to terms with the present era of globalisation: the outer world is the theatre of a daily life increasingly dedicated to instant communication, interspersed with travelling and migratory flows and characterised by an ever-growing “creolisation” (Bourriaud) substituting the fallacies of a multiculturalist perspective. Art itself acquires a global aspect in the face of human cultures communicating

and debating with each other through the processes of “translations, subtitling and generalized dubbing” (Bourriaud), all mechanisms of mutual recognition allowing art to explore the widest range of expressive media possible: the simple text does not suffice anymore, since the artistic expression has slowly become, format-wise and meaning-wise, universal. The above delineated context paves the way to another rejection of the postmodernist worldview, this time in the name of a wider cultural interconnection on a global scale: if such interconnection gives birth and permits a greater cultural, social and hence also artistic contamination and mutual influence, then the postmodernist devices of “cultural relativism and deconstruction” prove themselves to be useless against the negative effects of such contamination, namely mass consumerism and cultural elitism (Bourriaud).

A careful comparison is also drawn between the various outcomes of modernism, postmodernism and altermodernity: the first is viewed as an essentially Western event caged in its peculiar language with universal pretensions, whereas the second showed a marked preference for discovering and confining different identities to their own language game rules. The third phenomenon, altermodernity, appears instead as a particular reconceptualization of modernity with a global outlook, given its intrinsically multilinguistic nature and the absence of a dominating centre from which discourses from every area of the world emerge and collide. It is precisely through these different discourses and *Weltanschauungen* that the altermodern artist is supposed to journey, an alter ego of the present-day globetrotter whose perennial state of mobility is echoed in the works of art themselves, where the disappearance of a fixed spatial and temporal point for the traveller reflects into the trajectorial nature of the artistic output: “a new type of form is appearing, the journey-form, made of lines drawn both in space and time, materializing trajectories rather than destinations” (Bourriaud).

In quite a different and more optimistic manner when compared to Kirby, the French critic celebrates the hypertext as the quintessence of the new art of altermodernity. The surplus of information deriving from the increased cultural exchanges becomes a window of opportunity for a more complex artistic experience, one in which both creators and viewers find themselves travelling from one context to another, whether in geographical or historical terms, thereby enriching their respective knowledge of the world (Bourraud). Altermodernity is thus rendered as the cement which may hold human differences together, replacing both modernist elite demands and postmodernist excesses of relativism.

7.6. THE POST-FACT/POST-TRUTH DEBATE AND ITS RELATION TO POSTMODERNISM

In November 2016, the Oxford Dictionary website publicly announced its final choice for the Word of the Year competition, which saw the new entry into the English language of the word ‘post-truth’. It would be quite useful, for the purposes of our paper, to quote the full definition provided: “Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief “ (“Post-truth”). The Dictionary webpage announcing the final decision justified it by asserting that the use of the term had increased prominently in the course of the 2016 Brexit referendum and American presidential elections, to the point that this two-word adjective had often been associated with the term ‘politics’ (“The Word of the Year is...”). The webpage continued by referencing to a January 1992 article by Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich, entitled *A Government of Lies*, where the author vented his outrage and disgust towards the dismantling and occultation of true facts during the Iran-Contra scandal and the First Gulf War: this article, according to the Oxford researchers, could be cited as the first known use of the adjective

'post-truth' in the modern sense of the term ("The Word of the Year is..."). It would be our intention to start from this specific article for an examination of the issue of post-truth or post-fact, as it is also known, in relation to postmodernism.

7.6.1. Tesich/Pomerantsev: journalism and post-truth politics

Tesich began his article by reminding his readers of the aftermath of the Watergate scandal: the first, impulsive reaction of disbelief and indignation towards the betrayal of trust by America's first man was slowly succeeded by a public-opinion distrust towards bad news in general. It was as if the American public was prepared to do away with the harsh reality of politics, no matter how it corresponded to the truth of what was actually taking place: "we didn't want bad news anymore, no matter how true or vital to our health as a nation. We looked to our government to protect us from the truth" (qtd. in Kreitner). The situation was doomed to worsen when the Reagan administration played a controversial, double-faced role in the Iran-Contra affair and during the course of the First Gulf War, when the censorship of governmentally unacceptable news about the conflict was openly tolerated by a vast portion of the American public. Tesich strongly condemned both reactions to what he perceived as a clear indifference to the truth on one side and the perverse manipulation of it on the other. His words can hardly be mistaken for mere complaining: "In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world" (qtd. in Kreitner).

With hindsight, such an accusation seems to sound even more justifiable, especially when considering the misinformation propaganda operated by the Putin regime and Donald Trump's election campaign as exposed by Ukrainian writer Peter Pomerantsev in an article for *Granta* magazine. On the Russian side, the 2014 invasion of the Crimean peninsula was

completely disregarded by Vladimir Putin with the surprising claim that there was no trace whatsoever of Russian military presence in the Ukrainian territory; on the American side, Trump's escalation of pre-conceived assumptions and stereotypes, in spite of fact-checking organizations tirelessly disproving the candidate's claims, only seem to have gained the American billionaire increasing political support, as his final election would ultimately demonstrate. To add further insult to injury, Pomerantsev recalls another case in point from the Brexit referendum, where the pro-Brexit electors' will to recuperate a substantial sum of pounds from the EU into the National Health Service was officially set aside as a mere "mistake" and ... "an aspiration" (Pomerantsev): such strident contrasts between true, concrete facts and the political machinery of lies seem to prove the existence of a post-truth state of affairs. The only difference, argues Pomerantsev, between past politicians' deception and its present form is that the public representatives of the nation do not seem to worry about demonstrating the factuality of their statements anymore.

It seems only quite natural to wonder how it has been possible for such a mind-numbing situation to come into being. A first potential culprit might be found in new technologies, which, far from guaranteeing the spread of factual truths, seem to have been caught in the psychological biases of confirmation: for every lie and falsity being disproven and debunked, a much greater number of them finds its way into the Web, taking advantage of the fact that internet surfers have the tendency to search for information confirming their prejudices and accepted lies. Social media in particular are charged with offering their users "only the things that make us feel better, whether they are true or not" (Pomerantsev). Furthermore, the excess of informational material and media platforms result in a distorted, because fragmented, perception of reality, seen either as chaotic or ungovernable, so that collective myths of a

perfect, stainless past soon emerge and arm themselves with a complete ideological apparatus in order to transform myth into actuality. The clash between these various forms of “restorative nostalgia” (Boym, qtd. in Pomerantsev) is the dominant landscape of virtual, if not often analogic, warfare. This taking refuge into a nostalgic, seamless past of glory and beatitude may also be a response to a growing perception of restlessness both in economics and society under the influence of globalisation. Given the increasing interconnection of most areas of the world and the domino effect which both revolutions and disasters can have on each area or zone, it would not be too shocking to witness the collapsing of trust in old institutional sites of power and the craving pursuit of non-mainstream information, which does not seem to result in stronger critical thought, but in the proliferation of conspiracy theories behind every single fact, starting from Putin-controlled media’s obsession with American plots and Trump’s wish to reopen the 9/11 investigations (Pomerantsev).

This long consideration on the truth-perverting power of new information technology allows Pomerantsev to discern another responsible factor in postmodernism, with a special mentioning of its relativistic claim to the absence of ‘facts’ in the name of ‘interpretations’, another rendering of Nietzsche’s perspectivistic outlook. What follows is basically a summary of the anti-postmodernist positions which we have analysed in the previous chapters: the shift from the Enlightenment project of rational emancipation to the Cartesian distinction between the mind and the body sparked a growing temptation to radicalise interpretation, a process which Pomerantsev, quoting Maurizio Ferraris’ analysis of postmodernism, seems to trace back to Schopenhauer’s “the world is my interpretation”. From that to the postmodernist assumption of the inseparable bond between knowledge and power, and the perversion of the emancipation from dominant metanarratives into the absolute mystification of facts, it was

only a quick step. Ferraris' stand against postmodernism will be the object of a further analysis after Pomernatsev's article.

The grave consequences of power-driven alternative narratives offering a distorted, twisted vision of reality may be detected in the increasingly stronger appeal to emotions and feelings during public political speeches and meetings, a choice which Pomerantsev is not afraid to link to the postmodernist rejection of reason in favour of the body dimension as the only locus left for revolution. Arron Banks' quote about the counter-Brexit campaign leaves little space for doubt: "The remain campaign featured fact, fact, fact, fact, fact. It just doesn't work. You have got to connect with people emotionally. It's the Trump success" (qtd. in Pomernatsev). Such a statement confirms a mental break away from the Cold War commitment to fact accuracy. When one of the two sides was called into question for their allegedly irresponsible or doubtful behaviour, the reaction was forceful and also filled with indignation, since facts' adherence to the respective ideological programme was deemed to be fundamental for the success of either capitalism or communism. With the fall of the Berlin wall and the incorporation of former socialist countries into the prevailing economic domain, Pomerantsev argues for positing the beginning of post-truth in the decades of the 1990s, pointing to the reckless indebteding of the Western world in spite of its precarious bank system and to the transformation of old political maneuverers into "spin doctors and political technologists", whose actions brought to the establishment of a puppet democracy in Russia, the influencing power of a simple spokesman like Alastair Campbell in Tony Blair's election campaign and the media orchestration of the First Gulf War on the part of the American government (Pomerantsev).

The intensification of such policies would later to a situation where we have reached an apparent point of no return: when the illusion presented to the public was laid bare, especially in the case of the second Iraq invasion and the 2008 financial crash, the sudden reaction of the powers that be was the incredible denial of truth, “to deny that facts matter at all, to make a fetish out of not caring about them” (Pomerantsev), an open act of misinformation having culminated in the carelessly fake propaganda mentioned at the beginning of the article. Pomerantsev’s pessimistic conclusion is that the habit of telling lies without caring about their real-life consequences has resulted in a sort of Orwellian Big-Brother-like ceremony, where the audience is fed falsehood for the mere sake of venting its instinctive emotions.

7.6.2. *New realism and post-truth: Maurizio Ferraris*

New realism is a term comprehensive of multiple philosophical positions characterised by a strong desire to overturn postmodernism’s ideas into a return to a realistic principle which does not intend to deny the factualness of an outer world existing independently from human interpretation. The Italian philosopher Maurizio Ferraris has been a leading promoter of this new conceptual framework, which has also allowed him to attack and delegitimise the post-fact/post-truth allegations apparently thriving in the present cultural moment.

Ferraris’ arguments have been shortly anticipated in Pomerantsev’s article on post-truth politics as a reaction to the shameless populism of Putin’s and Trump’s systematically fake news, both argued to be evidence of the failure of a post-Enlightenment denouncement of master narratives and groundless striving for emancipation from the former. From a more philosophical viewpoint, Ferraris sees the end of the postmodernist dominance in the academic discourse in the work of John Searle and Umberto Eco, who respectively provided a critique of social constructivism and boundless interpretation: while constructivism cannot

possibly reduce all of reality to a mere schema mediated by society, the reductionism of postmodern interpretation fails to come to terms with the hardcore substance of reality, which does not disappear from sight for the simple act of the human mind interpreting it. From this acceptance of an outer world where we find ourselves to be, stems the possibility of discovering the truth, whose value is pragmatically and theoretically more useful than Vattimo's postmodernist solidarity/empathy: "Se uno va dal medico, sarebbe certo felice di avere solidarietà, ma ciò di cui soprattutto ha bisogno sono risposte vere sul suo stato di salute" (Ferraris, 2011).⁷

The Italian philosopher can thus delineate the conduct lines for New Realism, namely *Ontologia, Critica, Illuminismo*, that is *Ontology, Criticism, Enlightenment*. *Ontology* is the field which postmodernism has either refuted or ignored as nothing more than a sophistication, but such judgement openly betrays their mistake: a statement or judgement concerning our human knowledge of a real object cannot and must not be mistaken for the object itself. An insightful knowledge of water, argues Ferraris, will inevitably force us to develop a specific language for its description and analysis, e.g. the language of chemistry for discerning the union of two molecules of hydrogen and one of oxygen. This, however, does not change the essential, unalterable characteristics of water: dryness, liquidity, etc. In short, new realism has learned, from the postmodernist wrong equalling of ontology with epistemology, not to repeat the same mistake. Realism also enforces and demands a critical approach to reality, which postmodernism seems to have abandoned for the mere sake of describing each and every interpretation: "Se pensi che non ci sono fatti, solo interpretazioni, come fai a sapere che stai trasformando il mondo e non, invece, stai semplicemente

⁷ If you go to the doctor, you would be glad to find some empathy in him, but what you most need are concrete answers on your health conditions (*my translation*).

immaginando di trasformarlo, sognando di trasformarlo?” (Ferraris, 2011)⁸. Finally, returning to the emancipatory ideas of the Enlightenment implies a return to the very concepts of truth and reality as disclosed above, since the need for progress and liberation is far from being a mere modern illusion or an achieved goal. The only alternative left would be embracing an absolute faith in authority and miracles (Ferraris, 2011).

This strong attack on postmodernism and its iconoclastic nature provides Ferraris with a series of counterarguments against the dangers of living in a post-truth or post-fact period. During a 2017 radio interview, when asked why the present age seems incapable to discover universally accepted criteria for truth, Ferraris drew a line between the action guidelines of democracy and the establishment of truth: democracy must judge the line of conduct which is best to follow according to its own criterions of free elections, free governance and so on; truth is and remains independent of potential political biases. For quite a humorous example, if the whole of the Italian Parliament declared the moon to be made of cheese, that would never change the fact that the moon is not a dairy product (00:01:01-00:01:13). Moreover, the voice of truth is not the same as the voice of the majority, since any majority, even in a democratic context, may show signs of superstition and lack of in-depth analysis interfering with factualness and truth. It should be also remarked that any individual may find himself in the same situation as the majority, where his ignorance of facts forces him to listen to and rely on the authority of the so-called experts, since no human being is omniscient (00:01:27-00:01:43). Nonetheless, in a world where facts are not given the proper relevance and validity, the very experts are either regarded with a sceptical look or see their opinion openly rejected, to the point that medical authority and competence is criticised in the name of non-scientific,

⁸ If you think there are no facts, but only interpretations, how can you be aware of changing the world, when you could be simply imagining its change or dreaming of changing it? (*my translation*)

often individual therapies and demanded in case of illness at the same time (02:02-02:10; 02:44-02:49). Therefore, the interviewer hypothesises a connection between the digital age and the collapse of traditional authority, a reasoning to which Ferraris gives a positive answer: the democratisation of society is a result of the transition from a firm ideological control on society by parties or churches to a new environment where the individual is allowed to think by himself; however, free thought proves to be useless if it doesn't allow the individual mind to also understand other people's mentality and mindset. This lack of understanding is all the more to be feared when the will to truth turns into a fundamentalist claim to omniscience, which seems to characterise the present historical period and which Ferraris argues to be deeply rooted in the age-old human demand to be always right about everything (00:03:30-00:04:49).

Although the school of New Realism may have been inferred to be a merely negative reaction to postmodernism from its description in the previous paragraphs, a further exploration of its main arguments would be likely to shed more light on its proactive approach. Ferraris seems not to dismiss postmodernism as nothing less than a sort of bad joke, but to have learned the correct lesson from its ideological failure: the fact of postmodernist philosophies having favoured the "prevalence of the concept" (2014, 173), the superiority of thought over reality and its objects, has now lead the supporters of New Realism to strongly assert a new "prevalence of the object" (174), due to which the outer world reacquires both meaning and ontological consistency. The denial of an external reality independent from our human conceptualisation was and still is the exact flaw in postmodernist constructivism. Furthermore, since this reality apparently resists and frustrates our human attempts to fully know and understand it, such an act of resistance provides the hard background for our

distinction between what is true/right and what is false/wrong. The same background logic is preserved when human assumptions or hypotheses receive confirmation from reality. In Ferrari's own terms, "the world gives itself as positivity, as richness, as an offer of objects that turn out to be much more fine-grained than the concepts with which we try to measure them" (177). Here lies the key difference between this alternative positive realism and postmodernism: the simple circumstance of reality confuting our prejudices and expectations about it does not necessarily imply the reverse reductionism of degrading the whole of reality itself to a mere human interpretation. The outer world is still present and resists our futile attempt to reduce it to nothing more than a Derridean text. However harsh or pleasant our relationship with reality may be, the latter is always presupposed and confirmed. Overall, the positions of postmodernism seem to have provided the dialectical basis for its own overcoming, thereby placing new realism in the category of those philosophies able to come to terms with the past without discarding it completely.

7.7. JOHN FOWLES: THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE NOVEL

At this point, it would seem quite proper to understand John Fowles' own opinion on postmodernism today. However, the analysis of the following interview will surprisingly reveal not only Fowles' dismissal of the label 'postmodernist' for his entire literary career, but also an understanding of himself as a man of letters in quite a more complex and articulated manner.

The 1995 interview with Dianne Vipond is the closest insight available into John Fowles' final opinion on the task of writing and on the identity of the novel in the present day. Vipond's first essential question concerns the future of the arts in the light of the then looming new millennium, a future which Fowles does not hesitate to see quite promising in spite of

the vexed conditions of both the outer and the artistic world. Pessimism is swiftly rejected as a denier of defensible art work because of its reliance on “formlessness and unthinking hazard” (Fowles, 1995), both of which drain artistic expression of its capacity to further its message. Moreover, the evolution of the arts themselves is detected as a necessity involving the novel itself, which has survived and is said to be surviving “the countless ‘invasions’ by the visual arts” (Fowles, 1995).

Language itself continues to play a vital role for Fowles. The rich linguistic texture and variety of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is an adamant debt to the already mentioned love for Hardy's novels, a fact which finds its ultimate goal in “an attempt to magnify reality” (Fowles, 1995), a linguistic quest for increasing or even exaggerating the powerful influence of the external world on the human mind. The fact that such magnifying of reality may lead to the outcome of extreme novelistic self-consciousness and thus metafiction in the postmodern sense is here rendered in a double manner, which is not to be deemed ambiguous: Fowles suspects that such a crisis in the novel's expression has indeed happened, no matter whether it was a forced step towards its demise or its improvement. His own metafictional devices in his 1969 novel stand as the ultimate proof to such awareness. However, the increased “complexity of technique” of the self-conscious novel does not seem to end or alter the allegedly original purpose of this literary form, mainly a pedagogical insight into the world (Fowles, 1995). The book which has been the object of our present paper testifies to the truth of Fowles' assertions: his experimenting with the stratagems of metafiction can be seen both as a result of a historical concern about the novel's potential, as confirmed by the references to Barthes and Robbe-Grillet in Chapter 13, and an increased will to enhance the novel's life-changing power.

In addition to this, there are two more answers which, although not openly using the term 'postmodern', may indicate Fowles' still leaning on such poetics. When asked about the nature of the major influences on his work, the Dorset narrator openly attacks the deconstructionist idea of a multiple series of voices or personae living inside the same narratorial mind, thereby preferring to see himself as "one being". Nevertheless, this unity of mind is the resulting mosaic of the most disparate artistic influences experienced by Fowles in his lifetime: one might be tempted to argue that the postmodernist argument of plurality and difference is partly dismissed and partly accepted in the light of the previous assertions. Vipond proceeds to conclude the interview with another question strongly reminiscent of postmodernism and its dilemmas: "Trust the teller or the tale?". Fowles' answer can hardly be regarded as something shorter than postmodernist: "Neither.... No absolutes, except our- both your and my- final ignorance. We may pretend we know, but we never do" (Fowles, 1995). *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a perfect example of such mentality operating behind the scenes: are we really supposed to trust the narrator after Chapter 13? If not, are we then supposed to search for the truth in the tale itself, completely dismissing the voice and the writing hand behind it all? The novel's freedom emerges again in all its power: the reader, the very single reader is left with the final choice.

7.8. SCRIPTA MANENT: A BRIEF LOOK AT THREE CONTEMPORARY POSTMODERN NOVELS

Fowles' optimism concerning the future of the novel has remarkably found confirmation in the years following his 1995 interview: not only has the production of novels increased and their reception met a wider reading public, but also the postmodern characteristics analysed in the paper's core chapter have managed to captivate the interest and attention of both writers

and readers. It would seem that, out of all the domains of knowledge, literature has reassessed itself as the preserver and continuer of the past, however near the latter may be, as in the case of postmodernism. As such, we shall be briefly considering three works published between the end of the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium as an insight into the contemporary literary legacy of John Fowles and other prominent postmodern narrators.

1996 witnessed the literary debut of Chuck Palahniuk with the publishing of *Fight Club*, a devastating satire on the desolating socio-cultural landscape of the present-day Western world. The very structure of the novel informs the reader of Palahniuk's heavy debt to postmodern poetics: the first-person nameless narrator tells his story through short, fragmented sentences mirroring his hallucinated, confused state of mind, while also intermingling his own personal considerations with the emergence and advancement of the plot. Moreover, in spite of the extreme and often deliberately shocking scenes forming the subtext of the plot, Palahniuk's narrator's voice seems to remind the reader of Fowles' aspirations to social change through the reading of his own novels. The main difference between Fowles and Palahniuk lies in the radicalness of the change emerging from their respective work: the former, as seen in the novel analysed in this paper, tries to reassess the freedom of his characters by making them active agents of their own fortune even at the cost of breaking the traditional barriers of fictions; the latter conjures up a fictional world drained of any freedom beyond mere consumerist choice of products and services, a world allegedly calling for and forcing desperate measures in the name of anarchy. Freedom is thus rendered possible through anarchy, through the book's 'Project Mayhem' of overturning a desensitised, only apparently human society: chaos seems to be the antidote.

The second novel published in the shade of postmodernism is to be found in Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park*, a novel which manages to blur the edge between its author's real life and the fictional one of its alter ego in a typically postmodern twist of the plot. The main character is Ellis himself, which may trick the reader into believing the book to be a mere memoir, arguably a romanticized autobiography. This assumption is slowly invalidated by the narrator's craftsman-like ability to turn his own life into a fiction, a process highly reminiscent of Fowles' claim that we are all novelists: Ellis follows such claim in creating another parallel universe where he is married to an actress with no correspondent in the outer world and where also characters from his previous works appear, such as the serial killer and the detective from *American Psycho*. This pastiche of quotations reaches its climax at the very ending of the book, where the novel's self-referential quality is expressed by the narrator's appeal to his son not to worry, because he will always be able to find his father at the end of *Lunar Park*. One might be tempted to say that the valuable lesson of intertextuality has been thoroughly learned and practised.

Intertextuality also surfaces as the dominant theme of a later 2007 novel by David Markson, quite eloquently entitled *The Last Novel*. It would hardly seem exaggerated to find in this work one of the apexes of contemporary postmodern literature: the central theme of a writer heroically struggling to create his last book is literally buried under a seemingly endless heap of historical, literary and artistic anecdotes, all of which function as the mask concealing the real plot of the novel. One may also feel the necessity to ask if this work is to be considered fiction at all: the congeries of quotations are the very substance of Markson's work, as every traditional indicator of prose (headlines, chapter titles, etc.) is absolutely absent, overall resulting in an obsessive, quasi-Joycean stream of consciousness from which there is no

apparent escape. The reader is once again faced with the difficult task to recompose the pieces concerning the novelist's actual life into a coherent jigsaw, only to discover a mind oppressed by loneliness and disease, whose only apparent relief lies in the overwhelming abundance of clever references and citations provided by his personal culture. Arguably, the very sum of these citations may be said to form the authentic plot of this work, so that the novelist's small voice becomes the subplot itself, the mere background for the collage of quotations. Also in this case, it would seem that the dictates of postmodernism have been taken in due account.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS

As the present paper has attempted to demonstrate, the unexpectedly deep influence exercised by postmodernism on twentieth-century culture is hardly supposed to find a parallel in other phenomena of the global scenario. The simple fact of postmodernism having become the subject of discussion in the most disparate fields of research and knowledge, together with its acceptance into the bestselling books arena and the recent mainstream debate over its hypothesised demise, seems to be quite an evident confirmation of its overall polemic allure. Our analysis has also corroborated the existence of a multiplicity of postmodernisms, each of them traceable to a specific philosophical or theoretical mindset, and a correspondent multiplicity of anti-postmodernisms deeply rooted in the Western tradition of thought, namely Marxism, socialism and rationalism: the dialectic battle of ideas generated by postmodernism was highlighted as an introductory analysis to the literary postmodern landscape of John Fowles' 1969 work, whose dense prose and complex themes were discovered to have deep connections with the presented theoretical framework. The previous chapter has tried to underline the potential legacy of postmodernism for the present time, a legacy which is alternatively perceived either as noxious or beneficial depending on the single scholar's or opinionmaker's view on the matter. As such, it would seem quite reasonable for the writer of this paper to draw his personal conclusion on the basis of the overall examination of the postmodern issue.

As I have sought to understand through this work, the emergence of postmodernism as a mindset, a philosophical stand or a literary technique is highly unlikely to be separated from its historical and cultural background. The impossibility to conceive such phenomenon as

isolated or lone-standing, the spontaneous brainchild of a selected elite or group, has been clarified both in Harvey's second-chapter dissection of the causes lying behind the transition from modernity to postmodernity with their respective ideologies and in the third chapter illustrating the main theories in support of postmodernism: both reveal the bond between the turmoil of the post-WWII decades and the slowly mounting reaction to the impositions of modernism finally resulting in its paradoxically revolutionary and continuing aftermath. The very positions of both supporters and detractors of philosophical postmodernism seem to span a period of time ranging from the 1970s to the 1990s, from mass social movements and subcultures to the crumbling of communist regimes and the subsequent domination of capitalism. The novel by John Fowles which has been the core object of our analysis of literary postmodernism, was not only a best-seller at the time of its publishing due to its innovative contents, but also a corresponding match for the theoretical stances of both those in favour and those against postmodernism, to whose specific cultural debate it hence bears further evidence. Moreover, Fowles' acknowledged debt to the Great Tradition of English Literature only serves to confirm the subterranean running of the past in the postmodern veins, a past either employed for stylistic purposes or revised with a keenly ironic look in Fowles' case.

Judging from the seventh chapter, it would then appear that the twenty-first century allows postmodernism a space for critical debate only to assert the conditions of its present validity or uselessness, only to discern the present-time value of its claims and assumptions. Metaphorically speaking, postmodernism seems remindful of a deceased person whose will attends further examination by the heirs. If we wished to radicalise our argument, we may also detect how the global issues threatening mankind at this stage in its history hardly appear

to find in postmodernist claims for extreme difference and plurality per se a viable answer or solution. Out of all these controversial topics, immigration might be the most useful one for illustrating my point. The clash of different human beings with different cultural backgrounds and different worldviews has resulted in a self-contradictory outcome, speaking from a postmodern viewpoint: on one hand, the multiculturalist melting pot has forced different members of the same species to live with and confront each other on every issue concerning both daily life and existence in general, thereby apparently celebrating the postmodern horizontality of diverse worldviews; on the other hand, this rhizomatic intermingling of differences has led either to exasperated localism on the part of those cultural groups feeling threatened in their own identity or to the ghettoization of minorities with no practical possibilities of concrete social interaction with the locals and subsequent cultural segregation. One can hardly see in such phenomena an emancipatory success of postmodernism, not lastly for the latter's inability to provide an effective politics for the acceptance and co-existence of differences. The very insistence on the postmodernist preference for relativism does not seem to have gathered so-to-say universal consensus, as the counter-theories of the previous chapter have showed in their demand for new perspectives and often for a new interest in discovering and establishing generally acceptable truths. It would seem that the self-destructive nature of relativism, in that it leaves no space for absolutes with the exception of relativity itself, does not yield fruitful answers on the social or pragmatic level, thus invalidating the very reasoning of postmodernism itself.

Are we then supposed to see postmodernism as a mere product of its own time and dismiss it completely? Has the anti-ideological approach turned out to be the ideology par excellence? In short, are we prepared to do away with postmodernism completely? My personal view

seems to bear a closer relationship to Linda Hutcheon's one, in that we both agree on the end of postmodernism as an ideological approach to reality and on its latent potential value for intellectual debate and criticism. The previous paragraphs have already attempted to provide the first side to such an answer: postmodernism presented the same characteristic shared by all worldviews and perspectives, that is their being a product of a specific time in history. If Voltaire's assertion that "every man is the creature of the age in which he lives" is to be understood as correct, then the incident of postmodernism is doomed to be no exception to such logic. Moreover, the analysis of Maurizio Ferraris' New Realism provided in Chapter 7 has shown that, however usefully the legacy of postmodern philosophy may have been tackled and re-discussed, the mainstream debate of Western philosophy seems to have already chosen a different path at odds with the past ambitions of the postmodernist enterprise. The new privilege accorded to facts over interpretational reductionism appears to indicate a renewed interest in the very objectivity often despised and denounced by postmodernists as fallacious and one-sided, so that new realism may be said to be practising Aristotle's famous aphorism: "Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas".

At variance with this, there is another aspect of the postmodern enterprise which seems to provide the opposite side to my and Hutcheon's final view: its literary production. Fowles' 1969 novel is once again a case in point, since, although a product of the time of its writing, it does not cease to attract attention for its unexpected and powerful approach to fiction and its limits, all the more captivating through the historical revisionism of the Victorian age. The continuing popularity of this book has been confirmed not only by another novel written in response to it, namely A. S. Byatt's 1990 *Possession*, but also by its inclusion in the *Time* magazine's list of the 100 best English-language novels published since 1923 (Lacayo). The

surge of interest in postmodern literary devices is also clearly identifiable in the three novels described in the previous chapter, written between the final years of the second millennium's last decade and the beginning of the next century. As such, postmodern literature seems to be still thriving in spite of the collapse of its correspondent ideology: however exhausted the pungently critical fuel may be, it has managed to find in contemporary fiction a substitute engine. It would thus appear that the literary domain could still be playing a determinant role in preserving the traditions and tendencies of its past, regardless of their specific collocation in spacetime or mundane success, so that literature could be claimed to be not the final resting place of postmodernism, but its protective haven. The historical proximity of the analysed novels bears further evidence to this assumption: if the postmodern phenomenon were truly a relic from a forgotten past, how is it possible that the twenty-first century still manages to see novels written in the postmodern style published, reviewed and often praised?⁹

Cumulatively and metaphorically speaking, postmodernist literature may be said to be fulfilling the role of the undead, for, in spite of the multiple attacks and criticisms, it may fulfil the role of Horace's peroration and not perish for ever: "Non omnis moriar multaque pars mei/vitabit Libitinam" (Horace, 1991, 133). Its dispersiveness and adaptability to fictional texts may be the ultimate secrets to its enduring success. A simple, arguably casual flickering through the pages of one of these texts will ensure the continuity and the diffusion of this appealing form of literary expression. Phoenix-like, it is still reborn into this world and rises from its ashes in the scholar's or reader's mind, ready to both repel and seduce those who dare to fly its back.

⁹ Even apparently strictly realist fiction from the new millennium, such as Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), does not seem to refute or resist the temptation of dwelling on metafictional strategies.

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