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Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Short Story in English

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Modernism, Postmodernism and the Short Story

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Abstract. This essay discusses the different approaches to modernism and postmodernism together with the development of the modern short story in English and its theorisations. Drawing on Dominic Head's *The Modernist Short Story* (1992), the essay highlights the genre's importance in the genesis of modernism as a significant instance of artistic and personal *autonomy*, a key modernist issue which is linked to a mode of *subjectivity* in conflict with social *totality* to which the literary text gives formal expression. The abandonment of previous *realist* models meant the problematisation of *representation* and *interpretation* in modernism and their abrogation in postmodernism along with the evanescence of modernist autonomy and subjectivity. These issues re-emerge at later stages in answer to the need of accounting for the experience of the Other, a re-politisation of postmodernism that links it in some way to the historical avant-garde (Huyssen). The essay tackles in passing the controversial distinction between the avant-garde, modernism and postmodernism, sees in recent approaches to the postmodern short story a reformulation of a previously theorised association between the short story and the marginal, and closes by stating that postmodernism continues nowadays in the works of some talented innovators of the genre.

Keywords: short story, modernism, postmodernism, (anti-) representation, subjectivity, autonomy.

The Modern Short Story: Beginnings

As is commonly acknowledged, the modern short story in English is American in origin and is linked to Edgar Allan Poe more than anyone else. Poe had a great influence on writers such as Charles Baudelaire, the French *symboliste* poet to whom we owe the stock definition of "modernity" as "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent" (qtd. in Nicholls 5). Poe's *dictum* (published in 1842) that the structuring principle and aim of "the tale proper" was "the unity of

effect or impression" (46) was echoed by later critics and practitioners such as Brander Matthews, in whose 1901 book-length study "the tale proper" became the "true Short-story" (52). Central to all these writers' arguments was the definition of the modern short story as a genre distinguished from other pre-existing shorter forms and from the novel in particular. Poe began his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* by making clear that not all of the pieces collected there were "tales"; some were "pure essays" that lacked the remarkable "precision and finish" of the others which, unlike "the ordinary novel", were endowed with "true unity" and organic "totality" (45, 47). In Poe's wake, Mathews affirmed that a "true Short-story" is something other and something more than a mere story which is short" (57). Thus, he "perceived[...] that the Novel and the Short-story are essentially different – that the difference between them is not one of mere length only, but fundamental" (57). If, for Mathews, characteristics such as "symmetry of design", "compression" and "ingenuity" (57) were essential to the genre, for Elizabeth Bowen "the short story proper" exhibited features like "oblique narration, cutting (as in the cinema), the unlikely placing of emphasis, or symbolism [...] which] were unknown" to those nineteenth-century English authors for whom the short story was just "the condensed novel" (153). Among the latter, Bowen counted James and Hardy, authors in whose stories "shortness is not positive; it is nonextension" (153). She echoed Poe's insistence on the genre's organic unity ("spherical perfection", she called it), while at once declaring the short story "exempt from the novel's conclusiveness", "the crux of the plot" (156-57). By forsaking the novel's "too often forced and false" closure, the short story comes nearer "aesthetic and moral truth", and renders and perpetuates the subjective experience of "amazement" which "was in life a half-second of apprehension" (155).

Writing in 1939, Bowen affirmed that the short story – meaning the English short story – was "the child of this century" (152). Its relatively belated development was possible thanks to the invigorating influence of foreign authors, Chekhov and de Maupassant in particular. Though in agreement with Bowen, H. E. Bates nevertheless qualified her periodisation by locating the emergence of the short story in England a few years earlier, in the final decades of the nineteenth century (78). Among others, Clare Hanson (*Short Stories and Short Fictions*) and Dean Baldwin connected the tardy evolution of the short story in England to the development of

magazine publishing in the 1880s and 1890s. Transformations in different spheres throughout the nineteenth century (mass-production of printed matter, technological innovation, removal of taxation and extension of copyright, the end of circulating libraries, growth of readership to reach mass proportions, etc.) did away with the near-monopoly of the serialised novel in periodical fiction, turning magazines into profitable outlets for short story writers and, more selectively, into affordable vehicles for artistically ambitious projects of literary experimentation with the short narrative form. As Adrian Hunter has argued in full, Henry James and highbrow journals like the *Yellow Book* (1894-1897) were so active in refashioning the genre that some of the stories published in these "little magazines" advanced many of the features and attitudes normally associated with early-twentieth-century "modernism", including their rejection of popular literature and their critique of bourgeois ideology. Hunter shows how, in James's prescriptive comments on the short story (echoed by other critics like Henry Harland, the editor of the *Yellow Book*), there is a forceful call to abandon inherited models of plot and character in favour of a style marked by indirection, indeterminacy, suggestion, subtlety and ambiguity, which were considered more suitable for rendering the subjective, inner experiences and external conflicts of individual characters (78, 33-34). The presence of these aesthetic precepts in stories by Hubert Crackanthrope, George Egerton, Ella D'Arcy or Arthur Morrison could be appreciated in simple artistic terms by an educated, minority readership sharply different from the mass audience of popular magazines such as *Strand* or *Tit-Bits*. More importantly, however, formal innovation was the means to articulate contemporary radical views which were critical of the political and moral values of Victorian ideology reproduced in traditional realist fiction and in periodicals that catered to the masses. Inversion of gender roles and models, portraits of unhappy marriages, and disruption of patronising attitudes towards the poor figure largely in the short stories carried by the *Yellow Book* and other highbrow journals of the period. Because formal innovation in these short stories went hand in hand with ideological critique, we can place the genesis of English modernism more firmly around 1890.¹ As Hunter states:

¹ Though Dominic Head highlights the concurrence of the "the rise of the modern [English] short story in the 1880s and 1890s" and "the emergence of literary

this interest in destabilizing familiar narrative structures, both as a way of identifying one's work in contradistinction to popular, mass-market fare and creating a fictional form adequate to the representational demand of the modern world, would come to dominate the work of the succeeding generation of modernist writers, among them James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf. (42)²

Breaking Away from Realism: Autonomy, Subjectivity and the Modernist Short Story

The adversarial thrust in *fin de siècle* English short fiction – which was informed by radical political movements of the time (feminism in particular) and impelled by the desire to produce a new form that rebelled against traditional realist standards of plot and character – could be taken as an early example of *autonomy*, one of the key issues in attempting to define modernism.³ The term *autonomy* refers primarily to the artwork's autonomy from a sociohistorical reality determined by capitalist expansion which, by the turn of the twentieth century, had affected the field of literary production dramatically and broadened the gap between elevated "purists" and market-bound "profiteers" (McDonald 13-15). "Purist" writers

¹ The value of the genuine contribution of the short story as a separate genre is seldom made explicit in discussions of the development of modernism. A recent instance is *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (2nd ed., 2011), which devotes individual chapters to the "novel", "poetry", "drama", "visual arts", "film" and "musical motives", but not to the short story *per se*.

² For Paul March-Russell, the short stories published in late-nineteenth-century "little magazines" were less oblique in their expressions of political dissent and, as a consequence, less impressionistic, technically speaking, than those of later modernist writers. March-Russell qualifies Hunter's view described above as follows: "a straight line cannot be drawn from the proto-impressionism of the 1890s to the development of the modernist short story" (69). The question of periodisation is a recurrent theme in approaches to modernism. Echoing Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, Marianne Thormählen states that the "commonest extended time-span is 1890-1950", meaning that 1890 is the earlier "outside" limit (8 n8, 3). For general approaches to modernism that are relevant to this topic see: Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds. (*Modernism 1890-1930*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976); Cyril Connolly (*The Modern Movement: One Hundred Books from England, France, and America, 1880-1950*. New York: Atheneum, 1965); Peter Faulkner ("The Era of Modernism: 1910-1930". *Modernism*. London: Methuen, 1977. 13-65); and Levenson (1984).

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belonged in the sphere of "high culture", whereas "profiteers" were part of "popular" or mass culture, the "two literary and cultural structures" which, according to Fredric Jameson, were engendered by the "structural breakdown of the older *realisms*" (*Political Unconscious* 207. Emphasis added). Thus, Jameson points out that while a writer such as Joseph Conrad (one of modernism's "progenitors" [Levenson 1-10], to say the least) was painfully aware of the split between high art and mass literature, a realist like Honoré de Balzac could not possibly have been, as "no contradiction [was] yet felt in his time between the production of best sellers and the production of what will later come to be thought as 'high' literature" (*Political Unconscious* 208). Indeed, as Jameson suggests elsewhere, the autonomy of the work – that is, "the construction of some heightened space wrested from a social itself in the process of being industrialized and organized bureaucratically" – was not an issue for realism ("Existence of Italy" 202). He considers realism as the cultural dominant in, or the mode of expression best adapted to, "market capitalism", the first stage in the evolution of the capitalist system, while defining modernism and postmodernism as the cultural dominants of, respectively, "the monopoly stage or the stage of imperialism" and the contemporary stage of "multinational capital" ("Postmodernism" 216-17).⁴ Moreover, realism for Jameson was "a component" in "the capitalist (or the *bourgeois*) cultural revolution itself", as realist narratives carried out what is properly the ideological function "whereby the biological individual and subject situates himself/herself in relationship to the social totality" ("Existence of Italy" 164-65). In naturalising the new social order of the dominant capitalist class, in enforcing their "epistemological claims", in "promot[ing] an increasingly naïve and unmediated or reflective conception of aesthetic construction and reception", realist narratives had to cancel their own fictionality and counteract "the intensified awareness of the technical means or representational artifice of the work itself" ("Existence of Italy" 158). As Astradur Eysteinsson puts it in his 1990 book-length exploration of the concept of modernism:

Realism tends to minimize or erase the relative boundaries between literature and "ordinary" social discourse. [...] Realist discourse in literature is constantly nourished and motivated by

⁴ Jameson follows the three-stage periodisation of the capitalist mode of production established by Ernest Mandel in *Late Capitalism* (1978) ("Postmodernism" 216).

the dominant modes of cultural representation in the respective society.

Through its language, therefore, in its very form, realism implicitly presents culture as a unified sphere [...] Realism is a mode of writing in which the subject "comes to terms with" the object, where the individual "makes sense" of a society in which there is a basis of common understanding. One could perhaps say that nineteenth-century realism consolidates as a re-creation of the "public sphere," at the time when some see that sphere as entering a process of fragmentation. (195)

This balanced relationship that realism contributed to constructing between subject and object, individual and social totality, was unsettled as capitalism progressed into its later stages, into what Marshall Berman has called "[t]he maelstrom of modern life" (16). The disintegration of the unity of and between social totality and the centred humanist bourgeois subject can be attributed mainly to the intensification and expansion of the processes of "rationalisation" (Max Weber) and "reification" (Georg Lukács). Weber pointed out that capitalism is characterised by the "rational organization of production and distribution; all units of human action (such as labour) are broken down into measurable, mechanical, standardized processes" resulting in "extreme bureaucratization and standardization" (King 619). Lukácsian "reification" is Weberian "rationalisation" enlarged to include the subjective realm. Lukács focused on how this process colonises human consciousness and impedes apprehension of the totality of production and social relations in which individuals take part. Reification enforces the conviction that social life and human consciousness are "fragmented and incoherent", "ungraspable and unchangeable", thus deactivating organised resistance and thwarting the possibility of social transformation and individual development (King 619). In "The Ideology of Modernism" (1957), Lukács was vehemently critical of modernism (for instance, of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Kafka's novels) for being an expression of reified consciousness under capitalism. Modernism's radical "subjectivism" (145) sanctioned the idea of the essential, inescapable and disabling alienation of human beings. Modernist characters are typically self-encapsulated heroes (undeveloped, insubstantial, lacking individual history) who inhabit a nightmarish "ghostly" world (148) and find no way out but a retreat into "psychopathology" (150-51), "angst" (155) or "morbid eccentricity" (152). Modernist literary form is for Lukács just "experimental" stylistic distortion", "fragmentation", "stream-of-

consciousness", the result of "impressionist methods", lacking any sense of perspective" or "selective principle" (153-54).

For Lukács, "literature must have a concept of the normal if it is to 'place' distortion correctly; that is to say, to see it as distortion" (153). Eysteinsson argues that this statement is ambiguous and contradictory, for if there is no experience of "the normal" under capitalism, and if all is reified distortion, then how can distortion be possibly placed "correctly"? He aptly turns Lukács's argument upside

down to propose a more positive view of modernism: "If, however, the reality of the bourgeois-capitalist era is lived as a more or less accepted order, as 'the normal,'" then modernism would actually be more politically enabling because it "present[s] society as a place of distortion by working against the dominant concept of the normal" (Eysteinsson 23-24). Therefore, if modernism is "subjective", it is so in a more positive sense: not as subjection to a totalised version of social reality which obliges the individual to internalise imposed rules and act accordingly, but as *subjectivity* proper, as the subject's experience of a desire which ideology cannot appease.⁵ It is not by chance that the beginning of psychoanalysis, the discourse that explores the tensions of the divided subject, coincided in time with the onset of modernism, some of whose canonised texts (*Ulysses*, or *Mrs Dalloway*) were "originally conceived as short stories" (Head 6).⁶

To speak of the autonomy of literary work in modernism – a phenomenon which is undoubtedly in tune with the increasing compartmentalisation and tendency toward autonomy affecting other spheres of life – is not the same as saying that the work is an autotelic object that exhibits organic unity based on aesthetic principles alone, a view inherited from the Paterian aestheticism promoted and celebrated by the New Critics and by modernists authors, and criticised by others such as Marxist critics (for being politically crippling), or some postmodernists (for its elitism).⁷ Autonomy is not independence, but relative autonomy", autonomy in relation to the dominant ideology

¹ A treatment of this contrast from a Lacanian perspective is to be found in, for instance, Slavoj Žižek's *Looking Awry* 91 and *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 122.

² The same is also the case with *Lord Jim*, a novel that Conrad revealingly subtitled "A Tale".

³ For a summary of the defence and contestations of, and the contradictions in, the modernist work's organic unity see Whitworth 8, 12-13, 18-19, 30, 41-49; Eysteinsson 8-18; and Bertens *The Idea of the Postmodern* 20-36.

in which the work is embedded.⁸ Jameson is very clear on this issue when he states:

Many of the now conventional descriptive features of modernism – such as style, plotlessness, irony, and subjectivity – can be productively rewritten or defamiliarized by rethinking them in terms of the problematic of artistic or aesthetic *autonomy*, provided this last is suitably enlarged. For one thing, it is a paradoxical feature of the concept of autonomy that it almost always turns out really to mean *semi-autonomy* (in the Althusserian sense); that is to say, the independence and self-sufficient internal coherence of the object or field in question is generally understood dialectically to be relative to some greater totality (in relation to which alone it makes sense to assert that it is autonomous in the first place). ("Existence of Italy" 201)

According to this view, the modernist text cannot and does not lose its bearing on the world, its hold on external reality, in favour of a radically subjective withdrawal into an inner realm of psychopathology, *angst* and absurdity, as Lukács criticised. What is rendered through "the conventional descriptive features of modernism" (in Jameson's phrase above) is, rather, a new, dialectical subject-object relation distanced from *realism* (in which a balance was reached between both poles) and from pure *aestheticism* (which, to echo Walter Pater, meant that music, the most abstract, formalist and anti-representational of all the arts, should be the model for the rest, and that inner and outer life were so changeable and transient that the most valuable thing affordable to privileged human beings was to enjoy ecstatic moments of aesthetic contemplation, each from their individual cell-like selves [*The Renaissance* 124-25, 119-20]). On the one hand, modernism's aestheticist aim of producing a unified work through structuring principles such as myth,⁹ against the chaos of

modern life, is undercut by strong evidence of textual fragmentation and formlessness which no device or feature (myth, symbol, epiphany, etc.) could cancel out adequately. On the other hand, the argument that a fragmented modernist work follows the principle of realist mimesis, in that it reflects modern disorder, clashes with the view that it is a distortion of normal or ordered reality. As Eysteinsson insists, modernism, unlike realism, refuses "to communicate according the established socio-semiotic contracts" thus subverting "the communicative and semiotic norms of society" (7, 24). This refusal and subversion is conterminous with the modernist "inward turn", the exposure of the workings of the mind that undermines "conventional ties between the individual and society" (Eysteinsson 26). Yet, Eysteinsson asks, how can this subjectivist turn be reconciled with a defence of highly anti-subjectivist and "impersonal" aesthetics, as in T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919)? "Subjectivism" and "impersonality" coincide, he claims, in their "revolt against the traditional relation of the subject to the outside world" (Eysteinsson 28). More specifically, both subjectivism and impersonality question the humanist, bourgeois model of subjectivity whose validity and values are nonetheless invoked by modernism, if only to portray their breakdown. In this way, modernism can be defined as "the negative other of capitalist-bourgeois ideology and of the ideological space of social harmony demarcated for the bourgeois subject" (Eysteinsson 37). In sum, modernism does not entail the abrogation of subjectivity but, rather, the articulation of the conflicts that the subject experiences in him or herself and in their relationship with the social norm.

The thesis that modernist innovation implied a new articulation of the subject-object relationship is the framing idea of Dominic Head's groundbreaking book-length study *The Modernist Short Story* (1992). Head's study adds analytical depth and theoretical sophistication to earlier assertions about the short story's superiority over the novel in its capacity to express alienation from and tension with dominant social values (e.g., O'Connor 87; Hanson, *Re-Reading* 5). Head's thorough survey of short story theory is fairly convincing. He shows how previous critics, likely influenced by Poe's seminal statement about the short story's "unity of impression", failed to

⁸"Relative autonomy" is a term French philosopher Louis Althusser borrows from the Marxist tradition and its exploration of the relationship base/superstructure. Though the base determines the superstructure, "there is a ‘relative autonomy’ of the superstructure with respect to the base" ("Ideology and ISAs" 91). In "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspé" (1966), Althusser had stated that "*real art*" is not to be ranked "among the ideologies" (151). While a great literary work "makes us see, perceive [...] the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes", it also distances itself or retreats from ideology so as to give us "a critical 'view' of it" ("Letter on Art" 152, 154).

⁹T. S. Elliot concludes his 1923 "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" by affirming that myth in the Joyce novel "is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and

significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (177).

establish the profound interconnection between text and context which defines literary modernism; either they relied too much on the power of elements such as symbols, images, “epiphanies”, taxonomies and even readers so as to invest an otherwise ambiguous and fragmented form with a basic degree of unity and clarity, or they did not explore deeply enough the relationship between the stories’ irresolvable ambiguities and dissonances and the alienation, instability and fragmentariness characteristic of modern experience (2-26, 185, 189-94).¹⁰

For Head, the temporal coincidence of the rise of the modern English short story and the emergence of modernism “is more than circumstantial: there are various connections between the formal properties and capacities of the short story and the new ways of representing the social world displayed in modernist fiction” (1). The disuniting, disruptive properties of the modernist short story which are characteristic of literary modernism in general (paradox, ambiguity, ellipsis, fragmented view of personal identity, limited action, etc.) are connected to the conflicts, tensions and resistances of the subject in relating to the dominant ideology whose function is to shape individuals in accordance with the social norm (Head 26). Head has recourse to the concept of “relative autonomy” sketched above to connect the disuniting effects of the modernist short story to modernism’s critique of social models and values. His approach, Head writes,

involves seeing the disruptive literary gesture as an instance of relative autonomy; as something which is simultaneously conditioned by, yet critical of its ideological context, a context which can be equated with literary conventions and whatever world-view they encompass. [...] For the modernists, [...] the

¹⁰ Head is not absolutely critical about the short story theorists whose work he reviews. For instance, he is quite appreciative of Susan Lohafer’s *Coming to Terms with the Short Story* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP, 1983), Valerie Shaw’s *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London: Longman 1983), and John Gerlach’s *Toward the End: Closure and Structure in the American Short Story* (Alabama: U of Alabama P, 1985) (Head 2, 193-94; 9; 12).

¹¹ According to Head, “the short story encapsulates the essence of literary modernism” (1). Tim Armstrong also considers the short story as representative of modernism, yet from the perspective of market. “The position of the short story”, Armstrong writes, “can be taken as emblematic of modernism as a whole: ‘quality’, cannot be dissociated from a consumer culture in which it identifies a particular audience” (53).

disclosure of ideological context is often an integral part of their formal experimentation. (26)

Because it is autonomous, Head maintains, the modernist short story distorts formal conventions and the ideological tenets inscribed in them. We find this argument in a more radicalised form in Eysteinsson’s account of Theodor W. Adorno’s modernist “aesthetics of negativity”. Eysteinsson says that, to Adorno, modernist art and literature is an

objectification [which], in order to express the negativity of experience, must be constructed in a radically ‘subjective’ manner – it must not take on the shape of ‘rationalized’ objective representation to which as social beings we are accustomed. [...] It] effects the erasure or explosion [...] of the bourgeois subject, while at the same time reflecting in a ‘negative’ manner, its social enchantment. (Eysteinsson 43-44)¹²

This idea of “expressing” or “reflecting” the negative experience of the modern world from the perspective of a subject who is no longer the subject of the humanist-bourgeois tradition is related to another central concern in the different theoretical approaches to modernism and its relationship to postmodernism, namely, *representation*.¹³ This concern is often connected to the questions of *subjectivity*, *autonomy* and *interpretation*.

Against Representation: From Modernism to Postmodernism

In his *Sociology of Postmodernism* (1990), Scott Lash defines “modernity” as “a process of cultural differentiation” (5). The differentiation of religious and secular culture that took place in the Renaissance was the ante-room of the modern (Kantian) push to autonomy in the theoretical, ethical and aesthetic realms. The latter, says Lash, opened up “the possibility for the development of ‘realism’ both in art and in epistemology” (6). Lash argues that one of the basic premises of aesthetic realism was precisely “the possibility of ‘representation’, in which one type of entity [cultural] must represent another type of entity [social]” while preserving a clear demarcation

¹² Eysteinsson does, likewise, stress the importance of relative autonomy in his final definition of modernism as a movement (240).

¹³ Eysteinsson speaks of Adorno’s “negative mimesis” (41-42) and Peter V. Zima of Adorno’s defence of “mimetic (non-conceptual) negativity [... which] is inseparable from a strong, autonomous subjectivity” (147).

between both – unlike “[symbolism]” (6). Modernism meant a move forward in the process of modernisation as “each of the cultural spheres attain[ed] the fullest possible autonomy”, which entailed their becoming “self-legislating” (8). He contrasts the process of modernisation, which had been going on for centuries, with contemporary “postmodernisation” as a process of “de-differentiation” (Lash 11). Postmodernisation has meant the loss of autonomy for the theoretical and the ethical spheres due to their colonisation by the aesthetic sphere. It also has done away with the “aura” of the cultural realm, which is now no longer separate from the social; as well, the lines separating high culture from popular culture, or literature from criticism, have been erased. All this affects “representation” in that the distinction between signifiers, signifieds and referents, retained in modernism, is blurred in postmodernism to the point where representation and reality seem to collapse into one another. As such, Lash states, an “increasing proportion of signification takes place through images and not words” as the former “resemble referents to a greater degree” than the latter (12). Lash then formulates the key distinction as follows: “*modernism conceives representation as being problematic whereas postmodernism problematizes reality*” (13). In realism, reality and representation are kept apart, though their relationship is not problematic. In modernism, they remain separate dimensions, yet representation becomes opaque and prompts interpretation; in postmodernism, there is a problematisation of reality itself which derives “from a society whose very surface, whose very empirical reality, is largely made up of images and representations” (Lash 14).

Even though postmodernism is a new “regime of signification” characterised by the predominance of images over words, it does not impede or inhibit interpretation (Lash 4). On the contrary, Lash argues, it poses an even greater hermeneutical challenge, “a highly rationalist pursuit, either aesthetically or theoretically, to try to make some sense of it” (4, 14). What is more, postmodernism is potentially more subversive than modernism in that it “can pose a greater threat to social and cultural order” because modernism is restricted to high culture whereas postmodernism “pervades both high and popular culture” (14). Fredric Jameson is less positive about postmodernism’s potential for transforming the cultural and social *status quo*. His comments in this direction are rather brief and vague (“Postmodernism” 228 and 232). Although he expresses a

desire to approach postmodernism dialectically in order to show its positive and negative aspects, he does not actually do this (“Postmodernism” 225). He considers postmodernism an expression of, and an agent in, the processes of reification and commodification that have taken over all spheres of life in the age of multinational capitalism (“Postmodernism” 216-17). Like Lash, Jameson highlights the paradoxical fact of the disappearance of the autonomy of the cultural sphere through its universal expansion and domination over the whole of social life (“Existence of Italy” 202, “Postmodernism” 226). Jameson adds, however, that the process of the expansion of autonomy has been taking place at increasingly lower levels and has generated an explosion, dispersal and fragmentation into “images”, “surfaces”, “sentences” and “signifiers” that circulate freely and are ready to be playfully reassembled into cultural objects through techniques such as “collage”, “pastiche” and “intertextuality” (“Existence of Italy” 206-08, “Postmodernism” 193, 196, 198, 201-02, 204, 213-14).¹⁴

For Jameson, one of the constitutive features of postmodernism is precisely “depthlessness”; the fact that the previously operative depth models (dialectics essence/appearance, latent/manifest, authenticity/inauthenticity, and most importantly, signifier/signified) are “repudiated” and replaced by surfaces and by spatial categories (“Postmodernism” 198). Typically, “modernism” (or, as he calls it, “high modernism”) is the foil of postmodernism in Jameson’s description and diagnosis. The (high) modernist feature of personal style linked to the category of the *subject* that encompasses it is lost in the funhouse of postmodernism. The alienated, anxiety-hidden subject of modernism, politically aware and endowed with a sense of his or her own historicity, is destroyed in a “decentering” process; along with it, not only *angst* but also the rest of the feelings constitutive of personality, are let go: “feelings – which it may be better and more accurate to call ‘intensities’ – are now free-floating and impersonal” (“Postmodernism” 200). Further, due to “the breakdown of the signifying chain”, both subject and writing become schizophrenic, yet, in the subject’s case, exempt from the anguish

¹⁴ Sociologists like Stephen Crook, Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters (*Postmodernization: Change in Advanced Society*) see postmodernity as a radicalisation of modern differentiation that leads to disorder (Bertens, “Sociology of Postmodernity” 116).

characteristic of this psychopathology ("Postmodernism" 210). In this postmodernist disorder of things, *interpretation* is blocked and *representation* becomes impossible; this contrasts with the

structure of the modernist work [which] includes and demands the interpretive moment and offers an exegetical blank check with the one requirement that you cannot propose nothing (unless 'nothingness' is your interpretation) ("Existence of Italy" 205).¹⁵

In "The Sociology of Postmodernity", Hans Bertens condenses Jameson's account of the effects of commodification in postmodernism as follows: "commodification [in Jameson's view] has led to a profound crisis of representation" (107).¹⁶ As Bertens argues, Jameson's theorisation is influenced by the work of Jean Baudrillard, who, building on Marshall McLuhan's thesis "the medium is the message", reached the conclusion that the capitalist sign system has dissolved reality to such a point that we inhabit a dystopic world of simulacra and the hyperreal with no possibility of escape ("Sociology of Postmodernity" 105-06). Postmodernism, which was from the very beginning – in the experimental and popular art in the 1950s and 1960s and in its earliest theorisations in the mid-1960s – a reaction against modernist elitism and a countercultural movement that opposed liberal humanism and its rigid and repressive political institutions, reached a point in the late 1970s (in, for instance, the work of Ihab Hassan) when, influenced by French poststructuralism and deconstructionism, it somewhat gleefully abandoned the idea that signs *stand for* reality to endorse the view that signs *are* reality (Bertens, "Debate on Postmodernism" 4-5).

Indeed, much of the modernism/postmodernism debate has focused on the effects of the absolute radicalisation of modernist anti-representationalism in postmodernism. David J. Herman draws a

sophisticated analytical distinction between modernism and postmodernism, in terms of how the Enlightenment inheritance of progressive ethos and epistemological doubt is articulated in the work of the major proponents of both modernism and postmodernism (roughly, Habermas, Jameson, Eagleton vs. Lyotard, Foster, Hutcheon).¹⁷ Herman shows how, despite their differences, Eagleton joins Habermas and Jameson in propounding that

modernism is an aesthetic category in which antirepresentationalism [derived from epistemological doubt] is ultimately recuperated into that consensus of representational norms – that Utopia – toward which art's 'material intervention' in fact aims. (66)

In contrast, postmodernism is, for Eagleton, "the aesthetic category in which this process is inverted: art's material intervention gets subsumed under the incessant antirepresentational machinery of aesthetic production itself" (Herman 66). Linda Hutcheon (on the postmodern side) echoes Lyotard's view that representational consensus is coercive and aligns herself with Hal Foster's defence of a permanent interference in what should be represented. As Herman argues, Hutcheon holds that postmodernism problematises what it means to represent by using strategies, such as parody and intertextuality, that thwart resolution or totalisation on behalf of provisornality, difference and heterogeneity (68-69). Herman then summarises the contrast by arguing that whereas modernism locates Utopia (Enlightenment's progressive ethos) in the gap separating the presentable from the unrepresentable that makes consensus desirable, postmodernism, because it melds them, bases its idea of Utopia upon the material density with which it invests words and representations, so that emancipation becomes proportional to dissent (Herman 73-76). He concludes that the debate modernism/postmodernism is

¹⁵ See also "Postmodernism" (205). The idea that the modernist text provokes interpretation, while the postmodernist work impedes and frustrates it, is an opposition on which psychoanalytical philosopher Slavoj Žižek draws to distinguish modernism from postmodernism. For Žižek, this distinction hinges on a difference in perspective upon symbolically constructed reality: whereas for modernism reality is incomplete, for postmodernism it is inconsistent, made up of a combination of disparate or mutually exclusive elements (*Looking Awry* 145-46, 151).

¹⁶ I draw on Bertens's "The Sociology of Postmodernity" and "The Debate on Postmodernism" as guides through the thicket of theories about and approaches to postmodernism. Jameson uses the phrase "crisis of representation" in his "Foreword" to the English edition of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* viii.

¹⁷ In the American scene, the debate between pro-modernism and pro-postmodernism ethics has been intense from its very beginning: Harry Levin's elegiac "What Was Modernism?" (1960) and Irving Howe's "The Idea of the Modern" (1967) vs. Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* (1967) and Leslie Fiedler's "The New Mutants" (1968) and "Cross the Border – Close the Gap" (1969) (Brooker 9-11). For Peter Brooker, the abrupt distinction between modernism and postmodernism is an Anglo-American concern: "the question of any break or opposition between 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' comes to look like a somewhat parochial topic in Anglo-American culture" (16).

undecidable because each part understands progress and representation differently (Herman 77).

Dowe Fokkema also considers “epistemological doubt” a key to establishing the distinction between modernism and postmodernism, with existentialism as a transitional moment between both. In “The Semiotics of Literary Postmodernism” (1996), Fokkema reiterates his earlier thesis that modernists subject all essences to criticism because knowledge is based on doubt, existentialists broaden this doubt and suffer despair, and postmodernists accept life’s absurdity, forget about doubt and despair, and simply tell stories. Fokkema’s view on modernism is akin to Brian McHale’s, who in his book *Postmodernist Fictions* argues that “the dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*” (9). McHale borrows the term “dominant” from Roman Jakobson who defines it “as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines and transforms the remaining components [...] and guarantees the integrity of the structure” (Qtd. in McHale 6). More precisely, the dominant “specifies the *order* in which different aspects are to be attended to” (McHale 11). In modernist fiction, therefore, questions about the subject and object of knowledge, about ways to know and to communicate what is known, and about the uncertainties and difficulties that affect all these processes, are foregrounded, whereas, in postmodernist fiction, “ontological” issues such as being and the existence of the self, text and world or worlds come to the fore (10). Though suggestive, McHale’s view that postmodernism is predominantly ontological has been contested by Fokkema, among others; Fokkema considers it “misleading” unless “it is both stretched and narrowed to mean ‘the making of autonomous worlds’” (21).¹⁸ Also in 1987, Theo D’haen argued that both modernist and postmodernist fiction reflect the age’s fragmentation in their texts, yet, while the former preserves the distinction fiction/reality and engages the reader in the interpretive task of filling in the blanks by relying on the validity of contemporary metanarratives (above all, the belief in the existence of the individual subject), the latter blocks interpretation through its frequent erasure of the boundary fiction/reality and its parodic allusion to modern metanarratives.

Buck on the Agenda: Subjectivity and Representation in “Other” Postmodernisms

The view that postmodernism has to do with the semiotic construction of (possible) worlds, rather than with the interpretation and representation of language-independent reality leads us back to the dominant trend in (American) postmodernist theory in which the idea of signs *standing for* things was substituted by the notion of signs *being* things. Yet this idea did not mark the end of the story. As Bérens argues, a new stage opened up in postmodernist thought and literature that put the old issues of representation and subjectivity back on the agenda in a substantially new way:

the anti-representationalism and the textuality of deconstructionist postmodernism soon modified itself into a postmodernism that returned to the question of representation and to the subject, without, however, abandoning its broadly poststructuralist orientation. [...] This postmodernism, of which Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) is an early and influential example, works to expose and undo hierarchies of power and advocates difference in order to let the countless victims of representations speak for themselves. It is this postmodernism that after the mid-1980s has informed what are now termed postcolonial and cultural studies. [...] The literary-critical world theorists of postcolonial literature quarrel loudly with an a-political deconstructionist postmodernism. (“Debate on Postmodernism” 6).¹⁹

Indeed, postmodernist theory had mostly been produced up to this point by white male western authors who attacked the very culture that had bred them. Decolonisation and the concomitant foundation of numerous independent countries had drawn attention to theorists, artists and writers who spoke for the minorities whom dominant patriarchal Eurocentric culture had silenced for centuries. Postcolonialism and second-wave feminism, roughly speaking, coincided in time; both were cultural movements in which the construction of new subjectivities and new ways of representing the world beyond the hierarchies and limits imposed by patriarchal western discourse were vital in the pursuit of their political aims. The extreme destabilisation of representation brought about by postmodernism was not simply politically disabling, but, viewed from

¹⁸ Fokkema quotes Steven Connor’s *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to the Theories of the Contemporary*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, 125.

¹⁹ This process could be considered the result of what Theo D’haen has described as “the postcolonial call for postmodern independence from universal postmodernism”, (*Cultural Identity* 9).

another perspective, opened up new possibilities in the struggle for recognition of silenced and dispossessed minorities.²⁰

Andreas Huyssen sees this re-politisation of postmodernism (which at this point put “its emphasis on exploring forms of gender- and race-based subjectivity in aesthetic production and experiences” against “standard canonizations” and against “high modernism”) as a retrieval of the emancipatory spirit that linked the earliest stages of postmodernism (the 1960s and 1970s) to the historical avant-garde (27). For Huyssen, the revival of Marcel Duchamp, the experiments of John Cage and the work of Andy Warhol in America showed that postmodernism was initially continuous with the avant-garde movements that occurred concurrently with the development of high modernism. Like their predecessors (Dadaists, Surrealists), early American postmodernists projected their temporal imagination onto the future in search of new frontiers, attacked the institution of art and the modernist consecration of autonomy in an attempt to reintegrate art into life, shared their technological optimism, and tried to do away with the hierarchical distinction between popular culture and high art (Huyssen 20-23). Huyssen, however, qualifies this idea of continuity by pointing out how the adversary ethos of pop art (happenings, pop vernacular, psychedelia, acid rock, etc.) was soon commodified in a way that Dadaists, Surrealists and the like would have found unacceptable. Besides, as Huyssen adds towards the end of his essay, “the avant-garde’s attack on high art as a support system for cultural hegemony always took place on the pedestal of high art itself” (50).²¹

In his conclusion to the book, Head offers a sketchy description of the postmodernist short story, in which he focuses on the way postmodernism problematises representation by placing greater emphasis on literary artifice (metafiction, in particular). While modernism has the “capacity to *re-present* the social world” by exploiting artifice up to a certain limit, postmodernism (e.g. Mansfield in terms of how they view the relationship between art and social life (142, 144).

In their respective monographic studies, Adrian Hunter and Paul March-Russell devote separate chapters to the postmodernist and the postcolonial short story. Hunter writes “post-modernist” with a hyphen as a way to refer to short story production and theorisation in the period 1930-1980, during which the modernist stories of Joyce, Mansfield and Woolf still remained important for the authors about which he writes (O'Connor, O'Faolain, Bowen, Pritchett, Carter and McEwan). For Hunter, all these authors picked on, transformed and departed from the models of their predecessors. Even in the case of the last two (Carter and McEwan), Hunter refuses to consider their stories “as abstracted representations of something called ‘post-

²⁰ Bertens criticises Jameson and David Harvey for obviating this positive aspect of postmodernism (“Sociology of Postmodernity” 113). In relation to the postcolonial world, Susan Stanford Friedman denounces the restrictive location of “modernism” in the Anglo-Saxon world and the establishment of its outer temporal limit as 1950. Modernism “as the expressive dimension of modernity” (432) is multiple, both temporally and spatially, because artists, writers, philosophers and critics from all over the world infect their experiences of modernity at different times in history. “To call their postliberation arts ‘postmodern’”, Friedman argues, “is to miss the point entirely” (427).

²¹ Like Huyssen, Eagleton accepts Peter Bürger’s thesis in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984) that the historical avant-garde reacted against the principle of artistic autonomy and tried to “return aesthetic production to its humble, unprivileged place within social practices as a whole” (61). In his view, postmodernism just mimics avant-gardist reintegration of art and social life.

modernity” (98). March-Russell, however, does outline what he thinks could be a “mutual relationship” between “postmodernism and the short story” in a chapter by the same title (222). His central idea is that both postmodernism and the short story defy definition and classification (222, 227, 230).²² The chapter is structured in sections in which March-Russell lists the familiar defining features of the otherwise indefinable term “postmodernism” (“undecidable”, “decentred”, “simulation”, “surface”, “pastiche”, “unrepresentable”) and shows how these are exemplified in the short stories by authors such as Ballard, Barth, Rushdie, Carter or, even, McEwan (222, 223, 226, 228, 229, 230). Barth’s short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) is listed as one of the earliest “specimens of postmodernism” along with Donald Barthelme’s *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (1964) (Fokkema 27), and it is not an exaggeration to say that Carter’s *Fireworks* (1974) and *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) are shorthand for English postmodernism. The short story was once again a genre hospitable to literary innovation and occupied a relevant position in the formation of postmodernism.

For Adrian Hunter, the disproportionate presence of short stories in colonial and postcolonial literatures cannot be explained simply in economic terms (that is, because of the fact that they are cheaper to print and distribute than, say, novels). In his view, there are formal, political and, even, linguistic factors which, combined, account for the fact that the short story is and has been an adequate form in which to express (post)colonial experiences. He links the genre’s intrinsic anti-totalising features (elusiveness, ambiguity, and so on) to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “minor literature”: “that which a minority constructs within a major language” (*Kafka* 16). Recalling Henry James’s and Elizabeth Bowen’s defence of the qualities and capacities that make the short story a distinct genre, Hunter states:

The interrogative story’s ‘unfinished’ economy, its failure literally to express, to extend itself to definition, determination or disclosure, becomes, under the rubric of a theory of ‘minor’ literature, a positive aversion to the entailment of power and law that defines the ‘major’ literature. (140).

Paul March-Russell argues that postcolonialism also shares with the short story its “undefinable quality” (247). March-Russell draws on Hunter’s view that the postcolonial short story is a form of “minor literature”, yet distinguishes the concept from major notions in postcolonial theory such as Gayatri Spivak’s silenced “subaltern” (as the author of minor literature does put the major language into use in producing “a form of *bricolage*: the generation of something new from working upon the remains of culture” [248]), or Homi Bhabha’s “hybridity” (since it articulates the functioning of “desire [that] emerges as a symptom of the oppressive system that it otherwise works to dismantle” [248]). In regarding the short story as a form of minor literature, Hunter and March-Russell reformulate, to a certain extent, traditional views held by critics such as Frank O’Connor who connected the genre to the experience of “a submerged population group” (86).

Farhat Iftekharuddin prefacing a volume of essays titled *The Postmodern Short Story* by setting postcolonial critics’ vindications and arguments against western domination of the “Third World”, mainly echoing the words of either more linguistic-oriented, deconstructive theorists (Derrida, Hassan), or of those who emphasise capitalism’s effect of derealisation (Lyotard and Baudrillard). As to literary postmodernism, Iftekharuddin places works in a spectrum that ranges from extreme textual reduction to prolific excess, a mockery against form” (6). Barbara Korte also discusses this formal variety in the short story in Britain from the 1960s onwards, and gives examples of stories that exhibit traits of postmodernist antimimeticism and antiformalism like metafiction, metalepsis, textuality, intertextuality, violation of chronology and fabulation (reappropriation of traditional fables and myths). Inside or alongside this postmodernist writing, Korte pays attention to some writers’ strong moral concerns – she calls McEwan, G. Swift and M. Amis “end-of-the-millennium moralists” – and also to the presence of gender, ethnic and regional (Scottish in particular) issues and perspectives (163). Paraphrasing Birgit Moosmüller’s 1993 study on the experimental English short story,²³ Korte also refers also to how

the short story in Britain has reverted to modes of writing more strongly orientated towards mimesis and story-telling [...], a post-

²² Valerie Shaw had concluded in 1983 that “[i]t seems reasonable to say that a firm definition of the short story is impossible” (21).

²³ Birgit Moosmüller. *Die experimentelle englische Kurzgeschichte der Gegenwart*. Paderborn: W. Fink, 1993.

postmodern development which has helped the short story to become a popular genre again. (165)

As the essay by José Francisco Fernández at the end of this volume demonstrates, there is at present a return to storytelling in British short fiction, which is perhaps a return to some original essence that short narratives of all times never seem to have abandoned. But this is not the end of the story. Postmodernism in the short story is neither over, nor only beginning,²⁴ but simply, continuing in new ways in the work of some talented practitioners. If this were not so, what could we make of, for instance, the extensive use of metafiction in Ali Smith's *The First Person and Other Stories* (2008) or *The Whole Story and other stories* (2003), where metafictional comment is combined with a marked ecological sensitivity? Or, what about David Mitchell's *Ghostswritten* (1999), a work which, in Tim Armstrong's view in this volume, is an example of how the novel in the context of globalisation becomes short story by constructing a world that is radically fragmentary, uncertain, mutable and incommunicable? Pronounced in 1996, Hans Bertens's statement seems not to have lost its validity: "Far from having exhausted itself, the postmodern impulse is alive and well, although its current manifestations are admittedly not those of thirty, or even those of twenty or fifteen years ago" ("Debate on Postmodernism" 3).

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²⁴ "In news of its official end, postmodernism might only just be beginning . . ." (March-Russell 234).

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