Introduction

Postmodernism and postmodernity

There is an episode of *The Simpsons* in which the barman, Moe Szyslak, tries to transform his dingy bar into somewhere 'cool' and futuristic, decorating it with randomly chosen objects such as suspended rabbits and eyeballs. His regulars don't get it. Faced with their non-comprehending stares, Moe explains: 'It's po-mo! . . . Post-modern! . . . Yeah, all right – weird for the sake of weird' ('Homer the Moe', *Simpsons Archive*).

The Simpsons is widely considered one of the most exemplary postmodern texts because of its self-reflexive irony and intertextuality. But postmodernism is not weird for the sake of being weird. Nor is it simply 'the contemporary' or 'the experimental'. It *may* be 'avant-garde' (though many critics, myself included, think it isn't), or it may be a continuation of the values and techniques of modernism (but then again it may just as plausibly be a break with modernism). It may be an empty practice of recycling previous artistic styles . . . or a valid form of political critique.

Postmodernism is a notoriously slippery and indefinable term. It was originally coined in the 1940s to identify a reaction against the Modern movement in architecture. However, it first began to be widely used in the 1960s by American cultural critics and commentators such as Susan Sontag and Leslie Fiedler who sought to describe a 'new sensibility' in literature which either rejected modernist attitudes and techniques or adapted or extended them. In the following decades the term began to figure in academic disciplines besides literary criticism and architecture – such as social theory, cultural and media studies, visual arts, philosophy, and history. Such wide-ranging usage meant that the term became overloaded with meaning, chiefly because it was being used to describe characteristics of the social and political landscape as well as a whole range of different examples of cultural production.

This begs the question: why has an obviously problematic term continued to be used? I think the reason is that there has been a genuine feeling amongst theorists, cultural commentators, artists and writers that our age, has, since the 1950s and 1960s onward (opinions vary as to when exactly), been shaped by significant alterations in society as a result of technology, economics and the

media; that this has led to significant shifts in cultural and aesthetic production as a result, perhaps even (though these are even more difficult to measure) changes in the way people who exist in these changed conditions live, think, and feel. To try to capture this sense of change, vague and multi-faceted though it may be, is why the term postmodernism has been invented, adopted, defined and redefined.

More precisely, one of the key questions behind the postmodern debate is how the particular conditions of postmodernity differ from or have arisen from those of *modernity*. Theorists have tended to portray modernity (i.e. from early to mid-twentieth century) as increasingly industrialized, mechanized, urban, and bureaucratic, while postmodernity is the era of the 'space age', of consumerism, late capitalism, and, most recently, the dominance of the virtual and the digital. Such generalized portraits of modern and postmodern society have been paralleled by similar comparisons of the specific aesthetic styles which have dominated in these periods. Where modernist art forms privilege formalism, rationality, authenticity, depth, originality, etc., postmodernism, the argument goes, favours bricolage or pastiche to original production, the mixing of styles and genres, and the juxtaposition of 'low' with high culture. Where modernism is sincere or earnest, postmodernism is playful and ironic.

The discussion in this book aims to move beyond such generalizations (and, in any case, after this chapter, will concentrate on prose fiction), but it is important to acknowledge that the question of how postmodernism relates to modernism remains a highly contentious one, not least because the term itself – 'post-modern' – implies, confusingly, that modernism has either been superseded or has entered a new phase.

The problems with the term postmodernism are complicated further because when reading about it we are actually dealing with three derivatives – not just 'postmodernity', but also 'postmodernism' and 'postmodern'. This latter term gives this book its title and is favoured throughout. 'Postmodern' is an adjective that refers both to a particular period in literary and perhaps cultural history (though this book is more interested in the former than the latter) which begins in the 1950s and continues until the 1990s (though inevitably there is disagreement about this too, as some would argue we are still in the postmodern period now), and to a set of aesthetic styles and principles which characterize literary production in this period and which are shaped by the context of postmodernism and postmodernity. Where 'postmodernity' refers to the way the world has changed in this period, due to developments in the political, social, economic, and media spheres, 'postmodernism' (and the related adjective 'postmodernist') refers to a set of ideas developed from philosophy and theory and related to aesthetic production. To provide a context

for the discussion in the rest of the book, this chapter will now turn to a more in-depth consideration of prominent theoretical uses of these latter two terms.

Postmodernity and 'late capitalism'

Postmodernity can be described most usefully in terms of the political and socio-economic systems which develop in what the Marxist thinker Ernest Mandel called the 'third stage' of capitalist expansion (Mandel, 1975).

In the period following the Second World War, the first two stages of capitalism, 'market capitalism' and 'monopoly (or imperialist) capitalism', were superseded by 'postindustrial' or 'late' capitalism. In effect late capitalism sees the accumulative logic of capitalism extend into every possible area of society, and into every corner of the globe, eliminating any remaining pockets of 'precapitalism'. It means that areas of society which were previously unaffected by the logic of the market, such as the media, the arts, or education became subject to the laws of capitalism (i.e. requiring growth, profits, and business models) and the advance of what we now call the 'globalization' of consumerism. The result of this is a cultural eclecticism, as summarized in a much-quoted sentence from the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard: 'one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and "retro" clothes in Hong Kong' (Lyotard, 1984, 76).

The key factor behind this expansion, as Larry McCaffrey has argued, is the rise of technology. As competition is so intense amongst multinational organisations, it follows that the most important resource of all – more than actual materials or products – is information which can be used for marketing, research, and production purposes. Ever more sophisticated means of gathering and analysing information, McCaffrey suggests, has meant that postmodern society has become increasingly 'high-tech', saturated by products such as medical supplies, weaponry, and surveillance technology (which protects the interests of multinational corporations) and consumer goods such as mobile phones, computers, plasma screen TVs, high-spec cars, etc.

McCaffrey argues that even more significant than these high-tech products are 'the rapid proliferation of technologically mass-produced "products" that are essentially *reproductions* or *abstractions* – images, advertising, information, memories, styles, simulated experiences' (McCaffrey, 1991b, 4) and which rely upon other technologically engineered products such as computers, televisions, digital music, etc. to package and transmit them to consumers. These

are much cheaper to produce and consume than more tangible products, and are the speciality of the advertising, information, and the media/cultural industries.

The consequence of living in a postindustrial, information-driven, media/culture-saturated world, according to theorists of postmodernity, is that we have become alienated from those aspects of life we might consider authentic or *real*. While our working lives are still 'real' (we go to work and pay the bills) they are not as real as, say, farming or building a ship. Instead we spend most of our time at our desks in front of a computer screen processing 'information' of one kind or another, engaging with symbolic representations rather than real, tangible objects. Much of our leisure time is spent engaging in simulated experiences or consuming more information. Existence has become more 'virtual' than real.

Baudrillard and simulation

We tend to think of 'virtual reality' in a 'sci-fi' sense as an experience to be available in the near future, once computers are sophisticated enough to enable us literally to inhabit a fake version of the world but interact with it as if it were real. It is conventionally imagined (curiously in terms of sado-masochistic fantasy) as a situation in which we don gloves, a helmet, or a suit and then interact with our real body in a fictional world. But as the postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard has argued, we don't need to wait for these devices to be possible: virtual reality is already here, and we all live in it almost every moment of our lives (Baudrillard, 1994a). We 'experience' the world through TV news or 'reality TV' shows, engage with other people we have never met (in internet chatrooms, or in our fascination with celebrities), use e-mail to communicate virtually to real people.

Central to Baudrillard's theory is the idea that we have entered a new phase of history, though he develops this thesis in a different and rather idiosyncratic way from Marxist thinkers like Mandel. What characterizes our world is that the last traces of the 'symbolic structure' that reigned in the pre-industrial world are disappearing. Baudrillard here draws on the economic theory of Marcel Mauss. Mauss's famous work *The Gift* (1953) explores the way primitive society was founded upon the logic of the gift-exchange rather than commodity-exchange. Where commodity-exchange is a system that works according to the exchange of goods for money, gift-exchange involves a threeway system of obligation: the gift must be given, received, and reciprocated. Most importantly, reciprocation means effectively giving back more than is received, in order to avoid the

receiver being placed in an inferior position to the giver and to ensure that the triangular pattern of exchange may continue (Mauss, 2001).

In early societies this logic underscored every aspect of life, from harvest festivals to military service to weddings, and meant that even people could be gifts. Where Mauss believed that remnants of this economy still operate in our own money economy (e.g. weddings, dinner parties), though they have largely been replaced by a formalized notion of commodity-exchange, for Baudrillard this form of symbolic exchange has died out completely. Now there is only the endless and meaningless exchange of *signs*, which are even less 'real' and more ambiguous than commodities or currency (often they are images or words): everything can be exchanged for everything else, every sign is potentially interchangeable, reversible. There is no surplus element as there was in symbolic exchange.

Baudrillard's term for this overall interchangeability of signs is 'the code'. Its function is to 'codify' reality according to the 'law of value'. In other words it establishes a system of signs which provides (or tries to provide) everything with a meaning and a value relative to other things. It establishes the binary oppositions upon which Western culture is founded (life over death, good over evil, cause over effect) and produces an apparent stability in essences, identity, difference, and meaning. In this way the code actually *produces* reality: we experience the world through the sign-system of values set down in its underlying metaphysic.

The special ability of the code is to duplicate things so that the copy is indistinguishable from and indeed replaces the original. It is visible in science (in biology or DNA) and in computer and information technology which enables perfect reproduction (e.g. of biological tissue or of a photographic image). Previously, copying something that is real resulted in a version of the real thing which was still recognizable as a copy. Yet because the code can produce an exact replica, the difference between the original and the copy is eliminated. This effect is a typical one in contemporary culture which is characterized by a process of reproduction Baudrillard terms simulation. He points to numerous instances in the contemporary world in which the ability to distinguish between the real and representation is compromised: for example, Disneyland, opinion polls, President Nixon, Michael Jackson. Perhaps the most powerful example is the way that the actual events of twentieth-century warfare have become replaced by their representations: we 'consume' the representations as if they are real. The Vietnam War, the Gulf War, even, retrospectively, the Holocaust, are visible only in simulated form: with Vietnam, Baudrillard argues, 'the war became film, the film becomes war, the two are joined by their common haemorrhage into technology' (Baudrillard, 1994b, 59).

Baudrillard's idea of simulation is often assumed to be the state of affairs when we engage somehow with a representation rather than the real thing. So that if one drinks a synthetic version of Irish beer in an Irish theme pub, one may be comically seen as consuming the hyperreal rather than the real. In fact, simulation refers to the process by which the technologies which dominate the contemporary world attempt to make aspects of the real, natural world around us into tangible, distinct entities. Paradoxically simulation tries to make the real properly *real* by attempting to explain everything in the world, eliminating mystery and the unexplained, and dividing the world up into a system of oppositions, differences, and values. Simulation does not just eliminate the real, it creates it.

Poststructuralism, postmodernism, and 'the real'

The idea that postmodernity separates human beings from 'the real' has important resonances with poststructuralism, a theoretical movement which has been hugely influential in literary studies (and other humanities disciplines) in recent decades, and which, like the work of Baudrillard, revolves around the separation of the realm of language from the real world.

It is important not to overplay the link between postmodernism and poststructuralism as some do and regard them as being 'really' the same, or the former having emerged out of the latter. Poststructuralist thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault are sometimes, erroneously, co-opted into the roll-call of postmodern theorists. As Brian McHale has put it, 'poststructuralism and postmodernism are more like cousins than parent and child' (McHale and Neagu, 2006, n.p.)

It is unnecessary here to consider the similarities and differences between postmodernism and poststructuralism beyond stating generally that poststructuralism favours a creative approach to interpreting the literary or artistic text that demonstrates how its meanings are always multiple and deferred rather than fixed, and this is in tune with the 'postmodern' approach to interpreting texts (considered in more depth in the next chapter).

But we can note here that one way in which postmodernism is indeed 'poststructuralist' is because in problematizing the question of 'the real' it signals that it comes after *structuralism*, the implications of which also triggered poststructuralist theory. The theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, the linguist whose ideas are the starting-point for structuralist theory, emphasize that language and the world are always separate, and the gap between them impossible to bridge. Saussure's theory argued that language was a system made up of signs.

He defined the sign as composed of two elements: the 'signifier', a distinctive combination of sounds or images (i.e. a word or a visual image), and the 'signified', the concept or definition that the signifier calls to mind. The signifier and the signified are yoked together arbitrarily (there is no reason why a book should have this name rather than a 'rook' or a 'magazine') but once connected they could not be divorced because for language to function as a form of social communication agreed meanings have to be maintained. Language works principally by convention.

The real implication of Saussure's theory is that language doesn't *need* the world to function; it works independently of it. What this means is that when someone is speaking about a real thing he or she is only understood because of the code of the signifier. So if I point at a book and say 'this book', the reason you understand what I am referring to is actually not because of 'the referent' (the actual book I may be pointing at) but because you comprehend the *signifieds* evoked by the signifiers 'this' and 'book'.

Saussure's ideas would seem to offer a foundation for the postmodern conviction, articulated most powerfully in the theories of Baudrillard (even though he was strongly critical of Saussure) that we inhabit a virtual world always already divorced from the real. In postmodernity, to quote Baudrillard, the map 'precedes the territory': in other words reality is determined by its simulated version. More directly relevant to postmodern fiction (as we shall see in the following chapter) is the structuralist idea that meaning is derived from the relations between elements in the system rather than their capacity to refer to something outside it. A book gains its meaning from how it differs from other terms both phonetically (i.e. it is not a rook or a boot) and conceptually (it is not a magazine or a leaflet) rather than inherent value: this is what Saussure meant when he described language as a 'system of differences with no positive terms' (Saussure, 1966, 120). This provides a theoretical underpinning for the idea which preoccupies postmodern fiction, that specific words in a literary text mean what they mean because of how they relate to other words in the text and to other literary texts rather than how they relate to the real world.

As the work of poststructuralist theorists such as Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser demonstrates, Saussure's theory also has profound implications for the way we conceive of human subjectivity. Indeed the very notion of the human 'subject', unlike the humanist idea of the autonomous 'self', emphasizes how we exist in the world as a kind of linguistic unit in a sentence, our 'meaning' derived from our position in the overall system rather than any inherent substance. The most powerful development of this idea is Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of how we derive identity from our position in what he calls the 'symbolic order', the system of 'meanings', codes, conventions, and rules that structure society.

We only gain a meaningful identity once we are inscribed in the symbolic order – most obviously because we are given a name, but also because our actions and assertions of identity can only signify in the terms of an agreed-upon network of signification. But entering the symbolic order separates us from 'the real' (our bodily drives) and means that everyday life is essentially virtual as everything real is made recognizable and meaningful by language and the codes of the symbolic order.

The outcome is the creation of desire and the unconscious and the whole symptomatology of neurosis and psychosis which are the special objects of psychoanalysis and are determined by our efforts to deal with what cannot be 'symbolized' (i.e. what does not 'make sense' to everyday reality, such as trauma or death). The most 'postmodern' articulation of this state of affairs is provided by the Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, whose work emphasizes how everyday reality – the world of our name, our consciousness and our social identity – is nothing but a necessary fiction which is designed to keep our *real* selves (i.e. the inaccessible part of ourselves located in unconscious) at bay (Žižek, 1991).

Sociology and the construction of reality

There is an interesting convergence between the Lacanian presentation of reality as a necessary fiction and sociological (and non-structuralist) theories about the 'social construction of reality' which have been used by some literary theorists (Waugh, 1984, 51–3; McHale 1987, 36–9) to provide a context for the self-reflexivity of postmodern fiction. Most influential of these is Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's idea that reality is not 'given' but is a fiction that we collectively subscribe to (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Reality is manufactured as a result of the interaction between given elements of the world and social convention, language, and individual vision. This produces a fairly stable version of reality which we inhabit in everyday life – what Berger and Luckmann call 'paramount reality' – though they contend that contemporary reality is especially subject to being reimagined and reshaped.

The idea that it is more accurate to speak of multiple *realities* in the postmodern world than a single reality is developed by Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor in their 1976 book *Escape Attempts*. Their study explores how we continually 'escape' from the world of paramount reality to inhabit other realities, which we project as we engage in different social activities, for example, reading about celebrities in newspapers, planning a holiday, playing games, watching a film, having sex, etc. In a world increasingly dominated by advertising, pop

culture and the media it means that 'miniature escape fantasies' are constantly available to us and switching from one to another effectively turns us into 'split personalities' (Cohen and Taylor, 1992, 139).

Jameson and the crisis in historicity

The experience of being 'split off' from reality, living in a 'hyperreal' world (Baudrillard's term for the culture in which the logic of simulation has become all-pervasive) might be expected to have profound consequences for the way we live – the way we *feel*, in other words. Indeed a loss of reality is a symptom of a range of psychic disorders, from mild depression to full-blown psychosis. This seems to explain a peculiar tendency amongst theorists of the postmodern to employ the language of mental disorder to describe its effects. Postmodernity has been described as 'schizophrenic' (Jameson, 1991), 'multiphrenic' (Gergen, 1992), 'telephrenic' (Gottschalk, 2000), depressive and nihilistic (Levin, 1987), paranoid (Burgin, 1990; Frank, 1992; Brennan, 2004), and liable to induce in those who live in it 'low-level fear' (Massumi, 1993), or 'panic' (Kroker and Cook, 1988).

This psychopathological terminology is easily explained, on one level, by the fact that the majority of theorists of postmodernism and postmodernity have tended to regard their effects as harmful. Most prominent of these is the Marxist thinker Fredric Jameson, whose diagnosis of postmodernism trumps all other theorists of the postmodern in its references to pathological conditions, associating the phenomenon with schizophrenia, hysteria, nostalgia, paranoia, and a 'waning of affect'.

Highly rhetorical as Jameson's style is, there is substance to it. His diagnosis is backed up with an extensive analysis of the impact of the conditions of late capitalism on individual perceptive and cognitive faculties. The starting-point for his analysis is that postmodernism heralds the death of one particular version of the subject: 'the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual' which existed in the period of 'classical capitalism and the nuclear family' has been dissolved 'in the world of organizational bureaucracy' (Jameson, 1991, 15). The result is that, in art, the kind of expression of anxiety which was typical of modernism ('alienation, anomie, solitude and social fragmentation and isolation'), and is represented by a modernist artwork such as Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, has been replaced by a more general reflection of 'intensities', feelings which besiege postmodern subjects and are 'free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria' (Jameson, 1991, 16).

More than any other thinker Jameson is responsible for making the link between postmodernity and the third stage of capitalism, as is shown by the title of his influential book, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Postmodernism, for Jameson, equates purely and simply to the effects of late capitalism on contemporary culture.

Central to his argument is his view that late capitalism has created a 'perpetual present' where time is dominated by the free-floating rhythms of the new electronic media. The result is that our apprehension of past and future is seriously weakened. Cultural production and consumption in postmodernity reveals that we are unable to place ourselves in a properly *historical* context. History has become simply a matter of 'styles' which can be pastiched in the latest retro clothes or 'theme pubs' or in 'nostalgia films' like Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) – a historical film which Jameson thinks bears no reliable traces of history (Jameson, 1991, 19–20). Postmodernism, for Jameson, is characterized by the 'random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion' (18). In terms of aesthetic technique, it means a preference for pastiche over parody. Both are devices which mimic a 'peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style'. But where parody has 'ulterior motives', namely a critical, satirical impulse, a commitment to making viewer or reader laugh, and retains the 'conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists', pastiche does not. It is simply 'blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs' (Jameson, 1991, 18), a kind of reflex aping process devoid of any sense of critical distance.

This state of affairs does not simply pertain in popular culture but in the most serious art and literature. E. L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime* (1975) is regarded by some (such as Linda Hutcheon) as an example of 'historiographic metafiction', a novel which powerfully interrogates our knowledge of the past. But for Jameson the novel is written in such a way as to 'short-circuit an older type of social–historical interpretation' (Jameson, 1991, 23) and ensure that its self-reflexive direction of the reader towards his or her own methods of knowing history prevents it from presenting its historical period with sufficient depth.

The problem is that postmodernism – or the cultural logic of late capitalism – has swallowed everything and it is impossible simply to ignore or extinguish it. This means that cultural production is unable to mount a critique of postmodernism because it inevitably conforms to its logic itself. From a Jamesonian perspective, Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* (1991), is on the face of it a critique of late twentieth-century capitalism and its rampant commodification. But because its language so obsessively mimics the language of 1980s consumer culture and continually name-checks its products, all it can

do ultimately is simply reflect the obsessions of the 1980s culture rather than comment meaningfully upon them (Annesley, 1998, 21–2).

For Jameson the only way 'out' of the postmodernist logic is through what he calls 'cognitive mapping', the identification and analysis of all its effects. Postmodernism has left us so disoriented, has so muddled up our sense of time and space, that we must construct maps to enable us to rediscover our spatial and historical location, to return us to a view of what he calls elsewhere 'the present as History' (Jameson, 1984, 65). This is what his own study aims to do, though he is aware of the paradox that if the logic of late capitalism envelops each discourse and cultural practice in postmodernity, then his *own* analysis is in danger of being contaminated by it.

Lyotard and the decline of the metanarrative

Jean-François Lyotard's idea of 'the postmodern condition' might seem the product of a similar impulse to that of Jameson's equation of postmodernism with mental 'disorder'. However Lyotard differs from the likes of Jameson and Baudrillard in depicting the condition of postmodernity as potentially more positive, even liberating.

His incisive analysis of postmodernism, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), offers a variation on a thesis developed by the sociologist Daniel Bell (Bell, 1973) that the key consequence of the transition to a postindustrial, 'computerized' society is a change in the 'status of knowledge'. Lyotard agrees that where in modernity the assumption was that knowledge was universally applicable, now in postmodernity it is localized and partial. Unlike Bell's, Lyotard's quarrel in making this point is with the tradition of 'Enlightenment' thinking which dates back to the work of the eighteenth-century philosophers Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and, especially, their descendant and Lyotard's contemporary, Jürgen Habermas.

For Lyotard, Enlightenment thought is sustained by what he terms 'metanarratives', grand stories which structure the discourses of modern religion, politics, philosophy, and science. Metanarratives are a form of ideology which function violently to suppress and control the individual subject by imposing a false sense of 'totality' and 'universality' on a set of disparate things, actions, and events. A metanarrative is like a literary narrative in that it is essentially a means of ordering discrete elements in a particular form and thus presenting a rhetorical case about the way things work or are connected, which legitimates political positions and courses of action. The metanarrative is at work in science, for example, in the tendency to legitimate a scientific discovery by recounting it in the form of 'epic' narrative. By this means science can sustain

its powerful position in the social and political system. As Lyotard explains, '[t]he state spends large amounts of money to enable science to pass itself off as an epic: the State's own credibility is based on that epic' (Lyotard, 1984, 28).

But the characteristic feature of postmodernity, according to Lyotard, is that the power of the metanarrative as a legitimating, empowering force is on the wane. Postmodern subjects simply don't believe in metanarratives any more. They instinctively acknowledge instead the rhetorical function of narrative, and appreciate that alternative narratives could be fashioned from the same groups of events. Postmodernity, Lyotard argues, prefers 'little narratives' (*petit récits*), those which do not attempt to present an overarching 'Truth' but offer a qualified, limited 'truth', one relative to a particular situation.

Though he is a philosopher not a literary critic, Lyotard's assumption that narratives are never innocent nor natural but always partial, selective, and rhetorical, is entirely in keeping with the approach to narrative taken by postmodern writers and critics. One of the 'realist' conceits which postmodern writers reject is the impression that narrative somehow unfolds naturally without being shaped by an author, that the task of the narrator is simply to present the reader with a coherent narrative which s/he has come upon. Instead narrative is always the result of selection and interpretation. This is something demonstrated repeatedly by the self-reflexive techniques of the 'metafictional' writers (explored in Chapters 3 and 4).

Lyotard's critique of the metanarrative and his faith in the power of the *petit récit* also has powerful resonances with the way postmodern fiction eschews the modernist strategy of referring to a key intertext which enables the reader to make sense of the fiction by 'recuperating' its fragmented elements. The journey of Leopold Bloom in Joyce's *Ulysses*, divided into eighteen chapters, each written in a different style, can be – indeed must be, as Joyce directs the reader to do so through the title and also via extra-textual comments he made about the novel – set against the journey of the eponymous character who features in Homer's *Odyssey*. Postmodern novels, such as Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* or Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, typically offer the reader a surfeit of intertextual references and allusions which seem, tantalizingly, to point to a single explanatory master-narrative but in the end lead us to nothing except an ironic recognition of how master-narratives function, and the value of individual, localized stories or temporarily useful interpretive constructions.

Irony and 'double-coding'

Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as 'incredulity towards metanarratives' implies that in his or her refusal to be duped by the legitimating ideology of the

political system, the postmodern subject possesses a valuable critical awareness, a mindset more discerning and political than the portrait presented by Jameson. There is a parallel between this capacity and the attitude of *self-reflexivity* or ironic knowingness which other, more aesthetically oriented theorists have identified at the heart of postmodern culture. Their logic is that we may be the pawns of the political machine, we may be divorced from the real, but at least we *know* we are. More precisely, we know we can no longer take for granted (if we ever did) that 'reality' is something natural, something innocently 'given'. Rather, reality is always already manufactured, an ideological illusion sustained by the matrix of postindustrial capitalism and media culture. This awareness is suggestive of the attitude described as 'cynical reason' by the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk which embodies a different understanding of how ideology works to the old Marxist notion of 'false consciousness', where people were fooled into subscribing to the belief systems of the ruling classes. Now, according to Sloterdijk, instead of being seduced by ideology into acting in the way it wants us to act or believing what it wants us to believe, we know what we are doing is false, but we do it anyway (Sloterdijk, 1987, 5).

Another way of putting this is to argue that the postmodern attitude is predominantly *ironic*. Irony is a non-literal usage of language, where what is said is contradicted by what is meant (either deliberately or unwittingly) or what is said is subverted by the particular context in which it is said. It works because we are unconsciously aware that in language meanings are not fixed but contain other possible meanings. All words bear traces of previous and other potential uses, and their meaning changes depending on the tone of utterance or the particular context in which they are uttered. Irony is therefore not just cynical, not just a way of making fun of the world. It demonstrates a knowingness about how reality is ideologically constructed.

This ironic attitude is exhibited in works of popular culture which are seen as characteristically postmodern, such as *The Simpsons*, episodes of which continually allude to, parody, and imitate other TV programmes, films, and cultural events. Take the episode 'Homer the Moe' (2001) I quoted from at the beginning of this chapter. The website 'The Simpsons Archive' (www.snpp.com) identifies a host of cultural references in this show, from movies such as *Mad Max 2*, *Ironweed*, *The Awakening*, and *Coyote Ugly*, to TV series such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, *Happy Days*, *The Munsters*, H. G. Wells's novel *The Time Machine*, the death of Virginia Woolf, songs by R.E.M. and Joan Jett and the Blackhearts. This is entirely typical of *The Simpsons*, as even a cursory browse through such webpages suggest. While its intertextuality might be considered as simply one more source of comedy in a show designed to be funny, *The Simpsons*'s intertextual references and self-referentiality also serve to remind us how deeply enmeshed our lives are in the world of media representation.

The relentless energy of the humour in *The Simpsons* suggests that there is surely something more at stake than making people laugh (or, alternatively, we could acknowledge that making people laugh has nothing to do with triviality) and behind the incessant irony there is surely a serious point about how postmodernity imprisons us in a frame of cultural references. This idea has been wittily (but earnestly) expressed by the Italian novelist and cultural theorist Umberto Eco. When he set out to write his postmodern detective story *The Name of the Rose* – a departure for a critic because it meant putting himself on 'the opposite side of the barricade', actually telling a story rather than analysing how it is read – he wondered, 'Is it possible to say "It was a beautiful morning at the end of November" without feeling like Snoopy?' (Eco, 1985, 18). His theoretical exploration of his anxiety is one of the most persuasive theories of how and why irony functions in postmodernism.

For Eco postmodernism is not a style which is typical of a specific moment in cultural history, but an *attitude* which underlies cultural production in any period: 'We could say that every period has its own postmodernism' (Eco, 2002, 110). The postmodern, he argues, emerges at the point when whatever is 'modern' in a particular era (and he defines this as the 'avant-garde', those writers and artists who occupy the frontline in the battle against tradition, producing innovative, experimental work designed to push the boundaries) recognizes that it cannot go any further without lapsing into silence. They reach this point because in the pursuit of the new they have to 'destroy' the past. However, art must continue, and so the only solution for those who come after the moderns is to engage with the past once again. It is at this point that the postmodern comes into being. The renewed engagement with the past is made possible through the use of irony, paradoxically saying something new, but only by acknowledging that it has already been said.

To illustrate the point Eco transposes his 'Snoopy' remark into a more extensive and much-quoted comparison:

> I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her 'I love you madly', because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, 'as Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly'. At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the

> past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony . . . But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love. (Eco, 2002, 111)

For Eco this analogy encapsulates the difficulty faced by the postmodern writer who by virtue of his or her position in history must come after the innovations of modernism. A similar anxiety was also famously voiced by the American postmodern novelist John Barth in his essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion' (1967) which wonders how it is possible to continue to write in the face of the knowledge that all the forms of fiction had been 'used up' by the moderns. Barth turns to the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges as a model, since he gets over the impasse by ironically turning exhaustion into the very subject of his fiction.

Eco's argument is a powerful riposte to those Marxist critics (Jameson, 1991, Eagleton, 1997, or Žižek, 1999) who argue that the postmodern predisposition towards irony is nothing more than quietism, evidence of the complete lack of any political function in postmodernism. Eco demonstrates that irony is not necessarily an empty, cynical gesture, but a necessary negotiation, an essential strategy to avoid the inevitable silence to which avant-gardism leads.

Other theorists have also seen something powerful in postmodern irony, without agreeing with Eco's 'metahistorical' theory about the cycles of post-avant-gardism. The architectural critic Charles Jencks regards the defining element of postmodernism as the strategy he calls 'double coding'. Double coding in architecture means 'the combination of Modern techniques with something else (usually traditional building) in order for architecture to communicate with the public and . . . other architects'. In this way it is able to combine the élite with the popular and the old with the new. This bringing together of elements from two spheres, this practice of doing two things at the same time, is what makes it essentially an ironic technique.

Jencks is strict about the terms of his definition: a work of art must be double-coded for it to qualify as postmodernist rather than modernist or even what he calls 'late modernist', an intermediary form of aesthetic creation positioned between modernism and postmodernism. He argues that Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Jameson (among others) actually mistake 'late modernism' for postmodernism in their analyses. Late modernism, Jencks suggests, remains 'committed to the tradition of the new and does not have a complex relation to the past, or pluralism, or the transformation of western culture – a concern with meaning, continuity and symbolism' (Jencks, 1986, 33–4).

The notion of double-coding is also central to an important contribution to postmodern theory by the literary critic Linda Hutcheon. Developed in a productive burst in the late eighties, when she published three monographs on

postmodern fiction (Hutcheon 1988a, 1988b, 1989 [2002]), Hutcheon argues that postmodernism is characterized by 'an inherently paradoxical structure' (Hutcheon, 1988a, 222). She insists that she does not mean postmodernism is oppositional or dialectical, but that it is *double* or contradictory, that is comfortable with doing two opposing things at the same time or representing both sides of an argument at once. Its approach is summed up by the linguistic conjunction 'both . . . and . . . ' rather than 'either . . . or . . . ' As such her theory provides a useful way of explaining why the debate about postmodernism has involved such radically polarized positions and also offers us a way of moving beyond such binaries. Rather than postmodernism being a continuation *or* a break with modernism, it is more accurate to see it as both. Rather than postmodern art being self-reflexive *or* referring to the real world, it does both.

For Eco, Jencks, and Hutcheon, then, postmodernism is principally an ironic mode, which simultaneously says or does one thing *and* another. Ironic strategies are frequently central to the examples of postmodern fiction discussed in this book. The most characteristic practice in postmodern fiction is *metafiction*, the technique by which a text highlights its own status as a fictional construct by referring to itself. Self-reference is the literary version of the postmodern ironic attitude, for it indicates – as I will show in the following chapter – that we cannot accept the 'reality' we are presented with in a novel at face value. Metafiction reminds us that the work of fiction we read *is* fiction; it is not a mirror-reflection of the world but a combination of words on a page that we must make sense of by relating them to other texts, not the external world. To state this seems superfluous, for even the least self-conscious reader of fiction knows that s/he is 'suspending his or her disbelief' as s/he reads. Yet the function of metafiction, as Patricia Waugh makes clear in her book *Metafiction* (1984), is to expose postmodernity for what it is: effectively just as constructed, mediated, and discursive as the reality we are presented with in the world of fiction.