Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 2 (51) - 2009
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

JULIAN BARNES AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF CONTEMPORARY FICTION

Aura SIBIŞAN[1]

Abstract: *In the complex arena of contemporary fiction, postmodern writings offer challenging solutions for the innovation in fiction at the level of form. The characteristics of postmodern fiction transcend the geographical boundaries, so writers belonging to different cultural spaces share similar features. Julian Barnes is one of the British writers who expresses courageously his affinities with the French culture. His vision, style and the fiber of his work place him in the area of postmodern writers.*

Keywords: *postmodern, post-war fiction, experiment, tradition, epistemologic anxiety, innovation.*

1. Introduction

In his comprehensive study "Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction in Britain" (in Edmund J. Smyth ed., *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, Batsford, 1991), Randall Stevenson discusses British postmodern fiction in relation to the concept as such, and in relation to the illustrations of the trend in Europe and America. Argumentative and extremely well-documented, the study starts from demonstrating that there really is a British postmodernism, by postmodernism meaning a trend that can be seen, in Brian McHale's terms, as the "'logical and historical' consequence of the earlier initiatives of modernism".

According to Randall Stevenson, three are the features of modernism that would be pursued in the postmodern paradigm. "Firstly, modernist fiction's most celebrated innovation lies in its focalization of the novel in the minds or private narratives of its characters" (Stevenson 19). The subjectivity of the narrative point of view is followed by the second feature, "its abandonment of serial, chronological conventions of arrangement". The third feature of modernism relevant for this discussion is "an interest in the nature and form of art which occasionally extends, self-reflexively, towards the novel's scrutiny of its own strategies" (Stevenson 20).

In other words, the innovations in narrative technique – the subjectivity of perspective and the abandonment of linear chronology in the novel – together with the metafictional dimension are taken over by the postmoderns in their quest for new literary expression. To this, Randall Stevenson rightfully adds the philosophical dimension, the questions that postmodern writers are concerned with. In the words of Brian McHale, who establishes in *Postmodernist Fiction* the main distinction

[1] Dept. of Foreign Languages and Literatures, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

BDD-A20253 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.141 (2026-11-03 20:36:18 UTC)

between modernist writers and postmodern ones: while the moderns are concerned with epistemological questions ("How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?" (McHale 9), the postmoderns are troubled by ontological questions, for example "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?". To quote more from Brian McHale, because this seems to me a key issue for postmodern writing, "Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?" (McHale 10).

Many postmodern writers include in their work meditations on the nature of the world we live in, the transformations of the contemporary scene, and also on the nature of fiction, its capacity to reflect the anxieties of contemporary man.

The quotation seems relevant in the discussion of Julian Barnes's work, because the British writer is concerned with what kind of world we live in, even in the proper sense of the terms, if we remember the scene in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters,* in which one character is floating in a boat on the ocean, during a possible environmental catastrophe. The aspect of different worlds colliding is illustrated in the same novel, in the chapter narrated from the perspective of the woodwarm (chapter 1).

2. The Complexity of Postmodern Fiction

The ontological aspect concerns also the relation between world and word, so much debated in modern literature. In postmodern literature as well, this relation is seen under the sign of the arbitrary: "As McHale suggests, any 'stable world' the text projects is at best fragmentary, and is generally 'overwhelmed by the competing reality of language" (McHale 234). The 'autonomy of this language establishes *Finnegans Wake* as an almost purely linguistic domain, a self-contained world, ontologically disjunct." (Stevenson 21). For Randall Stevenson, *Finnegans Wake* is the paragon, as "each work is a postmodernist paradigm, a prophecy of the self-reflexive foregrounding of language and fiction-making which has become a central, distinguishing characteristic of postmodernism" (Stevenson 22).

This is a characteristic which has been prominent in post-war British fiction, and Randall Stevenson illustrates with writers that embraced this feature: Lawrence Durrell, Doris Lessing, John Fowles with *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Authors that comment on their own practice, intruding in the narrative, or thematizing in their text the problematic relations between language, fiction and reality are numerous in the field of contemporary British fiction. Randall Stevenson enumerates them, including Julian Barnes in the list: "Christine Brook-Rose, Muriel Spark, Giles Gordon, Rayner Hepenstall, David Caute, John Berger, B.S. Johnson, Alasdair Gray, Julian Barnes and others".

The quotation from Alain Robbe-Grillet, who was admired by John Fowles, is emblematic, in my opinion, for the importance of self-reflexiveness in postmodern British fiction: "After Joyce… it seems that we are more and more moving towards an age of fiction in which … invention and imagination may finally become the subject of the book" (Stevenson 23).

The discussion of the way in which the moderns treat chronology and structure leads Randall Stevenson to relate the postmoderns' innovation of literary forms

BDD-A20253 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.141 (2026-11-03 20:36:18 UTC)

with their reflections on history. The critic contradicts Fredric Jameson, one of the most powerful adversaries of postmodernism, who stated that postmodernism is "an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history" (in Foster, 1983, 117)" (Stevenson 24). The quotation from Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1982) is very relevant for the connection between the XXth century innovations in narrative technique and the moderns' reflection on history itself, as Randall Stevenson points out: "… the dimension of time has been shattered, we cannot love or think except in fragments of time each of which goes off along its own trajectory and immediately disappears. We can rediscover the continuity of time only in the novels of that period when time no longer seemed stopped and did not yet seem to have exploded" (Stevenson 25).

In contemporary times, the sense of fragmentation and discontinuity is felt more strongly, because of recent events and the development of technologies, thus the fractured, accelerated life designs an "apocalyptic history", to use Randall Stevenson's phrase. These conditions are reflected in different and intriguing ways by postmodern fiction and art in general. In the words of Randall Stevenson, "Postmodernism not only radicalizes forms, but also satirizes them, exposing their incapacities to connect with reality and the possibilities for distortion which result. In one way, (…), this can be seen as evasive, a negation of art's potential to confront the challenges of life and history. In another way, however, it can be seen as responsibly encouraging readers to challenge for themselves cultural codes and established patterns of thought" (Stevenson 26-27).

This illustrates the self-reflexivity of postmodernism, its capacity to reflect on itself, on literary forms. The relation between art and life is extensively discussed by postmodern writers in their work.

I quoted *in extenso*, because a parallelism can be made, with Linda Hutcheon's view of postmodernism being a contradictory phenomenon, exposing the arbitrariness of literary signs and relying upon this very arbitrariness. At the same time, the quotation serves very well our discussion of Julian Barnes's work, that captures precisely the writer's concern with the 'progress' of humanity, the advancement of technologies, industry and tourist development, the sophistication of marketing strategies, at the expense of authenticity, truth and moral values.

3. The Contemporary Scene

Nevertheless, the innovative authors Lawrence Durrell or William Golding are proof that the picture is not uniform, dominated only by the return to realism and traditional forms of writing, especially in the 1950s. Coming closer to the contemporary scene, where Julian Barnes has been performing as a novelist since 1980, Randall Stevenson gives account of the complexity of the literary scene: "Many members of the current generation of British writers, including older, established authors whose careers began in the 1950s, show, in single novels or at various points of their careers, an attraction towards experiment as well as tradition and realism" (Stevenson 29). The critic mentions Antony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), or Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (1973), as examples of innovative writings. Martin Amis is quoted with the following remark, emblematic for the experimental vein of contemporary British fiction: "I can imagine a novel that is as tricksy, as alienated and as writerly as those of, say, Alain Robbe-Grillet while

BDD-A20253 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.141 (2026-11-03 20:36:18 UTC)

also providing the staid satisfaction of pace, plot and humor with which we associate, say, Jane Austen. In a way, I imagine that this is what I myself am trying to do"(Stevenson 30).

Martin Amis's words capture the mingling of experiment and tradition, the compromise between inventing new forms of writing and keeping the mirror to reflect the society, in the realistic tradition. In my opinion, the British way of writing postmodern texts seems to result in a tamed version of postmodernism, in tune with the British way of avoiding to stand out, keeping a middle way.

Many British writers expressed admiration for French writing: John Fowles refers in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* to "the lessons of existentialist philosophy", and is inspired by Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes. Another example is Christine Brooke-Rose, who translated some of Robbe-Grillet's fiction into English. I would say that Julian Barnes, with his deep interest in French literature and culture, integrates in a long line of British writers who construct their fictional universe drawing inspiration from French literary models.

Britain has always needed to borrow from France, Ireland, the USA the drive to break conventions, to explore new ways of writing literature. This is not seen as a weakness within the British scene, it is considered a proof of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, with philosophical consequences: "In Brian McHale's model, from the arbitrariness of the signs results an epistemologic anxiety for modernism, which seeks new forms to engage with a problematic, fugitive, but still reachable external reality. Ontologically centered, postmodernism largely abandons this quest, highlighting the inadequacies of systems of representation which assume the possibility of valid contact with an exterior reality. " (Stevenson 33)

Postmodernism abandons the moderns' anxiety about how we can know the world, how we can understand external reality. It focuses on the difficulty to reflect reality through various systems of representation.

I quoted *in extenso*, because the issue discussed here by Randall Stevenson is extremely relevant for Julian Barnes's view on literature, his formation as a writer and the themes he approaches. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, for example, J. Barnes discusses the nature of fiction, the relation between fiction and reality, the possibility of fiction to represent external reality.

3. Conclusion

Randall Stevenson ends his study expressing his firm belief in the capacity of British fiction to absorb foreign influences in order to maintain its freshness, complexity and leading position in contemporary fiction. Julian Barnes is a contemporary writer that is postmodern in many essential aspects of his work. His spiritual affinities with French writers and French culture simplify the theorist's attempt to have a general view of contemporary fiction.

References

1. Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism.* London: Routlege, 1988.
2. McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1987.
3. Stevenson, Randall. "Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction in Britain", in Edmund Smyth, ed. *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1991.

BDD-A20253 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.141 (2026-11-03 20:36:18 UTC)