CHAPTER-II

Postmodernism: Elements and effects

The second chapter highlights the major aspects of postmodernism. It aims to study a current cultural phenomenon that exists. The chapter is divided into two sections. Section-I ends with a detailed consideration of what is what the guiding concern of the entire chapter is, in fact: the problematizing of history by postmodernism. Section-II is specifically focused on the poetics of historiographic metafiction and how it affects postmodern fiction.

Section -1 Poetics of postmodernism

Postmodernism is a contradictory theory, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges—be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film video, dance, TV, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics, or historiography.

Postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political. Its contradictions belong to that of late capitalist society, but whatever the cause, these contradictions are certainly visible in the important postmodern concept of “the presence of the past”. This is not a nostalgic return but a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society. Its aesthetic forms and its social formations are problematized by critical reflection. The same is true of the postmodernist rethinking of figurative painting in art and historical narrative in fiction and poetry. It is
always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic “return”. Herein lies the governing role of irony in postmodernism.

Postmodernism is contradictory and works within the very systems it attempts to subvert, postmodernism can probably not be considered a new. It has not replaced liberal humanism, even if it has seriously challenged it. It marks the site of the struggle of the emergence of something new. The manifestation in art of this struggle may be those almost indefinable and certainly bizarre works like Terry Gilliam’s film, Brazil. The postmodern ironic rethinking of history is here textualized in the many general parodic references to other movies: A Clockwork Orange, 1984, Gilliam’s own Time Bandits and Monty Python sketches, and Japanese epics, to name but a few. The more specific parodic recalls range from Star Wars’ Darth Vada to the Odessa Steps sequence of Eisentein’s Battleship Potemkin. In Brazil, however, the famous shot of the baby carriage on the steps is replaced by one of a floor cleaner, and the result is to reduce epic tragedy to the bathos of the mechanical and debased. Along with this ironic reworking of the history of film comes a temporal historical warp: the movie is set, we are told, at 8: 49 am, sometime in the twentieth century. The décor does not help us identify the time more precisely. The fashions mix the absurdly futuristic with 1930s styling; an oddly old-fashioned and dingy setting contradict the omnipresence of computers—though even they are not the sleekly designed creatures of today. Among the other typically postmodern contradictions in this movie is the co-existence of heterogenous filmic genres: fantasy Utopia and grim dystopia; absurd slapstick comedy and tragedy (the Tuttle/Buttle mix-up); the romantic adventure tale and the political documentary.
While all forms of contemporary art and thought offer examples of this kind of postmodernist contradiction, this section will be privileging the novel genre, and one form in particular, a form that is called “historiographic metafiction”. In this category we may include those well know and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages: The French Lieutenant’s Woman, Midnight’s Children, Ragtime, Legs, G., Famous Last Word, History of the world in 10 ½ chapters. In most of the critical work on postmodernism, it is narrative-be it in literature, history or theory-that has usually been the major focus of attention. Historiographic metafiction includes all three of these areas: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past. This kind of fiction has often been noticed by critics, but its paradigmatic quality has been ignored: it is commonly labeled as “midfiction” (A. Wilde 1981) or “paramodernist” (Malmgren 1985) Such labeling is another mark of the inherent contradictoriness of .historiographic metaficiton., for it always works within conventions in order to subvert them. . It is not just metafictional; nor is it just another version of the historical novel or the non-fictional novel. Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude has often been discussed in exactly the contradictory terms that define postmodernism. For example Larry McCaffery sees it as both metafictionally self-reflexive and yet speaking to us powerfully about real political and historical realities: “It has thus become a kind of model for the contemporary writer, being self-conscious about its
literary heritage and about the limits of mimesis...but yet managing to reconnect its readers to the world outside the page” (1982,).

What is being challenged by postmodernism? First of all, institutions have come under scrutiny: from the media to the university, from museums to theaters. Make-believe or illusionist conventions of art are often bared in order to challenge the institutions in which they find a home-and a meaning.

The important contemporary debate about the margins and the boundaries of social and artistic conventions is also the result of a typically postmodern transgressing of previously accepted limits: those of particular arts, of genres, of art itself. Rauschenberg's narrative work, Rebus, or Cy Twombly's series pm Spenserian texts are indicative of the fruitful straddling of the borderline between the literary and visual arts.

The borders between literary genres have become fluid: who can tell anymore what the limits are between the novel and the short story collection (Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women), the novel and the long poem (Michael Ondaatje's Coming Through Slaughter) the novel and history (Salman Rushdie’s Shame), the novel and biography (John Banville’s Kepler). But, in any of these examples, the conventions of the two genres are played off against each other; there is no simple, unproblematic merging.

The traditional verifying third-person past tense voice of history and realism is both installed and challenged by the others. In other works, like Italian writer Giorgio Manganelli’s Amore, the genres of theoretical treatise, literary dialogue, and novel are played off against one another. Eco’s The Name of the Rose contains at least three major registers of discourse: the literary-historical, the theological-philosophical, and the popular-cultural.
The most radical boundaries crosses, however, have been those between fiction and non-fiction and-by extension-between art and life. Typically postmodern, the text refuses the omniscience and omnipresence of the third person and engages instead in a dialogue between a narrative voice and a projected reader. Its viewpoint is avowedly limited, provisional, and personal. However, it also works (and plays) with the conventions of both literary realism and journalistic facticity: the text is accompanied by photographs of the author and the subject. The commentary uses these photos to make us, as readers, aware of our expectations of both narrative and pictorial interpretation, including our naïve but common trust in the representational veracity of photography.

Kosinski calls this postmodern form of writing “autofiction”: “fiction” because all memory is fictionalizing; “auto” because it is, for him, “a literary genre, generous enough to let the author adopt the nature of his fictional protagonist- not the other way around” ¹

Much has been made of the blurring of the distinctions between the discourses of theory and literature in the works of Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, Ihab Hassan, and Zulfikar Ghose. Rosalind Kruss has called this sort of work “paraliterary” and sees it as challenging both the concept of the “work of art” and the separation of that concept from the domain of the academic critical establishment: “The paraliterary space is the space of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation; but it is not the space of unity, coherence, or resolution that we think of as constituting the work of art”. ² This is the space of postmodern.
In addition of being “borderline” inquiries, most of these postmodernist contradictory texts are also specifically parodic in their intertextual relation to the traditions and conventions of the genres involved. When Eliot recalled Dante or Virgil in *The Waste Land*, one sensed a kind of wishful call to continuity under the fragmented echoing. This kind of continuity is contested in postmodern parody where it is often ironic discontinuity that is revealed at the heart of continuity, difference at the heart of similarity. Parody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies. It also forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality that is well-matched with other postmodern interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions.

While theorists like Jameson see this loss of the modern unique, individual style as negative, as an imprisoning of the text in the past through pastiche, it has been seen by postmodern artists as a liberating challenge to a definition of subjectivity and creativity that has for too long ignored the role of history in art and thought.

The same is true of the fiction of John Fowles. As Foucault noted, the concepts of subjective consciousness and continuity that are now being questioned are tied up with an entire set of ideas that have been dominant in our culture until now: “the point of creation, the unity of a work, of a period, of a theme…the mark of originality and the infinite wealth of hidden meanings”.

Another consequence of this far-reaching postmodern inquiry into the very nature of subjectivity is the frequent challenge to traditional notions of perspective, especially in narrative and painting. The perceiving subject is no longer assumed to a coherent, meaning-generating entity. Narrators in fiction
become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate (as in D. M. Thomas’s *The White Hotel*) or resolutely provisional and limited-often undermining their own seeming omniscience (as in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*). In Charles Russell’s terms, with postmodernism we start to encounter and are challenged by “an art of shifting perspective, of double self consciousness, of local and extended meaning”.

Historical and narrative continuity and closure are contested from within. The teleology of art forms—from fiction to music—is both suggested and transformed. The centre no longer completely holds. And, from the decentered perspective, the “marginal” and what we may call the “Ex-centric” (be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) take on new significance in the light that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middleclass, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed. The concept of alienated otherness (based on binary oppositions that conceal hierarchies) gives way, to that of differences, which is to the assertion, not of centralized sameness, but of decentralized community—another postmodern paradox. The local and regional are stressed in the face of mass culture and a kind of vast global informational village.

It would seem that the “presence of the past” depends on the local and culture-specific nature of each past.

Postmodern art similarly asserts and then deliberately weaken such principles as value, order, meaning, control, and identity that have been the basic premises of bourgeois liberalism. The contradictions of both postmodern theory and practice are positioned within the system and yet work to allow its premises to be seen as fictions or as ideological structures. This does not
necessarily destroy their “truth” value, but it does define the conditions of that “truth”. Such a process discloses rather than conceals the tracks of the signifying systems that constitute our world—that is, systems constructed by us in answer to our needs. The very limitations imposed by the postmodern view are also perhaps ways of opening new doors: perhaps now we can better study the interrelations of social, aesthetic, philosophical and ideological constructs.

In writing about these postmodern contradictions, it has been seen as an ongoing cultural process or activity. What we need, more than a fixed and fixing definition, is a “poetics”, an open, ever-changing theoretical structure by which to order both our cultural knowledge and our critical procedures.

A poetics of postmodernism would not establish any relations of causality or identity either among the arts or between art and theory. It would merely offer characteristics of postmodernism. It would be a matter of reading literature through its surrounding theoretical discourse rather than as continuous with theory.

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for.

Jameson has listed “theoretical discourse” among the manifestations of postmodernism and this would include, not only the obvious Marxist, feminist, and poststructuralist philosophical and literary theory, but also analytic philosophy, psychoanalysis, linguistics, historiography, sociology and other
areas. Recently critics have begun to notice the similarities of concern between various kinds of theory and current literary discourse, sometimes to condemn (Newman, 1985, 118), sometimes merely to describe

Historiography is itself taking part in what LaCapra has called a “reconceptualization of culture in terms of collective discourses” 6 By this, he does not mean to imply that historians no longer concern themselves with “archivally based documentary realism”, but only that, within the discipline of history, there is also a growing concern with redefining intellectual history as “the study of social meaning as historically constituted”. This is exactly what historiographic metafiction is doing: Graham Swift’s Waterland, Rudy Wibe’s the Temptations of Big Bear, Ian Watson’s Chekhov’s Journey and Barnes’s “Flaubert’s Parrot”.

In the past, of course, history has often been used in novel criticism, though usually as a model of the realistic pole of representation. Postmodern fiction problematizes this model to query the relation of both history to reality and reality to language.

The view that the postmodernism consigns history to “the dustbin of an obsolete episteme, arguing gleefully that history does not exist except as text” is simply wrong. History is not made outdated: it is, however, being rethought— as a human construct. And in arguing that history does not exist except as text, it does not stupidly and “gleefully” deny that the past existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is totally conditioned by textuality. We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are texts. Even the institutions of the past, its social structures and practices, could be seen, in one sense, as social texts. And
postmodern novels—The Scorched-Wood People, Flaubert’s Parrot, Antichthon, The White Hotel—teach us about both this fact and its consequences.

Along with the obvious and much publicized case of postmodern architecture. It has been (American) black and (general) feminist theory and practice that have been particularly important in this postmodernist refocusing on historicity, both formally (largely through parodic intertextuality) and thematically. Works like Ishmael Reed’s Mumbo Jumbo, Maxine Hone Kingston’s China Men, and Gayl Jones’s Corregidora have gone far to expose—very self-reflexivity—the myth—or illusion-making tendencies of historiography. They have also linked racial and/or gender difference to questions of discourse and of authority and power that are at the heart of the postmodernist enterprise in general and, in particular, of both black theory and feminism.

Postmodernism often appear to exclude the work of women, even though female (and black) explorations of narrative and linguistic form have been among the most contesting and radical. Certainly women and Afro-American artists’ use of parody to challenge the male white tradition from within, to use irony to implicate and feminist thought have shown how it is possible to move theory out of the ivory tower and in to the larger world of social praxis, as theorists like Said (1983) have been advocating. Women have helped to develop the postmodern valuing of the margins and the ex-centric as a way out of the power problematic of centers and of male/female oppositions.
Any poetics of postmodernism should come to terms with the immense amount of material that has already been written on the subject of postmodernism in all fields. The debate invariably begins over the meaning of the prefix, “post”. The “Post Position” signals its contradictory dependence on and independence from that which temporally preceded it and which literally made it possible. Postmodernism’s relation to modernism is, therefore, typically contradictory. It marks neither a simple break from it nor a straightforward continuity with it: it is both and neither.

What postmodernism does, as its very name suggests, is confront and contest any modernist discarding or recuperating of the past in the name of the future. It suggests no search for transcendent timeless meaning, but rather a reevaluation of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present. We could call this, once again, “the presence of the past” or perhaps its “present-ification” (Hassan 1983). It does not deny the existence of the past; it does question whether we can ever know that past other than through its textualized remains.

A further postmodern paradox that this particular kind of fiction enacts is to be found in its bridging of the gap between elite and popular art, a gap which mass culture has no doubt broadened. Many have noted postmodernism’s attraction to popular art forms such as the detective story (Folwles’s *a Maggot*) or the western (Doctorow’s *Welcome to Hard Times* or Thomas Berger’s *Little Big Man*). But what has not been dealt with is the paradox of novels like *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* or *the Name of the Rose* themselves being at once popular best-sellers and objects of intense academic study. It would be argued that, as typically postmodernist
contradictory texts, novels like these parodically use and abuse the conventions of both popular and elite literature, and do so in such a way that they can actually use the invasive culture industry to challenge its own commodification processes from within. And, in addition, if elitist culture has indeed been fragmented into specialist disciplines, as many have argued, then hybrid novels like these work both to address and to subvert that fragmentation through their pluralizing recourse to the discourses of history, sociology, theology, political science, economics, philosophy, semiotics, literature, literary criticism and so on. Historiographic metafiction clearly acknowledges that it is a complex institutional and discursive network of elite, official, mass, popular cultures that postmodernism operates in.

To move from the desire and expectation of sure and single meaning to a recognition of the value of differences and even contradictions might be a tentative first step to accepting responsibility for both art and theory as signifying processes. In other words, may be we could begin to study the implication of both our making and our making sense of our culture.

**Postmodern: Parody and politics**

Postmodernism’s main interest is in the processes of its own production and reception, as well as in its own parodic relation to the art of the past. Linda Hutcheon in “Poetics of postmodernism” asserts: it is precisely parody—that seemingly introverted formalism—that paradoxically brings about a direct confrontation with the problem of the relation of the aesthetic to a world of significance external to itself, to a discursive world of socially defined
meaning systems (past and present)—in other words, to the political and the historical.⁷

The best model for a poetics of postmodernism is the postmodern architecture. The characteristics of this architecture are also those of postmodernism at large—from historiographic metafiction like Christa Wolf’s *Cassandra* or E.L. Doictorow’s *The Book of Daniel* to metafilmic historical movies like Peter Greenway’s *the Draughtman’s Contract*, from the video art of Douglas Da vis to the photography of Vincent Leo. And all of these art works share one major contradictory characteristic: they are all openly historical and unavoidable political, because they are formally parodic. It will be argued throughout this chapter that postmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) at once use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionally and to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past. In implicitly contesting in this way such concepts as aesthetic originality and textual closure, postmodrnist art offers a new model for mapping the boarderland between art and the world, a model that works from a position within both and yet not totally within either.

The paradox of postmodernist parody is that it is not essentially depthless, trivial kitsch, but rather it can and does lead to a vision of interconnectedness: “illuminating itself, the artwork simultaneously casts light on the workings of aesthetic conceptualization and on art’s sociological situation” ⁸. Postmodrmist ironic recall of history is neither nostalgia nor aesthetic cannibalization. Nor can it be reduced to the glibly decorative.
It is true that postmodern art does not offer what Jameson desires—“genuine historicity”. What postmodernism does is to contest the very possibility of our ability to know the “ultimate objects” of the past. It teaches and enacts the recognition of the fact that the social, historical and existential “reality” of the past is discursive reality when it is used as the referent of art, and so the only “genuine historicity” becomes that which would openly acknowledge its own discursive, contingent identity. The past as referent is not bracketed or effaced.

Postmodernism self-consciously demands that the “justifying premises and structural bases” of its modes of “speaking” be investigated to see what permits, shapes, and generates what is “spoken”.

In reaction against what modernist ahistoricism led to, however, postmodern parodic revisitations of the history of architecture interrogate the modernist totalizing ideal of progress through rationality and purist form (Lyotard 1986, 120)

What soon became labeled as postmodernism challenged the survival of modernism by contesting its claims to universality: its transhistorical assertions of value were no longer seen as based—on reason or logic, but rather on a solid alliance with power, with what Portoghesi calls its “identification with the productive logic of the industrial system”.

And, just as modernism (oedipally) had to reject historicism and to pretend to a parthenogenetic birth fit for the new machine age, so postmodernism, in reaction, returned to history, to what is called “parody”, to give architecture back its traditional social and historical dimension, though with a new twist this time.
“Parody” here is not the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic practice suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition of with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity. In historiographic metafiction, in film, in painting, in music, and in architecture, this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity, this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity: the Greek prefix *para* can mean both ‘counter’ or ‘against’ and ‘near’ or ‘beside’.

In order to understand why ironic parody becomes such an important form of postmodernist architecture, we should remind ourselves of what the domination of “heroic” or high modernism has meant in the twentieth century. There have been two kinds of reactions to this modernist hegemony:

- those from architecture themselves and
- those from the public at large.

Perhaps the most expressive and polemical of the recent public responses has been that of Tome Wolfe in his *From Bauhaus to our House*. Wolf’s is a negative aesthetic response to what he amusingly calls “the whiteness & lightness & leanness & cleanness & bareness & spareness of it all” 10 But it is also an ideological rejection of what can only be called the modernist architects’ “policing” of the impulses of both the clients and the tenants of their buildings.
It doesn't mean that postmodernism negate modernism entirely. It cannot. What it does do is interpret it freely. Thus modernism’s dogmatic reductionism, its inability to deal with ambiguity and irony, and its denial of the validity of the past were all issues that were seriously examined and found wanting. Postmodernism attempts to be historically aware, hybrid, and inclusive. Seemingly inexhaustible historical and social curiosity and a provisional and paradoxical stance replace the prophetic, prescriptive of the great masters of modernism. An example of this new collaborative position would be Robert Pirzio Biroli’s rebuilding of the Town Hall in Venzone, Italy following a recent earthquake.

Postmodernism’s failure to break completely with modernism is interpreted by Portoghesi as a necessary and often even affectionate “dialogue with a father”

Postmodernist parody, be it in architecture, literature, painting, film, or music, uses its historical memory, its aesthetic introversion, to signal that this kind of self-reflexive discourse is always inextricably bound to social discourse. In Charles Russell’s words, the greatest contribution of postmodernism has been a recognition of the fact that “any particular meaning system in society takes its place amongst-and receives social validation from-the total pattern of semiotic systems that structure society” 11 If the self-conscious formalism of modernism in many of the arts led to the isolation of art from the social context, then postmodernism’s even more self-reflexive parodic formalism reveals that it is art as discourse that is what is intimately connected to the political and the social.
Postmodern architecture seems to be paradigmatic of our seeming urgent need, in both artistic theory and practice, to investigate the relation of ideology and power to all of our present discursive structures, and it is for this reason that it will be using it as the model throughout this chapter.

**Postmodern: the paradoxical outcome of modernism**

Postmodernism has a direct link with modernism. Whatever the disagreements about it, we appear to have agreed upon recognizing its existence. And the same is gradually becoming the case with postmodernism. Even Fredric Jameson, one of its most vociferous antagonists, calls postmodernism a periodizing concept “whose function is to associate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order” 12

Clearly for these theorists and critics, among other, postmodernism is an evaluative designation to be used in relation to modernism. The modern is ineluctably embedded in the postmodern but the relationship is a complex one of consequence, difference, and dependence.

The main emphasis here is on the postmodernist novel, it is because it seems to be a special forum for discussion of the postmodern. Ortega y Gasset has suggested that each epoch prefers a particular genre and the novel (along with architecture) appears to be the postmodern genre. But this does not seem that postmodernism is limited to this in actual aesthetic practice. In fact it would be argued that we must take into account not only other art forms but also theoretical discourse, if we are to define a poetics of
the paradoxical creature of our age that we have labeled, for better or worse, as postmodernism. As Rosalind Kruss has pointed out:

If one of the tenets of modernist literature has been the creation of a work that would force reflection on the conditions of its own construction, that would insist on reading as a much more consciously critical act, then it is not surprising that the medium of a postmodernist literature should be the critical text wrought into a paraliterary form. And what is clear is that Barthes and Derrida are the writers, not the critics, that students now read.

The interrogations and contradictions of the postmodern begin with the relationship of present art to past art and of present culture to past history. In his book, *form Follows Fiasco* (1977), Peter Blake sees postmodernism arising out of the rethinking of modernism by the modernists themselves, in the face of the social and aesthetic failure of the International Style. Seeing the need for a new direction that would return architecture to the human and material resources of the social landscape, they turned from pure form to function and to the history of function. But one never returns to the past without distance, and in postmodern architecture that distance has been signaled by irony.

Many of the enemies of postmodernism see irony as fundamentally antiserious, but this is a mistake and misconstrues the critical power of double voicing. As Umberto Eco has said, about both his own historiographic metafiction and his semiotic theorizing, the “game of irony” is intricately involved in seriousness of purpose and theme. In fact irony may be the only way we can be serious today. There is no innocence in our world, he
suggests. We cannot ignore the discourses that precede and contextualize everything we say and do, and it is through ironic parody that we signal our awareness of this inescapable fact. The “already-said” must be reconsidered and can be reconsidered only in an ironic way.

This is far from “nostalgia” as anyone could wish. It critically confronts the past with the present, and vice versa. In a direct reaction against the tendency of our times to value only the new and novel, it returns us to a re-thought past to see what, if anything, is of value in that past experience. But the critique of its irony is double-edged: the past and the present are judged in each other’s light.

For its enemies, however, such a critical use of irony is conveniently overlooked. Postmodernism is deemed reactionary in its impulse to return to the forms of the past. But to say this is to ignore the actual historical forms to which artists return. It also overlooks everything that return is in reaction against. In Portoghesi’s words:

This recovery of memory, after the forced amnesia of a half century, is manifest in customs, dress..., in the mass diffusion of an interest in history and its products, in the every vaster need for contemplative experiences and contact with nature that seemed antithetical to the civilizations of machines that has characterized modernism in the twentieth century. This is not a monolithic nostalgia that bankrupts the present; it is postmodern’s search for “its own ‘difference’ in the removed repetition and utilization of the entire past”.

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While postmodern architecture has been the art form to come most under attack for its parodic intertextuality and its relation to history (both aesthetic and social), postmodernist fiction has also been called the death of the novel by so many critics. It is important to note, however, that what is usually meant by the use of the term “postmodern” in this case is metafiction. Theorists of metafiction themselves argue that this fiction no longer attempts to mirror reality or tell any truth about it. This is certainly one of the consequences of not as postmodernism, but as an extreme of modernist autotelic self-reflexion in contemporary metafiction. It is for this reason we postmodernism in fiction be revealed to describe the more paradoxical and historically complex form that I have been calling “historiographic metafiction”. Postmodern novels problematize narrative representation, even as they invoke it.

Like the architecture of Charles Moore and Riccardo Bofill, this kind of fiction (Star Turn, A Maggot, The Old Gringo, Ragtime, and so on) not only is self-reflexively metafictional and parodic, but also makes a claim to some kind of historical reference. It does not so much deny as contest the “truths” of reality and fiction-the human constructs by which we manage to live in our world. Fiction does not mirror reality; nor does it reproduce it. It cannot. There is no pretense of simplistic mimesis in historiographic metafiction. Instead, fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality, and both the construction and the need for it are what are foregrounded in the postmodernist novel.
One of the ways that this foregrounding is carried out is by stressing the contexts, in which the fiction is being produced—by both writer and reader. In other words, the questions of history and ironic intertextuality necessitate a consideration of the entire “enunciative” or discursive situation of fiction. Postmodernism does not just move the emphasis from the producer or the text to the receiver, it re-contextualizes both the production and reception processes and the text itself within an entire communication situation which includes the social, ideological, historical, and aesthetic contexts in which those processes and that product exist. And in no way are these “inertly contextual”. The modernist tendency of the alienated artist’s perspective and language gives way to the postmodernist “re-evaluation of the individual’s response to his society, and in particular, to society’s semiotic codes of behavior, value and discourse as can be seen in this address to readers by the Chinese–American narrator of Maxine Hong Kingston’s the Woman Warrior (1976):

Chinese American, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese?

How do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese?

What is Chinese tradition and what are the movies? ¹⁴

We say that that Specificity of context is part of the “situating” of postmodernism.
In other words, postmodernism goes beyond self-reflexivity to situate discourse in a broader context. Self conscious metafiction has been with us for a long time, probably since Homer and certainly since *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy*. In film, self-reflexivity has been a common technique of modernist narrative, used to undercut representation and viewer identification. The more complex and more overt discursive contextualizing of postmodernism goes one step beyond this auto-representation and its demystifying intent, for it is fundamentally critical in its ironic relation to the past and the present. This is true of postmodern fiction and architecture, as it is of much contemporary historical, philosophical and literary theoretical discourse today.

One of the things we must be open to listening to is what is called the ex-centric, the off-centric. Postmodernism questions centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems: questions, but does not destroy. It acknowledges the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the orders we create are just that: human constructs, not natural or given entities. It is more a questioning of commonly accepted values of our culture (closure, teleology and subjectivity), a questioning that is totally dependent upon that which it interrogates. This is perhaps the most basic formulation possible of the paradox of the postmodern.

We have seen that the contradictions that characterize postmodernism reject any neat binary opposition that might conceal a secret hierarchy of values. The elements of these contradictions are usually multiple; the focus is on differences, not single otherness; and their roots are most likely to be
found in the very modernism from which postmodernism derives its name. Many critics have pointed out the glaring contradictions of modernism; its elitist, classical need for order and its revolutionary formal innovations; its "Janusfaced" anarchistic urge to destroy existing systems combined with a reactionary political vision of ideal order; its compulsion to write mixed with a realization of the meaninglessness of writing; its melancholy regret for the loss of presence and its experimental energy and power of conception.

Postmodernism challenges some of the aspects of modernist dogma: its view of the autonomy of art and its deliberate separation from life; its expression of individual subjectivity its adversarial status vis-à-vis mass culture and bourgeois life. But on the other hand, the postmodern clearly also developed out of other modernist strategies: its self-reflexive experimentation, its ironic ambiguities, and its contestations of classic realist representation.

Postmodernism is almost always double-voiced in its attempts to historicize and contextualize the enunciative situation of its art. Black American culture has been defined as one of “double consciousness”, in which black and white, slave and master cultures are never reconciled, but held in a double suspension. Some types of feminism have argued much the same sort of relationship between female and male culture.

One of the ways in which it achieves this paradoxical popular-academic identity is through its technique of installing and then subverting familiar conventions of both kinds of art.

In its contradictions postmodernist fiction tries to offer what Stanley Fish once called a “dialectical” literary presentation, one that disturbs
readers, forcing them to scrutinize their own values and beliefs, rather than satisfying them. But as Umberto Eco has reminded us, postmodern fiction may seem more open in form, but constraint is always needed in order to feel free. This kind of novel self-consciously uses the trappings of what Fish calls “rhetorical” literary presentation (omniscient narrators, coherent characterization, plot closure) in order to point to the humanly constructed character of these trappings—their arbitrariness and conventionality. It means that the typically contradictory postmodern exploitation and subversion of the familiar staples of both realist and modernist fiction.

We have seen that when postmodern architects showed the world their wares at that Venice Biennale in 1980, they chose as their banner the motto: “the present of the past”. This obvious paradox offers a conjoining of performance in the present and recording of the past. In fiction, this contradiction played out in terms of parody and metafiction versus the conventions of realism. The metafictionally present modern narrator of Fowles’s *the French Lieutenant’s Woman* jars with and parodies the conventions of the nineteenth-century novelistic tale of Charles, Sarah and Ernestina. The various Chinese boxes of narrators and fiction-makers are matched by more generic ironic play on nineteenth century authoritative narrating voices, reader address, and narrative closure.

This complex and extended parody is not, however, just a game for the academic reader. It is openly intended to prevent any reader from ignoring both the modern and the specifically Victorian social, as well as aesthetic, contexts. We are not allowed to say either that this is “only a story” or that it is
“only about the Victorian period”. The past is always placed critically—and not nostalgically—in relation with the present. The plot structure of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* presents freedom and power that is the modern existentialist and even Marxist answer to Victorian or Darwinian determinism. But it requires that historical context in order to interrogate the present (as well as the past) through its critical irony. Parodic self-reflexiveness paradoxically leads her to the possibility of a literature which, while asserting its modernist autonomy as art, also manages simultaneously to investigate its intricate and intimate relations with the social world in which it is written and read.

This kind of contradiction is what characterizes postmodern art, which works to subvert dominant discourse, but its dependence upon those same discourses for its very physical existence: the “already-said”. Yet it is wrong to see postmodernism as defined in any way by an “either/or” structure.

Postmodernism is marked by a return to history, and it does indeed problematize the entire notion of historical knowledge. But the reinstalling of memory is not uncritical or reactionary, and the problematization of humanist certainties does not mean their denial or death. Postmodernism does not so much erode our “sense of history” and reference, as wear away our old sure sense of what both history and reference meant. It asks us to rethink and critique our notions of both.

The postmodern is not quite an avant-garde. It is not as radical or as adversarial. In Charles Russell’s view (1985), the avant-garde is self-consciously modern and subject to sociocultural change. The same is true of
the postmodern, but this valuing of innovation is conditioned by a re-evaluation of the past which puts newness and novelty into perspective. The avant-garde is also seen as critical of the dominant culture and alienated from it in a way that the postmodern is not, largely because of its acknowledgement of its unavoidable implication in that dominant culture. At the same time it both exploits and critically undermines that dominance. In short, the postmodern is not as negating or as Utopic as is, at least, the historical or modernist avant-garde. It incorporates its past within its very name and parodically seeks to inscribe its criticism of that past.

These contradictions of postmodernism are not really meant to be resolved, but rather are to be held in an ironic tension. For example in John Fowles’s *A Maggot*, there are an amazing number of such unsolved and unresolved paradoxes. On a formal level, the novel holds in tension the conventions of history and fiction (specifically, of romance and science fiction). One of its main narrative structures is that of question and answer (a lawyer’s questioning of witness), a structure that foregrounds the conflicts between truth and lies, differing perceptions of truth, facts and beliefs, and truth and illusion. The transcribing clerk believes there are two truths: “one that a person believes is truth; and one that is truth incontestable”, but the entire novel works to problematize such binary certainty.

The different and the paradoxical fascinate the postmodern. So too do the multiple and the provisional. The challenging of certainty, the asking of questions, the revealing of fiction-making where we might have once
accepted the existence of some absolute “truth”-this is the project of postmodernism.

The debate over the definition of both modernism and postmodernism has now been going on for years. Modernism literally and physically haunts postmodernism, and their interrelations should not be ignored. Indeed there appear to be two dominant schools of thought about the nature of the interaction of the two enterprises:

- the first sees postmodernism as a total break form modernism and the language of this is the radical rhetoric of rupture;

- the second sees the postmodern as an extension and intensification of certain characteristics of modernism.

The radical break theory depends upon firm binary oppositions that operate on the formal, philosophical and ideological levels. On the formal level postmodern surface is opposed to modernist depth and the ironic and parodic tone of postmodernism contrasts with the seriousness of modernism. Postmodern skepticism is presented as the refutation and rejection of modernism’s heroism. Instead of this kind of opposition, we may argue that what postmodernism does is use and abuse these characteristics of modernism in order to install a questioning of both of the listed extremes.

The other school of thought argue a relationship of continuity or extension between the two. For David Lodge, they share a commitment to innovation and to a critique of tradition, even if the manifestations of these shared values differ. On a formal level, modernism and postmodernism are
said to share self-reflexivity and a concern for history. Certainly postmodern works have turned to modernist texts—often in different media—in their parodic play with convention and history.

On a more theoretic level, some critics see postmodernism as raising the same kind of issues as modernism:

- investing the cultural assumptions underlying our models of history (or
- Challenging the entire western humanistic tradition.
- Other argue that the ironic distance that modernism sets up between art and audience is, in fact, intensified in postmodernism’s “double-distancing”
- For others, postmodern fiction completes modernism’s break with traditional realism and bourgeois rationalism, just as postmodern poetry seen as continuing the modernist challenge to romantic self-transcendence, though its stress on the local and topical does contest modernist impersonality

What most of these theoretical points of view share today is a desire to question what Christopher Norris calls “the kinds of wholesale explanatory theory which would seek to transcend their own special context or localized conditions of cultural production”. They also tend not to become paralyzed by their very postmodern realization that their own discourses have no absolute claim to any ultimate foundation in “truth”.

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A poetics of postmodernism would not set up a hierarchy that might privilege either theory or practice. It would not make theory either autonomous or parasitic. And one of the justifications for keeping the focus on both theory and aesthetic practice would be the didactic and selfconsciously theoretical nature of postmodern art itself.

**Decentring the postmodern: the ex-centric**

Like much contemporary literary theory, the postmodernist novel puts into question that entire series of interconnected concepts that have come to be associated with what we conveniently label as liberal humanism: autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin. To put these concepts into question is not to deny them-only to interrogate their relation to experience. The process by which this is done is a process of installing and then withdrawing those much contested notions. It is neither uncertain nor suspending of judgment: it questions the very bases of any certainty (history, subjectivity, reference) and of any standards of judgment. Who sets them? When? Where? Why?

No doubt, this interrogative stance, this contesting of authority is a result of the decentered revolt, the “molecular politics” of the 1960s. It would be hard to argue that this challenge to models of unity and order is directly caused by the fact that life today is more fragmented and chaotic; yet many have done so, claiming that our fiction is bizarre because life is more bizarre than ever before. This view has been called simplistic and even lunatic in the light of history (both social and literary). But whatever the cause, there have
been serious interrogations of those once accepted certainties of liberal
humanism.

These challenges have become the sayings of contemporary
theoretical discourse. One of the important among them is notion of center, in
all its forms. In Chris Scott’s postmodern historiographic metafiction
_Antichthon_, the historical character, Giordano Bruno, lives out the dramatic
consequences of the Copernican displacing of the world and of humankind.
From a decentered perspective as the title suggests, if one world exists, then
all possible worlds exist: historical plurality replaces atemporal eternal
essence. In postmodern psychoanalysis, philosophical and literary theory, the
further decentering of the subject and its pursuit of individuality and
authenticity has had significant repercussions on everything form our concept
of rationality to our view of the possibilities of genre.

If the center will not hold, then, as one of the Merry Prankstes (in Tom
Wolfe’s _The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test_) put it, “Hail to the Edges!” The move
to rethink margins and borders is clearly a move away from centralization with
its associated concerns of origin, oneness and monumentality that work to
link the concept of center to those of the eternal and universal.

Much of the debate over the definition of the term “postmodernism” has
revolved around what some see as a loss of faith in this centralizing and
totalizing impulse of humanist thought.

When the center starts to give way to the margins, when totalizing
universalization begins to self-deconstruct, the complexity of the
contradictions within conventions—such as those of genre, for instance—begin to be apparent.

To move from difference and heterogeneity to discontinuity is a link that at least the *rhetoric* of rupture has readily made in the light of the contradictions and challenges of postmodernism. Narrative continuity is threatened, is both used and abused, inscribed and subverted. The nineteenth century structures of narrative closure (death, marriage; neat conclusions) are undermined by those postmodern epilogues that foreground how, as writers and readers, we make closure: Fowles’s *a Maggot*, Thomas’s *The White Hotel*, Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Banville’s *Doctor Copernicus* ends with “DC”—both the protagonist’s initials and the (initiating/reiterating) da capo which refuse closure. Similarly the modernist tradition of the more “open” ending is both used and abused by postmodern self-consciously multiple endings (Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*) or resolutely arbitrary closure (Rushdie’s *Midnight Children*). From the point of view of theory, Derrida has argued that closure is not only not desirable, but also not even possible and he has done so in a language of supplement, margin and deferral.

The decentering of our categories of thought always relies on the centers it contest for its very definition. The adjectives may vary: hybrid, heterogeneous, discontinuous, antitotalizing, uncertain.

The center may not hold, but it is still an attractive fiction of order and unity that postmodern art and theory continue to exploit and subvert. That fiction takes many forms in the institutions of culture and, in many of them, its
limitations are becoming the focus of attention. The notion of the physical book is challenged in formally hybrid “intermedia” (Caramello 1983,), and of course, the categories of genre are regularly challenged these days. Fiction looks like biography (Banville’s Kepler), autobiography (Ondaaatje’s Running in the family), history (Rushdie’s Shame). Theoretical discourse joins forces with autobiographical memoir and Proustian reminiscence in Barthes’s Camera Lucida (1981), where a theory of photography grows out of personal emotion with no pretense to objectivity, finality, authority.

The ex-centric, the off-center: ineluctably identified with the center it desires but it denied. This is the paradox of the postmodern and its images are often as deviant as this language of decentering might suggest: the freak is one common example: in novels like E.L. Doctorow’s Loon Lake and Paul Quarrington’s Home Game. The multi-ringed circus becomes the pluralized and paradoxical metaphor for a decentered world where there is only ex-centricity. Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus combines this freak-circus framework with contestings of narrative centering: it overlaps the border between the imaginary/fantastic and the realistic/historical, between a unified biographically structured plot, and a decentered narration, with its wandering point of view and extensive digressions.

Another form of this same move off-center is to be found in the contesting of centralization of culture through the valuing of the local and peripheral. Postmodern architects similarly look to the local idiom and ethos for their forms. In addition, postmodern painters, sculptors, video artists, novelists, poets and film-makers join with these architects in collapsing the
high/low art hierarchy of earlier times, in an attack on high art centralization of academic interest, on the one hand, and, on the other, on the homogeneity of neutralizing and popularizing.

It is again to the 1960s that we must turn to see the roots of this change, for it is those years that saw the inscribing into history of previously “silent” groups defined by differences of race, gender, sexual preferences, ethnicity, native status, class. The 1970s and 1980s have seen the increasingly rapid and complete inscribing of these same ex-centrics into both theoretical discourse and artistic practice as andro-(phallo-), hetero-, Euro, ethno-centricism have been vigorously challenged. Think of Doctorow’s *Ragtime* with its three paralleled families: the Anglo-American establishment one and the marginal immigrant European and American black ones. The novel’s action disperses the center of the first and moves the margins into the multiple “centers” of the narrative, in a formal allegory of the social demographics of urban America.

The 1960s brought many of these issues into the center, as the political and the aesthetic merged in the so-called counter culture. In the United States the rise of millitant black protest in literature in the 1060s had direct political consequences. Since then black literature has also forced reconsiderations of cultural specificity, the canon, and methods of analysis that have had repercussions well beyond the borders of the United States, for it is possible to argue that it literally enabled feminist and other forms of protest. Blacks and feminists, ethnics and gays, native and “Third World” cultures, do not form monolithic movements, but constitute a multiplicity of responses to a
commonly perceived situation of marginality and ex-centricity. And there have been liberating effects of moving from the language of alienation(otherness) to that of decentering (difference).

The center used to function as the pivot between binary opposites which always privileged on half: white/black, male/female, self/other, intellect/body, west/east, objectivity/subjectivity-the list is now well know.

The autobiographical novels of black American men in the 1960s have given way to a more structurally and ideologically complex form of narrative because of the new voice of black women writers. There is a postmodern desire to “make and unmaking meaning, effect a simultaneous creative surge and destructive will”. But black women have been aided in their particular “voicing” by the rise of the women’s movement. The reaction of women took a very “sixties” form:

- a challenging of authority (male, institutional),
- an acknowledgement of power as the basis of sexual politics,
- a belief in the role of socio-cultural context in the production and reception of art.

All of these contestations would be visible as the bases of the paradoxes of postmodernism in the immediate future, as feminist and others recognized as “sexism, hetrosexism ,racism, capitalism and imperialism intersect in complex often contradictory ways.
Postmodern feminist fiction like Susan Daitch’s L.C foregrounds these contradictions most clearly. Here the position of women in France in 1848 is the initial focus: “Women were considered part of their husbands’ accumulated property; they were denied citizenship, had the same legal rights as lunatics and the mentally deficient’ 16. But the protagonist soon learns that this bourgeois concept extends even to the leftist revolutionaries: during a political meeting, Proudhon orders women to the back of the room, provoking her to note the contradiction of “the authoritarian order from one who only a few minutes earlier had spoken of the tyranny of proprietor and legislator” Reduced to an observer of male action, Lucienne sees that

Without the right to vote, own property or be educated, wives, mothers, mistresses, daughters play the role of sweeps to history, as much a part of an anonymous support system to men of the left as to men of the right.

Black women brought to the general ex-centric reordering of culture for awareness of their own personal and historical past as the “foundation for a genuine revolutionary process”

The language of margins and borders marks a position of paradox: both inside and outside. Given this position, it is not surprising that the form that heterogeneity and difference often take in postmodern art is that of parody- the intertextual mode that is paradoxically an authorized transgression, for its ironic difference is set at the very heart of similarity. For example, feminist artists like Silvia Kolbowski and Barbara Kruger use ads and commercial fashion plates in new parodic contexts in order to attack the capitalist production of homogeneous images of women.
Similarly black writers (both male and female) parody or repeat with difference the many traditions within which they work: European/American, black/white, oral/written, standard language/black vernacular. The figure of repetition has been claimed as a tradition in black culture generally and perhaps the particular postmodern variant of this repetition may well be parody: Morrison’s Utopian three woman household in Song of Soloman inverting and challenging the dystopic one in Falukner’s Absalom! Absalom!.

However, parodic double-voicing or heterogeneity is not just a device which allows contesting assertions of difference. It also paradoxically offers a textual model of collectivity and community of discourse which has proved useful to both feminism and postmodernism.

Postmodernism does not move the marginal to the center. It does not invert the valuing of centers into that of peripheries and borders, as much as use that paradoxical doubled positioning to critique the inside from both the outside and the inside. Just as Padma, the listening, textualized female narrate of Rushdie’s midnight’s Children, pushes the narration in new direction its male narrator had no intention of taking, so the ex-centric have not only overlapped in some of their concerns with postmodernism, but also pushed it in new directions.

Thanks to the ex-centric, both postmodern theory and art have managed to break down the barrier between academic discourse and contemporary art (which is often marginalized, not to say ignored, in the academy). Even more than black theory, perhaps, it has been feminism that has shown the impossibility of separating the theoretical and the aesthetic, the
political and the epistemological. As Stephen Heath has proclaimed: “Any
discourse which fails to take account of the problem of sexual difference in its
own enunciation and address will be, writing a patriarchal order, precisely
indifferent, a reflection of male domination”. What has been added most
recently to this list of “enabling” differences is that of ethnicity. Studies like
Sollor’s *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986) are made possible by postmodern rethinking
of difference in the face of modern, urban, industrial society that was expected
to efface ethnicity.

In Angela Carter’s novel, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor
Hoffman*, the portrait of the “Rive people” reveals the extreme of this ex-
centric ethnicity. Here everyone is an expatriate; everyone is ex-centric.
Carter uses this society to ironic and satiric ends.

In *China Men* (195), putting the ironic emphasis on gender as well as
reason. In *China Men*, the intersection of feminine and national identity is
even more powerfully revealed. As a child, hearing her father’s Chinese
obscenities and curses against women, the narrator tries to come to terms
with what she sees as his hatred of her: “What I want is for you to tell me that
those curses are only common Chinese sayings. That you did not mean to
make me sicken at being female”

In such postmodern historiographic metafiction as this, language-
nationalist, sexist, racist-is made the basis of the narrator’s search to define
her different (female Chinese-American) subjectivity
Contextualizing the postmodern

Timothy J. Reiss has argued, in *The Discourse of Modernism*, that at any given time or in any given place, one discursive model or theory prevails and thus “provides the conceptual tools that make the majority of human practices meaningful” This dominant theoretical model at the same time represses or suppresses an equally potent discursive practice, a practice which gradually works to subvert the theory by reveling its inherent contradictions. At that time, certain forms of the practice itself emerge to become tools of analysis. Since the seventeenth century the prevailing theoretical model has been the one variously labeled as “positivist”, “capitalist”, “experimentalist”, “historicist”, or simply “modern”. Reiss calls it by another name: analytico-referential discourse. The reason for choosing this label is that he sees in this model the coincidence of the order of language (and other signifying systems) with the logical ordering of “reason” and with the structural organization of a world given as exterior to both these orders. Its relation is not taken to be simply one of analogy, but one of identity. Its exemplary statement is cogito-ergo-sum (reason-semiotic-mediating system-world) Its suppressed practice is that of “the enunciating subject as discursive activity”

Science, philosophy and art are now themselves becoming the site of the surfacing of that very repressed practice. And it is in the various discourses of postmodernism that we are seeing both the inscribing and subverting the notions of objectivity and linguistic transparency that deny “the enunciating subject”.
The old (in this case, formalist) aesthetic paradigm was exhausted and that the consolidation of a new one was imminent. But without the help of the hindsight that Reiss can use to such good advantage, we would seem to have few means of studying the state of crisis of our present discursive system—that is, unless, we are willing to allow the self-reflexive quality of both contemporary art and theory to lead us to what may indeed turn out to be those very paradoxes or moments of internal contradictions that mark both change and a provisional kind of (discontinuous) continuity in the emergence of a repressed practice into the position of a new theoretical mode.

In other words, postmodernism might be seen to operate as an internalized challenge to analytico-referential discourse by pointing to the way, in which its model of infinite expansion is, in fact, as Reiss shows, underpinned by a drive toward totalization and finite and closed knowledge. The self-conscious theorizing and historicizing of theory by writers such as Edward Said, Terry Eagleton, Teresa de Lauretis, Frank Lentricchia, and Michael Foucault, have been working in much the same manner as have contemporary art forms such as historiographic metafiction: both have foregrounded the need to break out of the still prevailing paradigms-formalist and humanist—and to “situate” both art and theory in two important contexts. They must be situated

- first within the enunciative act itself, and
- second, within the broader historical, social and political (as well as intertextual) context implied by that act and in which both theory and practice take root.
The art of enunciation always includes an enunciating producer as well as a receiver of the utterance, and thus their interrelations are a relevant part of the discursive context. This point needs making only because, in the collective name of scientific universality (and objectivity), novelistic realism, and various critical formalisms, that enunciating entity is what has been suppressed—both as an individual humanist subject and even as the postulated producer of a “situated” discourse. It is the latter that has become the focus of attention in theory lately, from Said’s arguments for critical *engagement* to the speech act theorists’ views of the utterance as always produced both in a situation (within a set of contextual circumstances), and by and for intentional beings.

In fiction this attention has taken the form of open textual emphasis on the narrating “I” and the reading “you”. In John Berger’s historiographic metafiction, *G*, the narrator works to make us aware of the usual conventions of third-person narrative which, in fact, condition the context of our understanding as readers.

The narrator’s discourse is paradoxically postmodern, however, for it both inscribes context and then contests its boundaries. Despite the overt foregrounding of the act of production and enunciation in this novel, there is also a paradoxical assertion that the discursive act is also somehow “empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it”. These, however, are Roland Barthes’s words to define what happens when the concept of the author and authorial authority are called into question. He continues:
The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the “human person”. It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the “person” of the author.

Barthes contests this notion of original and originating author, the source of fixed meaning in the past, and substitutes for it the idea of a textual Scriptor or what is called a “producer” who exists only in the time of the text and its reading: “there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is written here and now”. And it is the reader whom Barthes sees as the activator of this contextual network.

Certainly many postmodern novels would support such a view of the importance of the act of reading. Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* thematizes the quality and mode of different kinds of readers (such as, lay and professional-1984, 75-6) and their demands upon a narrator: “You expect something from me too, don’t you?” he asks (86). It is not accidental that a line like this might remind us of Camus’s *The Fall* with its silent, but inscribed listener. This textual and thematic attention paid to the process of reading is meant, we learn, as an allegory of the process of interpreting life as well as art:

Life, in this respect, is a bit like reading. And as I said before: if all your responses to a book have already been duplicated and
expanded upon by a professional critic, then what point is there to
your reading? Only that it’s yours.\footnote{17}

In emphasizing the receiver’s role, postmodern works never repress the
process of production. The concept of the artist as unique and originating
source of final and authoritative meaning may well be dead, as Barthes
claimed. Certainly postmodern works like Sherrie Levine’s *After Walker Evans*
series of photographs of famous photographs suggest it is. Nevertheless, it is
possible to argue that this position of discursive authority still lives on,
because it is encoded into the enunciative act itself. This paradox has itself
become the focus of much postmodern art and theory: simultaneous with a
general deposed of suspect authority and of centered and totalized thought,
we are witnessing a renewed aesthetic and theoretical interest in the
interactive powers involved in the production and reception of texts. The most
extreme example of art is, perhaps, “interactive fiction” or computerized
participatory “compunovles. “Here process is all; there is no fixed product or
text, just the reader’s activity as producer as well as receiver.

Normally we are merely presented with a self-reflexive exposition of the
power relations involved in the interaction of producers and receivers. Michael
Coetzee’s recent novel *Foe* opens with an enunciative signal of speech:
quotation marks. Who is speaking, though? It takes the reader a while to
piece together that the speaker is female, British, of another century, and a
castaway. But to whom is she speaking? This is harder to establish. Later she
tells her story to “Robinson Cruso”, but at that point she repeats information
she had already given to her initial unidentified interlocutor and, of course, to
the reader. It takes almost a third of the novel to discover that the addressee is Daniel Foe (later Defoe) whom she wishes to convince to tell her story of the female castaway to the world. The second part of the novel is specifically and overtly addressed to him, at least until he disappears, and then the narrator, Susan Barton, must write in journal form to herself, though still for Foe’s eyes. The third section lacks the quotation marks but is in the first person and is clearly in Susan’s voice. We are again unsure as to whom she is addressing, and we thus mirror her own uncertainty: “(but to whom do I confess this?)” The first-person narrator of the fourth and final section is not, however, Susan, for the narrative begins with her death. This voice repeats, in quotation marks, Susan’s opening narrative to Foe, but then moves outside those discursive markings, and from there, outside time and narrative logic. The reader is made very aware of the enunciative context in this novel, but is asked to question its customary security of meaning in a typically postmodern way.

For Barthes the “text” is “that social space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder”. The idea of “text” in this sense, as that which stresses process, context and enunciative situation, is important to postmodernist discourses, both theoretical and practical. For instance historiographic metafictions like *Legs* or G. combine the effects of two important tendencies in poststructuralist theory, tendencies which are often deemed incompatible: as metafiction, they incarnate the Derridean network of trances in their own self-reflexive textuality; but, as “historiographic” metafiction, they present their texts as part of a larger set of Foucauldian
discursive practices (defined as bodies of “anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function” - Foucault Textuality is reinserted into history and into the social and political conditions of the discursive act itself.

The change from the concept of “author” and authority to this one of production and inference can be seen in Eagleton’s reader-focused and contextual definition of intentionality:

To ask in such a situation, “What do you mean?” is really to ask what effects my language is trying to bring about: it is a way of understanding the situation itself, not an attempt to tune into ghostly impulses within my skull. Understanding my intention is grasping my speech and behavior in relation to a significant context. When we understand the “intentions” of a piece of language, we interpret it as being in some sense oriented, structured to achieve certain effects; and none of these can be grasped apart from the practical conditions in which the language operates.18

Michael Foucault asserts the traditional notion of subject:

The theory of the subject (in the double sense of the word) is at the heart of humanism and this is why our culture has tenaciously rejected anything that could weaken its hold upon us.
In a postmodern poetics adequate to the art of today, an art that (like advertising) often addresses the collective “you” which is then, perhaps unavoidably, perceived as singular (in English), the issue of subjectivity and the interactive power of, and even collusion between, the subject positions of producer and receiver must be taken into account. In other words, what we witness is the transformation of a suppressed discursive practice (the entirety of the enunciation) into one of the very tools of theoretical analysis. This involves a rethinking of the relation of receiver to both text and inferred producer:

We have to see ourselves neither as inventively fooling around with texts not as “decoding” complex ciphers, but as generating a reading of the text by a process which, because it involves an intercourse between our concerns and those of the text of a kind whose outcome we cannot altogether control (we may indeed find ourselves “read” by the text), has more in common with a relationship between persons than with the scientific scrutiny of a natural object.

The postmodern way of defining the self (an internalized challenge to the humanist notion of integrity and seamless wholeness) has much to do with this mutual influencing of textuality and subjectivity. What Thomas’s *The White Hotel* or Wibe’s *The Temptations of Big Bear* overtly enact and teach about this process recalls, not surprisingly, Lyotard’s typically postmodern lesson:

A *self* is not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and
mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at “nodal points” of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be.

Theory and literature today share the same problematics of the subject; they echo each other’s concerns. What both historiographic metafiction and much theory today also foreground, though, are the implied consequences of such a definition of subjectivity. These novels ask (along with Foucault 1972, 50-5):

- Who is speaking?
- Who is accorded the right to use language in a particular way?
- From what institutional sites do we construct our discourses?
- From what does discourse derive its legitimating authority?
- From what position do we speak—as producers or interpreters?

For Foucault, because of the complexity of the answers to these problematic questions, the subject of discourse is always the dispersed, discontinuous network of distinct sites of action; it is never the controlling transcendental knower. Like other theorists, even those of quite different persuasions, Foucault always insisted on the specific spatio-temporal coordinates of the enunciative act and, at the same time, the discursive context of signifying practices within which that act finds its meaning. So too does historiographic metafiction, usually through allegories of textual production and reception within the narrative plot. As Charles Russell explains:
Postmodern novels like Findley’s *Famous Last Words* allegorize precisely this same problematizing of the notions of enunciation and subjectivity. But historiographic metafiction enacts a concern. Not just for the general notion of subjectivity, but for the specific pragmatics of the conditions of production and reception of the text itself, and these two problematizing strategies of enactment work together to suggest “a theory of meaning as a continual cultural production that is not only susceptible of ideological transformation, but materially based in historical change. “.

Many postmodern installations, films and video art attempt to make the receiver into a Brechtian, aware participant, self-consciously part of the meaning-making process.

**Historicizing the postmodern**

One of the few common denominators among the detractors of postmodernism is the surprising agreement that the postmodern is ahistorical. It is a familiar line of attack, launched by Marxists and traditional alike, against not only contemporary fiction, but also today’s theory—from semiotics to deconstruction. What is important here, is not the detail of the debate, but the very fact that history is now, an issue—and a rather problematic one. It seems to be inevitably tied up with that set of challenged cultural and social assumptions that also condition our notions of both theory and art today: our beliefs in origins and ends, unity and totalization, logic and reason, consciousness and human nature, progress and fate, representation and truth, not to mention the notions of causality and temporal homogeneity, linearity and continuity.
In some ways, these problematizing challenges are not new ones: their intellectual roots have been firm for centuries, though it is their actual concentration in a great many discourses today that forces us to take notice anew. It was only in 1970 that a noted historian could write:

Novelists and playwrights, natural scientists and social scientists, poets, prophets, pundits and philosophers of many persuasions have manifested an intense hostility to historical thought. Many of our contemporaries are extraordinarily reluctant to acknowledge the reality of past time and prior events, and stubbornly resistant to all arguments for the possibility or utility of historical knowledge.

Only a few years later, Hayden White proclaimed that:

One of the distinctive characteristics of contemporary literature is its underlying conviction that the historical consciousness must be obliterated if the writer is to examine with proper seriousness those strata of human experience which is modern art’s peculiar purpose to disclose.  

But his examples are telling: Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Mann—the great modernists, not postmodernists. Today we have to modify this kind of claim in the wake of postmodern historiographic metafiction like Skvorecky’s Dvorak in Love or Funtes’s the Old Gringo. There seems to be a new desire to think historically, and to think historically these days is to think critically and contextually.

This problematizing return to history is no doubt a response to the airtight ahistorical formalism and aestheticism that characterized much of the
art and theory of the so-called modernist period. If the past was invoked, it was to deploy its “presentness” or to enable its transcendence in the search for a more secure and universal value system. (be it myth, religion or psychology Some writers seemed caught between skepticism and a mystical-aesthetic ideal of historical understanding. In the perspective of cultural history, it is now easy to see these as reaction against the burden of tradition, often taking the form of an ironic enlisting of the aesthetic past in the overhauling of western civilization (Joyce, Eliot)

However, Modernism’s “nightmare of history” is precisely what postmodernism has chosen to face straight on.

The reader of Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Women* is never allowed to ignore the lessons of the past about the past or the implications of those lessons for the historical present. Paradoxical postmodernism is both oedipally oppositional and filially faithful to modernism. The provisional, uncertain nature of historical knowledge is certainly not a discovery of postmodernism. Nor is the questioning of the ontological and epistemological status of historical “facts” or the distrust of seeming neutrality and objectivity of recounting. But the concentration of these problematizations in postmodern art is not something we can ignore.

To speak of provisionality and indeterminacy is not to deny historical knowledge. What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past. In other words,
the meaning and shape are not in the events but in the systems which make those past “events” into present historical “facts”.

The postmodern affects two simultaneous moves. It reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining and in doing so, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge. This is another of the paradoxes that characterize all postmodern discourses today.

Postmodern works like Doctorow’s Ragtime contest art’s right to claim to inscribe timeless universal values, and they do so by thematizing and even formally enacting the context-dependent nature of all values. They also challenge narrative singularity and unity in the name of multiplicity and disparity.

Herbert Lindenberger explains the characteristics of new history:

The new history we are beginning to see these days has little in common with the old-and for an interesting historical reason: its practitioners were nurtured in the theoretical climate of the 1970s, a time during which the individual literary work came to lose its organic unity; when literature as an organized body of knowledge abandoned the boundaries that had hitherto enclosed it, to an extent even abandoned its claims to knowledge; and when history began to seem discontinuous, sometimes in fact no more than just another fiction. It is no wonder that the scholarship we now pursue cannot take the form or speak the language of the older literary history. 21
The new history is not an attempt to conserve and convey a canon or a tradition of thought; it bears a problematic and questioning relation to both history and literary criticism.

Due to the pioneering work of Marxists, feminists, gays, black and ethnic theorists, there is a new awareness in these fields that history cannot be written without ideological and institutional analysis, including analysis of the act of writing itself. It is no longer enough to be suspicious or playful as a writer about art or literature (or history, through there is never really was); the theorist and the critic are inevitably implicated in both ideologies and institutions.

Postmodernism returns to confront the problematic nature of the past as an object of knowledge for us in the present. There is no abyssal infinite regress to absence or utter groundlessness in the fiction of Salman Rushdie or Ian Watson, or in the films of Peter Greenaway. The past really did exist. The question is: how can we know that past today—and what can we know of it? The overt metafictionality of novels like Shame or Star Turn acknowledges their own constructing, ordering and selecting processes, but these are always shown to be historically determined acts. It puts into questions, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real. This is why I have been calling this historiographic metafiction. It can often enact the problematic nature of the relation of writing history to narrativization and, thus, to fictionalization, thereby raising the same questions about the cognitive status of historical knowledge with which current philosophers of history are also grappling.
What is the ontological nature of historical documents?

Are they the stand-in for the past?

What is meant-in ideological terms-by our “natural” understanding of historical explanation?

Historiographic metafiction refutes the common methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claims to truth from that identity. This kind of postmodern fiction also refuses the relegation of the extratextual past to the domain of historiography in the name of autonomy of art. Novels like *The Public Burning* and *Legs* assert that the past did indeed exist prior to its “entextualization” into either fiction or history. They also show that both genres unavoidably construct as they textualize that past. The “real” referent of their language once existed; but it is only accessible to us today in textualized form: documents, eye-witness accounts, achieves. The past is “archaeologized” but its reservoir of available materials is always acknowledged as a textualized one.

Historiographic metafiction explicitly contests the presumptive power of history to abolish formalism. Its metafictonal impulse prevents any suppression of its formal and fictive identity. But it also reinstates the historical, in direct opposition to most arguments for the absolute autonomy of art, such as Ronald Sukenick’s: “Unless a line is drawn [between art and “real
life"], the horde of Factists blunder in waving their banner on which it is written: ‘It really happened’"

There are continuing debates over the definition of the historical field and about the strategies deployed to collect, record and narrative evidence. As Derrida, among others, has noted, many of these debates assume that the past can be accurately captured; it is just a question of how best to do so.

The twentieth century discipline of history has traditionally been structured by positivist and empiricist assumptions that have worked to separate it from anything that smacks to the “merely literary”. In its usual setting of the “real” as unproblematic presence to the reproduced or reconstructed, history is begging for deconstruction to question the function of the writing of history itself. In Hayden White’s deliberately provocative terms:

[historians] must be prepared to entertain the notion that history, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident, a product of a specific historical situation, and that, with the passing of the misunderstand that produced that situation, history itself may lose its status as an autonomous and self authentic mode of thought. It may well be that the most difficult task which the current generation of historians will be called upon to perform is to expose the historically conditioned character of the historical discipline, to preside over the dissolution of history’s claim to autonomy among the disciplines. 22

The same impulse can be found in historiographic metafiction: Christa Wolf’s Cassandra retells Homer’s historical epic of men and wars in terms of
the untold story of women and everyday life. In historiography, the very concept of time has been made even more problematic than before. The work of Fernand Braudel called into question the “history of events”, the short time span of traditional narrative historiography of individuals and isolated events in the name of a history of “longue duree” and the “mentalite collective”.

Hayden White feels that the dominant view of historians today has gradually come to be that the writing of history in the form of narrative representations of the past is a highly conventional and indeed literary endeavor—which is not to say that they believe that events never occurred in the past:

A specifically *historical* inquiry is born less of the necessity to establish that certain events occurred than of the desire to determine what certain events might *mean* for a given group, society, or culture’s conception of its present tasks and future prospects.

The shift from validation to signification, to the way systems of discourse make sense of the past, is one that implies a pluralist (and perhaps troubling) view of historiography as consisting of different but equally meaningful constructions of past reality—or rather, of the textualized remains (documents, archival evidence, witnesses’ testimony) of that past. Often this shift is voiced in terms that recall the language of literary poststructuralism:

- How did [a given historical] phenomenon enters the system entitled history and
how has the system of historical writing acquired effective discursive power?"

The linking of power and knowledge here suggest the importance of the impact of the work of Michel Foucault and, to some extent, that of Jacques Derrida in our postmodern rethinking of the relation between the past and our writing of it, be it in fiction or historiography.

Historiographic metafiction self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning. And, even more basically, we only know of those past events through their discursive inscription, through their traces in the present.

Historiography according to Derrida, is always teleological: it imposes a meaning on the past and does so by postulating an end (and/or origin). So too does fiction. The difference in postmodern fiction is in its challenging self-consciousness of that imposition that renders it provisional. As Michel de Certeau has argued, history writing is a displacing operation upon the real pas, a limited and limiting attempt to understand the relations between a place, a discipline and the construction of a text.

Section II

Poetics of Historiography metafiction:

In the nineteenth century, literature and history were considered branches of the same tree of learning, a tree which sought to "interpret
experience, for the purpose of guiding and elevating man” Then came the separation that resulted in the distinct disciplines of literary and historical studies today. It is this very separation of the literary and the historical that is now being challenged in postmodern theory and art, and current critical readings of both history and fiction have focused more on what the two modes of writing share than on how they differ. They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. But these are also the implied teachings of historiographic metafiction. Like those recent theories of both history and fiction, this kind of novel asks us to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time.

In the last century, historical writing and historical novel writing influenced each other mutually. Macauley’s debt to Scott was an obvious one, as was Dicken’s to Carlyle in A Tale of Two Cities. Today, the new approach to skepticism or suspicion about the writing of history found in the work of Hayden White and Domnick LaCapra is mirrored in the internalized challenges to historiography in novels like Shame, the Public Burning, or a Maggot. They share the same questioning stance towards their common use of conventions of narrative, of reference, of the inscribing of subjectivity, of their identity as textuality, and even of their implication in ideology.
In both fiction and history writing today, our confidence in empiricist and positivist epistemologies has been shaken, but not yet destroyed. And this is what accounts for the skepticism rather than any real denunciation. It also accounts for the defining paradoxes of postmodern discourses.

Postmodernism is a contradictory cultural enterprise, one that is heavily implicated in that which it seeks to contest. It uses and abuses the very structures and values it takes to task. Historiographic metafiction for example, keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and historical context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there no reconciliation, no dialectic here-just unresolved contradiction.

The history of the discussion of the relation of art to historiography is therefore relevant to any poetics of postmodernism, for the separation is a traditional one. To Aristotle, the historian could speak only of what has happened, of the particulars of the past while the poet, on the other hand, spoke of what could or might happen and so could deal more with universals. Freed of the linear succession of history writing, the poet's plot could have different unities.

It didn’t mean that historical events and personages could not appear in tragedy: “nothing prevents some of the things that have actually happened from being of the sort that might probably or possibly happen”. History-writing was seen to have no such conventional restraints of probability or possibility. In spite of it, many historians since have used the techniques of fictional representation to create imaginative versions of their historical, real worlds. The postmodern novel has done the same, and the reverse. It is part of the
postmodernist stand to confront the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation, the particular/the general, and the present/the past. And this confrontation is itself contradiction, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, yet it is more than willing to exploit both.

Defoe’s works made claims to authenticity and actually convinced some readers that they were factual, but most readers today (and many then) has the pleasure of a double awareness of both fictiveness and a basis in the “real” - as do readers of contemporary historiographic metafiction.

In fact Michael Coetzees' novel, Foe, addresses precisely this question of the relation of “story”- and “history”-writing to “truth” and exclusion in the practice of Defoe. There is a direct link here to familiar assumptions of historiography: that every history is a history of some entity which existed for a reasonable period of time, that the historian wishes to state what is literally true of it in a sense which distinguishes the historian from a teller of fictitious or mendacious stories 23

Foe reveals that story tellers can certainly silence, exclude, and absent certain past events-and people-but is also suggests that historians have done the same: where are the women in the traditional histories of the eighteenth century? As we have observed, Coetzee offers the teasing fiction that Defoe did not write Robinson Crusoe from information from the male historical castaway, Alexander Selkirk, or from other travel accounts, but from information given him by a subsequently “silenced” woman, Susan Barton, who had also been a castaway on “Cruso”’s [sic] island. It was Cruso who suggested that she tell her story to a writer who would add “a dash of color” to
her tale. She at first resisted because she wanted the “truth” told and Cruso admitted that a writer’s “trade is in books, not in truth”

Susan does tell Foe her tale and his response is that of a novelist. Susan’s reaction is irritation:

You remarked it would have been better had Cruso rescued not only musket and power and ball; but a carpenter’s chest as well, and build himself a boat.

In frustration she beings her own tale: “The Female Castaway. Being a True Account of a Year spent on a Desert Island. With Many Strange Circumstances Never Hitherto Related” but discover that the problems of writing history are not unlike those of writing fiction:

➤ Are these enough strange circumstances to make a story of?

➤ How long before I am driven to invent new and stranger circumstances: the salvage of tools and muskets from Cruso’s ship; the building of a boat….a landing by cannibals…?

Her final decision is, however, that “what we accept in life we cannot accept in history” (67)-that is, lies and fabrications.

The link of “fictitious” to “unreliable” stories (and histories) is one with which other historiogrphic metafictions also seem to be obsessed: Famous Last Words, Legs, Waterland, Shame. In the latter, Rushdie’s narrator addresses openly the possible objections to his position as insider/outsider writing about the events of Pakistan from England-and in English:
Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in a forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?

Linda Hutcheon replies with more questions in The Poetics of postmodernism: is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories?

The eighteenth century concern for lies and falsity becomes a postmodern concern for the multiplicity and dispersion of truth(s), truth(s) relative to the specificity of place and culture.

The romantic and modernist presentation of art led, however, as Jane Tompkins (1980b) has shown, to a marginalization of literature. Historiographic metafiction, in deliberate contrast to what I would call such late modernist radical metafiction, attempts to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical and it does so both thematically and formally.

For example, Christa Wolf’s No Place on Earth is about the fictionalize meeting of two historical figures, dramatist Heinrich von Kleist and poet Karoline von Gunderrode. The “we” of the narrative voice, in the present, underlines the metafictive historical reconstruction on the level of form. The metafictive and the historiographic also meet in the intertexts of the novel, for it is through them that Wolf fleshes out the cultural and historical context of this fictive meeting. The intertexts range from Gunderrode’s own letters to canonic romantic works like Holderlin’s Hyperion, Gother’s Torquato
This novel reminds us, as did Roland Barthes (1967) that the nineteenth century could be said to have given birth to both the realist novel and narrative history, two genres which share a desire to select construct, and render self-sufficient and closed a narrative world that would be representational but still separate from changing experience and historical process. Today history and fiction share a need to contest these very assumptions.

David Hackett Fischer asserts: To the truth of art, external reality is irrelevant. Art creates its own reality, within which truth and the perfection of beauty is the infinite refinement of itself. History is very different. It is an empirical search for external truths, and for the best, most complete and most profound external truths, in a maximal corresponding relationship with the absolute reality of the past events.

These words are not without their ironic tone, he sees a standard historian’s preconception about the relation of art to history. But it not far from a description of the basic assumptions of many kinds of formalist literary criticism. For I.A Richards, literature consisted of “pseudo-statements” (1924); for Northrop Frye (1957), art was hypothetical, not real—that is verbal formulations which imitate real propositions.

Postmodern novels like Flaubert’s Parrot, Famous Last Words and A Maggot openly assert that there are only truths in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness per se, just others’ truths. Fiction and
history are narrative distinguished by their frames, frames which historiographic metafiction first establishes and then crosses, positing both the generic contracts and of fiction and of history. The postmodern paradoxes here are complex. The interaction of the historiographic and the metafictional foregrounds the rejection of the claims of both “authentic” representation and “inauthentic” copy alike, and the very meaning of artistic originality.

Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological. Such is the teaching of the novels like Susan Daitch’s *L.C* with its double layer of historical reconstruction, both of which are presented with metafictional self-consciousness. Other metafictions point to other implications of the rewriting of history. Ian Watson’s *Chekhov’s Journey* problematizing the nature of historical knowledge. In the novel one of the team says:

Past events can be altered. History gets rewritten. Well, we’ve just found that this applies to the real world too……May be the real history of the world is changing constantly? And why? Because history is a fiction. It’s a dream in the mind of humanity, forever striving….towards what? Towards perfection

Such kind of historiographic metafiction points both the need to separate and to the danger of separating fiction and history as narrative genres.

Novels incorporate social and political history to some extent, though that extent will vary; historiography, in turn, is as structured, coherent, and
teleological as any narrative fiction. It is not only the novel but history too that is “palpably betwist and between”. Both historians and novelists constitute their subjects as possible objects of narrative representation, as Hayden White has argued. And they do so by the very structures and language they use to present those subjects. In Jacques Ehrmann’s extreme formulation: “history and literature have no existence in and of themselves. It is we who constitute them as the object of our understanding.”. This is the teaching of texts like Doctorow’s *Welcome to Hard Times*, a novel about the attempt to write history that shows historiography to be a most problematic act:

- Do we, in writing our past, even create our future?

- Is the return of the Bad Man from Bodie the past re-lived, or the past re-written?

Postmodernism deliberately confuses the notion that history’s problem is verification, while fiction’s is veracity. Both forms of narrative are signifying systems in our culture; both are what Doctorow once called modes of “mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning (and the seeming necessity for us to make meaning) that historiographic metafiction like Coover’s *The Public Burning* reveals. This novel teaches us that “history itself depends on conventions of narrative, language and ideology in order to present an account of ‘what really happened’”

Both history and fiction are cultural sign systems, ideological constructions whose ideology includes their appearance of being autonomous and self-contained. It is the metafictionality of these novels that underlines Doctorow’s notion that history is kind of fiction in which we live and hope to
survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history.....by which the available data for the composition is seen to be greater and more various in its sources than the historian supposes. According to Paul de Man: The binary opposition between fiction and fact is no longer relevant: in any differential system, it is the assertion the space between the entities that matters.

But historiographic metafiction suggests the continuing relevance between fiction and fact even if it be a problematic one. Such novel both install and then blur the line between fiction and history. This kind of generic blurring has been a feature of literature since the classical epic and the Bible, but the simultaneous and over assertion and crossing of boundaries is more postmodern.

Umberto Eco has claimed that there are three ways to narrate the past:

- the romance,
- the swashbuckling tale, and
- the historical novel.

He has added that it was the latter that ha intended to write in The Name of the Rose. Historical novels, he feels, “not only identify in the past the causes of what came later, but also trace the process through which those causes began slowly to produce their effects” This is why his medieval characters, like John Banville’s characters in his Doctor Copernicus, are made to talk like Wittgenstein, for instance. This device points to a fourth way of narrating the past: historiographic metafiction. –and not historical fiction-with its intense self-consciousness about the way in which all this is done.
What is the difference between postmodern fiction and nineteenth-century historical fiction? It is difficult to generalize about this latter complex genre because history plays a great number of distinctly different roles, at different levels of generality, in its various manifestations.

Historical fiction is modeled on historiography to the extent that it is motivated and made operative by a notion of history as a shaping force. However, it is George Lukacs’ influential and more particular definition: the historical novel could enact historical process by presenting a microcosm (a world in miniature) which generalizes and concentrates. The protagonist, therefore, should be a type, a synthesis of the general and particular, of “all the humanly and socially essential determinants (influencing factor)”. 

From this definition, it is clear that the protagonists of historiographic metafiction are anything but proper types: they are the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history—the Coalhouse Walkers (in Ragtime), the Saleem Sinais (in Midnight’s Children), the Fevvers (in Nights at the Circus) the woodworm (in History of the world in 10 ½ chapters). Even the historical personages take on different, particularized and ultimately ex-centric status: Doctor Copernicus (in the novel of that name), Houdini (in Ragtime), Richard Nixon (in The Public Burning). Historiographic metafiction espouses a postmodern ideology of plurality and recognition of difference; “type” has little function here, except as something to be ironically undercut. There is no sense of cultural universality. The protagonist of a postmodern novel like Doctorow’s Book of Daniel is overtly specific, individual, culturally and familiarily conditioned in his response to history, both public and
private. The narrative form enacts the fact that Daniel is not a type of anything, no matter how much he may try to see himself as representing the New Left or his parents’ cause.

Related to this notion of type is Lukacs’s belief that the historical novel is defined by the relative unimportance of its use of detail, which he saw as “only a means of achieving historical faithfulness, for making concretely clear the historical necessity of a concrete situation”. Therefore, accuracy or even truth of detail is irrelevant.

Postmodern fiction contests this defining characteristic in two different ways.

- First, historiographic metafiction plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record. In novels like Foe, Burning Water, or Barns’s History of the world in 10 ½ chapters, certain known historical details are deliberately falsified in order to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error.

- The Second difference lies in the way in which postmodern fiction actually uses detail or historical data. Historical fiction (pace Lukacs) usually incorporate and assimilates these data in order to lend a feeling of verifiability (or an air of dense specificity and particularity) to the fictional world. Historiographic metafiction incorporates, but rarely assimilates such data. More often, the process of attempting to assimilate is what is foregrounded: we watch the narrators of Ondaatje’s Running in the Family or Findley’s The Wars trying to make sense of the historical facts they have collected. As readers, we see
both the collecting and the attempts to make narrative order. Historiographic metafiction acknowledges the paradox of the reality of the past but its textualized accessibility to us today.

Lukac’s third major defining characteristics of the historical novel is its relegation of historical personages to secondary role. Clearly in postmodern novels like *Doctor Copernicus, Kepler, Legs* (about Jack Diamond), and *Antichthon* (about Giordano Bruno), this is hardly the case. In many historical novels, the real figures of the past are deployed to validate or authenticate the fictional world by their presence, as if to hide the joins between fiction and history in a formal and ontological sleight of hand. The metafictional self-reflexivity of postmodern novels prevents any such trick, and poses that ontological join as a problem:

- how do we know the past?
- What do (what can) we know of it now?

For example Coover does considerable violence to the known history of the Rosenbergs in *The Public Burning*, but he does so to satiric ends, in the name of social critique. It does not mean that he intends to construct a willful betrayal of politically tragic events; perhaps, he does want to make a connection to the real need to question received versions of history. Historiographic metafiction’s obvious (and political) concern for its reception, for its reader, would challenge the following distinction:

The discursive criterion that distinguishes narrative history from historical novel is that history evokes testing behavior in reception;
historical discipline requires an author-reader contract that stipulates investigative equity. Historical novels are not histories, not because of a penchant for untruth, but because the author-reader contract denies the reader participation in the communal project.  

While the debates still rage about the definition of the historical novel, in the 1960s a new variant on the history/fiction confrontation came into being: the non-fictional novel. This differed from the treatment of recent factual events recounted as narrative history, as in William Manchester’s the Death of a President. It was more a form of documentary narrative which deliberately used techniques of fiction in an overt manner and which usually made no pretence to objectivity of presentation. The metafictionality and provisionality obviously link the non-fictional novel to historiographic metafiction. But there are also significant differences.

It is probably not accidental that this form of the New Journalism, as it was known, was an American phenomenon. The Vietnam War created a real distrust of official “facts” as presented by the military and the media, and in addition, the ideology of the 1960s had licensed a revolt against homogenized forms of experience. The result was a kind of openly personal and provisional journalism, autobiographic in impulse and performative in impact.

Perhaps, too, the non-fictional novel in its journalistic variety influenced writers like Thoman Keneally who wrote historical novels, often of the recent past.
The non-fictional novel of the 1960s and 1970s did not just record the contemporary hysteria of history. It did not just try to hold “the fictional element inevitable in any reporting” and then try to imagine its “way toward the truth”. What it did was seriously question who determined and created that truth, and it was this particular aspect of it that perhaps enabled historiographic metafiction’s more paradoxical questioning.

We may agree with the former as a designation of the non-fictional novel, though not of all metafiction; and the latter certainly defined a lot of contemporary self-reflexive writing more accurately than it does in the New Journalism. Historiographic metafiction, of course, paradoxically fits both definitions: it installs totalizing order, only to contest it, by its radical provisionality, intertextuality, and, often, fragmentation.

There are non-fictional novels, however, which come very close to historiographic metafiction in their form and content. Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* is subtitled *History as a Novel the Novel as History*. Like many postmodern novels, the provisionality and uncertainty do not “cast doubt upon their seriousness” but rather define the new postmodern seriousness that acknowledges the limits and powers of “reporting” or writing of the past; recent or remote.

Postmodern novels raise a number of specific issues regarding the interaction of historiography and fiction and that deserve more detailed study:

- issues surround the nature of identity and subjectivity;
- the question of reference and representation;
- the intertextual nature of the past; and

- the ideological implications of writing about history.

A brief glance at this point will show where these issues fit into the poetics of postmodernism.

First of all, historiographic metafictions appear to privilege two modes of narration, both of which problematize the entire notion of subjectivity: multiple points of view (as in Thomas’s *The White Hotel*) or an overtly controlling narrator (as in Swift’s *Waterland*). This is not a transcending of history, but a problematized inscribing of subjectivity into history. In a novel like *Midnight’s Children*, nothing, not even the self’s physical body, survives the instability caused by the rethinking of the past in non-developmental, non-continuous terms.

Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context. It is not a modernist desire to order the present through the past or an attempt to void or avoid history. Instead it directly confronts the past of literature—and of historiography, for it too derives from other texts (documents). It uses and abuses those intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony. In all, there is little of the modernist sense of a unique, symbolic, visionary “work of art”, there are only texts, already written ones. Walter Hill’s film *Crossroads* uses the biography and music of Robert Johnson to foreground the fictional Willie Brown and Lightening Boy, who pick up the Faustian challenge from the devil of his song, “Crossroads’ Blues”. To what
does the very language of historiographic metafiction refer? To a world of history or one of fiction? It is commonly accepted that there is a radical disjunction between the basic assumptions underlying these two notions of reference. History’s referents are presumed to be real; fiction’s are not. Historiographic metafiction problematizes the activity of reference by refusing either to bracket the referent or to revel in it. The text still communicate—in fact, it does so very didactically. There is not so much “a loss of belief in a significant external reality” as there is a loss of faith in our ability to (unproblematically) know that reality, and therefore to be able to represent it in language. Fiction and historiography are not different in this regard.

Postmodern fiction also poses new questions about reference.

➢ To which discursive context could this language belong?

➢ To which prior textualizations must we refer?

Postmodern art is more complex and more problematic than extreme late modernist auto representation, with its view that there is no presence, no external truth which verifies or unifies, that there is only self-reference. Historiographic metafiction self-consciously suggests this, but then uses it to signal the discursive nature of all reference—both literary and historiographical. The referent is already inscribed in the discourse of our culture. This is no cause for despair; it is the text’s major link with the “world”, one that acknowledges its identity as construct, rather than as simulacrum of some “real” outside. Once again, this does not deny that the past “real” existed, it only conditions our mode of knowledge of that past. We can know it only through its traces, its relics.
Historiographic metafiction shows fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured, and in the process manages to broaden the debate about the ideological implications of the Foucauldian conjunction of power and knowledge-for readers and for history itself as a discipline. As the narrator of Rushdie’s *Shame* puts it:

History is natural selection. Mutant versions of the past struggle for dominance; new species of fact arises, and old, saurian truths go to the wall, blindfolded and smoking last cigarettes. Only the mutations of the strong survive. The weak, the anonymous, the defeated leave few marks.....History loves only those who dominates her: it is a relationship of mutual enslavement. 27

The question of whose history survives is one that obsesses postmodern novels very much. The novels like Timothy Findley’s *Famous Last Words* and Barnes’s *History of the world in 10 ½ chapters* present this question effectively. In problematizing almost everything the historical novel once took for granted, historiographic metafiction destabilizes received notions of both history and fiction. To illustrate this change, let me take Barbara Foley’s concise description of the paradigm of the nineteenth-century historical novel and insert in square brackets the postmodern changes:

Characters [never] constitute a microcosmic portrayal of representative social types; they experience complications and conflicts that embody important tendencies [not] in historical development [whatever that might mean, but in narrative plotting, often traceable to other intertexts]; one or more
world-historical figures enters the fictive world, lending an aura of extratextual validation to the text's generalizations and judgments [which are promptly undercut and questioned by the revealing of the true intertextual, rather than extratextual, identity of the sources of that validation]; the conclusions [never] reaffirms [but contests] the legitimacy of a norm that transforms social and political conflict into moral debt.

Novels like the Public Burning or Ragtime do not trivialize the historical and the factual in their “game-playing” but rather politicize them through their metafictional rethinking of the epistemological and ontological relations between history and fiction.

All the issues—subjectivity, intertextuality, reference, ideology—underlie the problematized relations between history and fiction in postmodernism. But many theories today have pointed to narrative as the one concern that envelops all of these, for the process of narrativization has come to be seen as a central form of human comprehension, of imposition of meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of events. Narrative is what translates knowing into telling), and it is precisely this translation that obsesses postmodern fiction. The conventions of narrative in both historiography and novels, then, are not constraints, but enabling conditions of possibility of sense-making.

The issues of narrativity encompasses many others that point to the postmodern view that we can only know “reality” as it is produced and sustained by cultural representations of it. In historiographic metafictions, these are often not simple verbal representations, for ekphrases (or verbal
representations of visual representations) often have central representational functions. For example in Carpentier’s *Explosion in a Cathedral*, Goya’s “Desastres de la Guerra” series provides the works of visual art that actually are the source of the novel’s descriptions of revolutionary war.

Historiographic metafiction, like both historical fiction and narrative history, also deals with the problem of the status of their “facts” and of the nature of their evidence, their documents. The related issue is that of how those documentary sources are deployed: can they be objectively, neutrally related? Or does interpretation inevitably enter with narrativization? The epistemological question of how we know the past joins the ontological one of the status of the traces of that past. Needless to say, the postmodern raising of these questions offers few answers. It also realizes that we are epistemologically limited in our ability to know that past, since we are both spectators of and actors in the historical process. Historiographic metafiction suggests a distinction between “events” and “facts” that is one shared by many historians. Events, are configured into facts by being related to “conceptual matrices within which they have to be imbedded if they are to count as facts”. Historiography and fiction, as we saw earlier, constitute their objects of attention; in other words, they decide which events will become facts.

The postmodern problematization points to our difficulties with the concreteness of events (in the archive, we can find only their textual traces to make into facts) and their accessibility. (Do we have a full trace or a partial
one? What has been absented, discarded as non-fact material?) It is projected in postmodern fictions like Barnes’ *Flaubert’s Parrot*.

Historiographic metafiction often points to this fact by using the paratextual conventions of historiography (especially footnotes) to both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations. The postmodern fiction deals with the questions: Whose truth gets told? How can a historian (or a novelist) check any historical account against past empirical reality in order to test its validity? Facts are not given but are constructed by the kinds of questions we ask of events

**Intertextuality, parody and the discourse of history**

In response to attacks on modernist formalist closure, postmodernist fiction opens itself up to history, to what Edward Said (1983) calls the “world”. It can no longer do so in any remotely innocent way, and so those un-innocent paradoxical historiographic metafictions situate themselves within historical discourse, while refusing to surrender their autonomy as fiction. And it is a kind of seriously ironic parody that often enables historiographic metafictions’ contradictory doubleness: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the “world” and literature. The textual incorporation of these intertextual pasts as a constitutive structural element of postmodernist fiction functions as a formal marking of historicity—both literary and “worldly.”

The intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction enacts, in a way, the views of certain contemporary historiographers: it offers a sense of
presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces—be they literary or historical.

Discussion on postmodernism these days do seem more prone than most to confusing self-contradictions, because of the paradoxical nature of the subject itself. Charles Newman, for instance, in his challenging book *The Post-modern Aura* (1985) begins by defining postmodern art as a “commentary on the aesthetic history of whatever genre it adopts” This, then, would be art which sees history only in aesthetic terms. However, when postulating in American version of postmodernism, he abandons this metafictional intertextual definition to call American literature a “literature without primary influences”, “a literature which lacks a known parenthood”, suffering from the “anxiety of non-influence” (87). Here the discussion is primarily focused on American fiction in order to reply to Newman’s claims by examining the novels of writers such as Toni Morrison, E.L. Doctorow, John Barth, Ishmael Reed, Thomas Pynchon and others.

When that past is the literary period known as modernism, then, as we have seen in earlier part, what is both instated and then subverted is the notion of the work of art as a closed, self-sufficient, autonomous object deriving its unity from the formal interrelations of its parts. Postmodernism both asserts and then undercuts this view, in its characteristic attempt to retain aesthetic autonomy while still returning the text to the “world”. But it is not a return to the world of “ordinary reality”, “as some have argued; the “world” in which these texts situate themselves is the “world” of discourse, the “world” of texts and intertexts. This “world” has direct link to the world of
empirical reality, but it is not itself that empirical reality. It is contemporary
critical truism that realism is a set of conventions, that representation of the
real is not the same as the real itself. What historiographic metafiction
challenges is both naïve realist concept of representation but also any equally
naïve textualist or formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the
world. The postmodern is self-consciously art “within the archive”, and that
archive is both historical and literary.

To parody is not to destroy the past; in fact to parody is both to
enshrine the past and to question it. And this, once again, is the postmodern
paradox.

The theoretical exploration of the “vast dialogue of postmodernism”
between and among literatures and histories made possible by Julie
Kristeva’s (1969) reworking of the Bakhtinian notions polyphony, dialogism
and heteroglossia-the multiple voicing of a text. Out of these ideas, she
developed a more strictly formalist theory of the irreducible plurality of texts
within and behind any given text. Kristeva and her colleagues at Tel Quel in
the late 1960s and early 1970s mounted a collective attack on the “founding
subject” as the original and originating source of fixed and fetished meaning in
the text. It puts into question the entire notion of “text” as an autonomous
entity, with immanent meaning.

We still need a critical language in which to discuss those ironic
allusions, those re-contextualized quotations, those double-edged parodies
both of genre and of specific works that proliferate in both modernist and
postmodernist texts. This, of course, is where the concept of intertextuality
has entered. As later defined by Barthes (1977) and Riffaterre (1984),
intertextuality replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one
between reader and text, one that situates the locus of textual meaning within
the history of discourse itself. A literary work can actually no longer be
considered original. It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives
meaning and significance.

The typically contradictory intertextuality of postmodern art both provides and
undermines context. In Vincent Leitch’s terms:

Intertextuality posits both an uncentered historical enclosure and
an abysmal decentered foundation for language and textuality;
in so doing, it exposes all contextualizations as limited and
limiting, arbitrary and confining, self-serving and authoritarian,
theological and political. However paradoxically formulated,
intertextuality offers a liberating determinism.

It has been claimed that to use the term intertextuality in criticism is not
just to avail oneself of a useful conceptual tool. But its usefulness as a
theoretical framework that is both hermeneutic and formalist is obvious when
dealing with historiographic metafiction that demands of the reader not only
the recognition of textualized traces of the literary and historical past but also
the awareness of what has been done-through irony-to those traces. The
reader is forced to acknowledge not only the inevitable textuality of our
knowledge of the past, but also both the value and the limitation of the
inescapably discursive form of that knowledge. Calvino’s Marco Polo in
Invisible Cities (1978) both is and is not the historical Marco Polo. How can
we, today, “know” the Italian explorer? We can only do so by way of texts-including his own (Il Milione), from which Calvino parodically takes his frame-tale, his travel plot, and his characterization.

Roland Barthes once defined the intertext as “the impossibility of living outside the infinite text”, thereby making intertextuality the very condition of textuality.. Umberto Eco, writing of his novel, The Name of the Rose, claims: “I discovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told” The stories which the Name of the Rose retells are both those of literature (by Conan Doyle, Borges, Joyce, Mann, Eliot and so on) and those of history. This is the parodically doubled discourse of postmodernist intertextuality. However, this is not just a double introverted form of aestheticism: as we have seen, the theoretical implications of this kind of historiographic metafiction coincide with the recent historiographic theory about the nature of history writing as narrativization of the past and about the nature of the archive as the textualized remains of history.

In other words postmodern fiction manifests a certain introversion, a self conscious turning toward the form of the act of writing itself; but, it is also much more than that. Patricia Waugh notes that metafiction like Slaughterhouse-five or The Public Burning “suggests not only that writing history is a fictional act, ranging events conceptually through language to form a world-model, but that history itself is invested like fiction, with interrelating plots which appear to interact independently of human design”. Historiographic metafiction is particularly doubled, like this, in its inscribing of
both historical and literary intertexts. Its specific and general recalls of the forms and contents of history-writing work to familiarize the unfamiliar through (very familiar) narrative structures, but its metaficitonal self-reflexivity works to render problematic any such familiarization. The ontological line between historical past and literature is not effaced, but rather is underlined. The past really did exist, but we can “know” that past today only through its texts, and here lies its connection to the literary.

Historiographic metafiction, like postmodernist architecture and painting, is clearly and resolutely historical—though, admittedly, in an ironic and problematic way that acknowledges that history is not the transparent record of any sure “truth”. Instead, such fiction corroborates the views of historians like Dominick LaCapra who argue that “the past arrives in the form of texts and textualized remainders—memories, reports, published writings, archives, monuments and so forth” and that these texts interact with one another in complex ways. This does not in any way deny the value of history-writing; it merely redefined the conditions of value. Historiographic metafiction, therefore, represents a challenging of the (related) conventional forms of fiction and history writing through its acknowledgement of their inescapable textuality.

Previously it has been argued that parody’s contradictory ideological implications make it an apt mode of criticism for postmodernism, itself paradoxical in its conservative installing and then radical contesting of conventions. Historiographic metafictions, like Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude or Grass’s The Tin Drum or Rushdie’s Midnight’s
Children (which has both of the former as intertexts), use parody not only to restore history and memory in the face of the distortions of the “history of forgetting” but also, at the same time, to put into question the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality.

When Parody is linked with satire, as in the work of Vonnegut, Wolf or Coover, it can certainly take more precisely ideological dimensions. Here too, however, there is no direct intervention in the world: this is writing working through other writing, other textualizations of experience. As we saw previously, one of the effects of this discursive pluralizing is that the center of both historical and fictive narrative is dispersed. Margins and edges get new value. The “ex-centric”- as both off-center and de-centered-gets attention. That which is “different” is valorized in opposition both to elitist, alienated “otherness” and also to the uniformizing impulse of mass culture. And in American postmodernism, the different comes to be defined in particularizing terms such as those of nationality, ethnicity, gender, race and sexual orientation.

American fiction since the 1960s has been described by Malcolm Bradbury (1983) as being particularly obsessed with its own past-literary, social and historical. Perhaps this preoccupation is (or was) tied in part to a need to find a particularly American voice within a culturally dominant Euro-centric tradition. The United States (like the rest of North and South America) is a land of immigration. In E.L. Doctorow’s words. “We derive enormously, of
course, from Europe, and that’s part of what Ragtime is about: the means by which we began literally; physically to lift European art and architecture and bring it over here”. This is also part of what American historiographic metafiction in general “about”. Critics have discussed at length the parodic intertexts of the work of Thomas Pynchon, including Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and Proust’s first person confessional form in V. In particular The Crying of Lot 49 has been seen as directly linking the literary parody of Jacobean drama with the selectivity and subjectivity of what we deem historical “fact”. Here the postmodern parody operates in the same way as it did in the literature of the seventeenth century, and in both Pynchon’s novel and the plays he parodies (Ford’s Tis Pity She’s Whore, Webster’s The White Devil, the Duchess of Malfi, and Tourneur’s The Revenge Tragedy, among others), the intertextual “received discourse” is firmly embedded in a social commentary about the loss of relevance of traditional values in contemporary life.

Just as powerful and even more outrageous, perhaps, is the parody of Dicken’s A Christmas Carol in Ishmael Reed’s The Terrible Twos, where political satire and parody meet to attack white Euro-centred ideologies of domination.

Historiographic metafiction, like the non-fictional novel, also turns to the intertexts of history as well as literature. Barth’s The Sot-Weed Factor manages both to expose and to create the history of Maryland for its reader through not only the real Ebenezer Cooke’s 1708 poem but also the raw historical record of the Archives of Maryland. From these intertexts, Barth
rewrites history, taking considerable liberties: sometimes inventing characters and events, something parodically inverting the tone and mode of the intertexts, sometimes offering connections where gaps occur in the historical record. Berger’s Little Big Man recounts all the major historical events on the American Plains at the end of the nineteenth century (from the killing of the buffalo and the building of the railway to Custer’s Last Stand), but the recounting is done by a fictive, 111-year-old character who both inflates and deflates the historical heroes of the West and the literary clichés of the Western genre alike—since history and literature share a tendency to exaggerate in narrating the past.

In historiographic metafiction, it is not only (serious or popular) literature and history that form the discourses of postmodernism. Everything form comic books and fairy tales to almanacs and newspapers provide historiographic metafiction with culturally significant intertexts. In Coover’s The Public Burning, the history of the Rosenbergs’ execution is intervened by many different textualized forms. One major form is that of the various media, through which the concept of the disparity between “news” and “reality” or “truth” is foregrounded. The New York Times is shown to constitute the sacred texts of America, the texts that offer “orderly and reasonable” versions of experience. And one of the central intertexts for the portrayal of Richard Nixon in the novel is his famous televised “Checkers” speech, whose tone, metaphors and ideology provide Coover with the rhetoric and personality of his fictionalized Nixon.
Historiographic metafiction appears, then willing to draw upon any signifying practices it can find operative in a society. It wants to challenge those discourses and yet to use them, even to milk them for all they are worth. In Pynchon’s fiction, for instance, this kind of contradictory subversive inscribing is often carried to an extreme: “Documentation, obsessional systems, the language of commerce, of the legal system of popular culture, of advertising: hundreds of systems compete with each other, resisting assimilation to any one received paradigm”

This contradictory attraction/repulsion to structure and pattern explains the command of the pardoic use of certain familiar and clearly conventionally plotted forms in American fiction, for instance, that of the Western: *Little Big Man*, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Welcome to Hard Times*, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*.

Ishmael reed’s consistently parodic fiction clearly asserts not just a critical and specifically American “difference” but also a racial one. And, on a formal level, his parodic mixing of levels and kinds of discourse challenges any notion of the different as either coherent and monolithic or original. Reed is always serious, beneath his funny parodic play. It is feminist writers, along with blacks, who have used such ironic intertextuality to such powerful ends—both ideologically and aesthetically. Parody for these writers is more than just a key strategy through which “duplicitly” is revealed; it is one of the major ways in which women and other ex-centrics both use and abuse, set up and then challenge male traditions in art.
The ex-centric in America is not just a matter of gender or race or nationality, but also one of class. Even within black or feminist novels, for instance, the issue of class enters. In Doctorow’s *Ragtime* the issues of ethnicity (Tateh) and race (Coalhouse) both merge with that of class. Doctorow’s fiction, like Reed’s, reveals the kind of powerful impact, on both a formal and ideological level, that parodic intertextuality can have. *Loon Lake* presents us with all the kinds of intertextual parody that we have seen in American fiction in general: of genre, of the European tradition, of American canonical works (classic and modern), of the texts of popular culture and of history. British intertexts also abound in this novel, from the Wordsworthian signal message to D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*.

The multiple, complex echoing points to the different possible functions of intertextuality in historiographic metafiction, for it can both thematically and formally reinforce the text’s message or it can ironically undercut any pretensions to borrowed authority or legitimacy.

Despite the focus in this chapter, it does not mean that this is true only for American fiction. Canadian writer Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is as complex as any American text in her serious parodic echoing and inverting of the canonical *Scarlet Letter* (in selecting theme, and narrative frame) and of Zamyatin’s *We*. In contemporary British fiction, we need think only of the work of John Fowles, Anthony Burgess, Peter Ackroyd, Julian Barnes, or John Berger.

Postmodernism clearly attempts to combat what has come to be seen as modernism’s potential for hermetic, elitist isolationism that separated art
from the world, literature from history. But it often does so by using the very techniques of modernist aestheticism against themselves. The autonomy of art is carefully maintained: metafictional self-reflexivity even underlines it. But through seemingly introverted intertextuality, another dimension added by the use of the ironic inversions of parody: art’s critical relation to the “world” of discourse—and through that to society and politics. History and literature both provide the intertexts in the novels examined here, but there is no question of a hierarchy, implied or otherwise. They are both part of the signifying systems of our culture, and therein lies their meaning and their value.

The Problem of reference:

The updated version of this view in literature can be seen in American surfiction, in the “texts” of Tel Quel in France, and in the works of the Gruppo 63 in Italy. These Italian writers share with postmodern artists a certain ideological impulse: the desire to challenge the institutional structures of bourgeois society by awakening readers to the political implications of accepted literary practices. But the method they chose to bring this about is a (late) modernist one which attempts to separate literary language from reference.

This kind of separation is precisely what postmodernism, in turn, has challenged through conflating this same kind of metafictive reflexivity with documentary materials. Historiographic metafiction always asserts that its world is both resolutely fictive and yet undeniably historical, and that what both realms share is their constitution in and as discourse. Paradoxically this
emphasis on what at first may appear to be a kind of discursive narcissism is actually what connects the fictional to the historical in a more material sense.

In historigoraphic metafiction like John Banville’s *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*, the focus of the problem of reference is on the writing of history, for in them history appears to have a double identity. On the one hand, its discourse does seem to be ontologically separate from that of the self-consciously fictional text (or intertexts) of fiction. This is an extension of the common-sense distinction between two kinds of reference:

- what history refers to is the actual, real world;
- what fiction refers to is a fictive universe.

This distinction can be found articulated in any introduction to fiction written since at least the advent of New Criticism, if not before. On the other hand we have seen that there also exists quite another view of history in postmodern art, but this time it is history as exists quite another view of history in postmodern art, but this time it is history as intertext. History becomes a text, a discursive context upon which fiction draws as easily as it does upon other texts of literature. This view of history is the logical extension of theories like those of Michael Riffaterre which argue that:

> reference in literature is never anything but one of text to text and that, therefore, history as used in historiographic metafiction, for instance, could never refer to any actual empirical world, but merely to another text. At best, words refer, not to things, but to system so signs that are “ready-made textual units” (159).
And this is the way literature can challenge naïve notions of representation. In postmodern fiction, these views of history-as intertextual and as extra textual-appear to co-exist and operate in tension.

It is interesting that the work of Hayden White has arguably had more impact in literary than in historical circles. By opening history up to the rhetorical strategies of narrative, White has also raised questions that contemporary fiction has been asking.

➢ What constitutes the nature of reference in both history and fiction? (Is it the same? Totally different? Related?)

➢ How exactly does language hook onto reality?

What our literary theory, our literary theory, our literature, and our philosophy of history are doing these days is becoming part of an already existing and now general problematizing of the entire idea of reference.

Historiographic metafiction explicitly and even didactically asks the same central questions about the nature of reference that are being asked in many other fields today.

➢ Does the linguistic sign refer to an actual object- in literature, history, ordinary language?

➢ If it does, what sort of access does this allow us to that actuality?

Reference is not correspondence, after all

➢ Can any linguistic reference be unmediated and direct?
What a novel like Rudy Wiebe’s *The Temptations of Big Bear* suggests, by its very form as well as its content, is that what language refers to—any language—is a textualized and contextualized referent: the Big Bear we come to know is not really the Big Bear of actuality (for how can we know that today?) but the Big Bear of history texts, newspaper, accounts, letters, official and unofficial reports, but also of imagination and legend. The very fabric of the novel refuses any separation of fictional reference from that of so-called “scientific” descriptions of the past that many critics still want to make. But it also refuses, just as firmly, any formalist or deconstructive attempt to make language into the play of signifiers discontinuous with representation and with the external world.

That frequent and common denial of representation, gets more consideration here because this is what is usually associated (that is wrong) with the concept of postmodernism. It seems to be the case that this entire question of reference has recently been re-opened in the wake of various kinds of formalism which bracketed it, even to the point of declaring interest in it illegitimate. Roland Barthes’s famous overstatement is typical of this repression of reference: “‘What takes place’ in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally *nothing*; ‘what happens’ is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming” (1977, 124) It is out of this view of language that most theories of postmodernism seem to have been derived.

Historiographic metafiction, in fact, works to short-circuit what critics like to call the “referential fallacy” Historiographic metafiction renders
problematic both the denial and the assertion of reference. It blurs the
distinction which Richard Rorty makes between “texts” and “lumps”-things
made and things found, the domains of interpretation and epistemology. It
suggests that there were lumps-historical personages and events-but that we
know them only as texts today.

Postmodernist reference, differs from modernist reference in its
acknowledgement of the existence, if relative inaccessibility, of the past real
(except through discourse) It differs from realist reference in its assertion of
that relative inaccessibility of any reality that might exist objectively and prior
to our knowledge of it. In this it approaches a long tradition which argues that,
while reality may exist ‘out there’, it is unavoidably ordered by the concepts
and categories of our human understanding. Historiographic metafiction, while
teasing us with the existence of the past as real, also suggests that there is no
direct access to the real which would be unmediated by the structures of our
various discourses about it.

Historiographic metafiction does not deny that reality is (or was), as
does this kind of radical constructivism (according to which reality is only a
construct); it just questions how we know that and how it is (or was). In doing
so, it simultaneously opposes and joins forces with Marxists and common-
sense advocates who resist the splitting off of language from reality. This is
the paradox of its very nature as historiographic metafiction.

Facts versus events: how language hooks onto reality. The questions
raised by historiographic metafiction regarding reference in language (fictive
or ordinary) are similar to those raised by these theoretical discourses today.
John Banville’s *Doctor Copernicus* focuses directly on the relations between facts and events or, more specifically, between names and things, scientific theories and the universe. And the intertextual allusions to Wittgenstein in the novel point to the broad implications of this theme. In Coetzee’s *Foe*, it is Robinson Cruso’s [sic] tongue less Friday who is the focus of the question of the relation of language to reality. *Foe* suggests a utilitarian approach to the issue of how much language Friday needs to know in order to survive.

A similar complex view of the world/word relationship can be seen in the work of Jean Francois Lyotard, the one analyst of postmodernity who has consistently addressed the question of reference. For Lyotard, language does not articulate the meaning of the world; it constantly excludes what it tries to grasp. This self-contradicting situation is reminiscent of the general postmodernist paradox of a discourse which uses and ironically abuses, asserts and denies the conventions within which it operates.

In his most recent work, Lyotard’s interest in reference takes place within the context of a pragmatics of narrative that includes that produces the producer of the narrative, its receiver, the narrative itself, and all the complex interactions of these components. In this enunciative context, the referents of narrative are presented as referring inevitably to other narratives (or discourses), and not to any brute reality: they are narrative facts not events. Just as the term “I” always refers to the speaker of the particular enunciation or discursive act so the “reality” to which the language of historioraphic metafiction refers is always primarily the reality of the discursive act itself.
(hence its designation as metafiction) but also the reality of other past discursive acts (historiography).

Both in this kind of fiction and in current philosophical inquiry, the question of reference often includes the issue of naming.

Perhaps women have been more aware of naming in relation to reference because they have traditionally been designated by paternal and spousal surnames. In certain cultures, such as some African ones, the name is seen as the expression of the soul.

Generally speaking, all metafictional self-reflexivity and auto-representation act to question the very existence as well as the nature of extratextual reference. But *historiographic* metafiction complicates this questioning. History offers facts-interpreted, signifying, discursive, textualized-made from brute events. Is the referent of historiography, then, the fact or the event, the textualized trace or the experience itself? Postmodernist fiction plays on this question, without ever fully resolving it. It complicates the issue of reference in two ways, then: in this ontological confusion (text or experience) and in its overdetermination of the entire notion of reference (we find autoreferentiality, intertextuality, historiographic reference and so on). There is a tension, then, not only between the real and the textualized, but also among a number of kinds of reference.

George Lavis (1971) has argued the distinction between real and fictive referents (on the level of *parole*). Referents can be fictive either because they are imaginary or because they are falsehoods. It is not accidental that one of the constant themes of historiographic metafiction is that of lying: will
Mauberley tell the “truth” in his writing on the wall (as Quinn believes) or will he lie (as Freyburg believes)? On the level of narration, falsehood is also an issue for the reader: did George Vancouver really die before returning to England? (No, despite *Burning Water.*) Were the Duke and Duchess of Windsor involved in a plot called Penelope? (No, despite the “evidence” offered in *Famous Last Words.*) Here it is the historiographical event that complicates the reference question. Metafiction teaches its reader to see all referents as fictive, as imagined.

In novels like *Ragtime,* there is no realist pretense that the referent could be brute experience, although there is no denial that J.P. Morgan or Henry Ford did exist. There is, instead, an acknowledgement that we know Morgan or Ford only from their textualized traces in history. As Paul Veyne (1971) has argued, even the event closest to us personally can be known to us afterwards only by its remains: memory can create only texts. There is no such thing as the *reproduction* of events by memory: “As a symbolic structure, the historical narrative does not reproduce the event is describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events”. Historiographical metafiction does not pretend to reproduce events, but to direct us, instead, to facts, or to new directions in which to think about events.

Postmodernist fiction, while not denying the existence of that experimental world, contests its availability to us: how do we know that world? We know it only through its texts.

Nevertheless, this binary model is a popular one, appearing in various guises in current theory. Malmgren’s (1985) terminology is “out-referential”
and “in-referential”: referents which are verifiably extra-textually existent and those which are non-existent, counterfactual, and thus fictionally justified, rather than factually true. Again historiographic metafiction radically problematizes that seemingly simple concept: “verifiably extratextual”.

We have to move to a multi-term model, because the reference of historiographic metafiction appears to be multiple and over-determined. If we do, at least, five directions of reference would seem to have to be taken into account:

- intra-textual reference,
- self-reference,
- inter-textual reference,
- textualized extra-textual reference, and what we might call “
- hermeneutic” reference.  

There are many theories that argue the intra-textual reference of fiction: that is that fictional language refers first and foremost to the universe of reality of fiction, independent of how closely or distantly it be modeled on the empirical world of experience. This is the argument that rests on a view of intentionality similar to that of Searle or Ohmann: the intended framework of fiction is fiction. It is also an argument that validates fiction through its autonomous, internally consistent, formal unity. Murray Krieger claims: “we must feel that Tolstoy’s Kutuzov-or, for that matter, Shakespeare’s Henry V- has a different ‘material’ status from that of history’s Kutuzov (or Henry)”
History’s Kutuzov derives his status, by this argument, from “evidence” outside even the system of historical discourse; Tolstoy’s Kutuzov has only a “feigned” materiality, an imaginative identity controlled by the “form-giving power” of the author’s imagination. Krieger, like many others, uses this autonomous-world basis of intratextual reference in order to transcend history: “man’s [sic] capacity to create forms and to impose them on matter in a way that brings it to organic life can free him from history by allowing him to reshape it will” (34). The implication is that “history’s Kutuzov” is not reshaped in any way, that historical discourse has direct access to the real and does not deviate form or transform brute reality, as does fiction (355) historiographic metafiction questions both these assumptions. The Ambrose Bierce of Fuentes’s The Old Gringo both is and is not the Bierce of history—in its many textualized forms or its “histories”, to use Lyotard’s term. It is this paradoxical identity that make it postmodern, and that makes this referential model here have to be expanded.

A second kind of reference operative in historiographic metafiction is clearly not only to the coherent fictional universe but also to the fiction as fiction. This auto-representation or self-reference suggests that language cannot hook directly onto reality, but is primarily hooked onto itself. In postmodernist fiction, it is the kid of reference that makes the very name of the protagonist of Famous Last Words, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, into a marker of metafictionality.

Related to this kind of reference is a third kind, the intertextual. Mauberley’s name does not just signify metafiction; it points to a specific intertext, Pound’s poem. But that novel abounds in other layers of intertextual
reference: among the texts to which this postmodern fiction refers us are the biblical Book of Daniel and the work of Alexandre Dumas, Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Conrad, and many others. The reference can be on the level of word (mene, mene, tekel upharsim) or of structure (Conrad’s Lord Jim jumps, and Marlow’s ambivalence in recounting its consequences are intertextually linked to the moral leap of Mauberley [and his father] and Quinn’s problematic ambivalence as out reading surrogate in the novel0. Among these intertexts, however, are those of historiography: those “texts”-both specific and general-by which we know that the German concentration camps existed, that Edward abdicated the British throne for Wallis Simpson, and so on.

This intertextuality is, in fact, close to the fourth, the textualized extratextual kind of reference. The difference is one of emphasis. The first is history as intertext; the second is historiography as presentation of fact, as the textualized tracing of event. Here history allows some-mediated-access to what semioticians call “External Fields of Reference” (Harshaw 1984, 243-4), all the while acknowledging that historiography itself is a form of reshuffling, reforming, in short, mediating the past. This is not the kind of reference that attempts to derive authority from documentary data; instead it offers extratextual documents as traces of the past.

Just as each of these four kinds of reference borders on or overlaps with others in these historiogaphic metafictional “routes of reference”, so this textualized extratextual reference suggests a fifth part of the network, one which I have called hermeneutic. In Peter Ackroyd’s postmodernist detective novel, Hawksmoor, the reader gradually catches on that the recurring sign “M SE M” (which marks the sight of some of the novel’s action) omits the U-the
you'-need to make sense of the plot. This points overtly to why a static model of reference must be avoided, for we cannot ignore the role of the hermeneutic process of reading: historiographic metafiction does not just refer in textual (that is, product) ways (intra-, inter-, auto-, extra-). The postmodernist’s text’s self-conscious return to performative process and to the entirety of the enunciative act demands that the reader, the reader gradually catches on that the recurring sign “M SE M” (which marks the sight of some of the novel’s action) omits the U—the “you”-need to make sense of the plot. This points overtly to why a static model of reference must be avoided, for we cannot ignore the role of the hermeneutic process of reading: historiographic metafiction does not just refer in textual (that is, product) ways (intra-, inter-, auto-, extra-). The postmodernist’s text’s self-conscious return to performative process and to the entirety of the enunciative act demands that the reader, the you, not be left out, even in dealing with the question of reference.

These five kinds of referentiality all demand to be considered by historiographic metafiction’s complexity of representation.

Subject in/of/to history and his history

The topic of “man as the concrete universal” to use Said’s term has hovered over our various intellectual enterprises, descending now and again to become the basis of some attack or other on the humanist tradition. Theorists of all political propensities have recently pointed out the trendiness of the subject of the “subject” in both criticism and literature. Jameson calls the fragmentation and death of the subject a “fashionable theme” of contemporary theory, marking the “end of the autonomous bourgeois monad
or ego or individual” Gerald Graff had earlier defined the essence of the avant-garde aesthetic in terms of “a refusal of the entire bourgeois view of reality, epitomized by the subject-object paradigm of rationalist epistemology”.

The coincidence of the concerns of criticism and art—their shared focus on the ideological and epistemological nature of the human subject—marks another of those points of intersection that might define a postmodern poetics. This is a point of challenge to any aesthetic theory or practice that either assumes a secure, confident knowledge of the subject or elides the subject completely.

The philosophical, “archaeological”, and psychoanalytic decentering of the concept of the subject has been led by Derrida, Foucault and Lacan. To decenter does not mean to deny. Postmodernism does not. Its historicizing of the subject and of its customary (centering) anchors radically problematizes the entire notion of subjectivity, point directly to its contradictions. Cindy Sherman’s photographs of herself expose the fiction of selfhood underlying both photography’s representation of reality and its status as art. The humanist notion of the unitary and autonomous subject is both installed (in each individual photo) and then subverted (by its context within an entire discontinuous series). As Derrida insists: “The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don’t destroy the subject: I situate it “. And to situate it, as postmodernism teaches, is to recognize difference—of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on. To situate is also both to acknowledge the ideology of the subject and to suggest alternative notions of subjectivity (HuysSEN 1986)
Luce Irigaray has pointed out that theories of the subject always seem to turn out to be theories of the masculine (1974, 165). They also tend to be theories of bourgeois, white, individual, western “Man” too. This is what really defines the so-called universal and timeless human subject. In this context, neither man nor woman is an autonomous, coherent agent; neither can be separated from cultural systems or what Kaja Silverman calls “historically circumscribed signifying operations” (1983, 129) which prove to have priority over the subject. Human reality, for both sexes, is a construct. Obviously such a view is bound to pose problems for traditional humanist notions of the stability of the self and of the equation of the self with consciousness. To reinsert the subject into the framework of its parole and its signifying activities within an historical and social context is to begin a force a redefinition not only of the subject but of history as well.

When Michael Foucault and others introduced a kind of historical analysis based on categories of discontinuity and difference, the cry went up that this was a murdering of history, but, as Foucault saw it later:

One must not be deceived: what is being bewailed with such vehemence is not the disappearance of history, but the eclipse of that form of history that was secretly, but entirely related to the synthetic activity of the subject; what is being bewailed is the “development” (devenir) that was to provide the sovereignty of the consciousness with a safer, less exposed shelter than myths, kinship systems, languages, sexuality, or desire. 30
What contemporary self-reflexive, discontinuous, and often difficult historiographic metafiction does is work to subvert this very view of history that much poststructuralist thought is also contesting. And, it has been received with much the same vehement response from those for whom the novel too-like history-represents and presents a coherent and motivated inscription of a unified subjectivity.

Many of the postmodern novels (*The White Hotel, The French Lieutenant’s Woman, Blackout* among others) are contestatory on yet another level: they openly pose questions about subjectivity that involve the issues of sexuality and sexual identity and of the representation of women. And they do so in political terms.

*Both The White Hotel and much feminist theory today confront the relation of non-coincidence between the discursive construct of “woman” and the historical subjects called “women”. Both expose this as a culturally determined relationship, intimately related to cultural notions of femininity. And both suggest the representation of woman must now be destabilized and altered.*

*The White Hotel* is a novel which both enacts and thematizes one of the issues that most concerns de Lauretis: that of the woman as spectacle, of woman as the result of the inscriptions of her subjectivity by herself and by others. This is a novel about how we produce meaning in fiction and in history. Its multiple and often contradictory forms and points of view (first-person poem, third-person expansion of it in prose, “Freudian” case history, third-person limited narration, first person epistolary form used by many
characters) call attention to the impossibility of totalizing narrative structures in a more overt way than did the resolutely insistent, but inadequately ordering, male voice of Saleem Sinai, but the challenge to the illusion of unity on all levels remains just as potent: the narrative ‘s dispersion becomes the objective correlative of the decentering of the female (as well as male) subject and of history. The metafictional stress on writing, reading, and interpreting emphasizes the fact that the gendered subject is where meanings are formed, even though meanings are what constitute the subject.

*The White Hotel* creates a curious doubling effect as narrative: it manages to offer both a vivid and concrete rendering of the world of a Jamesian center of consciousness (witness the power of the Babi Yar scene) and a subversion of it through its multiple points of view. The reader is both offered and refused a comfortable position “from which the text is most ‘obviously’ intelligible, the position of a transcendent subject addressed by an autonomous and authoritative author”. The overt use of multiple intertexts-Freud’s case histories, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Anatoli Kuznetsov’s *Babi Yar* (1966, 1967), the operas *don Givoanni* and *Eugene Onegin*- suggests a textualized refusal to “express” either singular subjectivity or single meaning. As Said has claimed, the image of writing has changed from one of unique inscribing to one of parallel script (1983). What much recent theory has argued, this novel (as typical of much historigoraphic metafiction) has put into action: through its intertextuality, it suggests that knowledge is discursively produced.
Even the eye-witness account of Babi Yar by Dina Pronicheva is offered in a slightly altered version, re-fictionalized once again as the protagonist's experience: re-fictionalized, because Kuznetsov’s narrative account of it already twice removed from any historical reality. It is his version of her later narrativization of her experience. It is his version of her later narrativization of her experience. In neither case, however, is there any guarantee outside of discourse-or, at least, not any more. The narrative unity within each section of the novel is disrupted by the start of another section with a different point of view. At any given moment, the text seems hypothetical, ready to accept the impossibility of its own coherence and completion; the protagonist's identity, likewise.

**Conclusion:**

Instead of looking to totalize, this chapter has tried to interrogate the limits and powers of postmodernist discourse, by investigating the overlappings within a plurality of manifestations in both art and theory, overlappings that point to the consistently problematized issues that define this poetics of postmodernism: historical knowledge, subjectivity, narrativity, reference, textuality, discursive context. Postmodernism tries to problematize and, thereby, to make us question. But it does not offer answers. In their contradictions we may find no answers, but the questions that will make any anwering process even possible are at least starting to be asked.
References -II

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