

PROBLEMATIZING THE PROBLEMATIC: *A POETICS OF POSTMODERNISM* AND THE POWER OF THE MODERNIST WORD

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“What is new in postmodernism?” This is one among the small number of reiterative questions which seem to appear once and again in contemporary volumes on interpretive theory and literary criticism. Usually critics make “postmodernism” —whatever it happens to be— confront that other apparent predecessor named “modernism” to immediately argue in favour of any of the two. Linda Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) is not very exceptional in this respect: she favours the postmodern even if, when considering fiction, she disguises it under the label of “historiographic metafiction”. This kind of fiction constitutes the center of her literary analysis, and to develop it Hutcheon uses a type of discourse which we may define as “poststructuralist”, as poststructuralist is one of the main theses of her book: we are —as Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, Barthes or Foucault have recently taught us— determined by the act of enunciation, (wo)man is eminently a linguistic animal and the double-faced factor of power/ideology has its origins deeply rooted in language. For Hutcheon postmodernism also means the recognition of a parallel group of creative writers of “historiographic metafiction”, who apparently share these views on the important role of enunciation and who accordingly introduce in their writings these contemporary beliefs: historiographic metafiction appears then —using Derridean terms— to “deconstruct” categorical thinking and to reveal the eternal play of differences existing in any discourse, which leads these writers to “problematize”¹ the notion of absolute or objective truth. As she summarizes in Chapter 7 of her book, the notions of (objective) history and (fictional) story have been subjected to strong scrutiny in later years, the result being a poststructuralist new historicist account —as the one best represented by Hayden White— and the blooming of historiographic metafiction. In both grounds, the notions of history and fiction are

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. (p. 105)

In other words, the “past” is only accessible in “textualized” form, and now that the

validity of texts to convey the truth is under scrutiny, the result is that literature, in the texts qualified as “historiographic metafiction”², may be recognized, once again, as a subversive weapon.

This summary of what —according to my reading— constitutes the main thesis of Hutcheon’s book, is my first step in an attempt to “problematize” the problematic, my purpose being to show Hutcheon’s contradictions when she deals with her notions on —her discourse about— modernism. I will focus my analysis on her explicit views on both this literary period and postmodernism and on the “problematic” relation of both periods towards the delivering of “truth” in the act of enunciation.

Hutcheon seems to systematically erase almost any interpretation of modernism which would present it as a moment also very problematic for discursive activities. Chapter 9 of her book, dedicated to the problem of reference, does not seem to contradict much this impression: in most parts of her discourse modernism has lost all possibility to likewise appear as a moment of hard inquiring into the capacity of texts to convey objective truth, a critical activity that, not only in my view (see L. Menand 1987), did clearly exist and that soon led a number of modernist writers to contest both the validity of language to write in an “objective” way and the conventional realist discourse in power. Following with Hutcheon’s poststructuralist arguments, I am simply arguing that her views are also dubious —or problematic— because she has radically moved to the center of her discourse which she seems to know better —i.e., postmodernist fiction—, while also radically marginalizing what she does not seem to know so well —modernist literature. Therefore, and to defend my argument, I must start by introducing her views on modernism.

In her attempts to center the activities of contemporary writers who problematize the acts of interpretation, Hutcheon soon asserts

Modernists like Eliot and Joyce have usually been seen as profoundly humanistic (e.g. Stern 1971, 26) in their paradoxical desire for stable aesthetic and moral values, even in the face of their realization of the inevitable absence of such universals. Postmodernism differs from this, not in its humanistic contradictions, but in the provisionality of its response to them: it refuses to posit any structure or what Lyotard (1984) calls, master narrative — such as art or myth — which for such modernists, would have been consolatory. (p.6)

Attention should be paid in this quotation to the way in which Hutcheon eludes, at the very beginning, all direct responsibility for the assertion that modernists like Joyce or Eliot “have usually been seen” as humanistic: Stern is the only one to be blamed within this discourse for such view, a view which however is already taken for granted almost immediately, when we learn that “Postmodernism differs from this” paradoxical modernist-humanistic desire for stability and moral values. Modernism —an abstract label— has been confronted by Postmodernism —another abstract label— with the result that this latter entity seems to be more “smart” because “it refuses to posit any structure” or —deferring the meaning a bit more— any Lyotardean master narrative: finally there is the suggestion —never the assurance— that art or myth could have functioned as “con-

solatory” master narratives for “such” modernists as Eliot or Joyce —which obviously may also be read as an implication that there are other kinds of modernists different from that of Eliot or Joyce. The reader will perhaps coincide with my view that in this paragraph Hutcheon is simply maintaining a very reductive and somehow obsolete notion of Modernism as if that period of time had been the grounds in which a number of artists—including writers— developed a completely uniform ideology in their art production, ideology heavily stressed by a mythic transcendental pull. The existence of mythic patterns in many modernist works is evident, but the “consolatory” effect of them is more than dubious in a number of well-known literary works, among which I select the one which, likely, is the most representative modernist poem: despite what has been affirmed by some older(-oriented) critics (cfr. Ronald Bush 1984), can any careful contemporary reader of *The Waste Land* consider the mythic element of this poem a “consolatory master structure”? I was the more surprised when reading Hutcheon’s paragraph because this critic has very seriously worked on two literary devices whose importance is manifest in Eliot’s text: parody and self-consciousness (Hutcheon 1985). The power of myth as a master narrative is thoroughly undermined all along the lines of *The Waste Land*. The “land” never recovers, in part V the western mythic “questing knight” approaches the Chapel Perilous only to hear the cock crowing, a noise that is answered by the eastern myth of “the voice of the thunder”, a triple signifier “Da” interpreted in three different ways by gods, men and demons, and which finally resolves in the tremendous accumulation of literary references in the voice of a self-conscious narratorial figure who confesses to be left only with “those fragments” (v. 430) —poetic rags that constitute the poem “The Waste Land”— and the wish for a transcendental unreachable answer—triple signifier “shanti”—, unreachable because, as Eliot defined it in his last note to the poem, “shanti” is “the peace which passeth understanding”, i.e. knowledge, language: and Eliot’s poem resolves into an always deferred quest for certainty, for knowledge, a quest which a parodied myth—integrative storymaking— structure cannot solve. Epistemological failure replaces Hutcheonean “consolation”.

Examples of this derogatory—marginalizing— presentation of Modernism abound: according to Hutcheon’s views, modernist fragmentation may be underpinned by a sense of continuity already rejected by postmodern literature. Once again Eliot’s poem is used to highlight the smarter use of parody in the hands of postmodernist writers:

When Eliot recalled Dante or Virgil in *The Waste Land*, one sensed a kind of *wishful call* to continuity beneath the fragmented echoing. It is precisely this that 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 (Hutcheon 1985). Parody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies. (p. 11; my italics)

Some questions about the first sentences of this paragraph immediately arise, for instance what can we “sense” or what type of “call” can we hear in the middle of what appeared

to be Hutcheon's "poststructuralist" discourse? I think it may be a hard and problematic task for postmodern parody to contest what "one sensed" as "a kind of wishful call to continuity beneath the fragmented echoing" of Eliot's intertexts, especially because Hutcheon probably also means here—as she does in some other parts of her book—that for contemporary writers parody becomes a very good device to contest *realist* assumptions of referential truth and that for historiographic-metaphorical writers parody is a powerful instrument to enhance the narrative or narrativizing (H. White 1981) quality of *any* historical discourse. Nevertheless and so as to confirm the innovative character of the postmodern, Eliot's text and, by extension, modernism have been once again victimized.

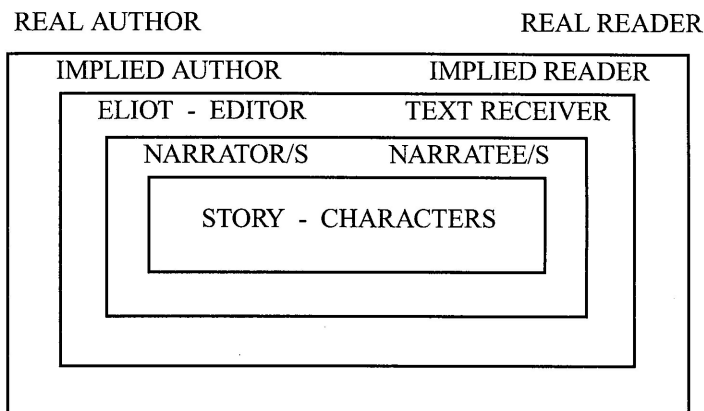
The issue, obviously, is ultimately one of referentiality. As I have already indicated, Hutcheon dedicates to this problem chapter 9 of her book ("The problem of reference", p.141 et seq.), where she asserts that historiographic metafiction,

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? [...] Can any linguistic reference be unmediated and direct?(p.144)

However, in this chapter Hutcheon also argues that the status of the referent had already become an important issue in modernism, but the activity of reference was soon denied by what she calls late Modernism (Tel Quel, Surfiction). Only in a third stage, historiographic metafiction "renders problematic both the denial and the assertion of reference" (p. 145). The reader may have noticed the tension implied in the quotations I have selected from p. 144 and p. 145 of Hutcheon's book: the paragraph from p. 144 posits a series of unresolved epistemological questions which historiographic metafiction is now asking. The paragraph from p. 145 implies that postmodernist writers of historiographic metafiction have already reached an answer to our epistemological plight, even if this answer shows its tense ambiguity: both the denial and the assertion of [the epistemological problem of] reference *is* problematic.

As I will now argue, that "*kind of wishful call* to continuity" which Hutcheon "sensed" in her appreciation of the intertextuality existing in *The Waste Land* (p. 11) can be, perhaps, "sensed" —whatever it means in her discourse— but it is never "materialized" in the epistemological implications of Eliot's text because, as she paradoxically also argues (p.144), Modernism was a period in which the issue of reference was rendered very important indeed, and *The Waste Land* is a good example of this modernist epistemological plight.

Eliot's poem is perhaps one of the best literary metaphors to suggest the twentieth-century artistic —and philosophic— preoccupation with "en-abyeme" structures (L. Dällenbach 1977), a preoccupation which still persists in contemporary literature and which, ultimately, undermines language capacity to come to terms with reality and helps us to discover the fictionality of its enunciatory powers. A narratological analysis (G. Genette 1980, 1988; M. Bal 1985) of the edited text of *The Waste Land* —i.e. the poem and Eliot's Notes— reveals the following communicative levels:



This diagram shows several communicative acts, starting from the level of the story, in which one or several narrators refer to a number of events which befell various characters in several places and times. As the reader of the poem knows, some of the characters also operate as narrating instances, introducing stories within the story, but we shall come back to this later on. The surprising factor —according to the literary standards of the time— appears when we realize that there is an extra level of communication which is very uncommon in a work of creative writing: there is an Editor of the poem and a series of Notes which apparently function to “clarify” the difficult meaning of the poem. The result, in a contemporary reading, seems to be obvious: the alleged meaning is being further “deferred”, especially when one confirms that these Notes do not clarify much after all. And they do not fulfil their classic function of clarification because the Editor (ultimately Eliot) is the first one to undermine their capacity to communicate or convey the truth. The famous Notes to the poem cannot begin in a way more clearly ironic against their own signifying intentions:

[...] Miss Weston’s book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem *much better than my notes can do* ; and I recommend it [...] to any one who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble. (Preface to the Notes; my italics)

In the same Preface this Eliot-Editor also suggests “to any one who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble” the reading of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* but, in fact, any person who reads Weston’s (1920) and Frazer’s (1890-1915) anthropological works with the intention of getting a better understanding of Eliot’s poem is bound to be disappointed because these two books effectually provide the reader with information about certain vegetation symbols used by Eliot but actually take him or her a step further

in the referential game: the poem is a collection of literary “fragments” coming from many places and times —the Bible, Dante, Wagner, Shakespeare,...—; Frazer’s and Weston’s simply add to the list on the level of the Notes, and once again meaning escapes.

The erosion of signifying practices is perhaps better appreciated on the level of the narrating of the story. A leading “voice” which soon appears as being “neither living nor dead” (v. 39-40) promptly confesses that it “knew nothing” (v. 40), enhancing one of the most relevant themes in Eliot’s poem: that of the difficulty to know. Part II perhaps offers the best example of the predominant role played by this theme. The story the narrator(s) is telling opens here with a first episode constituted by the description of a richly furnished room. However, this description ends up being an extended metaphor on the impossibility of experiencing direct knowledge or of apprehending the external referent. In effect, lines 76 to 106 of “A Game of Chess” are indeed also a game on reflection and indirect apprehension of more fragments:

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
 Glowed on the marble, where the glass
 Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
 From which a golden Cupidon peeped out 80
 (another hid his eyes behind his wing)
 Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
 Reflecting light upon the table as
 The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
 From satin cases poured in rich profusion.
 In vials of ivory and coloured glass
 Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,
 Unguent, powdered, or liquid — troubled, confused
 And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air
 That freshened from the window, these ascended 90
 In fattening the prolonged candle-flames,
 Flung their smoke into the laquearia,
 Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling.

Mirrors, indirect lights, and marble reflections accumulate in the visual description of the room. The important play of synesthesia also becomes evident: sight is followed by odours which mix to reach the ceiling where some pictures of mythological scenes can also be seen. In this manner, the description of the room functions to further suggest that the poet is that Eliotean medium “in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways”³. It should also be noted that many elements in these describing lines clearly refer to indirect possibilities of knowing and to several perceptual problems. In the following verses (96-110) terms and phrases like “voice”, “cried”, “told upon the walls”, “hushing”, “footsteps shuffled on the stair”, or “her hair [...] glowed into words”, further confirm the incapacities or difficulties of the human being to produce an effective communication. The crossing of boundaries from the narrating level into the story is also highlighted by a process of intratextual allusions when line 126 suddenly

repeats line 48: “Those are pearls that were his eyes”, the narrator says again ⁴, stressing in this way the metafictional or self-referential component of the poem, and the game of reference upon reference.

Nevertheless, if the first episode of Part 2 of Eliot’s poem suggests, in this metaphorical way, the incapacity of the subject to perceive reality in a direct way, the second episode of this part—which takes place in a pub—also suggests, perhaps in a clearer way, the problematic deferring game of language. Line 139 of the poem introduces a female voice talking in her present narrating time to some friends in the pub, but she is talking about a previous conversation she had with another female friend called Lil. Within this second conversation the female narrator mentions another previous conversation she had witnessed between Lil and her husband ⁵. In this regressive way, the narratees in the pub are told some news related to the main topics of the poem as a whole: namely, the lack of understanding between Lil and her husband, Lil’s abortion, and the misunderstanding between Lil and the female narrator. But, whose truth do we have after all? Language imposes upon language and the ultimate truth seems to be always deferred. On top of everything else the reader discovers that the female narrator is not the first level narrator of the story of the poem. On the contrary, after the low-class farewell of the group of friends in the pub ⁶, the first level narrator reappears parodically to end this second part of the poem with Ophelia’s departing words: “Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night” (v. 172). In this way, the reader is witness to a conversation about a conversation about a conversation... the condition “en-abyme” could have gone on for ever, only to suggest that signifying practices are not to be taken for granted: we are trapped in language, left with Eliotean fragments also called “traces” much later on in the twentieth century. In short, the role of language has certainly become “problematic” in Eliot’s poem, being its lines also the grounds for the use of techniques very much favoured by contemporary historiographic metafictional writers—namely the regression in infinitum, parody and intertextuality.

I am aware that it could be argued that Eliot’s personality was extraordinary and *The Waste Land* a very unusual—postmodernist?—poem. The old notion that poets are always the vanguard of later artistic movements could also be posited here to base a defense of the innovative “problematization” of the enunciating act in postmodernist fiction. And, in fact, Hutcheon systematically and almost exclusively refers to fiction, Eliot’s being but an exceptional example to point out differences between modernist and postmodernist ways to narrate. And differences for Hutcheon have become very clear when we consider the assertive quality of her following summarizing words:

Postmodern fiction challenges both structuralist/modernist formalism and any simple mimeticist/realist notions of referentiality. It took the modernist novel a long time to win back its artistic autonomy from the dogma of realist theories of representation; it has taken the postmodernist novel just as long to win back its historicizing and contextualizing from the dogma of modernist aestheticism [...] What I want to call postmodernism in fiction paradoxically

uses and abuses the conventions of both realism and modernism, and does so in order to challenge their *transparency* [?], in order to prevent glossing over the contradictions that make the postmodern *what it is: historical and meta-fictional, contextual and self-reflexive, ever aware of its status as discourse, as a human construct.* (p.53; my italics)

After reading this paragraph one may have problems to locate Faulkner or Dos Passos in either of the two literary categories: here they seem to be neither modernist nor postmodernist... or perhaps, being historically committed, they seem to fall a bit on the side of the postmodern? Hutcheon's assertion is, once again, problematic, and to further undermine it I am going back in time to the writings of another great poet whose "dogma of modernist aestheticism" [?] could never hide his political and historical commitment: I am referring to Ezra Pound. His poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) cannot be simply labelled "aestheticist" despite the role that Pound played to bring innovative and experimental ideas to modernist poetry. Some of the lines of this poem are clearly committed and anticipatory of Pound's later social views:

Faun's flesh is not to us,
Nor the saint's vision. 50
We have the Press for wafer;
Franchise for circumcision.

All men, in law, are equals,
Free of Pisistratus,
We choose a knave or an eunuch 55
To rule over us.

It seems clear that Pound's words here, more than "aesthetical", are "historical". But, following with Hutcheon's definition of postmodern fiction above, it is also very easy to conclude the self-reflexive, metafictional quality of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, because the XIII and very last part of this poem, "Envoi", is a song dedicated to the permanence of Beauty—a very old poetic motif—, but the way to reach this conclusion proves to be a very peculiar one: "Envoi" is a reflection about the perishable quality of artistic productions. Two artistic works are involved in this last part of the poem: on the one hand the previous twelve parts of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* itself, on the other an actual recitation of Edmund Waller's seventeenth-century poem "Go, Lovely Rose" which, in its turn, proves to be also a self-reflective poem⁷: as also happens in *The Waste Land*, literature reflects upon itself and highlights the play of linguistic referential practices.

In order to continue my problematization of the frontiers risen by Hutcheon between Modernism and Postmodernism, I turn my analysis towards the first book of Lawrence Durrell's *Avignon Quintet* (1974-85), well aware that this collection of novels would perfectly "fit" Hutcheon's definition of postmodern historiographic metafiction: *Monsieur*, the first book (1974), already starts in an extremely metaleptical way (G. Genette 1980), narrative levels and different narrative voices appear and disappear very quickly. By the end of the novel, the traditional—realistic—type of

reader has had such terrible problems to follow the unfolding of the story that s/he may welcome the last page of the book, a page of biblical echoes which also attempts [?] to be an explanation of the different levels and voices which have been mixing till that very —reading— moment. We will immediately recognize the title and peculiar —poetic— disposition of the words in that page:

Envoi

So D.
 begat
 Blanford (who begat Tu and
 Sam and Livia)
 who begat
 Sutcliffe
 who begat
 Bloshford
 Piers and Sylvie and Bruce
 who begat
 Akkad
 and
 Sabine
 and
 Banquo
 who begat Pia
 who begat Trash
 who begat...

The page will also “help” anybody who decides to read the subsequent books of the *Quintet*, a collection of narratives in which the modernist relish for “en-abyme” referential problems is but one motif among a collection of (post- and) modernist devices: myth, Jungian symbolism, history and history-telling, treasure-transcendence hunting... The fall of the Templars —and their alleged gnostic faith— constitutes one of the essential elements to “integrate” contents and formal devices: their belief in the false appearance of a Universe really controlled by Monsieur the Devil is already suggestive, in my reading, of the power of enunciation and the delusive quality of discursive reflection. To suggest a “historiographic metafictional” bias in the *Quintet* is not difficult but, obviously, this is not my main purpose here: to further disseminate the Hutcheonian frontiers between modernist and postmodernist fiction I turn, once again, to the motif of the “messenger/concluding part of a poem” [envoy-envoi]:

The epilogue’s a sort of envoi to whatever eyes, against all odds, may one day read it. But though you’re to go through the several parts in order, they haven’t been set down that way: after writing the headpiece I began to fear that despite my planning I mightn’t have space enough to get the tale told; since it pivots about Part Four (the head piece and three parts before, three parts and the tailpiece after), I divided Helen’s hide in half to insure the right proportions...[178]

Helen here is not the mythical Helen of Troy but a she-goat whose skin is being used by this extremely self-conscious narrator as paper to write the tale he is narrating, a story called “Anonymiad” which is also the last message or concluding part of John Barth’s collection of short-stories *Lost in the Funhouse* (1969). The narrator, a Greek bard in a lonely island, sends to the waters his poetic messages year after year in the empty wine amphorae whose contents he has been drinking and using as ink. His plight is also a metaphoric —referential— one: the Greek bard also stands for the writer, trapped in language, overconscious of the power of words to create alternative worlds. The following comments of Barth’s bard would be very appropriate if we were in need of an example of how contemporary fiction problematizes the borders between history and story and warns about the power of enunciating acts, :

For eight jugsworth of years thereafter, saving the spells of inclement weather aforementioned, I gloried in my isolation and seeded the waters with its get, what I came to call *fiction*. That is, I found that by pretending that things had happened which in fact had not, and that people existed who didn’t, I could achieve a lovely truth which actuality obscures—especially when I learned to abandon myth and pattern my fabrications on actual people and events: Menelaus, Helen, the Trojan War. It was *as if* there were the minstrel and this milkmaid, et cetera; one could I believe draw a whole philosophy from that *as if*. (p.193; the bard’s italics)

In effect, the philosophy of the “as if” has already been drawn and perhaps is as old as the culture about which the fictional bard of Barth’s story fictionalizes. The power of language to create “as if” —or even “it is”—, the messenger as the message, the meta-lingual referential game, are all elements which can be traced back, within this century, to modernist literature. Chronologically there is, at least, a literary figure who stands as a clear link between the High Modernism poets cited here and the more contemporary fictions of Barth and Durrell: form as content, fiction upon criticism upon fiction, the act of enunciatory begetting, the blurring of frontiers between literature and reality, and the fictional creation of history are all apparent components of Jorge Luis Borges’s fictions.

Although both his name and his *Ficciones* are very well-known in Anglo-saxon literary circles ⁸, Borges has also been erased from Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, something which can be the more surprising because in her book on parody (1985) Hutcheon highlights the important role played by the Argentinean writer in the formation of contemporary (postmodern) fiction. The erasure perhaps is due to Hutcheon’s realization this time that Borges *Ficciones* was not a book published in 1962 (year of the English translation) but in 1956, and that its more interesting —because “postmodern”— first part, “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” (translated as “The Garden of Forking Paths”), is dated in 1941 —with some authorial additions of 1947. ⁹ And, in effect, some of the tales which form the collection of “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” could almost perfectly fit in Hutcheon’s definition of postmodernist historiographic metafiction: the very first page of the very first tale in the collection, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”, introduces the figure of a narrator —in the persona of a literary critic— who promptly gives the reader a clue to under-

mine the veracity of his apparent historical account on how the civilization of Tlön came to be known by the humans:

Bioy Casares había cenado conmigo esa noche y nos demoró una vasta polémica sobre la ejecución de una novela en primera persona, cuyo narrador omitiera o desfigurara los hechos e incurriera en diversas contradicciones, que permitieran a unos pocos lectores —a muy pocos lectores— la adivinación de una realidad atroz o banal. (p. 13)

Of course, what follows is the narrator's account of how he traced the existence of a fictitious country, Uqbar, in the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* and, later, of a fictitious whole planet, Tlön, in the volumes of the encyclopaedia *Orbis Tertius*. Ultimately, in a post scriptum to the reader —dated 1947—, the story of Tlön has already become history and elements from the fantastic —literary— world of Tlön are continually entering the “real” world of the narrator —our planet Earth—: “ya en las memorias un pasado ficticio ocupa el sitio de otro, del que nada sabemos con certidumbre —ni siquiera que es falso—. Han sido reformadas la numismática, la farmacología y la arqueología. Entiendo que la biología y las matemáticas aguardan también su avatar...” (p. 35-36). Literature in this tale has entered life but, once the reader remembers the conversation of the narrator with Bioy Casares in the first page, life can re-enter literature: the narrator appears as a playful critical and unreliable persona who already shows his fondness of distorting the limits between life and literature, between history and story. From Eliot this narrator also seems to have inherited the device of introducing critical apparatus —footnotes— in the narration of the fictive (?) tale. And, as happens in *The Waste Land*, “en-abyme” structures abound: the narrator's world begets the forged *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* which begets Uqbar which begets *Orbis Tertius* which begets Tlön which begets the narrator's world... whose credibility is undermined from the very first page of the tale.

Narratorial unreliability, blurring of the frontiers reality-fiction and history-story, self-consciousness and the literary motif of the “begetting” are, all of them, predominant devices which appear in most of the titles of “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan”. I will finally refer to two more instances easily recognizable as precedents —or typical instances— of Hutcheonian “postmodernist” fiction. In the well-known story “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”, the narrator tells the reader that the main literary project of Menard was to write *El Quijote* again but,

¿Por qué precisamente el Quijote? dirá nuestro lector. Esa preferencia, en un español, no hubiera sido inexplicable, pero sin duda lo es en un simbolista de Nîmes, devoto esencialmente de Poe, que engendró a Baudelaire, que engendró a Mallarmé, que engendró a Valéry, que engendró a Edmond Teste.” (p.54; my italics)

At the beginning of the first story —“Tlön...”— Borges's narrator has also introduced the motif of the mirror and the legends of the gnostics (pp.13-15) as being correlative, in a sense, of the specular relationship existing between life and literature. Literature is here self-begetting in the same way that D. —Durrell, the Devil— starts

the ever-playing discursive-begetting process of his *Quintet*. In “La lotería de Babilonia” the narrator’s society has become totally controlled by the “Compañía” lotteries: the Company¹⁰ is even responsible for the writing of history in that community and, as the narrator asserts, “nada tan contaminado de ficción como la historia de la Compañía” (p. 78), story and history mingle once again because even the Company’s clerks make a secret oath to lie in their historic reports (p.79): at the end of the story we may wonder, is the narrator telling us the truth? could not his discourse be the result of his chances in the lottery? could he not be one of the Company’s clerks? In any case, it seems clear that for Borges the power of enunciation acquires a predominant role in his *Ficciones*. The reader of García Márquez’s *Cien Años de Soledad* (1967) has no problem either to perceive the narratorial irony on the alleged objectivity of historical discourse: there it is both the politicians and the Compañía Bananera the ones which decide the way history shall be written. Pynchon’s character Stencil spends many years of his fictional life tracing the signifier *V* in the novel of the same title (1963): Stencil’s is a quest for meaning where human signifying practices are put at stake. In the same way Rushdie’s unreliable narrator Saleem Sinai in *Midnight’s Children* (1981) makes us wonder about the human power to fictionalize and the alleged objectivity of capitalized History.

After these literary examples, we are back in Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction and also back at the beginning, what is new in Postmodernism? Some things are necessarily new in literary Postmodernism but the answer to our question should perhaps not be found simply in the —postmodern— writers’ problematization of our relation to history and fiction, or in the appellation to metafiction or to poststructuralist theories still unknown for writers till the 1970s. To delete modernist texts from our discourse does not validate historiographic metafiction as a postmodernist mode of writing. On the contrary, according to Hutcheon’s definition, postmodern “historiographic metafiction” may have been operative for many decades. It is my belief [sic] that we cannot define postmodernist literature simply by adducing a number of technical devices and metaphysical assumptions (already present in Modernism): if the scope of this paper were different, we would comment on the importance for literature of the new scientific revolution (R. Nadeau 1981) and the theory of chaos (N.K. Hayles 1991), on the relevance of the mass media (D. McQuail 1972), or on the impact of television and the cinema in contemporary society (Jowett and Linton 1989) as factors which should also have to be taken into account —among others— if we want to differentiate our contemporary discourse from that of modernism. In any case chronological borders will never be clear-cut: it is not enough to almost ignore modernism or to mention it only referring —deferring— to what other critics have said about it, as Hutcheon does. Despite all, this is also what is good about reading *A Poetics of Postmodernism* : discourse is problematic and it is also here to be problematized by writers, critics, or any other type of readers.

Notes

1. This being one of the favourite words used by Hutcheon in her book, a word which also reveals the very essence of postmodernist literature. As she asserts in her Conclusion, "this study 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 I think define this poetics (or problematics) of postmodernism: historical knowledge, subjectivity, narrativity, reference, textuality, discursive context." (p. 231)
2. "By [historiographic metafiction] I mean those well-known 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 Words* [...] 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." (Hutcheon 1988: 5)
3. As Eliot affirmed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919: 2203).
4. Once again repeating Shakespeare's line in *The Tempest* (I.ii.398).
5. When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said—
 I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself, 140
 HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
 Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
 He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
 To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
 You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set, 145
 He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.
 And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,
6. Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight. 170
 Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.
7. In effect, in Waller's poem the rose is sent by the poet's *persona* as a messenger of the contents of the poem itself. In this way, message and messenger become one in their announcement of the brevity of life:
 Go, lovely Rose!
 Tell her, that wastes her time and me,
 That now she knows
 When I resemble her to thee,
 How sweet and fair she seems to be. 5

 Then die! That she
 The common fate of all things rare
 May read in thee:
 How small a part of time they share
 That are so wondrous sweet and fair. 20
8. John Barth himself has frequently recognized the important influence played by Borges's oeuvre in his own writings. In his Introduction to *Lost in the Funhouse* Barth even suggests that this collection of stories were written as a result of his having read Borges's *Ficciones* (p. vi-vii). In effect, references abound and sometimes they are as overt as the one in the story "Water-message", in which his protagonist, Ambrose, has "named" a place the Jungle because "it was mysterious by rank creepers and honey-suckle [...] and by a *labyrinth of intersecting paths*." (p.48; my italics).
9. Hutcheon is not the only contemporary critic both to recognize the importance of Borges and to mistake the date of publication of his collection "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan". See also P. Waugh's *Metafiction: the theory and practice of self-conscious fiction* (1984). In his role as a metafictionist, Hutcheon locates Borges together with Italo Calvino, John Fowles and Umberto Eco (1985: 83).
10. Perhaps in a double irony on the Spanish "Compañía de Jesús" and the United States trading companies, respectively the old and new "owners" of Central and South America.

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