Searching for Roots: Surrealist Dimensions of Postmodern Fiction

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This paper is meant to approach postmodernism beyond the limiting constraints of historical periods, taking over Patricia Waugh's assumption that postmodernism is not, as so often has been said, a "radical break with the previous Western ways of knowledge and representation," but, rather, "a late phase in a specifically aestheticist tradition of modern thought, inaugurated by philosophers such as Kant and embodied in romantic and modernist art" (3). In the same line of thought privileging continuity via cultural constants rather than historically delimited periods and breaks, Umberto Eco describes postmodernism as "the modern name for mannerism as a historical category." In her turn, Camille Paglia sees Western culture as continuity rather than break and explains it as a continuity of decadent thought, manifested in the perpetual subversion of Apollonian forms of art by Dionysian ones (131). As such, postmodernism—with its discourse of reinterpretation of past historical periods that share a similar feeling of identity crisis, whose belief in reason has fallen prey to the expansion of capitalist forces of production, an "incomplete project," as proclaimed by Habermas, because of the current insufficiency of reason as a foundation of knowledge—is also decadent. It is at the same time Dionysian (irrational) and Apollonian (rational), the Dionysian being continuously suppressed and masked by the Apollonian.

Basing her theory about the relation of continuity which postmodernism establishes with tradition precisely on this incompleteness, Patricia Waugh also uses the concept of decadence (an ambiguous one, an artistic reflection, according to Paglia, of the tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian) in its positive, gratuitous, but creative sense, as characteristic of postmodernism, "an awareness of our powers to fictionalise" (13), in tune with J.F. Lyotard's proclamation of narrative knowledge over the scientific one.

In its crisis of content which leads to a manneristic exacerbation of form, postmodernism, in its late, recent stage, has overcome fragmentation at the textual level and has opted out for the narrative mode (extended beyond the realm of fiction, since it most completely secures a frame to stage the masquerade of unstable identities, wavering, in their post-Nietzschean indecision, between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Within this frame, a temporary substitute for historical situatedness, postmodernism looks back to, it masquerades as past models, searching its "roots" in previous times that use excessive form to supplement a (decadent) crisis of content, the artistic projection of identity crisis: mannerism, late baroque and rococo, pre-romanticism (e.g. William Blake, who interestingly prefigures

Salvador Dalí), post-romanticism (the Pre-Raphaelite painters, late Victorian poetry).[1] These epochs are actually the ones in which the precursors of surrealism can be found.

Looking back to the turn of the century, we can perceive surrealism as a bridge between these ages taken as models for reinterpretation and the postmodern present. Assuming the decadent posture of a mask of masks, the interpretation of interpretations, postmodernism is interested not in these ages as such, but actually in the tension between them and the previous or the subsequent ones. In its donquixottesque attempt to draw the line and approach, eclectically, the whole tradition in a different way, postmodernism picks up its clues from the turn-of-the-century avant-garde trends, where surrealism plays a crucial part. We should, however, from the very beginning be aware of the distinction operating within surrealism itself, which marks its definition, on the one hand, as a formal method, on the other as an artistic attitude.

In the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), André Breton defines the movement as a liberation of imagination from the dictatorship of reason via the artistic interpretation of dreams derived from Freud's theory, describing it in the following technical terms: "pure psychic automatism meant to express verbally, in writing or in any other way the real functioning of the processes of thought. It is a dictate of thought, without the regulating intervention of reason, foreign to any aesthetic or moral preoccupation" (44). This technical description of the intellectualisation of crisis is carried further on in Salvador Dalí's paranoiac-critical method, a "spontaneous method of irrational knowledge, based on a critical and systematical objectivation of delirious associations and interpretations" (301).

These methodical formulations are continued by Breton in the *Second Manifesto* (1930), which now situates surrealism in the realm of attitude and political action, as a trigger of a necessary crisis of conscience in the world that would lead to a universal revolution, meant to put an end to stupidity, limitation and self-sufficiency (159-237). Of course, from this utopian, totalising impulse of revolutionising the world, characteristic of the avant-gardes, little, if anything, is left in the postmodern denial of essence and practice of pastiche, validated by an all-encompassing "waning of affect" (Jameson 1075). As far as the methodical assumptions are concerned, things are different, as we can find this deconstruction-reconstruction process both at the textual level itself, in the early stages of fragmented postmodernist narrative (see Pynchon's oniric, paranoid texts, developing on several levels at the same time) and, further on, in recent texts of postmodern reinterpretation and return to narrative continuity, at the level of alternative world construction (John Fowles, Rose Tremain, A.S. Byatt), as we shall see below.

It is indeed surrealism that seems to initiate the modern process of reinterpretation of tradition in this questioning, dialogic way, as an act of knowledge exempted from any accusation of plagiarism, which substitutes the model of objective reality by the twice-removed copy, the reality of art. The surrealists begin to paint after already existing, consecrated paintings, under the reconstructive impulse that gives the artist full right to see from differ-

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[1] For a more complete description of the relations between contemporary arts and such "roots," inherited via . Surrealism, see Alexandrian 5-25.

ent angles. Indeed, an initiation into alternative forms of seeing is what the audience is offered via paintings such as *Las Meninas* by Picasso (who, though not a surrealist, shares important features with the movement), after Velázquez; *Archeological Reminiscence of the Angelus by Millet* by Dalí, after Millet; the two *Dutch Interiors* by Joan Miró, after H.M. Sorgh and Jan Steen.

Further on, surrealism anticipates the postmodern fascination for the theme of the double (a symptom of an insecure identity), supplemented by the mask, on the one hand, and by the idea of madness, on the other. Joan Miró's *Carnival of Harlequin*, with its protagonist whose fragmented portrait, integrated in a carnivalesque frame, offers a suggestive visual representation of what is going to be the multifaceted postmodern identity, made of an infinite number of self-objects that are taken in, vital conditions for the character to rely on in the attempt to overcome identity crisis (Frosh). This is the 20th century representation of the Fool, a character as old as the Renaissance, the alter ego of the King, the only one, as Shakespeare's theatre shows, who enjoys the privilege of being allowed to speak the truth without being punished. Miró's Harlequin, however, projects a fragmented personality upon the world, prefiguring the postmodern awareness of the fact that there is no longer any *truth* to be spoken, but only *truths*, as expressed by his more-than-one-piece portrait. Folly, however, as the officially-accepted version of madness, tolerated because it is supposed to trigger laughter, is always supplemented by the awareness of its other, clinical counterpart (Picasso's *Madman)*. This is a kind of madness that triggers not laughter, but exclusion, madness which is read not as the merry face of authority, but as difference.

These two characters, the Fool and the Madman, have fascinated postmodern arts from the very beginning, alongside of ways of expression deriving from the irrational ways of knowledge that, as prompted by Freud, favour dreams over reason, looking for expression in ways that derive from the surrealist intellectualisation of crisis. Though no longer expecting to change the world by finding the real truth, as Surrealism did, having lost revolutionary impetus in its all-encompassing waning of affect, Postmodernism constructs its alternative multiple truths in ways that similarly disregard possible charges of plagiarism and violation of historical truth, giving the author the absolute right to construct past historical ages as appropriated alternative worlds whose ingredients are reassembled according to the author's own omnipotent wish.

Taking over Lyotard's statement of the prevalence of narrative ways of knowledge in the postmodern age, supported by the recent proliferation of narrative works in the audience's preference (as compared to other artistic forms) in many literatures, of which the British one is an obvious example, I shall illustrate the argument above on two recent British novels—*Restoration* by Rose Tremain, and *Possession* by A.S. Byatt. These two novels are instances of what Brian McHale calls "the creative anachronism," since the postmodern psychology of the characters (identity crisis reinforced by role-play and the double perspective created by various assumptions of debatable mental states, as well as the contemporary-minded, self-aware narrative voices) is problematised at the interface between the present of the novel's writing and the historical ages where the action is located. What these novels have to share with the findings of Surrealism is not to be found at the level of the

text itself—whose appearance of coherence comes from its pastiche of literary conventions corresponding to the respective historical ages—but rather in the way in which narrative consciousness, under the pretext of such debatable mental states (freeing the literary discourse from the stifling dictates of reason, in Breton's sense) negotiates and alters the relationship between past and present. The historical ages in question—the British Restoration, wavering between a repressed social unconscious of a baroque nature (manifested in the debauchery at Charles II's court) and the emerging 17th century rationalism; and the Victorian age, with its irreconcilable dichotomies, containing the germs of the modernist revolution under a repressive conservatism—are thus seen through the deforming lens of postmodern consciousness, implying the awareness that everything is construct and pastiche, that nothing is to be taken at its face value. This lens is mainly applied by way of three important instruments that the two novels share, whose origin can be traced back to Surrealism and its impact on the formation of postmodern thought: narrative points of view relativised under the assumption of folly/madness; the construction of the characters and of the narrative discourse itself in ways that imply various speculations of the double perspective; the perpetual presence of a strong visual dimension, originating in the surrealist marriage of image and language, of painting and poetry (as Dalí was writing in a letter to García Lorca: "The only real poets are the painters").

Thus, Merivel, the 1st person narrator and protagonist in *Restoration*, repeatedly calls himself "the King's Fool," in an absolute veneration of authority that is meant to describe the state of mind of the English people when monarchy was restored after Cromwell, but which, in its excessiveness, describes rather the postmodern despair at the loss of all authorities and the need to artificially create alternative ones. In his love for the King, which exceeds, as he says, his love for any other being, including his dead parents, including Celia, whom the King forces him to marry to hide her real status as his mistress, Merivel actually hides an instance of mimetic desire characteristic of the Fool figure: that of being the King himself. But his narrative discourse, willingly constructed as unreliable, constantly inviting the reader not to take it too seriously, seems rather to suggest his sad awareness of the fact that this is never going to happen, his postmodern knowledge of the fact that authority is inaccessible, simply because it doesn't exist as absolute truth. This awareness is also based on the fact that there is a clinical double to his folly, real madness, embodied by Katharine, the madwoman Merivel meets at the Whittlesea asylum and whom he is, for different reasons, also forced to marry. Katharine is the embodiment of everything Celia is not, her perfect Other, and, consequently, the perfect Other of Merivel's desires, but also the mirroring of what, in fact, he himself hides under his Fool's mask.

In *Possession*, a third, ambiguous dimension of narratively speculated madness, between clinical status and aesthetically constructed mask, is embodied by Christabel LaMotte, the Victorian lesbian feminist poet who turns out to have had a passionate illegitimate affair with the poet Randolph Henry Ash. The two of them are constructed by Byatt basically after the model of the real Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but in the universe of the novel they come closer and closer to being perfect doubles of their contemporary exegetes, Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, who are gradually drawn, as they discover and study the poets' manuscripts, into a similar passionate affair. Christabel,

whose secrets have long been explained via the assumption of melancholia, a quasi-clinical formulation of what is in fact her difference, her status as the Other, a woman-poet in the world of male-dominated Victorian literature, is symbolically a temporal projection of Maud's own otherness, as a feminist, in the contemporary world.

The double story, constructed simultaneously on two parallel temporal levels in between which the omniscient narrative voice is split, supplemented by the construction of contemporary characters as doubles of the Victorian ones, creates a multi-perspectivism that implies the culturally-assumed relativity of all difference, the impossibility to assume anything as objective truth, since the perspective is continuously varied along criteria of temporal situatedness and mentality. A similar relativisation is obtained via the double perspective in *Restoration*, where the 1st person singular narrative voice, embodied by a male character living during the British Restoration period, actually hides a contemporary female author. The awareness of this fact purposively disorientates the reader's perception of a possible (but continuously deconstructed) hierarchy of values in the world in which Merivel's luxurious erotic experiences (mirroring the King's own) take place.

These multifaceted personalities are further relativised via their dispersed projections in the world outside, coloured in tones faithful to the staging of the age, but which also visually supplement the main narrative arguments of the two novels. Thus, Merivel creates a prolongation of his motley personality in the baroque decoration of his Bidnold house, dispersing the components of his personality into the world around in a way that reminds us of the deconstructed body of Miró's Harlequin. Thus, the baroque space of Bidnold—meant as an alternative to the King's Whitehall, just as Merivel, the Fool, wishes to be an alter-ego of the King—with its "rampant tones of red, pink and gold," is meant to communicate a supplementary visual discourse to any visitors that may come around (including, we understand, the readers), a natural outcome of what he calls his "new vocation" as a painter: "I would order," says Merivel, "to be made a dazzling collection of scarlet sashes, bilberry shawls, ruby slippers, pink bonnets and yellow plumes with which to adorn my *invitées*, thus affording my eye considerable delight and my spirit a great deal of mirth" (44).

In *Possession*, what we may call the conclusion to the story, the *Postscript 1868* that narrates Ash's encounter with his daughter May, a complimentary gift to the privileged reader only, the truth unrecorded by chronicles, to which the characters within the frame-tale do not have access, is thus almost entirely visual, depicting, in Pre-Raphaelite tones that fully emerge as the only possible comment at this stage, after appearing here and there along the Victorian story, in tune with the repressed subconscious of the age:

> The grasses had an enamelled gloss and were connected by diamond-threads of light. The larks sang, and the thrushes, and the blackbirds, sweet and clear, and there were butterflies everywhere, blue, sulphur, copper, and fragile white, dipping from flower to flower, from clover to vetch to larkspur, seeing their own guiding visions of invisible violet pentagrams and spiralling coils of petal light. (508)

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