



The Configuration of Fictional Space in Postmodernist Fiction

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Abstract:

The modernist retreat of the author from his/her prerogated space as “authorial persona” precipitated the radical changes in the nature and form fictional space that bifurcates into narratival and narrational. This evacuation of the authorial persona space, effected by the cultural pressures that render “totalization” difficult, transfers the interpretation responsibility to the reader. Postmodernist fictions, in this respect, push the reader to occupy more space in the narrative by leaving sizable gaps in it; metafiction presents itself as a logical outcome of this process. When the reader has secured a place within the narrative ontology, the metafictional author contends with the reader for the occupation of fictional space. This results into the foregrounding of the fictional space and fictionality in general. The dynamics of this process relates to a consideration of the space of the speaker, the narrational space of fiction. This paper discusses the issue of postmodernist fictional space with reference to pertinent theories and relevant postmodern novels as examples that clarify the discussion.

Key words: space, postmodernism, metafiction, overdetermination

تشكيل الفضاء الروائي في رواية مابعد الحداثة

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قسم اللغة الإنكليزية / كلية التربية / جامعة القادسية

المستخلص:

لقد أسهم تراجع المؤلف الحداثي عن فضاءه الخاص كشخصية مؤلفة في تعجيل التغييرات الجوهرية في طبيعة وشكل الفضاء الروائي، ذلك الفضاء الذي ينقسم على قسمين: الخطابى نصي والروائي. لقد نقل فراغ فضاء المؤلف الذي نتج عن الضغط الثقافي والذي افضى بدوره الى صعوبة الفهم الكلي، نقل مسؤولية التأويل الى القارئ. لذلك فإن رواية مابعد الحداثة قد دفعت بالقارئ الى فضاء أوسع في أدب القص من خلال ترك فجوات كبيرة في هذا الأدب. وبرزت رواية ماوراء القص كنتيجة منطقية لهذه العملية. وحيث أمن القارئ لنفسه مكانا في هذا العالم، إنبرى مؤلف روايات ماوراء القص في مقارعة القارئ للإستحواذ على الفضاء الروائي. ولقد أفضى هذا الأمر الى إبراز الفضاء الروائي والخيال على وجه العموم. تتصل ديناميكية هكذا عملية بفضاء المتحدث (فضاء الراوي في الرواية). تتناقص الورقة هذه الفضاء الروائي لرواية مابعد الحداثة مع اشارات لما يتصل بالنظريات والروايات التي لها علاقة بالأمر تحقيقا للتوضيح.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفضاء، مابعد الحداثة، ماوراء القص، التركيز المفرد

Introduction

There are two basic areas of signification within the text space of fiction: narrational space and narrational space. The narrational space is generated by the signs that particularize the fictional world; the narrational space is created by the signs particularizing the speaker who narrates the story of that fictional world. The radical changes in the nature and form of the fictional space that happened during the modern age resulted into a modernist retreat of the author from his/her prerogated space as authorial persona. This evacuation, catalyzed by cultural pressures that make totalization more and more difficult, transfers the responsibility of interpretation to the reader. Postmodernist fiction compels the reader to occupy more and more space in the narrative by leaving gaps in it. Metafiction, a term used by Scholes who



attributed it to William Gass, presents itself as a logical outcome of this process. Acknowledging the fact that the reader has secured him/herself a place within the narrative ontology, the metafictional author, as a result, contends with the reader for occupation of fictional space. The dynamics of this process can be understood through considering the space of the speaker, the narrational space of a fiction.

A Possible Model

Narrational space can be divided into two major subspaces: discursive space and iconic space. The discursive space is generated by the fact that the narrative space exists by a speech act of a speaking subject; the iconic space relates to the fact that the speech act is transcribed on physical medium. These two subspaces textually indicate that the narrative proper is mediated and metatextually remind the reader that what he/she is experiencing is not unadulterated reality.

In her consideration of "The Turn of the Screw." Christine Brooke-Rose (1976) distinguishes between the text and metatext for any narrative unit. The text consists in the denotative signification, the simple textual meaning, of the words in the narrative unit. However, the full signification of this unit is not limited to the denotative value; with the adherence to a narreme, there are unstated connotations that are generated in the reader's mind. The reader brings a metatext from cultural conventions that govern and direct understanding, to every bit of text that he/she consumes. As Brooke-Rose says, "metatext is always essentially the reader's text" (p. 538). For example, Brooke-Rose analyzes the text and metatext of the famous first sentence of the governess's account, "I remember the whole beginning as succession of flights and drops, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong", as follows:

The whole beginning connotes (AM)* a tendency to dramatize ("the beginning" would have enough for denotation), and, by the same token, the narrator's type of talent, for the fact that any narrator must have at least the talent to keep us interested (a talent lent by the author) is of great importance *As a succession of little flights and drops* denotes her alternating



impressions, connotes the above *plus* a certain instability of the narrator (AM). *A little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong* (adding to the talent-metatext with a telling metaphor) connotes (AM) all the above *plus* a tendency to see things in Manichean and moralistic terms (up/down //right/wrong). (p. 538; emphasis original)

This analysis captures well the dynamics of text/metatext reading process. In it, Brooke-Rose works from the pattern of diction and elements of style to infer certain qualities of the speaker. This can be done for any narreme from any first-person narrative since every word and phrase the speaker uses acts as an index of his/her character.

The same process can be done in the case of the narratives in which the speaking subject is not foregrounded clearly as in first-person, especially the authorial and impersonal enunciations, regardless of the visibility of the speaker. Any narreme can be analyzed stylistically and rhetorically for the indexical information about the nature of the speaking subject – this is just what Wayne Booth does to several impersonal enunciations in the first chapter of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. This means that the authorial narratives, which use the components of discursive space substantially, offer relatively more information about the speaking subject – as some critics believe that the narrator of Henry Fielding's fictions and the persona in Jane Austen's fictions are in some ways the most important characters in their works.

The reader reads elements of discursive space as indexical signs for the speaker and for the culture that produced the enunciation. Also, the reader, confronted by a text that occupies portions of iconic space, is encouraged to read those signs metatextually as an index to the nature of textuality. The iconic configuration explores the notion of what it is to be a text. Both discursive and iconic space give rise to a metatextual reading that ponders and then explores the nature and fact of fictionality, the former by reminding the reader time and again that the story has been mediated and is therefore only a version, the latter by foregrounding the fact that the story consists only in so many words on so many pages, not reality after all.



As Brooke-Rose notes, matatext is essentially the reader's text. However, an author may preempt readerly prerogatives in this regard simply by incorporating metatextual commentary into his/her own discourse, by manipulating its discursive and iconic spaces. Or the author might manage the world and story of the narrative enterprise to call attention to the made-upness of these components and thus foreground its fictionality. Any narrative that deploys its narratival and narrational spaces in such a way as to foreground its own fictionality is metafiction.

The Competition for Fictional Space

As a narratological tool, the fictional space is suitable to encompass the triad of literature experience: the culture-specific author, the text, and the recreating and responding reader. This dynamic is found in the very nature of narrative, which presupposes a teller, a tale, and a told. In traditional narrative, the author assumes control and "creates ... an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement"; during this reading experience, there happens "an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader" (Booth, 1964, p.155).

In postmodernist fiction, some novelists realized that this relationship is no longer available to them. The modernist novelist abdicated certain traditional authorial privileges. As a result, showing was preferred to telling. Hence, postmodernist authors helped in the debunking of fictional authority by conferring on the reader compositional as well as interpretive responsibilities; the reader became an integral part of the house of fiction. Therefore, the author cannot assume that the twentieth century, with all concomitant cultural and artistic changes, has not happened. In addition, the postmodernist author is aware of the arbitrary nature of language, of the gap between sign and referent, between signifier and signified; he can no longer accept what the Victorian author took for granted – a belief in the interplay between language and the world (whether that world is represented by the empirical or psychological reality). The Victorian authors assume automatically a relationship between the real world and the world of fiction;



for them language is mainly a tool of *re*-presentation. Postmodernist authors, however, believe that that fiction is twice removed from the reality: first, it is made-up; second, it is made up of words that signify things whose relation to the signified is arbitrary – words are merely substitutes for the real thing. So, the *re*-presentation becomes a problem or the postmodernist author. This is clearly Paul de Man's and Jacques Derrida's take on the experience of reading literature, for their reading shows a conscious understanding of the contradictions underlying aporia.

“WHAT RECOURSE” asks one Donald Barthelme's texts. This is a reminder of the predicament of the postmodernist author, who is generally well-read and self-conscious. This author may reoccupy the previously emptied parts of his/her fictional space. In this case, the author is fully conscious of questions of fictionality, authority, textuality, and the responsibility of the reader. Hence, the fictional space is foregrounded as the author/speaker is “fighting” to reclaim the imaginary terrain.

The Self-Conscious and Self-Reflexive Texts

There is nothing new about self-conscious authors, or fictions about writers, or stories about the desire to tell stories; Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* can serve as the prototype for this narrative subgenre. What is new about postmodernist metafiction is the motivation behind foregrounding the process of fiction. About earlier examples of metafiction, one critic has said:

the Greeks were concerned with metafiction, but not as a self-consciousness problematic about the “meaning” of one's interpretations. For them one way of interpreting expressed the qualities of a person, and only secondarily reflected the possible intelligibility of events. (Altieri, 1977, p. 333)

In other words, metafictional devices were employed as a means of characterizing the speaking subject. Or, the speaker might call attention to him/herself in order to promote the fictional illusion, a technique William Empson refers to as “pseudo-parody to disarm criticism” (1950, 52). The text reveals its artificiality, but only to demonstrate an awareness that there might be other versions of the story and to suggest that this version will not



therefore give the reader the unadulterated truth. Furthermore, metafictional techniques may be employed, as in the case of *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy*, in order to make fun of other literary genres, conventions, or texts. All these functions relate to the assumption about the relation of fiction and/to reality, a belief in the “inexplicable and intersubjective nature of the world” (Eile, 1977, p. 119). It is thus the responsibility of narrative fiction to reproduce the underlying order; to give the reader a totalized vision, which is, eventually, severely questioned and debunked by postmodernist thinkers.

Belief in some rational order of reality is not available to postmodernist authors; in fact, the very notion of such an order is ludicrous. In these circumstances it is equally ludicrous to demand of fiction that it discovers the deep structure of reality, perhaps even ludicrous for fiction to undertake to *re-present* reality, especially when we consider the protean quality of postmodern reality. Metafictional techniques in postmodernist fiction are founded on a different epistemology, one unconvinced of the knowability of the world. Therefore, it is appropriate to refer to these texts as self-reflexive and not simply self-conscious. The self-conscious text broods on its own processes and components in a thoughtful and considered fashion. The self-reflexive text regurgitates the elements of fiction to make fun of them, to explode them, to deconstruct them. As one notes, postmodernist fiction evinces the “activist faith that discourse, becomes self-conscious and self-reflexive, can raise the writer’s and reader’s awareness of the properties and operations of language and social discourse and of their own problematic placement within them” (Russell, 1980, p. 38). These fictions constitute a deliberate assault upon the fact of fiction, the need of fiction, the form of fiction; they expose the fallacy of the lofty cognitive ends some ascribe to fictions.

The (Over)Determination of Narratival Space

Any narratival space has two components: its story and its actants; this reflects the preoccupation of traditional criticism with plot and characterization. Hence, some postmodernist fiction transforms these components in such a way so as to expose their conventionality; at the same time, it exploits them in order to bring the fiction into existence. The basic



technique utilized for this purpose can be called overdetermination. An overdetermined literary device is one that serves several functions at once and one which thus draws attention to itself as a device. John Barth uses the term “*escalation*” (cited in Scholes, 1967, p. 135), a term that suggests the adversary role of the author vis-à-vis his text and his audience.

Speaking of the tension between fiction and reality, Barth says, “A different way to come to terms with the discrepancy between art and the Real Thing is to affirm the artificial element in art (you can’t get rid of it anyhow) and make the artifice part of the point” (cited in Scholes, 1967, 137). One affirms the artificial element by defamiliarizing it, by bringing the literary convention to the foreground. For example, Barth foregrounds the story of *Giles Goat-Boy* by so emphasizing the plottiness of the tale that the reader is constantly reminded that he/she is in a fiction. The full title of the text, with its biblical overtones, reminds the reader that George’s life recapitulates Christ’s; George’s ambition to become a mythic hero and his exposure to various mythical texts underscore the story’s scrupulous adherence to Joseph Campbell’s monomyth of the hero with 1,000 faces. In addition, the story repeats predictably certain motifs – George must pass through the belly of WESCAC three times, learning a new lesson each time) and multiply coincidences. This makes the novel thickly plotted.

In *V.*, Thomas Pynchon draws attention to the human pattern-making instinct, our need to conceive or contrive plots, by making a central character, Herbert Stencil, obsessed with the enigmatic character V., a woman somehow connected with the “Plot Which Has No Name.” Stencil is “quite purely He Who Looks for V.,” and by treating his obsession with the magic initial ironically, Pynchon was able to explore the absurdity and values of the human need to invent plots.

Similarly, postmodernist novelist can emphasize characterliness, or the lack of this component, by working some transformations upon his/her actants. Donald Barthelme and Robert Coover make traditional figures from literary folklore - like *Snow White*, *Little Red Riding*, *Hansel and Gretel* - primary actants in their fictions, but assign to them a contemporary life style that serves to mock readerly expectations about their identities. And even

more disconcerting example of actant transformation might be the appearance, within the fiction, of the author himself. A character like John Barth appears magically to rescue Sheherazade in a moment of distress in *Chimera*. Another way to foreground narrational space involves the narrative act itself the subject of the story by making the primary actant a fiction writer struggling with his/her own narrative. Several of the stories in Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* deal with self-conscious fiction-makers whose self-consciousness results in writer's block.

Preoccupation with plottiness and plots, characters stolen from real life or literary tradition, and narratives about the trials and triumphs of frustrated fiction writers is a conscious attempt of these writers to deploy these narratives strategies calling attention to the artifice and conventionality of fiction, its fictionality. Overdetermination of elements of narrational space enables metafictionists to acknowledge what they are doing while they are doing it.

Narrational Space and the Real World

In an attempt to deal with the ever-increasing amount of reality in the twentieth century, certain postmodernist authors incorporated the unprocessed stuff of history (facts, events, personages). Readers were subsequently asked/obliged to assemble the disparate pieces of the fiction into a coherent whole. This process of assimilation of undigested and untransformed historical fact continues in forms of postmodernist fiction. Fictions like Pynchon's *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, and Coover's *The Public Burning* are examples for such fictions that deal directly with the stuff of history. These fictions deliberately convert history into fiction, by assuming the privilege of rewriting entire historical events in a way that satisfies the needs of imagination. In *The Public Burning*, for example, Coover reinvents the true history behind the scenes of the Rosenberg trial and execution, turning the event into a ritualized (and totally ludicrous) mass public catharsis, engineered by none other than Nixon (who narrates about half of the novel), Eisenhower, and other real-life witch-hunters. In this novel and others like it, history is not a nightmare from which to escape but just another narrative or meaning system to make over.



Narrational Space and Metafiction

Narrational space, which is generated by signs that particularize the speaking subject or the text's materiality, consists of two subspaces: discursive and iconic space. A basic metafictional strategy involves deploying these subspaces in such a way as to foreground either the speaking subject or the text's materiality. In the former case the fiction calls into question notions of authority; in the latter case, notion of textuality.

(Over)Determination of Discursive Space

The most obvious way to incorporate metafictional elements within a fictional space is to place them in the enunciation of the speaker, in the form of metalingual community. That is the speaker interrupts the story to interpose statements that address the medium, the codes, or the conventions of the narrative act. A speaker may, for example, pause to consider the medium through which contact is realized with the receiver; an example for this type is Humbert Humbert's cry from within the pages of his text: "Oh, my Lolita. I have only words to play with!" (Nabokov, 1968, p. 32) This cry is echoed in a number of postmodernist novels. A speaker can make similar phatic statement by discussing the syntax his message conforms to or the page on which it appears.

A second kind of metalingual remarks consists in references by the speaker to the literary codes that govern and direct the understanding of the literary message. Donald Barthelme addresses the whole notion of a symbolic field in "The Glass Mountain," a story designed "simply to disenchant a symbol" (Barthelme, 1967, 68). And in a story in the same volume, "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," he examines the code of irony: "Now I suppose that I am suddenly curious about how my irony actually works – how it functions" (Barthelme, 1967, p. 94).

Metafiction and Iconic Space

Overdetermination in the development of elements of narrational space and discursive metalingual statement of a parodic intent remind readers of the fictionality – and ultimately the fallacy – of what they read. An important



aspect of fictionality is textuality, and a fiction that deploys its latent iconic space undertakes to explore/comprehend the “whatness” of a text, especially a fictional text. The iconic space develops from the text’s physicality – its existence as letters grouped according to conventions into recognizable words, which are used across the text’s pages that are received in a certain order. Any fiction that systematically foregrounds one or another of these aspects may be described as utilizing iconic space, and thus calls itself into question as a text (metatextually).

John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1969), a series of short stories “meant to be received ‘all at once’” (p. ix), can be seen as a collection of almost all the metafictional tactics that foreground it as fiction. the following metafictional strategies can be identified in it:

1. Overdetermination of the story motifs in “Night-Sea Journey” and “Menelaïad,”
2. Interpolation of ironic metalingual statements in “Lost in the Funhouse” and “Life-Story,”
3. Parody of narrative conventions: the tale-within-a-tale in “Menelaïad”; the history of fiction in “Anonymiad,”
4. Alphabetic space, especially the letters A, B, C, D in “Frame-Tale,” “Night-Sea Journey,”
5. Parody of the notion of fictional space: “Frame-Tale.”

Lost in the Funhouse can be, therefore, plumped for its systematic foregrounding of its fictionality.

Metafiction and the Reader

The foregoing discussion of the metafiction treatment of text space shows that metafiction establishes new relations with readers; readers who look for a cooperative relation with the narrative speakers may realize that their expectations are frustrated. In traditional fiction, authorial or first-person, the relation between the speaker and the reader is friendly and mutually satisfying; the speaker tries to create a fictional community, welcoming readers into the world of the narrative. In postmodernist metafiction, however, the speaker sometimes treats the reader as an adversary and



frequently prevents readerly activities. The speaker does this by occupying the overdetermining areas of signification that in traditional fiction belong to the reader.

The new speaker/reader dynamics in postmodernist metafiction is found in the prototype of metafiction, *Tristram Shandy*. In *Tristram Shandy*, the speaker turns, from time to time, from the matter at hand to address the reader personally. Sometimes he even puts words in his/her mouth:

“ – How could you, Madam, be so inattentive invading the last chapter? I told you in it, *That my mother was not a Papist*. – Papist! You told me no such thing, Sir. – Madam, I beg leave to repeat it over again, That I told you as plain, at least, as words, by direct inference, could tell you such a thing. – Then, Sir, I must have miss’d a page. (Sterne, 1940, p. 56)

This kind of address establishes a certain type of relation between the speaker and the reader as it serves to enlarge the discursive space of the fiction. Such a type of fiction introduces its actants gracefully a number of times, it particularizes its milieus, and it provides adequate transitions from its narrative plotlines; these strategies help the reader feel welcome in the text’s domain.

The relation between the speaker and the reader is not amicable always. The author may not like the fact that the reader assumes the privilege of taking the words, plotlines, and motifs of the text and assigning to them an extratextual meaning. Donald Barthelme incorporates into his novel *Snow White* (pp. 82-88) a questionnaire for his readers that parodies their hermeneutic activities. The questionnaire poses questions like “Has the work, for you, a metaphysical dimension?” and “Have you understood, in reading to this point, that Paul is the prince figure?” Such questions poke fun at the reader’s search for meaning and significance; at the same time, they subvert readerly responsibility. In a deliberate “plagiarism”, Raymond Federman takes Barthelme’s idea and inserts a questionnaire of his own in *Take It or Leave It* (n.p.; Federman’s novel is not paginated); he closes with questions that make fun of the notion of intertextuality:



P.S. Do you think all books should have such a questionnaire?

Yes () No ()

And furthermore have you ever seen such a QUESTIONNAIRE?

Yes () No ()

If so where? _____

The cumulative effect of such strategies is to shake the reader out of his/her complacency and reinforce the postmodernist notion that the truth of the reading activity lies less in the meaning which the reader decodes than in the *jouissance* the he/she experiences (Ronald Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*). The pleasure is to be had not “by reading between the lines themselves (for there is nothing there, in those white spaces) but by reading the lines themselves – looking them and so arriving at a feeling not of satisfaction exactly, that is too much to expect, but of having read them, of having ‘completed’” (Barthelme, 1967, 106) .

Posttext

In his “Beyond Interpretation: The Prospects of Contemporary Criticism,” Jonathan Culler believes that the “insidious legacy” of New Criticism is the idea that the critic’s job is to interpret literary works. So many critical works addressed the instrumentality of interpretation to critical practice. Even reader-response criticism tends to accept that the production of readings is the function of the processes it describes. Wolfgang Iser in *The Act of Reading*, for example, demonstrates the way in which a text’s perspectives structure the reader’s participation in the dynamics of meaning production. Steven Mailloux, rejecting Iser’s model as too text-centred, locates interpretive constraints in social reading models based on “traditional,” “regulative,” or “constitutive” conventions (Ch.1). This debate revolves about how and where of interpretation, the locus of interpretive endeavor, rather than upon the possibility of interpretation.



Postmodernist texts, however, tend to call in question the very possibility of interpretation. They accomplish this, generally, by a conscious and systematic overdetermination of conventional narrative elements like plot, character, point of view, structure, and language, elements traditionally drawn upon to produce and substantiate interpretation. An overdetermined element has more than one determining narrative function or value, thus drawing attention to itself as a literary device while at the same time preempting (or at least one way) to read it. It points to other signifiers rather than to structures of signifieds. The systematic deployment of such elements is instrumental in the texts that resist, defy, or ridicule interpretive activity.

In chapter 6 of *Interpretive Conventions*, Mailloux argues that “all interpretation is translation”:

we translate one meaning into another

one text into another

one phenomenon into another

one interpretation into another

one translation into another. (Mailloux, 1982, 144)

He also notes that the word “interpretation” derives from the Latin *interpres*, meaning an agent who passes back and forth between two parties, an intermediary. Viewed in this light, interpretation can be seen as the ongoing activity of filling in the gaps in order to invest discontinuous texts with coherence. Reading a (para)modernist text, then, can be seen as a variation of conventional interpretive practice; the gaps in this case infect the text itself, and the reading process involves not so much a search for a valid translation (the text of the real) as the creation of a seamless texture. Such is not the postmodernist overdetermined text, which questions all models of *vraisemblance* (Culler) and calls for novel readings. Mailloux notes that literary theorists agree “that the reading conventions which constitute the ‘set of acceptable or plausible readings’ are always evolving” (1982, 59). This evolution is not dictated or directed by the reader but by culture-specific texts, which subvert or undermine regular conventions (interpretation as



translation, gap-filling, assemblage) and therefore force new conventions to emerge. The conventions for reading a postmodernist text is always to be codified or determined.

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