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The Paradoxical Status of Knowledge in American Postmodern Fiction

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> Readers of novels often assume that the knowledge of a particular subject of information, displayed . . . must be the visible tip of a submerged iceberg when in fact there is often no iceberg.
>
> David Lodge

The question that the present work addresses is related to the paradoxical investment and questioning of knowledge in the American experimental fiction since the second half of the twentieth century. The thematic importance assigned in American postmodern fiction to the examination of language games that inform the narrativity of literary and informational or scientific texts, is linked to a critical exploration of the discursive articulations of knowledge. Such interest in the textuality and textualization of knowledge does not, however, bind postmodern fiction with a purely epistemological perspective. Actually, part of the paradoxes that inform the poetics of postmodern fiction are related to its tendency to situate its critique of the notion of knowledge within the arena of aesthetics, mainly because its major concern is with the status that knowledge acquires when appropriated by literary narrativity and the ways such appropriation affects the aesthetics of fiction.

It is significant that in the contemporary critical discourse the terms used in describing the orientation of postmodern literature towards the mode of radical irony, and a consciously assumed indeterminacy or plurality of meaning, are equally used in specifying other aspects of postmodern culture, in particular the question of knowledge. Thus, Michael Fischer, for instance, insists that "nothing defines the present conditions of knowledge so well as irony" (224), while Linda Hutcheon (*Poetics* 124-140) and Brian McHale (165-187) posit in their seminal works on postmodern literature and

art that the peculiar ironic, parodic, and self-critical modes in postmodern literary narrativity entail a questioning of the accessibility and circulation of knowledge. Raymond Federman, on the other hand, describes the shift in postmodern literature as a movement away from the existentialist "crisis of conscience" to a preoccupation with "the crisis of literature, with the crisis of language and of communication, with the crisis of knowledge . . ." (5). When Federman describes the metafictional, metacritical orientation of postmodern literature in terms of "the pursuit of non-knowledge," such pursuit is specified as part of a central paradox, rather than a liquidation of the relevance of knowledge to literary writing (8, 9). Indeed, the poetics of the experimental, "New fiction" rests on the paradoxical recognition of the "impossibility of saying the world" (Federman 14-15) and an intensely implemented contention that "everything can be said now, everything is on the verge of being said anew."[1]

In addition to its understanding of knowledge within the terms of the provisional and the unstable, postmodern fiction is also informed by a consciousness about the novel's definitive dispossession of its traditional role of offering knowledge about man and the world. If such a dispossession, induced by the media and the information technology of the postmodern culture, may partly account for the self-reflexive orientation of postmodern fiction; it did not, however, entail its abandonment of the traditional "complicity" that has for long bounded narrative fiction to historiography, journalism, psychoanalysis, and the various discourses of knowledge. Part of the self-critical spirit of postmodern fiction manifests itself in its questioning of literature's traditional reliance on the forms of knowledge available; a questioning that is often integrated in its subversive, ironic use of the conventions of fiction writing.

Throughout the present work, the emphasis will be put on the paradoxical status ascribed to historical knowledge and psychoanalysis in the American postmodern fiction. Its parodic critique of the traditional appropriation of historical knowledge in fiction will be discussed in relation to its concern with investigating the limits of literary and historiographic representation. The significance of the parodic mode to the critical handling

1 Federman builds his interpretation of the paradox on Robbe-Grillet's essay, "A Future for the Novel" (1956) in which the French writer points to the striking realization that the world is neither transparent nor mastered.

of historical and psychoanalytic knowledge in the American metafictional narrative will be further underlined in relation to the ambiguous, often ironic, forms of self-knowledge and literary knowledge impelled by a polemical use of autobiographical fiction and a critical foregrounding of intertextual metafiction.

Historiographic Metafiction and the Questioning of Historical Knowledge

The question of the use and "abuse" of historical knowledge in postmodern fiction has been extensively discussed in Linda Hutcheon's canonical book on postmodern poetics (*Poetics* 105-123). In its deliberate problematizing of the opposition between history and fiction, the postmodern novel still acknowledges, as Hutchon insists, the relevance of such opposition, rather than claiming its dissolution (113). Very often the postmodern American novel illustrates this tendency to undertake a deliberate crossing and questioning of the boundary between fiction and history, not for the sake of erasing or denying it, but to articulate (within the process of story-telling) a critical examination of fictional narrativity from the angle of its interaction with, its use of, and resistance to, historiography.

The practice of historiographic metafiction in the American postmodern novel, involves its critical scrutiny of the relations between "story" and "history" articulated in past literary traditions and texts; the relation between fiction's veracity and the rule of verification that applies to historiography.[2] Thus, the American novel's critique of the conventional strategies through which fiction has been appropriating historical knowledge often encompasses a questioning of narrativity in historiography as well. This may be illustrated by some American postmodern narratives in which a parodic version of the historical or autobiographical novel is joined to the foregrounding of the theme of writing history. In Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night* (1966), an ironic version of historical and autobiographical fiction contains the central theme of writing since the narrative takes the form of Howard Campbell's written confessions of his role as a Nazi propagandist during the war. Campbell's insistence on the gaps and the distortions that the act of writing inevitably generates, maintains in the forefront of the narrative the reality of historical knowledge as the product of textualization. Campbell's frequent need to betray the theme of his

2 Hutchon illustrates this tendency through a reference to Coetzee's *Foe*. (See *A Poetics* 107)

writing (his confessions are supposed to sustain an official documentation of the Nazi system) in order to dwell on his literary works (he is originally a playwright), maintains an unsolved tension and overlapping between history writing and literary, creative writing throughout Vonnegut's novel.

Many American novels of the fifties, sixties and seventies, John Hawkes's *The Cannibal* (1949), Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1977), to name but a few, encompass a parodic version of historical fiction, which allows the writers to join together a critical pondering on the poetics of fiction (in particular the conventions of verisimilitude and plot) and a sceptical attitude towards the authority of historical knowledge. The parody of the historical novel in works such as *The Cannibal*, like the parody of autobiographical fiction in *Mother Night* or *The Woman Warrior*, is often reinforced by a metafictional orientation that manifests itself in the foregrounding of the act of writing as the locus of the novel's thematics. The interrelation between the mode of parody and the metafictional theme of writing (the writing of history in particular) highlights a conscious problematization of the historical knowledge that fiction appropriates. Indeed, the parodic mode, operating through the ironic distortions of verisimilitude and plausibility, and the deliberate insertion of falsified data,[3] lays bare the fact that the accessibility of historical knowledge depends on discursive strategies and language games which involve the risk of falsification.[4] The credibility of such knowledge is not negated; it is rather relativized or held in suspension, through the emphatic reference to the risks of distortion that the language games of narrativity (even historiographic narrative) and the whole process of textualization are likely to produce.

The overlapping targets of the postmodern metafictional critique, that is, its revision of the poetics of fiction and its questioning of the historical knowledge on which verisimilitude and plausibility often rest, are interconnected through the predominance of parodic perversion. A

3 For instance, in John Hawkes's *The Cannibal*, the plot of the Nazi revival in1945 Germany and the execution of the single American overseer, Leevey, foreground a surrealistic world at the expense of verifiable history.

4 Hutcheon pointed to the game of deliberate falsification in historiographic metafiction, and commented on it as "foreground[ing] the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error" (*A Poetics* 114).

sustained critique of the traditional forms in narrative fiction tends to contain the American postmodern narrative's exploration of the issue of knowledge. Hence, the parody of the picaresque tradition in *The Crying of Lot 49* informs Thomas Pynchon's deployment of the historical facts that marked post-War America of the sixties (the Cold War, McCarthyism); an ironic subversion of the rhetoric of self-revelation and self-invention, typical of the *Bildungsroman* and autobiography, guides Kurt Vonnegut's reinvention in *Mother Night* of a personal experience of captivity during the Second World War; an ironic mixture of historical fiction and of fictional biography in *Libra* informs Don DeLillo's fictionalizing of John F. Kennedy's assassination and the major events related to Kennedy's presidency (the Bay of Pigs, hostility between the USA and Cuba, the Cold War). The parodic mode that induces the handling of history within the terms of intertextuality in American metafiction unveils a critical rethinking of the status of knowledge in literature and of the narrative modes that determine the accessibility, and so our knowledge, of the past (Hutcheon *A Poetics* 118). Such orientation inscribes the paradoxical status of historical knowledge within the poetics of postmodern fiction: it is part of the narrative's thematics, but does not assume the status of the backgrounded "given." The focus is put on the process itself of such appropriation, with the consequent ironic highlighting of the risk of falsification, inadequacy of the discursive elements or their failure to convey the intended informational content.

In *Libra*, DeLillo articulates a critical questioning of historiography, its role in enacting the accessibility and circulation of historical knowledge through the portrayal of Nicholas Branch in his archive room, struggling for the impossible task of historicizing Kennedy's assassination. The issue of writing history in a postmodern American culture saturated with information and conspiracy theories, is given additional emphasis through the ironic mirroring of Branch in the characters of Guy Banister the detective, and Lee Oswald, Kennedy's presumed murderer. The critique of the processes of historiography is enacted through the ironic clashes and paradoxes that inform Nicholas Branch's task. The clash between his image as expert (his professionalism) and his sense of loss and even alienation ("he is in the fifteenth year of his labor and sometimes wonders if he is becoming bodiless [14]"), is related to the general paradoxical situation of technical efficiency joined to the impossibility of reaching the truth. The efficiency of the archival system within which Branch works ("when he

needs something he simply has to ask. The Curator is quick to respond . . . forwarding precisely the right document [15]") is ironically contrasted with the impossibility for him to reach any stable truth or reliable causality about the event he is historicizing.

The irony of Branch's situation is the irony of the condition of knowledge in postmodern culture: the sophisticated informational technology as it saturates the postmodern world with "flows" of information, generates a radical instability, even uncertainty, in the knowledge made available. This contradiction that pertains to the condition of knowledge in postmodernity had been described by Nietzsche in terms of a discontinuity between technical efficiency and "meaningfulness." Habermas (*Connaissance et intérêt* 324) has explained the Nietzschean theory of knowledge by insisting on the schism it emphasizes between the achievements of science and the significance or meaningfulness of man's actions and experience: the methodology that guarantees the certainty of scientific knowledge alienates science from the interests that exceed mere technical manipulation; the interests that alone could give that knowledge a *significance*.

In *Libra* also, the dilemma of Nicholas Branch is partly related to the entrapment of the historiographer in the rhetorical games of the archive that he deciphers and interprets when his aim is to focus on the pure facts. Branch cannot help being fascinated by the variety of rhetorical strategies through which the event of death or murder is reshaped (more than simply reported) in the written documents (57). Lyotard has already assigned to the language games as defined by Wittgenstein the effect of accentuating the question of the legitimation of knowledge because the discourse of legitimation is generated by the provisionality and instability of those language games (*Postmodern Condition* 17, 28-29). Moreover, the discourse of legitimation on which the authority of knowledge depends (scientific knowledge), allows the elements of narrative ("le narratif") to continuously erupt in the scientific, rendering, thus, impossible the "purity" of facts or data (Lyotard *Postmodern Condition* 27-28). Therefore, with DeLillo's historiographer, the impossibility of the "pure facts" is not only accounted for by their inevitable textualization, that is, their reinvention in the narratives of the archival documents; it also reminds us that with historiography as such, knowledge is the product of narrativity, of particular rhetorical games.

Moreover, part of the radical irony that problematizes the theme of historiographic writing in *Libra* emanates from the fact that the "narrative knowledge" it is expected to generate, is challenged by the eruption of what Lyotard has identified as the "figural"; the non-discursive element in discourse (what resists "presentation," *Discours, Figure*). The figural, in the situation of Nicholas Branch is embodied by the element of the "dream," or also the many photographs of Kennedy's assassin (300, 301), the relevance of which remains impossible for him to articulate. Actually, what justifies the figural quality of the dream and the photographs is not the claim that they resist verbalization; it is rather the absence of their relevance to the totality of the recorded "story" of Kennedy's assassination. The missing meaningfulness of those elements that Branch has to include in his historiographic narrative accounts for their challenging eruption (like non-discursive elements), which further problematizes the articulation and the transmission of knowledge.

In addition, Nicholas Branch has to face the impossibility of the "totalizing" claim of historiography. The pursuit of "totalization," attributed by Georg Lukács to the historical novel (90-92), and which has been central to the traditional conception of history writing, is ironically negated in DeLillo's novel and in much of postmodern fiction. The huge corpus of documents and testimonies that Branch has access to could only point to the absence of "the great and masterful scheme, the plot that reaches flawlessly in a dozen directions" (58); the "master narrative" itself (to use Lyotard's term for the totalizing tendency of historiography) remains beyond Branch's reach, because, in the first place, the claim of a possible "grand récit" does not hold any longer. Actually, part of the subversive irony in *Libra* and in other American postmodern narratives like Vonnegut's *Mother Night* or Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, emanates from the tendency of the conspiracy theory enacted in them, to re-implement the "totalizing" effect but within a perversive structure of signification. The conventional process of a meaningful causality (the source of the totalizing effect) is not reproduced as such in those novels; it is assigned to a vague mood of conspiracy that contains but does not clarify the absurdity, fragmentariness, and sometimes the surrealistic quality of the happenings.[5] The prevalence of

5 Those postmodern conspiracy novels embody what Fredric Jameson describes as the attempt "to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system." (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 38).

conspiracy novels in the American literary scene since the 1960s, and their reliance on the thriller motifs, is directly related to the forceful quality that the critical thought about knowledge has assumed in American fiction. Brian McHale has linked the periodical emergence of conspiracy fictions to the re-occurrence of "crises in cognitive mapping": "Whenever the complexity of the social-economic system outstrips our capacity to represent it to ourselves, conspiracy theory arises to fill the gap . . ." (179).

As a consequence to the aforementioned factors (the historiographer's loss in the rhetorical games of archival documents, the persistence of the non-discursive or the figural that resists interpretation, the impossibility of a totalizing historical account), Nicholas Branch is blocked: "the truth is he hasn't written all that much. He has . . . notes . . . but of actual finished prose, there is precious little "(181). Not only does Branch fail to make any real progress in his task, but he ends up betraying his feeling that the relevance of the Warren Report (the official, actually historical account of Kennedy's assassination) has more to do with the world of fiction writing than with that of historiography: "Branch thinks this is the megaton novel James Joyce would have written" (181). What accounts for the emphatic attribution of literary value (rather than historiographic one) to the Warren Report is, first, its game of deferral (the deferral of historical information it is supposed to offer: "everything in the Warren Report is elsewhere [181]"). In addition, the reference to the Warren Report as "the Joycean book of America" (182) does not only point to the encyclopedic nature of the two texts (the historical report and the fictional *Ulysses*); it draws our attention to the parodic and intertextual games that account for the bulky nature of Joyce's *Ulysses*, and the similar relevance of intertextuality (the repetition and interpretation of primary documents) in the Warren Report. John Johnston has already commented upon DeLillo's qualification of *Libra*'s fictionality as a refuge from the uncertainty, the "half-facts" and speculations that marked the historicizing of Kennedy's assassination (324).

As the historiographer-surrogate in *Libra* suggests the overlapping between the processes of writing in historiography and in parodic fiction, he points to the rule of re-writing (the necessary repetition of the already written texts of the archive) which informs historiography and inevitably inscribes its intertextual nature. The appropriation and interpretation of past texts (the archival documents) entail in the historiographic work the use of language games which are not substantially different from those

through which parody and intertextuality function in literature. But the implicit comparison in *Libra* does not lead to any naïve equation that would negate the difference between historiography and fiction; it rather explores (as it points to the discursive nature of historical knowledge) the elements that generate instability and a plurality of meaning in it. Thus, to articulate the thematics of a novel that re-invents a historical episode in contemporary America around a critique of historical knowledge, can only produce an intense self-irony.

Consequently, DeLillo's novel, like most of the postmodern narratives, does not confine its thematization of historical knowledge within the epistemological sphere. The issue of knowledge is always brought to the domain of aesthetics, and the critical pondering on the processes of historiography lead DeLillo's narrative to foreground the literary issue of parodic intertextuality. Therefore, Branch's handling of the Warren Report as an archetypal text (like the archetype of the parodist; "the twenty-six volumes haunt him [182]") becomes an ironic reminder of the fictionality of the historian-surrogate: Branch's link to the historical text of the Report is defined by the terms of literary parody. Thus, the historiographic text that Nicholas Branch is struggling to produce (and that exists only as a fictional theme) condenses the ironic play of self-mirroring throughout DeLillo's narrative. The game of self-mirroring; the narrative producing its own ironic double in the process of story-telling, has become substantial to the poetics of American postmodern fiction, and often entails a critical pondering on the terms of the interaction between literary narrativity and the cultural discourses of knowledge, besides its implicit questioning of the limits of literary representation.

The dimension of literary self-referentiality in *Libra*, enacted in the ironic doubles of the narrative, joins a highlighting of the textuality of historical knowledge to a parodic form of the *Bildungsroman*.[6] DeLillo's narrative is structured around the overlapping of two plot lines: the evolution of the conspiracy to assassinate Kennedy (with the proleptic scenes of Branch struggling to write the historical account of the event) and the life-story of Lee Oswald from his early childhood in New Orleans to his

6 The parody is based on the fictionalizing of a historical figure; Oswald, who was a key figure in the assassination of Kennedy, is turned into the center of the re-invented *Bildungsroman* (as one axis or plot line in *Libra*). Part of the novel's irony is that DeLillo's fictionalizing competes with the equally fictitious accounts of Oswald produced by the mass media.

own assassination. As the two axes (history and fictional biography) that inform the structure of *Libra* crystallize in Lee Oswald's "Historic Diary" (149-156), they allow the ironic double of the narrative to foreground the problematic nature of representation in relation to both historiography and fiction writing. Oswald's naïve assumption about an unpolemical continuity between the historical moment he is involved in (he is part of the military and intelligence machinery and becomes the agent of the assassination scheme) and his life story (as ex-marine and ex-spy in Russia) leads to an absurd magnification of his private life (perceiving every aspect of it as "historic"). The historical information in his writings is consequently subverted, disfigured by his tendency to subordinate it to his obsession with his life-story as historically significant (149), and even by his dream of becoming a writer of "short stories on contemporary American life" (160).

The ironic inadequacy of Oswald's attempt to write history through the lenses of his "autobiography" implies a critique of the dominant orientation in the traditional forms of fiction writing, especially in the *Bildungsroman*, towards re-inventing and fictionalizing historical data or information in the light of the novel's thematics. The result is not only a deliberate confusion of the fictionality of the protagonist's life story with the historicity of the narrative's framing world, but also an ideologically-oriented interpretation of the historical knowledge incorporated in the fiction. What the postmodern metafictional critique implies, however, is not the possibility of avoiding such fusion of the knowledge with the ideological orientation of its use in fiction; it rather urges the need to self-consciously assume the fusion (and the confusion!) that inevitably takes place with every fictional narrative. In addition, the absurdity of Oswald's assertion of a continuity between his life-story and the historical knowledge to which he contributes, implies an ironic pointing to another aspect of the condition of knowledge in postmodernity. According to Lyotard, again, what marks the postmodern condition is the rupture between the circulation of knowledge and the development (or "formation"; *Bildung*) of the individual mind (*Postmodern Condition* 4, 29). The old principle that used to link the acquisition of knowledge to the "formation of the personality of the individual self" has become irrelevant since postmodern culture tends to recast the status and functioning of knowledge within the logic of commodity exchange ("knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold," *Postmodern Condition* 4).

Such split between the thematics of knowledge and the traditional novelistic concern with the development of the human self or mind, is one of the most significant forms of rupture that postmodern fictional writing has installed within the poetics of the novel genre. As will be demonstrated in the next part, the polemical use of psychoanalysis reinforces such aesthetics of rupture in the American fiction.

The Polemical Status of Psychoanalysis in American Postmodern Fiction

The paradoxical implementation and questioning of scientific knowledge, typical of American postmodern fiction, is significantly illustrated by the polemical status attributed to psychoanalysis. As with its problematic handling of historical knowledge, its critical attitude towards psychoanalysis is doubly anchored in scepticism about the discourses of knowledge characteristic of postmodern thought, and in an aesthetic concern with a recasting of the poetics of narrative fiction on the basis of a deconstruction of conventional psychic characterization and of psychic depth. The paradoxical attitude towards psychoanalysis in many of the American fictional narratives assumes, however, a more pronounced intensity (than is its handling of historiography), partly because the tendency of such narratives is to rely on psychoanalytic concepts in its dismantling of conventional psychic characterization and of conventional forms of narrative coherence. Actually, the intensity of the paradox could be described with reference to the vacillation of many postmodern fictional narratives between Freudian psychoanalysis and the more problematical Lacanian theory with its focus on instability, provisionality of identity, and its problematization of the very concept of subjectivity.[7]

Part of the ambiguity that informs the status of psychoanalysis in American postmodern fiction, emanates from the fact that many fictional narratives hesitate between the critique of the psychological realism consecrated by modernist fiction (the uncritical implementation of psychoanalytical knowledge in literary narratives in ways that maintain the tradition of realism) and the questioning of the scientific discipline as

7 Such vacillation which could be noticed when one considers the differences between some of the postmodern narratives like John Hawkes's and Thomas Pynchon's, nuances Linda Hutcheon's assumption about a "stable" complicity between the postmodern aesthetic practices and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory (see *A Poetics* 53).

such. In both cases, the postmodern narrative does not claim to go beyond the major psychoanalytic concepts that have been informing our thought about subjectivity and the human self since the beginning of the twentieth century. It rather explores the possibilities offered by psychoanalytic knowledge to implement non-realistic forms of literary representation: to dismantle the conventional illusionist effect and experiment with the mimetic impulse of fiction from without the traditional forms of literary realism.

In the fiction of John Hawkes, for instance, it is often the parodic mode that channels an ironic questioning of the modernist narrative's psychic thematics. In novels like *The Lime Twig* or *The Passion Artist* the oedipal theme is confined to the surface of the narrative and is mechanically deduced by the narrator, so that the conventional psychic depth of the modernist novel is ironically denied. Hawkes's parodic handling of the conventional psychological themes of modernist fiction underrates a new literary sensibility rooted in the aesthetics of paradox (a sensibility that Hawkes contributed a great deal to install in the American literary scene, as Marc Chénetier in *Beyond Suspicion* points out [155]). Thus, at the same time as the parodic mode in the fiction of Hawkes ironically subverts the modernist thematics of psychic depth and complex characterization, it sustains the "verbal and psychological coherence" pursued by the novelist. In the opening of *The Lime Twig*, the irony produced by the articulation of the oedipal theme as part of the narrative's surface assigns to it a mechanical quality. In William Hencher's reminiscence of the past tragic death of his mother in the fire, the narrator's oedipal longing for the mother ("mother and son in a single robe" [15]) enacts an ironic repetition of a traditional psychological theme (the irony emanates from the mechanical quality that informs the presentation of the oedipal theme throughout Hencher's story-telling).[8] But the same ironic perversion of the conventional effects of depth and complexity traditionally associated with the oedipal theme, allows the parodic version of the psychic theme to enhance the subversion of the verisimilitude of the scene of the fire. In *The Lime Twig*, the oedipal theme itself is not the "serious" message of Hencher's narrated past life, but it is the force that generates the perversity of his narrative point of view (the tragic scene of the mother trying to escape from the fire is consequently

8 This mechanical quality emanates, for instance, from Hencher's reference to his mother as "my girl," his simplistic comparisons ("I loved Mother in the same way" 9).

presented within the terms of an erotic scene). The incongruity of the narrator's perception of the tragic scene as an erotic one offers the reader a glimpse into the irrationality and chaos of the libidinal content of the unconscious, while the free-floating eruption of the chaotic unconscious in the process of story-telling itself allows the narrative to dismantle the conventional illusionist effect.

Actually, Hawkes's *The Lime Twig* illustrates an important tendency in American postmodern fiction to make a different appeal to psychoanalysis. Unlike the modernists' reliance on psychoanalysis for the sake of enhancing new aesthetic forms that would renew the tradition of realism (the stream-of-consciousness novel), the American postmodern fiction appeals to the psychoanalytic concepts that would not perpetuate the conventional forms of narrative coherence and complexity and their related effect of the human-like. It implements the notions of the unconscious, the dream-world, the death-impulse, to create narratives in which meaningfulness depends on poetic structure and on the sustained deconstruction of conventional characterization. This may account for Pierre Gault's comment: "Hawkes joue avec Freud, mais il ne peut pas s'en passer" (104), which summarizes the critic's pertinent description of the paradoxical relation that the Hawkesian narratives maintain with Freudian psychoanalysis through the terms of intertextual play and deliberate contest.[9]

This paradoxical strategy, appealing to psychoanalysis to deconstruct the psychological realism of fictional character, manifests itself, in the tendency of such narratives like *The Lime Twig* and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, to dissociate the "play" of psychic mechanism from the process of character portrayal, a process that is reduced to the minimum or is repeatedly subverted through the pervasive presence of clownish, comic figures. In *The Lime Twig*, Michael's and Margaret's entrapment in the violence of the dream-world (the violence of the death-instinct) is displayed in the dream-like structure of the narrative; not in their characterization. The chaotic drives of Eros and Thanatos inform the surrealistic fictional world with its confusing structure of overlapping scenes of violent death and sexual orgy. The characters themselves are maintained within a deliberate

9 What is contested by the Hawkesian narrative, according to Gault, is the assumption in Freudian psychoanalysis, about the discovery of a hidden truth and so the possible return to ordered meaningfulness (104).

flatness often reinforced by the comic awkwardness of their excessively incongruent responses to situations of extreme violence or suffering. This had often confused critics, or has taken them simultaneously in different directions, when trying to establish the significance of the psychoanalytic material and motifs used by Hawkes.[10] The comic incongruity which is typical of the Hawkesian characters (Margaret and Michael in *The Lime Twig*, Skipper in *Second Skin*, etc.) blocks the possibility for the intensively used psychic material to assign to the characters any conventional "inner" experience or complex "self."

Consequently, the aesthetics of surface emanate from this deconstruction of psychic depth and complexity. The ordering consciousness, within the fictional world of the postmodern narrative, remains lacking, and so does the image of the characters as human-like, complex entities. Some critics have linked the aesthetics of surface in American postmodern fiction to its deliberate attitude of "open[ing] itself up to the play of mass-cultural surfaces as a way of enacting a thoroughgoing skepticism regarding foundational modes of truth and representation" (Simmons 3). This may be illustrated by the parodic repetition of the popular thriller plot in *The Lime Twig* and the equally subversive use of the thriller motifs in DeLillo's *Libra*. In Hawkes's novel, the paradoxical appeal to psychoanalytic knowledge joined to the sustained parody of the detective and hard-boiled story, reinforce an unsolved problematization of the very possibility of "knowing" the human self and motives. In DeLillo's novel, *Libra*, as seen earlier, the thriller motifs support a questioning of the articulation of historical knowledge. The deliberate investment of the surfaces consecrated by the media of mass culture allows the American postmodern narrative to inscribe its aesthetics within a skeptical spirit that questions both mass culture (through the prevalent irony and satire) and the poetics of fiction.

In Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, the irrationality of the dream mechanism informs the parodic orientation that the picaresque

10 See Robert Scholes's comment on the excessive black humor produced by Margaret's thoughts in the scene of her beating and slow killing by a gang member. When accounting for that surrealistic scene, Scholes hesitates between the focus on the parody of de Sade's *Justine* (182) implied in the scene, and the assertion of the novel's pursuit of a balance between conventional plot on the one hand and the requirement of poetic structure on the other (*Fabulation and Metafiction* 178-189).

form assumes all along Oedipa's quest. The mechanisms of displacement and substitution operate at a purely structural level to subvert the conventional pattern of the journey and the quest motif,[11] while the link between those mechanisms and the "protagonist"s consciousness remains flat and superficial, because Oedipa's consciousness, in the first place, is fractured, dispersed in the discontinuous fragments of her experience. In addition, the notion of paranoia that frames all the forms of perception, deciphering, and comprehension in Pynchon's narrative is not associated with any conventional effect of psychic depth or complexity in the portrayal of Oedipa or any other character. The theme of paranoia is rather central to the novel's ironic revelation of the possibilities of knowledge in an American culture permeated by the conspiracy theories. Marc Chénetier has discussed the motif of paranoia in Pynchon's novels from the perspective of the significant link consecrated by American postmodern fiction between the possibilities of knowledge on the one hand and paranoia or hysteria on the other (123-124). Following Chénetier's argument, the pursuit of hypothetical, concealed truths binds the characters' quest in Pynchon's narratives with the writer's reflection upon the process of knowledge as one that depends on "forced connections, the logical reinforcements of paranoia as a way of knowing" (123).

The psychic themes are thus the tools for a metafictional critique and/or a satirical scrutiny; in either case they contribute primarily to the recasting of the poetics of narrative fiction from within the modes of literary self-questioning and through the sustained upsetting of the conventional forms of psychological realism. In Pynchon's novel, the issue of paranoia is joined to that of narcissistic self-centeredness, in order to subvert the verisimilitude of Oedipa's portrait. Oedipa's obsession with the mirror (like her paranoiac fear) does not allow the narrative to produce any psychological portrait in the conventional sense: the irrational scene of Oedipa perceiving "a beach ball with feet [23]" reflected in the full-

11 See for instance the scenes in chapter 2 when Oedipa's quest is first displaced as it is attributed to the travelling Baby Igor in the movie she watches on TV, and then it is associated with the accidental movement of the can of hair spray in the space of the room (24). In the first instance, the displacement highlights the element of fictionality (the implied parallel between the cinematic plot and the fictional one becomes an ironic reminder of the artifice that creates the quest in the narrative), while in the second the displacement (motion and "travelling" are attributed to the inanimate object of the can) enacts a grotesque distortion of the literary motif.

length mirror instead of her female body, invites the reader to interpret the mirror in relation to the non-realistic aesthetics of the narrative; not so much within the psychological thematics. The motif of narcissism acquires its relevance in the self-reflexivity of Pynchon's narrative that lays bare its own fictionality and, consequently, subverts the conventional "content" of the picaresque novel and the psychic depth (or complexity) of the fictional protagonist. Again, the epistemic dimension of the thematized psychoanalytic knowledge is subordinated to the issues of poetics.

Such subordination may appear more significantly in some American postmodern novels where the scientific discipline as such (that is psychoanalysis) is brought under scrutiny or is ironically questioned as in John Barth's early fiction (in particular *The End of the Road* (1958) and *Giles-Goat Boy* (1966)) or in Thomas Pynchon's novels. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, for instance, the comic image of the psychotherapist, Dr. Hilarius, who ends up losing his mental integrity and identifies himself as Freud's victim (93, 95), implies a questioning of Freudian psychoanalysis. As Dr. Hilarius ascribes his fall into insanity to the deceptive promises of the scientific discipline, he points to the contradictions of Freudian psychoanalysis, mainly its tendency to identify itself within the realm of narrativity and interpretation (that is, within the provisional) on the one hand, and its occasional fall into dogmatic, rigid assertions, on the other (see Schafer). Actually, in Pynchon's novel, the significance of the critical (satirical) comment on psychoanalysis is anchored in the narrative's systematic attempt to bind its psychic thematics to a deliberate dismantling of the conventionally meaningful "wholeness" of the subject, very much in a Lacanian fashion. Very often, the reader does not fail to notice the continuity in many American postmodern novels between the portrayal of characters who upset the conventional "roundness" and "wholeness" of fictional characterization, and the Lacanian deconstruction of the traditional notions of subjectivity and identity.[12]

The peculiar fusion of the metafictional critique with the questioning of the issue of knowledge maintains the theme of knowledge in postmodern American fiction half way between the epistemological scrutiny and the

12 For a detailed comment on Lacanian psychoanalysis in relation to ironic forms of literary narrative, see Gary J. Handwerk, *Irony and Ethics in Narrative: From Schlegel to Lacan*, 125- 171.

aestheticist orientation. This aspect of the paradox may be further illustrated by the sophisticated overlapping in some narratives of an ironic form of autobiographical fiction with a systematic problematization of historical and/or psychological knowledge. In Grace Paley's story "A Conversation with my Father," for instance, autobiographical narrativity is practiced and subverted through the deliberate equation (informing the whole narrative structure) of self-knowledge with self-fictionalization, while the two processes acquire a significance only within the activity of writing. The main scene in "A Conversation with My Father" of the daughter and father discussing the fictional writings of the former, situates both the literary form of autobiography and the Freudian paradigm of the "family romance" within a critical examination of the story's central theme: the "literariness" of self-writing. In his or her attempt to make meaningful deductions about the theme of the authorial self (the center of autobiographical narration), the reader depends totally on its traces produced by, and dispersed all along, the fictional fragments of an inserted story, invented by the daughter in order to "please" her father.

The ironic doubling, inside Paley's narrative,[13] of the inevitable fragmentation and dispersal of the subject of autobiographical narrativity (the inevitable recognition of absence which animates autobiography) does not only undermine the claim of self-knowledge. It also joins the questioning of the possibility of self-knowledge and self-presence to an implicit critique of the Freudian paradigm of the "family romance"; autobiographical narrativity, like the psychoanalytic model developed by Freud, cannot claim to lay down the path that would lead to a final or stable self-knowledge. The ironic situation of the writing daughter in Grace Paley's story, whose imagination seems to be informed by the Freudian description of the oedipal desire (not only does she write to "please" her father, but also her fictional story is about the complicity between a son and his mother) is that her autobiographical narrative could only develop through the generation of its own double inside the fictional world. The embedded story introduces the game of self-mirroring in the main narrative: the boy whose story revolves around his relationship with his mother, is also a writer (of newspaper articles), whose early life was marked by a discovery of artists and academic scientists. The irony of literary self-reflexivity in

13 I am pointing here to the story within the story: the quoted narrative produced by the protagonist of the framing, autobiographical story.

Paley's story sustains the parodic quality that autobiographical fiction has assumed in postmodern narrative: the continuous re-inauguration of story-telling within the embedded versions of the main narrative stands as an ironic reminder of the impossibility of any stable or final self-knowledge; as Tristram Shandy sums up the dilemma: "write as I will, and rush as I may into the middle of things . . . I shall never overtake myself" (207). What postmodern autobiographical writing can only represent is the *attempt*, the process itself of struggling through writing for self-knowledge.

This may further be elucidated by Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, a Chinese-American autobiographical novel in which the problematical status assigned to autobiography frames the complex mingling of the narrative's critique of historical knowledge (especially its articulation in historiographic narrativity) with the questioning of the possibilities of self-knowledge offered by the politics of "Western" feminism. The pursuit of self-knowledge is presented in Kingston's autobiographical novel as a process that depends on the deconstruction of the official discourses that distort historical and political facts into ideological propaganda (whether in China or America). But the rhetoric of "mythicizing" on which Kingston's narrative relies in that deconstruction, foregrounds the self-assumed fictionality of literary narrativity as the reliable context (different from the traditional notion of fiction's veracity) within which the pursuit of self-knowledge (not necessarily its achievement which often remains beyond the limits of narrative text) may be articulated. Throughout *The Woman Warrior*, the displacement (and the consequent dispersal) of the conventional center of autobiographical narrativity in a plurality of female figures mingles identity with otherness[14] (the mythical woman warrior, the mother, the historical and "mythicized" aunts) and dramatizes a literary sensibility that conceives of myth-making as the basis for the sceptical, self-ironic approach to the issue of self-knowledge, since self-knowledge is continuously challenged by the slippery divide between the fictionality of self-invention and the verifiability of the historical.

Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* has also been read by Fischer (208-210) as illustrating the possibilities of understanding ethnicity and

14 For a more detailed discussion of the subversive form of autobiography and its upsetting of dogmatic visions of culture, feminist activism, etc., see my "Writing the Self, Decentralizing the Self: Ethnic-Postmodern Autobiography in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," in *Texte. Revue de critique et de théorie littéraire* 41-42 (2007): 217- 234.

multiculturalism offered by ethnic autobiography, beyond the discourse of sociology and the limits of its cognitive language (196).

Conclusion: The Paradox of Metafiction: Demystifying or Problematizing Literary Knowledge?

What emerges from the previous discussion is that the critique in the American postmodern fiction of the forms of knowledge appropriated and implemented in literary writing ultimately foregrounds a metafictional, self-ironic concern, and consequently, crystallizes into a questioning of literary knowledge.

Actually, the question of literary knowledge has been directly associated, in recent studies, with the need to reconsider the function and the scope of significance of literary criticism. In a recent study of the pedagogical and epistemic implications of the polemical issue of literary knowledge in the Anglo-Saxon culture, Carol Atherton posits that the current debate about the study of English literature unveils a "'disciplinary anxiety': an uncertainty about the kind of knowledge to which literary criticism should lay claim, the usefulness of such knowledge . . . " (7).[15]

In American postmodern fiction, such concern with the very notion of literary knowledge is inevitably implied by the metafictional, metacritical axis of the narratives. The implicit literary critique implied in the self-ironic, self-questioning dimension of postmodern metafiction inevitably polemicizes the issue of literary knowledge by binding it to the activity of interpretation. Parody, and the various forms of subversive repetition of classical literary forms and texts, necessarily generate a questioning of the kind of knowledge transmitted (or claimed) in the various interpretive processes through which the fiction writer appropriates other (archetypal) texts. Equally questioned are the limits of the validity of that literary knowledge when articulated in such literary modes as parody and intertextuality.

Indeed, as could be deduced from the previous fictional narratives, parody is not only a major literary mode that binds the recasting of the poetics of fiction (in American postmodern fiction) to a re-examination of

15 Throughout her analysis, Atherton links the issue of literary knowledge to the debate about the study of English literature: whether it is academic enough to compete with the disciplines like history and the sciences.

the dialectical interaction between literary narrativity and the discourses of historical and scientific knowledge; it also brings to the foreground the very question of literary knowledge. As noted by Heide Ziegler, parody "require[s] the author and the reader to be (to a greater or lesser extent) connoisseurs of a certain literary tradition" (58). But this requirement does not make of the idea of "knowing" a literary tradition or a literary text an unproblematical matter; parody rather upsets, destabilizes such idea or claim of "knowing" when it points to its own interpretive processes. The issue of interpretation with its assertion of plurality and instability of meaning, and which is fully dramatized in the parodic games of postmodern fiction, can only render polemical the question of literary knowledge in the sense that it undermines the element of consensus (required for knowledge to acquire its authority as such). The ironic and self-ironic spirit of such fiction does not only illustrate its attitude of "cynical knowingness" (Hutcheon *Irony's Edge* 41) (knowing the extent of indeterminacy and instability of all forms of knowledge); it also consolidates the aesthetics of surface through the continuous sliding of meaning in the overlapping between the language games of literary narrativity with those of historiography and psychoanalysis, among other discourses of knowledge.

Finally, the choice in this work of a narrative like DeLillo's *Libra*, together with Grace Paley's short story, may give us a glimpse at a point of encounter between the two major tendencies in postmodern fiction: minimalism and encyclopaedic narrativity. It is the implied critique of knowledge in both tendencies that creates that point of encounter. Minimalism has already been described as carrying an assertion of the apocalyptic; an inevitable movement towards silence that entraps the process of literary writing. As suggested by Philip Simmons, minimalist fiction's "concern with inarticulateness and silence" manifests itself in its focus on the lack of self-knowledge, the failure to understand situations (110,111). Part of the irony in much of the American postmodern fiction (novels like *Libra* or also Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, among others in the postmodern literary scene) is that its encyclopedic quality, just like the minimalist tendency, highlights the problem of knowledge in a world that continuously challenges the possibility of a global grasp. As pointed out by Chénetier, "the excesses of form" generated by the experimental orientation of American postmodern fiction "bear witness to the problems

of [knowledge] in a world that defies global understanding" (133).[16] Thus, in its critique of the processes of representation on which knowledge and literary narrativity both rely, postmodern fiction does not give up the mimetic impulse of literature; it rather reshapes it in response to the aestheticist orientation with which it faces the epistemological crisis.

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16 In the French original: "Les excès de la forme rendent compte des problèmes de la connaissance dans un monde qui défie les saisies globales" (*Au-delà du soupçon*, Paris : Seuil, 1989, 186-87); however in the English translation "connaissance" is inadequately translated by "consciousness."

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