Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction* falls into the category of literary criticism and focuses on conceptualizing and defining the philosophical terrain of what might be called “postmodernist fiction.” As McHale acknowledges, his text is a one-idea book whose argument may be summarized as follows: while modernist texts largely foreground and explore epistemological concerns, which are “cognitive questions” regarding the limits of knowledge and the status of knowers, postmodernist narratives engage the questions of ontology. That is, they deal with “postcognitive” inquiries regarding the mode of existence of the world’s texts project. He calls each mode of writing respectively “modernist epistemological poetics” and “postmodernist ontological poetics.”

Drawing upon Dick Higgins’ concept of “cognitive” and “postcognitive” inquiries from *A Dialectic of Centuries*, McHale poses several questions that can help us understand his notion of modernist texts that engage in epistemological pursuits: *How can I interpret this world which I am part of? What is there to be known? Who knows it? What are the limits of the knowable. How is knowledge transmitted?* On the other hand, questions that foreground ontological concerns are: *What is a world? Which of my selves is to do it? What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted? What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?* Even though McHale suggests that postmodern texts privilege ontological issues, he acknowledges that issues of epistemology do not simply disappear from postmodernist texts. In fact, while resisting the confines of binary hierarchies, he claims that epistemological considerations are still present as a background for the questions of ontology. Both epistemological and ontological concerns cannot be easily separated, for they function in texts in bidirectional, nonlinear ways.

McHale acknowledges that postmodernism is a problematic term, often perceived in the context of negative associations because, as some critics have argued, the prefix “post” suggests the impossibility of defining postmodernism in its own terms. In his numerous citations, McHale also makes a
reference to Richard Kostelanetz, who asserts: “No genuine avant-garde artist would want to be ‘post’ anything.” Hence the often heard charge that postmodernism cannot be thought of as an “original” aesthetic movement. McHale, however, does not see the prefix “post” as a suggestion of some internal flaw embedded in the notion of postmodernism. Instead, as a “discursive construct,” postmodernism signifies temporality after the modernist movement, and, he argues, “post” in this context indicates historicity. Therefore, the “post” in postmodernism should not be conceptualized as “post modern,” but “post modernism.” In other words, he claims that postmodernist poetics should be considered “a poetics which is the successor of, or possibly a reaction against, the poetics of early twentieth-century modernism” and a posterity of modernism.

Drawing on the discussions of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, McHale posits the notion that postmodernist fiction might be best understood as “polyphonic” poetics which, through its self-conscious interest in heteroglossia, foregrounds the interweaving of various discourses and ideologies. Unlike, for example, The Waste Land, which at first glance might appear heteroglossic but is not because it strives to “integrate the multiple worlds of discourse into a single ontological plane,” he argues, postmodernist fiction highlights the heteroglossic nature of discourse to disrupt the idea of a monological discursive world. Some of the postmodern authors whose literary texts McHale discusses as pertinent examples to his theory are, among others, Angela Carter, Ishmael Reed, Salman Rushdie, E. L. Doctorow, Vladimir Nabokov, and Jerzy Kosinski.

As you read this selection, consider these three questions: Explore McHale’s notion of “postmodernist fiction.” Why, according to McHale, is postmodernism a problematic term? What is his definition of postmodernism? Analyze McHale’s idea of “postmodernist ontological poetics.”

PART ONE: PRELIMINARIES

The Cognitive Questions (asked by most artists of the 20th century, Platonist or Aristotelian, till around 1958):
“How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?”
The Postcognitive Questions (asked by most artists since then):
“Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?”
(Dick Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries*, 1978)

**From Modernist To Postmodernist Fiction:**

**Change Of Dominant**

I don’t think the ideas were “in the air” . . . rather, all of us found ourselves at the same stoplights in different cities at the same time. When the lights changed, we all crossed the streets.
(Steve Katz, in LeClair and McCaffery [eds], *Anything Can Happen*, 1983)

“Postmodernist”? Nothing about this term is unproblematic, nothing about it is entirely satisfactory. It is not even clear who deserves the credit—or the blame—for coining it in the first place: Arnold Toynbee? Charles Olson? Randall Jarrell? There are plenty of candidates. But whoever is responsible, he or she has a lot to answer for.

“Postmodernist”? Nobody *likes* the term. “Post,” grouses Richard Kostelanetz,

is a petty prefix, both today and historically, for major movements are defined in their own terms, rather than by their relation to something else. . . . No genuine avant-garde artist would want to be “post” anything.

John Barth finds the term awkward and faintly epigonic, suggestive less of a vigorous or even interesting new direction in the old art of storytelling than of something anti-climactic, feebly following a very hard act to follow.

And even more pungently, the term “postmodernist,” for Charles Newman, “inevitably calls to mind a band of vainglorious contemporary artists following the circus elephant’s of Modernism with snow shovels.” Nobody likes the term, yet people continue to prefer it over the even less satisfactory alternatives that have occasionally been proposed (such as Federman’s “Surfiction,” or Klinkowitz’s “Post-Contemporary fiction”). And it becomes more and more difficult to avoid using it.
“Postmodernism”? The term does not even make sense. For if “modern” means “pertaining to the present,” then “post-modern” can only mean “pertaining to the future,” and in that case what could postmodernist fiction be except fiction that has not yet been written? Either the term is a solecism, or this “post” does not mean what the dictionary tells us it ought to mean, but only functions as a kind of intensifier. “In a world which values progress,” says John Gardner, “‘post-modern’ in fact means New! Improved!”; and Christine Brooke-Rose says that “it merely means moderner modern (mostmodernism?).”

“Postmodernist”? Whatever we may think of the term, however much or little we may be satisfied with it, one thing is certain: the referent of “postmodernism,” the thing to which the term claims to refer, does not exist. It does not exist, however, not in Frank Kermode’s sense, when he argues that so-called postmodernism is only the persistence of modernism into a third and fourth generation, thus deserving to be called, at best, “neomodernism.” Rather, postmodernism, the thing, does not exist precisely in the way that “the Renaissance” or “romanticism” do not exist. There is no postmodernism “out there” in the world any more than there ever was a Renaissance or a romanticism “out there.” These are all literary-historical fictions, discursive artifacts constructed either by contemporary readers and writers or retrospectively by literary historians. And since they are discursive constructs rather than real-world objects, it is possible to construct them in a variety of ways, making it necessary for us to discriminate among, say, the various constructions of romanticism, as A. O. Lovejoy once did. Similarly we can discriminate among constructions of postmodernism, none of them any less “true” or less fictional than the others, since all of them are finally fictions. Thus, there is John Barth’s postmodernism, the literature of replenishment; Charles Newman’s postmodernism, the literature of an inflationary economy; Jean-François Lyotard’s postmodernism, a general condition of knowledge in the contemporary informational regime; Ihab Hassan’s postmodernism, a stage on the road to the spiritual unification of humankind; and so on. There is even Kermode’s construction of postmodernism, which in effect constructs it right out of existence.

Just because there are many possible constructions of postmodernism, however, this does not mean that all constructs are equally interesting or valuable, or that we are unable to choose among them. Various criteria for preferring one construction of postmodernism over the others might be proposed—the criterion of self-consistency and internal coherence, for instance.
Or the criterion of scope: postmodernism should not be defined so liberally that it covers all modes of contemporary writing, for then it would be of no use in drawing distinctions, but neither should it be defined too narrowly. (If there is no true postmodernist poet except Paul Celan, as someone once proposed to me, then why not simply talk about the poetics of Paul Celan and eliminate this distracting term “postmodernism” altogether?) Another criterion might be productiveness: a superior construction of postmodernism would be one that produces new insights, new or richer connections, coherence of a different degree or kind, ultimately more discourse, in the form of follow-up research, new interpretations, criticisms and refinements of the construct itself, counter-proposals, refutations, polemics. Above all, a superior construction of postmodernism would be one that satisfied the criterion of interest. If as literary historians we construct the objects of our description (“the Renaissance,” “romanticism,” “postmodernism”) in the very act of describing them, we should strive at the very least to construct interesting objects. Naturally I believe that the fiction of postmodernism which I have constructed . . . is a superior construction. I have tried to make it internally consistent; I believe its scope is appropriate, neither indiscriminately broad nor unhelpfully narrow; and I hope it will prove to be both productive and interesting.

“Postmodernist”? Since we seem to be saddled with the term, whether we like it or not, and since postmodernism is a discursive construct anyway, why not see if we can make the term itself work for us, rather than against us, in constructing its referent? Ihab Hassan helps us move in this direction when he prints the term so as to emphasize its prefix and suffix:

POSTmodernISM

This ISM (to begin at the end) does double duty. It announces that the referent here is not merely a chronological division but an organized system—a poetics, in fact—while at the same time properly identifying what exactly it is that postmodernism is post. Postmodernism is not post modern, whatever that might mean, but post modernism; it does not come after the present (a solecism), but after the modernist movement. Thus the term “postmodernism,” if we take it literally enough, à la lettre, signifies a poetics which is the successor of, or possibly a reaction against, the poetics of early twentieth-century modernism, and not some hypothetical writing of the future.

As for the prefix POST, here I want to emphasize the element of logical and historical consequence rather than sheer temporal posteriority.
Postmodernism follows from modernism, in some sense, more than it follows after modernism. If the statements from Richard Kostelanetz, John Barth, and Charles Newman are any indication, it is this POST that has most bothered people about the term “postmodernism.” It need not have. After all, the presence of the prefix post in literary nomenclature—or of pre, for that matter—merely signals the inevitable historicity of all literary phenomena. Every literary-historical moment is post some other moment, just as it is pre some other moment, though of course we are not in the position to say exactly what it is pre—what it precedes and prepares the way for—except retrospectively, while we are always able to say, in principle, what it is post—what it is the posterity of. Postmodernism is the posterity of modernism—this is tautological, just as saying that pre-romanticism is the predecessor of romanticism would be tautological. But there is more than mere tautology to the relation between modernism and postmodernism if we can construct all argument about how the posterior phenomenon emerges from its predecessor—about, in other words, historical consequentiality.

To capture this consequentiality, the POST of POSTmodernISM—which is this . . . primary objective—we need a tool for describing how one set of literary forms emerges from a historically prior set of forms. That tool can be found in the Russian formalist, concept of the dominant, to which I now turn.

THE DOMINANT

Jurij Tynjanov probably deserves the credit for this concept, but it is best known to us through a lecture of Roman Jakobson’s, dating from 1935. I quote from the 1971 English translation:

The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure . . . a poetic work [is] a structured system, a regularly ordered hierarchical set of artistic devices. Poetic evolution is a shift in this hierarchy. . . . The image of . . . literary history substantially changes; it becomes incomparably richer and at the same time more monolithic, more synthetic and ordered, than were the membri disjecta of previous literary scholarship.

“Hierarchical”? “Monolithic”? To pre-empt the deconstruction that such deterministic and imperialistic language, with its overtones of power and coercion, seems to call for, let me try to salvage Jakobson’s dominant for my
own uses by deconstructing it a bit myself. Or rather, let me observe that Jakobson has in effect already deconstructed it somewhat himself.

Despite his claim about the monolithic character of a literary history organized in terms of a series of dominants, Jakobson’s concept of the dominant is in fact plural. In this brief but typically multifaceted lecture, Jakobson applies his concept of the dominant not only to the structure of the individual literary text and the synchronic and diachronic organization of the literary system, but also to the analysis of the verse medium in general (where rhyme, meter, and intonation are dominant at different historical periods), of verbal art in general (where the aesthetic function is a transhistorical dominant), and of cultural history (painting is the dominant art-form of the Renaissance, music the dominant of the romantic period, and so on). Clearly, then, there are many dominants, and different dominants may be distinguished depending upon the level, scope, and focus of the analysis. Furthermore, one and the same text will, we can infer, yield different dominants depending upon what aspect of it we are analyzing: as an example of verse, it is dominated by one or other of the historical dominants of verse; as an example of verbal art, its aesthetic function is dominant; as a document of a particular moment in cultural history, it is dominated by its period’s dominant; as a unique text-structure, it possesses its own unique dominant; and so on. In short, different dominants emerge depending upon which questions we ask of the text, and the position from which we interrogate it.

Having defused somewhat the overly deterministic implications of Jakobson’s language, we can now see, I think, what kinds of advantages the concept of the dominant offers. Many of the most insightful and interesting treatments of postmodernist poetics have taken the form of more or less heterogeneous catalogues of features—the membra disjecta of literary scholarship, as Jakobson calls them. While such catalogues do often help us to begin ordering the protean variety of postmodernist phenomena, they also beg important questions, such as the question of why these particular features should cluster in this particular way—in other words, the question of what system might underlie the catalogue—and the question of how in the course of literary history one system has given way to another. These questions cannot be answered without the intervention of something like a concept of the dominant.

Catalogues of postmodernist features are typically organized in terms of oppositions with features of modernist poetics. Thus, for instance, David Lodge lists five strategies (contradiction, discontinuity, randomness, excess,
short circuit) by which postmodernist writing seeks to avoid having to choose either of the poles of metaphoric (modernist) or metonymic (anti-modernist) writing. Ihab Hassan gives us seven modernist rubrics (urbanism, technologism, dehumanization, primitivism, eroticism, antinomianism, experimentalism), indicating how postmodernist aesthetics modifies or extends each of them. Peter Wellen, writing of cinema, and without actually using either of the terms “modernist” and “postmodernist,” proposes six oppositions (narrative transitivity vs. intransitivity, identification vs. foregrounding, single vs. multiple diegesis, closure vs. aperture, pleasure vs. unpleasure, fiction vs. reality) which capture the difference between Godard’s counter-cinema (paradigmatically postmodernist, in my view) and the poetics of “classic” Hollywood movies. And Douwe Fokkema outlines a number of compositional and semantic conventions of the period code of postmodernism (such as inclusiveness, deliberate indiscriminateness, nonselection or quasi-nonselection, logical impossibility), contrasting these generally with the conventions of the modernist code. In all these cases, the oppositions tend to be piecemeal and unintegrated; that is, we can see how a particular postmodernist feature stands in opposition to its modernist counterpart, but we cannot see how postmodernist poetics as a whole stands in opposition to modernist poetics as a whole, since neither of the opposed sets of features has been interrogated for its underlying systematicity. Nor can we see how the literary system has managed to travel from the state reflected in the catalogue of modernist features to the state reflected in the postmodernist catalogue: these are static oppositions, telling us little or nothing about the mechanisms of historical change.

Enter the dominant. With the help of this conceptual tool, we can both elicit the systems underlying these heterogeneous catalogues, and begin to account for historical change. For to describe change of dominant is in effect to describe the process of literary-historical change. Here is Jakobson again:

In the evolution of poetic form it is not so much a question of the disappearance of certain elements and the emergence of others as it is the question of shifts in the mutual relationship among the diverse components of the system, in other words, a question of the shifting dominant. Within a given complex of poetic norms in general, or especially within the set of poetic norms valid for a given poetic genre, elements which were originally secondary become essential and primary. On the other hand, the elements which were originally the dominant ones become subsidiary and optional.
If we interrogate modernist and postmodernist texts with a view to eliciting the shifts in the hierarchy of devices—remembering, of course, that a different kind of inquiry would be likely to yield a different dominant—then what emerges as the dominat of modernist fiction? of postmodernist fiction?

Let us try out our tool on Douwe Fokkema’s formulation of the period code of modernism, taking as our exemplary modernist text William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), a high-water mark of modernist poetics. According to Fokkema, the compositional and syntactical conventions of the modernist code include textual indefiniteness or incompleteness, epistemological doubt, metalingual skepticism, and respect for the idiosyncrasies of the reader. Its semantic aspects are organized around issues of epistemological doubt and metalingual self-reflection. All of these conventions, with the possible exception of the convention of respecting the reader’s idiosyncrasies (which seems to me a poor and debatable formulation), are reflected in *Absalom, Absalom!* The story of the rise and fall of the Sutpen dynasty comes down to Quentin Compson and his room-mate Shreve in a state of radical incompleteness and indefiniteness—“a few old mouth old mouth-to-mouth tales,” as Quentin’s father says, “letters without salutation or signature”—its indefiniteness only heightened by the successive interpretations imposed upon it by biased or underinformed or otherwise unreliable informants (Mr. Compson, Miss Rosa Coldfield, ultimately Thomas Sutpen himself). At the later stages in this chain of unreliable transmission, if not at its earlier stages, epistemological doubt and metalingual skepticism are insistently thematized. The rhetoric of Miss Rosa Coldfield, one of the few surviving parties to the events, may seem free from doubt (although for her, too, there are impenetrable mysteries), but that of Mr. Compson is permeated by doubt and skeptical self-reflection:

It’s just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that’s it: they don’t explain and we are not supposed to know. . . . we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting, in this shadowy attenuation of time possessing now heroic proportions, performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable—Yes, Judith, Bon, Henry, Sutpen: all of them. They are there, yet something is missing; they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from the forgotten chest, carefully, the paper old and faded and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense, the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces; you bring them together in the proportions called for, but noth-
ing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens: just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene, against the turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs.

And if it is not perhaps very satisfactory to say that Faulkner’s modernist text respects its reader’s idiosyncrasies (whatever that might mean), we can certainly say that it deeply implicates its reader in its own preoccupations, “transferring” to him or her (almost in the psychoanalysts’ sense) the same problems of reconstructing a coherent story from a radically indefinite and doubtful text that beset its own characters. Mr. Compson’s account of reading and re-reading the doubtful texts of the Sutpen story is, in short, a mise-en-abyme, applying to the reader of Absalom, Absalom! as much as it does to the readers in Absalom, Absalom!

So far so good: there is demonstrably a close fit between Fokkema’s formulation of the modernist code and Faulkner’s actual practice in Absalom, Absalom! But what is the dominant that “rules, determines, and transforms” the components of this text, guaranteeing the integrity of its structure? Or, to put it differently, what is the common denominator of the conventions which constitute Fokkema’s modernist code? This seems self-evident, so much so that it is surprising that Fokkema has not identified it explicitly himself. Fokkema’s modernist code is a follow-the-dots puzzle, with every dot in its place and properly numbered, and all that remains for us to do is draw the connecting line in order for the dominant to emerge.

I will formulate it as a general thesis about modernist fiction: the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological. That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as those mentioned by Dick Higgins in my epigraph: “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?” Other typical modernist questions might be added: What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable? And so on.

I think there can be no doubt that Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!, for example, has been designed to raise just such epistemological questions. Its logic is that of a detective story, the epistemological genre par excellence.
Faulkner’s protagonists, like characters in many classic modernist texts—Henry James’s and Joseph Conrad’s, for instance—sift through the evidence of witnesses of different degrees of reliability in order to reconstruct and solve a “crime”—except that in Faulkner’s case the quotation-marks can be dropped from around the word crime, for there really is a murder-mystery to be solved here. Absalom foregrounds such epistemological themes as the accessibility and circulation of knowledge, the different structuring imposed on the “same” knowledge by different minds, and the problem of “unknowability” or the limits of knowledge. And it foregrounds these themes through the use of characteristically modernist (epistemological) devices: the multiplication and juxtaposition of perspectives, the focalization of all the evidence through a single “center of consciousness” (the character Quentin), virtuoso variants on interior monologue (especially in the case of Miss Rosa), and so on. Finally, in a typically modernist move, Absalom transfers the epistemological difficulties of its characters to its readers; its strategies of “impeded form” (dislocated chronology, withheld or indirectly-presented information, difficult “mind-styles,” and so on) simulate for the reader the very same problems of accessibility, reliability, and limitation of knowledge that plague Quentin and Shreve.

So Faulkner in Absalom, Absalom! practices a poetics of the epistemological dominant—modernist poetics, in other words. Except perhaps in one chapter, where modernist poetics threatens to break down, or more than threatens, actually does break down. In Chapter 8, Quentin and Shreve reach the limit of their knowledge of the Sutpen murder-mystery; nevertheless they go on, beyond reconstruction into pure speculation. The signs of the narrative act fall away, and with them all questions of authority and reliability. The text, passes from mimesis of the various characters’ narrations to unmediated diegesis, from characters “telling” to the author directly “showing” us what happened between Sutpen, Henry, and Bon. The murder-mystery is “solved,” however, not through epistemological processes of weighing evidence and making deductions, but through the imaginative projection of what could—and, the text insists, must—have happened. “Shall I project a world?” is Oedipa Maas’ anguished cry when faced by the absolute limits of her knowledge in Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 (1966). Quentin and Shreve project a world, apparently unanxiously. Abandoning the intractable problems of attaining to reliable knowledge of our world, they improvise a possible world; they fictionalize.

In short, Chapter 8 of Absalom, Absalom! dramatizes the shift of dominant from problems of knowing to problems of modes of being—from an
epistemological dominant to an ontological one. At this point Faulkner’s novel touches and perhaps crosses, the boundary between modernist and postmodernist writing.

This brings me to a second general thesis, this time about postmodernist fiction: the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological. That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls “post-cognitive”: “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on.

Equipped with this thesis about the ontological dominant of postmodernist fiction, we could now return to the various catalogues of features proposed by Lodge, Hassan, Wollen, and Fokkema, and if we did, we would find, I think, that most (if not quite all) of these features could easily be seen as strategies for foregrounding ontological issues. In other words, it is the ontological dominant which explains the selection and clustering of these particular features; the ontological dominant is the principle of systematicity underlying these otherwise heterogeneous catalogues.

Furthermore, once we have identified the respective dominants of the modernist and postmodernist systems, we are in a good position to begin describing the dynamics of the change by which one system emerges from and supplants the other. There is a kind of inner logic or inner dynamics—or so the case of Absalom, Absalom! strongly suggests—governing the change of dominant from modernist to postmodernist fiction. Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they “tip over” into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions—the sequence is not linear and unidirectional but bidirectional and reversible.

A philosopher might object that we cannot raise epistemological questions without immediately raising ontological questions, and vice versa, and of course he or she would be right. But even to formulate such an objection, the philosopher would have to mention one of these sets of questions before
the other set—inevitably, since discourse, even a philosopher’s discourse, is linear and temporal, and one cannot say two things at the same time. Literary discourse, in effect, only specifies which set of questions ought to be asked first of a particular text, and delays the asking of the second set of questions, slowing down the process by which epistemological questions entail ontological questions and vice versa. This in a nutshell is the function of the dominant: it specifies the order in which different aspects are to be attended to, so that, although it would be perfectly possible to interrogate a postmodernist text about its epistemological implications, it is more urgent to interrogate it about its ontological implications. In postmodernist texts, in other words, epistemology is backgrounded, as the price for foregrounding ontology.

Steve Katz said it better, and a good deal more pithily, in the remark I have cited as my epigraph. The logic of literary history brought writers in various cities—cities in Europe and Latin America as well as in North America—to a crosswalk; when the stoplights changed, they had one of two options, either to remain on this side and continue to practice a modernist poetics of the epistemological dominant (as many of them have done, of course), or to cross to a postmodernist poetics of the ontological dominant. The streets were different, but the crossing was the same.

Faulkner made that crossing in Chapter 8 of Absalom, Absalom! This is an isolated event in his oeuvre, however; he did not stay on the postmodernist side of the street, but quickly returned to the practice of modernism. So Faulkner is not very representative of the change that has occurred throughout western literature in the years since the Second World War. The change of dominant appears in its most dramatic form in writers who in the course of their careers travel the entire trajectory from modernist to postmodernist poetics, marking in successive novels different stages of the crossing. By way of substantiating my claims about the change of dominant, I have chosen to examine some of the more familiar contemporary writers of whom this is true: Samuel Beckett, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Carlos Fuentes, Vladimir Nabokov, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon.

**Worlds of Discourse**

*The novel is the expression of a Galilean perception of language, one that denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language—that is, that refuses to acknowledge its own language as the sole verbal and semantic center of the ideological universe.*

(Mixail Baxtin, “Discourse in the novel,” 1934–5)
The litany, or catalogue, is the only form of discourse of which Donald Barthelme’s Miss R. approves. But is the sort of litany she has in mind really a form of discourse at all, or is it rather a subversion of discourse, an antidis-course? Here is Miss R.’s own example of an “approved” discourse:

pewter
snake
tea
Fad #6 sherry
serviette
fenestration
crown
blue

Such a catalogue, we know, functions to disengage words from syntax, thus hindering the reconstruction of the projected world, and foregrounding the ontological difference between the stratum of words and the stratum of worlds. But it also has another function, for it forces us to reflect on the principles of selection and order that could have produced such a heterogeneous assemblage. Is this a word-list, and if so, what governed the selection of these words, and their arrangement in this particular order? Not alphabetization, or any of the other familiar ways of ordering a list of words. Or is it a collection of objects, and if so, why these particular objects? Miss R. herself is of little help in elucidating the underlying principles of her discourse: “I run to liquids and colors,” she says, but these categories account for no more than half the items.

The problem becomes more acute, and our disorientation even stronger, when a catalogue of Miss R.’s sort appears in a context which claims to be representational—for instance, when such a catalogue purports to describe a barricade thrown up against the marauding Indians:

I analyzed the composition of the barricade nearest me and found two ashtrays, ceramic, one dark brown and one dark brown with an orange blur at the lip; a tin frying pan; two-litre bottles of red wine; three-quarter-litre bottles of Black & White, aquavit, cognac, vodka, gin, Fad #6 sherry; a hollow-core door in birch veneer on black wrought-iron legs; a blanket, red-orange with faint blue stripes; a red pillow and a blue pillow; a woven straw wastebasket; two glass jars for flowers; corkscrews and can openers; two plates and two cups, ceramic, dark brown; a yellow-and-purple poster; a Yugoslavian carved flute, wood, dark brown; and other items.
This assemblage does not cohere either as discourse or as representation; order is conspicuous by its absence. No principle of selection can be proposed that would account for the make-up of this barricade—not even the principle of selecting items that could not plausibly be used in barricade-construction, since the catalogue does include a “hollow-core door,” which might plausibly serve in a barricade. But not in this barricade.

“The thing we apprehend in one great leap,” writes Michel Foucault:

the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that.

He is referring to the heterogeneous Chinese encyclopedia of Borges’ fable, but he might as well be talking about the impossible litanies of Barthelme’s “The Indian Uprising” (1978). What we learn from Barthelme’s litanies is the stark impossibility of thinking that—of thinking the order of things that could have generated such an assemblage. Reflecting on the impossibility of such an order, we come also to reflect on the ideas of order which are possible for us to think. The form of discourse of which Miss R. approves is, in this sense, the “other” of our own familiar discourses, and reflecting on this unthinkable “other” makes us freshly aware of our own discourses, and of discursive ordering in general.

So perhaps we should say that Miss R.’s sort of litany is not a “form of discourse” at all, but rather a heterotopia, the disorder that is made up of fragments of a number of incommensurable orders. Like the heterotopian space of the zone, where incommensurable spaces are juxtaposed or superimposed, here discursive orders mingle promiscuously without gelling into any sort of overarching “super-order.” In fact, the world of “The Indian Uprising,” in which these assemblages appear, is itself a heterotopia. From moment to moment in the world of this text we undergo disorienting shifts among what Barthelme calls “situations”—in effect, shifts from one world to another:

Once I caught Kenneth’s coat going down the stairs by itself but the coat was a trap and inside a Comanche who made a thrust with his short, ugly knife at my leg which buckled and tossed me over the balustrade through a window and into another situation. Not believing that your body brilliant as it was and your fat, liquid spirit distinguished and angry as it was were stable quantities to which one could return on wires more than once, twice, or another number of times I said: “See the table?”
Abruptly, without the least motivation, we, along with Barthelme’s protagonist, are literally precipitated into a different world. And this other world in which we find ourselves is characterized by a different mode or genre of discourse; it is, in effect, this other mode of discourse, and the shift we have undergone is a shift between different discursive orders, different worlds of discourse.

Thus the heterotopian form of discourse, or antidiscourse, of which Miss R. approves, actually mirrors the global structure of “The Indian Uprising”: it functions as a scale-model of that global structure, a mise-en-abyme. Conversely, “The Indian Uprising,” in the global structure of its projected world, literalizes or realizes the uneasy juxtaposition of discourses that characterizes Miss R.’s litanies, turning incommensurable discourse into incommensurable worlds, and a discursive heterotopia into an ontological heterotopia. At both levels, that of global structure and that of structure en abyme, “The Indian Uprising” confronts us with the unthinkable “other” of our own familiar discourses, and forces us to reflect on the discursive order of things.

**DISCOURSE IN THE NOVEL**

Postmodernist fictions such as Donald Barthelme’s “The Indian Uprising” are fictions about the order of things, discourses which reflect upon the worlds of discourse. As such, they participate in that very general tendency in the intellectual life of our time toward viewing reality as constructed in and through our languages, discourses, and semiotic systems. Especially identified with Wittgenstein and linguistic philosophy, and more recently with Michel Foucault, this intellectual tendency is by now widely diffused throughout the so-called “human sciences.” Not everyone has been able to sympathize with postmodernist fiction’s role in this project of unmasking the constructed nature of reality, however. There is in some quarters considerable nostalgia for fiction in which the emphasis falls upon the order of things rather than upon the order of things—for, in other words, a mimetic fiction purporting to give direct access to extralinguistic and extratextual reality, and for a criticism willing to acknowledge the legitimacy of this claim, instead of suspiciously deconstructing it.

Among those who exhibit this nostalgia for unproblematic mimesis, Robert Alter is one of the most enlightened and most persuasive. “The attack on mimesis ultimately depends,” Alter writes, “on defining experience out of existence,” and so he sets about defending real-world experience from its
deconstructors. The word *tiger*, as everyone has known since Saussure, is a sign which acquires its meaning from the system of relations among the other signifiers and signifieds of the language; it is only conventionally and arbitrarily related, Alter concedes, to, “the real striped beast in the jungle.” *Tiger*, the word, may of course function in a text such as, for instance, Jorge Luis Borges’ “El otro tigre.” But this certainly does not mean that the real tiger has been textualized. The ontological status of the real tiger is unaffected by the textualization of the word *tiger*: “We are free to decenter, deconstruct, decode, re-encode a tiger in a text, but even the hardiest structuralist would not step inside the cage with the real beast, whose fangs and claws, after all, are more than a semiotic pattern.” And certain texts, “El otro tigre” among them, aspire to evoke the direct experience of that irrededucibly real, irrededucibly extra-textual tiger. These are the texts which we describe as mimetic.

Alter’s witty parable of the tiger makes a strong, commonsensical case for mimesis and the preconstructed nature of reality, but not an unanswerable one. The best answer might be formulated in terms of the by-now widely familiar poetics of the Russian literary theorist, Mixail Baxtin. In effect, Baxtin reminds us of how little the novel has historically been concerned with real-world experience on the order of Alter’s irrededucibly real tiger, and how much it has been concerned with human and social reality—reality that is first and foremost linguistic and discursive, reality experienced in and through discourse. In Baxtin’s view, the function of the novel, throughout its history, has been to represent that reality in all its polyphonic complexity, and not the tigerish reality which Alter is so intent on defending. Its purpose has been, we might say, to represent not the tiger but “the tiger”—“tiger” as a sign in human semiotic systems, one which changes as it passes from discourse to discourse, from speaker to speaker, becoming a miniature arena in which the dialogues between different voices and discourses are acted out. A mimetic theory of fiction, Baxtin’s theory is nevertheless unlikely to satisfy the nostalgia for unproblematic mimesis, for what the novel mimes, according to Baxtin, is social discourses, the vehicles of human social experience.

From the Baxtinian point of view, then, postmodernist fictions about the discursive order of things, such as Barthelme’s “The Indian Uprising,” only carry a step further the reflection upon discourse which has been characteristic of the novel throughout its history, merely giving an extra turn to the screw of discursive self-consciousness. Or perhaps, bearing in mind our
reading of Barthelme’s text, we ought to say that postmodernist fiction literalizes or realizes what in Baxtin is only a metaphor: the metaphor of “worlds” of discourse. Behind each discourse in the novel, as indeed behind each discourse in social life, we can, according to Baxtin, discern the ideological position or world-view which animates it and from which it emanates:

Every language in the novel is a point of view, a socio-ideological conceptual system of real social groups and their embodied representatives... any point of view on the world fundamental to the novel must be a concrete, socially embodied point of view, not an abstract, purely semantic position; it must, consequently, have its own language with which it is organically united. A novel is constructed not on abstract differences in meaning nor on merely narrative collisions, but on concrete social speech diversity.

Baxtin slips easily from the abstractions of “socio-ideological conceptual system” and “socially embodied point of view” to the convenient metaphor of “worlds”:

Actual social life and historical becoming create within an abstractly unitary national language a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems.

Baxtin himself comes close to literalizing his own metaphor when, in the passage I have cited as my epigraph, he speaks of the novel’s “Galilean perception of language”—Galilean as in Galileo, that is. Unlike the Ptolemaic, geocentric model of the universe which preceded him, and which he helped to unseat, Galileo perceived the universe as comprising a plurality of worlds. Similarly, the polyphonic novel, unlike monological genres, acknowledges and embraces a plurality of discourses and the ideologies and world-views associated with them. This is still metaphor, of course, but metaphor barely a step away from its literalization in the interplanetary motifs of science-fiction—or postmodernist fiction. To speak of “world-views,” and the juxtaposition or confrontation of world-views, is to speak in epistemological terms; to take the metaphor literally, projecting worlds which are the realizations of discursive world-views, is to convert an epistemological motif into an ontological one.

Baxtin has shown us how dialogue among discourses is a staple of all polyphonic novels. Postmodernist fiction, by heightening the polyphonic structure and sharpening the dialogue in various ways, foregrounds the ontological dimension of the confrontation among discourses, thus achieving a
polyphony of worlds.

**HETEROGLOSSIA**

“A novel is constructed,” Baxtin tells us, “not on abstract differences in meaning nor on merely narrative collisions, but on concrete social speech diversity.” The “concreteness” of this diversity of discourse is secured by using different repertoires of stylistic features, correlating with different situations or uses of language—what M. A. K. Halliday would call *registers*. The interweaving of different registers in the text of the novel produces the effect of *heteroglossia*, plurality of discourse; and it is this concrete heteroglossia which serves as the vehicle for the confrontation and dialogue among world-views and ideologies in the novel, its orchestrated *polyphony* of voices.

It is important to distinguish between the formal and stylistic heteroglossia of a text and its ideological polyphony, for heteroglossic texts are not inevitably polyphonic. Thus, for example, “classic” modernist texts such as *The Waste Land* or Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy are genuinely heteroglossic, juxtaposing and interweaving a variety of languages, styles, registers, genres, and intertextual citations; yet their heteroglossic form is held in check by a unifying monological perspective. Resisting the “pluralization” of worlds which is implicit in heteroglossia, modernist texts integrate the multiple worlds of discourse into a single ontological plane, a unified projected world. Or rather they *strive toward* such an integration and unification; for heteroglossia is not easily kept under control, and tends to exert a centrifugal counterpressure on the text. Eliot’s notorious notes to *The Waste Land* attest to the strength of this counterpressure. By drawing attention in his notes to the presence of his poem’s unifying mythic structure, Eliot seems to be trying to buttress it, to assert unity in the face of the text’s dis-integrative tendencies. Paradoxically, the notes actually tend to have the opposite effect, further complicating the already complicated form of the poem by introducing another genre of discourse—that of scholarly footnotes—and aggravating the text’s dis-integration by foregrounding the problem of its *boundaries* (do the notes stand inside or outside the text proper? what is the “text proper”?). Polyphony, in other words, is *inadvertent* in modernist writing, an unintended side-effect of heteroglossia. Postmodernism erects this inadvertence into a positive principle; the side-effect is shifted to the center. Instead of resisting centrifugal tendencies, postmodernist fiction seeks to enhance them. Heteroglossia is used here as an open-
ing wedge, a means of breaking up the unified projected world into a polyphony of worlds of discourse.

How heteroglossic diversity serves as an opening wedge for polyphony is suggested by Donald Barthelme in a comic parable from *Snow White* (1967). Here Jane writes a letter to a certain unfortunate Mr. Quistgaard, drawing his attention to the discontinuity between the “universe of discourse” he occupies and her own:

You and I, Mr. Quistgaard, are not in the same universe of discourse. You may not have been aware of it previously, but the fact of the matter is, that we are not. We exist in different universes of discourse. . . . It may never have crossed your mind to think that other universes of discourse distinct from your own existed, with people in them, discoursing. You may have, in a commonsense way, regarded your own u. of d. as a plenum, filled to the brim with discourse. You may have felt that what already existed was a sufficiency. People like you often do.

Jane threatens to introduce discourse from her own “universe of discourse” into Quistgaard’s universe, thus disrupting, in effect “pluralizing,” his monological world:

At any moment I can pierce your plenum with a single telephone call, simply by dialing 989-7777. You are correct, Mr. Quistgaard, in seeing this as a threatening situation. The moment I inject discourse from my u. of d. into your u. of d, the yourness of yours is diluted. The more I inject, the more you dilute. Soon you will be presiding over an empty plenum, or rather, since that is a contradiction in terms, over a former plenum, in terms of yourness. You are, essentially, in my power. I suggest an unlisted number.

There is a striking analogy between this “injection” of alien discourse into a closed, homogeneous world of discourse, and the fantastic motif of “another world’s intrusion into this one.” Much as the other-worldly spirits penetrate and seize the middle-class house in Cortázar’s fantastic story, “House Taken Over” (from *End of the Game*, 1978), or Dr. Hoffman threatens to overwhelm the City with unreality in Angela Carter’s *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* (1972), so here Jane threatens to penetrate and overwhelm Mr. Quistgaard’s monological world of discourse.

This is only a parable, but in fact the strategy of “injecting” a specialized register of language into a homogeneous discourse-world, as a means of inducing polyphony, is typical of postmodernist fiction. Barthelme himself uses this strategy in texts like “The Police Band” (1968), where the highly
incongruous specialized register of jazz breaks in upon the world of police discourse, with disorienting effect:

What are our duties? we asked at the interview.
Your duties are to wail, the Commissioner said.

This same strategy also underlies William Gass’s story “Icicles” (1968), where the closed discourse-world of a real-estate agency is uncannily disrupted by the injection of discourse from, of all things, the highly specialized register of flower arrangement.

More radical than this intrusion of one specialized register into the world of another is the strategy of antilanguage. An antilanguage is the specialized discourse of a deviant social group—either deviant in the usual negative sense (e.g. criminal and prison subcultures) or what we might call prestigiously deviant (e.g. military elites, religious mystics, perhaps even poets). Just as the group’s behavior deviates from social norms, so analogously its language deviates from the standard. Antilanguage is developed through systematic transformation of the standard language, especially through such lexical processes as relexicalization (adaptation of a standard word to special, nonstandard use within the group) and overlexicalization (proliferation of synonyms or near-synonyms for concepts especially important to the group). Thus, an antilanguage is inherently dialogic, in Baxtin’s sense of the term, conducting an implicit polemic against the standard language and its worldview. It creates in effect an “anti-world-view,” a counter-reality of its own that is dialectically related to “straight” or “official” reality.

Roger Fowler has described the function of the criminal antilanguage in William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959). Here, Fowler argues, the implicit dialogue between language and antilanguage, reality and counterreality, generates a true polyphony and not, as in modernist writing (or in Fowler’s other example, Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*), a polyphony that ultimately flattens out into monologue:

If *Naked Lunch* is successfully polyphonic, it is not so merely because it includes a large number of distinct social voices. It is so because each of these voices embodies a significant ideological position... and because these ideologies related to one another, and to an implicit norm ideology, dialectically.

Among the devices that Burroughs uses to foreground the language/antilanguage dialectic in *Naked Lunch*, Fowler observes, is that of glossing special-
ized counterculture vocabulary, translating it into the language of the “straight” world:

(Note: Grass is English thief slang for inform.)
(Note: People is New Orleans slang for narcotic fuzz.)
(Note: Yen pox is the ash of smoked opium.)
(Note: Make in the sense of dig or size up.)

The effect of such glossing is not, as the text seems to pretend, helpful, but on the contrary aggressive, alienating:

it draws attention to the limitations of readers’ knowledge; suggests that the narrator knows that the reader’s knowledge is limited, that the reader is an outsider.

Another of Burroughs’s foregrounding devices may be illustrated from *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962)—namely, quick-cutting back and forth between passages of antilanguage and a specialized register of “straight” language:

(desperately effete negation of societal values fecundate with orifices perspective and the ambivalent smugness of unavowed totalitarianism.)

I knew why he was standing there. He didn’t have the ready to fill his script. He was waiting for somebody he could touch.

(foundering in disproportionate exasperation he doesn’t even achieve the irrelevant honesty of hysteria but rather an uneasy somnolence counterpointed by the infantile exposure of fragmentary suburban genitalia.)

“Need bread for your script, man?”

*The ready, script, touch, bread*—these belong to the “shop talk” of the underworld, specifically, in this case, the junkie underworld. The “straight” register parodied here is what Burroughs calls “prose abstracted to a point where no image track occurs”—that is, intellectual prose, in this case the review of a book that sounds suspiciously like Burroughs’ own. Thus, the implicit dialectic between “straight” reality and criminal counterreality is brought into the open: on the one side, the antilanguage of the junkie world projected by Burroughs’ book; on the other, the language which the official culture uses to talk about that book and its world.

Interestingly, Burroughs stages this confrontation between language and antilanguage without violating the mimetic framework of the episode. The quick-cutting is motivated by the fictional situation: Inspector Lee, while waiting for a junkie suspect to arrive at the chemist’s for his fix, browses through an issue of *Encounter* at a newsstand. There are other texts, how-
never, in which the confrontation between worlds of discourse occurs outside of any motivating context, in a representational void; where the only worlds we are able to reconstruct are the worlds of discourses, and not any fictional world that might plausibly contain them. This is the case, for instance, with Donald Barthelme’s collage texts, including “The Viennese Opera Ball” (1964), “A Picture History of the War” (1968), “The Rise of Capitalism” (1972), “Aria” (1981), and of course “The Indian Uprising.” Of these the earliest, “The Viennese Opera Ball,” is in some ways the most radical, for here the mimetic framework that might serve to motivate the clash of discourses realistically has been reduced to the absolute minimum—namely, to the phrase “the Viennese Opera Ball” itself. Punctuating the collage of disparate genres and registers—obstetrics, anthropology, etiquette, marriage manual, magazine genres (Glamour, Fortune), encyclopedia entries, botany, arts foundation report, index to a book on Dostoyevski, specifications for an electrical generator, sentences quoted from Hemingway’s “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber”—this recurrent phrase indicates, though only residually, the presence of a fictional situation.

In “A Picture History of the War,” by contrast, identifiable fictional characters have been projected into the foreground of the collage text: Kellerman and his father, the general. General Kellerman is unmistakably a preliminary sketch for the Dead Father, a quasi-allegorical authority-figure representing a conservative and univocal culture. This Father-figure with a capital “F” acts out the conflict between a monological world-view and the multiple-world universe of Barthelme’s polyphonic text. “Why does language subvert me,” the general exclaims:

subvert my seniority, my medals, my oldness, whenever it gets a chance? What does language have against me—me that has been good to it, respecting its little peculiarities and nicilosities, for sixty years?

(Reaching for our dictionaries to look up “nicilosities,” we may well wonder what Barthelme’s language has against us.) Through his parable of General Kellerman, Barthelme directs our attention to the subversive potential of polyphony, its relativizing and leveling effect, its undermining of stable, univocal ontology.

Barthelme juxtaposes discourses along a horizontal axis. That is, segments from different discourses are spliced end-to-end in “The Viennese Opera Ball” or “A Picture History of the War,” and the ontological tension between incommensurable discourse-worlds develops, so to speak, across the seams between adjacent segments. It is also possible, however, to construct a
vertical collage. In this case, two or more discourse-worlds coexist within the same segment. Extrapolated to the dimensions of a six-hundred-page text, this strategy of “internal dialogism” becomes the structural principle of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. Here each segment belongs to two or more discourses at the same time; the result is a layering of discourses, a *lamination*:

Is it not that we are commanding from fullback, woman permitting, a profusely fine birdseye view from beauhind this park? Finn his park has been much the admiration of all the stranger ones, grekish and romanos, who arrive to here. The straight road down the centre (see relief map) bisexes the park which is said to be the largest of his kind in the world. On the right prominence confronts you the handsome vinesregent's lodge while, turning to the other supreme piece of cheeks, exactly opposite, you are confounded by the equally handsome chief sacristary’s residence. Around is a little amiably tufted and man is cheered when he bewonders through the boskage how the nature in all frisko is enlivened by gentlemen’s seats. . . . The black and blue marks athwart the weald, which now barely is so stripped, indicate the presence of sylvious beltings. Therewithal shady rides lend themselves out to rustic cavalries. In younder valley, too, stays mountain sprite. Any pretty dears are to be caught inside but it is a bad pities of the plain. A scarlet pimparnell now mules the mound where anciently first murders were wanted to take root.

Leaving aside the many local effects of internal dialogism, we can discern in this passage two superimposed discourses: at one level, the register of a tourist’s guidebook (a book rather than a tour-guide’s discourse, because of “see relief map”); at another level, a sexual discourse, transforming the topography of Phoenix Park (“Finn his park”) into the topography of the male body, with special emphasis on the buttocks (*beauhind, cheeks, gentlemen’s seats*). The park, as well as being the body, is also apparently the site of sexual activity—sadomasochistic activity? (note *black and blue marks, weald, beltings*). In any case, the “pretty dears” that may be caught in the park at the level of the sexual discourse do double duty as decorative animals at the level of the guidebook discourse. The relation between the two discourses invites allegorization: we might say that just as the park’s foliage and topography hides sexual goings-on, so the “innocent” discourse of the guidebook hides the language of sexuality.

Notoriously, Joyce builds up his vertical collage not merely from the registers and discourses of the English language, but from other national languages as well. *Finnegans Wake* is a multilingual text in the strict sense,
nearly every phrase yielding a bi- or tri- or even quadri-lingual pun. According to Baxtin, radical heteroglossia emerges in cultures which embrace several languages, cosmopolitan cultures in which the various national languages are mutually aware of one another. This is the source of the “Galilean perception of language” which finds its expression in the novel. Thus the polyphonic novel develops first in the cosmopolitan and polyglot Hellenistic culture, then emerges again in the equally cosmopolitan and polyglot Renaissance. Joyce, by superimposing several national languages in his multilingual text, thus reconstructs the original conditions for the novel’s emergence, returning the novel to its historical roots in heteroglossia.

ENDNOTE

1 A different version of this . . . has appeared under the title “Change of dominant from modernist to postmodernist writing,” in Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema (eds.), Approaching Postmodernism (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 1986). I am grateful to the editors and publisher for permission to reprint this material here.