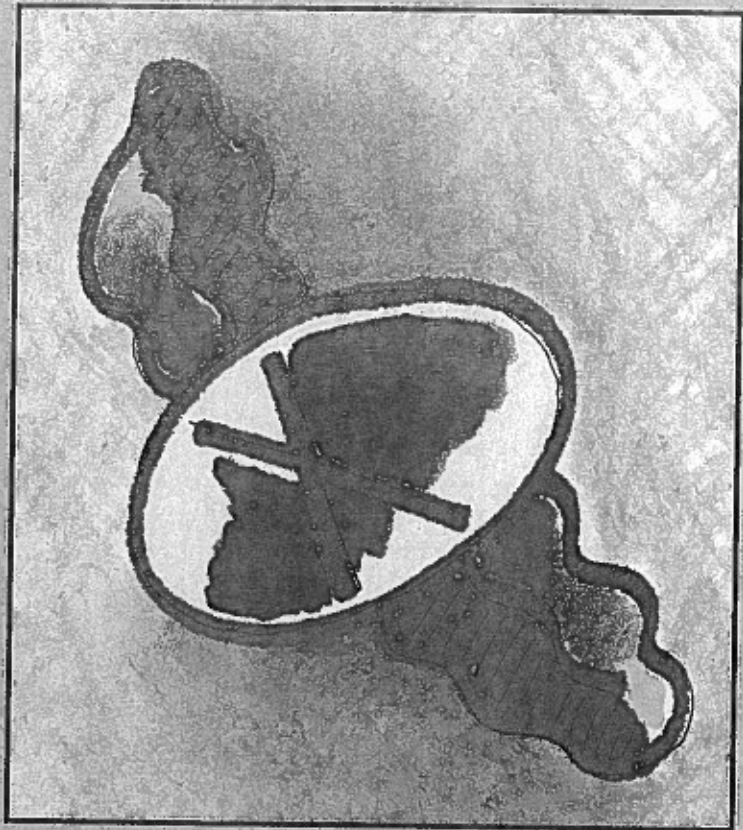


NARRATIVE STRATEGIES
— IN —
CANADIAN LITERATURE



edited by
Coral A. Howells and Lynette Hunter

**Narrative Strategies in
Canadian Literature**

Feminism and Postcolonialism

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Coral Ann Howells and Lynette Hunter

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Introduction

Lynette Hunter

The one consistent motif in Canadian studies over the last three decades has been the discussion of the search for 'Canadian identity'. Initially perceived in terms of the need to construct such an identity in the face of an apparently banal culture and apathetic society, recent developments have radically recast the discussion. Contemporary studies view the issue not as the construction of an absent identity, but as the articulation of a distinct identity that has been suppressed by or subject to dominant traditions and conventions from elsewhere, particularly Europe or the United States.

This recasting, along with the emerging relevance of postmodernist strategies – long perceived as typical to Canadian literature – has located in Canadian writings a fruitful setting for the study of literary techniques and devices helpful to the articulation of non-traditional voices outside the mainstream. Unless you can attempt to say who or what you are, you cannot be heard. You have to have both a position to speak from and a voice to speak with.

The essays in this collection are concerned with the parallel strands of colonial and women's writings in Canada over the last two decades. Both strands can be seen as attempts to find a voice amid a set of conventions and traditions which do not necessarily encourage them to speak. The more consciously they foreground the problems of articulation, the more securely these writings situate themselves within postcolonialist and feminist approaches or discourses. While women's search for a different voice has been a consistent strand in Canadian literary history, the postcolonial voice has been a long time surfacing. In some ways the relegation of women to a non-contentious domestic sphere has permitted an exploration of narrative strategies, of varieties of discourse, which

would not have been acceptable within the overtly political struggle of colonialism. This is, of course, a matter of perception.

The postcolonial is perceived as more threatening to tradition since it implies a re-examination of structures of power, of the hierarchies of public/personal/private that in effect puts all people in Canada in a feminist position. In doing so postcolonial writing underlines the compromises and complexities of social organization, not only from the position of those with no voice but also from the position of those who only have a conventional voice. The feminist dilemmas, parallel to but different in emphasis from the postcolonial, are to find a voice without denying it to others. This lies at the heart of feminist politics and at the heart of the compromises feminism makes.

The different stances explored by Canadian writers over the last twenty years have initiated alternative ways of writing. The attempt to find a voice amid sets of conventions and traditions which do not necessarily encourage you to speak raises related issues. To be heard, recognized, permitted to engage actively in the life of a society, you have to speak in the traditional language of that society. Yet this is the very tradition whose conventions and limitations make it difficult for you to speak, and bias what you want to say. The focus of the critical discussions throughout this book is upon the interrelation of realism, modernism and postmodernism as a set of tensions within the literary tradition generated from these social contradictions. The discussions here comment directly upon the current theoretical debate about the need to articulate history within traditional/conventional language and discourse which does not allow for it.

If much of the current debate begins from the position that the postmodernist realism of the late-nineteenth or early twentieth century is a stale and over-worked convention of representation, then all these essays can be seen as attempts either to reclaim the word 'real' for material history or to reclaim the possibility for historical recounting that lies at the root of a now conventional representative tradition. Modernism can be defined as the articulation of the subject trying to speak of real personal experience. Many developments in modernism do not explicitly address history since they are concerned with the private rather than the public. Furthermore, the tendency of modernism to look inward for self and position can underwrite many of the limiting qualities of fixity, of inviolate essence, that the word 'identity' often calls up. At the same time, on rarer occasions, the modernist look inward, sees nothing. Certainly the most enduring modernist works are at this crossroads of self and nothing. Yet modernism's attempt to lasso the significant moments, those isolated epiphanies of experience where we seem to find ourselves, indicates its residual striving after the unique, the essential.

The development of postmodernism has been double-sided. On the one hand its strategies can be taken as an attempt at a complete severance from history. Such severance is only available to subjects perceiving themselves or being read as within the mainstream literary tradition. Only these subjects can at one and the same time detach themselves from history and still find it possible to speak. It

could be said that while they think they are achieving ahistoricity, their medium is inexorably rooted in historical event of which they are consciously or subconsciously choosing to remain unaware. But postmodernism has also claimed the utter necessity of history, the inevitability and significance of social contingency. While both postmodernisms try to fragment the essential identity of modernism, the former instigates a pluralism of games playing which attempts to evade social action. In contrast, the latter attempts to fracture the conventional, expose what is taken for granted, and engage both with the significance of or perceived need for the convention, and with possible different action and articulation appropriate for the present.

The essays here watch the intercommentary between feminist and postcolonial writings as they engage with realism, modernism and postmodernism. In studies of both text and theory they emphasize the strength that each position derives from a historical stance, one that recognizes and stresses the material event.

Emerging into the arguably appropriate generic structures of the short fiction which speaks of isolation or the serial short fiction book with its fractured wholeness, and generic modes of the fictional documentary or autobiography with their precarious identity, the Canadian writings discussed here yield a wide range of narrative strategies for speaking about alterity and difference. Alternative, marginal, writers have consistently turned to fantasy as a stance through which they could speak in opposition to the conventional. In the last two decades women writers in particular have developed a series of generic strands from the fantastic to the utopian/dystopian. It is significant that women in the western world, who have not been denied education or publishing possibilities to the same extent as even more marginalized groups, have turned to a literary form which is deeply rooted in conventional and naturalized communication. Fantasy permits other voices but controls and defines them. It is immensely appropriate, and profoundly supportive of the ideological.

For other alternative voices the attempt is necessarily different, partly because they have learned from the history of fantasy. But further, rather than being controlled or repressed, many of these voices have quite simply been denied. The recent explosion of postcolonial literature into postmodernist techniques of generic disruption, intertextuality and detailed poetic displacements aims, according to the critics in this book, toward the fractured, the nebulous, the delirious. The stances described in these literary forms try to avoid the oppositional, although it is not possible at the moment to assess just how successful the attempt can be, because being in opposition presupposes acceptance of the 'normal' and compromises the writing into the conventional. The postcolonial foregrounds the shortcomings not only of realism but also of fantasy, and the essays on Canadian women's writings that are included, helpfully explore the implications of those shortcomings and assess the developments.

In many ways, the broader significance of Canadian literature from the last two decades for other writing in English may be derived from its problematic

engagement with the contradictions between the different strands of post-modernism, its attempt to be apolitical and yet historical at the same time, its insistence on the materiality of personal identity simultaneously with its rejection of the social. The examples of postcolonial and women's writings which are studied here address the contradictions directly. Through them the essayists attempt to retrieve the real, and realism, for historical postmodernism.

* * *

The opening contribution to this collection, 'Short fictions and whole books' by Andrew Gurr, discusses the specifically modernist attempt to articulate individual difference or identity through the narrative structure of short fiction, within a world of realism which asks for entrenched convention. Short fiction, with its metaphoric and associative strategies, raises a unique set of problems when a writer chooses to juxtapose a series of such fictions and create a whole book. The wholeness of this set of fictions is difficult to maintain because the formal conventions of the novel can pull it into the linear and the discursive, and can diffuse the intimacy of the individual subjective portrait. Firmly set within a Commonwealth perspective, the essay comments on both the potential and the problems of the whole-book form in Katherine Mansfield's writing, before suggesting that Rudy Wiebe's *Blue Mountains* is one of the few successful attempts. Gurr goes on to study the way that Naipaul, Richler, Laurence and Munro, all moving from the example of Steinbeck's *Canney Row*, use the 'street' as an informing motif for structuring short fictions into whole books. All of these writers, Laurence in particular, are regional, located in a specific place and history. This historical bias means that they fail to use, or indeed actively reject, the personal alienation, the intensely private epiphanies and the open-endedness of modernist forms. However, while this bias can move the narrative back into the conventions of premodernist realism, the suggestion is made that in shifting the observer's gaze from the inward to the outward, the serial form may prove helpful to the regional voice, may enable the communication of history through strategies of cumulative background. On the one hand those strategies are conventional and obstructive to different identity, while on the other they are a site for the reclamation of different histories.

It is precisely this dilemma faced by the regional writer using strategies of realism that Peter Fasingswood addresses in 'Semi-autobiographical fiction and revisionary realism in *A Bird in the House*'. The discussion here opens with the voices of two prairie writers: Margaret Laurence claiming realism as a vital strategy for extending regional identity and Robert Kroetsch arguing that the compulsion to history and regionalism makes necessary a violation of realism. This essay presents Margaret Laurence as looking at the interconnection of literary realism and life through recall and re-telling. The reiteration of event is

the process which Laurence calls history. The process is enabled/well served by the serial short fiction structure: the form allows for gaps, discontinuities and breaks not only in the narration of event (the contradictions of memory) but also of narrative perspective (clashes of realism, for example, between the views of child and adult). The resulting genre of the re-told or oft-told tale yields a criticism of the kind of realism that takes for granted an ability transparently to tell the stories of minority peoples, here native people and the Métis. Indeed Fasingswood suggests that Laurence's primary concern within her regionalism is with the recognition of people without a voice and the need to help them find one. She simultaneously rejects the commonplace and insists on common experience. In order to articulate common experience, to foreground the need for a realism that actively seeks out a voice for the voiceless, Laurence mingles into it romance, which is interpreted here as the negation of realism in contrast to fantasy which is simply its other face.

The importance of finding a voice, of locating self, place, position, is carried further in 'The tuning of memory: Alistair MacLeod's short fiction' by Colin Nicholson. Here once more it is suggested that what relates life to history is language. In an argument of some elegance, Nicholson brings together a reading of Paul Ricoeur's theory of history and language with a practical reading of Alistair MacLeod's short fictions; this reading anchors and permits discussion of concepts that by definition resist stated explanation. The underlying question concerns the relation between realism and history, which in the post-Renaissance period has come, despite a general recognition of its inadequacy, to connote a referential or essential representative function. History needs language and writing to be recognized as history; it has to be recounted or we cannot communicate it. But the moment you arrest it to tell it, it ceases the movement through time that makes it history. This is parallel to the problem of the recognition of the self as something other than essential identity. Indeed Nicholson claims that the location of self is not possible without a history; but history is not fixed, closed and permanent, rather it is modulated with changing time and circumstance. Therefore the location of self makes necessary the narration of the past in language where memory and recall overlap with linguistic and literary structures.

The study of MacLeod's writing leads to the suggestion that the occurrence of historical event need not be referential but intertextual. Intertextuality is the literary device that engages with the overlap and is the primary narrative strategy used by MacLeod in his stories. Through it the random contingency of event becomes an iterative structure. Building on this argument the discussion moves on to address the issue of compromise: that we need language to locate history and self, but that the conventions of that language are those constructed by others, for other histories, often histories of oppression and power. Language can be used by others to define us, but may also be used by us to define ourselves. The essay suggests that the particular compromise reached by MacLeod's short fictions consists of a process of change and slippage from historical origins,

textual certainty and predictable convention. Its intertextuality is a way of writing devoted both to existing within and changing the language. It resists closure, consolation, permanence and seeks to write a continuous present that will articulate self, give voice.

The concern with personal and cultural identity being formed through language becomes in John Thime's study, 'Historical relations: modes of discourse in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*', a concern with origins and genealogy, with culture and mythology, and the way in which language connects us to personal history. Ondaatje has long been recognized as a writer who points out the inadequacies of conventional realism with a thoroughgoing post-modernist investigation of language and form. Thime presents Ondaatje's work not only as a deconstruction of received versions of language and history, but also as a reconstruction into alternative paradigms. Possibly because *Running in the Family* is autobiographical and semi-documentary, the writer is here seen to focus on the problem of arriving at any construction at all. What begins as a personal quest for self becomes, in the shared journey, becomes necessarily familial and public. This quest, this textual journey, becomes a commentary on the fugitive nature of past experience and the impossibility of arriving through discourse at any definitive version of history. Yet the emphasis here is not upon intertextual commentary, but upon generic breakdown at all points of the linguistic and literary medium. The text interpolates snapshots of discourse, minimalist disruptions, essentially unrelated juxtapositions. It combines the oral story-teller with the photographer, the journalist, the poet, and positions the writer, the reader and the text in a kaleidoscope of shifting patterns and interactions. Thime suggests that on the whole the work seems curiously innocent of politics, that the writing is not really concerned with the brutality of imperialism. However satisfying the narrative may be to those who do not need an alternative history, who appreciate/enjoy the pleasure of the formal post-modernist strategies of the text, there is a sense that here the quest has lost its way, that language has permitted the re-telling but has not connected us to history: a useful reminder that strategies of dislocation do not inevitably tell another history, except perhaps here a history of the inadequacy of traditional structures.

'*Burning down the House: Neil Bissoondath's fiction*', from David Richards, takes on the specific issue of the relation of colonial discourses to post-modernism. The commentary raises profound theoretical questions about the implications of compromise into a system of discourse which at least permits a legitimate voice but provides a circumscribed and misleading political position. It also offers suggestions about the helpfulness of moving out of that compromise and hence also out of an immediately effective political position, while maintaining the possibility for discussion because the voice still speaks.

Taking on early theory from Fanon and recent theory from Homi Bhabha, Richards argues that whereas colonial discourse was originally dialogic, between other voices and the central tradition, it is now a triangulation of different voices that can potentially change the way we read. Working from the

suggestion that Canadian literature is based on a recognition that literary conventions from one society are never appropriate to a different place, Bissoondath's work is fundamentally involved in the recognition of art or representation as self-delusion. The novel sets up a traditional narrative of realism and linearity, as well as an evocation of its capacity for misrepresentation and failure. But this is not a banal historical construction of dualism. The tradition and the misrepresentation ironize each other into the terrible comedy of the colonist subject. Bissoondath's postmodernist play, like Ondaatje's, examines the privilege/priorities of myth and narrative which allow the colonial only misrepresentation or negation of self and identity. This dilemma is presented as one not only for the characters but also for the writer: how can narrative escape the bias of convention without fleeing to negation? How can a voice make, but not be in, a narrative? Here the writer develops a detached voice, attempting to give voice to the voiceless in someone else's accents, accents not connected to the historical subject. Bissoondath himself. An array of strategies of omission, disruption and fracture constructs continual ellipses, a 'constellation of delirium' from whose interstices the writer speaks with a voice which has no place in colonialism or realism yet which cannot speak without them.

Extending the problems of colonialism into the multiple marginalities of race, immigrant groups and gender, Shirley Chew's 'One cast of a net: a reading of Daphne Marlatt's *Stevenson*', questions how or if one can come to a sense of self/place/voice. Placed alongside Marlatt's poem, *Stevenson*, is the documentary form of *Stevenson Recollected* in which the writer tries to locate the history of the town in interviews, transcripts, translations, photographs and memory as well as other more conventional devices for narrative description. Yet even the various, multiplicitous form of this document is curiously unsatisfactory. Too much is taken for granted, the voiceless cannot be heard. In contrast, *Stevenson* interprets the silences of the documentary, fills the gaps with a voice. To find this voice, Chew follows the poet as she leaps into different discourses in a precarious poetics which overlaps verse and prose, initiates a disruptive play around genre, style and voice, and which dislocates the syntax of language laying open its multiple and conflicting possibilities. This graceful critical activity points first to the negativity of oppositions, to the entrapments and compromises entailed in using and even in ironizing conventional language. Such atrophy is supplanted by a critical poetics that refuses closure, and indicates the spiral movement of *Stevenson* toward recognition of self. Certainties are erased, as are oppositions; they are replaced by 'simultude'. Particularly rewarding, the poetics of both the critic and the poet are firmly positioned on a historical basis. Chew's presentation of *Stevenson* foregrounds the oppositional qualities of the first and second generation Japanese-Canadians, who are tied to traditional accounts of history. Against the vision of the *issei* and *nisei*, are set present-day Japanese-Canadians, who look to the terrain and its material contingency. Marlatt is like these *sansai*, a voice that finds self in articulating the real, the simultude of place, of the immediacy of our social history.

Far more uneasy with the potential in language and profoundly distrustful of genre is Coral Ann Howells' reading of Marian Engel: 'On gender and writing: Marian Engel's *Bear* and *The Tattooed Woman*'. Engel is shown to move between the conventional presentations of woman's life in realism and the promise of realized personal desire in fantasy, as a way of articulating female experience. *Bear* moves between the two, mixing the genres, disrupting their pattern to indicate that both are seductions into the ideological and usual. It is only in the brief moment between the two, when realism is supplanted by the irrational, the magical, the mystical, that we can peer through to the other side. Whereas *Bear* moves to a recognizably too easy mystic communion, the narratives of *The Tattooed Woman* leave one with an uneasy oddness. These short fictions write about the need to use all available conventions, to find the discontinuities between the real and the writing available to expressing that reality: not only the literary but the daily, the mundane ephemera of lives, even the physical body if that is the only medium left to a woman to try to speak about herself. As the narrators in these stories move from one convention to another, it is the movement itself which seems to enable the articulation of fundamentally strange and different obsessions, fears, rages and passions. There is a sense that the group of short stories generates a mosaic of genres and of social pattern, where the pieces only roughly fit together, and where actual experience – the voice of Engel's women – may come only from the irregular joins or spaces that lie along the edges of the pieces.

The need to move beyond the immediate oppositions of realism and fantasy is paralleled in the 'Arrangements', 'Disarrangements', and 'Earnest Deceptions' of Rosalie Osmond's title. This contribution studies a development in Alice Munro's short fiction style from the patterns and arrangements that provide her characters with their sense of self to the disarrangements of *Who Do You Think You Are?* and *The Moons of Jupiter*. Osmond argues that Munro increasingly finds life and reality random. Its disarrangements function as epiphanies that disturb what is taken for granted and call individuals to find their own patterns and rearrangements. Yet this tension between order and disorder, between rejection of and desire for romance begins to suggest the possibility that just as with reality and fantasy, both arrangements and rearrangements are earnest deceptions. Munro's later work, including the title story of *The Progress of Love*, shows a shift in emphasis away from personal rearrangements, to a living with different versions of the real that is artful but does not look to satisfy a desire for pattern and significance. The critic here indicates that the modernist epiphany can be a problem for a marginal writer, a writer from a minority position, because it posits a possible solution to or revelation of identity and even if it is transcendent, such action suggests compromise, points to an earnest deception.

The commentaries by Howells and Osmond also hint at why the fragmentation of postmodernism is so attractive or helpful to writers outside mainstream traditions, here women, because other modes can more easily be reconstructed as compromise. Postmodernism can emphasize the fracture, not

just foreground the difference which indicates as significant something that others may have thought of as banal, but difference which indicates the rifts in ideology, the places where there is no voice yet there is a person. This strategy describes not liberal plurality which uses the deconstructive techniques of post-structuralism and postmodernism to allow for a number of voices somehow all existing side by side, but instead a position that recognizes that any ideology will disadvantage someone – there is always a marginalized someone deprived of adequate voice. In these essays postmodernist strategies become a political tool both to indicate the disadvantaged and to give it voice or space.

The different strands in postmodernism are outlined in Jill LeBlhan's study of Margaret Atwood's recent novels, 'Feminist? Futures?'. Here the differences are cast in terms of the prefix 'post': first as signifying a response to something that has passed into the past, then as an indication of contemporaneity and plurality of voice, and lastly as the edge feature, the delimiting conditions of which we become aware as we shuttle between past and present, and which attains its positivity through attention to history. The argument put forward is that to read *The Handmaid's Tale* or *Car's Eye* as oppositions of realism and fantasy, of feminism and postfeminism, is to cast them into either/or positions which do not encourage the articulation of anything outside the already-defined or accepted. Furthermore LeBlhan suggests that both novels insist on a conscious awareness of historical event which jogs personal memory into recognizing the inadequacy of such either/or positions. History is far more complicated than this and always indicates the positions which are defined or encompassed by neither but which emerge along their limits as edge features. *The Handmaid's Tale* plays with the generic oppositions of social utopia and private fantasy, and stretches them with the disrupting features of memory, autobiography, confession. Within the strongly defined ideological voice from which she is specifically excluded, the narrator attempts to locate a self through illicit acts of memory which construct alternative histories. But what is significant about those histories is not that they are true but that they show up the edge features that elude both official and individual definitions. The more subtle oppositions of conventional and personal realisms in *Car's Eye* find edge features in the constructions of the dimension of time, as the past infuses the present.

Atwood's emphatic message is that we can arrange and can be arranged, but we can also helpfully indicate edge features as long as we remain aware of history. Her writing focuses on the differences for the marginalized not only as subjects but also as objects. The compromises of language are not only personal but also public. Nothing happens if you do not attempt to speak, and you have a responsibility to do so. There is a further responsibility not to include the marginalized as such in the compromise of speech and writing, but to indicate it only in the edge features. Atwood's feminism is here presented as to do with indicating or drawing the edge features of women's position. As such it eludes definition of fixed identity; it functions as a location through which, not from or at which, we may act politically on behalf of a particular marginality.

The final essay in the collection is '“The presence of the past”: modernism and postmodernism in Canadian short fiction', contributed by Stephen Regan. Gathering up several strands from the discussions both of colonialism and feminism, the essay claims that historical and political postmodernism is a defining literary response from Canadian writers to their historical circumstances. As David Richards' contribution also notes, Canadian writing may be presented as continually self-conscious about reference and representation, this self-consciousness immediately problematizes the status of history and fiction, as well as the manner in which identity is represented. Regan depicts several short fiction writers, focusing on Laurence, Gallant and Munro, as worried about the ideological underpinning of realism, the way it takes too much for granted and appears to obstruct the personal and public questioning of self and action. Yet each also avoids the autonomous ground, the isolation of modernism. The short fiction form provides a narrative strategy for a subtle play of the relationship between traditional history and private memory. Gallant's shifts in memory perspective probe possibilities for political action in their sceptical exposure of social and historical determinants. Laurence uses lies, secrets and deceptions to emphasize the discrepancy between public and personal memory; her realism repeatedly fractures, destabilizes and disorders the conventional. Munro's intensely self-reflexive questionings of historicity seek not truth but the delicate adjustments of significance and in doing so invite the reader into the process. Regan ends with a brief look at developments into postmodernist fabulation and historiographic metafiction in writings by Audrey Thomas and Rudy Wiebe. Canadian writers emerge as defined by their response to the distortions of conventional historiography, their writing finding identity in their rewriting of history from the point of view of the dispossessed.

Each of these essays studies the particular problem of self-definition for people who live outside mainstream culture and identity and the need to locate and articulate self, place and position in order to be seen and to be heard. They respond to the contemporary debate about an ahistorical postmodernism by reclaiming the techniques for historical narrative from realism and challenging its conventional stance. These critics portray recent Canadian writing as sabotaging traditional identities, as writing which overtly presents the over-written world of private memory, collective region, and personal history. Through strategies which gain particular strength from the extended juxtapositions of parallel texts, intertextuality, serial fiction, generic mixing and disruption, all deny an easy coherence at the same time as they claim a narrative. The critics here look for and sometimes find the location for a repressed or denied voice in the interstices of mosaic, fracture, rift, simultaneously, edge feature, ellipsis. The techniques of the postmodern are subjected to scrutiny as these writers discard its plurality and insist on history.

I

Short Fictions and Whole-Books

Andrew Gurr

My tour is from Katherine Mansfield's Bunnell or 'Karoni' stories, through Naipaul's *Miguel Street* via Mordcaai Richler's *The Street*, with a detour into Rudy Wiebe's *Blue Mountains*, and a peep at *The Bird in the House*, to end up at Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* and *The Beggar Maid*: a conducted tour of a far from orchestrated chorus of writers of short fiction. The conductor of such a tour has to take account of the peculiar problems of form that all these books offer. The problems are not just the basic one which faces any collection of short stories, which William Sansom compared to the incompatibility of paintings seen side by side in an art gallery. 'Short stories in book form', he wrote, 'like pictures in galleries, create bad habits: read or seen one after the other they cancel themselves out.'¹ The collections of short stories I have listed here on the whole do the opposite. By their juxtapositioning, and by the fact that they use the same raw materials in each story – a family, a street, a community or a small town – the stories augment one another and actively inhibit the process of selecting and isolating each artefact, each story, as Sansom feels the form requires. Their problem is that they lose their separate identity as short stories through that juxtaposition, and therefore become something else, more like a discontinuous set of chapters from a novel, and yet not a novel. They are a distinct, and I would go so far as to say distinctly peculiar, genre of their own. They meet the aesthetic requirements neither of short fiction nor of the novel.

This is a problem largely because the modernist short story has its own distinctive aesthetic, incompatible with that of the novel. These unified collections have the classic problem, or possibly we should think of it as the domestic