

# Postmodernism in short fiction



**JOHN BARTH, TED HUGHES, ITALO CALVINO  
AND DINO BUZZATTI**

# Outline of the lecture

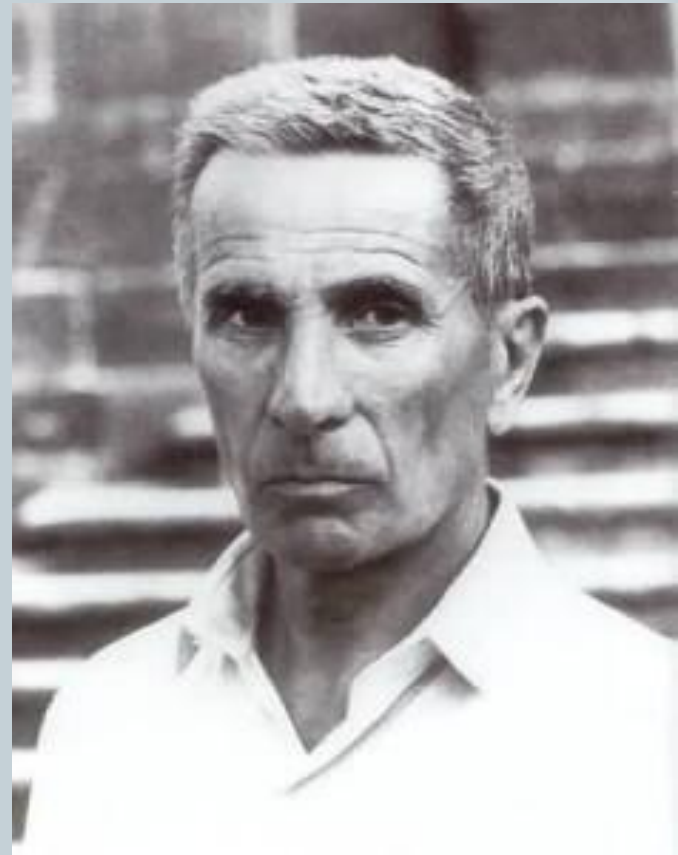


- What is postmodernism?
- How does a postmodern story differ from a modernist one?
  - The breakdown of structure
  - Narrative uncertainty
  - Self-conscious narration

# Dino Buzzatti (1906-1972)



- Italian novelist, short story writer, journalist and poet.
- His narratives often blend the fantastic with the realistic.
- His work sometimes described as magical realism.
- Interested in the relationship between the individual and their environment.



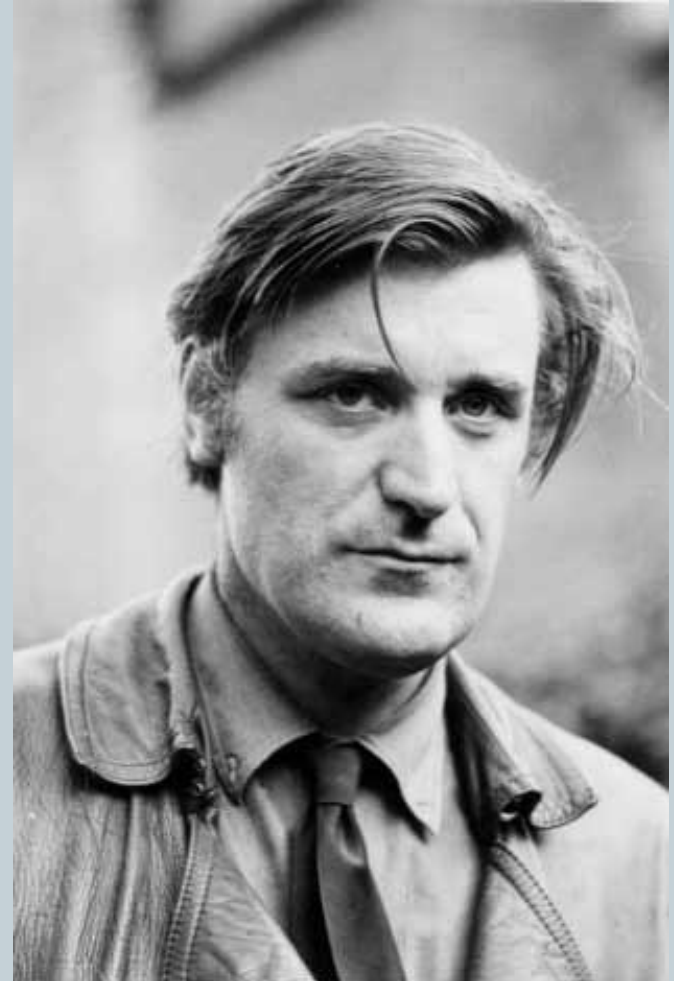
# Italo Calvino (1923-1985)

- Italian journalist and fiction writer.
- His work is often playful and mixes science fiction with more experimental forms.
- He was also interested in self-conscious literature and narratorial unreliability.
- His most famous short fiction involves the unpronounceable protagonist Qfwfq – shows Calvino's playfulness.



# Ted Hughes (1930-1998)

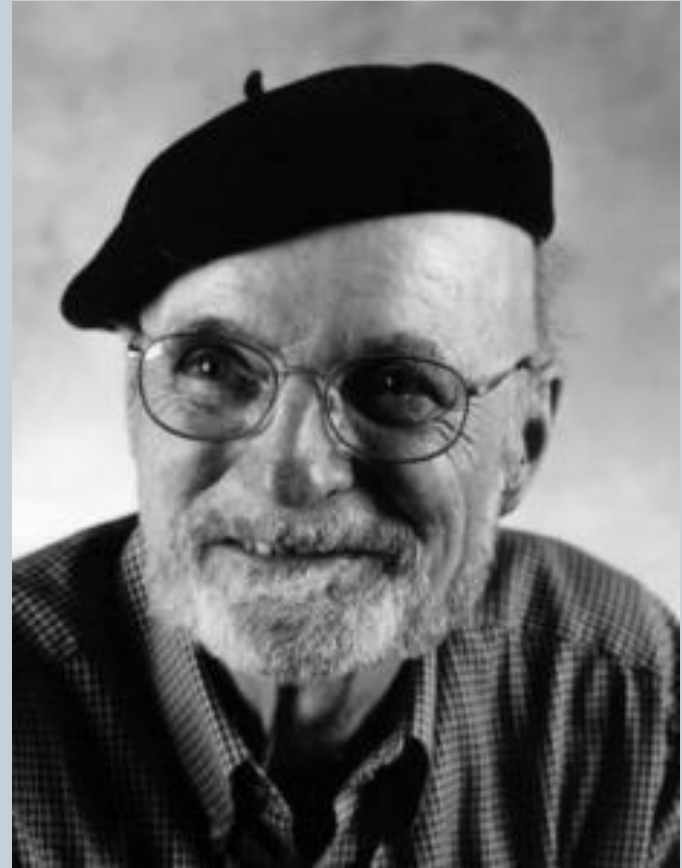
- Best known as poet (Poet Laureate until 1998).
- His writing often focused on nature but also the place of the individual in the natural world.
- His fiction writing is also interested in subjectivity and defamiliarisation.
- Also interested in narrative experimentation and the effect on the reader.



# John Barth (b.1930)



- American novelist and short story writer.
- One of the first-wave of American postmodernists.
- Another very playful writer – experiments with form and narrative structure.
- Also interested in disordered realities and non-linear plot-lines.



# What is postmodernism?



- Movement that developed after WWII as an extension of modernism.
- Partly a reaction to another war – after WWI people genuinely believed there would never be another conflict on that scale.
- But WWII even worse re. loss of life, destruction of landscape/cities, etc.
- Also a reaction to nuclear age – apocalypse no longer associated with God but now potentially manmade.
- Finally, is also a reaction to the Holocaust – mechanised, industrial genocide revealed new low in human behaviour.

# What is postmodernism?



- Events of WWII led to new uncertainties about human nature and the powerlessness of the individual.
- This was heightened post-WWII by Cold War – fear of nuclear war between US and Russia in 1950s.
- Also new awareness of environmental damage being done – breakdown of concrete reality.
- Led to increased paranoia and even more doubt about meaning in reality.



# Postmodernism vs modernism



## Modernism

- Mourned loss of order in society.
- Used elitist 'high culture' references.
- Language seen as inadequate to convey reality.

## Postmodernism

- Believed order had never really existed.
- Championed popular culture as high art.
- Questions any form of shared reality – there is only interpretation.

# What is postmodernism?



- Postmodern literature highly variable but essentially rejects any rules for writing.
- Some common themes include:
  - Meaninglessness of human experience
  - Paranoia and conspiracy theory
  - Focus on the individual and subjectivity
  - Blending of genres
  - Multiple narratives
  - Breakdown of time and space

# The breakdown of structure



- None of the four stories have a traditional, linear narrative – no beginning, middle, end.
- Each looks at the expanding present moment – past and future are largely unknowable.
- Reflects postmodernism's collapsing of conventional ideas about time and space – demolishing the last certainties in the narrative.
- What is the impact of these games on the reader – how do we read stories that don't even have a conventional structure?

# John Barth, 'Lost in the Funhouse'



- Story has an almost total breakdown of structure – contradictions and jumps in the narrative.
- Makes it difficult to tell what is real and what is hallucination/fantasy.
- Isn't like modernism's stream of consciousness because it is third person – no sense of narrator helping the reader.
- Being lost in the funhouse = reader being lost in the story.
- Is experience of being lost that Barth focuses on – confusion and lack of meaning at the heart of the narrative.

# Ted Hughes, 'Snow'



- Also prevents narrative progression – circles around one idea instead.
- No reference points in the landscape and no sense of time either – impossible scenario but the reader has no way to challenge it.
- The chair is totally arbitrary – randomness prevents it having meaning but is only solid object in narrator's reality.
- Returns us to postmodernism's obsession with meaninglessness – why do we assign meaning to inanimate objects?
- Is stream of consciousness in narration but has no outside world to help the reader orient themselves – no way to fix it.

# Italo Calvino, 'Il conte di Montecristo'



- Also circles around a single idea – more like a theoretical discussion of metaphysics than fiction.
- Dantes, like Hughes's protagonist, is living in his head – focuses on the present in a very limiting environment.
- Calvino also creates an unworkable reality here – subverting time and space to prevent us identifying with Dantes's world.
- Does the vocabulary of science help Dantes or the reader understand what is happening?

# Dino Buzzatti, 'I sette messaggeri'



- Not 'out of time' but lacks conventional narrative progression.
- No sense of events of journey, just schedule of the messengers – makes the narrator's journey seem meaningless.
- No direct speech or interaction and no goal to achieve – blankness of the landscape.
- Impossibility of an endless landscape – reader questions the reality of the story with nothing concrete to cling to.

# The breakdown of structure



- None of the stories are ‘about’ anything in the conventional sense – all illustrate a state of mind instead.
- Absence of a conventional structure encourages the reader to remake the text – open to us remodelling it.
- All about how we respond as individuals – no right or wrong way to read these stories.
- Can see the contrast with some of the modernist texts but can also link to Woolf and Pirandello’s approaches to narrative.



# Narrative uncertainty – first person



- All four stories raise issue of madness directly or indirectly but not as restricted to certain individuals.
- Instead is shown as a universal instability of comprehension or unreliability of reality.
- Use of first person narration by Buzzatti, Calvino and Hughes – their realities are not viable for the reader.
- But unlike most modernist stories there is no ‘normality’ to guide the reader or contrast with the viewpoint of the protagonists.
- So not about individual perceiving the world eccentrically, is about individual creating their own world through perception.

# Narrative unreliability – Calvino and Hughes



- So not really talking about mental instability like earlier authors were – more a discussion about nature of reality.
- Neither Calvino nor Hughes makes the narrator attempt to explain what is happening – they just accept their conditions and get on with it.
- So the stories refuse to satisfy the reader's desire for meaning – remain totally enigmatic.
- Is this why they are successful – they fire our imagination differently to more conventional narratives?

# Self-conscious narration



- All four allude to the individual's role in creating a reality by examining the relationship between reader and text.
- However, Barth and Calvino take this one step further – draw attention to the stories' construction as texts.
- Barth open about this from the start – comments on use of italics and the construction of the narrative.
- Narrative voice continually interrupts progress of the story by talking about linguistic and artistic techniques – disorients the reader further.

# Self-conscious narration



- Breaks boundary between fiction and reality.
- Why might Barth want us to be conscious of how the text is constructed and why it affects the reader?
- Partly to unsettle the narrative structure but also to undermine the conventional relationship between text and reader.
- Usually the text presents the reader with a coherent reality to interpret – here the text is interrupted by what appears to be a version of the reader's reality, where the text is a constructed object.

# Self-conscious narration



- Barth also refers to other, real novels in the story – suggesting that reality is a fiction created by the individual observer without any higher authority or order/meaning.
- See this in Calvino's story – Dantes wants to be a character in someone else's writing so he won't have responsibility for his own life?
- Creates disorienting situation by imagining Dumas's desk covered with details of Dantes's life – would he have meaning as a character while as an autonomous individual his life is meaningless?

# Self-conscious narration



- Calvino plays similar games to Barth by referencing other books.
- Here Dantes is marooned within different layers of fiction – can't find his way out and neither can the reader.
- Calvino creates an existential mystery that the reader cannot solve – who is responsible for Dantes's situation, Dumas, Calvino or the reader?
- As with some of the earlier stories, there doesn't appear to be a clear answer.

# Self-conscious narration



- Suggests literature conventionally a comfort or an escape.
- Now is a means of indicating how powerless the individual really is in twentieth-century society.
- Ambrose and Dantes want meaning and normality in their lives but cannot achieve either – is literature then a promise of normality that cannot be attained in the real world?
- The self-conscious element shows how illusory order is.
- All stories expose unconscious processes of narrative – highlights the gap between meaningful, ordered fiction and the chaotic reality of lived experience.