

The 'post' in literary postmodernism: A history

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Introduction

Postmodernism as a literary-critical concept has followed a complicated trajectory that, now that the once heated debates no longer generate much interest, cannot be said to have led to much general agreement as to what exactly it stands for. We have a Wittgensteinian family of narrative strategies and poetic techniques that are indeed generally seen as postmodern, but that is as far as critical agreement goes. It might therefore be tempting to dismiss this particular incarnation of the 'post'-phenomenon, but there are excellent grounds to resist that temptation. Although the terms 'postmodern' and 'postmodernism' had occasionally been used – in rather diverse settings – before they entered the literary-critical vocabulary, it is in literary studies that they first were used systematically, initially in discussions of new modes of writing in American post-war poetry and fiction, but then also in analyses of far wider cultural developments and, finally, in ambitious attempts to understand the 'postmodern' world that we supposedly inhabit. And it is also in literary studies that the writings of the French so-called poststructuralists – Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and others – had their first impact outside France and gave rise to what soon came to be called postmodern theory, a mode of literary criticism that was – and still is – enormously influential and has forced disciplines within and without the humanities to reflect on their own practices.

This chapter will trace the history and development of the concept, with the important caveat that any such history will inevitably be incomplete and sketchy. The *International Bibliography* of the Modern Language Association of America, the most comprehensive and authoritative bibliography in literary studies, lists at the time of writing 8,932 publications under 'postmodernism', another 7,042 under 'postmodern', and again another 4,630 under 'postmodernist'. No doubt there will be a good deal of overlap between these lists, but clearly the number of articles and books on literary postmodernism is overwhelming. I shall therefore limit myself

to what seem to me the most pertinent or interesting contributions to the discussion about postmodernism as it unfolded.

Postmodern poetry

When we think of literary postmodernism we tend to think first of all of fiction, since it is in fiction that postmodernism has easily had the largest impact, both because poetry is relatively marginal compared to fiction and because postmodernism's narrative innovations were better suited to fiction. However, long before it was first applied to fiction, the term 'postmodern' had already gained some currency in American poetry criticism. In 1947 the American poet-critic Randall Jarrell used it in a review and in 1948 another poet, John Berryman, picked up Jarrell's term in another review. More importantly, from the early 1950s onward American poet Charles Olson used 'postmodern' repeatedly to describe his own poetry and that of a number of like-minded poets. Olson's use of the term would for a long time echo in discussions of contemporary American poetry. For Olson postmodern poetry does not so much distance itself from modernist poetry as from the whole Western tradition, a tradition led astray by the rationalistic heritage of classical philosophy. That rationalism stands between us and authentic experience, as Olson's Heideggerian distinction between 'language as the act of the instant and language as the act of thought about the instant' (originally published in 1951)¹ makes clear. Olson's postmodernism is premodern, or, to adopt his terminology, pre-West, rather than postmodern (see, for a full discussion, George F. Butterick).² Olson's existentialist perspective makes an even more radical appearance in the postmodernism of William Spanos, one of literary postmodernism's most prominent early champions. For Spanos, co-founder (in 1972) of the highly influential journal *boundary 2: a journal of postmodern literature* – probably the first journal devoted to postmodernism –

it was the recognition of the ultimately 'totalitarian' implications of the Western structure of consciousness – of the expanding analogy that encompasses art, politics, and metaphysics in the name of the security of the rational order – that compelled the postmodern imagination to undertake the deliberate and systematic subversion of plot – the beginning, middle, and end structure – which has enjoyed virtually unchallenged supremacy of the Western literary imagination ever since Aristotle.³

As Spanos makes clear, however, postmodernism's 'strategy of decomposition'⁴ that must strip 'its audience of positivized fugitives of their protective garments of rational explanation'⁵ is not new. As was the case

with Olson, Spanos's postmodernism is, in fact, not post-anything but typological. He sees signs of the postmodern resistance to 'the Western structure of consciousness' in modernism and finds a fully developed postmodern impulse throughout the history of Western literature – in, for instance, Euripides' *Orestes*, Shakespeare's 'problem plays', Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, and Sartre's *La Nausée*.

In one of the first attempts to distinguish postmodern poetry more sharply from its modernist predecessor, another influential critic, Charles Altieri, invoking the authority of Olson (next to that of Kierkegaard and Heidegger), argues that whereas modernist poetics were 'informed almost entirely by the symbolist tradition', postmodern poets seek 'to uncover the ways in which man and nature are unified'.⁶ Echoing Olson, Altieri tells us that for postmodernists 'value is not mediated but stems directly from a direct engagement with the universal forces of being manifest in the particular'.⁷ A prerequisite for such an engagement is the prior destruction of 'human forms', which is exactly what postmodernism seeks to do: "[d]ecreation" ... is a basic process for the postmodern arts,⁸ a process that enables '[i]nfinite modes of authenticity'.⁹ For Altieri's postmoderns, as it was for Olson, language 'is directly linked with the experience of things'.¹⁰ Still, although Altieri distinguishes postmodernism sharply from a symbolist modernism, it does not so much react against modernism as against a long poetic tradition. What we see in Olson, Spanos and Altieri is an argument that has accompanied all major literary transitions of the last 250 years, summed up in Altieri's 'authenticity'. Postmodern poetry's representation of reality is superior to that of all earlier literary modes. It gives us direct access to authentic reality, allowing us to participate in authentic being. As we will see, the question of representation is never far away in discussions of literary postmodernism and becomes especially important when, in the course of the 1970s, the (mostly American) participants in those discussions begin to embrace what they call poststructuralism.

Let us stay for a moment with Altieri because he presents an instructive case which illustrates the early instability of postmodernism. In 1979, in a contribution to an early symposium on postmodernism, Altieri has found a new postmodernism and, imagining an ideal practitioner, reflects wryly that 'my imaginary post-modern, who must be considered a 1979 post-modern [is] probably soon to be as obsolete as my 1972 post-moderns'.¹¹ This '1979 post-modern' produces 'the pure writerly text' as theorized by Roland Barthes, a text 'that refuses to stabilize meanings' and 'stresses the productive power of writing', thus 'free[ing] writing to disseminate multiple shifting codes' that admit no clear synthesis or resolution'.¹² This postmodernism is clearly under the spell of poststructuralist thinking and is a far cry from Altieri's earlier postmodernism which worked to enable 'modes

of authenticity'. But for Altieri, this poststructurally inflected postmodernism was not satisfactory either. By 1986 the poststructuralist siren song has become less persuasive and we find him telling us that 'the best critical account' of postmodernism is that of his fellow critic Marjorie Perloff, which he goes on to quote in full:

Postmodernism in poetry, I would argue, begins in the urge to return the material so rigidly excluded – political, ethical, historical, philosophical – to the domain of poetry, which is to say that the Romantic lyric, the poem as expression of a moment of absolute insight, of emotion crystallized into a timeless pattern, gives way to a poetry that can, once again, accommodate narrative and didacticism, the serious and the comic, verse *and* prose.¹³

Perloff sees postmodern poetry as a contemporary revival of pre-romantic, rather than pre-modernist, poetic traditions, although not as a simple return to those traditions – we now have multiple voices or voice fragments and a collage mode that are wholly absent from pre-romantic poetics. To be fair to Altieri such conceptual readjustments were not at all uncommon as the debate on postmodernism kept developing. As Altieri said in 1979 of a conference he had recently attended, '[i]t turned out that often the participants simply did not know one another's example of post-modernism. And when they did, one man's post-modernism appeared to others as only slightly varied modernism, or nostalgic and mystified returns to the sixties, or mere fringe *avant garde* phenomena'.¹⁴ Only the loosest, un-theoretical and unphilosophical formulation (which still emphasized postmodernism's superior representative qualities), such as the one offered in 1978 by Robert Kern, could capture what most of these postmodernisms had in common: 'Modernist poetics stresses the way in which the poem is a closed, self-sufficient object. [...] Postmodern writing, on the other hand, seeks a greater openness for the poem, an openness to the world and to experience.'¹⁵

Postmodern fiction

Even if there was not much agreement on what exactly it covered, American poetry criticism adopted the term postmodernism without serious resistance as a heuristic tool, catholically seeing it as a sort of umbrella term for various new departures in post-war poetry. Criticism of the novel, however, was more reluctant to adopt the new term. This was partly due to a false start. The first one to apply 'post-modern' to the novel was the influential socialist critic Irving Howe who in 1959 published an article titled 'Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction'. Howe here sees postmodernism, represented for him by the fiction of such writers as Bernard Malamud,

Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow, as a phenomenon of the American 1950s. For Howe post-war American society is characterized by an erosion of traditional centres of authority and a loss of strong beliefs, of 'causes'. 'It was,' he tells us, 'as if the guidelines of both our social thought and literary conventions were being erased.'¹⁶ Howe's postmodern novels reflect – and reflect upon – the 'malaise' of an 'increasingly shapeless' world: 'In their distance from fixed social categories and their concern with the metaphysical implications of the distance, these novels constitute what I would call "post-modern" fiction.'¹⁷ No one would now consider Howe's authors postmodern, but his emphasis on representation – 'How can one represent malaise, which by its nature is vague and without shape?'¹⁸ – and his linking of postmodernism with socio-economic causes (rather than with a changing of the literary guard) would much later find an echo in the enormously influential analyses of the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson.

Howe's negative view of the post-war breakdown of traditional values was rejected by another prominent critic, Leslie Fiedler, who in his 1965 essay 'The New Mutants' saw in the so-called counterculture of the 1960s a new dawn rather than the self-destructive endgame of Western civilization. What Fiedler sees is a celebration of 'disconnection' accompanied by an indifference to the social order and a refusal to accept existing religious, racial or sexual dividing lines. His 'post-modernists'¹⁹ are not only post-modern, but their world is 'post-humanist, post-male, post-white, post-heroic'.²⁰ Fiedler is the first to connect postmodernism with the 1960s counterculture, claiming that this Pop-oriented countercultural postmodernism is a necessary and long overdue correction of the course of Western civilization (Fiedler, 'Cross the Border – Close the Gap').²¹ As Gerald Graff pointed out, Fiedler's suggestion is 'that the entire artistic tradition of the West has been exposed as a kind of hyperrational imperialism akin to the aggression and lust for conquest of bourgeois capitalism'.²² Like Howe's postmodern novels, Fiedler's examples of postmodern literature would now not be accepted as such. But their diametrically opposed and widely known views led to confusion rather than clarity. Moreover, such false leads – false in terms of how postmodernism would ultimately come to be seen – did not stop with Howe and Fiedler. Critics who adopted the term 'postmodernism' quite often applied it in idiosyncratic ways. As late as 1984 Charles Newman still saw the work of Saul Bellow as 'quintessentially Post-Modern'.²³

On the other hand, many critics who did address what we now would call postmodern fiction avoided the term. In 1967 Robert Scholes, analysing the work of a number of contemporary writers, including such canonical postmodernists as Kurt Vonnegut and John Barth, calls them fabulators who practice a surrealist form of picaresque.²⁴ In 1968 Richard Poirier

signals 'a newly developed ... literature of parody that makes fun of itself *as it goes along*',²⁵ but never mentions postmodernism. The prominent British critic Frank Kermode speaks of 'palaeo- and neo-modern' (and downplays the differences between them: 'There has been only one Modernist Revolution, and ... it happened a long time ago. So far as I can see there has been little radical change in modernist thinking since then').²⁶ Richard Wasson disagrees and discusses in detail the differences between 'moderns and contemporaries' (the latter including Alain Robbe-Grillet, John Barth and Thomas Pynchon), with the 'contemporaries' displaying a more sceptical attitude and coping with chaos where the 'moderns raged for order'.²⁷ In a pessimistically titled collection, *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*, the writer Ronald Sukenick speaks of the 'post-realist novel'²⁸ while another writer, the English academic David Lodge, finds more realism than Sukenick in postmodern fiction and creates the category of the 'problematic novel'. For Lodge, one of whose examples is André Gide's *Les Faux-monnayeurs* of 1925, such a novel does not wholly abandon 'the reality principle' but makes the reader '*participate* in the aesthetic and philosophical problems the writing of fiction presents'.²⁹ Philip Stevick avoids the term 'postmodern' in his 1971 *Anti-Story: An Anthology of Experimental Fiction* (which includes stories by Borges, Barth and Robert Coover)³⁰ and prefers 'new fiction' to postmodern or postmodernist – 'an epithet that I, for one, find annoying and unhelpful'³¹ – in a discussion of the differences between modernism and postmodernism (represented here by such canonically postmodern writers as Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan and Robert Coover). For Stevick, who lists seven major differences between this new fiction and modernism, the break between them is most clearly illustrated by the new fiction's 'implicit intention to let the surface be the meaning, let the possibility of a symbolistic level of reference be consistently undercut', and by the fact that it 'permits itself a degree of latitude from the illusionist tradition greater than in any body of fiction since the beginning of the novel',³² while representing 'the act of writing as an act of play'.³³ Giving his own twist to the notion that fiction may present itself as surface, the writer Raymond Federman proposes the term 'surfiction' for a 'new fiction that will not attempt to be meaningful, truthful, or realistic; nor will it attempt to serve as the vehicle of a ready-made meaning'.³⁴ Albert J. Guerard speaks of 'anti-realist fiction',³⁵ Charles Russell of 'contemporary self-reflective literature'³⁶ and Jerome Klinkowitz comes up with the rather outlandish 'post-contemporary fiction'.³⁷ The list could easily be expanded. For some of these critics, Wasson, for instance, the postmodernism that they do not mention reacts against modernism, but for most of them the target is a much longer tradition of attempts at realistic representation of which modernism is only one practice out of many.

And then we have critics who accept the idea of 'postmodernism' in a general way, but single out a dominant mode that they then give a more personal label. An especially interesting example is Alan Wilde, who offers an attempt to distinguish the new fiction from its modernist predecessor. Whereas modernist irony is an 'equivocal irony' that secretly longs to transcend the ironic stance, the irony of Wilde's 'midfiction' is a 'suspensive irony', an irony of cautious assent, of tolerance – the 'tolerance ... of a fundamental uncertainty about the meanings and relations of things in the world and in the universe'.³⁸ Wilde's 'midfiction', the 'tertium quid' of contemporary fiction, neither realist nor experimental,³⁹ anticipates, as we will see, Linda Hutcheon's influential 'historiographic metafiction', which will be discussed below, while his observation, in an earlier discussion of modern and postmodern irony, that Donald Barthelme 'puts aside the central modernist preoccupation with epistemology' and that his 'concerns are, rather, ontological in their acceptance of the world'⁴⁰ anticipates Brian McHale's distinction between an epistemologically oriented modernism and an ontologically oriented postmodernism. Wilde's notion of a 'mid-fiction' also has much in common with the 'problematic fiction' of David Lodge, who in the later 1970s had adopted the term postmodernism. Lodge recognizes the continuities between modernism and postmodernism, but also sees a crucial difference in narrative strategies and formal properties: 'The difficulty, for the reader, of postmodernist writing is not so much a matter of obscurity (which might be cleared up) as of uncertainty, which is endemic, and manifests itself on the level of narrative rather than style.'⁴¹ Like Wasson's contemporary writing, Stevick's new fiction and Wilde's midfiction, Lodge's postmodern writing faces up to its representational shortcomings and sees them as inevitable: given the chaotic and inscrutable nature of reality, representation can always be only partially successful. What I must emphasize here is that this inherent inadequacy of representation is not a matter of language, as it will be for many later critics who see postmodernism through a poststructuralist lens, but of the world – it is the chaotic nature of reality that effectively rules out adequate representation.

The avant-garde revisited?

Even Ihab Hassan, one of postmodernism's most indefatigable advocates, was fairly slow in adopting the term. In his *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* he refers to his 'The Dismemberment of Orpheus' of 1963 as '[p]ostmodern criticism'.⁴² Perhaps the criticism was postmodern, but the term is never mentioned. Instead, Hassan discusses what he calls the 'literature of silence', a literature in which '[l]anguage aspires to silence

and form moves toward anti-form',⁴³ and his examples of that literature are certainly not postmodern. Until he adopts the term postmodernism – 'The change in Modernism may be called Postmodernism'⁴⁴ – Hassan would seem to prefer 'the literature of silence'. And as late as 1980, he still considered postmodernism an 'uncouth' term.⁴⁵

Like Charles Altieri, Hassan more than once changed his views on postmodernism. *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* of 1971 presents the Marquess de Sade, Dada and Surrealism, Hemingway, Kafka, Existentialism, Genet and Beckett as belonging to a proto-postmodern tradition.⁴⁶ In *Paracriticisms* of 1975 'without a doubt the crucial text is [James Joyce's] *Finnegans Wake*'⁴⁷ while in 1982, in the second edition of *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, 'the postmodernist attitude merges also with the poststructuralist stance'.⁴⁸ In Hassan's earlier writings the emphasis is on an anarchist sensibility (which he links with the avant-garde of the interbellum): 'whereas Modernism created its own forms of Authority, precisely because the center no longer held, Postmodernism has tended toward Anarchy, in deeper complicity with things falling apart'.⁴⁹ The 'Postmodernist Notes' in *Paracriticisms* list anarchy, anti-authoritarianism, Beat and Hip, the Hippie movement, the homosexual novel, the Counter Cultures, in short practically everything that we remember about 1960s cultural, political and sexual dissent.⁵⁰ As Matei Calinescu pointed out in an early discussion of Hassan's postmodernism, '[t]aking the term avant-garde in its continental acceptation we can argue that what Hassan calls postmodernism is mostly an extension and diversification of the Pre-World War II avant-garde. Historically speaking, many of the postmodernist notes defined by Hassan can easily be traced back to Dada and, not infrequently, to Surrealism'.⁵¹ (In line with this, Calinescu, who makes an interesting distinction between an intellectual and theoretical Continental European avant-garde and a more spontaneous and an anarchistic British and American version, prefers 'new avant-garde' or 'contemporary avant-garde' to 'postmodernism'.) In a similar vein, the English writer and academic Christine Brooke-Rose, in a comment that calls to mind Robert Scholes's description of the new fiction as a surrealist form of picaresque, claimed that 'American "postmodernism" often seems a late and diluted imitation' of the 'basic philosophy of surrealism'.⁵² In the meantime, Hassan's capacious postmodernism had come to include such undisputedly postmodern writers as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon and Robert Coover, while he had gone beyond anarchism in coming to see 'indeterminance', a combination of indeterminacy and immanence, as the defining element in postmodern fiction ('we cannot simply rest – as I have sometimes done – on the assumption that postmodernism is antiformal, anarchic, or decreative').⁵³

Hassan could apply the term 'postmodern' to what he himself saw as a contemporary avant-garde because the 'modern' in his 'postmodern' refers to the rather narrowly defined modernism of the Anglo-American literary-critical tradition, which at the time did not include the avant-gardes of the interbellum. But because he kept adding on to his postmodernism he came to feel that postmodernism 'ought to be distinguished from the older avant-gardes',⁵⁴ a wish that was almost immediately gratified. In 1981 Andreas Huyssen published an important article in which he follows Calinescu in signalling 'the similarity and continuity between American postmodernism and certain segments of an earlier European avant-garde'⁵⁵ (and defines in passing as 'modernist' such features as self-reflexivity and indeterminacy that other critics, including Hassan, saw as typically postmodern). But there is also a significant difference. This 'American postmodernist avant-garde' has abandoned the avant-garde ideals of social change and the transformation of everyday life and 'is not only the endgame of avant-gardism. It also represents the fragmentation and decline of the avant-garde as a genuinely critical and adversary culture'.⁵⁶ Still, for Huyssen, as for his fellow European Calinescu, this American avant-garde is more modern than postmodern, although he is ready to grant that it may indeed seem postmodern in an environment with no history of avant-gardes comparable to Dada or Surrealism: 'Where Europeans might react with a sense of *déjà-vu*, Americans could legitimately sustain a sense of novelty, excitement, and breakthrough'.⁵⁷

The linguistic turn: poststructuralist postmodernism

The avant-garde interpretation of literary postmodernism soon had to contest with a formidable rival. As early as 1974 Stanley Fogel had called attention to 'writers of metafiction'⁵⁸ who were as aware as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida of the deeply problematic status of language. In 1980, we see Craig Owens arguing that 'a deconstructive impulse is characteristic of postmodernist art in general' and that postmodernism 'works ... to problematize the activity of reference'.⁵⁹ For Huyssen, writing in 1981, it was clear that 'there are definite links between the ethos of postmodernism and the American appropriation of poststructuralism, especially Derrida',⁶⁰ and in 1982, as we have seen, Hassan noted a merging of the 'postmodernist attitude' with the 'poststructuralist stance'. In the course of the 1980s postmodernism and poststructuralism would indeed practically merge – under the banner of postmodernism – so that in 1991 John McGowan could declare that 'Derrida's work has been so crucially important to postmodernism'.⁶¹ In the same year, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner's

Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations discussed the work of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Baudrillard and Lyotard, with Derrida making frequent appearances.⁶² Two years later, Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon's *A Postmodern Reader* included articles and excerpts from Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and Baudrillard,⁶³ and in 2003 Michael Drolet's *The Postmodern Reader: Foundational Texts* still presented the same cast.⁶⁴ For some twenty years literary critics routinely referred to 'postmodern thought' in their discussions of Barthes, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard and other less prominent so-called poststructuralists. 'Postmodernism' or 'postmodern theory' (as in Best and Kellner's title) now referred to an amalgam of poststructuralist ideas and assumptions. As a consequence of this identification of postmodernism with poststructuralism, postmodern fiction was increasingly seen as the creative counterpart of poststructuralist theory (see, for instance, Allen Thiher),⁶⁵ so that analyses of postmodern fiction came to focus on elements such as self-reflexivity that Huysen still saw as modernist but that now were taken to present poststructuralist themes. In the course of the 1980s and 1990s, critics, inspired by what was now broadly seen as 'postmodern theory' (later simply called 'theory'), go with magnifying glasses through the (Western) literary tradition and find *différance*, aporias, ideologically constructed realities, linguistically constructed identities – in fact, the full gamut of poststructuralist themes – in an amazing range of texts, from the contemporary, via the modernist, to Chaucer's fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales*. Here, representation – and not just postmodern representation – is forever out of reach. Reality is a construction and authenticity a mirage. But even the construction that we call reality cannot be represented. Given the premise that language is inherently subject to the play of difference and to an infinite deferral of meaning, no text will ever be able to plug all holes and to avoid aporias that will effectively forestall representation. From this perspective, all texts, whatever their pretensions, have always been postmodern. What distinguishes them from each other is their degree of blindness to that condition, with contemporary, 'postmodern', writing the most aware of its inadequacy. This poststructuralist mode of reading postmodern texts puts the most radical interpretation possible on every single feature that critics such as Stevick and Lodge had identified as 'new', as post-the-modern, and turns all postmodern texts into poststructuralist exhibits.

The growing importance of poststructuralism in the debate on postmodernism in the early 1980s is illustrated by a highly idiosyncratic, although influential, intervention by the one poststructuralist thinker who tried his hand at answering the question 'what is postmodern literature' (the title of his high-profile contribution). For Jean-François Lyotard the litmus test is not self-reflexivity or a combination of formal characteristics, but how the

text positions itself vis-à-vis the sublime, 'the unrepresentable' in his terms. The hallmark of 'modern aesthetics', which for Lyotard is an aesthetics of the sublime, is nostalgia. Modernism 'allows the unrepresentable' – of which it is fully aware – 'to be put forward as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure'.⁶⁶ Postmodernism, however, refuses that solace and is wilfully disruptive in order to confront us with the 'unrepresentable': 'The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste ... that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.'⁶⁷ This postmodernism is definitely part of the modern, which Lyotard defines in historiographic terms, hence his suggestion that 'the essay (Montaigne) is postmodern'.⁶⁸ Lyotard implies an endless dialectic of modernist and postmodernist moments: the new anti-representational schemes offered by postmodern works of fiction (or art) will inevitably lose their shock value and their power to 'put forward the unrepresentable' and will themselves become 'pre-established'. Since for Lyotard, as for most poststructuralists, representation, because of its attempt to fixate reality, is inherently totalitarian, such pre-establishment will necessitate a new confrontation with the unrepresentable. 'Let us wage a war on totality,' Lyotard urges, 'let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable.'⁶⁹

Against poststructuralism and beyond

In the course of the 1980s all the other terms that had been used to discuss postmodern literature gradually disappeared so that by the end of the decade 'postmodern' (without a hyphen) was the sole survivor. Terms such as metafiction (coined by the postmodern writer and philosopher William S. Burroughs) were still used, but only for a specific type of narrative that was itself seen as fitting within a larger postmodern framework. Primarily responsible for this apparent simplification of things was the identification of postmodernism with poststructuralism. Another reason was the publication, in 1983 and 1984, of two enormously influential articles in which the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson did not so much identify postmodernism with poststructuralism, but went one step further in defining poststructuralism as one of the manifestations of a much wider defined postmodernism. But the victory of the terms 'postmodern' and 'postmodernism' was pyrrhic in the sense that it never led to true consensus. In 1973, Philip Stevick had pointed out that, in the case of postmodern writing, 'what we have is not a movement, not a clique, not a group, not a school, not a unified assertion of anything

nor a reaction against anything. [...] As for the manifestos, the polemical introductions, the defensive stance-taking so commonplace in the past, they are all virtually non-existent'.⁷⁰ Far more than earlier literary movements postmodernism was, and is, the product of academic theorizing, which, at least in literary studies, rarely leads to concurrence. Still, by the early 1980s a relatively clear pattern had emerged, with the discussion now dominated by only a few positions (and with existentialist, avant-garde, and other interpretations of literary postmodernism having either a marginal presence or having disappeared from view altogether).

One of the lasting ways of seeing literary postmodernism – as the creative version of poststructuralist theory – has been discussed above. For the advocates of this postmodernism, what Owens called its problematization of the activity of reference – in other words, of representation – was a political, emancipatory act. Another, diametrically opposed view of postmodernism was offered by Fredric Jameson. The impact of Jameson's Marxist approach is hard to overestimate. As Khachig Tölölyan observed in a 1990 article that reviewed a number of recent books on postmodernism: 'However heterogeneous the other concerns invoked during the debates that structure these books, the marxist ... and poststructuralist ... version of postmodernism remain formative.'⁷¹ As we will see, Tölölyan overlooks another important, but at the time less prominent version, but apart from that he is absolutely right.

For Jameson, who opens the first of these articles with the, at that point, quite correct observation that '[t]he concept of postmodernism is not widely accepted ... today',⁷² postmodernism is a periodizing concept so that his postmodernism is virtually omnipresent. It is the 'cultural dominant' of the contemporary period because it is the 'cultural logic', as he has it in the second article, of late capitalism (also referred to as multinational or consumer capitalism): '[P]ostmodernism expresses the inner truth of that newly emergent social order of late capitalism.' Jameson is prepared to concede that all the features of postmodernism that he lists 'can be detected, full-blown, in this or that preceding modernism' – with some of the avant-gardists already 'outright postmodernists, *avant la lettre*'⁷³ – but because of postmodernism's 'very different positioning in the economic system of late capital' and because of the 'transformation of the very sphere of culture in contemporary society' modernism and postmodernism are 'utterly distinct in their meaning and social function'.⁷⁴ Under the regime of late capital, culture has become completely commodified – 'aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally'⁷⁵ – while simultaneously we have witnessed 'a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm'.⁷⁶ This 'expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas' has eliminated the last 'enclaves of precapitalist

organization',⁷⁷ and has had disastrous political consequences. Whereas modernism had been 'an oppositional art'⁷⁸ and still had the potential to offer political critique because of its relative autonomy – that is, its distance from capital – 'distance in general (including "critical distance" in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism'.⁷⁹ Postmodern literature is characterized by 'a new depthlessness' which Jameson also finds in poststructuralist theory – 'the very concept of "truth" itself is part of the metaphysical baggage which poststructuralism seeks to abandon'⁸⁰ – and by a 'weakening of historicity', apart from which modernism's alienation of the subject – which still allowed political critique – is now 'displaced by the fragmentation of the subject'.⁸¹ Under the pressure of capital postmodern literature has given up on representation, which for Jameson is a prerequisite for political critique. This is not to say that all potential for political dissent has disappeared, but postmodern art and literature can offer no such vantage point. Whereas for Lyotard representation takes us on the road to totalitarianism, with only dissenting anti-representation offering emancipatory alternatives, for Jameson postmodernism's refusal to engage in representation – or its least its failure to do so – leads to political impotence.

A more Lyotardian way – minus the sublime – of looking at the postmodern/poststructuralist nexus is offered by Linda Hutcheon who developed her influential view of postmodernism in the course of the 1980s and in 1988 published her important *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Hutcheon does not claim that her 'historiographic metafiction' represents all of the ways in which literary postmodernism has expressed itself, but certainly presents it as the most important one.⁸² Hutcheon's dominant postmodern mode strikes a balance between representation and anti-representation. Her historiographic metafiction pits representational and anti-representational modes of writing against each other so that we have Lyotard's cycle of representation and anti-representation in every single text. Such a text offers elements that strongly suggest representation and create the illusion of reality, but it also offers elements that counteract that illusion and suggest that we are dealing with an autonomous linguistic construction. To see this in terms of reading instructions, we get elements that suggest depth and meaning and invite traditional interpretation, while practically simultaneously other elements will block and perhaps even ridicule attempts at interpretation. Such a text, then, sets up a dialogue that keeps the representational qualities of the fiction in question firmly in play while simultaneously casting doubt on its potential for representing the real. For Hutcheon, this dialogue enables political critique (because of the fiction's representational elements), while it prevents that critique from hardening into dogma (by countering the suggestion of

representation). Hutcheon's model recognizes the force of poststructuralist arguments, but does not wholly want to give up on the traditional humanist view of language as a window on the world.

From the early 1980s onwards, poststructuralism was practically omnipresent in the debate on postmodernism – almost feverishly embraced, emphatically rejected or treated with optimistic caution. But there were exceptions, the most important one the formalist approach best exemplified by the work of Brian McHale who in 1982 (quite correctly) observed that '[m]ost writing about postmodern writing to date has been polemical or apologetic'.⁸³ But he also noted some contributions to the debate that had been 'more descriptive', among them those of David Lodge and Alan Wilde, and would go on to present the fullest descriptive account of postmodern literature to date. For McHale the difference between modernist and postmodernist fiction is to be found in a change of dominant – not the cultural dominant of Fredric Jameson, but the literary dominant of the literary theorist Roman Jakobson, who had defined it as 'the focusing component of a work of art' which 'rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components' (McHale's quotation).⁸⁴ Modernist fiction, McHale argues, is epistemological in the sense that it

is designed to raise such questions as: 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 knowledge? and so on.⁸⁵

The dominant in postmodern fiction, however, is ontological. Postmodern fiction deploys strategies that foreground such questions as: 'what is a world? what kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? what happens when different worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated ... how is a projected world structured? and so on.'⁸⁶ In this scheme of things, McHale points out, modernist fiction follows the epistemological structure of the detective novel while the postmodern novel prefers the ontological mode of science fiction – with both modes always sharing important elements with the other. To put this in other terms, McHale's modernism, with its focus on knowledge, is primarily concerned with the conditions that make representation possible (or, as the case may be, impossible), whereas his postmodernism, while certainly not uninterested in representation, allows itself a good deal of autonomy in the construction of its verbal worlds. McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* of 1987, whose 'descriptive poetics' largely resists the lure of poststructuralism, offers the fullest catalogue of the various ways in which that autonomy is achieved.⁸⁷

Conclusion

Postmodernism was by no means the natural, self-evident term for the 'new literature' of the 1960s and 1970s. On the contrary, in both poetry criticism and that of fiction it was initially applied to texts that would later disappear from the postmodern canon, while many critics who correctly identified what would later come to be called postmodern literature studiously avoided the term. And those who did use it, and took the full spectrum of modernism into account, felt uneasy about applying the term to what seemed a reshaping of the strategies of the continental avant-gardes, which had often involved anti-representational moves that were politically inspired. From their perspective, postmodernism looked more like avant-garde modernism than something that was genuinely post-modern. It took the extraordinary embrace of poststructuralism by American academe and its identification of postmodernism with poststructuralism to turn postmodernism into a generally accepted term and to create a definitive distinction between avant-garde modernism and postmodernism. While avant-garde anti-representation was interpreted as politically motivated, a form of protest against the bourgeois status quo, postmodern anti-representation was seen in poststructuralist terms as anti-essentialist, anti-metaphysical. This anti-essentialism had a political dimension, as argued by for instance Lyotard and Hutcheon, but its basis was philosophical.

Depending on how literary postmodernism's 'project' was interpreted, that postmodernism was pre-Socratic, pre-modern, avant-garde modern, self-consciously modern or indeed post-modern. It is not surprising, then, that the advent of postmodernism as a literary-critical concept affected but did not revolutionize our idea of modernism. As Astradur Eysteinnsson pointed out a long time ago, attempts to redefine modernism in the light of postmodernism were 'frequently tied to narrow modernist canons ... that [we]re, moreover, restricted to a single language',⁸⁸ and he might have added that language was English. Those redefinitions of modernism construct a high modernism that is far less experimental and more conservative – in other words, more 'realistic' – than it actually was and tend to avoid writers such as André Gide, Gertrude Stein, Mikhail Bulgakov, Franz Kafka, Antonin Artaud and many others who would seriously compromise the picture. One solution to this dilemma is to lift such writers out of modernism altogether and make them honorary postmodernists – 'outright postmodernists, *avant-la-lettre*', as Jameson says of the avant-garde – but such sleights-of-hand too obviously serve definitional purposes to be convincing.

An important development connected with literary postmodernism, although not 'literary' in itself and applied far beyond the literary field, is

the emergence and triumphal progress of postmodern criticism, also known as postmodern theory. Postmodern criticism adopted from poststructuralism its central interest in problems of language and signification and radicalized its questioning of Enlightenment humanism. It distrusted conceptual systems and saw universalism and its concomitant essentialism as ultimately totalitarian. It rejected the notion of the unique, self-determined and coherent subject and questioned notions of originality and authorship. In a later stage it developed an interest in how language was instrumental in establishing and perpetuating power relations and in processes of marginalization. It is this postmodernism that in the course of the 1980s and 1990s branched out in all directions, making itself felt in historiography, ethnography, musicology, religious studies, legal studies, cultural studies and other areas that experienced a postmodern moment or even a more lasting postmodern reorientation. And it is this postmodern criticism that widely came to be seen as radically relativist, fact-free, and anti-rational and that gave postmodernism its bad name. Let me offer some examples. In 1997 Alan Sokal, a physicist and mathematician at New York University, and his Belgian colleague Jean Bricmont published *Intellectual Impostors: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science*, reviewed by the biologist Richard Dawkins in an article called 'Postmodernism Disrobed' whose opening phrase left little to the imagination: 'Suppose you are an intellectual impostor with nothing to say, but with strong ambitions to succeed in academic life.'⁸⁹ In the same year another famous biologist, E. O. Wilson, exasperated by postmodern theory's claims, told us that the 'postmodern hypothesis is blissfully free of existing information on how the mind works'.⁹⁰ For Wilson postmodern theory was the unfortunate result of the 'pathetic reverence commonly given Gallic obscurantism by American academics'.⁹¹ In the psycholinguist Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* of 2002 we find a similar indictment of postmodernism, which according to Pinker is 'based on a false theory of human psychology'⁹² and 'a militant denial of human nature'.⁹³ For Pinker, the totalitarian regime that cynically keeps rewriting history in George Orwell's *1984* 'is thoroughly postmodernist'.⁹⁴ There is no dearth of prominent academics attacking what they saw as postmodernism's radical, irrational and irresponsible relativism. After 9/11 even newspapers turned against postmodernism. 'Attacks on U.S. Challenge the Perspectives of Postmodern True Believers' was the headline of a *New York Times* article two weeks after the destruction of New York's World Trade Center.⁹⁵ 'Postmodern Outlook Objectively Smashed' reported the *Washington Times*.⁹⁶ But here we have left the territory of literary postmodernism, even if this frontal assault did not leave postmodern literature's reputation unaffected. That is another story, for another time.

Notes

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