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Postmodernism and the Novel

To discover which narratives might be postmodern novels we must first sort out the various and conflicting definitions of the term *postmodernism*. Depending on the interpretive code that governs its use, this term can mean almost anything. A Marxist, for example, defines postmodernism negatively, in such a way as to suit the agendas of Marxism. The cultural critic defines postmodernism historically, as a set of discursive conditions requiring readjustment of traditional values. The conventional moralist treats it as an unfair assault on All We Hold Dear. Such differences in usage testify to the resilience of the term that has become a kind of system-marker; what it marks is not the identity of postmodernism but the values and limitations of the various interpretive codes.

Whatever else it is, postmodern narrative is a feat of language: an effort to resurrect powers of language that have become constrained by mechanisms of production, especially the production of "meaning." Language, postmodern writing reminds us—and all the systems of meaning and value that operate like language—has many other functions than the production of "meanings," which are the portable property produced by narratives of a bygone cultural moment. Because usage of the term *postmodernism* vacillates in this way, between the excessively narrow and the meaninglessly broad, this entry will frame a definition of postmodernity in broadly historical terms.

Across a wide range of activity since World War II, European culture has sustained a multivalent challenge to some of its founding assumptions. From academic disciplines to practical science, from physics to philosophy, from politics to art, the description of the world has changed in ways that upset some basic assumptions of modernity about identity and structure, about the nature of space and time, and about transcendence and particularity. And these developments are not local events; they have been long-prepared and reflect tectonic shifts in founding cultural arrangements.

As a historical term, *postmodernism* indicates something that comes after modernity. Consequently its definition varies with the term *modern*. Sometimes *modern* indicates movements in the arts around the turn of the 20th century known as modernism, and in that case *postmodernism* refers to a fairly local phenomenon of the mid- to late-20th century. Alternatively, *modern* indicates the period that follows the medieval—that is, Renaissance culture and its sequels—in which case *postmodern* refers to a broadly distributed cultural phenomenon.

The present account accepts the broad usage of the term *modern* and conceives *postmodernism* as whatever it is that follows and transforms that particular Renaissance (or Reformation, or even Enlightenment) modernity. Some of the more ahistorical contributions of recent French philosophy (Derrida, Lyotard, Irigaray) trace their postmodern critique of Western metaphysics back to the Greeks, but while these efforts are important they blur practical issues because they occupy a period so vast that they scarcely allow for historical change at all. Postmodernity is a historical term and a historical event, and the practical and political issues it raises took their particular definition from post-medieval modernity.

Two key assumptions in particular characterize postmodernism. The first is the assumption that all human systems oper-

ate like language, that is, as systems of differential (rather than referential) function: systems that are finite and that powerfully construct and maintain whatever we know of meaning and value. The second and related assumption is that no common denominators exist to guarantee either the One-ness of the world or the possibility of neutral or objective thought: in short, no "Nature" or "Truth" or "God" or "The Future" or any of the explanatory narratives based upon those fictions exist to rescue any value from finitude and any individual from choice.

The first of these assumptions—that language, not more traditional notions of structure, is the model for all human systems of meaning and value—expands the notion of language to include a variety of symbolic systems, whether they involve politics, fashion, gender relations, wrestling, or money. Language can act as such a model because language is conceived as a system of differential function, not as a collection of referential pointers. This view of language was stated influentially by Ferdinand de Saussure at the beginning of the 20th century in a series of lectures at Geneva on linguistics (c. 1906-17, published from notes by his students as *Cours de linguistique générale* [1916; *Course in General Linguistics*]). The linguistic sign, as Saussure defined it, does not refer to objects in the world (each of which has different names in different languages), but instead it specifies a particular linguistic system. To read or understand a linguistic sequence, even the simplest, is to recognize difference, and at a level of complication of which we are blissfully unaware; it is to perform an incalculably complex and continuous act of differentiation, more and more balanced and rich the more that linguistic sequence inclines toward poetry or other complex usage. (Technically, Saussure's word points not to an object but to an idea, and that idea is itself linguistic; there is nothing prior to language.)

So, for example, the word *tree* has no natural relation to any object, and we understand it only because we understand what it is not (not *free*, not *trous*, not verb)—in other words, we understand the entire system called "English" in which this term functions and which it specifies. Even a simple word like *tree* has no exact equivalent either in other languages or in the world. It is not translatable; it is only readable according to a set of tacit rules (called "grammar") that enables us to differentiate between a nonsense sequence of words (for instance "Sleep ideas green furiously colorless") and an "English" sentence, however nonsensical (for instance "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously"). One cannot translate Baudelaire exactly into English, nor English nouns into Chinese, because each language is a system of functions, not a collection of pointers. Each system differs from all other languages except in *being* such a system. A "native" speaker is someone who understands that complex code-system; by extension, we "speak" or "write" in various nonverbal code systems simultaneously and continuously as we go through ordinary life.

These rather dry terms in fact are describing language's capacity for poetry: its capacity as a living language to provide its speakers with particular alphabets and lexicons of possibility, and to modify, even radically, the usages with which we constitute our worlds. It is here we begin to see a main agenda of narrative that could be called postmodern: the narrative that emphasizes those alphabets of possibility and that requires of us

new acts of attention. And we begin to see why the term *narrative* may be preferred over *novel* as more inclusive in its implication of those narratives that act like but are not primarily verbal constructs.

The postmodern moment, as Derrida puts it in his essay "La Structure, le signe et le jeu" ("Structure, Sign and Play"), is the moment "when language invaded the universal problematic": that is, when it has become broadly evident that everything operates by such codes, that everything behaves like language including the silent gesture, the plan of a city, the unspoken agenda, the fashion statement. The postmodern writer engages us not in the objectifying practices that belong to plot-and-character reruns of the same old stories, but instead in the recognition of the complexity and richness of our most unnoticed daily practices where coded systems function in multiples; they interest us in an expertise we have already but have depreciated in the interest of producing portable property ("meaning"). "There is no message," as Julio Cortázar says in *Hopscotch*, "only messengers."

Probably it is worth distinguishing postmodernism from deconstruction, with which it is sometimes confused. As an interpretive method, deconstruction seeks like postmodernism what is *not* present; but unlike postmodernism, which finds in that negative definition a liberation and an opportunity, the keynote of deconstruction too often zivers attention on loss—on points of crisis and breakdown in a system or coded rationalization—and in so doing gets lost in circularities and negative, even paranoid, questioning. It is almost as though deconstruction operates a kind of permanent nostalgia for lost objectivity. Postmodernism poses slightly different questions: what is the system of meaning and value? What are its limits and its capabilities? How does one negotiate between one and another?

The linguistic turn just described amounts to a major shift in the foundations of knowledge because it challenges the bases of consensus and representation that: Renaissance culture inscribed in science, in politics, and in art. That knowledge-system or "episteme" is founded in the humanistic belief that the world is One. This belief, codified in centuries of realist art, representational politics, and empirical science, is tantamount to the assertion that a common denominator can be found for all systems of belief and value: that the world is a unified field, explicable by a single explanatory system that belongs to nobody in particular, but to everybody in general.

However, as this belief informed increasingly secular and materialistic practices it became less secure in its claims to universal applicability. After the Renaissance, the "totalizing" claim to universal applicability was increasingly transferred from divinity to infinity, that is, from God to the infinite neutralities of humanist time and space; especially the infinity of space and time as they were radically reconstructed by Renaissance art and science. These developments established the neutral media of modernity in which so much has been possible. Postmodernism is the condition of coping without these absolute common denominators, especially without the neutral and homogeneous media of time and space that are the quintessential, field-unifying media of modernity.

By the 19th century the relativism not just of individual achievement but of systems was generally understood, but implicitly the belief in Truth remained. Darwin's theory of natural selection was not merely one among a number of unreconcilable

theories but one that more closely approximated Truth than prior ones. Implicitly, "totalization" or complete realization of a system's potential remains possible, even though it may not be visible from any single historical moment.

In postmodernism, on the other hand, relativism tips over into relativity, and "totalization" is positively to be avoided as a form of system-death. A system—for example the Latin language—once it has been universally achieved, fulfilled, or expressed, dies out literally and morally; it can be useful in limited ways but it lacks living tolerance and capacity for change.

Postmodern narrative positively avoids the kind of explanatory fullness that would "totalize" its instruments; full descriptions of motive and causality of the kind that formulate "character" and "event" are to be avoided because they tend toward objectification; a margin of multiplicity always remains, and usually a wide margin. This is not to be confused with vagueness, for postmodern narrative language is preternaturally precise. But as Alain Robbe-Grillet (1963) said of Kafka, "nothing is more fantastic than precision." It is the lack of mediating conditions, conditions that unify the world in a common horizon and system of explanation, that postmodern narrative lacks. In this it tips over into relativity.

The work of Robbe-Grillet, for example, thrives on the complete reduction of history and totality in favor of what he called the "obscure enterprise of form." His narrative strategies appear both in novels such as *La Jalousie* (1957; *Jealousy*) and in films such as *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961; *Last Year at Marienbad*). The nature of the sequence is similar in both: the written description or the camera trace various elliptical trajectories in which repetitions and variations are compounded and multiplied until they produce a kind of absorption and even emotional investment of a sort customarily associated with traditionally meaningful plots, and which yet have no plot or "meaning" in any customary sense of the term. Of course, one has to be capable of letting plot "out the door," but to the well-intentioned reader the effect is almost always one of delight and pleasure in the pattern-making and, perhaps, in the priority the narratives give to such activity. As in Cortázar or Nabokov, Robbe-Grillet's witty film and novel tease the conventional reader with vestiges of the old plot-and-character convention, only to undermine them completely.

Readers are either alarmed or inspired by the implication in postmodern narrative that all systems are self-contained, that therefore all beliefs and values are systemic, that none involves "Truth," and that Truth is impossible and undesirable. This implication goes beyond the recuperable relativism of the 19th century to unrecuperable difference in the 20th. In modernity, relative systems still cohabit more or less uneasily in a common world; in postmodernity, finite systems (Marxism or "English") *construct* the world, which means the world is *not* One but many. Words like *truth*, *nature*, *reality*, and even *human* imply, *falsely*, that an autonomous world of meaning and values exists that *transcends* all finite and mutually exclusive human systems and somehow guarantees them. Postmodernism denies that absolute basis. The questions always remain: What truth? Which nature? Whose reality?

When Truth and Reality disappear so does the objectivity that supported them through the humanist era: an objectivity that itself proves to be a finite system that operates like language, a differential system of function that the "objects" and the referential

language of modernity exist to sustain. In postmodern narrative, those "objects" and their psychic counterpart, "subjects," cease to have interest; instead, language can have new functions because it is sprung from the need to refer to "objects" and "subjects" or to support objectifying enterprises such as empiricism or the Napoleonic Code. So, for example, Cortázar's *Rayuela* (1963; *Hopscotch*) offers different sequences for its chapters. The conventional sequence, which produces plot, event, and character, concludes midway through the novel. The recommended "hopscotch" sequence elides event and character for the sake of a protracted, delightful improvisation that continues well past "the end."

Postmodern narrative is a feat of language that plays with the elements of systems and refuses responsibility for consistency within this or that totalized explanation. What one wants to avoid at all costs is something without play, without slack, without the living capacity for movement; one wants play in the line, play in the structure, in the sense of flexibility and variability even to the point of reorganizing the structure. So, for example, Italo Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979; *If on a winter's night a traveler*) consists of a series of first chapters in a never-ending opening gambit. This process, rather than anything that could be summarized in terms of character or plot motivation, constitutes Calvino's novel. We have only beginnings, no endings; by implication the reader who wants an explanatory narrative must construct it herself.

The postmodern attenuation of history and individualism means that narrative seeks other sources of energy and satisfaction than the development of plot and character. Postmodern narrative focuses on the multiplicity of code-systems—of languages in the widest sense—and thus problematizes the ideas of "individuality" and of "history" that were so important to humanism.

The "individual"—and the related idea of "self"—was constructed by and for Enlightenment knowledge and social projects. In postmodern narrative this "founding subject" of history, as Michel Foucault called it, disappears, and instead the possible individuality suggested by terms like *identity* or *self* or *consciousness* remains opaque, problematic, mobile. Marguerite Duras' narrative voice in *L'Amant* (1984; *The Lover*) is problematic as it vacillates between "she" and "I" as if unwilling to settle for one or the other. Duras' I/She is neither the stable entity belonging to a Cartesian *cogito* nor a helpless function of systems, but part of a rhythmic element in the novel that has little or nothing to do with psychological definitions and much to do with the power of language and the strength of a writer. Readers of postmodern narratives must accept that the romantic "individual" is no more; that whatever is "individual" about a life does not at all arise from a cultivated "natural" essence—a romantic soul trailing clouds of glory—but instead from the activity and the work a subject does: from its particular specification of the discursive complex that it inhabits.

Different writers problematize identity in different ways, depending on their commitment to history. Duras abandons the romantic self with positive delight; in her text, past and present belong to the same oscillation, the same rhythmic element that effaces individual identity, effacing the coherence of history in favor of a different relation to the past. Heinrich Böll, on the other hand, anatomizes with more nostalgia the corrosive effects on identity of a society motivated by multinational corporations

and the tabloid press in *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (1974; *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*). In this novel the multiplied systems of power and value only bleed into each other by violence, a violence that makes individual integrity viable only in prison. But while Böll's thematic undertones are nostalgic for a European tradition reaching back in narrative from Camus' *L'Étranger* (1942; *The Stranger*) to Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir* (1830; *The Red and the Black*), his narrative strategies disrupt the thematic agendas at every turn and belong to the complex interplay of systems characteristic of postmodern narrative. His narrative voice longs for but conspicuously fails to achieve a history; that is, the power to bring all stories into a single story.

The absence of historical conventions in postmodern narrative is perhaps its most noticeable feature. History is a kind of perspective system that potentially aligns all viewpoints in space and time into a single, common-denominator medium—into the same putatively "neutral" time that objectifies a common world subject to common rules. This idea of history is crucial to most 19th-century narrative, especially under the influence of Sir Walter Scott, whose work was celebrated throughout Europe and North America because it provided a new narrative medium for a new social order of things. It is a narrative suitable to democratic social agendas because it assumes, and thus inscribes, a universal connectedness between past and present.

Historical narrative, however, is a totalizing system of the subtlest kind because its totalizing mechanism is not a dogma but a medium. By constructing a temporal medium that is neutral, historical conventions make possible universally applicable systems of human, social, and even scientific explanation. Postmodernist narrative puts history in the interesting position of considering its own historicity. Time does not pass in Duras or Böll or Nabokov, and characters who try to discover underlying causalities or to understand the past come to grief. Vladimir Nabokov's novels always submit "history" to the characteristically postmodern play of systems. Once plot is "let out the door," as he says in his last important book, *Ada; or, Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), the writer and reader can get on with the main business of postmodern narrative, which is to experience the powers of language unconstrained by teleological necessities. Especially in *Ada*, in *Lolita* (1955), and in *Transparent Things* (1972), Nabokov abandons "the disaster of receding time" in favor of the process by which the so-called "individual" subjectivity, inhabiting its complex systemic structures (its language), develops its unique and unrepeatable "poetry."

Postmodern narrative, then, belongs to a cultural reformation that implicates the entire range of cultural practices, and includes academic fields from anthropology to philosophy, from physics to art. Many of the best examples of postmodern writing, especially those from the Latin American "boom," have become best-sellers in English-speaking countries and have gained international recognition. And, with a few notable exceptions, the most original postmodern writing has been done in Latin languages (French, Spanish, Italian) and not in English. This is a politically interesting fact. The postmodern critique of culture and knowledge is least understood and most resisted in Anglo-American cultures because they are so thoroughly invested in empiricism and in the representational politics and capitalist economies that seem to accompany empiricism.

The philosophical critiques of modernity and of rationalism

have in many cases been anticipated by the creative work of artists and scientists who have gone well beyond philosophers in locating the practical implications of postmodernism. Artists such as René Magritte and various surrealists, filmmakers such as Luis Buñel, Alain Resnais, and the Coen brothers, post-Einsteinian scientists interested in quanta and chaos, feminists interested in new acts of personal and political attention, and architects who play with traditional conventions—all these have explored more fully than most theoretical writers the practical and material implications of postmodernism.

Postmodern writers make possible for readers something that even filmmakers cannot achieve: a new habitation in language, a new sense of the autonomous powers of words, of writing, of speech. In fact, one of the most immediate material conditions of life is precisely language. What is more material than the kinesis and sonority of language, or than the torque and tension created by the not-said? Postmodern writers are thoroughly invested in exploring the play of meaning and value that differential systems of all kinds make available.

What postmodern writers do, then, is to make visible both the powers of verbal language that have been suppressed by rationalist agendas as well as the degree to which all systems in their plurality operate like language. Earlier narrative strategies work to mediate plurality by resorting to history, where difference can always be reconciled by the temporal common denominator essential to the dramas of emergent form. By comparison, postmodern writers attempt what the surrealists attempted: to make the limits of systems appear by pluralizing them and by providing no common denominators but language itself. Postmodern novels supply pieces of systems, alphabets of possibility, and the problem of linkage; but they leave the actual linkages precariously up to readers. To paraphrase Jean-François Lyotard's definition of politics in *Le Différend* (1983; *The Differend*), the postmodern narrative condition consists of differences in need of linkage. That condition is something that we already experience daily, and practically everywhere except in the traditional (historical) novel. Postmodern novels simply call attention to and validate that practical experience and its knowledge.

To classify postmodern novels or novelists leads to lists of qualifiers and finalists and obscures the point, which is to validate experiment and adventure. It is not difficult to round up the usual suspects and texts: the *nouveau romanciers* in France (including Duras, Robbe-Grillet, Raymond Queneau, Robert Pinget); a few German, Italian, and East European writers (such as Böll, Calvino, and Milan Kundera), following the lead of Kafka; in English, writers such as John Hawkes, Gerald Murnane, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon; and of course the writers of the Latin American boom (Isabel Allende, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, José Donoso, Gabriel García Márquez, Octavio Paz, and many others). In ascertaining what is or is not a postmodern narrative, anything qualifies that is consistent with the large agendas of postmodernity described earlier. How or whether a particular writer or text conforms to those agendas depends on the uncertain enterprise of reading as an enterprise of renewal.

"To speak of knowledge is futile." Virginia Woolf says in *The Waves* (1931), and postmodern novelists agree with her; "all is experiment and adventure." At the level of the sentence and in the entire text, the postmodern novel experiments with the possibilities opened up by the erasure of an objectified world. The

postmodern writer above all experiments with sequence, varying the syntactical development of traditional plot with various paratactic developments running parallel to and even sometimes in contradiction with any main plot line.

Postmodern narratives always proceed with tremendous zest and buoyancy, not anxiously regretting the passing of Truth and Reality but, on the contrary, rejoicing in the limitations of all systems and in the recovery of buried potentialities in ordinary languages, sequences, and discourses. Postmodern artists call full attention to the medium; that is the message, that is the "meaning." So-called "content" is a religious relic. While it is unprofitable to classify postmodern novels, one negative rule might apply: if the novel is not playful, enjoyable, pleasurable, erotic in the largest sense of life-affirmation, then it probably is not a postmodern novel.

Postmodernist writing offers both new freedoms and new constraints. The freedoms lie in the emphasis on the constructed nature of all knowledge and projects; this means that, because they have been invented, knowledge and projects can be changed. That there is morally or socially speaking no "nature" of things is a liberation, not a loss. The countervailing constraint is the enforced recognition of how many of our supposedly "personal" beliefs and values are not unique to us but things we are born into, that we inherit with the whole complex of interpretations and grammars that govern what we can say and who can speak. Modernity gave us World Historical models and goals. Postmodernity offers us more local, more collective, less heroic opportunities. Postmodernism gets rid of "character" and "point of view," but it by no means extinguishes individuality; it simply denaturalizes it and insists on its discursive function.

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See also Historical Writing and the Novel; Metafiction; Nouveau Roman; Realism; Time in the Novel

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