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Review of *International Postmodernism**
edited by Hans Bertens and
Douwe Fokkema

THOMAS DOCHERTY

This volume is an extremely large and diverse collection of essays whose function is twofold. On the one hand, it acts as a grand summation of cultural postmodernism and of sociological postmodernity at what is taken to be a kind of chiliastic, though nonetheless propitious, turning-point at the close of the twentieth century. On the other hand (as is already suggested in that division between postmodernism and postmodernity), it does not strive to present international postmodernism in the bland fashion of the 'reference-guide', but rather has its own lines of argument to advance. The broad shape of its position can be discerned from the mode of organisation of its fifty-four essays into four main sub-divisions. The first of these is a set of introductory essays which distinguish postmodernism from postmodernity, while yet also considering the ways in which there is a politics of the postmodern or a culturally postmodernist manner in which postmodernity might be discussed. That section is followed by what is the shortest section in the book, six essays on postmodernism in arts other than literature (architecture, performance, film, dance, music, visual arts), all written by key figures in the relevant fields (such as Charles Jencks or Sally Banes). These two sections thus set out a broad socio-cultural terrain onto which the main concerns of the book can be mapped: a third section deals broadly with formalist experimentation in postmodernist writing (mostly narrative), and the fourth, on the reception and processing of postmodernism, offers an extensive set of surveys of 'located' postmodernisms (in Latin America, Canada, the various

* *International Postmodernism*, edited by Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema (John Benjamins Publishing Company: Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1997). *A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages* Sponsored by the International Comparative Literature Association; vol. xi. Pp. xvi + 581.

Europes – western, central, eastern – Africa, India, China and Japan). This last section is necessarily broadly descriptive, giving accounts in an often introductory fashion, of what is and has been happening in postmodernist writing in these various diverse parts of the world. It is extremely useful in that it not only demonstrates the great international purchase that the postmodern possesses, but also serves once more to raise interesting questions about the potential interface between postmodernism and postmodernity, between the cultural and the geopolitical. All the essays (except one) are newly commissioned pieces, and the project is one that has been in composition for around six or seven years. In sum, what we have here is vast, but not monumental: there are sufficient spaces and cracks within its edifice to ensure that the book will provide for much lively and ongoing debate over the nature of the postmodern. Indeed, the very structure of the book's organisation – the way in which it has clearly been conceived by its editors – raises central and intriguing matter for debate and discussion.

What should we make of this collection and its appearance now, at this end-point of the twentieth century? In the opening introductory essay, Hans Bertens describes the postmodern as 'the second great upheaval in the arts of the twentieth century', after modernism. There is no doubting the fact that the eruption of a lot of talk about the postmodern certainly has made a great contribution to the progress or movement of the arts in recent decades; yet (if I may pose a threatening question) has it really been that important after all? In the early stages of this great 'upheaval', Gerald Graff published a brief essay on 'The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough', in which, among other things, he called into question the optimistic idea that we had suddenly been able to make some significant break with our immediate past. This curmudgeonly attitude was rather on its own in the late sixties and seventies, though it would be accurate to say that it has received much philosophical support in the subsequent years. It is a view that has been more widely accepted by those who have been re-reading Adorno (such as the Lyotard of the seventies and early eighties), and who share an anxiety or pessimism about the supposed straightforward gradual emancipation of those enslaved to superstitions through the progressive operations of a simply understood reason. Reason, progress, the relation of art to politics: these are crucial areas around which this volume has been conceived.

The point at issue is a simple one: how important or significant have been those great aesthetic experiments in narratology that we have seen

over the last forty years or so? For many critics, the hope is, of course, that these experiments and developments have in some sense been 'progressive', or that they have had some significant cultural, political or sociological impact. This is a rather 'academicist' view, in that it takes for granted a relatively easy or transparent relation between what goes on in the academy's discourses and what goes on in the other realms of activity that constitute the social formation. James McCorkle, writing here in Adornian mode of 'The Inscription of Postmodernism in Poetry', argues that 'If the term *postmodern* is to have any effective value it will have to be understood as a condition connecting ethics and aesthetics' (p. 46). Yet, as Susan Rubin Suleiman argues, in 'The Politics of Postmodernism after the Wall', that very academicist view which would link the aesthetic with the ethical is somehow inadequate to real political conditions. Considering events in the former Yugoslavia, she concludes that arguments within the academy between 'pro-postmodernists' (whom she identifies as, for rough examples, Hal Foster, Linda Hutcheon, Rosalind Krauss, Lyotard and others), 'pro-modernists' (such as Jameson, Habermas, Norris, Eagleton), and 'cultural pessimists' (Baudrillard above all, Gilles Lipovetsky, and occasionally some pro-postmodernists and pro-modernists), are all rather to the point, yet strangely ineffective. She writes: 'The problem is deciding what to do when it becomes obvious that conversation, dialogue, translation have failed. In the absence of any possible debate, what relation can exist between intellectuals modernist or postmodernist, and butchers or would-be butchers? This question appears all the more agonizing when one realizes that some of the butchers and would-be butchers are themselves intellectuals' (pp. 62-3). We can set this, further, against the argument of William Spanos in 'Rethinking the Postmodernity of the Discourse of Postmodernism' when he calls for a return to thinking about some great political issues - here the example given is the Vietnam War - 'in the terms originally invoked by such inaugural thinkers as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Althusser, Irigaray' (p. 73). The academicist view, in all its optimism concerning the function of the intellectual in socio-political amelioration, is clearly one that is questionable, and being questioned fairly insistently here. The diversity of the essays written for this volume, and the heterogeneity of the cultural and political conditions which they address, serve to emphasise the *fact* of the matter - that this 'instrumentalist' view of the intellectual and her or his social function is rather bankrupt - while yet, paradoxically or contradictorily, arguing (at least tacitly but certainly

structurally, *via* the organization of materials which lead out from a consideration of matters of form to matters of geo-political specificity), the case for the continuing optimism of the intellectual and the breakthroughs – socio-cultural or political – that she or he can make.

There is ostensibly a contradiction, therefore, at the core of this volume which, in its attempts to stress the multiplicity, plurality and variety of postmodernisms, nonetheless homogenises that diversity under the sign of a latent academicist optimism. Such an optimism is itself, of course, amenable to historical dating: it derives from the sixties, when experiment was in the ascendant and conformity was to be distrusted. That period, in fact, a high-point of both the *nouveau roman*, *nouveau nouveau roman*, and simultaneously of the emergent and rapidly dominant *nouvelle critique*, was one in which experimentation itself became almost synonymous with criticism; and so, especially in the field of narrative, a *rapprochement* was effected between the academy's intellectuals (such as Barthes, say) and the social formation's writers (such as Robbe-Grillet) precisely to the extent that the novels being written were experimental, that is to say, 'critical'. Academic critics and artists were thus aligned in the one great project of 'criticism', by which was meant the elevation of a self-consciousness to a primary position in progressivist thought. It was as if the concept of the 'engaged intellectual' – of which the typical manifestation might be Sartre, say – had suffered a kind of dissociation of sensibility such that her or his creative energies had been divorced from the critical intellect; and that such a dissociation would now have to be healed but, in a fashion different from that pertaining within existentialist marxism, especially after Adorno's essay on 'Commitment'. No longer was the critic the poor or belated servant of the author; rather, critic and author – or, as in the formulations around Barthesian thinking of the time, *reader* and *author* – were now to be co-workers in the production of self-consciousness and of critical thought in the social formation at large. It is perhaps for this reason that we can also see in this volume a further central tenet of the argumentation, running throughout but coming explicitly to the fore in the final section, that the role of the reading subject is crucial in textual interpretation, or that real readers existing in real-life situations are radically implicated in or interpellated by the specific acts of reading – the engagements or commitments to texts – that they make. Thus, the artistic work which, through its formalist experimentation, can be identified as an aspect of postmodernism, is brought into the social by the reader who, in the real world, confronts

postmodernity and finds ways of engaging her or his cultural activity as a reader with her or his social activity as a citizen.

Some of the implications of this kind of argument are teased out, explored, and critiqued in the splendid piece included here on 'Postmodernity as a Philosophical Concept', by Wolfgang Welsch and Mike Sandbothe which, through a fully informed and informative examination of the key philosophical concepts, positions, and stakes of the postmodern, arrives at a fundamental critique of contemporary reasoning itself. Their argument concludes with the observation that 'reason is no longer a faculty to be thought of as overriding and hierarchical, but rather a faculty with a transversal ability to facilitate connections and transitions between the forms of rationality' (p. 84). Transversal reason such as this is not new, but simply achieves a special importance in the contemporary moment insofar as it 'accentuates a moment which has always belonged to reason' (p. 84). That kind of argument around the construction of one specific mode of reasoning as some monolithic norm of Reason itself was again an argument whose roots lay in the sixties and seventies, particularly in the work of Foucault, of course, but also in Derrida's 'White Mythology' essay, or in the work of Irigaray. The editors of the volume are fully aware of the stakes of this kind of position, and, for them, it translates neatly into a consideration of the relation between the postmodern and, in relation to the examination of issues of power implicit within a mode of thinking or consciousness which the west has claimed as reason itself, the *postcolonial*. Many within the field of postcolonial studies want to distance the concerns of emergent and re-emergent nations from what are seen to be fundamentally 'western', 'imperialist', even, sometimes, 'American' concepts such as the postmodern. Bertens and Fokkema are able to reveal, in the lengthy section of pieces commissioned for this volume relating to world postmodernisms, that the 'transversal reason' outlined by Welsch and Sandbothe is, perhaps, the most useful if not the only way of considering the question of reason in our time. The shifting variety of readings of the postmodern, culturally, politically, ethically, in these essays dealing with a diversity of geo-political locations, requires from the reader of this volume an athleticism of spirit and intellect in which forms of reasoning are made to confront each other without the ready availability of any simple or neat hierarchisation among them. The consequence is, perhaps, shocking, in that it emerges first of all that any reading of the postmodern in terms of the normativity of a north American ideology is inadequate in the face of the range and

diversity of competing cultural formations of the term and the phenomena associated with it. Further than this, however, it also emerges that what we had perhaps taken to be an emergent 'European' form of the postmodern (in contradistinction to the American, say; or a 'Continental' postmodern which could be set against an 'analytic' conception of it) itself lacks a unified identity. The reasons for this have to do with the different relation of European nation-states to the influence of America or to their position with respect to the former Soviet Union or – and this is perhaps the most important factor to emerge, sometimes quietly, from this survey – their position with respect to national *tradition*. The strength or weakness of indigenous traditions has a great deal to do with the conditions in and through which the postmodern may prove its fertility or fecundity. In moments of great political change, as in Spain in 1975 or Portugal in 1974 (in both these cases arguably making the emergence of the postmodern possible in these countries), or France (in *Tel quel*, say) and Germany (the *Kursbuch* 15, say) in the years around 1968, we can see the ground in which radical forms of experimentation are actually required; for these situations are precisely moments in which ostensibly monumental traditions are being interrogated or discarded; and yet they are also moments in which the radicals, in their striving to overthrow regressive regimes, themselves reclaim specific traditions which, they say, have been traduced by the dominant forces whom they will overthrow. In this section of the study, it becomes clear that arguments about the postmodern are, in many respects, arguments about tradition itself and about the ownership or 'inhabiting' of such traditions or rival versions of history, especially of national history. The single greatest significant factor here is the kind of globalisation associated with comparative literature itself, in which the culture of Spain acknowledges and is aware of that of Portugal, and both of these acknowledge their own imperialist histories thus becoming more fully aware of Latin American developments, while France or Germany, aware of the centrality of their position in postwar Europe, assume for themselves a regenerated, if critically different, form of cultural and political centrality in their world-regions, and so on.

Tradition, in fact, is the great term required for a satisfactory engagement with the postmodern as such; but, as this volume shows, 'tradition' would be itself a term almost as fraught as 'postmodern' itself; indeed, what the collection – as opposed to any single essay within the volume – reveals is that tradition is, in many ways, almost

synonymous with postmodernism, paradoxically. Tradition, like postmodernism, is nothing more or less than the site for an argument about the possibility of change or development, continuity or rupture, conservative regression or radical progressiveness. That 'tradition' in this singular form is already a contradiction in terms (there being only 'traditions' over which arguments about hierarchy or priority can take place) is made clear by the great diversity – the *internationalism* – of this volume. It is a testament to the energy of the editors that they manage to be so inclusive, in the sense that they provide a vast amount of materials through which such argument about the postmodern, its internationalist cast or standing, and its relation to other cultural and aesthetic forms, can take place.

If this turns out to be a somewhat millennial project, it proves further its timeliness. Considerations of the 'end of the century' might also coincide with considerations of 'the end of postmodernism' itself; yet, once more, that end was always apparent in its beginnings, just like the century's end or the millennium's. Endings – multiple, contradictory, incomplete, fractured – are of the essence of postmodern culture; and it may well turn out to be the case that the postmodern was itself merely symptomatic of a set of chiliastic fears, anxieties or questions whose roots lie in the mid-twentieth century, with those by now dated (if recurring) arguments over the end of ideology. The question for art and culture will remain as fraught in 2000 as it was in 1999: 'how do I paint? How do I write? How do I compose?': and the question for criticism, likewise, persists: 'how do I think?' Indeed, one might re-phrase these questions in the light of my foregoing comments on the importance of tradition: 'how *dare* I write, paint, compose?' and '*what dare* I think?' If these questions are the legacy dealt to us for the next century by postmodernism, they seem to me to be in essence rather old, even fundamental questions; but they are all the more important for that, and this volume is all the more important for allowing them to be raised and requiring them to be answered.