

POSTMODERN HUMANISM

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Nothing is ever final in literary and cultural studies. Forty-five years ago religion was declared dead, capitalism was supposed to be moribund, and the novel was not doing too well either. The imminent death of the novel seemed even to be confirmed from inside, so to speak, by writers like the American novelist John Barth, who in a famous essay devoted to what he called the “literature of exhaustion” faced with a certain despair the question how fiction could manage to be “technically-up-to-date” and sophisticated while it still spoke “eloquently and memorably to our still-human hearts and conditions, as the great artists have always done” (Barth 2002: 140). Now, in 2012, we hear that we are living in a postsecular age, and we don’t need anybody to tell us that in spite of the best efforts of American and European banks capitalism is alive and doing pretty well. As for the novel, it is doing great business, both at the level of Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*, Nora Roberts’s romances, or the apocalyptic and seemingly unstoppable *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, and at the rather more demanding level that Barth had in mind, the level of, say, the English writer Nicola Barker’s *Darkmans* of 2007, to my mind one of the best novels of the last ten years and a book to which I will briefly return below. The unexpected survival of the serious novel was in large part due to the rise of a new mode of writing that soon came to be called postmodernism and that fascinated a whole generation of young North American and European writers. But before long postmodernism, too, was supposed to be in deep trouble. And indeed, with regard to postmodernism’s fall from grace, we can easily point to a whole range of major and minor turning points. In 1996 Alan Sokal, a physicist and mathematician at New York University, submitted a nonsense article called “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” to the prestigious poststructuralist journal *Social Text*, an article that he felt would flatter the editors’ ideological

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preconceptions. It did, and *Social Text*, published by Duke University Press, was only too happy to publish what to any scientist was blatant nonsense. (I first learned about the hoax through a front-page [!] article in the *International Herald Tribune* and it was impossible to miss its rather triumphant tone: postmodernism had gotten its well-deserved come-uppance.) The following year Sokal, with his Belgian colleague Jean Bricmont, published *Intellectual Impostors: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science*, an attack on what they saw as the scientific illiteracy of poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers. The book, largely ignored by the postmodern community, was immediately picked up by other scientists. The opening phrase of the review that the famous biologist Richard Dawkins devoted to Bricmont and Sokal's efforts to expose postmodernism's false pretensions left little to the imagination—"Suppose you are an intellectual impostor with nothing to say, but with strong ambitions to succeed in academic life..." (Dawkins 2003, 55)—as did its title, "Postmodernism Disrobed." In the same year another famous biologist, E.O. Wilson, took on post-

300 modernism in his *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. Trying to bridge the gap between C.P. Snow's "two cultures," Wilson deplores the fact that with the rise of postmodern thought the gulf between the natural sciences and the humanities seems to have become wider than ever. The "postmodern hypothesis," Wilson tells us, is "blissfully free of existing information on how the mind works" (234). What is worse, it wants to be uninformed because it refuses to accept empirical evidence. Referring to postmodernism as the unfortunate result of a "pathetic reverence commonly given Gallic obscurantism by American academics" (234), Wilson can only shake his head over the willful ignorance of the postmodernists, even if he applauds their "revolutionary spirit" and their stance of radical critique. What he cannot take seriously is what he sees as their utter disregard of empirical reality and its natural laws. Politically, postmodernism is a positive development bringing a long-overdue emancipation; epistemologically, it is a self-indulgent, foolish, even infantile delusion.

In the psycholinguist Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* of 2002 we find a similar indictment of postmodernism. In fact, the subtitle of Pinker's book should properly have read "the modern and postmodern denial of human nature." The modern and postmodern "movements," Pinker tells us, "are based on a false theory of human psychology" (412) and "a militant denial of human nature" (416). Pinker's view of postmodernism is summed up by a brief detour through George Orwell's *1984*. Referring to the cynical rewritings of history by the totalitarian regime in that novel and to that regime's claims that "[r]eality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else" and that men and women "are infinitely malleable"—a precondition for successful rewritings of history—he argues that "[t]he philosophy of the regime is thoroughly postmodernist" (426-28). Although Pinker's argument may lack sophistication, it is clearly heart-felt. But for many of its antagonists, postmodernism had already lost its status as the center of a fierce polemics and had become an object of ridicule. In 2000 Andrew C. Bulhak created his *Postmodern Generator*, a computer program that upon request could generate "post-

modern” texts, and the next year the seasoned debunker Frederick Crews published *Postmodern Pooh* (2001), a not particularly hilarious satire of postmodern studies (and its perpetrators).

Outside the academy postmodernism did not fare much better after its heyday of the 1970s and the 1980s. I have already mentioned *The International Herald Tribune’s* rather gleeful report on the Sokal hoax. But the gloves really came off after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. “Attacks on U.S. Challenge the Perspectives of Postmodern True Believers” was the headline of a *New York Times* article two weeks later (Rothstein 2001). “Postmodern Outlook Objectively Smashed” reported the *Washington Times* (London 2001), going a bit further than its New York competitor, and *Time*, responding to a defense of postmodernism by Stanley Fish in the *New York Times* (Fish 2001), joined the *Post* in noting that “The Age of Postmodern Irony Comes to an End” and that “One good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony” (Rosenblatt 2001). In Europe, similar conclusions had already been drawn by the press after the siege of Sarajevo, in 1991, and again after the genocide at Srebrenica (1995). For the press it was war and terrorism that exposed the inner emptiness of postmodernism. Ultimately, postmodernism was *Spielerei*, a trivial intellectual game that could not survive a confrontation with mass slaughter and evil—with extreme events that demanded the sort of moral stance of which it was not capable. I emphasize this because later on I will discuss a number of novels that purposefully place similar and far worse events in a postmodern framework.

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What these and virtually all other proclamations of the death or, as the case may be, triviality of postmodernism had in common was the assumption, either explicit or implicit, that postmodernism stood for an extreme form of cultural and moral relativism, a relativism that now had been unmasked as at best naïve, *Weltfremd*, but as often as not as perverse—as a form of self-hatred incomprehensibly popular among white, middle class, and left-leaning intellectuals. This should perhaps not really surprise us, since this sort of charge had been levelled at postmodernism right from the beginning, especially by Marxist critics and critics belonging to the religious Right—*bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble*. What is perhaps more surprising is that we find similar sentiments on the part of writers. The American short story writer Raymond Carver objected to postmodernism in furious terms:

The characters are dropped into silly situations where they are treated by their creators with the most extreme irony, or even downright contempt. They are never to be found in situations that might reveal them as characters with more or less normal human reactions. To allow characters to express any emotion, unless it can be ridiculed, is unthinkable. It is impossible for the characters even to see, much less accept, responsibility for their actions. There is a feeling that anything goes in the stories, that is, nothing in the story has to make sense, or has more pertinence, value or weight than anything else. This world is on the skids, man, so everything is relative, you know. (Carver 1991, 167-68)

While writing his magnum opus *Infinite Jest* (1996)—a novel which many critics

would unhesitatingly call postmodern—the American novelist and short story writer David Foster Wallace embarked on a similar crusade against postmodernism. In his novella “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way” we read that

if this were a piece of metafiction, which it's NOT, the exact number of typeset lines between this reference and the prenominate referent would very probably be mentioned, which would be a princely pain in the ass...but in a metafiction it would, nay *needs* be mentioned, a required postmodern convention, aimed at drawing the poor old reader's emotional attention to the fact that the narrative bought and paid for...is *not* in fact a barely-there window onto a different and truly diverting world, but rather an “artifact,”...not a real window, a gag, and this in a deep (but *intentional*, now) sense artificial, which is to say fabricated, false, a fiction...this self-conscious explicitness and deconstructed disclosure supposedly making said metafiction “realer” than a piece of pre-postmodern “Realism” that depends on certain antiquated techniques.... (Wallace 1989, 264-65)

302 One can see why Wallace objects to what is his prime target here, John Barth's story “Lost in the Funhouse,” but a wholesale condemnation of postmodern writing cannot be based upon so little evidence. In a later interview, allowing for the possibility that he had misrepresented postmodern writing, Wallace still had strong views:

...what's been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and to ridicule but to redeem. (McCaffery 1993, 147-48)

Numerous writers and critics, in particular but certainly not exclusively those of a feminist or postcolonial persuasion, have distanced themselves from postmodernism because of what they see as its “anything goes” permissiveness and relativism. In various places in Europe we have even witnessed programmatic efforts, articulated in polemical essays or old-fashioned manifestoes, to go beyond this “anything goes” postmodernism. Writers and critics have argued for a “new sincerity,” for a “new relevance,” for a renewed commitment. Disappointingly, however, the often repeated charge of “anything goes” is never substantiated in these attacks—and it would indeed be hard to do so. How many postmodern novels and stories apart from Richard Brautigan's and Donald Barthelme's whimsical fantasies and similar exercises in other languages have actually been based on a poetics of “anything goes”? And how many postmodern writers display the contempt for the characters they create that so angered Raymond Carver? Very few indeed, as Aleid Fokkema convincingly showed as long ago as 1991 in her *Postmodern Characters*. Characterization in the large majority of postmodern novels is not significantly different from that of the time-honored realist tradition. How, then, has postmodernism—the fiction that Carver and Wallace have in mind—come in for so much criticism?

In my *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* of 1995 I distinguished three major uses of the terms *postmodern* and *postmodernism*. They referred first of all, I suggested, to new forms of artistic expression that emerged in the late 1950s, gained momentum in the 1960s and became dominant in a number of artistic disciplines—including architecture—in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of these new forms, especially those that manifested themselves in the 1950s, had an obvious affinity with the avant-garde movements of the early decades of the twentieth century (and were because of that sometimes seen as a lackluster, superficial and specifically American replay of these avant-gardes—superficial because it lacked Surrealism’s interest in depth, that is, the Freudian unconsciousness, and Dada’s deliberately offensive radical edge). Other forms of artistic expression, however, were genuinely new. At the more general level of academic and intellectual debate, “postmodern” and “postmodernism” soon came to refer to a complex of arguments and ideas derived from and inspired by French poststructuralist thinkers, foremost among them Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes and, a bit later, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard. This postmodernism’s anti-foundational concerns—centered on history, on language, on identity, and so on—soon became standard fare in literary theorizing. Finally, I suggested in 1995, *postmodern* and *postmodernism* were used to diagnose a new stage in the history of Western culture, a new development whose origins were variously situated in the immediate postwar period (the collaboration of government and industry in the new military-industrial complex), the 1960s (the counterculture), the early 1970s (the oil crisis) or even somewhat later (the emergence of post-Fordist capitalism). “Diagnosed” is not a neutral term, but is not inappropriate. Almost without exception, the first generation of critics who saw postmodernism in terms of a new “socio-cultural formation,” foremost among them Marxists like Fredric Jameson, viewed this emergent or already fully established “postmodernity” with the deepest misgivings.

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I would argue that much of postmodern literature’s dubious reputation stems from the fact that almost right from the start it was taken to exemplify the other two, and considerably wider, definitions of the postmodern. This is most obviously the case with postmodernism as a periodizing concept, which, after Ihab Hassan had led the way, was first fully developed by Fredric Jameson in his much quoted “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” of 1983 and “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” of the following year. For Jameson late capitalism, a new and aggressive post-1950s form of capitalism, had replaced an older and less all-encompassing form of capitalism that had still tolerated the expression of genuinely alternative views. Late capitalism, however, had routed all pockets of resistance and had completely invaded both the public and the private sphere. Its cultural products had inevitably given up on the critical distance still preserved by modernist art and were content to serve this materialistic and amoral master. In fact, late capitalism’s culture had been fully co-opted by the market, had forsaken history for an eternal present, and had more generally given up on depth and embraced a sometimes glittering but always

deplorable superficiality. Although Linda Hutcheon, in her landmark study *A Poetics of Postmodernism* of 1988, made a valiant attempt to defend postmodern art against Jameson and his followers, pointing out that neither Jameson nor Terry Eagleton, the prominent English Marxist who had joined in the attack, produced any serious evidence for this charge, countless literary and cultural critics were happy to accept Jameson's claim that postmodern art and literature represented the "cultural logic" of an exceptionally disgraceful period in the history of mankind.

Looking back, we can see how dubious such periodizations are. How to explain why writers, with late capitalism getting an ever tighter grip on all of us—especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dismantling of the Soviet Union—increasingly turned away from that cultural logic and began to demand a new authenticity and a new sincerity? David Harvey, who in his influential *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* of 1989, seeks, like Jameson, to establish a causality of economic base/cultural superstructure, runs
 304 into a similar problem. For Harvey, postmodernism is the response of the 1970s and 1980s to what he calls time-space compression—the shrinking of the world and the wholesale acceleration and flexibilization brought about by the computer and other late capitalist developments. But here, too, that shrinking and acceleration have only been intensified after 1989. Tim Berners-Lee's original proposal to create a World Wide Web dates from March 1989 and the Web has only been publicly available since August 6, 1991. And with the World Wide Web causing more shrinkage and acceleration than anything had ever done before, writers like Carver and Wallace—joined later by Dave Eggers and others—demanded commitment, sincerity and authenticity. In any case, the view that postmodern literature should be seen exclusively in terms of a superficial, mercenary, and inauthentic postmodern socio-economic formation did not do much for its reputation. In especially the Western European press 'post-modern' soon came to stand for superficial glitter and intellectual glibness—both of course in Mammon's service.

As I have already mentioned above, postmodern literature also came to exemplify another postmodernism, the postmodernism of what one might call postmodern thought, a radically anti-foundationalist and anti-humanist intellectual movement that argues the centrality to all experience and perception of language, which is inherently unstable and incapable of true representation. For a whole generation of younger critics, postmodern literature came to embody postmodern theorizing and it is hard to find a postmodern novel in which those critics have not discovered characters to be linguistic constructs, identities to be fragmented, language constituting rather than representing the world (but given its nature "always already" failing to do so)—in other words, essences in various states of deconstruction. And at the end of the line, with everything fully deconstructed, and nothing left to say, they found not Samuel Beckett's existential despair, but a pervasive irony. This is the postmodernism that Wallace, Eggers and others, from a diametrically opposed perspective, seek to overcome. They find its relativism and its irony morally debilitating, ending

in moral paralysis. And it is also this postmodernism that was targeted by the press after 9/11. This is not the place to discuss these charges, although it might be pointed out, as Andrew Gibson already argued in his *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel* of 1999, that by the later 1990s practically every postmodern theorist had embraced a circumspect sort of humanism and that the postmodern theory that was so furiously attacked had become a straw target.

In any case, the scorn that Wallace and others pour on postmodern literature is largely misdirected. Their proper target is this postmodern thought, which, like many critics of the 1980s and 1990s, they equate with postmodern literature. There are indeed postmodern novels that must be judged guilty, in terms of the charges brought against them. And there are postmodern novels—Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1974) comes to mind—in which virtually anything the reader would want to find can indeed be found. However, in the large majority of postmodern novels the poststructuralist concerns that I have just mentioned are balanced by far more traditional elements that point in a wholly different direction and that are ignored in the criticism that sees postmodern literature as the literary processing of postmodern thematics. Although Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* made a very solid and convincing case for postmodern fiction's dual nature, the notion that postmodern fiction was the creative extension of postmodern thought proved hard to eradicate, in spite of such obviously political postmodern classics as Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977) or Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984). Postmodern fiction's wild improbabilities, dazzling displays of self-reflexivity—including unsettling asides to the reader—and, occasionally, general authorial zaniness, does not exclude moral seriousness. It admittedly achieves its effects through a wide range of self-reflexive, metafictional techniques and strategies that disturb the illusion of reality and foreground the fictional character of the text in question, inevitably calling into question the relation between text and world, its referentiality. But that, too, does not rule out moral seriousness. It is certainly the case that in some texts that are widely seen as postmodern the potential referentiality that their language inevitably carries is so overwhelmed by a barrage of metafictional devices that we cannot seriously connect them to the world as we know it. For Hutcheon, and I would agree with her, such texts' complete lack of referentiality qualifies them as late modernist rather than as postmodern, a late development of modernism that culminates in, for instance, the French *nouveau roman*—as Alain Robbe-Grillet put it in his polemical *Pour un nouveau roman* of 1963, "Un roman ne renvoie qu'à lui-même." This is an attractive position not so much because it removes a group of potentially embarrassing novels from the postmodern fold, but because it brings the end-point of the development of literary modernism in line with modernism in the visual arts as defined by Clement Greenberg, that is, as the culmination of an ever-increasing formalism.

In any case, for my purposes here "true" literary postmodernism succeeds in striking a balance between referentiality and non-referentiality. It does so by presenting us with two incompatible sets of reading instructions. It offers textual elements that

strongly suggest referentiality and create the illusion of reality as we think we know it, but it also offers elements that counteract that illusion and suggest that we are dealing with an autonomous linguistic construction. In other words, we get elements that suggest depth and meaning and invite traditional interpretation, while practically simultaneously other elements will block and even ridicule attempts at interpretation. Such postmodern texts, then, sit on the fence between referentiality and non-referentiality, effectively setting up a dialogue between a representational and an anti-representational reading strategy that keeps the referentiality of the fiction in question firmly in play. This double-edged, and far from apolitical mode of writing, both referential *and* non-referential, has right from the beginning characterized postmodern fiction—witness the prominence of the historically documented genocide against the original inhabitants of Namibia, the Herrero, in Thomas Pynchon's *V.* of 1962, or the equally historical execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* of 1977.

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Not too long ago Linda Hutcheon suggested that postmodernism was “a thing of the past” because with its “canonized texts, its anthologies, primers and readers, its dictionaries and its histories” it had become “fully institutionalized” (Hutcheon 2002, 165). I find it hard to agree with this assessment, and it is difficult to see why this sort of institutionalization and postmodernism could not go together. After all, as Hutcheon herself argued in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, the hallmark of postmodernism was that it was able to combine radical questioning with an acceptance of the status quo. As I hope to show below, postmodernism is alive and well. What may have changed is that its affirmative, humanist strand is displayed more openly than often was the case. But then again, in her desire to defend postmodernism against its detractors even Hutcheon had a tendency to overemphasize postmodernism's radical questioning, often presenting it as more intellectually rebellious and anti-humanist than it actually was, even if its formal experimentalism seemed to warrant such a reading.

What certainly has changed is that postmodernism no longer makes anyone sit upright—both postmodern thought and postmodern metafictional self-reflexivity have simply become part of the available repertoire and may be encountered in the most diverse novels. Here is a passage from Nicola Barker's *Darkmans* of 2008, a novel that freely employs Gothic impossibilities—the most important of which involve the inexplicable appearances of a malicious sixteenth-century jester in a twenty-first century Kentish town—and that I feel will become an early twenty-first century classic.

“The truth,” Peta smiled, “is that there is no truth. Life is just a series of coincidences, accidents and random urges which we carefully forge—for our own, sick reasons—into a convenient design. Everything is arbitrary. Only art exists to make the arbitrary

congeal. Not memory or God or love, even. Only art. The truth is simply an idea, a structure which we employ—in very small doses—to render life bearable. It's just a convenient mechanism, Kane, that's all."

"I've *seen* things," Kane doggedly maintained, "I've experienced things...crazy things. I've felt this energy, this sense of...*connectedness*..."

"Just chemicals," she pointed to his head. "Up here. Too much coffee. Too many hormones. Too much sugar..."

"But other people have felt it, too..."

"Then a kind of joint hysteria..."

"No." Kane shook his head.

(Barker 2007, 824)

Apart from its defense of art as what the American poet Robert Frost once called "a momentary stay against confusion," Peta's side of this dialogue practically summarizes what the detractors of postmodern thought object to. And this defense of art begins to look pretty dubious if we take into account that Peta Boroughs earns her money as a master forger, that in the course of the novel she has cheated everybody she has dealt with, and that presumably even her name—which sounds suspiciously like the Cambridgeshire town of Peterborough—is false. The sympathies of *Darkmans* lie with Kane, her interlocutor, and other characters who, through personal pain and suffering, find some sort of emotional anchoring, personal authenticity, and at least the beginning of what is a re-commitment after a long period of emotional and/or moral torpor. This is, in fact, exactly what the major characters in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* are after, in a novel that in spite of its insistence on authenticity and commitment is far more postmodern than Wallace would have wanted to admit. *Darkmans* is a wild, exuberant novel, very much aware of postmodern doubt and not at all averse to postmodern pranks and zaniness—even if its mode of narration is often high modernist. It is a novel that would almost off-handedly seem to incorporate postmodernism while moving beyond it in the sense that there can be no doubt whatsoever about its moral seriousness. In fact, what must be one of the most experimental novels of the still young twenty-first century, Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* of 2000, also accomplishes that feat. The novel is a fantastic, dizzying carousel of frames within frames, elaborately footnoted quotations—hundreds of them from both real and wholly false sources—typographic innovations, crude drawings, pointless photographs, poststructuralist musings and spurious interviews. Here, for instance, is Jacques Derrida: "Well that which is inside, which is to say, if I may say, that which infinitely patterns itself without the outside, without the other, though where then is the other?" (Danielewski 2000, 361). Like Barker, Danielewski is very much aware of postmodernism—judging by the quotations *House of Leaves* presents, he is, in fact, so familiar with it that he can off-handedly make fun of it while employing its most radical strategies. And yet at the heart of *House of Leaves* we find a totally unexpected and moving happy ending. As in *Darkmans*, what for Wallace and others is potential moral paralysis of the postmodern type is overcome by an act of almost

unthinking altruism by and for realistically conceived and presented characters.

We do, in fact, find a whole range of writers of fiction who do not want to give up on postmodern knowingness and postmodern fictional strategies, but who also want to signal their serious moral commitment. In his massive, fragmented and ultimately incoherent novel 2666, published posthumously in 2004, the Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño lists the gruesome details of the murders of around a hundred young women and girls, murdered in the fictitious Mexican town of Santa Teresa. But we know that he has lifted those details from police reports submitted in Ciudad Juárez, where since the mid-1990s over 500 women have been murdered. A postmodern conception of fiction and the desire to expose contemporary reality—presented in seemingly realist terms, but twice mediated, first through the discourse of police reports, then through Bolaño's prose—do not exclude each other. One could go on naming writers and titles who work along the same lines: Bolaño's friend Enrique Vila-Matas, with for instance *Bartleby y compañía* (2001) and *Dublinesca* (2010); another Spanish writer, **308** Javier Marías, with his trilogy *Tu rostro mañana*—translated as *Your Face Tomorrow* and published between 2006 and 2010; the Tasmanian writer Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001), the English writer David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* (2002, English translation 2005), and so on. I would like to look more closely, however, at one specific strategy that radically confronts with each other the two modes of reading, referential and non-referential, that postmodern literature invites, once again confirming that the coexistence of postmodern self-reflexiveness and traditional referentiality is not only possible but also can be a very effective instrument.

The novels that I have in mind evoke the Holocaust. They may do so very explicitly, as for instance the American writer Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) or the Flemish author Paul Verhaeghen's *Omega Minor* (published in Dutch in 2004, translated into English in 2007). Or they may do so more implicitly, as for instance the just mentioned Roberto Bolaño's *La literatura nazi en América* of 1996 (translated as *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, 2008) or the American author Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* of 2007. Or they may point forward to the Holocaust, as Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004) or the Bosnian writer Aleksander Hemon's *The Lazarus Project* of 2008 do.

It might seem a risky, even impossible, strategy to confront the Holocaust, or virulent and violent anti-Semitism, while making use of a postmodern poetics. But even though these novels inevitably draw our attention to their status as artifact we cannot *not* see them as referential. We *know* that anti-Semitism and the Holocaust are historical and we *know* of the unimaginable suffering they have caused in the real world. And there is a second point that mitigates the risk: we have come to realize that postmodernism is only one, admittedly self-advertising, instance of the dual nature of fiction—which almost always is inescapably referential and non-referential at the same time. That duality, no matter how loudly advertised, no longer is shocking to us and no longer gets in the way of a rather traditional mode of reading.

These novels follow widely different strategies. Roth's *The Plot Against America* and Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* both rewrite history. Verhaeghen's *Omega Minor* and Hemon's *The Lazarus Project* play complicated games with historical reality and fiction, Bolaño presents encyclopedic entries on some thirty wholly imaginary and mostly Latin America-based writers who either have been involved in, or openly sympathize with, Nazism. Finally, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* is a *tour de force* which tells us of the magical ancient history of a small Ukrainian shtetl, Trachimbrod, and the hilarious trip through the contemporary Ukraine of an American protagonist called Jonathan Safran Foer, but which ends with the mass murder by the Nazis of almost all the inhabitants of Trachimbrod and the suicide, more than fifty-five years later, of a guilt-ridden survivor. Let me now turn to a brief and inevitably superficial discussion of four of these novels.

Compared to Foer's complex interweaving of narrative lines, the premise and the narrative execution of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* are simple enough. In Roth's novel aviator Charles Lindbergh enters politics after his daring first-ever solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean. In the course of the 1930s Lindbergh's star status leads to a meteoric career and in 1941 even brings him into the White House after a landslide victory over Franklin Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential elections. In the White House Lindbergh presides over an administration that introduces policies that are increasingly sinister and anti-Semitic. Lindbergh signs an *entente cordiale* with Hitler's Germany and Japan, makes ominous remarks about war-mongering Jews, and develops programs that Philip's parents—the novel's protagonist is young Philip Roth—can only view with dismay and fear. They are fully aware that the Office of American Absorption's seemingly innocent "Just Folks" initiative, that officially is supposed to facilitate the integration of all minorities into mainstream America, in actual practice primarily targets Jewish children, and that the equally persuasively named "Homestead Act" of 1942 is all about getting Jewish families relocated to rural areas. As it turns out, however, in the short run American Jews have even more to fear from their fellow Americans than from their government. We witness random anti-Semitic harassment and hear about "the century's worst anti-Semitic rioting outside Nazi Germany" (Roth 2004, 272), culminating in the death of almost a hundred American Jews in the chaos after Lindbergh's disappearance on a solo flight from Louisville to Jackson.

The Plot Against America, which is largely situated in Newark, New Jersey, gives Roth the opportunity to once again revisit his own Newark childhood and family history. Its verisimilitude is further enhanced by the novel's "Postscript" in which Roth gives an account of the historical sources he has used, offers "A True Chronology of the Major Figures" and reprints Lindbergh's "Who Are the War Agitators?" speech of September 11, 1941. In general, the novel is presented in a wholly realistic mode, even when after a certain point the narrated world becomes sharply distinct from the actual America of the 1930s. But we know of course that the historical Lindbergh publicly sympathized with the Nazis and we also know that the policies of his fic-

tional administration and the street violence against Jews that it condones have an exhaustively documented historical basis in the real world. *The Plot Against America's* rewriting of history is a typically postmodern exercise. Aware that history as we know it took a different course, we cannot very well accept the novel in terms of direct referentiality, no matter how many 'realistic' details Roth may provide, and yet we remain very much aware of its indirect referentiality. And if we don't see the novel as an autonomous linguistic construct we must face the question how plausible its events have been, historically, and how they relate to contemporary America. Here, too, Roth leaves us with the sort of ambiguity that a reader familiar with postmodern writing more or less expects. *The Plot Against America* is very effective. The alternative history that it presents forces us to pay very close attention to the actual process that takes a nation into the danger zone of a collective paranoia and of random but unilateral violence. It captures the bewilderment, the growing uncertainty and the increasing fear of those who remember the pogroms of Eastern Europe or know what is happening in Germany, but can have no idea where things will end. And it presents those, like the rabbi who is the Office of American Absorption's national director, who feel that their co-religionists' fears are wholly unfounded. The fascist turn in American politics and culture as imagined by Roth also, paradoxically, confronts us with the uncertainties and ambiguities of real world history as it must have unfolded in 1930s Germany.

Philip Roth's rewriting of history—a subdivision of Linda Hutcheon's postmodern historiographic metafiction—pales next to Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007). Where Roth throws one single switch—American history derailed by a criminal intensification of the anti-Semitism that was undeniably a factor in 1930s America—and takes it from there, Chabon creates an alternative history that looks more like a whole shunting-yard. Moreover, Chabon opts for an openly self-reflexive generic framework in his use of the hard-boiled, *noir*, detective novel. His protagonist is the standard hard-drinking, foul-mouthed, divorced and insubordinate detective or, in this case, policeman whose weak and/or corrupted fellow citizens and superiors actively try to obstruct his investigation, but whose moral compass never wavers and who ultimately, at great cost to himself, lets justice triumph. An indication of Chabon's success in adopting the genre, by the way, is that *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* was a finalist for both the Edgar Allan Poe and Dashiell Hammett awards, given by the Mystery Writers of America and the North American Branch of the International Association of Crime Writers, respectively.

Chabon also rewrites history far more radically than Roth, in whose America morality and justice ultimately prevail and where after some dark years history as we know it resumes its course. Not so in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. In Chabon's alternative history, Russia has fallen after Germany's invasion and the Second World War has only ended in 1946 when Berlin was wiped out by a nuclear attack. Two years later the fledgling nation state of Israel has almost immediately after its declaration of independence been overrun by its Arab neighbors, and three million Central and

Eastern European Jews who have survived the Second World War, all of them still speaking Yiddish and most of them orthodox or ultra-orthodox, have under the so-called Alaskan Settlement Act of 1940 been allowed to settle on Sitka, an island of 1500 square miles just off the coast of Alaska. In Alaska they have created a rundown and Yiddish-speaking metropolis, where it would forever seem to be rainy, cold and generally dreary. Chabon got the basic idea for his novel from an actual political initiative, the King-Havener Bill of 1940, strongly backed by Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, that proposed to allow Jewish refugees into Alaska, but that was killed in both House and Senate, mostly because of the fierce opposition of Alaska itself. The fact that *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* won the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America's Nebula award for best novel of the year suggests how completely realized its alternative world is, but also, again, how effectively Chabon employs generic devices.

This is not the place to recount all the complexities of Chabon's plot. Let me just note that it revolves around a conspiracy hatched by a powerful and not too law-abiding sect of orthodox Sitka Jews, the Chasids of Verbov, to blow up an important Muslim shrine in Palestine and so to unleash a war in the Middle East that will give them the chance to drive out the Arabs and return to Jerusalem, ending the Diaspora. The unwilling central character in this conspiracy is a young man believed to have 'the potential to be Messiah...the Tzaddik Ha-Dor' (Chabon 2007, 141), who can indeed work miracles—even if he is extremely reluctant to do so—as long as he is not incapacitated by heroin or alcohol. What drives the Jews of Sitka is despair. The sixty-year lease that the Alaska Settlement Act granted them is running out fast and the United States, led by an evangelical president, refuses to renew it. Within a year, three million Jews will have to give up their homes and be expelled from the United States, with nowhere to go. The return to the Middle East, then, although the fundamentalist dream of a ruthless and violence-prone sect, is also a historical necessity. Chabon's rewriting of history ingeniously brings together various pre- and post-Second World War historical events and developments. The imminent expulsion from Sitka reminds us for instance of the fate of the 930 Jewish refugees on board the German ocean liner *St. Louis* who in 1939 were refused entry by Cuba, the United States and Canada and who, having nowhere else to go, found themselves forced to return to Europe. The tension between the Sitka Jews and the Native Alaskans—largely the result of Jews, 'mostly members of small Orthodox sects' (43), illegally occupying land outside the Federal District of Sitka—reminds us of the activities of Israel's 'colonists' in occupied territory. But what we are mostly and constantly reminded of is the Holocaust, even if the Holocaust as we know it is not part of Chabon's alternative history. In spite of the Nebula award for best fantasy novel of the year, *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* is thoroughly referential. Chabon's often irreverent rewriting of history confronts us as sharply as traditional realistic fiction with the catastrophes, the ignominy and the moral dilemmas of history as we know it. We are told that the potential Messiah "had the kind of mind that could hold and consider contradictory propositions

without losing its balance” (121). That is what these rewritings of history—and the other two novels under discussion in the section—ask us to do as well: to see them as autonomous verbal constructions and simultaneously recognize their inevitable referentiality, with the awareness that we are dealing with a construction creating a distance that invites us to weigh the referential implications in a more considered way than the illusion of presence would have made possible.

- With Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* we are confronted with the Holocaust itself in the sense that it is part of the events that constitute the narrative. As I have noted above, the novel gives us an account of the history of a Ukrainian shtetl, Trachimbrod, and of the accident-prone attempts of its protagonist, Jonathan Safran Foer, to find both Trachimbrod and the woman who has supposedly saved the life of his grandfather. In the interstices between these two story lines, that ultimately converge in one single apocalypse, we find heartbreaking letters written to Jonathan, after his return to the United States, by his young Ukrainian guide, Alex, who gets his English vocabulary mostly from a dictionary and has an uncanny knack for picking the wrong term. *Everything Is Illuminated* presents verbal pyrotechnics, slapstick—in the often bizarre antics of ‘historical’ Trachimbrod’s orthodox Jews and in the protagonist’s adventures in the Ukraine—the fantastic—including clairvoyance—and the sort of magical realism that we find in the shtetl stories of I.B. Singer. We can, moreover, never be completely sure of the credibility of the narrative voice in the chapters that deal with Jonathan’s Ukrainian trip because we sometimes get conflicting accounts and even the history of Trachimbrod suffers from uncertainties. In fact, its very beginning reminds us of the Peter Pinguid Society’s account of the first Russian-American naval confrontation in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*: “It was March 18, 1791, when Trachim B’s double-axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River” (Foer 2002, 8). And the plaque that must commemorate the event reads: “THIS PLAQUE MARKS THE SPOT (OR A SPOT CLOSE TO THE SPOT) WHERE THE WAGON OF ONE TRACHIM B (WE THINK) WENT IN” (93). But all of these high jinks lead up to what is incontrovertibly real, to the Holocaust. It is the enormous contrast between the novel’s postmodern elements—the slapstick, the antics, the forays into the fantastic, the intertextuality and the self-referentiality—and the gruesome events, including the suicide of Alex’s grandfather, in which all culminates that gives the novel its power. Foer’s novel makes us go back and forth between referential and non-referential modes of reading. But if our interpretive framework is referentiality all ambiguity disappears. From a referential perspective the novel presents historical events that are uncontestable and moral alternatives that leave us no choice. Still, while its representation of the Holocaust makes a wholly nonreferential reading impossible, *Everything Is Illuminated*’s postmodern elements make a wholly referential reading equally impossible. Here, too, the reader is invited to “consider” and to balance “contradictory propositions.” “Do you write because you have a thing to say?” Alex at a certain point asks Jonathan, to which the latter simply replies “No” (70). Postmodern writing does indeed have

nothing to say—and the role of writing in *Everything Is Illuminated* is material for a separate study—but it still says what it paradoxically has to say. Although “the origin of a story is always an absence” (230), the novel appeals as much to humanist presence as to poststructuralist absence.

The last postmodern Holocaust novel I would like to briefly consider is the Flemish writer Paul Verhaeghen's *Omega Minor* (2004), winner of the Foreign Fiction Prize of the British newspaper *The Independent* (2008) after its very free translation (by the author himself) into English. *Omega Minor* is a massive, panoramic novel that, like *Everything Is Illuminated*, presents two major narrative lines. The first one is situated in the present, and introduces a young Flemish psychologist, Paul Andermans ('Othermans'), who comes to Berlin for postdoctoral research and ends up in hospital after being beaten up by neo-Nazis. Verhaeghen takes us into the neo-Nazi milieu that still dreams of a revival of the *Reich* and is actively plotting to bring that improbable resurrection about. In the hospital Andermans meets the Holocaust survivor Jozef de Heer who has been hospitalized after a botched suicide attempt and, having won de Heer's confidence, persuades him to tell the story of his life. This second narrative line enables Verhaeghen to bring the full scale of the horrors of the Second World War into his novel. But *Omega Minor* also takes us to Los Alamos, New Mexico, where we see physicists working at what will become the atom bomb and to other places that will turn out to be relevant for Verhaeghen's purpose. Most of all, the novel is a wild and improbable narrative carrousel in which we get scenes of phantasmagoric pornography and scenes of absolute horror (in an aside to his readers, the narrator advises the weak-hearted among them to abandon his novel and to read Anne Frank's innocuous diary instead). We get Verhaeghen's versions of Werner Heisenberg, Albert Speer, and Erich Honecker (long-time leader of the communist German Democratic Republic) and we get the story of the notorious 'catcher' Stella Goldschlag who worked for the Gestapo and betrayed countless other Jews. We get a scene which strongly reminds us of the notorious coprophagy scene in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (even if here the 'product' is a small silver container rather than feces) and another one which outdoes even Pynchon and in which Andermans' lover is able to deduce all of De Heer's secrets from the movements of his penis in her vagina. (Pynchon in general looms in the background: *Omega Minor* at a certain point mentions Pig Bodine, the seaman who makes appearances in various Pynchon novels, and ends with the apocalypse—the destruction of contemporary Berlin by a nuclear explosion—that *Gravity's Rainbow* would seem to promise but never delivers.)

However, the most unexpected twist in *Omega Minor* is that De Heer's life story turns out to be completely false. Instead of a Holocaust survivor he is a former Gestapo member and involved in the neo-Nazi conspiracy to reinstate *das Dritte Reich*. Towards the end of the war De Heer, whose real name is Helmut Hinkel, has taken over the identity of a murdered Dutch Jew and the memories to which Andermans has so faithfully listened have been stolen from the memoirs of real sur-

vivors. They are lies, although in another sense they are truthful enough—even if inevitably mediated, and more than once. And there is another twist. Among the dozens of Holocaust authors that Andermans lists as De Heer/Hinkel’s sources we find a certain Wilkomirski. And indeed, in 1995 a Swiss writer called Benjamin Wilkomirski published *Bruchstücke. Aus Einer Kindheit 1939-1948*, a memoir of his war experiences. The following year the book was published in English as *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* to very positive reviews. In the years afterwards, however, Wilkomirski was unmasked as a fraud whose real name was Bruno Dösseken and whose childhood had been wholly untouched by war. And in a further revelation, Dösseken turned out to be an adopted child whose real last name was not Dösseken but Grosjean. Verhaeghen’s inclusion of Wilkomirski, who like De Heer had taken his war experiences from existing memoirs, suggests the sly acknowledgment of a real-life source of inspiration. In any case, Verhaeghen’s De Heer/Hinkel’s mystifications bring into play typically postmodern themes such as origin, identity, authenticity, history, and so on, while at various levels, ranging in importance from casual asides to the reader to the novel’s outlandish plot, we are again and again confronted with the novel’s metafictional character. Just like *Everything Is Illuminated*, *Omega Minor* brings home the point that the past comes to us through narratives, but that those narratives, with all the limitations that postmodern theory has so effectively exposed, don’t necessarily lose their force. De Heer/Hinkel’s paradoxical argument that it is authenticity that is superficial and that ‘deep’ lies are to be preferred to simple honesty echoes throughout the novel.

If one surveys these and other novels one is tempted to conclude that in the early twenty-first century, as much as during the heydays of postmodernism, “anything goes.” Even novels dealing with one of the very worst excesses in human history indulge in slapstick, in irreverence, in blasphemy and games of hide-and-seek with the reader. And novels borrow at will from any mode of writing that seems appropriate. Nicola Barker’s *Darkmans* employs realistic, modernist and postmodern techniques and shamelessly deploys a Gothic supernatural. Murakami’s *Kafka on the Shore* would seem to be a Japanese version of Latin American magical realism, and out of nowhere engineers encounters with Colonel Sanders—the goateed founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken—and Johnny Walker, of Scotch whiskey fame, both in full regalia but without any apparent function in the narrative. Literally everything is possible. The Irish writer John Banville’s *The Infinities* of 2009 might easily be taken for a thoroughly realist novel, its elegiac tone not unlike that of, say, other recent novels like Marilyn Robinson’s *Gilead* or Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*. But in Banville’s book the Greek gods are alive and well, busily interfering with the lives of mortals. And there have been great scientific breakthroughs. Cars run on salt water

and theoretical physics has finally found the Grail: the Grand Unified Theory. But instead of reconciling the special theory of relativity and quantum mechanics physicists have established beyond doubt that both relativity and quantum mechanics were mistakes—false leads going nowhere. And yet this sort of thing does not distract us from the human weaknesses, strengths and of course predicaments that Banville almost lovingly presents.

Indeed, anything goes. There would seem to be no boundary that contemporary eclecticism will not transgress. Except that, no matter how they alternate narrative modes, mix generic and sub-generic codes, cross ontological boundaries, play with supernatural elements, and rejoice in inconsistencies, these novelists show an unmistakable respect for the characters they create. This is not to say that they have revived the traditional liberal-humanist subject. Their characters are at least partly and often wholly at the mercy of forces they do not understand and quite often do not wish to understand. But the way they choose to present them invites the reader to take them seriously, even if they appear in scenes or environments that are not serious all. If there has been a substantial development in over fifty years of postmodern fiction—Pynchon's *V.* appeared in 1962—it is this. In fact, using the Holocaust, or events leading up to the Holocaust, without insisting on the human dignity of its victims, is in a Western context simply unthinkable. The fact that Foer, Roth, Chabon, and Verhaeghen can situate one of the greatest catastrophes in human history within a postmodern framework shows us that the reach of contemporary postmodern literature is equal to that of any other mode of writing.

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What no longer is necessary is the demolition of the autonomous liberal humanist subject, a demolition that in the early days of postmodernism, and especially in the United States, with its overwhelmingly strong liberal humanist tradition, seemed necessary. In the heady early phase of postmodern writing some writers felt that every bourgeois verity had to be unmasked as false and, somewhat later, as a position in a power game. We have moved on, but for many of the most interesting writers of our age the insights of postmodernism and the technical innovations of postmodern writing have lost nothing of their interest and relevance. Combining the best of both worlds, that of tradition and that of the postmodern, they have deliberately created a postmodern humanism.

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