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Dis/coursing Post-Modernism: Science, Magic, (Post)-Modernity

In 1979, Jean-François Lyotard started off *La Condition postmoderne* with the following paragraph:

Cette étude a pour objet la condition du savoir dans les sociétés les plus développées. On a décidé de la nommer "postmoderne." Le mot est en usage sur le continent américain, sous la plume de sociologues et de critiques. Il désigne l'état de la culture après les transformations qui ont affecté les règles des jeux de la science, de la littérature et des arts à partir de la fin du XIX^e siècle. Ici, on situera ces transformations par rapport à la crise des récits. (7)

Although the term *postmodernism* has a checkered history, and had been applied to various literary developments already well before the 1970s, the American critics Lyotard refers to as using the term would primarily have been applying it to a group of American fiction writers emerging from the mid-fifties on, and most notably comprising John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan, Robert Coover, Don DeLillo, Raymond Federman, William Gaddis, William Gass, John Hawkes, Thomas McGuane, Thomas Pynchon, Richard Sukenick, and Kurt Vonnegut. With several of these authors science plays a role, sometimes a major role, in their books. This is most notably the case with Thomas Pynchon, in *V.* (1963) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and Don DeLillo, in *Ratner's Star* (1976). With both these authors it seems safe to say that Lyotard's famous dictum that "on tient pour 'postmoderne' l'incrédulité à l'égard des métarécits" (7) fully applies when it comes to the attitude to science that speaks from their books. With regard to *Gravity's Rainbow*, this can perhaps best be illustrated by way of a shortcut, viz. by quoting from a 1983 essay by Alan J. Friedman that specifically concerns itself with "Science and Technology" in the novel under consideration. Friedman argues that "three distinct images from science — the eighteenth-century clockwork universe, the nineteenth-century statistical rules, including thermodynamics, and the essential uncertainties of twentieth-century quantum theory — have served as metaphors for the strategies for success that characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* adopt" (95). Friedman shows how all of these strategies fail for the respective characters, and he extends this to the attitude expressed by the novel as a whole:

Unfortunately, the visions from science do not provide more hopeful guides away from the horrors *Gravity's Rainbow* reveals in life and death. Doctrinaire acceptance of any of these visions proves as sterile as the non-science-related images that obsess characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The tragedies of our times are even deepened when the philosophical offspring of science proves as deadly as some of its physical products. (71)

If *Gravity's Rainbow*, then, lends itself to a reading along Lyotardian poststructuralist lines, it likewise slots into that other paradigmatic reading instanced by Fredric Jameson's celebrated essay "Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," first published in 1984 in *The New Left Review*. In this essay Jameson is primarily concerned with the problem of representation in postmodernism. The literary example he fastens upon to make his point is E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*:

Ragtime remains the most peculiar and stunning monument to the aesthetic situation engendered by the disappearance of the historical referent. This historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only "represent" our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes "pop history"). Cultural production is thereby driven back inside a mental space which is no longer that of the old monadic subject but rather that of some degraded collective "objective spirit:" it can no longer gaze directly on some putative real world, at some reconstruction of a past history which was once itself a present; rather, as in Plato's cave, it must trace our mental images of that past upon its confining walls. If there is any realism left here, it is a "realism" that is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that confinement and of slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach. (1991, 25)

As a neo-marxist, Jameson is primarily worried about History as referential touchstone for postmodern literature. However, in the passage just quoted one could easily replace the title *Ragtime* with that of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and the word history with the word science. Indeed, as the earlier quotation from Friedman suggests, *Gravity's Rainbow*, to take up Jameson's phrase, is a "most peculiar and stunning monument to the aesthetic situation engendered by the disappearance of the scientific referent." At the same time, *Gravity's Rainbow* is at least as strong an example also of the disappearance of the historical referent as Doctorow's *Ragtime*. Pynchon's novel, then, elides referentiality both in the diachronic plane — the ambition to approximate historical truth: what really happened, and in the synchronic plane — the ambition to approximate eternal truth: what really happens, according to the laws of science.

It should not come as a surprise that in the passage from Jameson I quoted the words history and science should be so easily interchangeable. After all, the ideas of progressive history and of the triumph of discursive reason as instanced by science jointly underpin the enlightenment project of modernity in the sense

that their truth-claims legitimate modernity to itself. Now Pynchon, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, but also in *V.* and in *The Crying of Lot 49*, directly engages with modernity. It is not a coincidence that *Gravity's Rainbow* draws so heavily on metaphors derived from the successive scientific views of modernity — Newtonian mechanism, statistical physics, and quantum physics — to model its historical visions upon. The point, precisely, is that *Gravity's Rainbow*, though set in the final months of the war in Europe, is not a novel about World War II as a struggle between the Germans and the Allied Forces, nor between fascism and democracy, nor even between good and evil, but rather as the collapse of modernity, going out with a bang, and not with a whimper, to use T.S. Eliot's memorable phrase.

Significantly, when in his 1991 revised version of "Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," an essay in the book with the same title, Jameson does allow for the possibility of representation in postmodern writing after all, he turns to writing that, precisely, represents the postmodern crisis in representation:

Yet something ... does tend to emerge in the most energetic postmodernist texts, and this is the sense that beyond all thematics or content the work seems somehow to tap the networks of the reproductive process and thereby afford us some glimpse into a postmodern or technological sublime, whose power or authenticity is documented by the success of such works in evoking a whole new postmodern space in emergence around us.... I want to suggest that our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of present-day multinational capitalism. The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself. This is a figural process presently best observed in a whole mode of contemporary entertainment literature — one is tempted to characterize it as "high-tech paranoia" — in which the circuits and networks of some putative global computer hookup are narratively mobilized by labyrinthine conspiracies of autonomous but deadly interlocking and competing information agencies in a complexity often beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind. Yet conspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt — through the figuration of advanced technology — to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system. (37-38)

The texts Jameson has in mind belong to what is now commonly labelled cyberpunk, and the specific author he mentions is William Gibson. Cyberpunk in general, and Gibson's work as instanced by his best-known novel *Neuromancer* (1984) in particular, thematizes the demise of modernity's referential touchstones. Science in Gibson's work is not used to approximate any kind of referential truth, but rather to create other, non-referential worlds, and to do so

in the future, not in the past: reality is replaced with virtual or hyper-reality when characters enter into, and live, computer simulated cyberspace.

Given the date of appearance of *La Condition postmoderne*, and given the starting premise of that book as outlined in its first paragraph, Lyotard of necessity had to inspire himself, as far as literature was concerned, upon the catalogue of American authors I enumerated before. Jameson's 1984 view, to my mind, largely amounts to a negative appraisal of the same authors' work, inspired by a neo-marxist reading of poststructuralist views of postmodernism, and particularly by the poststructuralists' repeated insistence on textuality, narrativity, and simulacrisation rather than referentiality. With regard to aesthetics in general, and literature in particular, this specifically leads Jameson to reverse Lyotard's positive appraisal of the potentially revolutionary qualities of the postmodern works under consideration. Moreover, it would be my contention that Jameson's 1991 revised view is largely based on an extrapolation of his 1984 view, extended to take in what is after all a fairly extreme example of one particular element already present in 1970s postmodern American literature, and most particularly in Pynchon. Indeed, as Brian McHale contends in *Constructing Postmodernism*:

The presence of Pynchon's texts, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) in particular, is pervasive in cyberpunk fiction at all levels, from the minutest verbal details right up to the paranoid world-view and conspiracy theory of history characteristic of most cyberpunk fictional worlds. (231)

Lyotard's and Jameson's discussions of literary postmodernism, then, are predicated on what is essentially the same body of texts. At this point it is worth noting that the producers of these texts are all white (some even dead white) males. The same thing applies to William Gibson. In other words, they are members of that category, in terms of race, class, and gender, that has been central to modernity as both agent and beneficiary. Moreover, they are natives of the continent the discovery of which is often taken to have sparked as well as marked the initial advent of modernity (Todorov; Habermas 1990 and 1992; Gikandi), and of the country that in its very creation as a nation at the end of the eighteenth century to its rise to world hegemony in the American century stands as the very embodiment of modernity and therefore also as the ultimate West. Whether read, then, from a Lyotardian perspective, as a window upon the future, perhaps even an overcoming of modernity, or from a Jamesonian perspective, as a crisis in modernity, postmodernist literature in its central manifestations can be seen as un-writing the discourses of progressive history and discursive reason that uphold and legitimize modernity to itself.

Since the time of appearance of Lyotard's *La Condition postmoderne* and Jameson's original version of "Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," however, the term postmodernism has been significantly extended

to take in a whole range of writing also by authors originating from the margins of modernity: whether natives of erstwhile colonies of the West, like Salman Rushdie, descendants of the West's vanquished, like Louise Erdrich, or of its enslaved, like Toni Morrison, or members of the West's inner repressed, like Angela Carter and Marina Warner, or even to authors that, although they originate from the hegemonic category, position themselves (to borrow a term from Stuart Hall) so as to speak for modernity's marginalized, like John Coetzee in *Foe*. Fed by the tides of multiculturalism and post-colonialism, theoretical reflection upon these ex-centric (to borrow Linda Hutcheon's apt term from her 1988 *A Poetics of Postmodernism*) cultural products tends to resent what it feels to be the universalizing ambitions of the hitherto dominant Eurocentric views of postmodernism as instanced by Lyotard and Jameson. Kumkum Sangari neatly summarizes the point:

Postmodern skepticism is the complex product of a historical conjuncture as both symptom and critique of the contemporary economic and social formation of the West. But postmodernism does have a tendency to universalize its epistemological preoccupations — a tendency that appears even in the work of critics of radical political persuasion ... the world contracts into the West; a Eurocentric perspective ... is brought to bear upon "Third World" cultural products; a "specialized" skepticism is carried everywhere as cultural paraphernalia and epistemological apparatus, as a way of seeing; and the postmodern problematic becomes *the* frame through which the cultural products of the rest of the world are seen.... Such skepticism does not take into account either the fact that the postmodern preoccupation with the crisis of meaning is not everyone's crisis (even in the West) or that there are different modes of de-essentialization which are socially and politically grounded and mediated by separate perspectives, goals, and strategies for change in other countries. (242-43)

The ambition of modernity's ex-centrics, precisely, is to finally come to share in modernity's boons, and to this end the emancipatory narratives of modernity have to be preserved and not erased, as Lyotard's and Jameson's postmodernism risks doing. Still, these narratives need to be modified to fit the ends of multiculturalism and post-colonialism. Therefore, a reading strategy serving these ends first refashions what have hitherto been propagated as *History* and *Science tout court* as peculiarly *Western* history and science, and, rather than as self-legitimizing enterprises, shows them up as accessories to the specific emancipatory project of the West that spells capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism, and that has as its central historical agent the bourgeoisie. Next, such a reading strategy counterposes *alter-native* (Zabus) forms to Western history and science, forms that in the Western view are customarily denied such status and that at the same time are seen as particularly belonging to marginalized groups: myths, tales, legends, magic, witchcraft. Elsewhere, I have proposed the term counter-postmodernism for this specific reading of postmodernism (D'haen 1994).

Just as it has been argued that the term postmodernism contains within itself both its affiliation with and its rejection of modernism, I would argue that the term counter-postmodernism at the same time signals its genealogical rootedness in both modernism and postmodernism as well as its rejection of or resistance to the specific conjunction of aesthetics and ethics these two terms imply in their orthodox or central configurations. Specifically, and in the terminology that Gayatri Spivak (1987 and 1990) and Homi Bhabha (1990), following Jacques Derrida, apply to postcolonial literature in its relation to the literature of the mother country, I would maintain that counter-postmodernism functions as supplement to postmodernism in its orthodox definitions. It counters orthodox postmodernism in putting its finger on the latter's complicity with what it purports to subvert or problematize, and thus rewrites — in a move that duplicates the actual practice of much postcolonial and feminist literature — orthodox postmodernism as one more form of the discourse of modernity, rather than as its transcendence. With the same move, though, counter-postmodernism also writes the subjectivity, history, and language of those hitherto suppressed by the discourse of modernity as emanating from Western bourgeois society. As such, it makes this discourse also accessible to those traditionally excluded or repressed by Western modernity. Ironically, by thus marking the end of modernity as the exclusive property of hegemonic Western man, and the advent of modernity also for the hitherto repressed, counter-postmodernism may well be the only truly post-modern reading of postmodernism in that it posits the transcendence of orthodox modernity, and the attainment of an-Other modernity.

Elsewhere, I have analysed Marina Warner's 1992 novel *Indigo* as an example of counter-postmodernism (D'haen, forthcoming). Here I will limit myself to a discussion of how in that novel science is de-essentialized (to use Sangari's term). In first instance *Indigo* is a postmodern re-write of *The Tempest*. Hulme, Hawkes, Barker and Hulme, Brown, Eagleton, Greenblatt, and Cheyfitz have all shown how Shakespeare's play moves against a colonial context. In line with conventional readings of *The Tempest*, as conveniently summarized in Frank Kermode's introduction to his Arden edition of the play, most of these commentators see the related issues of authority, sovereignty, and usurpation as forming the nexus of the play. However, as Barker and Hulme, and Hulme, most forcefully argue, these issues are usually only considered from the point of view of Prospero. This has to do with the fact that it is Prospero who tells the histories of all the *dramatis personae*, himself included, on the island. The only exception to this is Caliban, who tells his own history, but who is immediately corrected by Prospero providing a retelling of that same history. Both the histories of Prospero and Caliban are stories of usurpation, but Prospero recasts Caliban's story as a failed attempt on the island at doubling Antonio's usurpation of Prospero's sovereignty in Milan. As Barker and Hulme put it, this retelling effectively occludes the reality of Prospero's own usurpation of Sycorax's and

Caliban's original sovereignty over the island. What ultimately legitimizes Prospero's power over the island and its native inhabitants is their irredeemable othering (Hawkes) by invoking those values that make of Prospero a herald, if not a representative, of modernity: reason and progressivism. This, however, implies giving up what binds together Prospero and Sycorax: magic. If Prospero's rule in Shakespeare's play is ultimately justified by his superior reason, which is proven by his famous voluntary abjuration of his rough magic, then Caliban's, and *a fortiori* Sycorax's, subjugation is legitimized by, respectively, their un-reason and their adherence to magical ways. With Warner, however, Sycorax's magic is explained as only such from the point of view of the colonizing Westerners, while in reality it is the product of native skill, knowledge of herbs, and experience, or, in other words, of science other than that of Western man. The result is that the legitimization of Western rule over the natives is revealed as rooted not in fact but rather in discourse. *Indigo*, then, counter-poses native Caribbean science, and also history, as told and focalized by female and (part)-native Caribbean narrators, to those of the West. Perhaps it is not superfluous to recall here that for Habermas (1990 and 1992) and Todorov it is precisely the discovery of the Americas, which from a historical perspective primarily means the Caribbean, that ushers in the dawn of modernity, nor that Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is one of the earliest literary reactions to that discovery.

As far as science and postmodernism are concerned, then, a clear dichotomy seems to be shaping up, with on the one hand orthodox postmodernists, who are largely white, male, and Euro-American, and who un-write Western modernity's universalizing metanarrative of Science, and on the other hand the counter-postmodernists, who are largely non-white, and/or female, and/or non-Euro-American, and who counter the same Western metanarrative-as-narrative with alter-native but equi-valent narratives. Yet, it is only fair to immediately deflate this claim, and insist that whatever one finds in these texts is to a large extent determined by the reading strategies one adopts, and by the theoretical premises upon which the latter are predicated. Turning back briefly to Pynchon, for instance, it is instructive to note that Friedman, right after he has pronounced on how the various strategies borrowed from the sciences fail to bring success to the characters that adopt them, notes that

We leave other characters with clear evidence of survival and even success. Geli gets her man at last, but the only explicit tool she uses, besides persistence, is witchcraft. Here is a metaphor clearly external from the choices in science that *Gravity's Rainbow* has offered. The narrator affirms that category of alternative to the science metaphors after the final scene with Geli, Tchitcherine, and Enzian: "This is magic. Sure — but not necessarily fantasy." (95)

In other words, the seeds for a counter-postmodern reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* were always present. It is the date of appearance of Friedman's article — 1983 — that prevented its framing such observations along the counter-postmodernist lines I have just sketched. With regard to the relationship between science and postmodernism in literature, then, it would seem that a lot stands to be gained from properly historicizing not just the primary works themselves, but also the various readings to which they have been subjected.

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