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PATRICK WILLIAMS

POSTMODERN NARRATIVE

Nothing about postmodernism is uncontroversial. Whether it is a period, a movement, or a general 'condition' of culture, how broadly or narrowly it is distributed around the world, when it began and whether it has ended, even whether it happened at all, are all matters of dispute (see, e.g., Bertens 1995 and Calinescu 1987). The prefix *post-* identifies postmodernism as chronologically subsequent to modernism (*see* MODERNIST NARRATIVE), thereby placing it in the second half of the twentieth century, but its exact relationship to modernism is as hotly contested as anything else about it. If there is little consensus about what it is, nevertheless postmodernism is used as a counter in a wide variety of contemporary language games, including the language game of narrative theory. A preliminary distinction needs to be drawn between theories of postmodern narrative and postmodern theories of narrative – that is, between theories that seek to account for the poetics of narratives identified as postmodern, and general theories of narrative based on ideas native to the postmodern period (and more properly characterised as *poststructuralist theories of narrative) (Gibson 1996). The present essay will focus on the poetics of postmodern narrative, and in particular on the repertoire of strategies and devices by means of which postmodern narrative reflects on ontological questions (questions of being). Such questions include, what is a world? How many worlds are there, of what kinds, constituted in what ways? How do they differ, and what happens when they interact or collide? What is the mode of existence of a text, on the one hand, and of the fictional world (or worlds) it projects, on the other? How are such fictional worlds made, and how can they be unmade? What are the consequences of the making, unmaking and proliferation of fictional worlds for the way we think about, and live in, the real world?

Theories of postmodernism

General theories of postmodernism abound, and it would be impossible to review them all here. Two of the most influential of these theories, one based in the history of consciousness, the other in economic history, have special relevance to narrative. The first is Lyotard's theory that postmodernism reflects incredulity toward the *master narratives of progress, enlightenment, and human liberation that served to legitimate modern culture (*see* SCIENCE AND NARRATIVE). Sceptical of such 'grand narratives', postmodernism instead values the self-legitimating 'little' narratives of local groups, limited *institutions, and subcultural enclaves. Lyotard's theory helps explain both the paradoxical *anti-narrative impulse in some postmodern narrative, and the countervailing proliferation of stories and anecdotes in everything from Latin-American *magical realist novels to *television talk-shows. The other relevant general theory is Jameson's *Marxist account of postmodernism as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism'. According to Jameson, postmodernism in the cultural sphere (including narrative forms such as film and prose fiction) reflects the late capitalist mode of production in the economic sphere. Jameson inventories the constitutive features of postmodernism: the 'depthlessness' of a culture based on simulation and the circulation of *images; the weakening of a sense of history; 'schizophrenic' disjointedness and an intensified form of collage; a new experience of the sublime, identified with technology instead of nature; and a new experience of architectural *space, or what

Influential as they have been, such 'high' theories don't provide a direct bridge to actual narrative practice. Jameson comes closer to doing so than Lyotard; but closer still is Jencks, an architecture critic largely responsible for the currency of the term 'postmodernism' in his own field. According to Jencks, postmodernism in architecture is characterised by 'double-coding'. Postmodern buildings communicate on two different levels, to two different constituencies: on one level, through their modernist structural techniques and in-group ironies, they communicate with a minority constituency of architects and connoisseurs; on another, they reach a broader public of consumers through their allusions to familiar historical styles of architecture. Jencks saw analogies to architectural double-coding in the postmodern novels of John Barth and Umberto Eco, simultaneously popular (especially Eco's) and avant-garde. However, it was left to Hutcheon to develop Jencks's double-coding idea into a full-fledged theory of postmodern narrative, which she identifies with the *genre she dubs *historiographic metafiction. Historiographic metafictions such as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* narrate versions of history in legible, reader-friendly ways yet at the same time reflect critically and ironically on historical reconstruction itself (*see* HISTORIOGRAPHY).

Common to many of these accounts (including Jameson's, Jencks's, and Hutcheon's) is the assumption of postmodernism's belatedness, its 'post-'ness. Where modernists sought to 'make it new', postmodernists rummage through the cultural attic of past devices, styles, genres, and texts, recycling them in the modes of parody, pastiche, recontextualisation, and revision (as in Kathy Acker's subversive rewritings of literary classics and Angela Carter's revisionist *fairy tales, or, in the sphere of popular culture, the proliferation of Hollywood remakes, 'tribute' albums, and 'retro' fashions) (*see* INTERTEXTUALITY; NARRATIVE VERSIONS; POSTMODERN REWRITES). Critics sceptical of the 'myth of the postmodernist breakthrough' observe that postmodernism's most characteristic features, such as metafictional self-reflection, are hardly 'innovative', since most if not all of them can be found in narratives from earlier periods (*see* REFLEXIVITY). Most damning of all, postmodernism is accused of uncritically replicating modernist aesthetic values such as *irony, difficulty, self-consciousness, etc., while pretending to have superseded modernism.

Ontological poetics

While recycling is undoubtedly a feature of postmodern narrative, the charge of belatedness can be answered by appealing to the concept of the dominant (*see* FUNCTION (JAKOBSON)). Literary-historical change rarely involves the wholesale replacement of outmoded features and values by new ones, but more typically involves a reshuffling of existing features in the light of a new dominant function. Responding to changes in the world at large (such as the onset of late capitalism, in Jameson's terms) as well as the internal dynamics of literary history, dominants shift; what had formerly been foregrounded recedes to the background, while background elements advance to the foreground. Thus modernist features certainly do persist in postmodern narratives, but subject to a different dominant: where modernist narrative had been oriented toward investigating issues of perception and cognition, *perspective, the subjective experience of *time, the circulation and reliability of knowledge, etc., postmodern narrative is oriented differently, toward issues of fictionality, modes of being and the differences among them, the nature and plurality of worlds, how such worlds are made and unmade, etc. (*see* FICTION, THEORIES OF; POSSIBLE-WORLDS THEORY; TEXT-WORLD APPROACH TO NARRATIVE). In other words, postmodern narrative reflects an ontological dominant where modernist narrative reflected an epistemological one.

Postmodern narratives probe ontological issues by deploying a repertoire of characteristic devices and strategies (McHale 1987, anticipated by Fokkema 1984). First, there are strategies for pluralizing the fictional world itself; secondly, strategies for laying bare the ways in which fictional worlds are made, or in which they *fail* to be made; thirdly, strategies for driving a wedge between text and world, splitting them apart and pitting them one against the other; and fourth, strategies for exposing to view the ultimate ontological grounding of fictional worlds – their grounding, on the one hand, in the material reality of the book, and on the other hand in the material activity of an *author.

All narratives produce multiple possible worlds – potential states of affairs, subjective realities, etc. – but these are normally subordinated to a single actual world (*see* MODALITY). Postmodern narratives, by contrast, actualise multiple worlds, juxtaposing them and exploring the tensions between them. Weaker forms of ontological pluralism are achieved in conspiracy narratives, with their paranoid suspicions about another order of things behind the visible one (e.g., Don DeLillo's novels, Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*). Stronger forms juxtapose a recognisably real world with an adjacent fantastic world (e.g., Carlos Fuentes's *Aura*, Julio Cortázar's *House Taken Over*) or mingle naturalistic and supernatural elements (as in magical realist narratives), or they juxtapose the world of the living with the 'world to come', exploring the ultimate ontological frontier between life and death (e.g., Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Alastair Gray's *Lanark*, James Merrill's long narrative poem, *The Changing Light at Sandover*). If one were to collapse such a multiworld structure onto a single plane, the result would be a paradoxical 'heterotopia', where fragments of many worlds mingle in an impossible space, such as we find in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, or in the centreless, chaotic 'Zone' of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Plurality of worlds in postmodern narrative is often achieved by exploiting the conventions of various popular novelistic genres (*see* NOVEL, THE): *science fiction, with its literal juxtapositions of present and future, of one planet and another; the *fantastic, with its intrusions of other worlds into the fabric of this one; and historical fiction, with its complex mingling of the factual and the overtly fictional (*see* HISTORICAL NOVEL). Such genres are compatible with postmodernism's ontological dominant. By contrast, when postmodern narratives adapt the conventions of *detective fiction, a profoundly epistemological genre, they typically do so 'against the grain', subverting the genre's norms: mysteries go unsolved, detectives fail to perform their roles, ratiocination itself is discredited, and the case becomes metaphysical (e.g., Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*) (Merivale and Sweeney 1999). Plurality of worlds in postmodernist novels is sometimes signalled by the presence of a character who has 'migrated' from another fictional universe (e.g., Nabokov's Lolita in Gilbert Sorrentino's *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*). Alternatively, it may be signalled by the

of a being from another world, such as the angels of *Gravity's Rainbow* or the aliens of television's *The X-Files*, or by the opening of a kind of 'window' or 'portal' from one world onto another, such as the mirrors of Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* or the ubiquitous television screens of DeLillo's *White Noise* and Pynchon's *Vineland*.

While some postmodernist fictions provoke ontological reflection by projecting a plurality of worlds, others do so by troubling the very processes by which fictional worlds are constructed. One means of troubling the world-building process, and thereby exposing it to scrutiny, involves projecting a state of affairs in the fictional world and then rescinding it or contradicting it or otherwise placing it 'under erasure'. Placing parts of the world under erasure is a strategy common to the *nouveaux romanciers* (Alain Gobbe-Grillet, Jean Ricardou, Claude Simon) and the American surfictionists (Ronald Sukenick, Steve Katz, Clarence Major), among others (*see* NOUVEAU ROMAN; SURFICTION). Robert Coover, in stories such as 'The Babysitter' and *The Elevator*, produces multiple, mutually contradictory narrative sequences, actualising the 'garden of forking paths' structure that Borges once speculated about.

A related strategy involves distributing different parts of a world, or different worlds, over a number of narrative levels, one inset or embedded or nested inside the other like Chinese boxes or Russian Matrushka dolls, as in Barth's short story 'Menelaiad' (*see* EMBEDDING; FRAMED NARRATIVE). Inset micro-worlds are narratologically dependent upon, and consequently ontologically 'weaker' than, the framing worlds in which they are inset, and opportunities for paradox abound, including *trompe l'oeil* effects (one level mistaken for another) and 'strange loops' or *metalepses, when narrative sequences spill over from one level to higher or lower levels (and sometimes back again). The *nouveaux romanciers*, as well as Sorrentino in *Mulligan Stew* and Calvino in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, intensively exploit such opportunities. Another conspicuous narratological paradox that postmodern narratives regularly exploit is **mise en abyme*, the mirroring or duplication at a lower (embedded) narrative level of the higher-level world in which the duplicate is embedded. Familiar from the play-within-the-play structure of *Hamlet*, *mise en abyme* is ubiquitous in postmodern narra-

Winter's Night a Traveler to the structure of the abbey library in Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, which duplicates in miniature the novel's medieval universe.

If one focus of postmodern ontological reflection is the fictional world and its construction, another focus is the language of the fictional text. Some postmodern novels subject figurative language to particularly intense scrutiny and pressure, laying bare the unsettled relationship between the figurative and the literal. This is the approach, for instance, of García Márquez's magic realist novels *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, in which surrealist imagery sometimes functions metaphorically, but at other times reflects the fantastic realities that are such conspicuous features of these narrative worlds. *Gravity's Rainbow* is riddled with overgrown similes and *metaphors that create their own finely textured micro-worlds, temporarily eclipsing the novel's primary world. Another postmodern approach to the fictional text involves opening up a rift or gap between the level of text and the level of world, dissolving their normally close interdependence and thereby impeding the reader's progress from 'word' to 'world'. This is accomplished in some cases by means of intense stylisation (e.g., Guy Davenport, William Gass), in others by cliché and deliberate infelicity (e.g., Donald Barthelme, Kathy Acker), in still others by chance (e.g., William Burroughs' cut-up and fold-in techniques) or by mechanical text-generating procedures, as in the texts of the *Oulipo writers (Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, Calvino, Harry Mathews, and others). In every case, the object is to heighten language's palpability or its opacity, or in other words, to foreground those qualities that make language a potential object of attention in its own right, independently of any world that it might happen to project.

The entire edifice of the fictional text ultimately rests, in one sense, on the ontological foundation of its material support – the page, lines of type, the book as object – and in another sense on its origins in the activities, in real time and space, of a real author. Postmodern novels systematically trouble their own groundings, in both these senses – on the one hand, by foregrounding the materiality of the text instead of effacing it, as would normally be the case in novels; on the other hand, by making the author's problematic presence 'behind' the text an issue in the

include narratives distributed between a 'main' text and its annotations, as in Nabokov's *Pale Fire* or David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, and the shaped 'concrete prose' found in the novels of Raymond Federman and Christine Brooke-Rose, or in Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. Examples of problematising authorship include the recurrent postmodern *topos* of the writer at his or her desk writing the text at hand (Sukenick calls this the 'truth of the page'), and the simulated 'death of the author' rehearsed throughout Beckett's fiction and in Federman's *The Voice in the Closet*.

Cybertext

Some observers have thought that by the beginning of the new millennium postmodern narrative had run its course and exhausted itself, but others see it as renewing and even fulfilling itself through its affiliation with the new digital *media. Emerging in the 1980s, hypertext, i.e., textual or other informational media distributed in blocks and joined by electronic links, was championed as the actualisation and even vindication of poststructuralist theory (Landow 1997). Hypertext narrative, in particular, seemed destined to become the medium that postmodern narrative had been anticipating all along – literal gardens of forking paths! The hype outstripped the accomplishment, however, and first-generation hypertext narratives such as Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* and Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* appear in retrospect much less postmodern than they seemed at the time, and not even as fully hypertextual as contemporaneous print novels such as Milorad Pavič's *Dictionary of the Khazars*. Digital mediation does not inevitably entail reflection on ontological questions, and first-generation hypertext novels seem animated much more by epistemological concerns than by ontological ones. If postmodern print narrative is to achieve its digital fulfilment anywhere, it is more likely to be elsewhere in the range of digital forms that constitute Aarseth's umbrella category of 'cybertext', including MUDs (multiple-user domains), MOOs (object-oriented MUDs), *simulation games, and other approximations of the dream of virtual reality (Ryan 2001). Are digital media the apotheosis of postmodern narrative, or the end of narrative as we know it? Neither, probably, nothing about postmodernism is certain, but the utopian and apocalyptic scenarios are probably both exaggerated.

SEE ALSO: computer games and narrative; digital narrative

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POSTMODERN REWRITES

According to Pfister (1991), postmodern *intertextuality is not just 'one device among others'; rather, it is used as a 'central constructional principle' (214), thereby becoming a culturally dominant tool. *Postmodern narrative and artefacts in general are heavily intertextual since postmodern representation typically entails, and flaunts, a textual 'reprise' (Moraru forthcoming). That is, setting out to describe an object or narrate an *event

(collage-like and otherwise), and brings before us texts and representations of other objects and events.

Within postmodern intertextuality, critics have identified the particular practice of postmodern rewriting and, resulting from it, the postmodern rewrite. Postmodern rewrites take to another level intertextuality and its subsets as inventoried by Genette and others. A complex form, the postmodern rewrite may incorporate allusions to a previous work, *ironies, pastiches, etc., but it usually deploys, rather conspicuously, an elaborate diegetic parallel to a prior text, which oftentimes is also of narrative nature (Moraru 2001: 19) (*see* ALLEGORY). In other words, key here is the act of intentional renarrativisation (*see* INTENTIONALITY; NARRATIVISATION). As a *postmodern* act, this renarrativisation, or, retelling, differs from traditional imitation or replica in that it goes beyond simply rehashing, and paying homage to, its 'model'. In fact, numerous – if not all – postmodern rewrites erode this 'model' and its underpinning ideologies while critiquing the very social context within which the dialogue of the rewrite and the rewritten occurs. To put it otherwise, the rewrite reworks not only a text from the past – a form – but also cultural formations, i.e., the values underlying that text.

While usually suffused with intertextuality and its self-reflexive subcategory, *metafiction, not every postmodern narrative is a rewrite. Nevertheless, the number and significance of postmodern rewrites across literatures and narrative traditions are remarkable. A few examples: E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, which rewrites Heinrich von Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas*; Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, a rewriting of Horatio Alger's novels; Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*, which redoes Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*; John Updike's *Roger's version*, Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*, Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World*, Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, all of which rework Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*; J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*, a rewriting of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; Leonardo Sciascia's *Candido*, a postmodern retelling of Voltaire's *Candide*.

SEE ALSO: adaptation; metanarrative

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CHRISTIAN MORARU

POSTSTRUCTURALIST APPROACHES TO NARRATIVE

In the second half of the 1960s, some structuralist theorists, many of whom contributed to the French literary journal **Tel Quel*, came to broaden and relativise structuralist approaches to narrative texts (*see* STRUCTURALIST NARRATOLOGY). In general, this shift implies that a narrative is no longer reduced to one abstract and supposedly universal deep structure, and that a text is no longer regarded as a self-contained structure but rather as an open and multi-stranded texture linked with the extra-textual context (*see* INTERTEXTUALITY; NARRATIVE STRUCTURE). Thus, both text and context are viewed from a different angle than the one prevalent in classical structuralism. The classical search for textual coherence is replaced by an investigation of the ways in which the text leaves things undecided, open, and even contradictory (*see* INDETERMINACY). Dynamics, multiplicity, *polyphony, and boundary transgression are the keywords, replacing the structuralist preferences for static and homogeneous structures, clearly identifiable narrating *voices (*see* NARRATOR), and clear-cut boundaries.

work of Jacques Derrida. Indeed, Derrida's deconstructive approach can be viewed as the central influence on poststructuralist narrative analysis. Other important influences are the works of late structuralists such as Barthes and Kristeva; the ideological analyses of Foucault and Lyotard (*see* DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (FOUCAULT)); the psychoanalytical readings of Lacan; and the psycho-social investigations by Deleuze and Guattari.

With the shift to poststructuralism's open-ended view of texts, the *narrativity and literariness of the text no longer occupy the centre of attention. They are replaced by the more general concept of textuality, regarded as the cross-point of various texts. This means that there is no single integrated poststructuralist narratology comparable to Gérard Genette's embracing structuralist systematisation. In the analysis of contexts in which particular narratives are situated, special attention is paid not only to the corporeal and the unconscious, the latter seen as a form of language, but also to the ideological patterns that infuse narratives (*see* IDEOLOGY AND NARRATIVE).

This shift is exemplified in the work of Roland Barthes. In 1966 he published a classic structuralist analysis of the narrative text (Barthes 1977a), starting from the idea that the narrative form is universal and that it is based on one single abstract deep structure, consisting of functions and indices (*see* FUNCTION (PROPP); NARRATIVE UNITS). On the higher level of *narration, Barthes admits the importance of the narrating and reading subject, but it is not until 1970 (Barthes 1974) that he explicitly states that so-called deep-structures are in fact the work of the reader. In this readerly view of narrative structures, every story and every reading entails its own structure (*see* READERLY TEXT, WRITERLY TEXT (BARTHES)). The latter is no longer studied as a combination of minimal units such as functions and indices, but rather as a texture, a weave of five *codes that the reader uses to process the text. These codes interact and refer to the extra-textual context, thereby opening up the closed system of the text, and letting in the reader's *desire and ideology. From 1970 onward, Barthes develops this link between text and desire, stating that narratives are *metaphors for bodily longings and that reading is a form of pleasure-seeking which responds to the text's seductive way of telling.

The incorporation of human desire in narrative ... highlights an ambiguity in the post-