

The Sublime Object of Postmodernity

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Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction, by Amy J. Elias. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001. 320 pp. \$42.50.

In the last several decades much discussion in the humanities and social sciences has focused on an array of purportedly new identities and political positions: postfeminist, post-Marxist, postcolonial and, of course, postmodern. This trend indicates substantial unease about historical periodization, a difficulty marking social or cultural tendencies. The “post” is an oddly retro-futurist conception that hinges on a central contradiction: on the one hand, an unwillingness to specify change in decisive, positive terms; on the other, an urgent declaration of radical transformation—the end of an era, the arrival of a brave new world. Our society is fundamentally different, says the post, but we can speak of it only in the terminology of the past. This form of self-description seems appropriate to an era marked by skepticism about ontological grounds. Yet it does not simply articulate anxiety about groundlessness; it also offers a form of psychic compensation; it offers a dramatic periodizing gesture itself as a new ground. In an age marked by the loss of the grand gesture, what could be more attractive than a grand gesture?

The problem, however, is that few descriptions of this dramatic cultural change account for the same phenomena. For all the talk of decisive historical shifts, there has been little agreement about the nature and meaning of the biggest post of them all. Even the most incisive accounts have sometimes concentrated on largely unrelated examples of the postmodern. Fredric Jameson, for instance, analyzes a wide array of architecture, visual imagery, film, scholarly writing and literature, while Linda Hutcheon treats primarily historical fiction and imagery, virtually none of which is discussed by Jameson. Such disparities in the idea of the postmodern have led to radically different assessments of postmodernism’s political meaning. As Jameson observed two decades ago, the apparently aesthetic debates between early theorists of the postmodern are “in reality moralizing . . . judgments on the phenomenon” (62). Although directed at scholars who had taken strong positions for or against postmodernism, this

comment has proven true of even the most admirably dialectical arguments.

Jameson himself does not paint a particularly rosy picture of postmodernism, in part because it rejects his own totalizing commitment to Marxist historical analysis. For Jameson, the postmodern tendency to undermine historical certainty is not a healthy form of skepticism but a new "depthlessness"—an ahistorical nostalgia and mystification of global economic conditions that constitute "the cultural logic of late capitalism" (9). Hutcheon, by contrast, sees postmodern politics as a critique of dominant cultural values that is nonetheless compromised by its underlying ambivalence about moral and philosophical grounds. This apparently balanced notion of "complicitous critique," however, does not lead to a value-neutral account of postmodern representation (9). Instead, Hutcheon's focus on "historiographic metafiction" emphasizes the politically progressive elements of postmodern writing, which she sees as self-consciously undermining ideological assumptions (or "doxa"). Her central examples—novels by the likes of Atwood, Cortázar, Coover, Doctorow, Fowles, Eco, Kingston, Christa Wolfe and others—are notable primarily for their powerful attacks on patriarchy, capitalism, racism and nationalism. While they also express skepticism about our access to the past or the real, this skepticism is ultimately healthy, Hutcheon suggests, because a positivist confidence in our access to the real is delusive and dangerous. In short, Hutcheon's account of postmodernism is much happier than Jameson's. The relative outlook of these accounts—both Hutcheon's optimism and Jameson's pessimism—seems governed in large part by the selection of objects studied.

Subsequent approaches to postmodernism have occasionally struggled to close the vast gaps between now-definitive texts by Jameson, Hutcheon, Jean-François Lyotard, Brian McHale, David Harvey and others. More often, however, scholars align themselves with one kind of approach and subordinate or politely ignore the others. It is thus a pleasure to read Amy Elias's recent study of the postmodern historical novel, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*. Elias not only offers a compelling analysis of postwar fiction but also reconciles much existing postmodern theory. She accomplishes the latter feat by wading immediately into the thicket of disagreement about postmodernism with two important interventions. First, she begins by distinguishing the "postmodernism of the streets"—reality TV, Disneyland and our sprawling consumer culture—from "postmodernism in the arts"—the fictional, theoretical and architectural products that are often critical responses to the postmodernism of the streets. This useful distinction immediately severs symptomatic from diagnostic cultural

artifacts, the unreflective products of late-capitalist consumer culture from more thoughtful reflections on that culture. Failure to draw such distinctions has been a primary cause of what Jameson calls the “absolute moralizing judgments” of much postmodern theory (62).

Second, and more important, Elias offers a succinct but powerful summary of theories of postmodernism. The reason dramatic discrepancies have characterized such theories, she shows, is that they have stemmed from three separate academic traditions. The first, which she calls “epistemological,” has concerned itself largely with philosophical questions about the origins and promise of modernity. This scholarly conversation understands the postmodern as a modern way of knowing that is opposed to the central values of modernity: rationality, scientific positivism and humanism. The second, or “sociocultural,” approach to the postmodern is largely a historicist attempt to define postmodernity as a set of global economic shifts resulting in the diminished importance of the nation-state and the increased aestheticization of everyday life—the conversion of reality into “reality.” Unlike the epistemological approach—which suggests that “postmodern” thinking or knowing has been a growing feature of western culture since the Enlightenment—the sociocultural approach sees postmodernism as the arrival of a specific set of historical changes in postwar Western societies, “a new network of relations between worker, work, space, technology, consumers, nation-states, and social values” (xxv). The third conversation about postmodernism has been concerned with explaining the nature of late-twentieth-century art and has been especially interested in defining the relation of postmodernism to modernism and realism. Within literary studies, Elias points out, a consensus has emerged that postmodern writing consists of two discrete phases: “a late-modernist, metafictional phase predominating in the 1960s and 1970s, and an antimodernist phase of cultural critique predominating in the 1980s and 1990s, centering on the politics of race, class, gender, and nationhood” (xxvi).

Delineating these discursive strands is an invaluable way to begin a study of postmodern fiction. It allows Elias to avoid the confusion that haunts so many attempts to talk about the postmodern, and it allows her to make the case for her own approach, which articulates relations among all three strands of postmodern theory. The “ariadnean thread” that knits together virtually all aspects of the postmodern, she claims, is an “obsession with history” (xvii)—both a desire to know and understand the past and also a deep skepticism about our ability to obtain historical knowledge. This ambivalent attitude is visible not only in postmodern historiographic fiction but also in postwar antifoundationalist historiography and in theories of historical romance.

What links these discourses—genre theory, historiography, postmodern theory—is a powerful contradiction: a desire to recover the meaning of the past and a simultaneous sense that the past is a desired horizon that can never be reached:

For the postmodern . . . imagination, history is not knowledge we learn and “own” once we learn it; rather, postmodern arts and sciences posit that history is something we know we can’t learn, something we can only desire. . . . Once the postmodernist mind intuits or is taught by relativizing social forces that true history is unfathomable, “history” comes to be merely “desire” for solid ground beneath one’s feet. (xviii)

A sense of groundlessness has, of course, been central to many assessments of the postmodern, including both epistemological accounts, where it manifests itself as a difficulty establishing grounds for the construction of a philosophical system, and sociocultural accounts, where it has been called depthlessness and ahistoricism. For Elias, however, this attitude is best comprehended through the notion of the historical sublime. “The *historical sublime*,” she writes, “is the space of History beyond current human events, the space of the past. Like Tolstoy’s History, this space is unknowable by human agents . . . and unrepresentable in discourse” (42). In short, the postmodern historical imagination conceives of the past as a sublime object, an evanescent Real that is fervently desired but admittedly unreachable. It is the object of a deeply conflicted historicism.

How did we arrive at such a place? In what is perhaps the most innovative and interesting claim of this richly argued book, Elias suggests that we cannot understand contemporary historiographic writing without examining its relation to the genre of historical romance, which had its roots in the fiction of Walter Scott. While Scott embraced Enlightenment assumptions about history—that it is History, a reality outside time; that it can be objectively studied by neutral human observers; that it is linear and progressive—what makes him “interesting as a writer, and as an ancestor to postmodern historical novelists, is his complication of these empirical assumptions about history with the nostalgic romanticism for past cultural forms that runs throughout all his novels” (12). In particular, Scott believed that “the romance was aligned with the false or with fable, while the novel was aligned with mimesis and modern, deductive observation of real life. The melding of the two produced a unique and self-contradictory form, the historical romance” (13). It is this founding contradiction that has evolved into the far more ambivalent form that Hutcheon first termed historiographic metafiction. The specific difference between the original

historical romance and post-1960s historical fiction is the latter's increased emphasis on romance over history—fabulation over documentation. "Postmodernist historical fiction's turn toward fabulation may be understood as a tropological return, a swerving back, to the romance elements always embedded within classical historical romance" (22).

The cultural force driving this shift in the historical romance is a general suspicion of empiricism and a resurgence of the historical sublime. In an impressively detailed discursive history—part of her initial two-chapter section on "Theory"—Elias shows how these tendencies inform late-twentieth-century historiography as well as fiction. Particularly compelling in this line of argument is Elias's suggestion that the historical romance has always swung on a pendulum between its warring realist and romantic impulses. While early postmodernism swung violently away from Scott's more realist historicism, more recent, postcolonial fiction has swung back from fabulation to documentation. Focusing on the pendulum motion of historical fiction is a helpful way of sidestepping the simplistic dispute about whether postmodernism is antihistorical or deeply historical. It is also a helpful way of explaining the differences between early, satirical experiments like Coover's *Public Burning* and the more documentary impulses of recent postmodern fiction.

After sketching her arguments in chapter 1, Elias sets out four major propositions in a second theoretical chapter. The most interesting of these is that postmodern historicism has an inherently posttraumatic character. This is an astute observation. Not only have both individual and historical traumas become central to contemporary narrative, but a host of critics have suggested that the concept of trauma is crucial to an understanding of postwar culture. Indeed, for many theorists trauma has seemed a valuable model of history because it represents postmodern indeterminacy. Cathy Caruth, for instance, has articulated an influential analogy between the traumatized individual and the historian who can never access the past in all its fullness:

[I]t is here, in the . . . encounter with trauma—both in its occurrence and in the attempt to understand it—that we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference). Through the notion of trauma . . . we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not. (11)

For Caruth and others, psychological trauma is a powerful model of referential complexity because the traumatic event is the sublime object of history, a past Real that cannot be directly represented.

This analogy explains why so much recent fiction develops themes of trauma. The metahistorical romance, Elias explains,

is narrative that bears striking similarities to those produced by traumatized consciousness: it is fragmented; it problematizes memory; it is suspicious of empiricism as a nonethical resistance to “working through”; it presents competing versions of past events; it is resistant to closure; and it reveals a repetition compulsion in relation to the historical past. (52)

What is redemptive about the historical romance, she notes, is that it avoids both the depressing notion that we are forever doomed to act out our traumatic past and the Enlightenment fantasy of a past that can be unproblematically recovered by empirical study. On the contrary, Elias suggests, the metahistorical romance fits precisely Dominick LaCapra’s vision of an “ethical narrative”: one that conjoins “trauma with the possibility of retrieval of desirable aspects of the past that might be of some use in counteracting trauma’s extreme effects and in rebuilding individual and social life” (LaCapra 200; qtd. in Elias 54–55).

Elias’s three other major theoretical propositions are less innovative but still useful elaborations of her main argument: that the metahistorical romance repeatedly defers resolving historical questions; that its refusal to identify a firm historical ground indicates a simultaneous reliance on and distrust of *fabula*; and that it derives from modernist experiment but converts the modernist focus on individual consciousness into a more politically charged form by inverting the values of the traditional historical novel, “privileging romance over historical telling” (95). The explanation of these propositions is exemplary in its clarity and its command of the subject. Elias is equally compelling when exemplifying these propositions in the book’s three and a half chapters of “Analysis.” Those later chapters explain the postmodern entanglement with the historical sublime first as a formal feature of historical fiction, second as a thematic focus on the Enlightenment origins of modernity, and finally as a confrontation with the legacy of Western colonialism. A brief Coda compares Barth’s *Sot-Weed Factor* to Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* to show how the metahistorical romance has developed in the thirty years since the earliest experiments in postmodern metafiction.

Throughout these chapters, Elias offers insightful readings of scores of texts. Ranging over the writings of Faulkner, Dos Passos and Wolf through works so recent that they appeared only a year or two before

her own book went to press, she weaves together commentary on major postwar figures (Barth, Coover, DeLillo, Doctorow, Eco, Fowles, Morrison, Pynchon, Reed, Silko, Sontag, Vonnegut) with analysis of contemporary writers and contextualizing remarks on the historical fiction of Tolstoy, Scott and others. Especially welcome in this discussion is the way Elias comments simultaneously on fiction and historiographical theory. Although the book is divided into “Theory” and “Analysis” sections, Elias’s refusal to separate discussion of theoretical and fictional texts allows her to move beyond the simplistic treatment sometimes given to their relation. For instance, after swiftly dispatching the two “straw men of the debate about narrative and history” (77)—that history is either an unbiased collection of facts gleaned by quasi-scientific empiricism or a purely self-referential language indistinct from fiction—she moves into a brilliant reading of two novels by practicing historians. Counterposing Simon Schama’s *Dead Certainties* (1991) and Eric Zencey’s *Panama* (1995), Elias brings into sharp focus the historiographic crisis underlying all the material examined in her study. While Zencey wishes to defend an Enlightenment model of historical knowledge against “unbelievers,” he manages to do so only by suggesting that History is a natural force akin to entropy, a model that implies history’s inevitable dissolution and demise. Schama, by contrast, commits outright “historicide” by admitting that accounts of the past are always circumscribed by a narrating consciousness. “[C]aught between his distrust of *fabula* and his need for it” (84), Schama refuses to abandon the distinction between imaginative fiction and academic history that is everywhere eroded in his text.

Such discussions are especially relevant in the most interesting analytical chapter of the book, chapter 4, which begins by observing that numerous recent novels have taken the eighteenth century as their setting. This curious fact, Elias demonstrates, is no accident and is rooted in much more than a resurgence of interest in the Enlightenment. The “eighteenth century metahistorical romance,” Elias argues, is specifically designed to interrogate the philosophical and historical origins of modernity (179). It does so, moreover, by first developing oppositions between Enlightenment reason and romantic transgression and then privileging the latter:

In all of these novels, on the side of Reason and the representatives of Enlightenment are slavery, drudgery, and freedom only of the mind; on the side of the Sublime are terror, chaos and mad liberation of both mind and body. What is valorized, even implicitly, is passion over reason, disruption over order, life over theories that allow one to “develop” or “appreciate” life. (178)

This chapter provides an exceptionally compelling look at the ongoing dialogue between postmodernism and modernity.

The other major analytical chapters are also powerful, though they have drawbacks. Chapter 5, "Western Modernity versus Postcolonial Metahistory," argues that postmodernist and postcolonial fiction share a metahistorical imagination and "are a reaction-formation to the trauma of history itself." The two forms differ, Elias claims, in that postcolonial metahistory critiques the West from "outside its political, epistemological, economic, or cultural borders" (188). This proves a somewhat problematic definition, not only because many postcolonial writers are Western citizens, but also because it clashes with Elias's more tacit general sense that fiction written by minorities and women is postcolonial while fiction written by Anglo-Western men is postmodern. Elias is careful not to oversimplify, noting that "the First World, androcentric, metahistorical imagination" offers a continuum of political stances ranging from the "ironic, even nihilistic, deconstruction" of early metafiction to the "reconstructed 'secular-sacred' belief" of much postcolonial fiction (189–90). But even this concession begs the question of why she wishes to make any identity-based distinctions when the notion of a continuum of political stances offers a much more persuasive map.

The least compelling aspect of Elias's argument is her use of temporal and spatial metaphors to describe already familiar features of postmodern fiction. One of her four major propositions, that "metahistorical romance confronts the historical sublime as repetition and deferral" (48), is undoubtedly true, but seems unnecessarily confusing. Significantly, the point becomes clearest when Elias couches it in the language of Brian McHale. Metahistorical novels, she explains at one point, "construct the moments when the deferred border between past and present asserts itself, or the place where (as Brian McHale has noted) ontological boundaries meet" (66). This section of the text would have been clearer had Elias not tried to mix temporal and spatial metaphors (as in the incomprehensible "deferred border") and simply relied from the outset on McHale's powerfully simple notion that postmodern fiction mingles elements from different ontological realms. This problem becomes more serious when Elias spends much of chapter 4 arguing that the metahistorical romance "spatializes" history, "flattening" it into a plane, in order to suggest that "all of history is simultaneous" (190). While a planar metaphor for history does imply more than one path between two points (or events), it does not, as Elias suggests, imply simultaneity. (All points on a plane are not the same point, nor is a plane any more flat than a line.) Again, McHale's

“ontological confusion” much more nimbly accounts for postmodern deferral, fragmentation, atemporality and simultaneity.

Unnecessary complexity plagues some of the diagrams in the book, too—like the one of overlapping circles that illustrates the “Inversion and Replay of the Metahistorical Movement toward History” (203, fig. 2), a perplexing idea even if we knew what the circles were supposed to represent. An explanatory chart in the tradition of Ihab Hassan distinguishes traditional historical romance from its metahistorical offspring by aligning the two with oppositions that are often vague or incompatible. I don’t know what it means to suggest that the historical romance relates to the metahistorical romance as empiricism to desire or centering to deferral; the former pairing wrongly suggests that the empirical approach to history has nothing to do with desire (in whatever form), while the latter opposition mixes spatial and temporal metaphors.

While such explanatory metaphors are at times confusing, they do not detract much from this otherwise superb book. Indeed, they may be an unavoidable consequence of Elias’s admirable ability to reconcile so many other conceptual models within her own framework. On the whole, *Sublime Desire* is an exemplary study of perhaps the most important tendency in contemporary literature. It is lucidly written, richly textured, and commandingly researched throughout. No one interested in postwar culture should miss Elias’s excellent treatment of her subject.

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