

Revisiting Postmodernism

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Constructing Postmodernism, by Brian McHale. New York: Routledge, 1992.
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Brian McHale's earlier *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) had a clear thesis to argue: modernism was characterized by an epistemological preoccupation which in postmodernism shifted to questions of ontology, broadly a shift from the question "how do we know?" to "what do we know?" His new volume takes an altogether different purchase on his subject. *Constructing Postmodernism* is a collection of essays which mostly postdate the earlier study. There is a certain amount of repetition, especially in the references, but nowhere near as much as in David Lodge's recent collection *After Bakhtin*. McHale contextualizes and, in a number of important ways, revises his first study. The latter's central distinction derived from Dick Higgins's *Dialectic of Centuries* (1978) and is now reconsidered as only one of several possible "stories" of postmodernism. McHale here resists a naively linear narrative implicit in the term itself and now rejects the historical view of simple succession. Literary change does not occur in neat sequence, he now argues, but rather in quantum jumps and unpredictable shifts in direction. This is an important point to make because historical and theoretical analysis sheds a retrospective light over earlier literature. For example, some critics now suggest that Conrad's novels show early signs of postmodernism, and Lodge, Christine Brooke-Rose and others have even argued that indeterminacy—for McHale a central feature of postmodernism—lies at the heart of the discourse of realism.

McHale begins his self-revision with a fresh look at *Ulysses*, described in *Postmodernist Fiction* as a high modernist text. The error here, as he modestly acknowledges, was to understate the doubleness of that work, for *Ulysses* is, according to a substantial number of critics, a split novel and in that respect a "literary-historical scandal." McHale rationalizes the relation between the two halves in this way: "the poetics of the postmodernist chapters exceed the modernist poetics of the 'normal' chapters, and the postmodernist chapters parody modernist poetics." Tendencies already present in the first chapters, the heteroglossia of characters' discourse, for instance, later

become so extreme that they displace the subject and completely undermine the reader's capacity to identify the status of events.

The uncertainty resulting from narrative excess or contradiction is one of McHale's major motifs in discussing Pynchon. Indeed, *Gravity's Rainbow* stands symbolically at the centre of this volume as the archetypal postmodernist text, teasing the reader towards signification and then denying him/her any secure basis for meaning. Taking the elusive Mrs. Quoad as symptomatic of a general process, McHale argues that the reader is repeatedly forced to cancel out an interpretation "and to relocate it within a character's dream, hallucination, or fantasy." He identifies this effect as one of "retroactive deconcretization," one of a series of strategies Pynchon uses to oppose modernist readings of his text. Pynchon himself has made statements consistent with this view, in his introductions to *Slow Learner* and Richard Fariña's *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me*, that modernism had both fascinated him and retarded his recognition of new literary possibilities. *Gravity's Rainbow* is Pynchon's first work to confront expectations of literary decorum on every level, coherence included, and in a postscript to his first essay on that novel, McHale admits, with some acknowledgement of Alec McHoul and David Wills's *Writing Pynchon*, that it is ultimately impossible to distinguish between the real and the hallucinatory. At some points in this argument, clarity appears to depend on the reader's relative ability to situate events within a specific character's consciousness, but then Pynchon erects so many barriers to such a move that the attempt must be futile. The figure of mediumistic possession offers one blurring of the limits of consciousnesses penetrating each other, and Slothrop's dispersal into the Zone another less naturalistic example.

This issue resurfaces in one of McHale's best essays in the collection, a narratological analysis of the "you" forms of address in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Once again he wags his finger at those readers who distort the novel by resisting indeterminacy and by attempting to include themselves in the victim-victimizer relation. One of the most impressive characteristics of McHale's writing, apart from his evident learning and his modest recognition that Pynchon criticism is an on-going dialogue, is his respect for the detail of a text and especially for its resistance to theoretical rationalization. In approaching the second person, he argues strongly for plural significance on the grounds that "we may not satisfy our drive for certitude, but we . . . will have preserved the text's strangeness in the process." This recommendation is well put and is consistent with the view (of Thomas

Schaub and others) that in Pynchon's fiction we read among meanings, identifying what McHale (after Pynchon) calls "metasolutions."

The third major piece on Pynchon focuses on the presence of TV in *Vineland*. Here McHale shows how television is a medium uniquely appropriate to postmodernism because it is ontologically unstable. When it figures in the works of Robert Coover and Walter Abish as well as in *Vineland*, TV "not only contributes to and further aggravates the plurality of their worlds, but also reflects in miniature the ontological structure of the texts themselves." TV, then, offers an unusual kind of self-reflexivity at the expense of the hapless reader, since once again the result is a destabilizing of the narrative. Interestingly, McHale does not relate this effect only to performance but also to how Pynchon engages with death in the novel. The most extreme TV-addicts in *Vineland* are the Thanatoids, liminal figures positioned between life and death, and McHale sees them as evidence that "Pynchon may be seeking to convert TV into a tool for cognitively mapping the place of death in postmodern culture."

The second half of *Constructing Postmodernism* retains Pynchon as a point of reference in discussions of his contemporaries. Umberto Eco's novels are related to a general tendency in postmodernism to empty the detective novel of its epistemological substance and replace the latter with collisions between worlds, arbitrary linguistic patterning, and so on. *The Name of the Rose* is no exception to this general process nor to postmodernism's tendency to displace nuclear apocalypse on to alternative scenarios or other periods. Linking this novel to the ending of *Gravity's Rainbow*, McHale considers the metaphorical and temporal significance of apocalypse in Eco's novel. Historically it is anticipatory, but the library within the novel functions as a microcosm which is destroyed. If *The Name of the Rose* is a challenge to the "entire enterprise of literary history," *Foucault's Pendulum* raises another hardy perennial of Pynchon criticism—the question of paranoid reading. Here, however, McHale draws a distinction from Pynchon: whereas *Gravity's Rainbow* actively solicits a paranoid reading, Eco's second novel makes that its subject. McHale shows that *Foucault's Pendulum* combines attention to conspiracy theory ("the poor person's cognitive mapping," according to Fredric Jameson), mechanical reproduction in the computer Abulafia, and "procedural writing." By the latter McHale means the sort of works produced by the OuLiPo group, where author and reader join in complicity to recognize arbitrary linguistic restraints. Ultimately, McHale suggests, the novel resists the necessity of paranoid reading by substituting a more prosaic alternative based on the immediate physical data of this world.

McHale's revisionary examination of postmodernism next elaborates the proposition that an individual work might contain different modes. We have already seen this in *Ulysses*. Now McHale asks whether Joseph McElroy's *Women and Men* can be said to layer realist, modernist and postmodern devices. Insofar as it uses metonymy and a detective story, the first two modes are certainly present, but the third marks a sticking point. McHale gives an excellent reading of the function of angels in works by Alexander Theroux, William T. Vollman and, of course, Pynchon, concluding that angels operate as "realized metaphors of the violation of ontological boundaries." For that reason McElroy's novel turns out to be modernist since it uses angels to explore consciousness, whereas in *Gravity's Rainbow* the very term "angel" punningly unites two different worlds, the transcendental and the military (RAF slang for enemy aircraft). Brooke-Rose's actual practice as a fiction writer moves beyond her published criticism despite her endorsement of postmodernism. Uncertainty and ambiguity again prove decisive for McHale here, particularly Brooke-Rose's evocation of unstable narratological categories in *Thru* and her experiments with representational levels like the actualization of technical metaphors in *Such*.

Brooke-Rose, Pynchon, William S. Burroughs, Raymond Federman, and many others demonstrate a hospitality to science fiction, which McHale examines in the remaining essays. Where Jameson would gloss this connexion as a sign of the general breakdown of literary barriers, especially between "high" and "low," in postmodernism, McHale strikes a suitably technological note in proposing a feedback loop between SF and postmodernism. He shows how *Gravity's Rainbow* (itself arguably influenced by print and film SF) has had a pervasive impact on cyberpunk fiction. "Influence" does not really articulate the process McHale has in mind here, which is essentially a circulation of motifs from a common pool. He cites Kathy Acker's "borrowings" from William Gibson's *Neuromancer* as an extreme case of such appropriation, albeit one McHale describes as "pointless." The gradual convergence of SF and postmodern fiction McHale documents has a historical importance in its own right, and it is refreshing to see Philip K. Dick gaining recognition in this movement. McHale ends his discussion of cyberpunk by arguing that it cannot be understood separately from postmodernism, and he defines the former partly as a mode which literalizes "what in postmodern fiction occurs as metaphor." He cites as examples the microworlds which serve as "heterotopias," or spaces juxtaposing culturally diverse materials, comparing the war and urban spaces of writers like John Shirley and Pat Cadigan to the Zone in *Gravity's Rainbow* to good effect, although

with a residue of ambiguity: if cyberpunk zones are analogous to Pynchon's Zone, it is not clear how they can relate in terms of a metaphorical/literal contrast. And to a certain extent, the "paraspaces" of cyberpunk (its worlds-within-worlds) recall the library in *The Name of the Rose*, which functions simultaneously as metonym and metaphor. Such uncertainties apart, McHale makes a splendid job of explicating cyberpunk's strategies of fragmentation and its revision of standard SF motifs like robotics, zombies and the "centrifugal self." In particular, cyberpunk defamiliarizes and thereby renews the treatment of nuclear threat, which constantly risks sliding into cliché.

McHale wisely does not attempt a summarizing conclusion, which would anyway have been unnecessary since he has been concerned to demonstrate the strategies of postmodernism through close and careful examination of individual works. He shows that postmodernism is a mode or tendency that can surface in a period, in a particular writer's oeuvre, or within an individual work. This tendency clearly extends a sceptical impulse within modernism to ultimate ontological questions and to means of representation. Hence the crucial dimension of self-scrutiny McHale demonstrates in every essay, and hence also the sometimes extraordinary demands put on the reader's interpretive faculties. McHale never quite says it in so many words, but he repeatedly implies that our capacity to respond to postmodernism depends directly on our tolerance for uncertainty and our capacity to juggle plural meanings. In placing Pynchon within postmodernism and in cross-relating that mode to recent developments in science fiction, McHale's new volume makes an important and original contribution to the criticism of contemporary fiction.

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