

POSTMODERNISM

Defining postmodernism—in imaginative writing or in any field—is a notoriously difficult endeavor, and there are plenty of elitist guardians at the gate telling us we will never succeed. Susan Wheeler in an essay in

the *Antioch Review* is one of the most outspoken. She bemoans the possibility of “successful assimilation” and “trickle-up appropriations,” preferring, instead, to remain “resistant” to interpretation (2004, 148–149). Polemicists like Wheeler can make it hard to sympathize with postmodernism until we remember that the volatility of the term is one of its most stable features.

Nevertheless, it is possible to make some generalizations. Paul Hoover says simply, “Postmodernism is another term for avant-garde [literature] of the postwar period, 1950 to the present. Postmodernism is either the exhaustion of modernism or its logical extension” (2001, 154). Katherine Haake references a remark by José Ortega y Gasset that “the realist (pre-modern) writer looks *out* the window to the world, and the modernist writer looks *at* the window and how the world is reflected in and through it.” In contrast, “the postmodern writer may be said to look at everything at once: the world outside, the glass, the frame, the window coverings, and the very process of looking” (2000, 272). In *A Primer to Postmodernity*, Joseph Natoli notes a number of viewpoints held in common by postmodernists, including the belief that there is “gap between what we say about ourselves and the world, and the actual intermingling of ourselves and the world” (1997, 17). Postmodernists argue that “without a universal and absolute logic of word/world connection, words get attached to reality in either arbitrary or imposed ways,” with the result that “different narratives of reality can be made and therefore people can live in widely different realities” (17–18). As Natoli points out, it is not that postmodernists don’t believe in reality, only that they insist reality is necessarily different for everyone who experiences it, that one “cannot extract the prejudices of prior historical accounts and retain only the ‘objective’ part” (20).

Perhaps the clearest brief summation of the phenomenon can be found in David Lehman’s “What Is It? The Question of Postmodernism,” which, significantly, first appeared in the *AWP Chronicle* (now the *Writer’s Chronicle*), house organ of the creative writing profession. Lehman argues: “More than anything else, postmodernism is an attitude, and that attitude is definitively ironic” (1995, 5). Fragmentation, experimentation, contradiction, and stylistic imitation are the techniques of postmodern artists. Lehman alludes to Marx’s famous remark that everything happens twice, “the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce” (6), noting that “today the spirit of irony and parody must involve our own sacred objects” (15).

Granted, postmodernism occurs in a historical moment: beginning, by most accounts, sometime after the Second World War with the passing

of modernism and continuing into the present (though some would say we now live in a post-postmodern world). Yet postmodernists are generally skeptical of time-determined categories. Hence, postmodernism can claim writers from long ago, and multivoiced, indeterminate, paradoxical Shakespeare is a postmodernist in ways that his contemporary Ben Jonson was not. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is clearly postmodernist, though it was written in the eighteenth century. In our time we might say that Frank Conroy, for instance, is generally not a postmodern novelist, while Thomas Pynchon certainly is. If literary modernism is concerned with breaking, expanding, and combining traditional forms, it also acknowledges the ultimate value of those forms. Postmodernism questions the legacy of European patriarchy altogether. It embraces multiculturalism, oral culture, and the pop cultures of music, film, and television. In Lehman's words, the postmodernist author "tends to blur genres, stealing from all over, conflating kinds of diction, moving from the funny pages to the classics with the speed of a distracted newspaper reader" (1995, 10).

At the heart of postmodernism is the unreliable nature of language. What we think we're saying is never what we actually say. What others hear us saying is never exactly what we intended. If all writing is essentially an act of miscommunication, postmodernists argue that we might as well celebrate, rather than lament, that failure. Since no finite set of grand narratives governs past events, postmodernists renounce the responsibility of conveying Truth with a capital T and begin, instead, to investigate the contradictory, many-voiced nature of small t truths.

The relationship between postmodernism and creative writing has at times been vexed. Lehman's article in the *AWP Chronicle* is plainspoken and commonsensical precisely because, until very recently, most academic creative writers have been so skeptical of the jargon of critical theory. The conventional image of the late-twentieth-century American creative writer is of a belletrist struggling to become part of a canon upon which everyone but a few crazies agrees (see "Author"). Likewise, the paper-cutout postmodernist scorns the conventions and boundaries of institutional learning, is too busy arguing in cafés and breaking rules to worry about curricular reform.

However, if these visions once approximated a kind of truth, they are less and less accurate. Graduate creative writings programs like those at—to name a few—the State University of New York Buffalo, the New School, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and the California Institute for the Arts, specialize in turning out postmodern writers. As the latter two institutions indicate, cross-fertilization between writing and

other arts makes sense from a postmodernist perspective. The notion that writers should concentrate on and perfect themselves in a single genre, or even a single art form, violates the postmodern love of hybridity and multiplicity. The following list of course titles from Cal Arts gives a sense of what a postmodern graduate education might look like: Irreverent Research, Writing in Pixels, Digital Landscapes, Punk Writing, Queer Books, Globalit, Theorizing the Body, and From the Sublime to the Ridiculous and Other Forms of Non-Sense.

The traditional graduate workshop, in which literary-minded epebes gather around and learn from a master, is a modernist rather than a postmodernist model. It relies on everyone's consensus that ultimate authority belongs to the teacher; she is the senior member of the group, so her experience and ideas count the most. In contrast, a postmodernist workshop would never allow authority to rest for long in anyone's hands; it would privilege dissent over agreement, aspiring for the democracy of the web (and Web) rather than the hierarchy of the ladder.

Whether they like it or not, American creative writers in the twenty-first century share most of the starting points, if not all the assumptions, of postmodernists. The triumph of global capitalism means that writers work in the shadow of a "market," even if they consciously try to ignore the effects of that market. The preeminence of electronic media ensures that writing for the page will have a much smaller audience than writing for the small or big screen (see also "Electronic Literature"). And even a "realistic" writer inevitably rejects naive mimesis: every serious author soon realizes that what is on the page does not correspond to the complexity of the larger world.

Perhaps postmodernism as it applies to the arts is simply the current word for "avant-garde," for the consciously experimental. If so, its currency is limited. And somewhere in the jungle of critical theory lurks an obscure term that will someday be widely used to describe the general tendencies of the new millennium.