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The End of Postmodernism: New Directions

It is hard, perhaps impossible, to say when an era has reached, or will reach, its end, especially if that era happens to define one's own contemporary environment. Perhaps we have come to clamor for the end of postmodernism because we feel increasingly uncertain about its beginnings and thus our own stance within it. Or, unhappy with postmodernism's ambiguities, we feel the urge for a new beginning and new directions. Or, worst of all, we despair of ever getting out from under postmodernism and thus ironically proclaim its end in the hopes of seeing it arrive. The uncertain beginnings of postmodernism are often, and correctly, associated with the appearance of one particular text, although postmodernism applies to the other arts as well, first and foremost to architecture, but also to music, painting, photography, and dance. However, as William H. Gass has stated in his "Stuttgart Lecture One": "To live in a culture is to live in a space of signs, to have a station and recognize its duties, to read and be read at the same time." The signs Gass refers to do not necessarily have to be letters, they may also be sounds or images; yet the processes of reading and being read, which constitute culture, presuppose an act of conceptualization which can best be stimulated by a literary text and which, turned self-reflexive, has become the hallmark of postmodernism. This self-reflexivity enables the reader to distance or abstract himself from his position as individual situated in a particular culture. The text itself can reproduce this process of abstraction.

Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, published in 1939, is often called the first postmodern text, for instance by Ihab Hassan; as the first *theoretical* text to announce postmodernism, Gass cites Joseph Frank's seminal essay about spatial form in modern fiction (1945). For our present purposes, the definition of new directions in postmodernism, I would date the beginnings of literary postmodernism in or around 1960 - perhaps with the *mise en scène* of John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* or Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. From this point on, self-reflexivity - a time-honored philosophical concept which had called at first for serious treatment, and later, that is, starting with early Romanticism, for an ironic one - dominated what we call postmodern fiction in a conceptual sense. The result was metafiction, a reflection within the text on its own textual nature and on the multiple possibilities which emerge when the writer takes into account the fictional strategies of other writers in creating his or her own, and, thus, on the pleasures and dangers of citation. Postmodern fiction "quotes" other works of art for two reasons: one, the writer's self-reflexive impulses can thereby be converted into a means of placing the writer within a given tradition; two, by portraying culture as an interdependent series of texts, the writer invites the reader to textualize his own experience, reevaluate his position in the world. Postmodern texts ultimately enforce a will, not to power, but to art, a form of *Kunstwollen* that induces us, if not to change our lives, then at least to evaluate them in terms of aesthetic categories - kitsch not least among them.

Gertrude Stein, whom I would call the mother of postmodern fiction (certainly of the fictions of Raymond Federman or William Gass), has shown us what verbal self-reflexivity ought to look like, and Jorge Luis Borges, whom I would accordingly call the father of postmodern fiction (and who is certainly acknowledged as such by Barth in his 1967 essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion"), has taught us the aforementioned pleasures and dangers of citation. Both Stein and Borges, however, also unwittingly paved the way for the trivialization of the postmodern aesthetic and the concomitant inflation of the term "postmodernism." When not in the hands of a master, citation can easily

lose its bite and degenerate into mere playfulness, while self-reflexivity can quickly turn into narcissism. And it is this playfulness and narcissism which stand out in the eye of the general public as the distinctive features of postmodernism, rather than its courageous and moving attempt to replace metaphysics with aesthetics - the attempt that we find both in the parents of postmodernism and their true offspring, some of whom assembled to create the exceptional atmosphere of the first STUTTGART SEMINAR IN CULTURAL STUDIES.

Whereas modernism, which boasted a continuous avant-gardism, can be appropriately described only in synchronic terms, postmodernism is by definition always diachronic. This may account for the fact that the term has begun to move backwards in time: first, it came to be applied to certain developments in the twenties of this century, then it crossed the border to the nineteenth, and the end of its journey is not even in sight. Soon, as Umberto Eco has noted somewhat acrimoniously, the term "postmodernism" will have reached Homer and the Homeric epics.

One reason for this development can be found in the paradox posed by the term "postmodernism" itself and its relationship to modernism. It has been pointed out repeatedly, for instance by Malcolm Bradbury, that you simply cannot append (by means of, say, the prefix "post-") the notion of "what comes after" to a concept which, as "modern" is bound to do, denotes the contemporary. The historical dimension implied in the prefix "post-" and the notion of contemporaneity called up by the term "modern" create an ironic tension. They suggest that in postmodernism, conservative tendencies coexist with innovativeness. Indeed, I would like to contend that the innovative character of postmodernism consists precisely in the acknowledgement of its conservatism in the face of modernism's perpetual avant-gardism. This acknowledgement is effectively captured by a term that maintains, through its prefix "post-," the historicity of modernism - an epoch that always saw itself as radically ahistorical, even at a time when it had started to fade away. Implicitly, of course, the term points to the historicity of postmodernism itself.

To explore the implications of this paradox was the *raison d'être* of the Stuttgart Seminar entitled *The End of Postmodernism: New Directions*. To my mind, the crucial shortcut in most debates about postmodernism consists in its being considered only in relation to modernism, but not in relation to a more comprehensive concept of the "modern," as was introduced between 1795 and 1798 (the year in which *Athenäum* was first published) by Schlegel and Schiller. Modernity as defined by these two Romantic philosophers captured a revolution in art that was to be the aesthetic counterpart of the great political revolution of 1789. The principal concern of early Romanticism was to transcend the apparently unresolvable conflict between nature and civilization that had been one of the central themes in the work of Rousseau - and to transcend it through historical projection: nature was placed in antiquity, civilization in the present "modern" age; and since the experience of antiquity was closed, it was quasi inevitable that modern art should on the one hand be directed toward a utopian future and on the other pretend to the status of what Schlegel called universal poetry ("Universalpoesie"), that is, a poetry that would encompass all fields of civilization: religion, law, philosophy, and art.

All subsequent literary epochs should be seen in the context of this first phase of modernity; indeed, they may be seen as so many variations on the theme it set. In this light, these epochs appear as marked by a reflection of increasing depth and transparency on the impossible task of civilization: the constant struggle to resist the tug of nature, and the repeated insight that this is impossible. As a result, progressive irony in Schlegel's sense - a growing awareness of, and unwillingness to accept, this dilemma - becomes more and more important. For each new stage of reflection on the conditions of each successive age demands - as Schlegel's theory of irony anticipated - a deeper conscious commitment and, at the same time, a greater distance to nature than was previously required. Indeed, it almost seems as if each new development in art was launched out of an urge to find a way out of this ironic dilemma.

Thus the postmodern artist is once more trying to overcome the dichotomy between nature and civilization by resorting to Schlegel's solution and redis-

covering history. This new sense of being in history is the conservative element within postmodernism. However, the postmodern artist discovers his sense of history within the context of art itself: his reference is to another text, or to another work of art - world is seen as text. This is the innovative element within postmodernism. Citation, especially in combination with parody, marks the present stance of the postmodern artist as historicist. Citation returns us to an earlier point in history when the division between nature and civilization was less pronounced. Metafiction, parodically reflecting upon its own need to quote, gains a utopian dimension. But, in postmodernism, this struggle can no longer be subjectively contained; the world of signs becomes objective and independent of the writer. For when citation dominates, it may support the traditional opinion that art is, or ought to be, timeless. Quoted citation lends the text a potentially classical stature: the fact that it is being quoted suggests that it *deserves* to be quoted. Ironically, postmodern art implies a new body of classical, canonized texts even when - as is often the case with Borges - these texts prove to be a fiction. Once such a canon is established, postmodernism as a movement will indeed have come to an end, or, at least, will have to change direction; for then a new, unforeseen dimension will open up in the form of a new - no longer aesthetic - struggle over which texts are to be preserved and which forgotten. Indeed, this struggle has already begun in the academic institutions of the United States. Borges could still believe that his name need not be remembered, having come to stand for literature as such, and Gertrude Stein could still toy with the concept of autobiography. But the end of postmodernism arrives when citation itself becomes self-reflexive, when the writer's tentative immortality can no longer derive from his imagination, his ability to create an original text, when the author can no longer secure this immortality by inscribing himself into the text, and only the authenticity of his will to quote remains. Thus what we, paradoxically, now demand in this world where the text reigns supreme and citation has become paramount is the actual *presence* of the writer. The Stuttgart Seminar showed to what extent the actual pre-sence of the writer can thematize the aesthetics of

postmodernism precisely at a point in time that may signal its approaching end, signalling as well the need for new directions in contemporary art.