

From Modernism to Postmodernism or the Other Way Around

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Essay 2 – From Modernism to Postmodernism or the Other Way Around?

Asking Modernism and Postmodernism to face one another, and state how they stand in relationship to each other and to their common tradition, is no easy task, as the nuances of any attempted answer strongly depend on the assumptions underlying the start of the inquiry. The answers might range, in a general cultural context, from a complete rejection of postmodernity and a call for a revival of the modern, to reversing the temporal and historical order by having Postmodernism precede Modernism and revealing a system of deforming temporal and conceptual mirrors. A middle path is intended here, that is understanding Postmodernism as emerging in the wake of Modernism, having inevitably one contiguous and one revolutionary component. If Postmodernism reorders and redefines that which until then was thought to be the stable base of critical thought, this essay will try to find a point of equilibrium between the two movements by examining three concepts: methods of construction of the self, the unspeakable and the incommensurability between past and present. Each of these concepts surfaces in the two movements, but the aspects they put forward are quite different, as will be argued.

Taking the word “Postmodernism” at face value, it would immediately imply that it directly follows Modernism, or, in a broad historical context, postmodernity immediately comes in after modernity, signaling a new epoch of forward motion in culture. This immediate understanding is challenged, however, by the arguments of Habermas and Lyotard, who both give different directions of meaning to the “post”. Being thus aware of the concerns and contradictions in the context of Postmodernism, a reading of Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Woolf’s earlier work, *To the Lighthouse*, is attempted. Woolf’s novel thus appears to show tendencies which perhaps anticipate Postmodernist thought, while Atwood’s inscribes itself within the new form of representation, but not without playing its own language games.

Habermas argues that postmodernity discontinues the project of modernity, the ideal of which, in its Enlightenment embodiment, was to reinstate presence and use of art in daily life, independent of critical opinions, and thus achieve modernization in society. He points out that those he calls neoconservative theorists criticized modernist culture for its focus on individuality and search for authentic experience, thus being “altogether incompatible with the moral basis of a purposive, rational conduct of life”.¹ This belief, says Habermas, spread and generated further developments in postmodernism, further impeding “the reappropriation of the expert’s culture”² by the larger society, an act which he regards as being of high importance for the improvement and understanding of one’s private life in the public space. Following in Habermas’ view then, it could be argued that Postmodernism in its literary form does not further, but turns against Modernist concepts of individualism and self, deconstructing them into forms of history and culture and pulling the rug of self-determination out from under their feet. The character is downgraded to “subject”, a status which implies being acted upon and constructed by larger forces, ranging from the immediate social environment, up to culture and politics. As Voss and Schütze put it, “[i]nstead of aiding subjects to (objectified) “expression” by means of language, texts after modernism show how “subjects” are composed and “constituted” by speech, by diverse (meta)lingual semiotic matrices and praxi from their dark instinctual desires to their daily/ideological role identities”.³ To illustrate the idea, they give the example of Erika Kohut, from Elfriede Jelinek’s novel *The Piano Teacher*. Atwood’s Offred is not taken to Erika’s extreme, neither in her being constituted by speech, nor in her

¹ Jürgen Habermas, ‘Modernity - An Incomplete Project’ in *Postmodernism a Reader* (London and New York: Routledge 2013), ed. by Thomas Docherty, pp. 98-109 (p.101).

² Habermas, ‘Modernity - An Incomplete Project’, p.107.

³ Dietmar Voss and Jochen C. Schütze, ‘Postmodernism in Context: Perspectives of a Structural Change in Society, Literature, and Literary Criticism’, *New German Critique*, 47 (1989), p.119-142 (p. 130).

"dark instinctual desires", but the novel does show the presence of literal language games which reach down to affect Offred's inner being.

Lyotard takes a different path than Habermas and argues that Postmodernist art serves to disrupt "the task which academicism had assigned to realism: to preserve various consciousness from doubt [...] they [the postmodernist artists] must question the rules of the art of painting or of narrative as they have learned and received of their predecessors".⁴ Lyotard's Postmodernism does not have that "anti" quality which Habermas' does, but it is rather a revolution in the arts, which brings to light realism's ingrained assumption and reiteration of simplicity and one-sidedness of perceived reality. This idea was already present in Modernism, but Lyotard reinforces it by drawing attention to the Kantian sublime, which makes itself known when the text "present[s] the fact that the unrepresentable exists".⁵ The sublime has two modes of existence: first, in that "nostalgia for presence" by the human subject,⁶ which gives the content of and subject in the text the shape of illusion, and which already made itself felt in Modernist writings, and second, in an "inhuman" way of presentation, where the concept or intuition of a new rule comes before the rule itself, in the very form of the text, which is re-shaped to "formulate the rules of *what will have been done*".⁷ The human capacity for understanding is thus short-circuited, made obsolete, irrelevant, even unnecessary.⁸ This second mode is Postmodernism "proper", Modernism in its extreme, which refuses refuge in nostalgia and assumes its new, grown-up persona. This new focus on the unrepresentable in the form revives one of Modernism's main points of focus - the unspeakable⁹ - and promotes it from gap and suggestion to an outspoken (out-written) form, while still maintaining its ineffable nature.

Lyotard reorders present and future in his theory and opens the way to a critical examination of the past. This sheds light on one central concern of Postmodernism, which it shares not only with Modernism but also with the periods which came before, namely its attitude towards and relationship with the past. Modernism, as exemplified by Eliot and Pound, consciously incorporated the past and acknowledged itself as the one standing on the shoulders of giants, while in Joyce and Woolf it attempts to nuance and enhance the style and technique of past realist representations. The difficulty with Postmodernism,

⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' in *Modern Literary Theory* (London: Arnold, 1996) 3rd ed., ed. by David Lodge and Nigel Wood, pp. 412-420 (p. 114-15).

⁵ Lyotard, *What is Postmodernism?*, p. 417.

⁶ Lyotard, *What is Postmodernism?*, p. 419.

⁷ Lyotard, *What is Postmodernism?*, p. 420.

⁸ Emilia Steuerman draws the parallel between the Kantian sublime and the rules of language, which lie somewhere outside immediate human understanding, a fact which does not prevent us from using language and does not render it abstract and unknowable: "Wittgenstein's remarks on rules and rule-following are meant to show (rather than theoretically argue) the rule-governed character of language which, although making language possible, does not predetermine the game. Rule-following is not the application of a deeper set of rules. Rule-following is itself a practice and it is the practice of the game that defines the interpretation of the rule and what counts as a rule in a certain game" (Emilia Steuerman, 'Habermas vs. Lyotard: Modernity vs. Postmodernity?' in *Judging Lyotard* (London and New York: Routledge 1992), ed. by Andrew Benjamin, pp. 99-118 (p. 115)). This deepens the idea that Postmodernism relies on form rather than logic and puts language at the center of any analysis of novel aspects.

⁹ This paper is mostly concerned with the unspeakable in the sense of Lyotard's unrepresentable, but a very interesting interpretation is made by Tyler, when he says that "[p]lain style is the unspeakable; it erases the traces of speech because it sees the thoughts objects make" (Stephen A. Tyler, 'Epode' in *The Unspeakable: Discourse, Dialogue, and Rhetoric in the Postmodern World* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press 1987), pp. 3-59 (p. 8)). In my understanding, his argument is that writing itself covers up the presence of the speaker and only an extreme form of writing, undistinguishable from speech, would be not unspeakable. The form of *The Handmaid's Tale* would then, through various techniques, reduce the unspeakable of the writing, but not completely erase it.

however, is that, more than challenging, questioning, or reinterpreting, paradoxically, at some level, it confirms the past.¹⁰ Postmodern time is thus not linear anymore, it is not growing any more from past to future, but continuously re-gives birth to itself in the inward spiraling¹¹ chasms of each present moment and each present work of art which seeks and uses rules which will have been created. This obsessive focus on the present moment (and its alternatives) is one of the themes in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but Atwood takes the thesis of Postmodernism further, when suggesting, perhaps, that even the subjective present is not absolute, the past even less so, and the seeds of the future are not only not contained therein, but quite incompatible with it.

Like Modernism before, Postmodernism also focuses on individuality and self-determination of the self, but in quite a different manner. In Modernism individuality and the ability to make sense of the world were grounded in the belief that the self can rationally analyze the conditions of its own existence; but Postmodernism questioned the legitimacy itself of Modernist characters to conduct this analysis, as the characters themselves were thought to be defined by the very language they employ. This idea is especially striking in *The Handmaid's Tale* when noticing how Offred relates to language, when referring to herself, while coming to terms with the reality of her own existence, or when navigating the new world she is forced to adjust herself to. The dividing of society into castes creates, in addition to separation from the other castes, bonding and identity within. This is denoted by the use of a "we" which entails inclusion, yet at the same time anonymity: "[w]e slept in what has once been the gymnasium"¹² and "red: the color of blood, which defines us"¹³ she tells us at the very start of her story, keeping with the use of the personal pronoun in the plural form in the fragments where she talks about the past, thus placing herself and acknowledging her placement in the Handmaiden caste. She uses the singular form, on the other hand, when she tells the story of what feels like a continuous present: "I pick up the shopping basket, put it over my arm", she says. The personal pronoun appears also in its possessive form, strengthening her grip of herself, even as she denies possession: "The door of the room – not *my* room – I refuse to say *my*".¹⁴ In this present the "we" gains back its unobtrusive character, the simple reference to a group of people, where one includes oneself: "[w]e turn and walk together past the large houses".¹⁵

The insidiousness of language creeps up to the writing of words on the page, where the capitalization of the caste denominations gives a sinister ring to words which in speaking would be quite inconspicuous.¹⁶

¹⁰ Lyotard understands the critical assessment of modernity to be the third of three possible interpretations of the "post": "when it is understood in this way, the 'post-' of 'postmodern' does not signify a movement of *comeback*, *flashback* or *feedback* - that is, not a movement of repetition but a procedure in 'ana-': a procedure of analysis, anamnesis, anagogy, and anamorphosis that elaborates an 'initial forgetting'" (Jean-François Lyotard, 'Note on the Meaning of Post' in *Postmodernism a Reader* (London and New York: Routledge 2013), ed. by Thomas Docherty, pp. 47-50 (p. 50)).

¹¹ The word is meant to inspire a plastic representation of how Postmodernist time works, in my interpretation. It cannot be conceptualized as an arrow moving linearly from left to right. The past is revisited from present perspective (as opposed to Modernism, which lives in an idealized, nostalgic past of lost presence) and the present is an "already-happened", so one could argue that if any movement at all can be perceived, it can only be circular and concentrated in a continuous present.

¹² Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), p. 3.

¹³ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 8.

¹⁴ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 8.

¹⁵ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 19.

¹⁶ Arguably this links directly to a critique of logocentrism, the philosophical belief that meaning is made present in the transmission of words by speech, to the detriment of writing: "In the philosophical and rhetorical traditions since the classical Greeks, the spoken word and reason have been elevated over the written word and emotion. This privileging of speech and logic occurred because the ancients perceived it better for a speaker and a listener to be

The “Wives” for example, are thus transitioned from social status to caste, a difference which is lost in the spoken collocation “the commander’s wife”, while revealing its distorted face in the written collocation “the Commander’s Wife”. The capitalization of the word strips from it its supposedly natural, invisible meaning and de-familiarizes it into its grammatical meaning of something anonymous, which belongs to a group, which exists to be literally possessed. The situation is not that glaring for the “Handmaids”, since the word was presumably not in current use before the installation of the repressive regime, but the shift of Offred’s status to Handmaid (capital H) does affect her grasp and understanding of herself, as argued in the previous paragraph. Praisler and Gheorghiu argue, moreover, that “the narrator’s thoughts become, at times, aligned with the doctrine”,¹⁷ pointing to the idea that the individual is not an individual anymore, but a product of the regime, the large container which artificially presses the individual into a standardized form of being.

Offred’s subjectivity is, however, not as contained as the repressive regime would have it.¹⁸ She is, on the other hand, perfectly conscious of her “circumstances” and “composure”, as she calls it, and reveals this by pondering on words which, under the press of the regime’s containing box, regain their literal meaning, much like in the examples of “Wives” referred to above. There are several moments in the text, where she considers mundane, almost invisible objects, such as a chair (“I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting”)¹⁹, but also, her own self, which she now becomes very conscious of: “I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech”.²⁰ This is, ironically, the freedom that she can still dispose of: freedom brought down to a reassessment of language. As Hutcheon puts it, “[i]t is through language that the status of difference as ex-centricity is thematized”.²¹ To contextualize this to Offred’s “circumstances”, she does not see her self as the center of her own existence, but rather as a constructed refuge, which she either must present to others, or that she can rely on as much as her fragmented memory allows her to.

Modernism, on the other hand, had seen things from a larger perspective - the characters were only partially aware that they were trapped in a system, be it society (in Woolf and Mansfield) or the machinery of the state (as in Kafka or Joyce), to name just a couple. Only their public life was affected by it. They

in close proximity to an utterance” (Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winqvist, *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 232). The critique of logocentrism is present in Western philosophy, starting with Nietzsche and Heidegger and reaching a postmodernist form in the writings of Derrida and Lyotard, who accentuate *différance* and *différend*.

¹⁷ Michaela Praisler, Oana-Celia Gheorghiu, ‘The Art and Politics of Rewriting. Margaret Atwood’s Historical Notes on The Handmaid’s Tale’, *Cultural Intertexts*, 9 (2019), p.171-181 (p.174).

¹⁸ Ermarth calls this multifaceted, at times even contradictory, personality “multilevel, not dispersed” (Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), p. 107). Her book draws out the problematic nature of time, subject and language, as represented in Postmodernist fiction. The three concepts are also explored in the current paper, mostly with the intention of keeping them separate and bound to the practical matter at hand, yet with the awareness that they are so interconnected and tied up with each other, that one might as well argue that they are constitutive of each other, very much like Escher’s *Drawing Hands*.

¹⁹ Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p. 110.

²⁰ Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p. 66.

²¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p.73.

The decentering of character by means of language is arguably a characteristic of Postmodernism, but the decentering of character not necessarily. Already in Conrad’s proto-modernism we can see characters described as unconsciously pertaining to a social order. The Russian in *Heart of Darkness*, for example, is very suggestively described as wearing a motley (hinting to the character being patched together) and he is almost a religious acolyte to Kurtz’s persona.

could still assess their own inner life, as something which just “is”. Thus, in *To the Lighthouse* the characters perceive themselves as “double-layered”: they have an outer facet, which shows itself in social interactions, and an inner facet, rendered knowable by their worries and preoccupations and made visible through the stream of consciousness. Their social facet and “composure”, to use Offred’s word, is very much controlled by the characters, and they show sharp awareness of it throughout the dinner scene in “The Window”, chapter 17; there is however little focus on *how* the individual concerns and worries of the characters came to be, except for what we hear from them indirectly. Mrs. Ramsay, interestingly, shows that, while she holds precious her “something real, something private, which she shared neither with her children nor with her husband”,²² there are sides of her inner being which she is herself not aware of. She catches herself unwillingly surrendering agency of her life to God: “But instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? not she; she had been trapped into saying something she didn’t mean”.²³ This indicates that while belief in the essence of character still held strong, it was starting to fissure. Waugh, referring to the inner being of Mrs. Ramsay, says that “sinking into the wedge-shaped core of darkness may be a form of liberation from the violences of constructed and unified ego”,²⁴ but the question remains if an autonomous female self could exist outside social interactions. The compromise is made by Lily, who “can only paint by denying relational ties, traditional situatedness as a woman”.²⁵ This, Waugh says, is the novel’s concern: how can the modern woman reconcile her relational, multiple self with modernity’s lament of unity?²⁶

The effects of language surface in more than one aspect of inquiry of this essay. It is thus not only a building block of the Postmodernist subject, but it cannot be left out either when examining the unspeakable, that which lays dormant, present yet unquestioned, right under the surface of day-to-day experience. The concept can be understood in at least two ways.²⁷ Binary oppositions allow for the possibility that, if something cannot be spoken, it can be written, and this ties back to the concept of logocentrism, which has been briefly approached in the paragraph examining the effect of the capitalization in writing of “Wives” and “Handmaids”. The difference is unspeakable indeed, but its written expression makes it perceivable. The written form of these particular words entails “the discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality”,²⁸ and, as Lyotard argues, is a mark of modernity. The form of the writing allows

²² Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 69.

²³ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 74.

This particular moment, together with an almost imperceptible questioning on Mrs. Ramsay’s part of her tendency to see everyone married (“Slowly it came into her head, why is then that one wants people to marry?” (p. 141)), could perhaps point to an even more Postmodernist Woolf, than just a fissure in the shell. It is almost as if the character intuits that someone controls her being, without of course imagining the writer herself. Woolf also tends to more fragmented prose towards the end of her life.

²⁴ Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism, Reading Modernism* (London, New York: Edward Arnold, 1992), p.117.

²⁵ Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism*, p. 117.

²⁶ Waugh suggests elsewhere that the modern woman finds her answer in the postmodernist acceptance of and rejoice in a multiple self (Patricia Waugh, ‘Stalemates?: Feminists, Postmodernists and Unfinished Issues in Modern Aesthetics’ in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 3rd edn., ed. by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: Arnold, 1996), pp. 322-341).

²⁷ There is also an additional third way, particular to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, namely that that which is unspeakable is so because it is not allowed to be communicated in any way, spoken out or written. In order to subvert this, Offred relies on the only thing which is left to her to have and use anymore – her body: “there is the capacity of “semaphore” – systems of signalling across distances (symbolic or otherwise) – and body language to suggest both the restrictive policies of Gilead and to provide moments of liberation” argues Greene (Michael Greene, ‘Body/language in THM: Reading Notes’ in *Lire Margaret Atwood: The Handmaid’s Tale* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes 1999), ed. by Marta Dvorak, pp. 101-112 (p. 101)).

²⁸ Lyotard, *What is Postmodernism?*, p. 417.

thus for the assumption that handmaids and Handmaids cannot coexist. What exists are the Handmaids, the caste, and its constructed-ness by an oppressive regime. While as far from anything real as possible (in the sense of imposed, "legitimized" by biblical interpretations), its existence is at the same time driven by rationality, immoral and productive of the conditions which result in the very real historical document which is examined by Professor Pieixoto.

The illusion, sustained fully by realism and only partially by Modernism, that when a story is narrated, it is continuous, linear, and evolving gradually from beginning to end, is challenged in *The Handmaid's Tale* by its use of two frames of narration – Offred's and Professor Pieixoto's. The unspeakable, in this second sense, is what fits in the gaps between the frames, the shifting of the reader's picture of understanding throughout the story, its meaning. The intended listener to Offred's tale is forcefully transformed into a reader by the academic reconstruction of the audio cassettes, allowing perhaps even for a third frame of the narrative, the very inner one to which we do not have access anymore. Tyler comments on the destruction of the oral discourse as soon as it is written, turned into something which can be analyzed and "made" to mean: "A written transcription of oral discourse is no longer oral discourse as it was created and understood by participants [...] What relation this object and its analysis has to the understanding of participants is problematic at best".²⁹ The theoretical listener to her story, the reader of the recreated story and the reader of the historical notes are far removed from each other with regard to the story itself, insofar as one can even speak of "one story" at all. The fact that the novel brings out the three levels of storytelling is another aspect of Lyotard's unrepresentable: the reader sees the inner workings of the story in its form, but this is still at conflict with the inbuilt tendency towards the search for singular meaning.

The sense of the unspeakable examined in the previous paragraphs was already a concern in Modernism, albeit in a slightly different form.³⁰ Modernist authors believed that a complete and authentic translation of experience in words was possible, as long as one could do away with the gaps. One way of achieving that was the stream of consciousness technique, which was believed would render the story (how it is experienced by its narrator) clear, if dense. Childs sees this sense of the unspeakable as the crisis of Modernist consciousness; this is turned later on into the very limit of Postmodernist reality, which puts the experience which cannot be spoken (of) beyond anything which can be known: "Where postmodernists argue that 'reality' can only be engaged in and through language, Modernists believed that there was such a shared world, but that language was breaking down as it struggled and bent to encompass it. Language was in crisis [...] as ambiguity, irony, misunderstanding and the ineffable seemed commonplace".³¹

Lyotard asserts that Modernism had the nostalgia for presence, it was looking for the essence of things, for "the thing itself", as Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe indeed do in *To the Lighthouse*. Lily struggles to find the expression of her feelings for Mrs. Ramsay and embody it in her painting, moving all the while from

²⁹ Stephen A. Tyler, 'Memory and Discourse' in *The Unspeakable: Discourse, Dialogue, and Rhetoric in the Postmodern World* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press 1987), pp. 103-145 (p. 104-105). Tyler argues that memory is thought of as storing objects which possess properties changing over time, but in a Postmodernist representation objects should not be thought of as moving, changing, identities, but as time itself.

³⁰ The idea that there are several narrators to a story, but one of the voices supersedes the others, rendering the others invisible or "unspeakable", as it were, is explored by Ermarth. She argues that the so-called "nobody" narrator of realist fiction hides the temporal and subjective dynamics of the story and "rationalizes consciousness by aligning time into a single horizon" (Ermarth, *Sequel to History*, p. 27). The Modernist stream of consciousness allows for the presence of the narrator to sometimes take the foreground and sometimes the background, thus for an interwoven, perhaps more "egalitarian", narration. Postmodernism upgrades this perspective to the level of form, as argued in the paragraph above.

³¹ Peter Childs, *Modernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 62.

the extreme of not being able to find it ("It was absurd, it was impossible. One could not say what one meant")³² to recognizing it in the objects around her ("Then her eye caught the salt cellar [...] and she remembered that next morning she would move the tree further towards the middle").³³ Lyotard argues that "Joyce allows the unrepresentable to become perceptible in his writing itself, in the signifier",³⁴ proclaiming him as precursor of Postmodernism proper. Woolf too, however, in the character of Lily, suggests that the only way for her to capture the essence of Mrs. Ramsay is to paint her as a purple triangle. To concede, as it were, that there is no way of representing it. This might be an early (because the form was still contained in the content) indication of what later would become to be known as Postmodernism. Woolf was ahead of her time, perhaps, as if embodying Lyotard's convoluted idea of time, that an author must first be postmodern, if they are to be modern.

In a previous paragraph the argument was made that the listener of Offred's story, the reader of the recreated story and the reader of the historical notes would not agree on the "meaning" of the narration, a consequence due partly to the revealing of the existent layers, as well.³⁵ Offred's story, one of the layers itself, unfolds in what feels like a continuous present, but the text shows interruptions in the narration, challenging the very present the story is supposed to unfold in. One example is the concern with concurring versions of the present, such as the scene where Offred agrees to have intercourse with Nick. First, she tells one version in the present tense only to then playfully take it back: "I made that up. It didn't happen that way. Here is what happened".³⁶ Another version told in the present tense follows, only to be taken back again, this time in a more cerebral, accepting way: "It didn't happen that way either. I'm not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction".³⁷ Just as the name imposed to Offred is an uninterrupted hand-me-down emptied of content, just as Professor Pieixoto questions the authenticity of the "item", as he calls Offred's tapes, such is also any attempt to discover which the "real" version of the present is. It is lost to Offred herself, a fact which brings into question the unity and continuity in time of the subject and reveals an irreconcilable conflict between present and past.

The public memory is not very much different from the private memory, as Atwood's novel shows. The public narrative of the present also transforms and deforms the past, as it reiterates it. The difference is perhaps that private memory does this knowingly, without being able to intervene, while the public memory, in the grip of the regime, does it knowingly, consciously and sinisterly. Offred's mother's story can mostly be pieced together from Offred's memories of her, but it comes out that she participated in feminist rallies and marched for "[f]reedom to choose" and the right to "recapture our bodies".³⁸ Women were united and protesting, but this narrative is perverted by the regime, in its rebranding of them as "Unwomen". Offred remembers Aunt Lydia talking about "[w]omen united for a common end! Helping

³² Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 23.

³³ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 107.

³⁴ Lyotard, *What is Postmodernism?*, p. 419.

³⁵ This part of the essay focuses mostly on how the present influences the reconstruction of the past, and the "Historical notes" also attract the attention to how the past is transformed into a narrative of the present, how it is historicized, as it were. Hutcheon calls this type of text "historiographic metafiction" and sees its concern with history rather polemically: "The past really did exist. The question is: how can we know that past today — and what can we know of it? [...] It puts into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real. This is why I have been calling this historiographic metafiction. It can often enact the problematic nature of the relation of writing history to narrativization and, thus, to fictionalization" (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 92-93).

³⁶ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 261.

³⁷ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 263.

³⁸ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 120.

one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together".³⁹ Under the new regime, women would perhaps have the "freedom to choose", but, as it so often reiterated, they will not want what they cannot have. The movement from past to present has left the signifier intact, but its meaning has drastically changed. Hutcheon argues that Postmodernism has "[t]he semiotic awareness that all signs change meaning with time".⁴⁰ In Atwood's extreme interpretation, the meaning did not change organically and inconspicuously, but was removed, perverted, parodied and re-inserted in society, under the same apparel. A person from the present could be talking to a person from the past about "freedom", but they would most definitely not be talking about the same thing.

If Postmodernism saw that with the passing of time and emerging of memory the impossibility of a single narrative of the present arises, Modernism was imbued with the longing for the past (whether or not it did that against its better judgement can probably be argued⁴¹). Offred does make the past her present but does so with a sharp awareness that it is her doing. Lily, on the other hand, believes that the past, personified by Mrs. Ramsay, holds the key to transcendental art and experience. She can only live in the present, when recognizing that the past is lost, and the only thing left of it is its present memory: "She looked at the steps; they were empty"⁴² she says, accepting the loss of Mrs. Ramsay, and thus being able to lay the final stroke of brush on her painting.

The second part of Woolf's novel, "Time passes", could be understood perhaps as another version of conceptualizing the continuous present. This interpretation is supported by the title itself, which offers two ways of reading it. First, from language point of view, the syntagm can be understood in the sense that time passes as something external to human experience, as if occurring in the background while the human being holds the central position. But, when reading the chapter, a second meaning of the syntagm becomes apparent: time passes while it holds the central position, pushing human experience to the background, rendering it barely worthy of some bracketed mentions. It is interesting to notice that the bracketed experience is precisely the one which causes the most distress and is the ultimate unspeakable of life – death: "Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous",⁴³ tells the narrator, who, in their removal from anything human all along the middle passage, can perhaps be identified with time itself. Ermarth argues that what she calls "authentic" time is neither historical, nor linear, and it could be experienced by simply being, thus uncovering the workings of the omniscient narrator and their mystification of genuine experience: "it may be that in some authentic (not historical) temporality actual lived time can be experienced simply as being there, and not as being on a linear track, but this temporality has been covered up with another, grander, more teleological model of temporality constructed as a means of evading death".⁴⁴ Time does indeed pass, but it does so by itself, as the main character of its own narrative. Its experience of itself

³⁹ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 162-163.

⁴⁰ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 90.

⁴¹ Tyler sees Modernism's inclination to nostalgia for the past as self-made: "This is the fundamental irony of all that is modern – of the future that legitimizes the dismemberment of the past and of the past the future ends. It is the story of the necessity for loss and alienation and of the necessary longing for the lost and alienated" (Stephen A. Tyler, 'Epode' in *The Unspeakable: Discourse, Dialogue, and Rhetoric in the Postmodern World* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press 1987), pp. 3-59 (p. 3)). While the statement is quite strong, in my opinion, a certain blindness to present conditions and volitional return to the past is sometimes arguably apparent in Modernist writings. Jay Gatsby comes to mind, who even though hears how Daisy's voice is "full of money", is unmoved in his intention to create his perfect past.

⁴² Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 237.

⁴³ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 152.

⁴⁴ Ermarth, *Sequel to History*, p. 35.

could very well be linear,⁴⁵ but by describing death from its perspective, time naturalizes death for the human being and makes it perhaps more acceptable.

In the light of the two theoretical positions, one way to look at the sequence tradition – Modernism – Postmodernism is to see how the novel changes, without being necessarily able to assess whether the change entails evolution and improvement which reflect in the public life, or it crams the aspects of the novel further within themselves, with too little impact on the life outside. Another way is to see the novel as an aesthetic experience, which has shifted its focal point: if realism is the made-up story, transparent in its portrayal of human character, and Modernism is an act of conscious communication between writer and reader in a common attempt to exorcize demons and find redemption⁴⁶ and themselves with it, Postmodernism dislocates the word from the page in the claim that fiction and real life intersect and create one another. There is a change, I think that much can be said, but whether the shape the path of change takes is indebted to “a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present”,⁴⁷ as Habermas describes the continuous strive and search for “the new”, or is dedicated to “shattering of belief and [...] discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality”,⁴⁸ as Lyotard describes the workings of modernity, both Modernism and Postmodernism have contributed and keep contributing to a more refined and nuanced grasp of our own selves, our histories and of that unspeakable, inaccessible darkness arising from the dead infinite of that which is not known that it is not known.

⁴⁵ It could be very tentatively argued, while also bringing in Ermarth's point of view, that this chapter of the novel plays with the frames of reference. From the point of view of time, the human is perceived at discontinuous moments, incapable of discerning their own self and find meaning in a larger context; from the human point of view, “authentic” time is erratic, switching from past to present to future within the same present moment. As relativist physics postulates, both points of view are valid, none is “truer” than the other. But relativist physics does not consider time as an independent observer, so perhaps this theory needs a different approach.

⁴⁶ I come to think that Modernism in particular, perhaps together with psychological realism, offers the reader a mirror, as well as a window into a world which has little to do with day-to-day experience. Perhaps over the course of a lifetime one ends up realizing that each of us is responsible for living our own narrative, which, however gapped it might be, needs an end. The end might very well be a landing just shy of destination, as *To the Lighthouse* shows. I think that reading literature is building that unreachable destination, and maybe that is enough.

⁴⁷ Habermas, ‘Modernity - An Incomplete Project’, p.99.

⁴⁸ Lyotard, *What is Postmodernism?*, p. 417.

From Modernism to Postmodernism or the Other Way Around

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

GENERAL COMMENTS

80/100

Instructor

Another ambitious essay linking a complex reading of well-chosen texts through close and general reading to a range of theoretical positions -- themselves well focused through the consideration of Lyotard and Habermas and others.

Your ability to range from the general to the specific maintaining an overall thesis is impressive. And the whole is supported by detailed notes.

It is always possible to make qualifications to some of your points, for example: how are we to think about the idea of Offred's 'inner being' in this context; isn't the Kantian sublime in its immediate context rather different as it re-asserts the power of the mind; and (I'm still not quite sure) what do you mean by redemptive acts of reading in your conclusion? But this doesn't detract from what is an excellent essay.

One or two minor slips in expression.

PAGE 1



Comment 1

Modernity not necessarily a synonym for Modern

PAGE 2



Comment 2

If she can be said to have one(?)



Comment 3

For Kant the unrepresentable was still knowable

PAGE 3

Strikethrough.



Comment 5

Also the neccesity?

PAGE 4

Strikethrough.

PAGE 5

PAGE 6



Comment 7

Ok -- frame narrative can be found in texts that might be considered realist

PAGE 7



Comment 8

The idea of abstraction in Modern art?

PAGE 8

PAGE 9

Strikethrough.



Comment 10

arguably realism isn't really transparent -- it just seem so



Comment 11

ok but why is this redeptive?