

notion of *aletheia*, letting the truth reveal itself, letting it shine, letting it come forth.

Stephanson: Given the social circumstances of which it is a product, black American language seems to me, on the outside, not to allow very easily for prevalent white orders of theoretical reflection.

West: It is a hustling culture, and a hustling culture tends to be *radically* 'practicalist', deeply pragmatic, because the issue is always one of surviving, getting over.

Stephanson: This, I imagine, demands some sharp linguistic twists for you.

West: I am continually caught in a kind of 'heteroglossia', speaking a number of English languages in radically different contexts. When it comes to abstract theoretical reflection, I employ Marx, Weber, Frankfurt theorists, Foucault, and so on. When it comes to speaking with the black masses, I use Christian narratives and stories, a language meaningful to them but filtered through and informed by intellectual developments from de Tocqueville to Derrida. When it comes to the academy itself there is yet another kind of language, abstract but often atheoretical, since social theorising is mostly shunned. Philosophers are simply ill-equipped to talk about social theory: they know Wittgenstein but not Weber, they know J.L. Austin but not Marx.

Postmodernist Fiction

19 Umberto Eco, 'Postmodernism, Irony, the Enjoyable'*

Umberto Eco's writings, in semiotic theory, fiction and occasional journalism, show a breadth and mobility (his essays discuss fashion, sport, film, fine art, popular fiction, high modernism, the medieval world, and contemporary politics) which make him a living example of the multi-accented simultaneity characterising postmodernism. His *The Name of the Rose* (1981) was a best-selling example of this inter-animation of previously separated categories of fiction and non-fiction: a detective thriller (in its classic form, the most conventionalised and closed of popular narratives) which combines gothic suspense with chronicle and scholarship, which knits the medieval with the modern, and boxes narrative within narrative to produce a comic mystery 'about' the suppression and rescue of the subversive power of the comic itself.

The present essay is taken from Eco's supplementary reflections on the novel. Not the least interesting aspect of this is his reference to the authority of American examples (the present Introduction argues that postmodernism is in the first instance an American phenomenon). Postmodernism, Eco defines by its intertextuality and knowledge and by its relation to the past. Whereas modernism wished but failed to abolish the past, postmodernism revisits it, at any historical time, with irony – a perspective worth comparing with the apocalyptic tones and soulful nihilism found in other accounts.

See also, in particular, Eco's volume *Faith in Fakes* (1986), pub-

* Reprinted from *Reflections on 'The Name of the Rose'*, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker and Warburg, 1985), pp. 69–72.

lished in the United States and in paperback in Great Britain as *Travels in Hyperreality* (1987). For some discussion of *The Name of the Rose* in the present context, see Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures. Popular Culture and Postmodernism* (1989), pp. 60-4.

Between 1965 and today, two ideas have been definitively clarified: that plot could be found also in the form of quotation of other plots, and that the quotation could be less escapist than the plot quoted. In 1972 I edited the *Almanacco Bompiani*, celebrating 'The Return to the Plot', though this return was via an ironic re-examination (not without admiration) of Ponson de Terrail and Eugène Sue, and admiration (with very little irony) of some of the great pages of Dumas. The real problem at stake then was, could there be a novel that was not escapist and, nevertheless, still enjoyable?

This link, and the rediscovery not only of plot but also of enjoyability, was to be realised by the American theorists of postmodernism.

Unfortunately, 'postmodern' is a term *bon à tout faire*. I have the impression that it is applied today to anything the user of the term happens to like. Further, there seems to be an attempt to make it increasingly retroactive: first it was apparently applied to certain writers or artists active in the last twenty years, then gradually it reached the beginning of the century, then still further back. And this reverse procedure continues; soon the postmodern category will include Homer.

Actually, I believe that postmodernism is not a trend to be chronologically defined, but, rather, an ideal category – or, better still, a *Kunstwollen*, a way of operating. We could say that every period has its own postmodernism, just as every period would have its own mannerism (and, in fact, I wonder if postmodernism is not the modern name for mannerism as metahistorical category). I believe that in every period there are moments of crisis like those described by Nietzsche in his *Thoughts Out of Season*, in which he wrote about the harm done by historical studies. The past conditions us, harries us, blackmails us. The historic avant-garde (but here I would also consider avant-garde a metahistorical category) tries to settle scores with the past. 'Down with moonlight' – a futurist slogan – is a platform typical of every avant-garde; you have only to replace 'moonlight' with whatever noun is suitable. The avant-garde destroys, defaces the past. *Les Déracinés* d'Avignon is a typical avant-garde act. Then the avant-garde goes further, destroys the figure, cancels it, arrives at the abstract, the informal, the white canvas, the slashed canvas, the charred canvas. In architecture and the visual arts, it will be the curtain wall, the building as side, pure parallelepiped, minimal art; in literature, the destruction of the flow of discourse, the

Burroughs-like collage, silence, the white page; in music, the passage from atonality to noise to absolute silence (in this sense, the early Cage is modern).

But the moment comes when the avant-garde (the modern) can go no further, because it has produced a metalanguage that speaks of its impossible texts (conceptual art). The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognising that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, 'I love you madly', because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.' At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated: both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony... But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love.

Irony, metalinguistic play, enunciation squared. Thus, with the modern, anyone who does not understand the game can only reject it; but with the postmodern, it is possible not to understand the game and yet to take it seriously. Which is, after all, the quality (the risk) of irony. There is always someone who takes ironic discourse seriously. I think that the collages of Picasso, Juan Gris and Braque were modern: this is why normal people would not accept them. On the other hand, the collages of Max Ernst, who pasted together bits of nineteenth-century engravings, were postmodern: they can be read as fantastic stories, as the telling of dreams, without any awareness that they amount to a discussion of the nature of engraving, and perhaps even of collage. If 'postmodern' means this, it is clear why Sterne and Rabelais were postmodern, why Borges surely is, and why in the same artist the modern moment and the postmodern moment can coexist, or alternate, or follow each other closely. Look at Joyce. The *Portrait* is the story of an attempt at the modern. *Dubliners*, even if it comes before, is more modern than *Portrait*. *Ulysses* is on the borderline. *Finnegans Wake* is already postmodern, or at least it initiates the postmodern discourse: it demands, in order to be understood, not the negation of the already said, but its ironic rethinking.

On the subject of the postmodern nearly everything has been said,

from the very beginning (namely, in essays like 'The Literature of Exhaustion' by John Barth, which dates from 1967). Not that I am entirely in agreement with the grades that the theoreticians of postmodernism (Barth included) give to writers and artists, establishing who is postmodern and who has not yet made it. But I am interested in the theorem that the trend's theoreticians derive from their premises:

My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents. He has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back . . . He may not hope to reach and move the devotees of James Michener and Irving Wallace – not to mention the lobotomised mass-media illiterates. But he *should* hope to reach and delight, at least part of the time, beyond the circle of what Mann used to call the Early Christians: professional devotees of high art . . . The ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and idealism, formalism and 'contentism', pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction . . . My own analogy would be with good jazz or classical music: one finds much on successive listenings or close examination of the score that one didn't catch the first time through; but the first time through should be so ravishing – and not just to specialists – that one delights in the replay.

This is what Barth wrote in 1980, resuming the discussion, but this time under the title 'The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction'. Naturally, the subject can be discussed further, with a greater taste for paradox; and this is what Leslie Fiedler does. In 1980 *Salmagundi* (no. 50–1) published a debate between Fiedler and other American authors. Fiedler, obviously, is out to provoke. He praises *The Last of the Mohicans*, adventure stories, Gothic novels, junk scorned by critics that was nevertheless able to create myths and capture the imagination of more than one generation. He wonders if something like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will ever appear again, a book that can be read with equal passion in the kitchen, the living room, and the nursery. He includes Shakespeare among those who knew how to amuse, along with *Come with the Wind*. We all know he is too keen a critic to believe these things. He simply wants to break down the barrier that has been erected between art and enjoyability. He feels that today reaching a vast public and capturing its dreams perhaps means acting as the avant-garde, and he still leaves us free to say that capturing readers' dreams does not necessarily mean encouraging escape: it can also mean haunting them.

20 Linda Hutcheon, 'Telling Stories: Fiction and History'

For Umberto Eco (see above), postmodernism is chiefly a matter of technique and tone; its main effect the thrill which simultaneously disturbs and delights. For Linda Hutcheon postmodernism is more interrogative and instructive. In a series of related studies – of 'narcissistic' narrative, parody, and the poetics of postmodernism – she has come to identify postmodernist fiction pre-eminently with what she describes as 'historiographic metafiction': a mode (including a novel such as Eco's *The Name of the Rose*) which self-consciously problematises the making of fiction and history. Postmodernist intertextuality neither repudiates nor simply ironises the past; nor does it merely reproduce the past as nostalgia, as Hutcheon believes Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton argue it does. Instead, postmodernist fiction reveals the past, she says, as always ideologically and discursively constructed. Its irony and use of paradox signal a critical distance within this world of representations, prompting questions not about 'the' truth, but 'whose' truth prevails. The political effect of this fiction therefore lies in the double action by which it inscribes and intervenes in a given discursive order. In the following selection, Hutcheon replies to Eagleton, ironically, by way of the evidence of his own historical fiction, *Spirits and Scholars*.

See Terry Eagleton's 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism' in *Against the Grain* (1986), pp. 138–47. On postmodernist fiction see, for example, Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987); Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions. Revisiting the Postmodern* (1989); and Marguerite Alexander, *Flights from Realism* (1990). Alison Lee's *Realism and Power. Postmodern British Fiction* (1990) shares Hutcheon's conception of postmodernism.

* Reprinted from *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 47–61.