

‘Postmodernism and History’

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Lies Wesseling, ‘Postmodernism and History.’ In: Lies Wesseling, *Writing History as a Prophet. Postmodernist Innovations of the Historical Novel*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam / Philadelphia 1991, p. 1-16.

Zie voor verantwoording: https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/wess012post01_01/colofon.php

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I Postmodernism and History

A Revival of Historical Fiction

The use of historical materials as subject matter for literary prose is certainly not a constant in innovative twentieth-century literature. If we view literary history as a multilayered process comprising many different lines of development, and ranging from the clichés of popular literature to the innovative experiments carried out by various vanguard groups,¹ it seems fair to say that we rarely come across historical subject matter in experimental literature during the first half of this century. Practitioners of *Trivalliteratur* have spawned many a novel about the wives of Henry VIII and other titillating subjects. Novelists of putatively greater stature have sought to increase our insight into the past by producing novels which are perfectly respectable according to conventional literary standards. But experimental writers such as the modernists and the various representatives of the historical avantgarde,² who consciously sought to articulate the hitherto inarticulate by designing new literary strategies, generally neglected historical materials. Many avant-gardists were intent on making a radical rupture with the past, a project which did not stimulate the literary adaptation of historical materials. Although the modernists differed considerably from the historical avant-garde in their attitudes toward history, their interest was directed mainly toward the personal, rather than the collective past, apart from a few significant exceptions.³

It is therefore all the more remarkable that a great number of postmodernist novelists have turned to the collective past as a source of inspiration. The works that have resulted from this decided shift of interest cover a wide range of historical subjects. Many of these novels deal with episodes from twentieth-century history, such as the turn of the century, World War II, or the Cold War; some reach back further than that, while a few have been plotted on a world-historical scale. The literary adaptation of historical materials is conventionally regarded as the province of the historical novel, ever since Sir Walter Scott endowed this genre with a clearly recognizable and widely imitated shape. Therefore, the predominance

of historical subject matter in postmodernist fictions can be regarded as something of a revival for the historical novel. However, the type of historical novel that has returned to the region of High Literature since World War II differs significantly from its nineteenth-century predecessor. The tension between continuity and innovation is revealed by the generic labels that critics have tagged onto postmodernist rewritings of historical materials. One usually categorizes these works as historical novels, but not without some sort of qualification; thus we read of the ‘apocalyptic’ historical novel (Foley 1978), the ‘mock’ historical novel (Dickstein 1976), or the ‘comic’ historical novel (Turner 1979). This study addresses the question, In what ways do postmodernist historical fictions comply with and diverge from the conventions of the historical novel? Considering the wealth of publications on postmodernism, however, any new contribution to the subject cannot proceed without first commenting on the state of the art.

The Corpus of Postmodernist Historical Fiction

Robert Scholes opens the epilogue to his *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979) with the following assertion: ‘It has happened while we were unaware. The major novels of the past decade or so have tended strongly to the apparently worn-out form of the historical novel’ (Scholes 1979: 206). We have become keenly aware of this by now. Critics had already begun to remark upon the fact that a conspicuously unorthodox reappropriation of the past had become a recurrent feature of innovative postwar fiction before Scholes drew our attention to this phenomenon. In the course of the seventies, a considerable number of publications about contemporary historical fiction appeared (*cf.* Olderman 1972; Henderson 1974; Dickstein 1976; Weinstein 1976; Foley 1978, 1980; Bergonzi 1979; Turner 1979). The authors of these studies generally refer to the same novels in order to substantiate their arguments. As a result, a more or less well circumscribed corpus of innovative historical fiction had been defined toward the end of the seventies, at least where North American literature is concerned (*cf.* Schabert 1981: 188-194). The hard core of this corpus comprises such novels as John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade* (1969), Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1974) and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977). During the first half of the eighties, the corpus of innovative historical fiction was continually updated and even acquired international dimensions. Some works of the Latin American boom have been included, such as Gabriel García Márquez' *Cien años de soledad* (1967) (translated as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1970) and Carlos Fuentes' *Terra*

Nostra (1975) (translated as *Terra Nostra*, 1976), as well as products from British, German, and Dutch soil.⁴ The corpus in question is still open to the future, not only because the comparative approach has only just begun, but also because we have not yet seen the end of this trend in fiction.

On account of their historical and other fictions, the novelists mentioned also figure prominently in the wider circle of writers who have been assembled under the label of 'postmodernism.' Recent publications on this literary current clearly acknowledge that the relation between postmodernism and history is a subject well worth studying, and do not fail to devote at least a few passages to the postmodernist historical novel (*cf.* Waugh 1984; Thiher 1984; McHale 1987). Historical fiction has been singled out as a highly important subcategory of postmodernist literature; Christos Romanos even goes so far as to state that a renewed interest in the past is the major distinction between modernism and postmodernism (Romanos 1985: 140), while Linda Hutcheon (1988) privileges what she calls 'historiographic metafiction' as the dominant form of this literary current.

The Delineation of Postmodernism

Although several scholars have characterized the critical discussion of postmodernism as a confusing cacophony of dissenting voices (*cf.* Pütz 1973), it seems to me that one of these voices has become louder and louder, to the extent of almost silencing the others (*cf.* Bertens 1988).⁵ In the course of the seventies, the tendency developed to define postmodernist literature as essentially self-reflexive. Whether one adopts a thematic approach, by focusing on the worldview articulated by this corpus of texts (*cf.* Federman 1973, 1978; Russell 1974, 1980; Wilde 1981), or a stylistic approach, by describing dominant literary strategies (*cf.* Pearce 1974; Morrissette 1975; Lodge 1977; Byatt 1979; Burden 1979, 1980; Butler 1980), or both (*cf.* Hassan 1971, 1975, 1980), the conclusion is the same: postmodernist writing is basically fiction of the medium. Rather than representing the external world, postmodernist literature folds in upon itself in order to explore its own linguistic and literary conventions. Stylistically oriented critics contend that postmodernist literary strategies are geared toward safeguarding the text's autonomy. Richard Pearce, for example, argues that postmodernist fiction manipulates the categories of narration and focalization in such a way that 'the medium asserts itself as an independent source of interest and control' (Pearce 1974: 72). Bruce Morrissette's analysis of serial devices in the *nouveau roman* and in some contemporary films concludes that these strategies isolate the work of art from the outer world because they continually redirect its references back into the text, whereby the work of art can exist independently from ideological or sociological pressures (Morrissette 1975: 262).

Likewise, Christopher Butler's exposition of aleatory and serial strategies circles around the idea that the work of art thus organized does not refer to an external reality, but to the artificiality of the devices we use to create the illusion of external reference (Butler 1980: 41). David Lodge's seminal *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977) describes how postmodernist texts inflate the two master tropes for creating transparent icons of a supposedly orderly world. This metaphoric and metonymic 'overkill' (Lodge 1977: 237) produces unreadable texts that thwart the reader's desire to connect the text to the external world.

Somewhat paradoxically, thematically oriented critics are inclined to give a mimetic explanation for the supposedly antimimetic stance of postmodernism. Supposedly, writers have given up on the attempt to represent reality because 'reality' is experienced as amorphous, boundless, and chaotic. Such a reality cannot provide correspondences with or referents for the ordering structures of the human mind. This world view exposes linguistic conventions and other languagelike symbolic structures for creating orderly worlds as fictions that humanity has invented in the face of an unintelligible and indifferent universe. Accordingly, literature is necessarily self-referential: 'Sensing the distance between words and phenomena, the literary consciousness is thrown back upon itself, having only the dubious language which is its own constitution to refer to' (Russell 1974: 351). The absence of a rock-bottom level of indisputable reality on which to found our discourses has become a familiar topos in theories of postmodernism. As Hans Bertens puts it in the conclusion to his historical survey of writing about postmodernism: 'in most concepts, and in practically all recent concepts of Postmodernism the matter of ontological uncertainty is absolutely central' (Bertens 1986: 46; cf. McHale 1987). Thus, postmodernism is defined as the literature of ontological doubt, which does not merely abstain from representing reality, but even suspends the belief in the very existence of a paramount reality.

The concept of postmodernism as it emerged in the course of the seventies was formulated in predominantly negative terms - that is, postmodernism was basically defined in terms of what it is not. Apart from the positive assertion that postmodernist literature expresses an interest in language and other languagelike symbolic structures, the current is characterized in terms of what it doubts, dissolves, suspends, negates or rejects. Postmodernist writing is said to be nonhierarchical, to suspend the distinction between fact and fiction and the referentiality of the literary text, and to throw doubt upon the intelligibility of reality.

A similar trend prevails in the discussion of the more narrow subject of postmodernist historical fiction. Like postmodernist fiction at large, the historical variant is comprehended as a self-reflexive meditation upon its constitutive devices. Postmodernist historical fiction is said to confine itself to an investigation of the conventions of historical narrative, without articulating its own sense of history or inter-

pretation of the past. The postmodernist attitude toward history is also determined by radical ontological doubt:

In the ‘apocalyptic’ historical novel history is itself ultimately absurd, and whatever coherence the novelist extracts from it is a reflection not of any pattern immanent in his materials but of his own narrative control. (Foley 1978: 101; *cf.* Dickstein 1976: 195; Henderson 1974: 270)

Postmodernist historical fiction, then, is just another form of self-reflexiveness or ‘metafiction.’ From this point of view, the most salient feature of postmodernist historical fiction, namely its overt falsification of history, is regarded as a strategy for unmasking the fictional construction of the past. In other words, the blatant transgressions of historical facts are recuperated as a device for making a metafictional statement (*cf.* Waugh 1984: 104-108).

Marxist scholars (*cf.* Jameson 1983, 1984a, 1984b; Habermas 1983; Eagleton 1985) and critics of liberal-humanist bent (Graff 1979, Newman 1984)⁶ have been provoked by the supposed negativity of postmodernism into severe criticism. Both groups of critics consider postmodernism to be homologous to or even blithely affirmative of present-day consumer society. The use of historical materials in postmodernist writing is regarded as a merely nostalgic, glibly decorative use of the past (Jameson 1983), or as an apolitical reduction of history to esthetic history (Newman 1984). The only ideology which supposedly informs postmodernist writing, one argues, is that of linguistic determinism. It seems to me that the caricaturing of postmodernism reaches a climax in the following passage:

It [postmodernism] is fiercely dedicated to the integrity of autonomous verbal expression, and stands four square against the extra-literary pressures that have always surrounded fiction as a genre. It recognizes that its basic resources are irreparably, and without apology, literary. Above all, this writing is concerned with language, if not as the creator of reality, then as the ultimate shaper of consciousness. It is never framed by a dominant outside reality, and it thus tends eventually to reduce all distinctions to linguistic ones, exemplifying both temporal and historical subjectivity. It is radical aesthetically, largely apolitical and ahistorical, and in its relation of even the most terrifying matters, purportedly value-free. (Newman 1984: 172)

This passage enumerates the topoi which make up the negative definition of postmodernism, albeit here they are used to attack, rather than to define. According to this critique of postmodernism, it is nonreferential, ahistorical, apolitical, self-reflexive, and devoid of any sort of commitment whatsoever except to its own autonomy.

It is quite surprising that such characteristics have been attributed to a literary current which subsumes writers like Ishmael Reed, who regards his own writing as a political struggle (*cf.* Reed 1988), Günter Grass, who frequently makes statements about political issues and even campaigned for the Social Democratic Party in the 1960s and 1970s, Christa Wolf, who is actively involved in East German politics, not to speak of Latin American authors such as Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel García Márquez, who are both prominent public figures and deeply committed to the political problems of the South American continent. The epithet ‘apolitical’ also jars with the preference of postmodernist authors for subjects which are extremely sensitive politically, such as the case of the Rosenbergs, the subordinate position of ethnic minorities, women's emancipation, and the Western exploitation of Third World countries.⁷ The notion that postmodernism would be ‘ahistorical’ does not concur with the remarkable prominence of historical materials - of both an esthetic and a political nature! - in postmodernist texts.

Postmodernism and Deconstruction

The predominance of the negative mode of defining postmodernism may be regarded as a necessary stage in the process of coming to terms with a novelty. Whenever we encounter something new, we are initially bound to contrast it with the familiar, which means that we necessarily define it in terms of what it is not. But after some twenty years of theorizing about postmodernism, it should be possible to say a little more about it. Apart from the question whether they are ‘right’ or not, it seems to me negative definitions are unsatisfactory in themselves, just as the definition of ‘woman’ as ‘non-man’ will not do ultimately. We can also point to another factor which has undoubtedly contributed to this mode of defining postmodernism. The topics of language's folding in upon itself, radical ontological doubt, and the dissolution of hierarchies have a familiar ring to anyone who possesses even but a superficial knowledge of contemporary developments in philosophy and literary theory. In the course of the seventies, Jacques Derrida's works, which explore the implications of the illusory nature of a stable ontological center or fixed referent, were translated into English. These problems occupy a central position in the paper ‘La Structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines,’⁸ which Derrida presented to a seminar at Johns Hopkins University in 1966 (*cf.* Derrida 1970), a moment which marks the onset of his overwhelming influence on American literary theory. Clearly, deconstruction has influenced the reception of postmodernism, if only indirectly. Therefore, it was but a small step from the negative mode of defining postmodernism to a discussion of this literary current in explicitly deconstructive terms. Deconstruction easily gained a strong

foothold in the study of postmodernism around the beginning of the eighties, as comes out in Hal Foster's confident assertion that 'postmodernism is hard to conceive without continental theory, structuralism and poststructuralism in particular' (Foster 1983: x; cf. D'haen 1987: 165). His observation is corroborated by books such as Alan Thiher's *Words in Reflection* (1984) and Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), which are firmly entrenched in the conceptual apparatus of deconstruction, and by other recent publications that elaborate upon typically deconstructive topics such as the dissolution of the subject and the self-reflexive nature of language (cf. McCaffery 1982; Sciolino 1986; Todd 1986, 1987; Bertens 1987). In keeping with the deconstructive questioning of the boundaries between different types of discourse, literature and philosophy are almost inextricably interwoven in theories of postmodernism. The different uses of the term 'postmodernism' are symptomatic for this fusion. Whereas this concept started out as term of literary periodization, it now serves as a catch-all term subsuming a specific body of philosophical theory (not only deconstruction, but also other types of continental, 'poststructuralist' thought such as the work of Jean-François Lyotard and Michel Foucault) as well as contemporary developments in the arts.

Surveying the debate on postmodernism, we are confronted with an incongruous phenomenon: deconstruction has apparently become the 'natural' frame of reference for interpreting postmodernist literature. I certainly do not wish to deny the interest and relevance of deconstruction to the study of postmodernist literature, if only because some postmodernist writers obviously play with deconstructive and poststructuralist ideas. However, contemporary novelists have done more than merely reproducing the preoccupations of the Great French Philosophers. Now that deconstruction seems to be gaining a monopoly on the explication of postmodernist texts, it might be more interesting to look for divergences, rather than overlappings between deconstruction and literature.

There are at least two good reasons for problematizing the identification of deconstruction and postmodernist literature. First, if one wants to equate deconstruction with a specific corpus of literary texts, modernism would be a more eligible candidate than postmodernism, considering Derrida's literary preferences (cf. Huysen 1986). More importantly, we should seriously ask ourselves whether deconstructive readings do not unduly narrow the semantic potential of postmodernist literature to the self-reflexive exploration of linguistic and literary conventions, with a concomittant neglect of its political and historical implications. To what extent does a sophisticated deconstructive approach allow for a political reading of literary postmodernism? This question is not so easy to answer, if only because deconstruction is not a stable entity, but a body of thought which is subject to continuous change; moreover, it is at the moment undergoing precisely a process of politicization. As we can infer from Nancy Fraser's survey of this process (Fraser 1984),

questions concerning the political implications of deconstruction are far from settled. Particularly interesting in this respect is the debate over the advantages and disadvantages of deconstruction for feminism. Some feminists have it that deconstruction and feminism share the same interests (*cf.* Jardine 1980, Owens 1983). Others hesitantly grant that feminism could profit from deconstruction in some respects, but not without exposing the dangers of too close an alliance with deconstruction (*cf.* Creed 1987, Poovey 1988, Alcoff 1988). Deconstruction can be of use in de-mythologizing sexist notions of Woman and in disrupting the hierarchical and binary logic on which sexism depends. However, feminism is not only a critical, but also a constructive political project. Indeed, any political movement not only opposes certain power hierarchies, but also strives toward a new organization of society. It is difficult to discern the ways in which deconstruction could possibly serve this second aspect of feminism. According to Linda Alcoff, we here reach the point at which feminism ceases to benefit from deconstruction:

Following Foucault and Derrida, an effective feminism could only be a wholly negative feminism, deconstructing everything and refusing to construct anything ... As the Left should by now have learned, you cannot mobilize a movement that is only and always against: you must have a positive alternative, a vision of a better future that can motivate people to sacrifice their time and energy toward its realization. (Alcoff 1988: 418-419)

To completely identify feminism and deconstruction would be impracticable, Alcoff argues. Deconstruction shows how apparently pat oppositions are in fact arbitrary impositions of a binary order upon undecidable phenomena. The problem is, however, that one has to make decisions and choose sides in the political arena. One cannot remain within the realm of the undecidable. Barbara Johnson's statement that 'there is politics precisely because there is undecidability' (Johnson 1986: 35) is therefore only partly true. If human society were organized by natural laws then there would be no need for politics, indeed. There would be no need to make decisions, for everything would already have been decided for us. But the rather tragic task of politics is to decide the undecidable and to draw - admittedly arbitrary - boundaries.

There is another, perhaps even more problematic, side to deconstruction which feminists have exposed while investigating deconstruction's utility to their own project. Deconstruction has been of great value in dismantling the apparently 'natural' and 'eternal' categories of gender, and in demonstrating that 'the eternally feminine' is but a mystification of a multitude of different women, coming from different socio-historical situations. To what extent, however, can deconstruction it-

self be deconstructed in this way? Is there a place from which deconstructive critics can perceive deconstruction as just another historically specific, and therefore limited, practice? According to Mary Poovey, deconstruction hardly allows for such a self-reflexive criticism:

The more fundamental limitation of deconstruction follows from the reluctance of deconstructive critics to examine the artifice - and historical specificity - of their own practice. To committed deconstructive critics, everything seems subject to deconstruction's dismantling gaze except deconstruction itself. Insofar as it purports to be a master strategy instead of the methodological counterpart to a historically specific conceptualization of language and meaning, deconstruction - even in its demystifying mode - participates in the very process it claims to expose. The very project of deconstructing binary logic is inextricably bound to a preoccupation with the *structures* of language and conceptualization, after all, instead of, for example, an interest in the social relations or institutions by which language and ideas (including deconstruction) are produced, distributed, and reinforced. As long as it is viewed only according to its own implicit definition - as an ahistorical master strategy - deconstruction must remain outside of politics, because no stable position (other than its own) can exist. (Poovey 1988: 61)

The problems which feminists have with deconstruction are not exclusive to feminism. Third World critics committed to the decolonization of culture are bound to experience some of the same difficulties. But this is leading us too far afield. Suffice it say that the political bearings of deconstruction are unclear. Consequently, deconstructive critics are not likely to foreground political concerns postmodernist writers might have. Let me now try to be a bit more specific about these all-encompassing issues by means of a case-study of Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism*.

Linda Hutcheon's Poetics of Postmodernism

Hutcheon's inquiry into postmodernism lends itself admirably to a discussion of our problem because of its remarkable combination of a deconstructive frame of reference with a sustained inquiry into the historical and political dimensions of postmodernism. It is to Hutcheon's credit that she has given the most extensive treatment of the political aspects of postmodernism so far, and any criticism I will make of her book should be seen in the light of this obvious merit.⁹ Dealing with the impact of deconstruction on our understanding of postmodernism, let me first turn

to the way in which Hutcheon handles the deconstructive frame of reference. At first glance, it seems as if her relation to deconstruction differs from earlier publications on the subject. A poetics of postmodernism, Hutcheon argues, should not restrict itself to literature. Ideally, it would provide a structure of concepts that could order our knowledge of contemporary culture. If we adopt this position, deconstruction forms part of the object rather than of the descriptive framework of a postmodernist poetics. Indeed, Hutcheon explicitly makes this point when she distinguishes her own work from Allen Thiher's emphatically poststructuralist *Words in Reflection* (1984). Thiher's book opens with a survey of modern language theory, and subsequently interprets primary texts in the light of topoi from contemporary philosophy of language. Hutcheon, however, advocates a different attitude by inviting us to begin 'from the *texts* of postmodern art, instead of from the theory' (Hutcheon 1988: 141). This position seems plausible, as there are indeed, as Hutcheon indicates, 'perceived overlappings of concern' (14) between postmodernism and deconstruction. Various postmodernist writers have obviously been influenced by this philosophical current. Some postmodernist novels even include passages that more or less quote the deconstructive idiolect (see chapter 6). Clearly, there has been a vital exchange between literary theory and literary practice during the last two decades. This osmosis between primary and secondary literature can at least be partially explained by the fact that several influential exponents of postmodernism are affiliated with universities in some capacity or other, and appear to be equally at home in both the academic and the wider literary worlds.

Hutcheon's position, however, is more complicated than this. Deconstruction not only forms part of her object of study but also constitutes the interpretive model by means of which she encompasses the object. This model, as Hutcheon reveals in the introductory chapter, is a 'model of contradictions,' which has been designed for the naming of 'contestatory elements without necessarily reducing or recuperating them' (21). We may readily recognize the deconstructive model of thought here, which dissolves apparently hierarchical binary oppositions into irresolvable paradoxes. Hutcheon's fusion of the object- and the meta-levels does not make for a commentary on postmodernism that could move beyond deconstruction. If a poetics of postmodernism is to further our understanding of contemporary culture, I believe it should investigate the place and significance of deconstruction within contemporary culture, among other things. However, if we attempt to accomplish this task by means of the categories of deconstructive thought, then deconstruction becomes the master paradigm for defining contemporary culture. This turns any such investigation into a *parti pris*, a decidedly totalizing strategy, which moreover conflicts with the basic tenets of deconstruction. Where literary postmodernism is concerned, a poetics of postmodernism would ideally acknowledge that this current has interacted with deconstruction as well as with other com-

ponents of extraliterary culture. This is implicitly acknowledged by Hutcheon when she speaks about ‘overlappings of concern’ between postmodernism and deconstruction - overlapping not being the same as coinciding. Given the present state of the art, it would be interesting to obtain a view of those aspects of postmodernism that do not overlap with deconstruction. But because deconstruction forms part of both the object- *and* the metalevel of Hutcheon's book, it does not differ significantly from *Words in Reflection* and other related studies after all. This becomes manifest in the close resemblance between the categories Hutcheon uses to organize her discussion of postmodernism and Thiher's *topoi*, both of which comprise standard deconstructive issues such as the dissolution of the subject and the problematization of reference.

A Poetics of Postmodernism is clearly inspired by the reactions against a solipsistically self-reflexive postmodernism discussed above. In opposition to Jameson, Newman and Eagleton, who criticize postmodernist writing for its lack of historical and political substance, Hutcheon posits that this literary current is ‘fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political’ (Hutcheon 1988: 3).¹⁰ These three observations function as the key concepts of her poetics of postmodernism. At a certain point, however, it becomes somewhat disappointing to see how Hutcheon arrives at the same *type* of conclusion in every chapter of her book, no matter which problem she discusses. In keeping with the deconstructive project to transcend the confines of thinking in opposites, Hutcheon's observations attempt to reconcile opposing tendencies in theories of postmodernism. While some have defined postmodernism as a nostalgic withdrawal from the present, and others as an uncritical and ahistorical celebration of the immediate experience of the now, Hutcheon argues that postmodernism expresses the presentness of the past. Whereas some radically oppose the discourses of countercultures to the discourse of the official culture, Hutcheon has it that postmodernism speaks with both voices. While some oppose the realist project of representing the historical world to a nonreferential self-reflexivity, Hutcheon observes that postmodernism is both self-referential and historical, because it ‘inscribes and only then subverts its mimetic engagement with the world’ (20). And where the political implications of postmodernism are concerned, she holds that it is both critical of and complicitous with the dominant structures of consumer society, thus diverging from both critics *and* apologists of postmodernism who regard it as radically oppositional. And so on, and so forth. At a certain point, one gets the impression that the deconstructive approach has become a completely predictable reading trick, which ceases to be persuasive. It may very well be that the conclusion that the issues mentioned cannot always be solved by an either/or type of solution is valid. However, this observation does not carry much force within the context of an interpretive model that brackets an either/or way of thinking in the first place.

Let me now return to the question of the extent to which the deconstructive framework could accommodate a political reading of literary texts. Hutcheon's emphatic assertion that a poetics of postmodernism cannot do without a politics bears out the fact that the deconstructive approach need not result in an apolitical postmodernism. She seems to locate the political impact of postmodernism in the latter's subversive potential. Through postmodernism's incongruous combination of contestatory elements and its ironical suspension of valorized oppositions, it suspends the hierarchies on which power structures are based. However, this is but an aborted politics, for it only allows for the subversion of the status quo, while it rules out the invention of alternatives. Hutcheon's explication of the political implications of postmodernism, then, negates what is probably the most important strategy by means of which twentieth-century artists have sought to acquire political significance, namely the utopian anticipation of the future. She explicitly and repeatedly makes the point that the postmodern and the utopian are at odds with each other (*cf.* 47, 215, 218, 230). Again, I have reservations about the validity of this conclusion, for Hutcheon studies postmodernism from the perspective of an interpretive model designed for disrupting rather than propagating value systems. Utopian fantasy inevitably entails the privileging of one set of values over others. As such, it is irreconcilable with the deconstructive suspicion of valorized oppositions. Moreover, the imaginative anticipation of the future does not concur with the poststructuralist dethronement of the autonomous creative subject. Utopian fantasy presupposes that the artist could somehow transcend ruling linguistic, literary and social conventions so as to unfold hitherto unknown vistas. This presupposition has been contested by the objection that the subject should not be regarded as an autonomous essence that could turn prevailing symbolic structures to its own purposes, but as a cross road where the multiple discourses that constitute social reality intersect. It is therefore next to impossible for a literary scholar working within the parameters of deconstruction to attribute a utopian element to postmodernism. In this respect, Hutcheon's insights again converge with the observations made by other critics with poststructuralist leanings, who have also disconnected the postmodern from the utopian (*cf.* Russell 1980: 36; Foster 1983: xiii). Considering the centrality of the utopian moment in twentieth-century esthetic theory and practice,¹¹ it seems to me that we should not dismiss the possibility of a postmodern utopianism too easily. The issue is important enough to be examined from different angles, and not just from the reigning deconstructive perspective.

The Postmodern and the Utopian

In this study, I would like to reassess the relation of postmodernism to the historical and the political with respect to the same subcategory of postmodernist literature that also occupies a central place in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, namely historical fiction. I will confront postmodernist historical fiction with the literary strategies and attitudes toward history characteristic of the generic repertoire of the historical novel. As we tend to agree nowadays that literary genres are not ahistorical essences, but historically mutable sets of conventions (see chapter 2), the generic approach implies a diachronic perspective. Accordingly, I will make some observations about the diachronic development of the historical novel since the beginning of the nineteenth century (see chapters 3, 4, and 5) before moving on to the discussion of postmodernist embodiments of the genre (see chapters 6 and 7). I also diverge from ruling tendencies in theories of postmodernism in that I will not give a single, overall description or definition of the postmodernist historical novel. After some twenty years of theorizing about postmodernism, I believe we can afford ourselves the luxury of distinguishing between various brands of it.¹² Viewed from the diachronic perspective adopted in this study, the corpus of postmodernist historical fiction which has accreted so far does not form a homogeneous collection of texts. It differs within itself where the treatment of historical materials and the manner and degree of political commitment are concerned. Therefore, I shall not categorically declare the postmodernist historical novel to be profoundly political and radically utopian, in reaction against those scholars who have obscured the political and historical implications of the texts in question. Rather, I would like to bring out the *different* ways in which postmodernist embodiments of historical fiction relate to the generic repertoire of the historical novel.

One of the conclusions in which this inquiry has resulted is that *some* postmodernist texts (most notably works by Reed, Grass, Rushdie, Fuentes and Pynchon) still partake of the utopian, without naively perpetuating the illusion of the autonomous creative subject. The imaginative anticipation of the future which these novels figure forth proceeds along a somewhat more circuitous route than traditional utopian thought. Postmodernist novelists do not straightforwardly project inspiring alternatives for the status quo into the future. Rather, they turn to the past in order to look for unrealized possibilities that inhered in historical situations, and subsequently imagine what history would have looked like if unrealized sequences of events and courses of action had come about. This results in the invention of alternate histories which evidently have never taken place and therefore cannot lay any claim to historical truth, but which may perhaps come true at some point in the future as the return of the repressed. Interestingly, some postmodernists have found a way of inserting the utopian moment into the parodic recycling of extant

materials which, as Hutcheon has rightly observed (Hutcheon 1985, 1988), characterizes postmodernist writing. By evoking and altering historical facts, they ironically recycle historical materials. When these divergences from established historical facts are not entirely random, but obey an alternate logic, they envisage possibilities for the future transformation of society from a standpoint in the past. This mode of utopian, or rather 'uchronian,' fantasy foregrounds a form of historical fiction quite obscure until recently. I regard this foregrounding of a hitherto unfamiliar form as the major contribution to the generic repertoire of the historical novel which to have emerged from postmodernism.

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Eindnoten:

- 1 This view of literary history has been formulated by, among others, Itamar Even-Zohar (1979). His 'polysystem theory' eminently applies to the diachronic development of the historical novel (see chapter 3).
- 2 The term 'historical avant-garde' is used to denote collectively the avant-garde movements that materialized during the first half of this century, such as surrealism, futurism, expressionism, vorticism, and dada. The term 'modernism' is evidently *not* employed in the sense of Bradbury and McFarlane (1976), who use it as a generic term for all the innovatory movements of the

first half of the century. I adhere to the practice exemplified by Levin (1966), Hassan (1983), Calinescu (1987), Fokkema and Ibsch (1988) and others, who distinguish the historical avant-garde from modernism on sociological and poetical grounds. Contrary to the avant-garde, the modernists (Faulkner, Joyce, Mann, Proust, Woolf, etc.) did not organize themselves into a distinct group by collectively publishing manifestoes, holding meetings, giving press conferences, and the like. Nevertheless, they can be profitably grouped together because of shared esthetic, ethical, and philosophical concerns.

- 3 For studies of avant-garde attitudes towards history, and its difference from modernism in this respect, see Marino (1984) and Geyer-Ryan and Lethen (1990).
- 4 Bernard Bergonzi (1979) has remarked that contemporary British fiction did not really offer examples that were similar to American experiments in historical fiction: ‘Modern American novelists, working in the vein of emphatic fictiveness, or what Robert Scholes has called “fabulation”, have treated history as infinitely malleable, as a text of low and uninteresting organization, whose destiny is to be given point in comic or apocalyptic ways by the novelist; one thinks of Pynchon, Barth, Vonnegut, Hawkes and Heller. English novelists are less inclined to do this’ (Bergonzi 1979: 45). One of the books he nevertheless discusses as a tentative parallel to North American innovations of the historical novel is John Berger's *G.* (1972), which is also mentioned as such in Schabert (1981). John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) are conspicuously absent from Bergonzi's article. One could also point to *Nothing Like the Sun: A Story of Shakespeare's Love-Life* (1964) by Anthony Burgess. It seems to me that British experiments in historical fiction only got well under way in the eighties with the publication of novels such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983), Burgess' *The End of the World News: An Entertainment* (1982), Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), John Fowles's *A Maggot* (1985), and Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985) and *Chatterton* (1987). Where German literature is concerned, the names of Günter Grass and Christa Wolf tend to recur in the secondary literature. For studies of postmodernism which extend the corpus of primary literature with the British and German writers mentioned, see Thiher (1984), McCaffery (1986), McHale (1987), and Hutcheon (1988). Louis Ferron's work offers an evident example of postmodernist historical fiction within the context of Dutch literature (cf. Wesseling 1987). Significantly, Ferron has translated Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) into Dutch (*Het vluchtvirus*, 1977). Within the area of Romance languages, Michel Tournier's work has been associated with postmodernism (*Le roi des aulnes, Gilles et Jeanne*, 1983, *Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar*, 1980). Where Spanish literature is concerned, a novel like Goytisolo's *Reivindicación del conde don Julián* (1970) comes in for serious consideration. Within the area of Latin American literature, one could point to the Argentinian writer Abel Posse (*Los perros del paraíso*, 1983), besides the work of more famous exponents of the ‘boom,’ such as Fuentes, Márquez and Llosa. This enumeration is not exhaustive by far. For various reasons, I restrict myself mainly to works in North American, British, Dutch, and German literature.
- 5 The poststructuralist conception of postmodernism has more or less ousted alternative approaches, such as the annexation of postmodernism to the counterculture of the sixties, or its explanation in existentialist terms. See Bertens (1986) for a description of these earlier attempts to come to terms with the phenomenon of postmodernism.
- 6 Somewhat confusingly, these two types of critics tend to use the same categories in their analyses of contemporary cultural phenomena, in spite of the fact that they start out from rather different premises, and often arrive at similar conclusions.
- 7 These subjects are dealt with in, respectively, *The Public Burning* and E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971), *Mumbo Jumbo*, Günter Grass's *Der Butt* (1977) and Christa Wolf's *Kassandra* (1983), and *Gravity's Rainbow*.
- 8 This paper has been published in English translation as ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’ in Macksey and Donato (1970: 246-272).
- 9 While I was writing this chapter, Linda Hutcheon came out with a new book, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989). I have not been able to take this book into consideration.
- 10 Although Hutcheon's emphatic interest in the historical and political implications of postmodernism is quite unprecedented, as far as I can tell, she is not the very first to correct the definition of postmodernism as essentially self-reflexive. Other scholars have made modest efforts to attribute some form of referentiality to postmodernism. Wilde (1981) and Bertens (1986) distinguish between different modes of postmodernism, one of which is nonreferential

and self-reflexive, and the other hesitantly referential in its effort to attribute a provisional and fleeting meaning to the external world (Wilde's 'midfiction'). Musarra (1986) likewise suggests that we should not bring the whole of postmodernist writing under the label of autotelic self-reflexivity. John Barth's 'The Literature of Replenishment' (1980) is also highly relevant in this respect. Barth argues that postmodernist writing should ideally achieve a synthesis of modernism and realism, by transcending the self-reflexiveness and 'political olympianism' of the first without regressing to the 'naive illusionism' of the latter (Barth 1980: 70).

- 11 The utopian urge to transform everyday reality by reintegrating art and life was a highly important source of inspiration for the historical avant-garde (*cf.* Bürger 1981, Huyssen 1986). Furthermore, utopianism is an important component of the esthetic theories elaborated by Neo-Marxists such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Max Horkheimer.
- 12 For other examples of a more diversifying approach to the phenomenon of postmodernism, see Graff (1979), Wilde (1981), Bertens (1986), and McCaffery (1986).