Postmodern American Fiction

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Although the term has come to denote a general attitude toward traditional intellectual presuppositions or, more specifically, certain related practices in philosophy, the social sciences, and all of the arts, "postmodern" was originally a critical label attached to an emergent group of American fiction writers perceived to be challenging established literary convention. Conventional storytelling and the protocols of realism had been challenged, to be sure, by the previous generation of modernist writers, but this new fiction was "post-modern" in extending the modernist rejection of existing assumptions to include assumptions even the modernists still accepted, about the integrity of character, for example, or about the intricate effects of "point of view." Among the writers identified as postmodern were John Barth, Donald Barthelme, John Hawkes, Robert Coover, William Gass, and Thomas Pynchon. Certainly each of these writers differed, sometimes profoundly, in the way s in which they attempted to continue to "make it new," but that they were clearly enough engaged in the attempt seemed to warrant something like the designation of their work as postmodern.

Exactly how a concept originating in literary criticism came to carry the great cultural weight it now bears is a potentially confusing story relevant to a consideration of postmodern fiction only in that it highlights the extent to which it was identified, at least for a time, as an avant-garde movement calling into question not only particular literary practices but also more generally held beliefs about the value of representation, whether in art or in critical and philosophical discourse, as well as about the capacity of language itself to represent "reality" in any ultimately trustworthy way. These characteristics, however accurately they may have been ascribed to the original American postmodernists, have largely been appropriated to the broader cultural concept of postmodernism and its various academic branches. As a result, postmodern fiction has been left as a kind of curious collection of eccentric works, vaguely considered "experimental" at best, frivolous or unnecessarily difficult at worst, and for many already mostly a historical phenomenon with little if any relevance to currently notable writers and their work.

Some current writers do continue to be identified as postmodernists, or at least as influenced by various of the first-wave postmodernists. David Foster Wallace, Rick Moody, and Jonathan Franzen are perhaps the best known of the younger writers associated with the use of postmodern strategies or techniques (Franzen incorrectly, in my view); other writers, while not necessarily embracing the postmodern approach directly nevertheless to varying degrees produce works of fiction not assimilable to the assumptions and methods of neorealism now predominant in American fiction, and could be said to be fellow travelers along the modernist/postmodernist route of literary innovation. But the degree to which even a perceived affinity with postmodern challenges to convention has become increasingly viewed as an unwelcome deviation from the current norms of neorealism, a kind of clinging to an approach no longer fashionable, can be measured in the hostile critical reception of the most recent novels by Don DeLillo (Cosmopolis) and Richard Powers (The Time of Our Singing).
DeLillo could not really be considered postmodern in terms of the formal innovations to be found in his work. Instead, his novels provide readily identifiable, highly stylized analyses of what could be called postmodern culture-analyses that are inflected by such notions as self-referentiality, the fragility of human identity, or the blurring of the line between reality and culturally pervasive, manufactured representations of it but incorporate them as subject or theme rather than the inspiration for formal invention. Likewise Powers, whose books are stylistically audacious and formally unconventional, but who is really engaged in a relatively earnest examination of intellectual, cultural, and historical issues. Yet both of these writers have come under increasing attack by influential reviewers for literary sins that clearly derive from a larger impatience with unconventional approaches and with the moral equivocations of postmodernism.

To some extent, the relatively high profile enjoyed by these two writers in a cultural climate not otherwise friendly to serious literature almost inevitably invites the kind of critical backlash I am describing. In a literary world with limited favors to go around and characterized by a delicate sensitivity to the passing of movements and trends, writers exalted in one season are sure to be brought back down in the next. Similarly, such a radical shift in sensibility as literary postmodernism was originally perceived to be, will in time be declared passe, if not entirely mistaken in the first place. But postmodern American fiction has come to be regarded with some hostility from a number of critical quarters, in some cases united only in this hostility, which suggests there is something in the experimental or postmodern approach that many literary journalists and certain kinds of academic critics find fundamentally intolerable.

Although the heyday of literary postmodernism has certainly passed, many of its practitioners remain and, aging to be sure, continue to publish fictions defiant of mainstream assumptions about literary correctness. Since many of these current assumptions were adopted essentially through a reaction against postmodernism now thoroughly assimilated to prevailing critical standards, a survey of some of these more recent works might additionally reveal the source of the antipathy to postmodern experimentation as well as the possibilities, if any, that might still be uncovered in these kinds of literary experiments. Given what is sometimes presented as the uncertain status of imaginative writing itself in relation both to an American culture ill prepared to support it and to the rise of "alternative" media, one might even say that the very future of literature is to a degree at issue in such an effort. Should writers of fiction define their mission down to meet the depreciated capabilities of the available audience, or attempt to challenge that audience to revise its expectations? Defer to the well-advertised celebrations of the new media or seek to contest their claims?

Two of the writers to have published significant books in the last few years, Curtis White and David Markson, are postmodernists whose most notable work appeared in the 1980s and 1990s rather than in the 60s or 70s. For this reason and others, one might legitimately question whether they should finally be classified as postmodernists at all. They could as easily be read simply as writers of unconventional, formally inventive fiction that otherwise expresses no particular common outlook nor exhibits an allegiance to a shared approach or program, either in relation to one another or to the better-known first-wave postmodernists. To the extent that all of the writers discussed here share a commitment to formal innovation, their work does justify critical examination according to a very broad attribution of common identity, but "postmodern" is not a term that exactly captures that identity and clearly will not survive its association with a specific
phase of literary history. That some other critical label ought to replace it is a dubious proposition, perhaps, but to refer to such fiction only very imprecisely as "experimental" probably will not do it great service either.

However, like White's Requiem, Markson's This is Not a Novel (2001) is as resolutely experimental in the most literal sense of the term as any work of fiction is likely to be while still making a plausible claim to be considered a novel at all (despite the title). Markson's book is actually a sequel to or variation on his previous novel, Reader's Block, which takes essentially the same form: each book is constructed of brief comments on the lives, deaths, and works of past writers and artists, in some cases direct quotations or simple statements of fact. In This is Not a Novel these entries are presented to us as the notations of a writer, explicitly called "Writer," whose situation is described succinctly in a few additional narratorial notations on the novel's first page:

Writer is pretty much tempted to quit writing.

Writer is weary unto death of making up stories.

Writer is equally tired of inventing characters.

Although the ennui expressed here by Writer is exaggerated, certainly extreme, perhaps even a put-on, one could say that some such dissatisfaction with business as usual in the writing of fiction has all along motivated writers drawn to postmodern experiment, as well as those readers-surely sizable in number-who are as impatient with fossilized conventions as the writers themselves. But simply to confound convention is in itself an insufficient strategy if the creation of literary art is ultimately the goal. As the narrator indicates a few pages later: "Actionless, Writer wants it . . . Which is to say, with no sequence of events . . . Which is to say, with no indicated passage of time. Then again, getting somewhere in spite of this." The accomplishments of postmodern fiction, in other words, have been not in the various dismantlings of convention-the denial of plot or character-but instead in inventing new ways of "getting somewhere in spite" of the refusal to take the established path.

Markson generally succeeds in this task, although a fan of Reader's Block might conclude that this new installment is somewhat duplicative of the approach taken in the earlier book. Nevertheless, This is Not a Novel is ingenious, even entertaining, in juxtaposing the bits of information disclosed with the circumstances of Writer's own ongoing attempt to create a work of literary art, resulting in a coherent whole that kaleidoscopically illuminates the nature and the consequences of that attempt. One finishes both This is Not a Novel and Reader's Block feeling that the implications of creative endeavor have been plumbed to a level deeper than habitually apparent, an achievement produced through deceptively simple, in some ways incongruous, means.

While the impulse behind a work like This is Not a Novel is an entirely serious one-the impulse to create a work of fiction worthy of being regarded as an original work of art, as literary in the purest sense of the term-the humor of the book should not be discounted. Humor, or more precisely, comedy, is a distinguishing characteristic of postmodern fiction, especially among
American writers, in whose work a view of the world as absurd, farcical, or alien in a fundamentally comic way is as close to an overarching "theme" to be found in literary postmodernism. (Paradoxically, most of the negative critical responses to postmodern fiction have themselves tended to be dour and humorless, disapproving in an almost schoolmarmish kind of way, as if the comedic vision itself is what truly offends.) One might say that this comic view extends even to the ambitions and authority of literature, that the fragmentation, distortion, parody, and strategic deconstruction of traditional form amount to a comic reduction of "serious" fiction to a level where, among other things, it might be regarded more as an always renewable resource rather than as an already completed model to be emulated with all due deference.

Gilbert Sorrentino has long been perhaps the foremost literary comedian among American postmodernists. Whether Sorrentino would welcome such a designation may be questionable, given its connotations of good-natured frivolity or mere amusement. But Sorrentino's fictions are both hilariously funny and corrosively provocative, offering a scathing portrayal of the manifold inanities of American culture as well as entertainingly outrageous comic performances. Little Casino (2002), while duly comedic, is also somewhat more accessible to the uninitiated reader, although by no means conventional. Compared to Sorrentino's immediately preceding novel, Gold Fools (2001), written entirely in interrogative sentences, it is a work of metafiction of a relatively recognizable type. A series of very brief anecdotes, vignettes, and verbal portraits followed by direct self-reflexive commentary, it creates a fragmentary but ultimately apprehensible picture of a bygone Brooklyn, not unlike a previous Sorrentino novel, Crystal Vision.

As an introduction to Sorrentino's work, in fact, Little Casino would probably serve quite well. Unorthodox without being intimidating, it evokes an ultimately cogent fictional world through unusual but not overly complicated means. Once the reader accepts the idea of a novel without narrative-which for readers of serious fiction ought not by now be in itself a terribly radical notion-to catch on instead to an alternative structure in which "chapters" are more like a series of verbal photographs or brief film clips followed by self-reflexive annotations is not likely to seem overly difficult. The acerbic humor of many of the former and the arrant sarcasm of the latter ("Herbert Hoover died at the age of 137, of course. It is said that he never ate a steak in his life, and that his favorite dinner was farmer cheese on soda crackers with skim milk.") should seem as well an adequate substitute for whatever forward movement or dramatic tension may seem at first to be absent from Little Casino. However, if either the formal ingenuity or the comedic qualities of this novel were to motivate readers to seek out Sorrentino's important and even more substantial comic inventions such as Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things, Mulligan Stew, or Crystal Vision, it will have provided the very best introduction to Sorrentino's work possible.

Sorrentino remains something of a paradox, an author both impressively prolific (well over twenty books, both fiction and poetry) and not well known (much less read) except to long-established fans and devotees of the most uncompromising brand of postmodernism. Curtis White, less prolific (but younger), nevertheless also subscribes to this brand of postmodern formal defiance. Like Sorrentino, White confronts conventional narrative strategy with contrarian relish and great comic energy, especially in his most recent novels, Memories of My Father Watching TV (1998) and Requiem (2001). But White's fiction as well evidences a desire for direct political relevance and social engagement one doesn't really find in Sorrentino's
perhaps more self-consuming comedy. Not exactly satire, a work like Memories of My Father still seems in its phantasmagoric travesty both of television "entertainment" and the notion of the innocent American childhood to be designed as a critique—a particularly ferocious one, certainly—of American culture for which an experimental iconoclasm in technique serves as a kind of formal analogue to the thematic iconoclasm the novel equally seeks to communicate.

The same is true of Requiem, perhaps White's most ambitious work to date, both in its formal structure and its explicit cultural commentary. Each of these attributes is captured in the novel's title. Adopting the model of the Mass for the Dead, the novel's seven sections ("Requiem Aeternam," "Kyrie Elieson," etc.) contain in turn otherwise unrelated chapters, some of them extended through multiple episodes, others not, some of them in narrative form, others in various alternative forms (an interview with a fictional author conducted by "Terry Gross" of public radio's Fresh Air, for example). Among these chapters are several concerning real composers and real requiems, most of which illustrate the difficulties faced by serious artists in a world largely hostile to serious art, which is one of the embedded and interconnected themes that provide the book with its most obvious source of unity and its overriding message: that American culture (modern Western culture more generally) debases human potential and has itself become a kind of death cult.

Thus, while the novel is undeniably clever in its intertwining of means and ends, and many of its episodes are provocative and compelling (especially those that follow "The Life of Chris," the fictional author, and those examining the influence of the virtual reality of cyber culture), Requiem ultimately seems somewhat overdetermined, its discontinuities strangely enough too calculated. In the best postmodern fiction invention has always preceded expression (in the sense of having something "to say"), with paraphrasable intent or meaning generally left to take care of itself. This is partly why writers like Markson and Sorrentino have not really broken out beyond a small connoisseur-type audience. Most readers of even serious literary fiction expect a novel or short story to disclose its meaning in some directly discernible way; when it doesn't seem to do so readily or according to recognizable methods some readers no doubt conclude that such fiction has no meaning to disclose. (And perhaps it doesn't, if to be meaningful requires accepting the standards associated with the view of fiction as a fixed form of discourse.) White, on the other hand, seems determined to invest the experimental approach with if anything expanded powers of signification. In this view of postmodern strategy, only radically disruptive techniques are able to adequately represent the runaway excesses of current reality. Thus a novel like Requiem seeks its own kind of mimesis, an effort to represent the world as it presents itself to us, however unconventional the methods used to attain it.

While one might respect the integrity of White's vision of the present state of our civilization, as well as his skill in realizing it through the unorthodox approach he has taken, at its core Requiem has surprisingly close affinities with the novel of social criticism (albeit of a particularly unrelenting intensity), at times even taking on the character of a moral treatise. At the least, the novel's exhaustive treatment of its central conceit sometimes threatens to negate the effects of its structural innovations, perhaps with some readers bringing into question the need for such innovations in a work so focused on such a palpable theme. Indeed, it would be difficult to fully counter the charge that for all its energy Requiem eventually induces a kind of numbness, its alternating but parallel episodes finally reaching the point of seeming not insightful so much as
repetitious. Although it is a widely shared perception that postmodern fiction amounts to formalist game-playing that disdains mere ordinary "content," there have always been among the ranks of American postmodernists those writers whose work strongly accentuates content, who adopt unconventional strategies in order to more forcefully draw attention to the underlying representations of contemporary life. Ronald Sukenick has perhaps been the most prominent of these writers, a novelist who could truly be said to produce "antinovels" - novels that seek to banish "illusion" from fiction altogether in favor of something Sukenick would want to call reality. Paradoxically, this effort requires the author to emphasize continually the artificial nature of the text he composes, most often through typographical manipulations but also through fantasies and narrative disjunctions, so that the reader will never mistake "book" for the fabricated stories of "fiction." Thus the book becomes an authentic opportunity to convey the truth.

This method has arguably been most successful in 98.6 and Long Talking Bad Conditions Blues, but Mosaic Man (1999) is also a compelling illustration of Sukenick’s approach. Like Little Casino, this novel is somewhat more accessible than the author's other books, in this case taking the form of what could be taken as autobiography. Sukenick’s project has always led him to use his own experiences, barely if at all disguised, as the (so to speak) pretext for his writing, but Mosaic Man literally moves from childhood experiences to the author's current status as an aging writer. In the interim, the book serves as a meditation (often an entertaining one) on, among other things, what it means to be Jewish in the postwar world, as well as to be a writer in that world. Especially notable is Sukenick's use of Jewish legend and folk narrative forms, but the novel also contains a full complement of black humor and self-reflexive commentary.

Mosaic Man ultimately provides as well a satisfying case in both aesthetic and philosophical terms for the postmodern conceit of the decentered subject implicit in the novel's title. For both its formal agility and its suggestive themes, Mosaic Man is not merely a worthy addition to Sukenick's singular body of work, but also provides persuasive evidence that Sukenick is one of the most interesting and accomplished of postmodern American writers.

Three of the postmodernists whose accomplishments are most universally acknowledged, William Gaddis, John Barth, and Robert Coover, have each published new work since the turn of the new century. Gaddis’s Agape Agape (2002) is, unfortunately, posthumous. A writer whose fiction was essentially rediscovered rather late in his life, Gaddis’ s reputation rests on just four books, The Recognitions, JR, Carpenter's Gothic, and A Frolic of His Own. Agape Agape provides a kind of coda to Gaddis's career: short where the other novels tend to be massively long, a continuation of the idiosyncratic method used in all of his books, more than anything a crystallization of the themes in one way or another pursued in the other novels as well. For these reasons, it might give Gaddis initiates a manageable sample of what they might find in the longer books, but certainly it would not suffice to give such readers an adequate idea of what those books are like. Of all the postmodernists, Gaddis is perhaps the most difficult to read proficiently, although the rewards for doing so are considerable.

Like the previous fiction, Agape Agape is a text that emerges from Gaddis’ s skillful simulation of the human voice, but whereas the longer novels are complex orchestrations of multiple voices ("dialogue" doesn't really come close to capturing the effect of these voices), this last fiction
fittingly enough concentrates on the single voice of a dying writer trying to bring some kind of order to the materials of his final project—a history of the player piano. As scholar/critic of postmodern fiction Joseph Tabbi sums up the situation succinctly in his "Afterword," the writer "worries that his books will be left on the shelf, unread, while his unpublished research molders in the boxes stacked around him. But as long as he goes on reading, revising, adding to the manuscript, he will stave off death and madness and keep the work from becoming what it's about: entropy, chaos, loss, and a mechanized culture indifferent to the cultivation of particular, individual talents." These are, of course, what Gaddis's work has always been "about," and the monologist of Agape Agape can almost certainly be taken as a stand-in for Gaddis himself. Gaddis's work has some fundamental similarities with Sukenick's: both emphasize "talk," both reject the artificial narrative devices that encourage "suspension of disbelief." Like Sukenick, Gaddis seems to have approached writing novels as a form of truth-telling, however expansive and arduous the pursuit of truth becomes. Agape Agape might be taken as one final attempt to speak directly about the truth such a lifelong pursuit of it has revealed.

If Agape Agape seems an appropriate if modest finale to Gaddis's career, John Earth's Coming Soon!!! (2001)—which Barth presents (perhaps only playfully) as a finale of his own—unfortunately features many of Earth's more consistent weaknesses as a writer with few if any of his considerable compensatory strengths on display. Arguably the most influential and important of the first-generation postmodernists (or at least I would so argue), Barth frequently enough allows his fertile self-reflexive imagination to wander too far and with too few constraints. At its worst, this tendency results in stories that are tediously byzantine rather than clever, simply self-involved rather than illuminating of the capacities of storytelling. Coming Soon!!! succumbs to both of these miscalculations; where Barth at his best can be brazen and audacious but also hilarious, here he is undeniably self-indulgent and, finally, dull.

Barth must be given credit, however, for keeping up with the technological times and for a willingness to explore the narrative possibilities of newly emergent (and directly competitive) media. Not exactly "hypertext" fiction but instead a print-bound imitation of it, Coming Soon!!! presents the contest between Cyberspace and print as a simultaneous literary and generational rivalry between the aging father-figure novelist (Barth) and an aspiring son-substitute, a metafictional account of the anxieties of influence. The rivalry is intensified when the aspiring writer becomes a performer on the "Floating Opera" that was the inspiration for Earth's first novel by that name. The story of the rivalry itself is chronicled in the twin competing novels being written by "John Barth" and the young contender, both of which are introduced to us as found on a computer disk washed up on the Chesapeake shore, . . . Etc. The echoes of Earth's previous fiction are deafening, and, of course, intended, resulting in a book that is an unexpected chore to read and likely not very interesting even to those who count themselves fans of Earth's work. (I am one such. Barth explores the possibilities of an e-fiction/printed-page fusion much more effectively in a short story called "Click.")

Such a failure as Coming Soon!!! is probably inevitable—perhaps even desirable—from writers who are truly and resolutely "experimental." Not all experiments succeed, and failures can be at least as instructive as resounding triumphs (if not necessarily "good reads"). One might hope that a writer like Barth, entering what must be taken as a "late phase," at the very least, would have become sufficiently adept at balancing his commitment to narrative experiment with a concern
for its likely effect on readers to have avoided a work quite as insular and ultimately as slight as Coming Soon!!! turns out to be. (Although it might also be argued that at least Barth, even near the conclusion of his career, refuses to concede anything to popular tastes or reader passivity.) However, the potential benefits to literature for persevering in the attempt to push at the constraints of already established practice are illustrated with gratifying success in Robert Coover's The Adventures of Lucky Pierre, a novel that not only stands out among the more recent fiction of the American postmodernists but also serves to validate the postmodern approach—which is really an affirmation of the continuing possibilities of fiction as a form of serious literature bey- ond the confines of a specific era or prevailing critical fashion.

The Adventures of Lucky Pierre shares some superficial characteristics with Coming Soon!!!. Both novels in their way depict an artistic career in its waning days; formally, both as well produce this elegiac or autumnal tone through an effort to exploit the operations of another medium-in this case, film. But Coover does not merely create a verbal facsimile of a film, as in a previous book, A Night at the Movies. Rather, the world presented to us in Lucky Pierre is itself a cinematic world, an indefinite loop in which the title character, a celebrated star of pornographic movies in a cine-world defined by porn, finds himself trapped in one film scenario after another, at the mercy both of the determining lines of force in the stories themselves and of the directors—all women, all Pierre’s co-stars-in the process of filming these scenarios. In those few moments when Pierre seems to be free of such external control the simulated world he inhabits is depicted as a cold, dank, dismal place where the ubiquity of the sexual has rendered it tepid and one-dimensional. Having accepted the reductionist vision of the porn film as their reality, the citizens of "Cinecity" have become entangled in its underlying and inherently dehumanizing premises.

This kind of confusion of reality with a fantasized or artificial alternative version has long been both theme and method in Coover’s fiction, from The Universal Baseball Association to Ghost Town, the work that appeared immediately prior to The Adventures of Lucky Pierre. Lucky Pierre is perhaps the most impressively sustained of Coover's evocations of the sources of these fantasies, along with the imaginary baseball season in UBA and the public spectacle that gives The Public Burning its title, and the treatment of the theme is also among the most provocative in Coover's work. Neither a fantasy of mythopoeic or political grandiosity as in these two books, nor a nightmare of domestic disintegration as in "The Babysitter" or Gerald's Party, The Adventures of Lucky Pierre depicts the way in which even the most universal and potentially life-affirming of human activities-sex-can become the basis for an imperious and life-denying master narrative. As a character, Pierre himself is in some ways comparable to the Richard Nixon figure in The Public Burning: each of them bears some responsibility for perpetuating if not creating the master narrative, but both of them also are capable of eliciting sympathy from the reader in their efforts to comprehend and combat its influence on them. Coover's extended recreations of the sex scenarios and the filmic effects from which Pierre is perpetually unable to escape are ingenious as well as outrageous, and the novel's portrayal of the vicissitudes of male potency set off against the resiliency of female desire is both comedically skilled and almost certainly accurate. However, as with almost all of the American postmodern writers (including the near-postmoderns DeLillo and Powers), it is Coover's uninhibited prose style that registers the most immediate and ultimately most consequential impact:
Through the city, through the snow, under the gray belly of metropolitan morning, walks a man [Pierre], walks the shadow of a solitary man, like the figure in pedestrian-crossing signs, a photogram of a walking man, caught in an empty, white triangle, a three-sided barrenness, walking alone in a lifelike parable of empty triads, between a pair of dotted lines, defined as it were by its own purpose: forever to walk between these lines, snow or no snow, taking his risks—or rather, perhaps that is a pedestrian-crossing sign, blurred by the blowing snow, and, yes, the man is just this moment passing under it, trammeling the imaginary channel, the dotted straight and narrow, at right angles. . . .

However much formal experiment—even, with White, Barth, and Coover, experiments across formal boundaries—one encounters in postmodern American fiction, at the same time the overwhelming impression made by these writers and their work is that this is an intensely, enthusiastically written fiction, an attempt to above all keep writing itself alive as the material and medium of art—in other words, to preserve the idea of literature as a distinctive, perhaps necessarily even a self-consciously distinctive, order of writing. This might seem an overly genteel, positively conventional aspiration, but such a view is actually more consistent with what has been, and continues to be, the practice of "postmodern" writers than either the lifeless, theory-laden accounts offered by many of those seen as the advocates of postmodernism or the myopic, facile, often uninformed charges of rootless radicalism and idle gamesmanship leveled by most of its critics.