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Postmodern/Postwar — and After

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The Anxiety of the Contemporary

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Recently, I heard someone preface a paper with an apologetic disclaimer to the effect of, "this is very much a pre-November paper," referring to Donald Trump's victory and the apparent break it represents for, among other things, critical thought. We have become somewhat habituated to statements like these, to pre- and post- designations that seem to have appeared with increasing frequency since the beginning of the twenty-first century: pre- and post-2008, 2001, 1989, 1972, 1968, 1945, 1917.¹ Such a frequency of breaks should make us wonder what the status of the present really is. Are these shifts lateral? Additive? Are they epistemological or ontological? Are they really shifts at all?

Part of what makes this such a slippery thought may be, as Fredric Jameson indicated when he provocatively announced "we cannot periodize," that the basic causal structure that underlies what he calls the "dialectic of the period and the break" is flawed.² This structure, really a structure of thinking disguised as a structure of temporality, assumes that things progress in a more or less straightforward linear, causal fashion. The two-fold problem, for Jameson, is that the position from which we observe the unfolding of events and in turn assign designations of break and period is always and necessarily insufficient; we can never see enough to be sure. At the same time, this observational process excludes itself from the frame of observation: a kind of Heisenberg principle of historicity. This condition appears — appears to us at this time — to be particularly prevalent from the second half of the twentieth century to the present; perhaps because of the peculiarities of our relationship to time which, it is often said, has sped up, and perhaps — at least in the present case

— because of the observational proximity to certain objects. This latter is the specific problem of scholars who study literature variously classified as postmodern, postwar, or contemporary.

It's not surprising, then, that a book purportedly concerned with reexamining the periodizing logic on which these classifications depend would appear as a document of thoughts struggling under the weight of their own remit. The recent collection of essays, entitled *Postmodern/Postwar — and After: Rethinking American Literature*, is one such document and one which makes a point of foregrounding its anxieties. These anxieties stem almost universally from the basic problem outlined above and, somewhat ironically, give the book a certain cohesion. Debates about continuity and break abound, but so do discussions of unintuitive causal relations. What counts as "before" and "after" often becomes the contributions' central question. In the words of the collection's editors, the book seeks to "lay out the parameters of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary studies, to serve as a source book for the new field" and to do so as "more of a conversation than a conclusive account" (2). This comes as no small relief when so many field surveys proclaim encyclopedic ambition.

This is not to say this collection lacks ambition. To wrangle into a single calculus the disparate and mutable classifications of literary production after modernism, and indeed after postmodernism, would be nothing short of miraculous. But, as the introduction has it, the effects of canon expansion and acknowledgements of continuities (rather than emphasizing a strong break with previous periods and practices) have actually facilitated comprehensibility even if they haven't produced an entirely stable object. This shouldn't fool us into imagining a closure of the field, whatever its name. The introduction signals as much, ending with a provocative list of questions that inform many of the essays that follow. It's impossible to reproduce in full here, but it begins with this gambit: "Did postmodernity ever begin? Is it now over?" (15).

But what form should such an anxious document take? As the title suggests, the old divisions are held open at least provisionally. Three sections of essays — "The Postmodern Revisited," "The Postwar Reconfigured," and "What Comes After?" — are preceded by a "dialogue" on the state of this difficult to define field. Part of the problem appears to be one common to literary studies in our present moment: a number of fields are being subjected to "the continual emergence of provisional canons, idiosyncratic periodizations, and new approaches" (3). Another part, certainly related but not reducible to this general instability, has been the proliferation of arguments for continuity (aesthetic, institutional, socio-political) across the 1945 dividing line and the corresponding territorial encroachment of modernist studies whose most extreme iteration has attempted to annex no fewer than five hundred years of human activity. All of this comes in the context of a contemporary revival of interest in form in literary studies.

In the introduction, editors Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden suggest that the

general return to concerns of form might usefully be thought of as a return to a kind of postmodern critical logic and that, therefore, “a reevaluation of postmodernism might be useful for thinking of form today” (15). This seems to point toward a less ambitious — but no less important — agenda than those circulating through the essays themselves. The individual assertions about, for example, whether the end of the cold war or 9/11 constitute strong breaks in sociality or aesthetic practice, whether digital technologies have left a permanent imprint on textuality, or whether “sincerity” marks a unique aesthetic ideology, collectively produce something one might risk calling a meta-narrative. On this level, the collection raises a number of useful questions about the scale and substance of periodization and the qualifying features of epistemological rupture and can be generatively read as primary sources of a particular conjuncture of critical thought; one in which emerging, or in some cases renewed, critical practices combine with instability in neighboring fields as well as ever-increasing institutional drama.

In a foreshadowing example from the dialogue, Amy J. Elias muses, “I’m not the only one who firmly believes that there is a difference between modernism and what happens in art after the 1960s” (32). Presumably, she’s thinking of the shift from so-called countercultural interest in representing social totalities — like the urbanist art of the Situationists and Fluxus — to the predominance of the aleatory and the particular typified by the critical work of Nicolas Bourriaud. But even these apparently cut-and-dried shifts are actively debated, so it’s not always clear what the “difference” Elias refers to consists of.³ In other words, how does one distinguish the particular differences of an increasingly heterogeneous modernism from the implicitly universal difference between these differences and whatever postmodernism is? Elias later appends her statement, claiming “we needed to think break as well as continuity between modernism and what followed” (33-34). Anyone looking for a definitive account of a methodology for identifying these various breaks and differences, as well as continuities, will be dismayed.

If I appear to be dwelling overmuch on the introductory sections of the book it is because they raise concerns that thread through all the essays without ever being comfortably resolved. And this is no shortcoming of the collection. Indeed, any resolution would inevitably come off as spurious oversimplification. That said, the articulation of these issues in the editorial introduction — issues of periodizing scale, the logic of self-reflexivity, the concept of the contemporary — will be invaluable to anyone invested in this antinomian field which even still we seem unable to quite name (is it Post-45, Postmodern, Contemporary, Post-Post-... or, perhaps, as Donald Barthelme once quipped, just the “New Newness”?).

An exemplary case is provided by what Paul K. Saint-Amour calls, in his essay of the same name, “perpetual interwar” — the experience of both constant anticipation of the next war and being in the midst of war (167–68). Beyond merely a phenomenological condition, perpetual interwar signals a discrepant temporality

wherein the nominal end of war is not consonant with the actual activity of war. He cites here the continuity of war powers in the U.S. beyond the official cessation of hostilities after WWII as grounding the operant logic of the Authorization to Use Military Force, which facilitated most of U.S. military activity after 9/11. Accordingly, periods of so-called war and peace fail to be self-consistent and bleed into one another. In a forceful rereading of that seminal text of postmodernism, *Gravity's Rainbow*, Saint-Amour claims that it is “a veritable encyclopedia of means by which a time can fail or refuse to be contemporary with itself” (171), accomplishing this by reactivating a number of modernist texts “as undepleted resources in contending with war’s deformations of time and totality” (172).

The mode in which this continuity operates provides a good starting point for looking at the various elaborations of the field in this collection, which appear to produce a postmodernism that also refuses to be contemporary with itself. On the one hand, the concept of perpetual interwar interestingly contents with Daniel Grausam’s claims elsewhere in the collection that the apparent continuity of the cold war (or what we might call the cold war discourse) suggests “less a straightforward break with postmodernism” (144) than a kind of doubling down of the self-reflexivity of postmodernism — or else a slackening of this self-reflexivity which allows writers/critics to imagine they are critiquing the period from an “after.” In other words, to Saint-Amour’s claim that it is the structure of experience and especially time in perpetual interwar that authorizes a “*longue-durée* approach” (166), Grausman proposes the specific temporalizing of the cold war, or what he calls the “temporality of nuclearity” (145). Grausman’s essay, in turn, means to problematize the two major developments that appear to herald an *after* postmodernism: the end of the cold war and 9/11. But here something has to be said about some of the less clearly drawn differences.

On the significance of the post-cold war and the post-9/11 as determinate breaks, Leerom Medovoi makes an all too common misstep. “There are thus two distinct developments in the literature that follows postmodernism,” he claims, “separate phases in the cultural logic of what we might call ‘later capitalism’” (95). This claim appropriates the representational schemes attendant to the cultural logic that apparently shifts after both of these events to itself define a new phase in the mode of production; apparently an erroneous conflation of “postmodernism” as a designator of social configuration and phase of capitalism. This points to a larger problem of how to conceive the apparently disparate temporalities of cultural shifts and changes within a stage of capitalism which itself appears unstable. Medovoi would hardly be the first to argue that within the proliferation of responses to these so called breaks, as well as the speed at which the dialectic of period and break appears to operate, we should seek aesthetic evidence of a shift in the phase of capitalism. But he doesn’t make this argument. It is only implied by way of a semantic slippage in his use of “postmodernism.”

Either this is representative of what in the “dialogue” is marked as an awkward self-consciousness or, as Theodore Martin takes up in his essay, the difficulty of self-comprehension of the slippery “contemporary,” or else the problem is of a potentially more complicated nature.⁴ The latter case would be something like an exacerbation of what Ernst Bloch called “asynchronicity” — the temporal disjointedness of modernity in which capital, technology, and social life operate according to different temporalities. Such a set of conditions has produced, in other discourses, notions of a phase shift as well; toward vague notions of a “post-capitalism” that indicate either a redoubled entrenchment or, indeed, a something “after.”⁵ In either case, readers will likely wonder about certain absences in this book, such as the structural breaks that fail to appear in spectacular fashion, but which nonetheless we recognize as crucial, such as the collapse of the Bretton Woods agreement. Brian McHale, for example, makes frequent reference to 1972 as a critical mass of aesthetic, especially novelistic, production without ever mentioning Bretton Woods. Similarly absent from the discussion is the slow creep forward in time in academic focus — the very condition of possibility of the field of postmodern or contemporary literary studies — that is at least contemporary with the departmental expansions occasioned by the GI Bill.

It’s hard to determine whether these are merely problems with the essays or if they indicate problems with the field. Indeed, the myopia worried over by some of these scholars does seem at times to be the very core of its critical metabolism. So, while Caren Irr produces deft analyses of the novelistic politics of Jonathan Franzen, Philip Meyer, and Adam Haslett, in which she marks (rightly) the absence of class conflict and the generalization of particular political experience (white, male, middle class), we’re left to wonder at the selection of these supposedly representative texts and to the provisionality of canon formation to which Gladstone and Worden have already alerted us.⁶ Framing her canon as the neo-realist American political novel only partially shields her from the incaution. Irr appears to duplicate the epistemological error of the novels she’s chosen: they try to generalize from particular “American” or class experiences but are ultimately only representations of this or that particular iteration of an abstract generality, just as Irr’s account of “American national allegory” does not really account for the contemporary political novel in America (except perhaps via tautology), but only this or that particular American political novel.

In still other essays we can glimpse, if only obliquely, a response to this selection problem. Rachel Greenwald Smith is explicitly critical of the tendency toward what she calls “compromise aesthetics” in fiction after postmodernism, a kind of post-experimental aesthetics she perceives as symptomatic of neoliberalism (183). Smith mediates between aesthetic and critical practice, locating the source of critiques, like Irr’s, of the generalizing of particularity at least partly in a critical apology that fails to recognize the political and economic dimensions of the formation of that particular: “literature is said to affirm the fundamental existence and importance of individual

subjective experience in general even if works demonstrate skepticism toward any individual subject's reality as universal" (187). This self-consciously produced and flexible subject is, for Smith, analogous to the figure of the entrepreneur; both have the production of value as their ultimate objective.

Michael Clune's essay tracks a slightly different concern with subjectivity through postmodern and contemporary art and fiction; in particular, to a version of subject formation occasioned by the interruption of facile recognition. In Clune's estimation, it is the combination of the aesthetic and social programs aimed at producing unrecognizable objects in order to occasion new social formations "that constitutes the historical novelty of our emerging period" (244). It's worth dwelling for a moment on Clune's claims because of the implications they appear to have for the possibility of producing a discrete contemporary period, whether or not it includes postmodernism.⁷ For a number of reasons, Clune's conceptualization appears superficially spurious. Not least because as an aesthetic program it appears entirely consonant with the modernism of Wallace Stevens, for whom difficulty and unfamiliarity was meant to produce a new aesthetic sensibility, not to mention modernism's general inclination toward subjectivized rather than totalized narrative perspective. This would also seem to put paid to Clune's notion that such "unrecognizable" work would also be anti-Romantic. As Audrey Wasser has convincingly shown, the comprehensibility of literary form is inseparable from its Romantic articulation as long as it remains characterized by the speculative gesture of a work-to-come which has of necessity to retain a relation to that which it succeeds in time.⁸ Clune himself permits such continuity: "Beckett makes it vanish. Nabokov makes it vanish. O'Hara makes it vanish. Plath makes it vanish. Thomas Bernhard makes it vanish" (245). To be fair, it is Clune's notion that, in its more recent permutation, the aesthetics of subjective defamiliarization now corresponds to a "form of radical subjectivity" (247) upon which, somewhat obscurely, new "post-recognition" collectives could be built. This maneuver, fundamentally *pre-* rather than post- or anti-Romantic, allows him to oppose the objectal obsession of the current ontological turn on a Cartesian playing field. He is effectively making-it-new by making it old. It's a provocative claim and one that perhaps warrants more attention than the often-fatuous pronouncements of sincerity that abound in the contemporary discourse.

Ursula K. Heise re-raises the issue of postmodernism's internal periodizing dynamics in relation to an even broader scalar concern with overdue acknowledgement of the Anthropocene. I say overdue because hers is the final essay in the collection, but it is in fact brilliantly located as a final rejoinder to the myriad concerns of *Postmodern/Postwar — and After*. Opening postmodernism's perspectival paradoxes onto the dimensions of geological time, Heise meditates on the discrepant accounts of social and ecological pace in which modern life's rapidity has motivated a (somewhat reactionary) return to slowness while, at the same time, foot-dragging legislative and regulative institutions cannot keep up with the rate of environmental degradation.

Fast and slow are both conflictingly moralized within these concurrent discourses. In a final nod to the myopia lamented throughout the collection, Heise offers a picture of the period's self-reflection as a passive relation to its own conditions: "postmodernism watches itself riding toward the future, not knowing whether it is moving in time lapse or slow motion" (257).

To call *Postmodern/Postwar — and After* an important contribution to the field would be something of a cop-out. This collection has the dissimulating effect of causing one to wonder what an "important contribution to the field" would even be. Or what "the field" is ("Did postmodernity ever begin? Is it now over?"). These are not failings but fundamentally important reflections generated from the unique attempt to observe the protean thronging of aesthetic practice and produce out of it a useful object for scholarly examination. And whatever disagreements readers might find themselves having with this or that essay, the collection as a whole has done a fine job of already staging, within its network of critical and methodological commitments, many of the most provocative versions of those disagreements. In this way, it has paid apt homage to its most frequent interlocutor, Frederic Jameson, whose work is always a launch pad for often contentious but always vital discussion and thought.

Notes

1. 2001 having the dubious distinction of containing two major “breaks”: 9/11 and the end of the dot-com crash.
2. Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (New York: Verso, 2002).
3. See Hal Foster, *Bad New Days* (New York: Verso, 2016).
4. “Such paradigms as ‘the-neo-avant-garde’ and ‘postmodernism,’ which once oriented some art and theory, have run into the sand, and, arguably, no models of much explanatory reach or intellectual force have risen in their stead.” Hal Foster, “Questionnaire of ‘the Contemporary,’” *October* 130 (2009) 3.
5. McKenzie Wark, for example, has referred to this “after” as Vector Capitalism wherein commodity production shifts to information production and the means of production become the “legal and technical protocols for keeping information scarce.” See Wark’s “The Sublime Language of My Century,” *Public Seminar* (May 14, 2016). <http://www.publicseminar.org/2016/05/the-sublime-language-of-my-century>
6. On the opposite tendency toward representations of totality in contemporary visual arts see Peer Illner, “The Artist as Whistleblower,” *Continent* 6.2 (2017) 37-47; and for an alternative view of contemporary fiction and totality see Alison Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press, 2017).
7. This circulates as a kind of secondary concern in *Postmodern/Postwar — and After*, namely that, if we can’t make the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century cohere into a single period, what are the periods contained in that frame?
8. Audrey Wasser, *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism, and the Production of Literary Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).