On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary

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1989, the year of *American Literary History*’s founding, held out a tantalizing moment for periodizers of whatever comes after modernism. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War seemed to tell us that we had arrived at a moment of genuine historical transformation. Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history shortly after, in 1992, and it would seem to follow naturally that the post-45 era was coming to a close. But if this was true in the realm of global politics, it was less apparent in literature and the arts more generally. Political watersheds are one thing, but cultural or aesthetic ones quite another, and it was not immediately clear—nor is it clear now—that, to borrow a turn of phrase from Virginia Woolf, literature changed, even if the world did, on or about 9 November 1989. One could argue that 1989 launched us into the age of multiculturalism, or, more negatively, sectarianism. The culture wars were already warming up in the US: Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* and E. D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* were published in 1987; Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, one of the more lasting documents to come out of the culture wars, was published in 1992. 1992 also saw the start of the Bosnian War, the most dramatic example of resurgent sectarian strife in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union. On the American literary scene, pluralism defined the moment; in the international scene, sectarianism; in both cases, identities seemed to be at stake. But if, in Bosnia, your identity could get you killed, in America, it seemed, your identity could get you published.

In keeping with the largely happy outcomes of multiculturalism in literature and in the classroom, by the end of the century

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scholars of the period since 1945 had the pleasure of a vastly expanded canon, a wealth of well-crafted novels from relatively unknown writers to consider, a few major careers to account for, and the task of defining the second half of the twentieth century ahead of them. Wendy Steiner, in her section of *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, volume 7 (1999) (“Postmodern Fictions, 1970 to 1990”), quite elegantly represents the position in which the next generation of scholars of this literature found themselves as they defended their dissertations in the closing years of the twentieth century. She showed how a reading of experimentalist novels can be—and, indeed, must be—integrated with a discussion of realist writing. She thus set herself the task of undoing the reigning bifurcation of contemporary fiction into the “postmodern” avant-garde and the writing of women and people of color that was so often dismissed, in the academy, as naively realist or concerned more with social issues than with the development of literary aesthetics.

In this sense, Steiner was informed by the culture wars of the 1990s, but not shackled by them. Her account of what would then have been labeled as contemporary fiction crystallized an emerging critical consensus that the categories produced both by the literary press and by the academic disputes over the canon produced, at best, a misleading opposition between these two kinds of writing. At worst, that opposition suggested a hierarchy of value in which the writing of mainly white male authors such as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, William Gaddis, and Don DeLillo was deemed “literary” whereas the work of writers such as Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, Alice Walker, and Joan Didion was thought to be mainly concerned with the sociological aspects of fiction. This bifurcation of value, a legacy of New Criticism’s investment in modernist difficulty, was one of the primary ways that modernist understandings of the literary stretched beyond the moment of high modernist aesthetic production. The way Steiner mixes up the categories—by pointing out, for example, the literary self-consciousness on display in Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* (1993), the significance of Oedipa Maas as a housewife in Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49* (1966), or the way Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) came to seem like a realist novel in the age of Vietnam—has become, since the late 1990s, the standard practice among critics working in the field. Whether that takes the form of rising interest in writers such as Ishmael Reed and John Edgar Wideman, whose clearly political and identitarian commitments are combined with an exuberant experimental quality in their fiction, or the emergence of studies such as Rei Terrada’s *Feeling in Theory* (2001), which reveals the
sentimental underside of the most esoteric avant-garde theory of the late twentieth century, literary studies in this period sought to abandon the rigid divide between the so-called “postmodern” and “ethnic” or “women’s” literature. John Barth’s famous stigmatization of the latter as “secular news reports” in his 1967 essay, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” had lost its purchase by the turn of the millennium. Not incidentally, its author’s novels had lost a good deal of their purchase on readers as well.

The effort to move beyond ever more divided accounts of the post-1945 period in American literature was thus well begun in Steiner’s essay, even if it was not the main analytical aim of its argument. Morris Dickstein, in the same volume, used an attentive historicism to build bridges between novels of the 1940s and 1950s that are generally thought to be aesthetically quite distinct. He showed, for example, how novels as stylistically divergent as Lolita (1955) and On the Road (1951) confront similar American realities. But despite these local integrations, the purpose of the 1999 Cambridge History volume in toto was, as its editor Sacvan Bercovitch explained in his introduction, to maintain multivocality, to emphasize difference, and to reproduce in the volume’s critical accounts the oppositional times in which the fiction in question was written. This commitment is reflected in the way writing by women, people of color, gay and lesbian writers, and even regional writing, is separated out by chapter and section within the volume. At the same time, two sections of the book—on drama and on southern writers—seem to reflect a continuing interest in canon as traditionally understood, devoting a chapter to each writer among a small group of those already considered important by the literary press. Less magisterial surveys—such as the very short Bedford-St. Martin’s paperback on The Twentieth-Century Novel (1997), or the post-1945 chapters within the single-volume Columbia Literary History of the United States (1988)—produce similar structures and contradictions on a smaller scale, citing some works by women and writers of color in discussions of “postmodernism” but then devoting separate sections to African-American, gay and lesbian, and feminist literature and theory, or to stylistic categories like realism and self-reflexive fiction.

If this revisionary work was just settling into place at the core of post-45 literary studies by the turn of the century, where are we now? One answer can be found in Mark McGurl’s recent take on the Steiner-style mixing-up effort. In his essay, “The Program Era: Pluralisms of Postwar American Fiction” (2005), McGurl argues that the fiction of the postmodern white guys imagines itself finally in terms fully assimilable to the identitarian
ethos of ethnic fiction. This results in a convergence of what McGurl calls “high cultural pluralism” and “technomodernism” (106), such that “even the whitest-seeming technomodernism can function as a discourse of difference” (120), and the writing tagged as ethnic fully assimilates the self-reflexive interests of literary modernism. The university, which McGurl both reads out of the period’s fiction (as in John Barth’s campus computer in *Giles Goatboy* [1966]) and returns to as the institutional site of American literary work since the 1950s, becomes the training ground for both readers and writers. There, high-culture modernism and its assumptions about reading and about literature are bequeathed to post-war generations of students, and student-writers, by the New Criticism. This is how modernism, on McGurl’s account, ramifies throughout the niche fiction of the post-1960s literary marketplace. The essay I am paraphrasing here is part of McGurl’s broader argument about the period, that it is defined by the historically novel situation of the writer within the university.

If McGurl thus extends the work that Steiner and others were beginning to do at the close of the century, he also neatly, and I think productively, sidesteps the cultural materialist accounts of postmodernism that have been so powerful in defining the field—specifically, Fredric Jameson’s argument about the relationship between culture and late capitalism in *Postmodernism* (1991). McGurl finds the specific sociological conditions of production and consumption of literature—their location in the university—the relevant context through which to understand aesthetic transformations (and, more centrally, continuities) of American fiction in the second half of the century. His guides here are John Guillory, Bill Readings, and (implicitly) Pierre Bourdieu. Indeed, cultural materialist arguments in other fields, such as Mark C. Taylor’s account of postmodern religion in *Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World Without Redemption* (2004), often weakens when it turns to the literary. Like Jameson in *Postmodernism*, Taylor locates the moment of postmodernism not in the fall of the Berlin Wall or at the close of the century, but on 16 August 1971, when global finance ceased to be tied to the gold standard, but this exacting historicism undermines itself the moment novels are invoked. Taylor’s first two examples of the postmodern faith that is his subject are William Gaddis’s 1955 *The Recognitions* and Herman Melville’s 1857 *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, suggesting that the literary embodiment of what he defines as the condition of postmodernism cannot be neatly linked to genuinely transformative moments in the market. The connection works by analogy rather than by causation, which is
why McGurl’s more rigorously historical argument—which in pointing to the university classroom can account for precisely how the aesthetic inventory of modernism could be disseminated to the American pluralist market—seems to me more convincing.

The status of irony has also come under significant revision since the millennium, and since the philosophical apotheosis of irony in Richard Rorty’s 1989 *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. I am thinking here, for example, of Debbie Nelson’s recent work on the representation of affect and sincerity in Hannah Arendt, Mary McCarthy, and Joan Didion. In a more theoretical vein, we might also point to the transformation of Walter Benn Michaels’s career between the late 1970s and the early years of the new century: an early and influential critic of theory, he became even more controversial during the culture wars when he published *Our America* (1997), in which he deconstructs the idea of race as a cultural construction. He then combined the two enterprises in *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (2004), a book that connects the vogue for irony in the period with the reigning accounts of culture and identity. The burden of his analysis is to argue that we mean what we say, that who we are has nothing to do with the meaning of what we say, and that to think of disagreement in terms of difference is finally to embrace the logic both of terrorism and of biological essentialism.

In my own work, attending to religion in literature of this period has allowed me to see how the rise of sincerity over irony as a literary mode reflects and enables a peculiar belief in meaninglessness in American religious life. The writers I examine see fracture and materialism not as ends in themselves but as the conditions for transcendence, see the postmodern worry about truth-claims as the avenue to resurgent supernaturalism. Don DeLillo’s work provides a signal example of these shifting qualities of late twentieth-century literature: the ironic, playful *White Noise* (1985), a standard text of the old postmodernism, now seems an aberration within DeLillo’s oeuvre—or it is read to emphasize characters such as the child, Wilder, who represent what more than one critic has called a Romantic sensibility in DeLillo’s work. *Underworld* (1997) and *The Names* (1982), both of which are ambitious and only locally ironic, now seem more accurately to define his literary project. The unbelieving nuns who tend Mr. Grey’s gunshot wounds in *White Noise* are just one more satirical joke in secular white suburbia, but in *Underworld*, Sister Edgar’s embrace of a mystical vision in the multiethnic Bronx is rewarded with a very Catholic-looking afterlife on the internet. My reading of DeLillo as a religious writer, informed by the transformations of Roman Catholicism during the Vatican II era, grounds the changing assessment of his work in the
history of America’s peculiar religiosity. In DeLillo’s case, one begins to see how the shifting status of irony becomes palpable in the changing understanding of major fictional careers.

DeLillo’s vision of the internet in *Underworld* marks another transformation we are still in the midst of. The geekdom of computers, which, via Pynchon and Barth, provided the aura of what we thought of as postmodern fiction, is no longer for geeks only. Hypertext novels seemed for a moment an important point of contact between technology and literature; now they look archaic from a technological point of view and irrelevant from a cultural point of view. Far more central, I think, is the simple fact that new forms of reading and writing are emerging on a vast scale. Though YouTube may eventually make video as central to the web as writing is, I doubt it will replace writing in that realm, as the success of blogging suggests (just as video has not, as feared, entirely replaced writing outside the virtual world). So far the most serious attempt to come to grips with what these advances mean for literature—or more ambitiously, for language—is Katherine Hayles’s work on the posthuman, and on code. Though I am not convinced by her argument in *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (2005) that the structures of code itself are changing language, it is undeniable that the imaginative structures of software interfaces—from our metaphorically-named desktops to vast web-based collaborative games—inform both the logic and the imagination embodied in the endlessly ramifying internet. The problems of archiving raised by, for example, the Google book project and the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, with its “snapshots” of the internet that can be studied by historians as old newspapers are, suggest the vastness of the changes in book culture, and in the culture of reading, writing, and scholarship, that are yet—but soon—to come. Insofar as literary scholarship aims to have something to say about reading and language in general—insofar as it embraces the idea that we should ideally be able to speak to the general reader, and that we are more than curators of a relatively narrow sample of cultural production and the writers of its history—the scholars who study the late twentieth century and beyond will have to engage the forms of writing found in virtual space, either as literary artifacts in themselves, or as the penumbra of writing that surrounds the literary object.

At the end of the century, *ALH*, in publishing a special issue titled “American Writing 1999,” proclaimed the need to focus on the relationship between living writers and the reviewers and scholars who routinely respond to them—which is to say, the readers writers must contend with beyond the “passionate few” lay readers
they most covet. The scholars, both in the view of writers and of critics such as Mary Poovey, who wrote for the special issue, were still hamstrung by a disabiling commitment to theory, where theory and its jargon represented the high-status niche of the profession while writing—especially composition, or, in the literary realm, mere reviewing or old-fashioned close reading—occupied the low status. What has changed since then is the solid dominance of historicism. It was already in play by the time Representations started up in 1983, but it now seems less a critical movement than a simple assumption about literary-critical work, more widespread than any point of view that could be said to be strictly theoretical. A student of mine at Yale, writing what I think will be a brilliant book about the autonomy of the work of art in modernism—a New Critical or deconstructive take on the literary if there ever was one—seeks to historicize precisely that fantasy—a fantasy toward which he is nevertheless deeply sympathetic. This student’s approach represents not a wave but a tide, or even just the water we all swim in: close reading remains at the heart of our critical practice—and, as McGurl argues, is installed at the heart of creative practice, too. However, the uses of those readings are broad among the rising generation of post-1945 literary scholars: from a Marxist-inflected argument such as Andrew Hoberek’s The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work (2005), to Rachel Adams’s work on the literature of the Americas (part of the new transnational approach to literary study), to the work of Sean McCann or Michael Szalay on literature and politics since the 1950s, to my own culturally historical work on genocide and religion as they intersect with literature.

Another way of registering where we are now is to cite the founding, in the fall of 2006, of Post•45, a collective of scholars mainly just finishing first books or in the middle of second books. What emerged at the group’s initial symposium was the growing edge of scholarly work in the field formerly known as contemporary, produced by a new generation of scholars born at or after the end of the 1960s. For this generation, the 1960s are history, not memory—an advantage when it comes to the business of historicizing—and the politics of the 1960s are less a nostalgic ideal than an ambivalent example of what happens when institutional politics turns into cultural politics. Some of us work in the wake of our disillusion with multiculturalism, some in the hope of bringing a related agenda of inclusiveness further along with a more complex conception of what can be done with such an approach. Jonathan Freedman’s writing on Asian-American and Jewish cultural interfaces was one example of this constellation of concerns at the 2006 conference; it was also evident in the
globalizing work of Brian Edwards, Andy Hoberek, and Rachel Adams, for whom the history and ends of cultural permeability take on a less simply smug, or (on the other side) demonized cast. The arrival of Western cultural artifacts in Iran, for example, is not for Edwards a cause for celebration or a moment of lament, but simply the site of another creative engagement to be thought about.

Interdisciplinarity has also transformed since this rising generation was in graduate school; then, with theory at or just rounding its peak, English was an export discipline, with semiotic analysis entering history and political theory through the work of Michel Foucault and Hayden White. Now English is importing, though again, in a way that honors the enduring value literary study places on close reading: Post•45 began with a proposed session for the Modernist Studies Association meeting on the intersection of literature and sociology at mid-century. We read the session’s rejection as the signal that modernism was not what we were talking about, or at least, that if it were, then we needed a different context in which to define what modernism looks like in the mid- and late twentieth century. The seminar ran at the ensuing Post•45 conference with six participants presenting work, and what emerged was a remarkable set of common texts and writers, along with strongly debated issues arising from these. A room in which more than half the people in it have read Lionel Trilling’s 1947 novel, The Middle of the Journey, is rare; even rarer is a room whose occupants can also speak knowlegably about the work of William H. Whyte, Ann Petry (The Street [1946] was a common text), and Joan Didion. It is worth saying that the conference simply invited participants to present work in progress, rather than defining topics or authors to organize the papers. The convergence was part of the surprise rather than the programmatic aim. Other versions of interdisciplinarity on display in the 2006 meeting included J. D. Connor’s work on game theory and film, Sara Blair’s on Richard Wright’s photography, Abigail Cheever’s on identity and the medicalization of personality, and Deak Nabers’s on law and the literary logic of race.

In his response to a version of this paper given at an ALH symposium in the spring of 2007, Gordon Hutner told a story about deciding whether to take “Contemporary American Fiction” at Kenyon College in 1970—a year-long course that would not, however, be counted toward the English major. He suggests:

The thinking was that the contemporary was, in a word, too easy, since it did not pose the same sorts of problems as reading Troilus and Criseyde or Astrophel and Stella did...
The assumption went, and in large part still goes, that once students got their mettle tested with Milton and Melville, they should be able to distinguish what’s good and bad in contemporary writing for themselves. Or, more sympathetically, . . . that scholars and literary historians simply did not know yet what contemporary writing would prove interesting to the future and what was merely ephemeral.

This is changing, and quickly, thanks to the work of a new generation of critics in the field, critics who are not confined to those hefty postmodern slabs that formerly sat on syllabi as proof of the difficulty, and thus the worth, of contemporary writing in the academy. Still, even at Post•45, some evinced discomfort at writing about the literature of the late century even if we do now teach it with greater confidence, suggesting once again that focal distance may finally be necessary in order to see the past clearly, something historians have long known. Tyler Curtain recently pointed out to me that perhaps it would be worth conserving “contemporary” as the name for the period that began somewhere around the middle of the twentieth century and which we still, probably, inhabit. Post-45, a term I have favored, implies a minimal set of assumptions about the ways the world and culture—especially American culture—changed since the end of World War II. But even those assumptions are under debate, and perhaps the debate is useful. Perhaps it would be better to call this period long modernism, in keeping with McGurl’s sense, and my own, that the second half of the twentieth century sees not a departure from modernism’s aesthetic but its triumph in the institution of the university and in the literary culture more generally. But finally, how interesting are the arguments about how to choose beginnings and ends? More interesting is all the new work being done with the cultural artifacts of the last six or seven decades. It is enough to make me follow the pop singer Prince’s example, to which my title alludes, to give up the hieroglyphics we have nominated for the header of this period and concede that until the contemporary is over, I will call myself a scholar of contemporary literature.

Notes


3. The collective’s first symposium, held on 27–28 October 2006 at Concordia University in Montreal, was titled “Mid-century to Postmodern: The Post-War Era Reconsidered,” and the association was, for the purposes of that conference, called the Postmodern Studies Association. At the conclusion of the two days, the group renamed itself Post•45 and agreed to sponsor yearly meetings to discuss the pre-circulated work-in-progress of rising scholars in the field. The participants in the 2006 conference were Rachel Adams, J. D. Connor, Sara Blair, Abigail Cheever, Brian Edwards, Mary Esteve, Jonathan Freedman, Andrew Hoberek, Amy Hungerford, Sean McCann, Deak Nabers, Deborah Nelson, and Michael Szalay. The 2007 conference was held in October at Harvard, hosted by J. D. Connor; the 2008 conference will be held at Yale, hosted by Amy Hungerford.

4. Upon arriving at Yale in 1999, I felt this residual prejudice emanating as much from our elite students as from the structures of our undergraduate curriculum (though students did get major credit for studying contemporary literature). It was not until recently that I felt confident enough in my professorial gravitas to offer, as a lecture course, a post-45 novels course that I touted primarily as a course for fun reading. One student complained that it did not live up to the billing because of novels like *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Blood Meridian* (1985); if these were the objectionable novels, then I felt I had done my job balancing pleasure with pain.

**Works Cited**

