

# Should the Post-modern Really be 'Explained to Children'?

**Marc Chénétier**

Ecole Normale Supérieure Fontenay/St. Cloud

A wonderful French actress, Arletty, used to divide the people she knew into PM and PB types, "porte-bonheur" and "porte-malheur." If I were to adapt these terms to English I would have to say PB read as "probably—or potentially—benefic" and PM as "probably—or pretty—malific."

A similar stenography has invaded critical discourse over the last few decades and it has become common, and even banal, to be invited to decipher under the strange "pomo" an abstract of our very condition. It then refers to "the post-modern condition," in order to define which Jean-François Lyotard some time ago wrote a "report on knowledge" for the University of Quebec,<sup>1</sup> before proposing, in the way of an old likeable uncle, "to explain the postmodern to children," more particularly the children of a number of his friends to whom each chapter is

<sup>1</sup> *La Condition postmoderne* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979).

inscribed.<sup>2</sup> And because most of my life is dedicated to the study of recently published American literary texts, I was once suspected, most courteously, to be only relatively ignorant of what has become known as "postmodernism," the second term that hides under the "pomo" I was alluding to, as well as sometimes reproached with belonging to its promoters. Even though, over the years, I have repeatedly said in public I would not be caught using the term in any one of the analyses I might be conducting, friends were astute enough to ask me why I wouldn't.<sup>3</sup> Thus was this paper born.

\*\*\*

The subject, unfortunately—perhaps because of its intrinsic nature—demands, in order to be dealt with, that a number of distinctions be made, even though current use merrily dispenses with them, thus making sure that the term can be used at all. Even if one is willing not to consider for a moment—and I am not sure this moment can be anything but very brief—merely cosmetic and hip uses of a term whose janiform morphology allows its alternating but mostly undifferentiated use, the fact remains that "post-modern," under the current dispensation, covers two notions of which I am far from certain that they have anything obvious in common: if the ways in which a language constructs itself retain any validity in our times—skeptics welcome—I would first like to notice that the adjective "modern" presupposes such a thing as "modernity" whereas any recourse to the adjective "modernist" presupposes the existence of such a thing as modernism. However—and this is what I want to ground my remarks upon—modernity and modernism are very different intellectual objects.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (Paris: Galilée, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> The double confession of my sins will be found in the following texts: "Even post-humanists get the blues: contemporary American fiction and its critics; a lament and a plea," in *The American Identity-Fusion and Fragmentation*, ed., Rob Kroes (Amsterdam: Aménka Instituut, 1980), pp. 345-62; and "The soporific adventures of Neo and Post: an Insomniac's view," in *Neo-Conservatism: Its Emergence in the USA and Europe*, ed., Rob Kroes (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1984), pp. 110-129. They will at least have allowed me to measure the institutional stakes of "pomo" in the United States, and to understand that questioning its theoretical bases can be perceived as an attempt to saw off the branch—equipped with comfortable bird-baths—on which a few egos perch.

My intention is not to recapitulate the history of the notion of "modernity," but let me remind you that one can trace it back at least as far as Kant and Hegel. All of Lyotard's discourses on modernity are intimately linked with the universals of the Enlightenment, with a time when subjectivity became a principle, when individualism and the right to critique, moral autonomy and idealist philosophy took the upper hand. For Jiirgen Habermas, the new consciousness that was to emerge around the mid-eighteenth century and become theoreticized about one century later (the "nova *ætas*" of the Romantics), signals the birth of what we call modernity. Such is the reason why Lyotard manages to justify the use of the expression "post-modernity" in order to describe what happens when a world divorces the Enlightenment, be it under the dialecticized form it assumed with the Frankfurt School. Which, naturally, does not mean that the word was not used before. Truth to tell, it may not be completely impertinent to remind ourselves that Latin used it to refer to manners and accepted ways of behavior nor that numerous occurrences can be found in all centuries under different meanings. Lyotard, being conscious of this state of things, will say that modernity "is not an epoch, but rather a mode ... of thought, of enunciation, of sensibility," and remember that Auerbach "saw it looming in Augustine's *Confessions*."<sup>4</sup>

Habermas distinguishes—rightly so, it seems to me, two uses of "post-modernity." One refers us to the social and technological modernization that increases until it is qualitatively altered; the other refers to a radical critique of reason considered as alienating, a critique that would reopen our times to irrational values that are then supposed able to shake down the walls within which the "modern," seen as tyrannical imprisonment within the "rational" structures that gave birth to the horrors of the twentieth century, is then reputed to have deported us (Are reason, "rationality," industrialism, bureaucracy, high capitalism, Stalin and Auschwitz so obviously allied ? one may ask ...). Thus diversely and disputably defined, "modernity" logically generates various acceptions of the term "post-modern." It has been remarked that "modernity is a word that fascinates all ages. But [that] most of the time they do not know its contents, except for their anguish of the obsolete;"<sup>5</sup> as well, I might add,

4 *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, p. 44.

5 François Bott, *Le Monde*, 9 October 1992, p. 26.

as their refusal of what these successive tides have brought with them by way of disillusionment.

Modernity would then roughly define itself as a tension of the mind towards what Stephen Toulmin has called "horizons of hope," that can be revised over time, such "practical philosophy"—being called upon, in our days, to ease up a transition—and one that could do without any "post"—towards a new "phase of modernity."<sup>6</sup> As you know, Lyotard links modern thought to a unist or bipartite, at any rate functional, conception of society, society being gathered around one or two large metanarratives; he believes that the narrative function dominates the modern and all of his attention comes to bear, as he examines mutations, on the differences between systems of legitimization. Modernity could be reputed abandoned as soon as "the great narrative has lost its credibility, whatever the mode of unification it has been assigned: speculative narrative or narrative of emancipation."<sup>7</sup>

We would then enter post-modernity as soon as, "the work of mourning [having been] accomplished," the nostalgia of the lost narrative were itself lost for most people."<sup>8</sup> We all know what follows, in this logic, by way of generalized agon among "smaller narratives" according to Lyotard or "micrologies" according to Habermas, far indeed from any consensus, even should the latter be cleft; we also know the corollary of such evolutions as would then merely depend upon "plays or "moves" for, or "coups" over, discourse. This being said, there are enough averred uses of "modern" in the sense of "what denies previous certainties" not to distrust such far-reaching and all-covering declarations. The fundamental irony, when it comes to the use of this term, probably lies, short of a clearly defined object, in the mutual definition of "modernity" and "post-modernity; this remark also applies, as we shall see, to "modernism" and "post-modernism." Thus, André Gorz could declare that the thesis according to which modernity has come to a crisis

is the post-modern thesis, and essentially the French variety. But it proceeds from a truncated conception of modernity, born from twenty years of structuralist dogmatism for which individuals were non-autonomous products. Whereas modernity has nothing to do with the belief in progress or a sense of history, but above all with the powerful rise of the subject-

6 *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990), pp. 1-4.

7 *La Condition postmoderne*, p. 63.

8 *Ibid.*, 68.

individual who demands the right to define himself; which also implies that the meaning of his acts and of his place in the world is no longer guaranteed by a superior authority or a “natural” order. Max Weber’s interpretations, redeveloped by Habermas and, on another level, by Alain Touraine, now offer much more enlightening perspectives, inasmuch as they make modernity appear not so much obsolete as incomplete. Modernity is essentially a move toward—mostly cultural—emancipation and differentiation: the pursuit of the true, of the good, of the beautiful and the useful gain their autonomy vis-à-vis the power structure, and develop according to their own rationalities, calling for the differentiation of institutions and powers, a widening of all spaces of freedom?

And he adds that the industrialist paradigm, often mistaken for modernity, is rather a treason of it. Reading Valéry, one may see that the definition he gives of the modern has more than surface affinities with the term that is supposed to come in its wake: “And what constituted this disorder of our mental Europe?—The free coexistence in all cultivated minds of the most dissimilar ideas, of the most opposed principles of life and knowledge. This, he concludes, is what constitutes a modern epoch;” and Valéry is the one who italicizes the adjective in his text.<sup>10</sup> Which amounts to saying that the qualitative shift where “post-modernity” likes to recognize its birth might tolerate a few conceptual revisions and a vigorous semantic overhauling in order to have any chance at all of affording us an intellectual and social map that could help us in our analysis of the present and our explorations of times to come.

I shall come back later to the problems posed by the prefix “post” appended to the two distinct notions at hand, but it might be useful to say now that the least of its ironies is not hidden in the generalized process of scotomazation made possible by the notion of “break.”<sup>11</sup> That in an age dominated by the consciousness of metanarratives and organizing fictions, the “post-modern” should declare itself incapable of any satisfactory fiction, this may seem logical and acceptable, even if then things may look as if the very same role was now assumed by another and no less fictional fiction, one of absolute disorder. But that the “post-modern” should speak, as has been done, of the end of class struggle, ideologies and dialectics, or of the “post-modern collapse of ideologies” without taking stock of the possibility that such positions might themselves be a way of seeing and putting things that does away with what does not fit, in other words, another go at ideological moves, another

9 André Gorz, *Le Monde*, 14 April 1992, p. 2.

10 Paul Valéry, *Variété* (Paris: Gallimard, 1924), p. 18.

11 We are close, here, to the idea the United States entertains vis-à-vis its relationship to history.

ideology, and that such positions make it possible cheaply to ward off any dialectical process,—all of this makes me think of the picturesque central character of a recent work of fiction who declares his resolute hostility not only to universal gravitation but also, among others, to "the exiguity of the cranium, the weight of the foot, the farawayness of stars ..., the way bodily organs work, the obliquity of the ecliptic, the dumbness of fish, the brittleness of the collar-bone, ... the irreversibility of time [and] the distressing permanence of stone."<sup>12</sup> All of this also allows us, I think, to believe that the propositions of post-modernity are not necessarily innocent. As for me, I hold with such diverse men as Frederic Jameson, Charles Newman and Gerald Graff, that we would be wrong not to consider the utmost favors this very notion does to the powers that are.<sup>13</sup>

If such a notion as "modernity" has its deep roots in the French and German traditions, that of Modernism was assuredly, first and foremost an Anglo-American product, even if from the start it was used to designate an international, and particularly European, artistic movement that can fairly easily be placed in time. These differences of origin could however explain the reason why European "post-moderns" tend to explore a whole gamut of ethical and philosophical problems while American "postmodernism" stresses a variety of esthetic questions. This being said, the situation is not much clearer once we turn to the use of the term "modernism" (or of that to which it gave birth: "postmodernism"), not much clearer than it was in the preceding case. In fact, here as well, I would not rule out that moments thus opposing or succeeding each other derive their mutual definition from such succession or opposition. It is doing Modernism an immense favor to describe

12 Furne, in *Le Caoutchouc, décidément*, by Eric Chevillard, Editions de Minuit, 1992, p. 18.

13 Such is not my direct concern here. But Jameson (*Post-modernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso), Graff, "The Myth of the Post-Modern Breakthrough," in *Literature Against Itself* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 31-62, et Newman (*The Post-Modern Aura*) do not have much trouble designating the objective complicities linking the socio-economic system prevailing in our rich countries and a kind of thought that lets the market regulate value and the economic sphere pocket the surplus value that results from the culture of differences. It seems to me, furthermore, that the present American multiculturalist theme is a kind of agitation and protest with which an "establishment" convinced of the benefits of "divide and rule" can be perfectly content. By shifting protest onto the superstructural plane of the identity of ethnic and social groups one leaves the field perfectly free for economic forces that so thrive on the sale of the signs of difference that they have always encouraged it. Veblen, please come back !

it in the cursory and fairly monolithic way we do when we need to distinguish it from what is reputed to have followed.

Linda Hutcheon's book, *A Poetics of Modernism (History, Theory, Fiction)* is, from this point of view also, extremely interesting.<sup>14</sup> Theoretically informed, competent, detailed, balanced, honest, it is in my eyes the most serious, clearest attempt at theorizing "postmodernism;" it does not however help me escape my conviction that the object it attempts to define has far less coherence than the label endeavors to give it—up to and including its own contradictions. Still, the corpus it banks upon is neither such nor so large as to justify on its basis that one generalize processes or distinguish a dominant aesthetic mode. Indeed, some of the authors that belong to that corpus are a few light-years away from the notion they are used to establish.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, it would be easy to reproach Professor Hutcheon a few symptomatic errors: she, for example, attributes to Jerome Klinkowitz, whose post-modernist militancy, more gutsy than theoretically inclined, is no secret, the paternity of an expression ("the self-apparent word") whose real father is no less a Modernist than Vladimir Maiakovski.<sup>16</sup>

The two dominant features of this book may however help us circumscribe our problem: on the one hand, Linda Hutcheon must frequently demonstrate—against the grain of her programme and as if against her better judgment—that the characteristics she assigns to modernism are also present in the movement reputed to have followed it; on the other hand, the most frequently recurring term in her book is that of "contradiction." Perhaps this work, because of its very lucidity and precision, will someday enter critical history as the main moment in the burial of a concept that it discovers to be non-functional after having carefully examined the evidence at hand, far from the incantatory or self-proclaimed prophetic "studies" that, preceded it. One is struck by the abundance of "ex post facto" definitions of modernism ("it comes to be seen," "potential..."..) used in order to constitute an object which does not exist in the global way the title of the book announces, by the

14 London: Routledge, 1988

15 To present David Lodge et Malcolm Bradbury as by and large "postmodernist" really seems to me, considering the writing mode of these two eminently respectable and enjoyable authors, an effect of uncommon wilfulness... But then, Linda Hutcheon places irony among the brand-new tools of "post-modernism." The concept seems thereby to inherit a retroactive power of stupefying proportions...

16 *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 44.

numerous passages where "modernism" and "post-modernism" stand in mutually balanced definition: "modernism" being everything that "post-modernism" can no longer bear to be, and "post-modernism" being what "modernism" never was—or was not yet, depending on whether one privileges antagonism or successiveness—for all that, it never proves possible to draw clear lessons from differences that seem to operate on the basis of permanent sliding and overlap. May I therefore ask the reader to wonder with me about the efficiency of two Procrustean beds characterized by the elasticity of their dimensions? about the very possibility of a new oxymoron which would invite us "comfortably to cleave in two"? It is, at any rate, thanks to similar legerdemain that, no doubt moved by her desire to be precise and intellectually honest, Linda Hutcheon feels compelled to describe "post-modernism" as "oedipal in its opposition to modernism and faithful to it by filiation,"<sup>17</sup> giving from that point on free rein to a systematic use of an expression that is central to her book: "paradoxical postmodernism." Just as the "New Novel," as we perfectly see today, had no real unity outside of its common refusal of an obsolete realist mode, just as Valéry gave for Symbolism a definition based on its practitioners' common refusal of other poetic approaches, we could, borrowing a little of the biting irony Dr. Samuel Johnson was so fond of, say of such a theoretical "post-modernism" whose center would be everywhere and circumference nowhere, what he said himself of Gray, that he was "boring in a new way and that people therefore thought him great."

Nothing, if we examine what could constitute the specificity of "post-modernism" relatively to what follows it, is of a nature to indicate in any obvious way that the caesura can be demonstrated to have been as radical as one prefix would have it by dismissing the past so neatly. When Brian McHale, in his very interesting book, courageously runs the risk of proposing an operational distinction (Modernism is supposed to have had epistemological concerns whereas matters of ontology preoccupy its successor), one thinks immediately of enrolling in the service of the opposing thesis a certain number of contemporary American writers, among which Joseph McElroy, Don DeLillo or Thomas Pynchon are extremely present in the ongoing epistemological reflexion, and one has trouble imagining Joyce or Proust refusing that we see in their own

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.



literary practice a number of important ontological dimensions, from epiphanies to modes of temporality and being.<sup>18</sup>

One fact, however, remains, that explains part of the confusion: Modernism's other name is diversity; it covers practically all "isms" from Cézanne and Henry James to T.S. Eliot and Faulkner and mixes into a nebula of often interfering lights Cubism and Dimensionism, Futurism and Surrealism, Simultaneism and Unanimism; and I, for one, cannot see that the atoms were that crooked between Ezra Pound and Paul Eluard or Vachel Lindsay and Wyndham Lewis, or that the dialogue must have been easy, in spite of certain appearances, between Guillaume Apollinaire, Hart Crane and Malevitch. Often contradictory within itself, Modernism does not seem to me to be a particularly commodious foil to define a contrario what it might not be, unless one erase the specificity of artists regrouped under this label and thereby, of course, lose all and any usefulness, beside anecdotal. After all, "postimpressionism," to take only one example, was only known as such long enough for differences and particularities to appear that were to make its use no longer possible. This is why, just as "modernism" is a catch-all tag that only believers in a somewhat tardy type of literary history could possibly love, we can hardly be astonished that the concept of "post-modernism" as one of its most famous proponents, Ihab Hassan, promoted it for some time, be wide and vague enough to accommodate any textual phenomenon that differs in some way from the most conventional "realism" (if we consider of course that there ever was such a thing to begin with, one that could be illustrated by writers presenting any interest at all, since all good writers and artists escape the definition in one way or another).

Under such conditions, it can be little else than what has been called "zeitgeist post-modernism" in order to underline its vagueness and compare it to Mannerism according to Hocke, that had such a wide "definition" it no longer had any useful or enlightening critical potential,<sup>19</sup> or to such "Romanticism" as gets devalued into the weepy sentimentalism that is used as objective correlative for after-drinking speeches. In our days, the baroque is indeed threatened with equally abusive reductions and generalizations. Eclecticism, a sign under which "post-modernism" is always hastily lodged, happened to be, for Valéry,

18 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987).

19 This is what William Johnston does in *Post-modernisme et bimillénaire: le culte des anniversaires dans la culture contemporaine*, tr. P.-E. Dauzat (Paris: PUF, 1992).

a distinctive trait of the period we now know as "modernist": "In a given book of that period [1914]—and not among the worst—one finds, effortlessly: an influence of the Russian ballet—a touch of Pascal's somber style—quite a few impressions of the Goncourt type—a little Nietzsche—a little Rimbaud—some effects due to the frequentation of painters, and sometimes the tone of scientific publications."<sup>20</sup> The definition of "modernism" or "post-modernism" as a desire to manipulate all pasts and mix all discourses while equalizing them finds itself all the more relativized, as well as one of the most secure uses of the term "post-modernist": that of Charles Jencks which saw "post-modernism" appear in architecture in the mid 1970s, at a time when architects played with classical motifs and thereby denied them any particular status. Jencks even saw, coldly, in the phenomenon, a "post-positivism;" which does not do anything, it seems to me, to overrefine and overnuance definitions....<sup>21</sup>

If we agree that after the great disillusionments suffered by the West because of the First World War—particularly in the United States where idealism had widely presided, at least for the population, over entering the war—a situation in which many saw that gods and dreams were dead and all faith in man shaken, as F.S. Fitzgerald put it, was propitious to hypostasizing Art into an absolute and ultimate value, then we do indeed confer a certain unity upon an artistic period. But by the same token we should then forbid ourselves the use of the term that defines it to refer to any production that came before the event supposed to have given it birth as well as to any other chronologically following the moment when a Nazi officer asked an orchestra of Jewish skeletons to play Beethoven's "Pathetic" for him. It should also invite care in the measurement of the rhythms and differences in evolution, from one artist to the other and even, within the production of any single one, from one work to the other, prudence in overgeneralizing a label that no creator ever used without the tongs of inverted commas. Let us recall the smile with which John Barth, in his essay on "The Literature of Exhaustion," unduly considered by some as "post-modernist manifesto," as it is far

20 Paul Valéry, *Variété*, p. 19.

21 Charles Jencks, *Post-Modernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987).

from being that, talks of "post-modernism" as a place where you are either "admitted to the club or clubbed into admission."<sup>22</sup>

Linda Hutcheon's book, outside of the fact that it often uses indiscriminately "post-modern" and "post-modernist," like most writings on the subject, insists on the impossibility of risking any sort of generalization about the phenomenon. I am quite ready to admit it would make the period in question dear to my heart, since I am more inclined to studying particularities than to wielding global discourses; but if "post-modernism" must thus be defined as a sort of anti-generalizing posture, the terms I used myself before--critical intelligence or a sense of nuance—I will stick, if you please, to.

As for Lyotard, as he "explains the postmodern to children," he declares good naturedly that "it belongs to the modern," adding, probably to make sure that there remains no ambiguity in our minds as to limits and frontiers, that "a work cannot become modern unless it is postmodern first" and that "postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end, but in its native state, and this is a permanent state."<sup>23</sup>

You will probably have understood already that I am not certain it is indispensable to explain the postmodern to children, not only because it would be disastrous to destroy the innocence of umpteen tow-headed ones in this field, but also because I would not mind it if some of them eventually became interested in literature, and finally because I feel unable to despair over the future or the idea we entertain of it and that helps one grow up. Probably more concerned by the mirth of little ones as well as by the responsibilities that are ours, my friend Guido Almansi, in a brief facetious article entitled "The Post-modern bean" also notes that "post-modernity" is "a very entertaining intellectual find, with which we can play for hours as long as we don't believe a word of it," and he insists in a way that not only delights me but allows me a transition to my further remarks that "the danger is not so much believing in post-modernism as in its brilliant future."<sup>24</sup>

Because such, it seems to me, are the stakes of the *complacently prolonged* use of the prefix that occupies us. This is where ethical and aesthetic questions mix, between which two appellations are torn. Well

22 John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *The Atlantic*, 220, 2: 29-34, 1967.

23 P. 28. "All that is taken for granted, should it date back only to yesterday (*modo, modo*, Petronius wrote), should be placed under suspicion."

24 *Fabula* (Lille), no. 1, p. 136.

enough if the denunciation of a reputedly guilty mirror stage is provisionally followed by a sort of "Lego stage." If the pause indicated by the hyphen after "post" were not so long as to indicate a break away from Modernism and vectorize itself as elsewhere and as becoming—whether it be the consciousness of a necessarily "updated" Modernism (Hutcheon) or one pushed to the limits of its logic ("most modern," Christine Brooke-Rose calls it) or again lost forever (lost modernism, maybe), we could sit back and think it over a while. As a transition, we could understand, as William Johnston explains, that "because there is no longer a dominant style or conviction, it is possible to arrange in striking configurations elements borrowed from all former styles and convictions."<sup>25</sup> We could agree with him that "the postmodern position offers among other attractions that of promising openness, flexibility and the absence of all censorship, [that] it seduces intellectuals that no longer aspire to give a form to the future" and that "among other inconveniences, [it] suffers from a lack of coherence, a lack of precise direction and an inability to generate the least consensus, [that] because it is alien to all passionate commitment, "post-modernism" can literally mean all and anything for everybody, [that it is] a climate that no longer imposes any norm."<sup>26</sup> But one cannot—I cannot, at any rate—avoid seeing in this phenomenon a manifestation of what Thomas Kuhn describes in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* when he analyzes the temptation there is "to prolong the crisis by institutionalizing it," and that in order to get out of this one as from others, a will might be applied to a different set of attitudes.

The problem posed by the prefix "post" as I read it, is not only that its essentially chronological nature contradicts and betrays what usefulness "post-modernity" and "post-modernism" themselves might have: *i.e.* the possibility of reading in a new light works of the past, thus recuperated *ex post facto* and redynamized toward their being chalked up to the greater glory of the present; it is not only that its linear features bring it close to a teleological vision of the evolution of artistic forms gainsaid both by its lack of faith in all projects and its advent on the corpse of all vanguards (even if lots of modernists had already abandoned them); it is not only because its peripheral adaptation to other terms in order to flesh

<sup>25</sup> William Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

out the "post-modern" (humanist as in "post-humanist" or realist as in "post-realist") occasionally gives birth to lexical monsters which only the circumambient banalization of knee-jerk expressions and shameless unprincipled languages prevents whomever hears them to die of laughter or sadness (do you remember the cretinous sumptuousness of "post-contemporary"?), it is also and above all, as far as I am concerned, because of its vacuity and self-complacent intransitivity, when we know that obviously, "any position that gets its name from what preceded it carries along with itself a whiff of planned obsolescence."<sup>27</sup> There is no shame in finding oneself in a transitory situation, no shame in wanting to explain it; it may be more disputable to hang on to or even wallow in it. Even though I am far from claiming exceptional pedagogical gifts for myself, I would appreciate it if I could be granted that this way the prefix "post" has of inviting us to "back our way into the future"<sup>28</sup> does not encourage one to "explain the postmodern to children," should one inscribe all desire to educate in a project for the future. After all, even my explanations might convince the kiddies, and that is a risk I do not want to run.

The prefix "post" may not be designating anything other than a crisis of memory and imagination. A period that no longer knows how to invent its own future and contents itself with waiting for it still proves capable of inventing the reasons why it should not dare invent. Wounded in its capacity to conceive the radically new, it deploys all its intellectual and sensitive energies to convince itself that it even escapes all ultimate relativization of its assertions and failures by historical perspective. In order not to be judged in these terms, it not only delivers a radical critique of history, just one more metanarrative among others, but, having brought to light in a most positive way its fictional status, it does not even bother to follow its own rules by trying out the "discursive move" of its own fictions of history. Be things as they may, the end result consists in the evacuation of all dialectical vision, that is precisely the only violent poison which "post-modernism" and "post-modernity" cannot resist. What matters most is to keep the contradictions in place and to make sure nothing is attempted to overcome them.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>28</sup> This expression is Toulmin's.

Linda Hutcheon has understood this so well that she gives her last chapter entirely over to this question. If, "in such diverse fields as art, literature, research, advertising and politics, "post-modernism" distinguishes itself by the fusion of previously incompatible styles, doctrines and methods,"<sup>29</sup> this is because the hyphen that follows "post" settles one comfortably away from refusals and choices (always costly in courage and efforts), atop the soft consensus made possible by the abrasion of judgment and the relegation of all value to the shameful attics of "elitism"—as one says when one speaks PC, this natural child of the intellectual dehierarchization brought about by the "post-modern," and that one does not understand, or is, should I say, cerebrally different—in the very place where litotes feather intellectual cocooning and where a lazy forefinger can leaf through the new catechism or the new catalogue of received ideas. In the "interval," in other words, a place Daniel Oster defines as being that where there is "no central life, no roots, nothing that persists, except the power to become other. And thus consciousness goes from form to form, scattering on its periphery a mode of thinking that remains non-existent in the center."<sup>30</sup> Discourses of truth are sent packing, which is excellent, but only to benefit a generalized relativism that does not threaten them because it does not act otherwise and proclaims it is, indeed, ultimate itself. For Valéry, modernism was the consciousness that it is impossible to relativize without loss; for "post-modernism" one must relativize everything in order not to lose everything, even if that means that relativism becomes an absolute. Please, don't smile.

"Post-modernism" wallows in its waiting station and raises a small voice that tells us: "This century just won't end. In order to know where we're going, why don't we wait for the next?"<sup>31</sup> or "I don't know where we're going, but we're not getting there." Behind this voice, one overhears an infinitely more pained one, moving and beautiful, that of Robert Lowell saying: "In our unfinished revolutionary now, / everything seems to end and nothing to begin." Second hand store, garage sale.... In such light, existentialism was a heroism! Thus do entire periods choose not to have a name, not having the energy. Thus, we might think, ours. There is no longer enough power running under the iron files to

29 As noted by William Johnston, *op. cit.* p. 11.

30 Daniel Oster, *Dans l'intervalle* (Paris: POL, 1987), pp. 155-6.

31 Such is the explicit thesis that underpins the analysis of commemorations in William Johnston's book.

give a shape to the spectrum. There is no vanguard, for our fighters are tired. Modernism had something Iwo Jima about it. Then there was Danang. In the realm of ideas, it's no longer the charge of the brigade, however light: there's a party at the PX, they're spooning up the last of the molasses and munching what remains. "Give me liberty or give me death"? no thanks: not at the precise moment when one has managed to approach the trough of the "cultural-industrial complex" (Johnston), when one is now a star in "po-biz" (Robert van Hallberg). Don't say "idea" or "daring." Say "post-modern." One walks very slowly towards the future on pseudo-labels in the form of crutches. If this is the way (are we dreaming !?) we discover that "what 'post-modernism' has discovered is irony" (sic, Hutcheon, p. 146); if the fine analysis of Charles Russell, according to which "the major contribution of "post-modernism" will have been to recognize the fact that "any system of meaning in a society takes its place within the whole of semiotic systems that structure society and confer to this system its own social validation," if this analysis, then, must be jeopardized by its non-application to the very phenomenon concerned; if the post-modern comes down, institutionally, to an academic bonanza made for cultists of a tinkered "new" that makes it possible to dissimulate under wooden language, conceptual stenography and psittacic discourse the finessing of all and any question of value; if it is revealed to consist in a strict abandonment to the logic and demands of merchandise; if it renounces all questions of real power; if it is a refuge, if it is for today's criticism what his blanket is for Linus, then, indeed, no, I can't see that it is indispensable to "explain the post-modern to children." Too many things depend on them. And one may be too much in love with dissidence to be satisfied at the dissolution of margins and the banalization of difference. Such is my case.

\*\*\*

Such is the case of someone who spends his time reading contemporary American fiction in order to try and discern relevant forms there and who does not find that the concept of "postmodernism" has ever been, for that purpose, very useful to him. If I may sum myself up: 1) I am not sure there is such a thing as "post-modernism"; 2) should it exist, and as that eighteenth-century curate would answer when asked what he

thought of sin, "I'm against it" and 3) and most important, it never helped me understand anything.

First, I don't think it's true that the most representative artists of our time have abandoned all hope, as we are told. The narrowness of the scope of the literary corpus used by the theoreticians of "post-modernism" could suffice, in my view, to explain the superficiality of their conclusions. Having no longer at hand any manifestoes—precisely because it's been a while since the most important writers have understood things no longer work this way—one would need a little more than the eternal quoting of the selfsame works in order to be able to compose sharp enough a Galton photograph. The only literary "manifestoes" linked in any way with the question of "post-modernism" to . . . manifest themselves during the most recent period in the United States have been either so general as to be more welcoming than the exercise usually allows (the three prefaces to the collections of stories published by the first version of the "Fiction Collective," for example)<sup>32</sup> or read wrongly and subsequently amended (such is the case of John Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion," followed by that on "The Literature of Replenishment," in which any association with "post-modernism" was humorously rejected), or again a kind of exercise in mutual and local promotion (I am thinking of the published correspondance between Ronald Sukenick and Raymond Federman which later inspired the journals *Black Ice*, in Boulder, and *Blatant Artifice*, in Buffalo); the other "manifestoes" available (Tobias Wolff's introduction to the volume *Matters of Life and Death*, in particular,<sup>33</sup> but also introductory texts to the now defunct journal *Between C & D*) either repudiated the notions and principles underpinning "post-modernism" or gave a hip, quasi commercial version of it. So that, a great variety of aesthetic choices being available, it would be particularly awkward to frame the situation by means of a definition which would leave outside of its field of application the most vivid, creative and innovating products of American literature these last thirty years. It is not so much that creators have become incapable of launching "styles that could impose a profile on their time," as William Johnston fears;<sup>34</sup> it is much rather that personali-

32 *Statements I* (1975), *Statements II* (1977) and *American Made* (1986).

33 Wampeter Press, 1983.

34 *Op. cit.*, p. 16



ties are numerous and powerful and that the hour has indeed come of a struggle opposing diverse modes of fictional arrangement.

"Not giving a shape to the times," as the *sub rosa* proposal of a theorized "post-modernism" would have it, is indeed, to tell the truth, what no writer of fiction can afford, the acceptance of some sort of "narrative" or other being at the center of his or her enterprise. And in order to determine the relative value of numerous ongoing attempts, it might be more precious to examine the functioning and logic of precise texts than to cover them up with a thick, smothering layer of terms that we should then, supposedly, use the texts to "illustrate": "indeterminacy" (in a meaning Heisenberg could not make heads or tails of), "loss of identity" (one would have thought it had been the order of the day in the so-called "literature of alienation" of the 1940s and 1950s), "entropy" (a term that assuredly contrasts with its uncommonly creative exploitation by its restorer: Thomas Pynchon), "death of the novel" (we've already given, and Barth makes no bones about giving us a few illustrations of the feeling that range between 2000 BC and the 18th century...). Where it can be seen that even when it is a matter of trying to adapt the most recently devised concepts ("deconstruction" or "episteme"), the critical treatment to which these terms are subjected brings us back tirelessly to hackneyed thematics and acquires most rapidly as heavy a positivist mode as that in which the "myth and symbol" school of the 1950s and 1960s lost all possible use. A kind of crazed pragmatics seems to come over the minds of critics and theoreticians who want absolutely to placate over the texts of a period an intellectual set of tools that was devised elsewhere and for entirely different purposes.

The difference between what a mostly European reflexion on "post-modernity" may contain in terms of philosophical substratum and what the study of a putative "post-modernism," mostly in the United States, may contain in terms of aesthetic questions could be explained, very simply, by differences linked to cultural history. Against a background of rationalism and skepticism, relativism goes mostly of itself. American "postmodernism," in contradistinction, could be the *in situ* discovery of what a fideist and pragmatic culture had so far largely ignored or scotomized, even though it went pretty much of itself elsewhere. American "post-modernism" would thus deploy itself further from ethical preoccupations for the very reason that it is against the background of a long imposed ethics that a liberation of forms eventually came about.

For all that, the definitions and analyses of works as "post-modernist" most often fail to convince. Even when the game does not merely consist in taking refuge behind the ready-to-think of automatic labels and references in order not to have to handle the dirt and grease of real, and always singular, texts, even when a literary analysis is made, more and more often, more and more generally it is possible to guess before the book or article is open what modish clichés will be found recycled in the columns or between the covers at hand. *Con todas las salsas*, so to speak, but rarely twangy or tasty. Mostly and desperately institutional, in fact, and in spite of exceptions that are all the more admirable for being rare. Essentially to reduce "post-modernism" to historiographic metafiction, as Linda Hutcheon does, invites a simple question: "why not call it historiographic metafiction"? To say, with Harold Bloom, that the work of John Ashbery is eminently "post-modern" is one thing; to read under his pen that he is perfectly able to distinguish in this work the best accomplishments from the failures, is also one thing; but it would be quite another to explain why; it would also, probably, be the only interesting one.

Any suffix in "ism" hypostasizes and takes us away from the works themselves; any label affixed more or less wilfully on a work only substitutes synecdoche to analysis and allows all ancient recourses to the most hackneyed discourses of literary history. "Post-modernism" does not escape that rule and therefore finds most naturally its place in a perspective of classification and order that its theoreticians would have it deny. Talking of "postmodernism" in today's literary critical discourse in the United States does not help us in anyway to understand the triumphs and the failures. The most one can achieve, then, is some sort of verification that this or that text fits or suits the expectations of the prevailing theoretical vulgate. The latter makes blind a criticism which can now hardly do any more than offer a pre-arranged grid of discourse on lease to works in progress that cannot help it, than grope around to make sure the right codes, the right reflexes and the right references can be found in the right places. Three blind men wanted to describe an elephant.... You know the joke.

Whence the comprehensible confusion, in the minds of many, between, on the one hand, works said to be representative of "post-modernism" as it pre-thinks itself, inasmuch as they allow one to recognize the expected, even if such works are not very powerful, and on

the other, works that are sufficiently powerful to resist classification, in which case, of course, such knee-jerk criticism is completely at a loss, having made it impossible to speak outside of expected channels and illegitimate to react outside the beaten notions. Whence the failure to distinguish between experimental or pretentious gadgetry that makes sure it pays homage to prevailing "posts" — signposts?—even if, as in many cases, this means indulging in the most modernist of typographic work and old-hat stream-of-consciousness—and those who, in order to make themselves a name do not need any kind of label.

Linda Hutcheon frankly says that she does not want to enter the debate over the relative value of the works."<sup>35</sup> But I guess, and suggest, that the essential part of the debate lies exactly here. By neglecting oppositions and their validity, "post-modernism" forbids itself any dialectics, any move beyond the image it has of itself. By negating relative values, the criticism of "post-modernism" even forbids us all access to the specific quality of that image. Thus, practically no literary example chosen by Linda Hutcheon as particularly "representative" fails to evoke a more or less ancient precedent, from Rabelais to Nietzsche, without it being even necessary to borrow from more recent harmonics. Thus one forgets—or ignores—such obvious truths as Francis Ponge reminded us of: that, for example, "the capacity to destroy presupposes one's full mastery of rhetorical means," or that "the most radically terrorist of poets is that which best masters the instrument, the "artifices," the most "learned," in other words," that there is no "radical innovation without a certain amount of historical lucidity, [that] historical knowledge and technical knowledge go hand in hand, [that] they are indispensable to any iconoclast who aims at minimal efficiency and historical credibility."<sup>36</sup> To collect the tenets and confessions of a self-proclaimed "post-modernism" in order to make of them the stuff of "post-modernism" itself does not constitute, a priori, a very great intellectual risk. It would be one, however, to expose oneself to a few self-evident truths; for example, if E.L. Doctorow and D.M. Thomas constitute in Linda Hutcheon's eyes the most blatant examples of "post-modernist poetics"—and if this is indeed the case, modernism can sleep on both ears—neither Stanley Elkin, nor Joseph McElroy, nor Alexander Theroux, nor

35 *Op. cit.*, pp. 48-49.

36 Quoted by Jean-Marie Gleize in *A Norr, poésie et littéralité* (Paris: le Seuil, 1992), p. 182.

Guy Davenport, nor Annie Dillard, nor William Gaddis, nor Grace Paley, nor Paul Metcalf, nor, even, would you believe it?, Donald Barthelme—I quote haphazardly and omit a few dozen—find a place in Ms Hutcheon's index. And if Samuel Beckett and William Gass appear fugitively, it is in order to designate them as inveterate modernists, side by side with Kafka. As an indication, I refer you to a sentence in the article by Guido Almansi I quoted from earlier: "Beckett is the living proof that there is such a thing as post-modernism."<sup>37</sup> If such a list of essential names can deliberately be left out of the description of a tendency that would define our times, one can legitimately ask—if not, "Post-modernism, how many divisions?—at least whether the tendency in question has any place, usefulness or reality. Labels have a decidedly low productivity and Geoffrey Hartmann was not wrong to describe criticism as being "in the wilderness," even if such was not precisely his intention.

But fortunately, as bear witness the few names I have just named, the poetic word, as for itself, continues to be born, caring little for taxidermists, and goes on making us understand that one should not ask the poet for his identity papers. As for me, I hold that he or she who constantly brandishes them would be better inspired to write on sheets that better speak for himself or herself, and that the promoters of ready-made expressions that invite them to do so, thus making them prisoners, would be better inspired to accompany the works in their freedom rather than to see in them the battle field for institutional fights wherefrom the struggle for power is not absent, thus betraying the very source and aim of the works in question. Poetic words are always unique. When hastily distributed labels make them one, they invite them to resemble each other, and thereby to lose part of their power, pertinence and urgency. Modernism has been described as an artistic moment when art was changed into a sheltering value. It is a sorry sight to see that the dominant use of the expression "post-modernism" invites one to see in what it subsumes the art of finding a shelter away from risky value choices. Furthermore, on the one hand, literary art conceived as a resistance to the abrasions of language and as exploration of the fictions that might give a shape to the world by inventing a language able to speak it remains the instrument of a quest on which our very own lives depend;

37 *Fabula*, no. 1, p. 135.

on the other hand, it befalls criticism and creative intelligence to indicate directions, to examine possibilities, to look into the world to come.

As Valéry wrote, "everything is not false in what was abandoned. Everything is not true in what reveals itself," and the reexamination of tradition by a lucid artist is more innovative than the fleeting howls of a talentless rebel.<sup>38</sup> Because I share this conviction and because, to that extent, as I hope I have explained, the heuristic power of "post-modernism" seems extremely low to me, I absolutely refuse, just because the prevailing doxa might seem to require that I consent to do so, grossly to make up the faces of living texts that I love and in which I love to read both our present condition and the promise of times now germinating. I still believe, as did a famous "post-modernist" who was describing our "Babel, city upon city, continent over continent, a compressed and shrunk, or stretched out world, bouncing like a new rubber ball," that "in our age of giant machinery and speed-shaped men we need a little music. We need sons of Homer to roam the world and impress upon this howling havoc a rhythm that make it less frightening."<sup>39</sup> His name was John Dos Passos, this was 1922 and he was still writing well.

38 "Autres Rhumbs," *Tel Quel, I* (Paris : Gallimard, 1943). p. 151

39 *Orient-Express* (Monaco: Editions du Rocher, 1991), p. 274.