

Book Reviews

Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen, 1987. 264 pp.

I am sitting in front of a blank black screen writing my first line, and yet the PC tells me that I am at line 6. My letters are green on black, and those you read are black on white, a good enough reason to start arguing whose reality is more real. My now is two days past the deadline (Sorry editors, it's only you and I who know about it. I've tried to call you but the line went dead!); your now is for me future unpredictable. And I, who am both real and fictional, am sitting in front of a blank black screen writing my first real line on Postmodernist Fiction: "Descriptive poetics" McHale calls his book, I--post/modernist fiction catalogued.

(Prof has just walked into the office, looked at my introduction, nodded and left. Isn't that a good enough reason for introducing him into this discourse? Sure, but since he was in a hurry I'd better let him go and bring him back later).

I erase what I've just said and start anew:

Brian McHale's study does not claim to be a contribution to literary theory, but should be understood as an elaborated register of motifs and strategies in postmodernist text-production. This much said requires an explanation of the term "postmodern," which in McHale's book eludes any firm definition, and disperses into the views of fiction writers and various theorists. The postponed meaning foregrounds the ontological questions to the detriment of the epistemological ones. Postmodernist fictional practice is thus reduced/elevated to the demands of Peircean pure rhetoric: the interpretation of a sign (and the postmodernist text is a sign of the postmodern) is not a meaning, but a sign which has to be interpreted, and so on ad infinitum.

Before systematizing motifs and devices of postmodernist poetics, McHale discusses the discursive construct "post-modernism" which he deconstructs with Ihab Hassan, ascribing to the prefix "the element of logical and historical consequence rather than sheer temporal posteriority" (p. 5), and to the suffix, an organized system. Thus postmodernism, elusive of meaning, gets its meaning assigned, despite the fact that it is a post- without a pre-. McHale would have been much better off with Lyotard's definition of the postmodern as "that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself,"¹ as this definition would make it easier for the author to include modernist texts with postmodernist features in his corpus. To give an example: Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons (1914) is both modernist and postmodernist according to McHale, and even John Fowles's The French Lieutenant's Woman is catalogued as a postmodernist work of fiction on the basis of "Fowles'"s intrusion into the text and the multiple ending of the novel.

If, as he has clearly indicated, McHale's aim was to write a descriptive poetics on the basis of so-called postmodernist features and strategies in contemporary fiction (and it cannot pass unnoticed that he is a connoisseur of Anglo and

Latin American, British, French, and, to some extent, German fiction), this raises the problem of the number of traits a work of fiction must have before it can be labeled postmodernist. As the answer is a fiction par excellence, it points to the postmodernist insistence on howness before whatness, leaving an empty space for the answer, thus allowing for a multiplicity of readings.

McHale's approach to postmodernism through a catalogue of texts is in itself not new. He refers to previous works by Lodge, Hassan, and Fokkema and understands the method as one of "the most insightful and interesting treatments of postmodernist poetics" (p. 6). Whether the same statement is applicable to McHale's work is to be decided by the individual reader. Whichever the case, the study offers a thorough discussion of the relation between worlds and words which is always lively and engaging. Its weakness, however, lies in the author's apparent belief that the larger the list of works, the more postmodernist traces are justified, which only transforms the study into indexing contemporary fiction. When, for example, discussing the carnivalesque, the author does not abstain from using a whole page enumerating works which in his view share this particular trait. (A glance at p. 173 or a good number of footnotes would best illustrate the point.)

This criticism by no means aims at denying the many positive aspects of McHale's study: systematization and elucidation of textual strategies and a thorough (at times excessively so) exemplification. The notion of the postmodern, however, has not shown any impact on the author's own discursive practice, which could be understood as his affirmation of the nonexistence of the notion of the postmodern outside fiction. To exemplify: the schizoid text is a multiple-

Prof, it's about time to
bring you back. This
project of mine is taking
me too far, agree?

Prof.:()

column text which through its form
approaches the notion of
simultaneity. This textual
strategy, also practiced by
theorists like Kristeva, not
only problematizes the notion
of temporality or spatiality,

but points to the complexity of the mind and the world(?).

Doc 1 Pg 4 Ln 1. Black, blank, an abyss...and I Exit