

Introduction: *PoMo's Wake, I*

Charles B. Harris

Postmodernism is dead. Long live postmodernism.

Although PoMo's wake has dragged on for several years now, the corpse remains suspiciously lively. Like Barthelme's *Dead Father*, it continues to walk among us, not only prompting frequent sightings (a new novel by Barth here, one by Federman there) but producing offspring, another generation of novelists whose fiction, while bearing clear family resemblances, has staked out new directions of its own—following in the wake of the wake, as it were.

The title of this two-part *ABR* focus is intentionally ambiguous. On the one hand, it points to the oft-reported (and greatly exaggerated) demise of postmodernist fiction; on the other hand, it refers to PoMo's progeny, those works which follow PoMo as a genuine successor fiction, what John Barth calls "the next best thing."

Both its supporters and its detractors have warranted PoMo's death, but the latter seem to have attracted the most attention. They are the ones most likely to view postmodernist fiction as a diverting anomaly, an amusing guest in the house of fiction that has overstayed its welcome. Proclaiming its passing with an almost audible sigh of relief, they rush gratefully back into the arms of psychological realism, that staple of early modernism James invented at the end of the nineteenth century. Wendy Steiner, for example, explained her decision not to support Don DeLillo's PoMo masterpiece *Underworld* for the 1997 National Book Critics Circle Award by huffing, "I could no longer see why I needed to process 700-plus pages of esoteric 'in' jokes in order to see the meaninglessness of modern experience yet again" (*NYTBR*, 10 Oct. 1999). Like the majority of that year's judges, Steiner voted instead for Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower* (anyone out there remember it?), praised by Steiner for

its back-to-the-future "depth of feeling—for people, for language—that is intensely moving and satisfying." Equally satisfying for Steiner was the 1997 Pulitzer Prize fiction selection, Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, which Steiner commended for its "return to a more lyrical modernism." Déjà vu all over again?

Another influential critic who shares Steiner's enthusiasm for a resurgent traditionalism is James Wood. In his recent review of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, Wood applauds Franzen's resuscitation of the "novel of character," noting the "antique sensitivity" of Franzen's examination of human consciousness (*The New Republic*, 15 Oct. 2001). Like Steiner, Wood bashes DeLillo. "The DeLillo notion of the novelist as a kind of Frankfurt School entertainer, fighting the culture with dialectical devilry, has been woefully influential," Wood opines, "and will take some time to die." When Franzen stumbles, it's because he's not completely escaped his early hero's "tentacular ambition, the effort to pin down an entire writing culture." But the death of DeLillo's influence, like the death of postmodernism, seems assured to Wood, and with their passing, psychological realism—"the novel of intimacy, of motive, of relation"—can resume its dominance, unmarked by the periodic formal and thematic revolutions without which art has no history.

Fans of PoMo who believe nonetheless that its work has been largely completed and that it's time to move on to something even newer include Ron Sukenick, Larry McCaffery, and Michael Bérubé, among others. Unlike PoMo's detractors, who dismiss postmodernism as a minor tributary of narrative realism's main stream, adherents tend to regard narrative history as a divided stream, with transgressive fictions forming one of the major currents, what Sukenick calls the "rival tradition." As critic Patricia Waugh has noted, "[t]he term

‘metafiction’ might be new,” but “the practice is as old (if not older) than the novel itself.” Its emergence is “particularly likely,” Waugh continues, “during ‘crisis’ periods in the literary history of the genre.” Because conventional literary forms are complicit with other cultural constructions, however, the crises signaled by outbreaks of narrative reflexivity are more than merely aesthetic. Most likely to erupt when cultural consensus is eroding (postmodernist fiction emerged in the 60s), reflexive narratives suggest the possibility of new semantic systems. And “to change semantic systems,” as Umberto Eco once noted, “means to change the way in which culture ‘sees’ the world.” Viewed in this way, a primary historical function of narrative reflexivity has been to destabilize by foregrounding naturalized literary effects in order to critique the cultural consensus inscribed in those effects and to suggest the possibility of alternative definitions of “reality.”

Such fictions are necessarily difficult, posing special problems for mainstream reviewers facing short deadlines. Less accessible to the common reader as well, innovative fiction seldom turns a large profit. (At least not in the short run; in the long run, it’s the work most likely to survive.) So while conglomerate houses continue to publish a handful of well-known first-generation postmodernists (Barth, Pynchon, DeLillo, Coover, etc.) as well as a few important second-generation innovators (e.g., David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, William Vollmann, the late Kathy Acker), most transgressive fiction—along with most poetry, plays, and literary translations—has become the province of the nonprofit publishing world.

By contrast, novelists of an innovative bent who have been willing to redirect their efforts along more conventional lines reap significant rewards from the culture. Theirs are the books most likely to be selected by “serious” book reading groups, including

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Oprah’s—as Franzen recently learned to his chagrin. After writing two critically admired but economically insignificant novels, Franzen deliberately nudged *The Corrections* in the direction of greater accessibility. The result: vigorous pre-publication promotion by Farrar Strauss, extensive reviews, bestsellerdom, a National Book Award, rumors that the book’s a front-runner for the Pulitzer, and the Oprah selection. Franzen’s dilemma—he first poo-hooped the selection, then, after Oprah canceled the show devoted to his book, offered a lame apology—is as instructive as it is farcical: once a “serious” writer comes in contact with the corporate tar baby, it’s very difficult to pull free.

As Franzen’s early success indicates, these are also the books most likely to walk away with the major book awards, including the Pulitzer. Quick, can you name even half of the NBA fiction winners of the past decade? A hint: they don’t include Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* (1997) or Power’s *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991) or Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996) or DeLillo’s *Underworld* or Barth’s *On with the Story* (1996) or Vollmann’s *Fathers and Crows* (1992), most of which were not even short-listed for the award—and I’ve not even bothered to list the many deserving fiction titles published by nonprofits, since their chances of end-of-the-year recognition are virtually nonexistent.

Finally, these are the titles most likely to be adapted to film, which makes the entertainment conglomerates who own the corporate publishers as well as the movie studios and the television networks even happier. Of the five authors whose books are reviewed in this focus, two, T.C. Boyle and Chuck Palahniuk, have had earlier works converted into major motion pictures, and word has it that Franzen’s novel has already been optioned. By contrast, can you think of a single PoMo novel converted into film?

In the first of this two-part focus, we have selected recent books by novelists whose ages range from the early 30s to the early 50s, which places them in the generation immediately following first-generation postmodernist writers. With the exception of Jonathan Lethem, who, like the early postmodernists, continues to appropriate such popular forms as sci-fi, film noir, and comic strips for his novels, they are writers who early in their careers were associated with narrative innovation but who have recently moved in the direction of more conventionally serious fiction. Finally, they are writers whose books continue to be published by conglomerate houses, the ones most likely to encourage authors to aim their work at existing audiences (as opposed to writers of transgressive fiction, who must forge new audiences and new literary standards). In the next issue, we'll review new books by three original postmodernists (Barth, Federman, and Sorrentino) and several books by younger writers (Curtis White, Lily James, and others) who continue to move the old genre in new directions (and whose works, as a result, are often released by independent nonprofit publishers).

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