

Double Talk, Double Dutch, Dutch Chocolate

Even the editors of *Postmodern American Fiction* concede that as a principle of selection or classification “postmodern” is so nebulous as to be virtually without meaning except insofar as it signifies “fairly recent.” It can also mean “our gang,” but the gang in question can include almost anyone. The editors would have it that, “To a major writer and critic such as John Barth, postmodern American fiction is best represented by a well-established group of formally experimental authors who gained recognition in the 1960s: Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Richard Brautigan, Grace Paley, Donald Barthelme and Robert Coover most prominent among them.” If Barth himself cast his net so wide to recruit members of this “well-established group,” then his judgment is truly prescient of the era to come, in which “diversity” would become the last common ground. In any case, those six names do appear on PAF’s contents page, and probably represent an editorial consensus as to some irreducible postmodern minimum. Even so, Grace Paley would seem the odd woman out (or, here, in), since her stories are not notably experimental, even in their candid self-referentiality, which is rarely tricky in the manner of Barth or Philip Roth, but simply Grace-ful in an old-fashioned, tales-from-my-life way.

“Formally experimental” can serve as a qualification for postmodern status only if one forgets all the ways in which the modernists (not to mention the ancients) have anticipated most postmodern innovations, as represented in PAF. The popular cartoonists Lynda Barry and Art Spiegelman are represented here, but with work that is less innovative than George Herriman’s “Krazy Kat” strips of the 1920s. There is a cartoon version of Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*, by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, that isn’t a cut above the Classic Comic version of *Toilers of the Sea*, in a technical sense. As to inherent narrative interest, I’d have to give the palm to Victor Hugo. Other contributors to PAF offer innovations that pale by comparison to modernist works by Kafka, Woolf, Gide, Cendrars, Gertrude Stein, and, indeed, hundreds of others now known chiefly to modernist antiquarians—as, doubtless, most of PAF’s contributors will be known in due course chiefly to postmodernist antiquarians.

Review of Norton’s *Postmodern American Fiction*.

For if the postmodern pigeonhole is a shuck, so is the modernist pigeonhole. James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Thomas Mann, William Faulkner, and all the rest of the modernist Pantheon have as little in common as the politicians of the same era: i.e., celebrity and contemporaneity. Good artists are remarkable rather for their individuality and/or universality than for their adherence to a set of specs drawn up after the fact. The specs are drawn up for the use of epigones and camp followers, and that is surely the case here. The elder presences in PAF are writers of distinction and wide popularity, such as Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs, Kurt Vonnegut, Ntozake Shange, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Toni Morrison, Joseph Heller, and Don DeLillo—all represented by excerpts from such well-known full-length works as *In Cold Blood*, *The Armies of the Night*, *Breakfast of Champions*, *Beloved*, and *White Noise*. (So, to anyone whose bookcase is already stocked with those writers, caveat emptor.)

The younger contributors, by contrast, offer fictions of often exiguous brevity that seem to have been written with the official Chicago Manual of Postmodern Post-style before them. Thus, an extract from J. Yellowlees Douglas's hypertext screed offers an impressive, if illegible, reproduction of a flowchart, and then two pages of the fustian being diagrammed. A sample:

When he looks at Jake

he realizes the utter impossibility of his ever having the words to tell him this.

He has no inkling of what they would even sound like.

Yet he knows

that the only person in the world who is going to break the news to Jake is sitting in his chair.

Last night, in the parking lot, a guy with a shitty Saturday Night Special had jumped him. When he found Luke didn't have a shred of fucking paper on him—nothing, nada—he was so disgusted he didn't even try to pistol-whip him. Now, looking at Jake's lips curling up around the tube in an attempt at a smile, he wishes he had fucking bashed his skull to kingdom come. Given him retrograde amnesia. Tossed the coroner another stiff for the fridge.

Readers anxious to catch more of Ms. Douglas's act can find it at the Norton Web site: <<http://www.wwnorton.com>>. I would submit that the same half-baked hard-boiled piffle, offered as a book, would find no takers and that it is only within the protective confines of the post-modern label that such stuff could see its way to print. But is Douglas

ever a member of the club and proud possessor of the official encoding ring! Her attached resume informs us the author, born in 1962, was “formerly director of the Program in Professional Writing at Lehman College, the City University of New York. Douglas is now director of the Center for Written and Oral Communication at the University of Florida, where she is also assistant professor of English. Her critical work on hypertext has appeared in journals and collections in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, focusing on the applicability of literary theory, narratology, and esthetics to hypertext environments.”

That is typical in its institutional bonafides of the resumes of the younger contributors to PAF, as the excerpt from “I Have Said Nothing” is typical in its choppiness and effortless inexpressivity of their style. When they are not writing botched genre, they favor lame stand-up comedy, as in this intro by performance artist Laurie Anderson (born 1947):

Good evening. Now I’m no mathematician but I’d like to talk about just a couple of numbers that have really been bothering me lately, and they are zero and one. Now first, let’s take a look at zero. Now nobody wants to be a zero. To be a zero means to be a nothing, a nobody, a has-been, a zilch.

On the other hand, just about everybody wants to be number one. To be number one means to be a winner, top of the heap, the acme.

To heighten the hilarity, Anderson accompanies the script of “Talkshow” (which is a section of “Stories from the Nerve Bible,” which is taken from her book of 1986, *Lower Mathematics*) with a picture of herself on stage in a white suit and mask.

Want more? Here’s some schtick from Mark Leyner (born 1956), who prefaces this excerpt from *Tooth Imprints from a Corn Dog* (1995) with a statement of intent: “My work isn’t animated by a desire to be experimental or post-modernist or aesthetically subversive or even ‘innovative’—it is animated by a desire to craft a kind of writing that is at every single moment exhilarating for the reader, where each phrase, each sentence is an event.” Like this:

I have programmed the television in my bedroom to awaken me, and at six o’clock I’m roused by CNN. I mute the news and telephone room service for a sweetbreads burrito and a thermos of black coffee.

Several lines of verse have emerged intact from my hypnopompic state, and I scrawl them on a pad before they can evaporate:

In a drawing room at Armani Kids,
I found the dead body of a policewoman.
I sucked her toe and she came to life.

There are also two fragments. The neo-Keatsian

Beads of mercury bubble from
the mouths of hemorrhaging androids . . .

and the evocative

Tooth imprints on a corn dog.

After momentarily considering revising the initial lines to read: “At a counterfeit hair-care products lab, / I found the dead body of a policewoman. / I sucked her toe and she came to life,” and then not (there’s something so much more febrile and chthonic about discovering this sleeping-beauty-in-blue at a juvenile couturier), I decided against incorporating any of this material into the poem.

These samplings are sophomoric not only in their humor (big words are thought to be innately funny; likewise, body fluids, brand names, and unfamiliar food) but in their a priori hostility toward all forms of life other than sophomores. The message of postmodernism (as of Dada, back when) is that the Past is an oppressive burden that is best dealt with by inept parody that will show how *dumb* the past was. Thus, Duchamps’s urinal; thus, Douglas’s *faux noir*. Such barings of the artistic bum have become rituals of the avant-garde by this point: Yoko Ono made a movie featuring nothing but celebrity asses. PAF is often the prose equivalent.

“Postmodern” may also be the literary equivalent for that favorite euphemism of the politically correct, “diversity.” Those parts of the introduction in which the editors explain why writers who are women, gays, lesbians, African Americans, or other hyphenates are postmodern in their very nature are classic persiflage and worth close study by anyone intending a career in academia. It all boils down to why the once marginalized Other should become the canonical Author, as she has in PAF. Admittedly, of the fifty-nine authors of fiction, a preponderance are still male (thirty-five men, twenty-four women), but of those twenty-four women, two are Asian American, three African American, three Hispanic American, and two Native American. (There are, additionally, four males in these categories.) This would suggest that women writers of color

might be sympathetically disposed toward postmodernism as an arena of equal opportunities, but bell hooks (born 1955) in her essay “Postmodern Blackness,” included in PAF’s critical appendix, expresses mainly her sense of grievance and exclusion:

The failure to recognize a critical black presence in the culture and in most scholarship and writing on postmodernism compels a black reader, particularly a black female reader, to interrogate her interest in a subject where those who discuss and write about it seem not to know black women exist or even to consider the possibility that we might be somewhere writing or saying something that should be listened to, or producing art that should be seen, heard, approached with intellectual seriousness.

. . . Music is the cultural product created by African-Americans that has most attracted postmodern theorists. It is rarely acknowledged that there is far greater censorship and restriction of other forms of cultural production by black folks—literary, critical writing, etc. Attempts on the part of editors and publishing houses to control and manipulate the representation of black culture, as well as the desire to promote the creation of products that will attract the widest audience, limit in a crippling and stifling way the kind of work many black folks feel we can do and still receive recognition. Using myself as an example, that creative writing I do which I consider to be most reflective of a postmodern oppositional sensibility, work that is abstract, fragmented, non-linear narrative, is constantly rejected by editors and publishers. It does not conform to the type of writing they think black women should be doing or the type of writing they believe will sell.

I daresay that bell hooks speaks in this essay not only for many African American women writers, but for virtually all writers who have been discriminated against by editors and publishing houses solely on the basis of whether someone might want to read their work. Innumerable times I have been crippled and stifled myself in the same way as bell hooks, and I agree with her that “postmodern thinkers and philosophers [should] constitute themselves as an audience for such work” and open up the field so that it will be more inclusive. It seems a pity in the light of such advocacy that the editors could not have opened up their own pages to offer us a sampling from one of hooks’s abstract, fragmented, nonlinear narratives. Her nonfiction whets my appetite for more.

My estimate of the amount of material included in *Postmodern American Fiction* solely to meet affirmative action quotas would be eleven out of fifty-seven pieces. As many more stories by writers of distinction or at least

with name-recognition value might be present for diversity's sake as much as for merit, and as many more again are by writers with solid post-modern credentials, such as William Vollman, Susan Daitch, and the nine other PAF contributors whose work is also to be found in *After Yesterday's Crash: The Avant-Pop Anthology*, edited by Larry McCaffery (1995).

The practical consequence of using an anthology as a means of achieving "gender and racial balance" may well be the opposite of what its editors intended, for the dead and elderly white males who make the cut are generally not editorial "discoveries" but recognizable brand names whose presence will enhance the book's general sales prospects—Pynchon, Burroughs, Barthelme, et al.—and whose blatant talent tends to overshadow those who made the cut by virtue of the quota system. And there is no middle ground between them, for the white male mediocrities who might have counterbalanced mediocrities of diversity don't make the cut. The result is a seeming gulf between Menu A and Menu B, visible to all and never to be mentioned aloud.

This gulf can absorb any amount of criticism, since the disparity between the two menus—between, that is, the books people actually have enjoyed reading and those they should have enjoyed reading but don't or won't or haven't heard of—is the kind of aesthetic scandal that is grist for the critical mill.

Critics are happiest with texts that allow them to display their full toolkit, texts that are either dense, opaque, or occluded, and so can only be traversed with a guide's assistance, or else seem stupefyingly simple, like Warhol's movie of the Empire State Building. As yet, there is little published fiction of the latter, minimalist tendency. Is this only because of the efforts of editors and publishers, noted by bell hooks, to "promote the creation of products that will attract the widest audience"? She generously allows as how she is not "the only black person engaged in forms of cultural production, especially experimental ones, who is constrained by a lack of an audience for such work." One could go further and say she is not the only person of whatever race, sex, or gender preference to feel such constraints, and that almost everyone already in the postmodern club she is anxious to join shares her frustration with editors, publishers, and the lack of attentive critics and readers.

The situation with regard to criticism must be especially galling, when the critics who should be paying attention so often prefer to write about Elvis and Madonna rather than (as she notes herself) about bell hooks. In PAF's concluding eighty-page "Casebook of Postmodern Theory" there is little apparent connection between the preceding 580 pages of fiction and what the critics are concerned with. Jean Baudrillard takes a keen

interest in Disneyland, but then he's French and can't be expected to read postmodern American fiction. The same holds true for Hélène Cixous, who does, however, mention Mallarmé, and cites Plato, Hegel, and Nietzsche, whom she excoriates for "the repression, repudiation, distancing of woman; a murder that is mixed up with history as the manifestation and representation of masculine power" in a footnote of only three and a half lines. The opening scenes of the excerpt from Cixous's *Stories: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out, Foray* will be an inspiration to all students who've been required to buy PAF as a required text (and that is surely the book's *raison d'être*), for they are a model of how, postmodernly, to finesse any term paper or exam:

Where is she?

Activity/passivity

Sun Moon

Culture! Nature

Day! Night

Father! Mother

Head! Heart

Intelligible! Palpable

Logos! Pathos

Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress.

Matter, concave ground—where steps are taken,
holding- and dumping-ground.

Man

Woman

How is one to answer this new, non-hegemonic style of discourse? Donna Haraway (born 1944), an American theorist who teaches at the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California in Santa Cruz, offers her answer to that in a key passage from *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. (In PAF this title is footnoted, in part: "Research was funded by an Academic Senate Faculty Research Grant from the University of California, Santa Cruz." The footnote goes on to trace the complex evolution of Haraway's manifesto to a paper delivered at Barnard in 1983.)

Representation

Simulation

Bourgeois novel, realism

Science fiction, postmodernism

Organism

Biotic component

Depth, integrity	Surface, boundary
Heat	Noise

And so on for twenty-seven more dichotomies, concluding with:

Sex	Genetic engineering
Labour	Robotics
Mind	Artificial Intelligence
Second World War	Star Wars
White Capitalist Patriarchy	Informatics of Domination

It would not be fair to oppose the mind-privileging language of White Capitalist Patriarchy to a schemata inspired by a feminist-Lacanian discourse, so let me reply in kind to Haraway, Cixous, and the triad of editorial personnel engaged in the issuance of this cultural product:

Masculine	Feminine
He	She
They (male)	We (female)
Atomic bomb	Hug
<i>New York Times</i> bestseller list	Hug

Double talk, double dutch, dutch chocolate
Postmodern, Hostess Cupcakes, hostage taking

Hostage taking, not in the sense advanced by Sherman Alexie in his story in PAF, "Captivity," inspired by a seventeenth-century Indian captivity narrative, but in the sense that the many good writers in PAF act as a kind of human shield for the many more mediocre and lousy writers. None of these good writers are to be blamed for going along for the ride. New readers are born every minute, and what better way to find them than to have a chapter of one's most popular novel assigned as homework? Those who've already read it will be grateful to be spared the task, and among the vast majority who haven't some might want to read the rest of the book. As to keeping company with no-accounts, it is an accepted ritual of literary life to share the podium with lesser luminaries, and so long as they can be counted on not to look cleverer, what harm can come from it? So, even with the inevitable turn-downs from those whose agents or publishers demanded bigger fees than Norton's advance would accommodate (and there are some odd omissions that that might

account for), a phalanx of A-menu writers would have been a snap to recruit. The rest of the seats would be as easy to fill as lifeboats on the Titanic.

In the *New York Times* of November 1, 1997, six scholars were asked what was the Most Overrated Idea of the present day. The philosopher Richard Rorty replied, “The first thing that comes to mind is postmodernism. It’s one of those terms that has been used so much that nobody has the foggiest idea what it means. It means one thing in philosophy, another thing in architecture and nothing in literature. It would be nice to get rid of it.”

Anyone required to read *Postmodern American Fiction* would surely agree.