

Post 6

25 November 2015

A Note to the Editors of *Supplanting the Postmodern*

There recently appeared the first-ever anthology of theories of post-postmodernism, entitled *Supplanting the Postmodern* and edited by David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris (London: Bloomsbury, 2015). The editors, who kindly included the first chapter of my *Performatism* book in the collection, accurately summarized its main points in a brief introduction and also made some critical remarks that I'd like to respond to here.

The first critical objections relate to the theoretical sources I use, namely Erving Goffman's frame theory and Eric Gans's Generative Anthropology, which they say are "problematic." Let's start out with Goffman. The editors write:

Methodologically, there is no reason why Goffman's work—basically, a schematic approach to communication and behavior influential in the social sciences—could not be applied just as easily to postmodernist texts or artworks as to performatist ones.

Methodologically speaking, of course, you can apply anything to anything else, so it's not quite clear what is "problematic" about this. For example, I can (and do) also apply deconstruction to works of art and literature that many people consider post-postmodern. This in itself doesn't make deconstruction "problematic." What makes deconstruction problematic is that it simply doesn't work anymore (or rather works too well)—you can deconstruct the main premise of a novel like *Life of Pi* in about two seconds without gaining any insight into what makes the novel tick.

Regarding Goffman specifically, his frame theory isn't absolutely essential to my argument. The point was to show that there is a theoretical tradition outside of poststructuralism that treats belief and framing as positive social factors instead of as starting points for an endless epistemological critique. This positive assessment of belief goes back to the sociology of Emile Durkheim and is also important for Gans and Girard. The reference to Goffman helps show that performatism is not some oddball idea floating around without a coherent intellectual tradition. However, it's difficult to operationalize Goffman's concepts—convert them into tools that can be used directly in literary analysis—and I didn't try too hard to do so.

Things are different with Gans. Generative Anthropology *is* crucial to performatism and the editors correctly wonder why a "transhistorical theory of language rooted [...] in the evolutionary prehistory of human beings should have taken on a sudden relevance at the close of the twentieth century." A closer reading of the summary of my first chapter reveals the answer, which I'll repeat here:

The originary ostensive scene, in which the human, language, and aesthetics are all made present, is hypothetical. My own, specifically historical interpretation of the ostensive is that it embodies the semiotic mechanism generating the new aesthetic better than any other competing monist concept. The ostensive, in other words, marks the becoming-conscious of the new epoch (p. 36).

Put in a less technical way, this means that I'm interpreting Gans's theory as an expression of a larger turn away from postmodernism and poststructuralism and I'm not very much interested in proving or disproving his paleo-anthropological assertions (I say this directly on p. 6, namely that "[neither] paleo-anthropological nor ethnological evidence [regarding Gans's hypothesis] is crucial to my argument"). Gans's main innovation, as far as I am concerned, is to ground Derrida's notion of *différance* in Girard's notion of mimesis, which marks a specific (and I think very important) historical development in literary theory. If it seems odd that I am unconcerned about the absolute truth value of a theory that I otherwise find useful, one should not forget that I am concerned here with *historical* truths, which are by definition relative and subject to change. The truth of Gans's theory (if it is indeed true) is that its concept of sign neatly embodies the switch from the postmodern to the post-postmodern.

The last objection made by the editors is typical of the resistance that I encounter from colleagues who have become so comfortable with post-structuralist methodology that they can't really conceive of any alternative to it (except as some kind of oddball attempt to diverge from established theory). The editors write that

it might be worth entertaining the possibility that performatism names neither a historical epoch nor a new style of art or literature, but rather a method of interpretation. Just as it makes sense to differentiate between postmodernist novels and postmodernist readings of novels, so too what Eshelman seems to offer is a series of performatist readings of works that could, in principle, be read through a postmodernist lens just as easily.

This objection arises because the editors appear to view postmodernism as an endlessly self-renewing form of culture and my challenge to it as mere "method of interpretation" that arbitrarily posits something new. The suggestion is that I'm setting forth a new way of reading just to be different, and that this perspective can easily be neutralized by reading the works my theory treats using good old postmodernist methods (and arriving at good old postmodernist conclusions). In this regard I'm also not sure how the editors are able to

differentiate between “postmodernist novels” (which seem to exist entirely on their own outside of interpretation) and “postmodernist readings,” which presumably do not. Claiming that a novel is “postmodernist” or “performatist” necessarily involves an act of interpretation, and the question is whether that act produces useful results.

Seen this way, performatism is no more or no less a “method of interpretation” than is any other approach to literature. Performatism is however more than just a “method.” It is also a theory of literary history that provides concrete criteria allowing us to distinguish between postmodernism and post-postmodernism—something that postmodernist or poststructuralist theories can’t do because they literally can’t conceive of anything new that would not always already have been postmodern. Fortunately for the study of literary history, there are already four or five conceptual alternatives to postmodernism that share a set of similar core assumptions and can’t simply be written off as randomly generated “methods of interpretation” (for more on this see Post 4). The editors’ critique says less about performatism than about the posthistorical mindset of contemporary criticism, which is aware of massive shifts in the literary landscape but is unwilling to part with poststructuralist (postmodernist) methodology to describe them.