

Post 1

The Misery of Posthistoricism,

23 March 2015

If you start talking to any literary scholar today about what he or she thinks about post-postmodernism, you'll almost always get the same type of answer. First, they won't have any trouble agreeing that there have been pretty significant changes in literature and the arts in the last twenty years or so. In fact, they'll probably freely admit that postmodernism has become pretty predictable, and that something new is in the works. However, if you suggest that these pretty significant changes might be part of a consistent pattern that can actually be named, they'll quickly switch to an argument that sounds something like this: "Well, yes, hmmm, of course, but the situation is really hard to get a handle on, there's a lot going on out there." And, if you try to narrow the conversation down to a single author who you are pretty sure isn't postmodern anymore (because you've just spent six months writing a 10,000-word article on her), you'll get the reply "Oh no, she's totally postmodern—there's no doubt about it!" Further conversation reveals that your interlocutor, while keenly interested in new developments in literature and theory, doesn't have the slightest interest in parting with his or her poststructuralist methodology, which is in turn tightly intertwined with the postmodernism aesthetics that you're trying to overcome.

I've had this conversation with colleagues so many times that it's practically archetypal. The reason for this attitude isn't based on lack of knowledge or indifference (it's not that my colleagues don't know anything or don't care about contemporary trends in literature). The reason is that almost everyone in present-day academia has bought into a broadly defined, methodologically very comfortable position called posthistoricism. What is posthistoricism, then, and why has it become such a problem except to its countless practitioners?

When I started studying Slavic literature in the early 1980s, it was still common practice to talk about epochs or "epochal thresholds," especially in regard to (fairly) recent developments like the modernist avant-garde. The basic idea was that epochs are complex norm and value systems that have certain invariant, core aspects as well as many shifting, variant ones. We were aware that it was difficult to draw clear boundaries, but that wasn't really the point. The point was that understanding core aspects of specifically literary norm and value systems made it easier to talk about individual authors or developments that had no direct connection with one another, and it made it easier to make distinctions between writers at different stages of literary development. Nobody would "confuse" the way Pushkin writes with the way that Dostoevsky writes. However it's important to understand that Pushkin and

Dostoevsky (with all their idiosyncrasies) were neither lonely geniuses nor mere functions of discursive fields but were also shaped strongly by two very different literary norm and value systems called, respectively, romanticism and realism. Most of my posthistorical colleagues (even if they don't like the idea of epochs) wouldn't have any trouble agreeing with this, and in fact most scholars still use these notions when talking about literary developments before 1900 or so.

The problems start when poststructuralist (posthistorical) methodology gets tangled up with the period (postmodernism) that it is being used to describe. The conundrum goes something like this. Posthistorical thinking (which is itself of course has a history of its own—it started with Foucault in the late 1960s) denies that there are categorical slices of normative time called “epochs” relating to discrete systems like literature or art. Instead, it says that literary production is an effect of power relations governed by discourse, and that literary production is in fact intertwined with an awful lot of discourses (political, economic, medical, legal, whatever). Instead of being divided into temporal chunks (epochs) literature is spatialized, which is to say spread out among the many overlapping discourses that make up our social life. Discourse analysis of this kind dissolves literature as an autonomous system but at the same time shows how it interacts dynamically with all kinds of other things going on around it. There's nothing wrong with this kind of approach as such, and in fact it's enriched literary criticism and greatly broadened the scope of literary studies. (I've also used it myself, so I have absolutely nothing against it as a matter of principle.)

A Brief Excursus on the Term “Episteme” and Why We Should Stop Using It

What I've just described is the discursive approach to literature pioneered by Foucault. In his early phase, Foucault also proposed another, much more grandiose idea called the episteme (which he incidentally later dropped, for very good reasons). The episteme refers to a way of knowing that supposedly encompassed all forms of discourse in a certain segment of cultural development. At first this may sound something like the notion of an epoch. The catch here is that one episteme can't have anything to do with another—for Foucault there was absolutely no continuity between them. Also, the episteme is all-encompassing: it is supposed to apply not just to the arts but also to all forms of science, such as economics, biology, physics etc. Foucault made a very impressive case in *The Order of Things* (1969) for this kind of anti-historical thinking (it's a brilliant book). However this case crumbles pretty quickly at second glance. First, Foucault had to sweep a great many continuous chains of thought under the rug (Seán Burke has demonstrated this nicely in his *The Death and Return of the Author*, Edinburgh 1992, pp. 63-115). Secondly, beginning with the 20th century, it became increasingly difficult to know

enough about hard science to place it within a “way of knowing” that would also encompass things like art and literature (Foucault was smart enough not to even try it).

Foucault also made one very important stipulation: you can’t describe an episteme while you’re in it yourself. In other words, you can’t know your own way of knowing (to do so you would have to be in another episteme outside your own). If you take all this into consideration, the episteme is pretty much worthless for describing post-postmodernism. For one, we can’t describe the new episteme in full empirical terms (you would have to show how today’s economics, physics, and biology operate with the same tacit ways of organizing reality that art and literature do). For another, we can’t describe our own way of knowing (we would have to be both in it and beyond it at the same time).

In spite of this, the term “episteme” is still used a great deal by academics and has in fact entirely displaced the good old “epoch.” “Episteme” is, unfortunately, nothing more than a giant weasel word. It suggests that its user has an all-encompassing knowledge of knowledge (usually she just knows a lot about literature and maybe something about sociology or art or psychoanalysis). And, it suggests that its user is able to describe the way she is knowing from an outside position (which in the case of post-postmodernism doesn’t yet exist). The episteme also has other drawbacks if you take its original definition seriously. If you follow its logic, post-postmodernism would have to be an absolute break with postmodernism; it would represent a massive shift in discursive practice that stands postmodernism entirely on its head and is entirely unconnected with it. For all these reasons I’ve stopped using the word “episteme” entirely and returned to using “epoch” (and would advise everyone else to do the same). “Epoch” may not sound very fancy, but it has four big advantages:

- it focuses on literature (or other arts) as a more or less discrete system of norms and values;
- it doesn’t imply that you know everything about everything when you don’t;
- it allows you to make functional distinctions between old and new epochs. New epochs don’t have to be complete breaks with old ones; they can take formal aspects of old epochs and use them in new and different ways;
- you can apply the term “epoch” right away because you don’t have to have a complete overview of a “way of knowing” that encompasses all discourse.

But back to the problem of posthistoricism.

Posthistorical thought isn't just confined to Foucault. It includes such things as Baudrillard's notion of history wildly spiraling out of control or Derrida's definition of the event. As Derrida points out, any presumably "new" thing must necessarily always have been anticipated by the discourse of which it was always already a part (everything "new" must necessarily also involve a repositioning of something old). Then there is Lacanian psychoanalysis, which is ahistorical to begin with, or Deleuze's notion of virtuality, according to which different "sheets" of time overlap and actualize virtual images, or Hayden White's critique of historiography that reduces historical narratives to four alternating tropes; the list goes on and on. While these various versions of posthistory are not always compatible and sometimes mutually contradictory, they nonetheless form a vast, authoritative field of reference for most scholars today. Indeed, one great advantage of posthistorical thought is that you don't have to "worry" about epochs any more—they simply dissolve in the interplay of various discourses and previously existing chains of signs.

The problem with posthistoricism is not so much whether it is right or wrong. Rather, at some point it becomes part of a self-fulfilling prophecy. If history is either governed by overlapping sets of discourse, or if newness is always already anticipated, or if history is made up of wildly proliferating chains of virtual signs, then why bother trying to describe anything new in a systematic way when it can be readily assimilated to what already exists? This is, in fact, the position still taken by the majority of academics, and it explains the massive resistance to the idea of a new historical epoch that would be categorically opposed to postmodernism.

Posthistorical analysis would have gone on happily forever if it hadn't bumped into a *real* historical problem—the end of postmodernism. Around the year 2000 it had become clear to almost everyone that a) postmodernist irony was becoming predictable, annoying, and boring b) that there were a lot of new works coming out that didn't "feel" postmodern.

My reaction to this was to work out a set of concepts that would go beyond "feeling" and try to describe what these innovations were and explain them in functional terms, i.e. as literary devices. For example, the new kind of narrative was very often marked by closure, which is an absolute no-no in postmodernism (postmodernists think it sets us out on a totalitarian road to perdition). I tried to explain closure as one of several literary devices being used in a new way, not to promote totalizing authority, but to squelch postmodern irony and create an artificial frame in which things like love, belief, and transcendence could be experienced anew. The result was a historical theory called performatism which presented a clear conceptual alternative to postmodernism and poststructuralism (and which, as far as I can tell, has not set us off on the Highway to Hell).

Posthistorical thinking works in exactly the opposite way. Since it assumes that anything new has always already been anticipated by something old and that literary systems are governed by a wide variety of different discourses that spatialize and diffuse them, there was no great rush to address the problem of literary or cultural innovation. In fact, between the year 2000 (when my first article appeared) and the year 2008 (when my book on performatism came out), only two collections of essays on post-postmodernism appeared. In the first collection, edited by Klaus Stierstorfer, about half the contributors didn't even bother to address the question of post-postmodernism (they simply kept on talking about postmodernism as if it were still alive and kicking; Peter V. Zima, for example, wrote a prematurely optimistic essay entitled "Why the Postmodern Age Will Last"). A few of the contributors (Ihab Hassan, Vera Nünning) did actually allow for a possibility of post-postmodernism but remained vague about what it would look like.

In the second collection, which was edited by Andrew Hoberek and appeared in the journal *Twentieth Century Literature* in 2008, seven fairly young (as far as I can tell) scholars managed to completely avoid committing themselves to statements no more binding than "there's a lot of different stuff going on out there." In several cases, when it came down to brass tacks, it turned out some of them didn't really like the innovations connected with post-postmodernism at all (see Samuel Cohen's put-down of Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* for using—God-forbid—narrative closure). And, all the authors spent a great deal of their time and energy trying to reconcile the new developments as best they could with existing poststructuralist theory. What could have been a milestone in literary history turned out to be a gigantic posthistorical dud.

To give a concrete idea of how this works in practice, let's take a look at Andrew Hoberek's "Introduction" to the collection of essays entitled "After Postmodernism" that appeared in the above-mentioned *Twentieth Century Literature* special edition in 2008. The crux of Hoberek's posthistorical argument can be found in this paragraph:

"First, if contemporary fiction is indeed post-postmodern, this does not exemplify some singular, dramatic, readily visible cultural transformation—the search for which in fact constitutes a postmodern preoccupation—but grows out of a range of uneven, tentative, local shifts that in some cases reach back into the postmodern period and can now be understood in hindsight as intimations of a new order. And as a corollary, these shifts can be apprehended neither in wholly aesthetic nor wholly historical terms but only in the intersections of specific stylistic and historical phenomena" (p. 241).

Hoberek uses two concepts I noted above. The first is the postmodern, Foucauldian idea of the episteme (“a singular, dramatic, readily visible cultural transformation” that is a “postmodern preoccupation”). The second is a discursive concept of literature (“a range of uneven, tentative, local shifts” that “can be apprehended neither in wholly aesthetic nor wholly historical terms”). Hoberek quite rightly rejects the episteme (which requires a sudden, wholesale shift in ways of knowing that not even Foucault believed in anymore) and opts for the discursive model, which suggests a plurality of small, uneven, discursively governed shifts that can only be interpreted retroactively. Typically, he separates “aesthetics” or “style” (i.e., the study of literature per se) from “history,” which refers to the various discursive forces acting upon literature. Note that he does not think that “style” or “aesthetics” has a history of its own. Instead, “stylistic” and “historical” phenomena intersect in so many ways that they pretty much make any systematic or categorical description impossible from the start. The result is a posthistorical jumble of individual changes in literary practice unconnected by any sort of overarching pattern:

"If, as I have already suggested, American fiction has entered a phase of as-yet uncategorized diversity similar to the one that prevailed following World War II, then the proper response to this shift consists neither of assertions of postmodernism's continued relevance nor of sweeping declarations of a potential successor but rather of concrete analyses of literary form and the historical conditions that shape it" (p. 240).

On the one hand, Hoberek doesn't believe that postmodernism is “relevant,” but on the other, his posthistorical position keeps him from looking for something that might replace it. Instead, he would prefer to muddle through the literary present using “concrete analyses of literary form and the historical conditions that shape it.” (Note that “literary form” is dependent on non-literary, diffuse “historical conditions,” thus making it impossible to make any coherent statements about literary or epochal history to begin with.) The result is a more sophisticated formulation of the attitudes I cited at the beginning: “there’s a lot of stuff going on out there that’s hard to get a handle on” and “poststructuralist theory says we don't have to worry about epochal change anymore, so why bother!”

As long as this type of posthistorical thinking prevails there we won't make much headway in defining post-postmodernism. Fortunately, there are signs that things are slowly changing. Several younger authors have recently come out with books that acknowledge and describe functional differences between postmodernism and a “something after.” But that's a topic for another day. [For more on this see Post 4, “Theory Smackdown.”]