

Post 7: On Authenticity and Post-Postmodernism (Wolfgang Funk's *The Literature of Reconstruction*)

One of the many posthistorical strategies used to make post-postmodernism manageable for poststructuralist theory is to key in on the supposed “return” of modernist elements in contemporary literature. For if post-postmodernism (or what I call performatism) is really only modernism warmed over, poststructuralism will have no trouble treating it as a filiation, citation, or iteration of some already well-known pattern and subject it to its tried-and-true epistemological critiques. This attitude, incidentally, isn't confined to diehard postmodernists—there are also genuine theories of post-postmodernism that hedge on this issue. Metamodernism, for example, is said to be something new but at the same time “oscillates” between modernism and postmodernism (both of which are old). And, Irmtraud Huber's term for the new paradigm is “literature of reconstruction,” which means something is being constructed that was already there before.

One modernist concept that pops up frequently is “authenticity,” which is supposedly making a comeback in American literature. This notion is advanced most explicitly in *The Pathos of Authenticity: American Passions of the Real* (Heidelberg 2010), whose editors and authors treat the trend towards authenticity as a “revision of postmodernism” (p. 19). Authenticity, which was a key element in both modernist philosophy and literature, suggests that reality can be experienced directly in some special way by an autonomous self. The two examples that inevitably come to mind are Heidegger with his notion of an *Eigentlichkeit* (“actualness”) that is achieved by keying in on the time of one's own death and Hemingway with his unwritten macho code of honor that shows itself most fully in perilous borderline situations. Both assume that authentic experience is possible without explicit reflection and without being dependent on outside, conventional norms of behavior, and both favor a certain kind of self-contained, staunchly independent subject. Heidegger's dark phenomenological vision was however soured forever by his intellectual and personal proximity to Nazism, and Hemingway's macho persona and rhythmic short-sentence style are appreciated today mainly in parodic form. In postmodernism this kind of authentic persona became the target of relentless irony and skepticism and was replaced by a notion of self as endlessly contingent (dependent on the false signs and discourses around it). In the best of cases such a subject can be either acutely or playfully aware of its own weakness, dependency on false signs, and diffuseness—its inauthenticity— but not really be able to do too much about it except generate more critical irony or play.

Given this background it is noteworthy that a German scholar, Wolfgang Funk, has resolved to make authenticity the cornerstone of a new approach to post-postmodernism in his book *The Literature of Reconstruction. Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium* (London 2015). This involves a major overhaul of the concept of authenticity, which Funk says is now an “effect” that is “enacted in and through metareferential literature” (p. 2) in a process that he calls “reconstruction.” This serves as an interesting counterpoint to performatism, which also assumes that a binding combination of devices in the narrative and in the story (“double framing”)

produces a variety of positive, intensely felt effects (love, beauty, transcendence etc.)—the difference being that I do not consider them authentic (at least in not the way that the word was understood in modernism). Obviously, Funk is going to have to engage in a lot of fancy footwork to show that authenticity is operative in literature that works in metareferential ways—which is to say is mediated by highly manipulative and artificial narrative constructs that were utterly unthinkable in modernist philosophy or in the modernist literature of authenticity.

Funk begins by giving a brief, and not very generous, account of concepts of post-postmodernism, which are not exactly hard to keep track of (for more on this, see Blog Post Nr. 4). As readers of this website are aware, there are at the present time exactly four substantial books devoted to (American) literature by Huber, Timmer, Holland, and Moraru; my *Performatism*, which covers narrative genres, theory, and the visual arts; van den Akker and Vermeulen's wide-ranging meta-modernist website; Bourriaud's sketchy manifesto on altermodernist art; Kirby's book on digitization and culture; a speculative sociological study (Lipovetsky), and two socio-cultural treatises (Nealon and Samuels) that ramble on about all manner of topics without treating actual works of literature or art. Funk comments favorably on several of these concepts (most notably digimodernism and metamodernism) while giving a wide berth to performatism, which is not even mentioned by name. The reason seems to be that performatism is a bit too close for comfort: although rejecting authenticity as a criteria, performatism directly preempts Funk's concepts of metareferentiality, authorial authority, performativity, and transcendence. Since Funk—perhaps understandably—isn't very interested in engaging directly with a theory that resembles his own in numerous basic points, I thought I'd fill in the gap by vetting his notion of authenticity from my own peculiar point of view.

Funk, who is naturally aware of modernist authenticity's dodgy reputation, begins by giving the concept a thorough going-over in a chapter entitled "Eight Theses on Authenticity." Since authenticity is notoriously hard to define and has a long, convoluted philosophical and literary history, this is no easy task. Funk's approach (which is probably the only correct way to go about it) is not to take the many competing claims made about authenticity at face value. Instead, he undertakes a stringent epistemological review of their premises and arrives at a distinctly critical, belated perspective regarding the murky, semi-mystical claims that often accompany the term. I can't list all his conclusions here or treat individual ones in any great detail, but some of the most important are as follows:

- Authenticity implies transcendence: "In so far as it exceeds conventional frames of reference, authenticity comes with an inbuilt promise of transcendence" (p. 15).
- Authenticity is an effect created by formal means: "the only way to approach it is to address the formal procedures and methods by which the effects of authenticity are created" (p. 17).
- Authenticity implies performativity: "authenticity could be considered a performative concept, a simulation in so far as it postulates essence while eluding definition" (p. 17).

- “Authenticity presupposes and generates a notion of self” (p. 29).
- Authenticity is a “black box” which dissolves binary opposites in a higher order of things (“sublates discursive dichotomies” p. 55).
- Metareference (signals coming from the work that direct our attention back to how the work is constructed) is formally important in creating the effect of authenticity (p. 64).

Attentive readers will note that most of these criteria could be transferred almost verbatim to performatism. Here I’m not suggesting that Funk is unoriginal or a plagiarist. Rather, he arrives at very similar conclusions to mine in a different, conceptually exacting way—in a certain sense “proving” the same theorem regarding the nature of post-postmodernism using a different core concept and methodology. If we accept Funk’s massive redefinition of “authenticity” it would certainly be possible—and perhaps also quite productive—to think of literature after postmodernism in these terms.

Funk’s argument also involves an exhaustive new definition of “metareference,” which corresponds roughly to what I would call the outer frame. “Metareference” as Funk uses it means that narratives focus attention back on themselves in such a way that we experience what he calls “metareferential moments,” which are “imagined locations” within the work in which “the effect of metareference makes itself felt” (p. 87) (I would call these “inner frames” or “scenes”). In the case of the post-postmodern “literature of reconstruction” these “metareferential moments” convey a feeling of authenticity, which is necessarily dependent on inauthentic (metareferential) means to be experienced at all in the first place. The result is that authenticity and metareference work hand in hand: the reader exposed to them oscillates between “authority and participation,” “absence and presence,” “representation and a ‘secret beyond representation” (p. 106). I’m in complete agreement with this description (after all, I’ve said something similar using a different set of terms). Funk, however, goes one step further and supplies a typology of metareferential elements that consists of four points (display, location/direction, focus and effect) which break down into two further sublevels containing neologisms like “endo-,” “exo-,” “allo-reflective” and “alethiology” (p. 88). Readers willing to slash their way through this three-tiered jungle of jargon will probably find something of value, but it’s not easy going. Funk’s tangled typology in any event confirms my intuitive feeling that it was better to describe double framing as a general strategy and flesh out the details in individual interpretations—the whole thing gets incredibly complicated very quickly.

The crux of the matter is this: it’s no longer possible to experience “authenticity” in the way it was done in the 1920s or ’30s because postmodernist critical irony is in the way. (Try taking Hemingway’s macho heroes or Heidegger’s gloomy *Eigentlichkeit* seriously—you simply can’t anymore.) The only way to revive authenticity is, paradoxically, by creating an artificial—and I would add inauthentic—metareference or outer narrative frame that makes us experience “authentic” things like love, beauty, unity, trust etc. in a more or less involuntary way. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with using this kind of paradox to define a major concept like

authenticity. However, the use of a term that is peculiar to modernism to mark the cultural development after postmodernism makes that development seem much more backwards directed than it really is, and it encourages the posthistorical conceit that everything is just a continuation or intensification or “reconstruction” of something else that came before it. Also, “authenticity” (now understood as engaged in a paradoxical *pas de deux* with inauthentic metareferentiality) becomes inflated to the point where it almost doesn’t mean anything anymore. This is why I prefer a mildly provocative neologism (“double framing”) to the older concepts of authenticity, sincerity, and metareferentiality with all their excess conceptual baggage.

My own position is that performatism still interacts with postmodernism (whose norms are very much alive, though in decline) but that modernism as an aesthetic or philosophical source of value is dead as a doornail. Nobody—except maybe a few academic specialists—takes modernist truth claims, norms, or values seriously. To make modernist concepts “work,” they have to be subjected to the sort of intense critical scrutiny provided by poststructuralism or postmodernism. Funk’s project does exactly that: he can “revive” modernist authenticity only by transforming it from an essentialist concept into a metareferential, constructed one that would be unrecognizable (and unacceptable) to a 1920s- or ’30s-type modernist. While I’m in basic agreement with Funk on how he defines post-postmodernism—he comes to individual conclusions similar to mine, Huber’s, Timmer’s, and the metamodernists’—I don’t see any pressing need to fall back on a concept that has to be redefined from top to bottom to be of any use and that denies historical change in favor of “reconstruction” (it’s not clear to me what exactly is being reconstructed—it’s certainly not authenticity as modernism understood it). However, there’s no doubt that the basic problem marked by authenticity—how a more or less autonomous self can experience reality as directly and intensely as possible under certain given conditions—is also central to post-postmodernism.

How do we get out of the “return-to-modernism-trap” suggested by authenticity? One way is to conceive of authenticity within the framework of post-postmodernism is to turn to the old historicism, which is to say the study of history that makes categorical distinctions between epochs. In the old historicism, you were encouraged to make typological comparisons between non-adjacent epochs sharing similar essential qualities. Primary epochs like realism, modernism, and post-postmodernism make us experience reality as directly as possible and play down the mediating role of signs; secondary epochs like romanticism, symbolism, and postmodernism assume that reality can be experienced only through signs. The old historicism also suggests that this relation is dynamic and hierarchical. One such attitude doesn’t completely eliminate the other, but dominates it, pushes it into the background. These categorical distinctions would allow us to compare post-postmodernism to modernism and oppose it to postmodernism without suggesting a literal, ghost-like “return” of modernism and its practices or without turning “history” into the endless iteration of one constantly valid principle (such as authenticity). These kinds of historical opposition are however only possible if one allows categorical oppositions in the first place—something that is taboo in poststructuralism and that is rendered very fuzzy by phrases like “literature of reconstruction.” In the long run, the question won’t be

what post-postmodernism in literature is (there is already a solid consensus about it among the half-dozen or so scholars who have bothered to treat it in any detail) but whether we are going to open up to new methodology, names, and concepts or remain fixated on “reconstructing” old ones and “oscillating” between them.