

■ Twenty-First Century Free Narration

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Abstract

Since the mid-1990s postmodernism has been repeatedly declared dead. This article argues that those death notices have been premature. Postmodernism is still with us, both in its unadulterated form, and in fascinating combinations with other modes of narration. This interweaving of postmodern techniques with realist, modernist, magical realist or other modes resists easy theorization. That should, however, not stop us from recognizing the role that postmodernism plays in the sort of free narration that the novels in question represent and propagate.

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I. Recent Experimental Fiction

Postmodernism may have been declared dead, but the fiction of our new century certainly has not abandoned the experimental mode. As a matter of fact, even the death of postmodernism has been greatly exaggerated, to quote Mark Twain's reaction upon seeing a rather premature newspaper report of his departure from this world. One of the most famous examples of postmodernism's pertinency surely is *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Danielewski, a book that experiments with colors, with layout, with various fonts—in fact with virtually everything imaginable. *House of Leaves* is very much aware of the classic poststructuralist themes, such as language, origins, and authenticity, but is also deeply unserious about some of the high priests of poststructuralism, notably Jacques Derrida, who in a fake interview is not allowed to make a very convincing impression: “Well that which is inside, which is to say, if I may say, that which infinitely patterns itself without the outside, without the other, though where then is the other?” (Danielewski 361).

But it is not only its typographical fireworks and its use of poststructuralist themes that make *House of Leaves* an experimental novel. At its heart we find a detailed account of a documentary film shot by the film maker Navidson. Curiously, that account is the work of a blind octogenarian, a certain Zampanò, who cannot have seen Navidson's film and who perhaps not coincidentally bears the name of a character who in the mid-fifties disappears in Federico Fellini's film *La Strada*. To complicate things further, Zampanò's account is reconstructed from countless fragments by a down-and-out apprentice tattooist, whose own account of his unhappy past and his frantic social activities sometimes overwhelms the story of the film. But all of that pales, in terms of implausibility, next to the Navidson's documentary. First, when Navidson literally takes the measures of the new house he has just bought in Virginia, he finds that on the inside it is inexplicably larger than on the outside. But that is only the beginning. A new door appears overnight in an inner wall. All of a sudden another new door, now in the outer wall, between two windows, leads into a dark and long corridor that ends in an enormous hall with a staircase that would seem to wind down forever. From the outside, however, the wall appears unbroken. When Navidson, who is not fazed by any of this, explores whatever it may be that has attached itself to his house, he finds that it is able to change its shape, a process sometimes accompanied by a deep, unsettling growl. In *House of Leaves*, Stephen King, also interviewed at one point in the novel, meets Jacques Derrida.

Another radically experimental novel, which reminds the reader of the cut-up and paste technique employed by William Burroughs around 1970, is the

Dutch artist Paul Bogaers's *Onderlangs* (2007)—which translates as either *Along the Bottom* or *Via the Underside*. Bogaers's novel consists exclusively of sentences, groups of sentences and paragraphs taken from earlier Dutch novels, some of them prewar—easily recognizable because the spelling of the Dutch language was modernized after the war—and most of them either traditional detective novels or self-help books. Since Bogaers has cut, pasted, and then scanned, we actually have the original fonts, quotation marks or other indicators of direct speech, and so on. It is impossible not to be constantly aware of the author's hand, the more so since he obviously enjoys juxtaposing different styles and registers, even if he keeps a reasonably coherent story going.

A third recent novel that revels in showing us who is in command and that demonstrates a postmodern self-reflexivity is Jonathan Safran Foer's bestselling *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), which tells us of the magical ancient history of a small Ukranian shtetl, Trachimbrod, and of the hilarious trip through the contemporary Ukraine of an American protagonist called Jonathan Safran Foer who has come over to connect with his own family history in which the village of Trachimbrod has played a prominent role. In the interstices between these two story lines we find the heartbreaking letters to Jonathan of a young Ukrainian, Alex, who gets his English vocabulary mostly from a dictionary and who has an uncanny knack for picking the wrong term (as in the novel's title) from the list of possible translations that the dictionary provides.

Let me finish this very brief roll-call with a couple of rewritings—another staple ingredient of postmodern fiction. The old masters are still at it, witness Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), in which aviator Charles Lindbergh is elected president of the U.S. on the strength of his sudden fame following his solo flight across the Atlantic, or Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2007), which offers a wholly new explanation for the sudden collapse, in 1902, of the tenth-century campanile in Venice's Piazza San Marco. But a thematically far more postmodern rewriting of history—I will return below to this distinction between a formal postmodernism and a thematic postmodernism—is to be found in Kim Stanley Robinson's radical revision of world history in *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002). In Robinson's version of world history, Europe completely disappears from that history in the course of the fourteenth century because of an epidemic that almost completely wipes out its population. Its cities stand empty and remain empty. Interestingly, even with Europe permanently out of competition, Robinson's narrative fairly closely—far too closely, in fact, because the book is far too long—follows history as we know it. Here too, the Americas are “discovered”—not by the Europeans, however, but by the Chinese, landing on the West Coast. Unfortunately, they transmit the same diseases that in the history

we know, or think we know, were transmitted by the Europeans, even if in Robinson's history the native population of the Americas is allowed an infinitely better historical trajectory than it was allowed under European domination. As in "real" history, we get the scientific revolution, we get the industrial revolution, we get the formation of nation states and of great military alliances, we get a first world war, complete with trench warfare, and we even get the development of a nuclear threat. But all of this without Europe. Robinson's version of world history is the ultimate in anti-Eurocentric, postcolonial writing. In the world of *The Years of Rice and Salt* Europe is a *quantité négligeable*, wholly dispensable from the perspective of scientific and economic development—and, let me add, military destruction, because Robinson is not under the illusion that a world without Europe would be a world without war. In *The Years of Rice and Salt* Europe is an almost deserted backwater that over time is gradually colonized by an expanding Muslim population and its role as the driving force of modernization is effortlessly taken over by other civilizations.

As these examples will have illustrated, postmodernism is not dead. But there is also a new mode of writing that one hesitates to call postmodern even if the authors involved are clearly conversant with and influenced by postmodernism. Let me, by way of introduction, first look very briefly at a few recent novels, rather arbitrarily selected from a much longer list, that to my mind exemplify this mode. In Nicola Barker's *Darkmans* (2007), a brilliant 800-plus page novel—shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize—that is situated in the rather unremarkable town of Ashford, Kent, a growing number of inexplicable events suggests very strongly that the life, the being, of long dead seventeenth-century Englishmen intrudes on the life of some of Ashford's inhabitants. When one of the novel's protagonists, torn by doubt over his son's strangeness, has a paternity test done, he is positively unsettled by its outcome. The boy is definitely not his son, but the genetic material leaves open the possibility that the boy is his father's ancestor—"from ten—maybe eleven or so—generations back," as the lab's spokeswoman puts it (Barker 215).

In *The End of Mr. Y* (2006) by Scarlett Thomas, another English writer, a Ph.D. student discovers in a late Victorian novel the recipe for a homeopathic concoction that, in combination with a self-hypnotizing exercise, has the power to transport her to the Troposphere, where she actually has access to the minds of everybody who is physically close to her—without them being aware of her presence—and can even surf from mind to mind, with the thoughts and the memories of the mind she happens to visit functioning as links. Even before the adventures in the Troposphere get underway, we get serious expositions on Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, and others, perhaps to establish the credentials of the

research project of Thomas's protagonist. In *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001), by the Tasmanian writer Richard Flanagan, subtitled "a novel in twelve fish," we are supposed to believe that a down-and-out young Tasmanian, browsing in a local junkshop, finds a fantastically illustrated account of the incredible adventures of an eighteenth-century British convict, William Buelow Gould. When he finds it, the book gives off "an increasingly bright purple glow," and after our young Tasmanian has finished the last chapter, it dissolves in a "large, brackish puddle." Perhaps even stranger is that he reconstructs *Gould's Book of Fish* completely from memory—or is what we have really our young man's book, written or merely fantasized in a place where "they have taken [. . .] everything away now"? (Flanagan 4). The entry for William Buelow Gould in the Australian Dictionary of Biography makes clear that Flanagan's novel not only happily presents us with the impossible—with Gould eventually turning into a fish himself—but also rewrites Gould's personal history.

As I have just suggested, novels that unselfconsciously and more or less as a matter of course take us into the realm of the impossible are not rare these days. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) is a sequence of nested stories in which, as Mitchell himself has explained, all the leading characters, except one, are reincarnations of the same soul, identified by a unique birthmark. While *Cloud Atlas*, like a fair number of the novels I have in mind here, borrows from science fiction—the central stories are respectively situated in a high-tech dystopian future and a primitive post-apocalyptic world—and was actually shortlisted for both the Nebula and the Arthur C. Clarke Awards (apart from being shortlisted for the Booker Prize and winning a British Book Award), Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007) makes use of the mode of the noir, hard-boiled detective novel. But Chabon's novel would not be worth mentioning here if it did not do much more than that. Chabon drastically rewrites history. In 1946 Berlin has been wiped out by a nuclear attack, two years later the fledgling nation state of Israel has almost immediately after its declaration of independence been overrun by its Arab neighbors, and three million Central and Eastern European Jews, all of them still speaking Yiddish, have under the so-called Alaskan Settlement Act of 1940 found refuge in Alaska. However, the plot of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* revolves around a conspiracy at the center of which we find something perhaps even more puzzling, although more or less in line with what we have seen in the other novels that have just been mentioned: a contemporary figure who can actually work miracles (even if he is extremely reluctant to do so). If we step outside the Anglophone world for a moment, we find for instance *Kafka on the Shore* (2002) by the Japanese author Haruki Murakami, picked by the *New York Times* as one of the best books of 2005—the year it was translated

into English—and winner, somewhat amazingly, of the “World Fantasy Award,” although the novel does indeed offer a curious mix of dreamlike fantasy, inexplicable events, and popular culture—among the minor characters we find, for instance, Johnny Walker and Colonel Sanders, both in full regalia. It would, by the way, be incorrect to claim the use of what for want of a better word might be called supernatural material exclusively for the last ten years. In Australian author Tim Winton’s rollicking but also tragic family saga *Cloudstreet* (1991)—actually the saga of a house and the two families who are more or less condemned to live in it—a deeply mysterious “blackfella” keeps appearing out of nowhere and vanishes again in an equally inexplicable way.

II. The Modern and the Postmodern

How do these new novels, many of them by young writers, relate to the postmodern fiction that it reminds us of but that in spite of that does not seem to be the proper framework for classifying them? This is a question complicated by the fact that after thirty-odd years of critical debate postmodernism is still a contested area. We may, however, at least in the literary sphere, distinguish two main theoretical camps. For the first camp, postmodern literature includes the experimental writing of the 1960s, 1970s, and after—Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan, Ishmael Reed, William Gass, Kurt Vonnegut, Walter Abish, John Barth, Joseph Heller, Robert Coover, Kathy Acker, Paul Auster, and others. But it also includes many writers who are far less experimental and even writers who seem to work in a recognizably realistic mode. Among these writers we find representatives of the “New Journalism” of the 1960s and 1970s, and of the so-called “cyberpunk” science fiction of the 1980s and 1990s (William Gibson, Neal Stephenson), but the group is dominated by representatives of the post-1960s boom in Afro-American writing (Toni Morrison, Alice Walker) and in other “ethnic” American literatures such as native American literature (Leslie Marmon Silko, Sherman Alexie, James Welch, Louise Erdrich), “Chicano” and “Chicana” (Mexican-American) literature, Chinese-American literature, and other “ethnic” literatures.

For the theorists in the other camp postmodernism and realism, even a compromised or attenuated realism, are literary strategies that are so fundamentally at odds with each other that the two are wholly incompatible. For them, literary postmodernism by definition implies formal experimentation and innovation. What is more, in order to qualify as postmodern a novel or story must be experimental within a certain intellectual framework. What is at stake here is definitely

not the relative aesthetic merits of the fiction in question. For these theorists postmodern literature is characterized by a set of loosely related literary practices—specific strategies and devices—that work together to express a certain, ultimately philosophical, position, or perhaps it is more to the point to say that they express certain philosophical doubts. For the critics in the first camp, postmodern writing first of all reflects a new cultural condition, a condition that is the outcome of massive socio-cultural shifts whose beginnings we can trace back to the 1950s and early 1960s and that in the last forty years have transformed the Western world. This postmodern cultural condition is characterized by openness, flexibility, fluidity and a tolerance of indeterminacy wholly lacking in an earlier, modern condition. That modern condition was characterized by a deep-seated fear of uncertainty and undecidability, and was therefore always on its guard against losing control and against the threat of contamination. It protected itself from what it saw as anarchy by numerous boundaries: between the races, between a “male” and a “female” sphere, between social classes, between legitimate and unacceptable forms of sexual behaviour, between the sacred and the profane, between high art and popular art. Every infringement of those dividing lines was constructed as a threat to the natural order.

Under the postmodern condition, according to this line of reasoning, modern differentiation and hierarchization has largely given way to de-differentiation and to de-legitimation, to a situation in which the boundaries of the modern cultural condition have been dissolved or are ignored and in which former centres of power have lost much of their once seemingly unassailable legitimacy. As a result, the stable hierarchies of the modern condition have given way to an ever-changing socio-cultural landscape in which social and cultural hierarchies are provisional, temporary, and in any case always under attack. The involuntary silence of formerly marginalized groups has been replaced by a rainbow of voices: feminists, Native Americans, ethnic writers, same-sex spokespersons, and others now demand our attention from a clearly visible (and audible) position. (The fact that in the spring of 2008 an African-American and a female politician ended up battling for the Democratic presidential candidacy and that an African-American politician now occupies the White House—developments that were unthinkable only twenty years ago—suggests that there is much truth to this analysis.) Given their until very recently marginalized position, it is not surprising that these new voices are almost invariably politically oriented. In fact, they would seem to constitute a major counterforce to the perceived superficiality of the contemporary scene, a role that is not unlike that of the literature of high modernism, with its rejection of early twentieth-century consumerism, almost a century ago.

For the critics in the first camp, writing that reflects this new cultural formation counts as postmodern writing, even if it is not formally experimental or innovative. As often as not, it will deal with typically postmodern themes, such as language and identity, but even if it does not meet that condition, it will be considered postmodern because of its origins in the margin and its political stance. For the second camp, such writing only counts as postmodern if it actually distinguishes itself from earlier modes of writing—in particular realist and modernist writing—through its formal innovations. Such a criterion does of course not a priori eliminate the new voices of the last forty years. A good many writers representing those new voices have put formal innovation to excellent use, witness the fiction of for instance Ishmael Reed, Tony Morrison, and Gerald Vizenor.

Modernism

Modernist literature—from which I, at least here, expressly exclude the historical avant-garde—is very much preoccupied with how its characters experience their world. It shows us how the outside world becomes part of their inner world through a process of highly individual perception and interpretation. The great modernist novels all illustrate modernism's focus on states of consciousness and how consciousness allows us to be in touch with the past, both individual and collective, and thereby establishes authentic personal continuity. Moreover, although there is no guarantee of such a breakthrough in awareness, in many modernist novels that state of consciousness is at some point enriched by a flash of sudden insight that either leads to increased self-knowledge or else to new significance, new meaning. These moments of individual epiphany are of great importance in a modern world from which traditional, shared meaning has largely disappeared.

Modernist fiction is well-crafted, and although it portrays a world in which the continuities of an earlier era are seriously threatened and are already giving way to a more fundamental instability, it does not really reflect that new discontinuity in its forms. Coherence and continuity still provide the frame of reference, even if they can only be achieved with the help of a borrowed mythical framework, as in James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Postmodern literature is far less concerned with formal or aesthetic continuity and coherence. In many postmodern novels the narrative movement is not invariably progressive, but may at any point go lateral so that the narrative's structure is not so much developed, but rather added to in the manner of early picaresque fiction. In much postmodern literature, narrative energy and the sheer joy of invention take precedence over considerations of form. But apart from that, at a

more fundamental level, postmodern writers have given up on what the French theorist of the postmodern Jean-François Lyotard has called “the solace of good forms” (Lyotard 81). Postmodern writers strongly doubt that the world is coherent and in any meaningful way continuous and so refuse the suggestion that art, through its aesthetic harmony, or that the self, through the operations of individual consciousness, may create order where such order seems fundamentally lacking. The various sins against coherence and order that we find in postmodern texts may have their playful dimension, but they also point to an underlying view that differs sharply from that of the modernists. Postmodern writers are deeply skeptical of ideas of ultimate order and equally so of those luminous moments that bring understanding and significance. When Benny Profane, one of Thomas Pynchon’s protagonists in *V.*, is asked, at the end of the novel, whether he has learned anything in the course of his seemingly pointless meanderings, he immediately confirms our intuition: “Profane didn’t have to think long. ‘No,’ he said, ‘offhand I’d say I haven’t learned a goddamn thing’” (Pynchon 1962: 428). If epiphanies occur at all, they are framed in irony so that their status remains undecidable.

It is because of postmodernism’s abandonment of the defenses put up against chaos and meaninglessness by the modernists that its representational strategies can be so easily distinguished from those of mainstream modernism (a comparison with the modern avant-garde would of course give us a rather different story, witness the work of Gertrude Stein and others). As Linda Hutcheon pointed out some twenty years ago, postmodern writing characteristically is both referential and non-referential. With only a few (and rather uninteresting) exceptions, it presents us with two incompatible sets of reading instructions: we encounter textual elements that strongly suggest referentiality and create the illusion of reality as we know it (or possibly might know it), and elements that expressly counteract such an illusion and tell us that we are not dealing with any recognizable reality at all. To put this differently, we get textual elements that suggest depth and meaning and invite traditional interpretation, while simultaneously other textual elements will flaunt their distance from the world we know and ridicule interpretational initiatives. (Let me just remark—and leave it at that—that this way of looking at postmodernism offers an excellent vantage point for making a distinction between postmodernism and the modern avant-garde.) For readers unsympathetic to postmodernism, this dual strategy can only result in aesthetic and interpretational white noise. From a more generous perspective, however, a postmodern text sets up a dialogue between referentiality and non- or anti-referentiality, between realism and anti-realism, between historical verisimilitude and anti-history. It is both representational and anti-representational, and interpretation will depend on which side of that dialogue we prefer to hear (or

find more interesting), and on our intellectual response to postmodernism's preference for sitting on the fence.

Surface and Depth

As I have just suggested, the experimental elements and strategies that we find in postmodern fiction serve the purpose of calling our attention to the constructedness of the text in which they appear. Invariably, they have a metafictional function, exemplifying a narrative strategy that explicitly or implicitly uses the ontological boundary between a fictional world and the real world of the reader as a source of narrative and thematic possibilities. Explicit metafictional strategies include introducing the author into his or her own text, but also parallel—and mutually exclusive—developments in a story or novel that because of their very presence betray the author's hand. Implicit metafictional strategies include various forms of intertextuality but also rewritings of history and even a cavalier disregard for the laws of nature or logic that breaks the illusion of referentiality. In Thomas Pynchon's recent *Against the Day* (2007), for instance, travel from one Pole to the other is greatly facilitated by a direct connection through a channel so spacious that it even accommodates inhabitation. But such a strategy will only work if that disregard is incidental and not structural, in which case we would find ourselves in a different world altogether, and would be far less inclined to relate the fiction to the world we know. The point of postmodern metafictional strategies is to keep the reader going back and forth between illusion and reality.

Postmodern fiction oscillates between representation and anti-representation to offer us what may be described as a reality-check. It confronts us with the fact that we inevitably live within stories and tells us that we should not mistake these stories for the real thing. For postmodern writers, the great, overarching explanations of the world and its doings that were available to earlier generations—the explanations that Jean-Francois Lyotard has called "grand narratives"—no longer are believable. The comforts of Christianity, of all-encompassing philosophical systems such as Hegel's, of a Marxist future with an ultimately victorious proletariat, of the Enlightenment idea of an inexorable march toward reason and harmony, or even, at a far more mundane level, of psychoanalytic explanations or of a belief in a free market that will ultimately benefit us all, must be viewed with the greatest suspicion. All such narratives simplify the world in unacceptable ways. From the postmodern perspective it makes a good deal more sense to assume that there is no ultimate goal and that there is no underlying structure that determines the future or in unseen ways controls our lives. As Robert Coover's

Richard Nixon tells Ethel Rosenberg, only minutes before her execution, “We’ve both been victims of the same lie, Ethel! There is no purpose, there are no causes, all that’s just stuff we make up to hold the goddam world together” (Coover 436). The modernist model, in which what appears on the surface is the manifestation of an invisible, underlying structure—as, for example, in the Marxist base-and-superstructure model, or in Freud’s layered model of mental operations (the conscious versus the unconscious)—has therefore lost its credibility. “If you mean doing psychological studies of some kind, no, I’m not so interested,” Donald Barthelme said to an interviewer. “‘Going beneath the surface’ has all sorts of positive-sounding associations, as if you were a Cousteau of the heart. I’m not sure there’s not just as much to be seen if you remain a student of the surface” (LeClair and McCaffery 43). And Vladimir Nabokov, famous for his outspokenness (and unashamed aristocratic outlook), refers in one of his novels to Freud as “an Austrian crank with a shabby umbrella” (Nabokov 116). The simplifications that a grand narrative offers have obvious advantages, as the dwarfs in Barthelme’s version of *Snow White* realize only too well: “Snow White had added a dimension of confusion and misery to our lives. Whereas once we were simple bourgeois who knew what to do, now we are complex bourgeois who are at a loss. We do not like this complexity. We circle it wearily” (Barthelme 87-88). But intellectual honesty demands the disposition towards disbelief that most of all characterizes postmodernism. To signal their suspicion of grand narratives and modernist “deep” structures, which all tell us that there is an invisible reality—religious, philosophical, socio-economic, psychoanalytical—that is, in a sense, more “real” and “authentic” than the reality we see, postmodern writers deliberately create “flat” worlds or worlds that confusingly alternate “flatness” and “depth.” Although rarely simply mere caricatures, the characters of postmodern fiction are equally rarely the fully believable, seemingly authentic characters of modernist or realist fiction and usually oscillate between cartoon-like surface and humanist depth. Some postmodern writers choose to give their characters names that emphasize that status. In Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) we meet Pierce Inverarity, Mike Fallopian, Manny DiPresso, and a psychoanalyst not accidentally called Hilarius. The effect, in a reversion of our general approach to fictional characters, is that we do not take them seriously until the narrative invites us to do so, which it invariably does when switching to its referential mode.

III. Free Narration

Of all the novels mentioned in the first section only *House of Leaves* and

Along the Bottom follow the pattern of what one might call classic postmodernism in the sense that for the reader there is either a balance between representation and non-representation, between referentiality and self-reflexivity, or that the non-representational and the self-reflexive constitute the novels' dominant, in Roman Jakobson's use of the term. While the story of the Navidson house follows the first pattern, Danielewski's often facetious footnotes and much of *Along the Bottom* fall into the second category, which would also be true for much of for instance Douglas Coupland's *Jpod* (2006), with its deadpan narration of shocking events by a first-person narrator (who, like the other characters, appears to be beyond being shocked), with its elaborate numerical games, and with the substantial (and rather hilarious) part played by Coupland himself. However, in the other novels mentioned in section 1 referentiality clearly outweighs self-reflexivity. In Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, for instance, the shtetl of Trachimbrod may be unmistakably fictional and its history may equally unmistakably be fantastic, but it is drawn within a referential framework when it is destroyed by Nazi troops. The cold-blooded massacre of its Jewish population irrevocably turns it into history, in spite of all the fantastic events that we have witnessed; it becomes part of history as we know it. Even though inevitably mediated, the Holocaust is not a linguistic construct, but real. No matter how impossible some of the fundamental givens of these novels are, they mostly work with strategies derived from realist or—as in the case of Nicola Barker's *Darkmans* or Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*—modernist precursors. Their characters—even Navidson and his wife in the wildly experimental *House of Leaves*—are portrayed as the sort of autonomous subjects that poststructuralism rejected as a “liberal humanist” illusion. In fact, what we hear of Navidson's documentary suggests strongly that he only survives his final exploration of the seemingly infinite expanses that have attached itself to his house because his wife is prepared to sacrifice her life in a desperate attempt to rescue him. As a result, we have a straight, old-fashioned happy ending embedded in a deeply ironic larger framework. *The End of Mr. Y* offers a similarly happy ending, while *Darkmans* ends with the suggestion of a reconciliation between a deeply estranged father and son. Likewise, Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* and Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* offer happy endings—with Chabon not only restoring the latter's estranged and divorced wife to his protagonist, but also, in the time-honored hardboiled tradition, making him choose personal integrity over opportunism.

If realist and modernist techniques, and the liberal humanist subject are strongly dominant in novels that also display their familiarity with poststructuralist themes, and that employ clearly anti-referential, metafictional devices, what should we make of them? These novels are not realist, they are most certainly

not naturalist, and they are not modernist. A novel like Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* reminds the reader of magical realism, but characters such as Johnny Walker, Colonel Sanders and other anomalies fatally disturb that illusion. Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*, with its mysterious "blackfella," comes closest to magical realism and belongs because of that, and because of the strangely incantatory scenes in which a first-person narrator, who suddenly materializes, speaks to his characters—or would even seem to address history itself—not quite in the same category with the other novels mentioned here. But although these novels are not magical realist either, they are also not postmodern in the classic sense, even though in some postmodern novels we find similarly traditional characterizations. In for instance Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, Richard Nixon and Ethel Rosenberg seems traditional enough, but in the scene I have already quoted Nixon realizes that he has been only a puppet on a string: "We've both been victims of the same lie, Ethel! There is no purpose, there are no causes, all that's just stuff we make up to hold the goddam world together" (Coover 436). After this brief epiphany Nixon will go on playing what we now recognize as a role. But in the novels under discussion we never reach the point where what seems authentic behavior is unmasked as role-playing. In *Darkmans* and the other novels authenticity is once again a given and is never seriously questioned.

These novels would seem to be unclassifiable from the perspective of our usual taxonomy. Their mode is a sort of free narration that eclectically borrows from various traditions. It is a mode that is happily unconcerned with plausibility, even if its characters are plausible enough, and that freely mixes conventions while keeping its eye firmly on the referential shore it has set sail for. Free narration, if I may call it that for a moment, is of course not new, no matter how original its current manifestations. We have Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and other classics that similarly mixed conventions. But contemporary free narration would seem to range wider and to play with its constituent modes a good deal more exuberantly. The outrageous is without the slightest blush offered as fact. True enough, Kafka did not blush either in "Die Verwandlung" ("The Metamorphosis"), but his pessimism contrasts sharply with the affirmative undertone, sometimes even exhilaration, that we find in my examples of contemporary free narration. That affirmation also gives short shrift to the uncanny. While many of these novels offer uncanny moments and while we indeed occasionally encounter the cognitive dissonance traditionally associated with the experience of the uncanny, we do not find the outright rejection of the source of that experience that we expect. The uncanny is effectively neutralized by the strongly affirmative undertone that is never far away.

More than twenty years ago, Jean-François Lyotard theorized the postmodern in terms of Immanuel Kant's concepts of the sublime and the beautiful—or rather, in terms of his rather personal adaptation of the Kantian sublime. Central to the Kantian sublime is that when confronted with the incredibly large or incredibly powerful our imagination fails to cope. That failure, however, forces the mind to take recourse to ideas. The recognition that these ideas are indeed capable of handling both our perceptions and the emotions that those perceptions trigger, gives us the illusion of control and creates a sense of being uplifted. For Lyotard, postmodern art presents us with a confrontation with the sublime because it attempts to show the unrepresentable—that which we can conceive of but which we can neither see nor show. For Lyotard, the bottomless abyss suggested by postmodern writing—the infinite regression of meaning—functions as an instance of the sublime, be it a negative sublime. Since our ideas cannot very effectively counter the experience of radical estrangement that results from our confrontation with the abyss, this negative sublime cannot give us the sense of control and power that the Kantian sublime brings with it. Lyotard's experience of the sublime derives from our realization that we have reached the absolute limits of understanding.

I have characterized postmodern writing as alternating between anti-referential and referential modes. From the perspective that I have just sketched, it makes us go back and forth between the Lyotardian negative sublime and the Kantian beautiful—evoking alternately what Kant calls agitation and what he calls restful contemplation. But since there is no closure and we end up with undecidability, the overall effect of postmodern art is that of the negative sublime rather than that of the beautiful. While the novels that I have discussed here also remind us of the sublime, their presentation of potentially sublime material is neither Kantian nor Lyotardian. Although their excursions into the realm of the impossible and their hints of the supernatural keep the awe-inspiring and the unrepresentable in full view, their presentation of potentially sublime material does not inspire awe and it does not lead us to the abyss. It asks us to simply accept the incomprehensible, to sit back and relax in the company of the inexplicable. In these novels, the unrepresentable or the incomprehensible are merely a fact of life and do not inspire fear or elation. They may temporarily set up a tension, but that is the result of pleasurable anticipation rather than of a fear of the unknown and the tension is ultimately resolved in our recognition of the beautiful and the—in this case only fairly—restful contemplation that Kant ascribes to our experience of the beautiful.

There are, of course, a good many ways to theorize what I am calling free narration in this essay and I expect that the first books devoted to a mode of

fiction that no longer is postmodern but also cannot be classified in terms of our traditional taxonomy will appear before too long. It is, in any case, good to see that the daring, risk-taking, innovative and experimental spirit that characterized postmodern fiction is alive and strongly kicking, even it is no longer bothered by postmodernism's agonizing aporias.

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二十一世紀的自由敘事體

摘 要

從 1990 年代以來後現代主義一直被宣稱已經死亡。本文主張那些訃聞發得太倉促了。後現代主義依然健在，不只是以純粹的形式，還有與其他種敘事體迷人的混合。後現代技巧與寫實主義、現代主義、魔幻寫實主義或其他形式相互交織的情形不易予以理論化。但那並不足以阻止我們認識到後現代主義在本文所討論的小說裡再現與普及某些敘事體時所扮演的角色。

關鍵字：後現代主義，實驗小說，自由敘事體，雄偉的