

Re-Setting the Contemporary in the Postmodern Aftermath: Challenges to Traditional Periodisation and Literary History

CHRISTIAN MORARU

Résumé: *L'article poursuit le concept de périodisation dans l'histoire littéraire traditionnelle, en lui prêtant une dimension globale, «planétaire», à partir d'auteurs comme Gayatri Spivak, Paul Gilroy, et Masao Miyoshi. Je vais compter sur la notion planétaire pour définir le contemporain, mais pas avant d'aborder la question délicate de l'affaiblissement du postmodernisme. Certes, il y a des exceptions à ce phénomène. Mais je veux souligner la dominante mondiale documentée d'une manière topo-culturelle; il convient de souligner que cette planétarisation ou spatialisation planétaire s'impose comme une réalité définitoire du troisième millénium: notre temps est marqué par lui. Notre monde hyper-connecté a été ainsi «spécialisé», et aussi marqué par la spatialisation mondiale elle-même, qui porte sur la façon dont nous sommes en ce monde, ce que nous y faisons et ce que nous en faisons de lui.*

Keywords: *Postmodernism, literary history, planetarity*

My focus in what follows is essentially time – time, in a dimension that is both historical and intellectual. Specifically, what interests me is periodization. More to the point still, what I ultimately zero in here is the *contemporary* as a shifting category currently messing with our timelines and the literary-historical narratives derived from them as we are arguably witnessing the passing of postmodernism and with it perhaps the transition to something else. In a line of thought traced by critics like Gayatri Spivak, Paul Gilroy, and Masao Miyoshi, I designate this something else as *planetarity*. I propose that we are moving, slowly but clearly (to me at least), into a planetary paradigm. What we are witnessing is a *Paradigmenwechsel*, in the U. S. and other cultures I am familiar with.

I will depend on the planetary notion to define the contemporary, but not before dealing with the vexing issue of postmodernism's waning. In a recent issue of *American Book Review*, I turned to an automotive allegory to help the publication's diverse audience relate somehow to postmodernism's becoming a thing of the past under our own eyes (if not necessarily *passée*) – to this *passing* business. Thus, I invited the magazine's reader, imagine you are driving down the interstate, in the right lane. Long overdue for a tune-up, your early-1990s Mustang is also low on gas, practically running on fumes. You would rather not speed. Truth be told, you have grown comfortable with limits. A hazy memory now, your past transgressions have become mainstream. You

find this quite flattering, actually, and you are slowing down a bit more so you can enjoy this feeling. But, as you do so, other cars are passing you. You are not troubled by their disregard for said limits and rules – they exist to be snubbed, although not necessarily by you, not any more. You are not taking it personally either. After all, their self-aggrandizing bumper stickers speak an all-too-familiar language (“Save the ales!”). What annoys you, though, is the inconsistent style with which they zoom by. Some do signal their intent to pass, their blinkers flashing out elaborate messages encoding claims to the road ahead; others, not so much. Some appear faster than you (even the orthopedic-shoe-looking hybrids do). Others do not. Some accelerate as they overtake you, while others crawl into your lane and then drag themselves along, forcing you to tailgate. Their engines are not peppier. Neither is their design smarter than yours. And yet they are keen on leaving you in the dust.

I admit that the parable is contrived. But I also think it conveys the ongoing predicament of postmodernism as well as of the historian of post-Cold War literary-aesthetic traffic, interchanges, and overall sociocultural change in the U. S. and elsewhere. Indeed, many would suggest that, for some time now, we have been witnessing the weakening if not the “passing” of postmodernism (*The Passing of Postmodernism* is the title of a 2010 book by Josh Toth). The question or questions remain, however, if this passing equals a neatly demarcated exit and thus the end of an era; if the cohort of hot rods and fancy imports so eager to leave the postmodern behind – digimodernism, performatism, globalism, hypermodernism, altermodernism, etc. – are sufficiently marked stylistically, thematically, and otherwise; if the ironic, parodic, manifestly intertextual, and cross-generic discursive signals they send as they pick up speed on the highway of aesthetic and cultural history allow for an effectively individualizing profile; if authors who have driven previous shifts in taste and form and still are central to the postmodern, postcolonial, and multiethnic canons in the U. S. and abroad can be cavalierly enlisted in a trend plausibly geared toward the supplanting of postmodernism; if a writer like DeLillo can be postmodern in *White Noise* and post-postmodern later on in *Point Omega*; if the digital, Internet-based experiments of style, format, and venue à la Jennifer Egan will ever reach critical mass or will amount to more than a digitalization of the postmodern; and if the much-advertised return to realism, new eclecticism, new “earnestness” or “sincerity” (and to “new weirdness” too), along with the comeback of the empathic, the ethical, and the metaphysical, and the temptation of the “post-identitarian” and of the “grand narratives” will prove enough to set off a well-configured, epoch-making paradigm shift away from postmodernism and to something else, truly, if awkwardly labeled, post-postmodern.

Jeffrey T. Nealon’s *Post-Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (2012) is only the latest, Fredric Jameson-derived, installment in a series of inquiries clustered around the “what comes after postmodernism?” dilemma. For a real dilemma it is, and, again, one that is hardly recent. Initiated by postmodern critics themselves, disputes around postmodernism’s limitations and obsolescence started, significantly enough, at the end of the Cold War, probably with John Frow’s 1990 landmark contribution “What Was Postmodernism?” to Ian Adams and Helen Tiffin’s

collection *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*. The original essay and the book chapter allude, of course, to Harry Levin's 1960 classical article, "What Was Modernism"; in 2007, Brian McHale replied with his own article bearing the same title, in *Electronic Book Review*. A few years before, in 2001, Andrew Hoberek and others had examined the same thorny subject in "Twentieth-Century Literature in the New Century: A Symposium," *College English* 64, no. 1 (September 2001). And so have done, since then, Timothy S. Murphy, Robert L. McLaughlin, Neil Brooks and Josh Toth in their collection *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* (2007); then Alan Kirby, in "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond," *Philosophy Now* 71 (January/February 2009), and in a whole book. Mary Holland, Amy J. Elias, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, Thomas Vaessens, Yra van Dijk, Alison Gibbons, and others have followed suit, wrestling with this conundrum in a flurry of special-focus journal issues and critical collections, some of them still forthcoming. The "Epilogue" of my 2011 *Cosmodernism* ("Postmodernism into Cosmodernism") also articulates theoretically and historically, through a reluctant axiomatics, a transition out of the postmodern.

But what makes postmodernism's *passing* a conundrum? Passing has to do with being, or not being (any more), and this is an ontological issue. No doubt, ontology is paramount – "dominant," McHale has famously said – in matters postmodern. But postmodernism has always been an ontological oddball. Out of sync with itself, it has been viewed and practiced as a form of cultural belatedness, as a poetics and politics of generalized if subversive intertextuality. Modernism's allusive afterthought *after* the modernist fact, postmodernism has something inherently posthumous to it, a spectrality of sorts (Toth's subtitle is "A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary"). After all, one cannot feed off the dead (authors) decades on end with impunity. Sooner or later, it will rub off.

And it has. Postmodernism's heyday was a glamorous afterlife already. It is important to keep this in mind when we couch questions ("What Was . . .?") and otherwise speak about postmodernism in the past tense so as to chart the postmodern aftermath. For, what we are talking about is an incomplete departure complete with extemporaneous returns. Postmodernism is not dead but "deadish," as somebody says about zombies. In other words, this spectrality, the ambiguous passing of the postmodern paradigm, the passing of something that has always defined itself in this elusive and indirect, *en passant* mode, as a presence never entirely present, already passed but not quite (past), in a Faulknerian sense, will in all likelihood play out as an exceptionally resilient specter. As we compose the chronicles of postmodernism's foretold death, let us be mindful of the *revenant*; recursiveness is the curse the postmodern specter puts on us all. And so, chances are, for quite a while, we will have no choice but to revisit the postmodern so as to think through whatever seems to be superseding it. Our theoretical prophesies will be – are already – its visitations; it will reappear to us, over and over again, as we struggle to part company with it; it will continue to be in that modality of being that, suggests Derrida, deploys ontology as hauntology.

Compounding this struggle at a time world cultures awaken to an increasingly shared, planetary horizon are the postmodern's largely culturocentric inheritance and bent. Coming to terms with the Western thrust and legacy of postmodernism will be another challenge any efforts to get past the postmodern post will have to face. Granted, postmodernism has been a most accommodating paradigm stylistically, as well as philosophically, culturally, and otherwise. At the same time, it has been demonstrably constraining, and more and more visibly so as we have entered what some of us have called the late-global era. The struggle has to do with how wedded we have been, and still are, to said paradigm at a juncture in world history when we may have no choice but to try and step outside the postmodern box.

Step into what, though? I have just used the qualifier "global" to describe a possibly post-postmodern world. But the global seems to be just another Westernizing and thus already contested term, and so critics such as Spivak, Wai Chee Dimock, Ursula Heise, and Amy J. Elias, and myself have offered another candidate to pick up where the postmodern appears to leave off: the *planetary*.

Arguably, what begins to crystallize around this point in history is the planet as an ambiance of discursive practices revolving around a poetics and theatics of relatedness. At the risk of painting the last one hundred years or so of cultural history with some wildly broad brushstrokes, I propose that this period has coalesced around three pivotal moments or paradigms: the modern, up until the early 1960s; the postmodern, which lasted, in its strongest configuration, for the next thirty years; and the planetary or, the emerging cultural paradigm or dominant. The first two stages and their respective "conditions" – modernity and postmodernity – have been conceptualized primarily in Western, Euro-American, and chiefly North-Atlantic discourse forms and sites; the third no longer revolves exclusively around this geopolitical center, its methodologies, and vocabularies.

Under the impact of various postcolonialities during and, in Europe, especially after 1989, this centrality has been weakened, fragmented, disseminated, and otherwise transformed and displaced. What happens in the 1980s, right through the end of the Cold War, can be defined as postmodernism's planetary extension. But the "planetary" of postmodernism was a Pyrrhic victory. The postmodern went places only to self-displace and eventually dissipate. This has happened, on the one hand, through processes such as localization, creolization, and indigenization; on the other hand, as a result of its failure to meet non-Western cultural and socio-political exigencies. Noteworthy here is what made it possible – but also what helped postmodernism travel – to begin with: its "place fixation" itself or perhaps the opposite, postmodernism's insatiable appetite for unfixing and loosening, for setting things adrift and deferral, the transgressive, intertextually digressive *furor topologicus* that bows to neither center nor inside because the marginal and the outside, along with the "outside the text" (*hors-texte*), have lost their contours on its maps.

In this light, is postmodernism's anti-logocentrism a "lococentrism" – is the postmodern keen on place (*locus*) as much as center-*loco*, both crazy about centers and centro-phobic? At any rate, the postmodern's re-centering around space and across

world spaces rests on a core-periphery dialectic redolent of Pascal's *Pensées*, where the stable, "rooted" center-circumference dichotomy gives way to multiple, ubiquitous, shifty, and "rhizomic" spatialities. This plural and fluid topology has been postmodern, terminally postmodern perhaps, before becoming not only a theoretical-aesthetic but also a geocultural "dominant" of planetarity.

In a previous discussion, where the focus was recent American narrative, I identified this dominant – this new cultural "condition" – as cosmodernism, a concept I preferred for its semantic neighbors (modernism, postmodernism, cosmopolitanism) and the ways its strategic use might deploy them. Here – and because I want to keep those notions on the sidelines, but also for the sake of increased geopolitical clarity – I will call it the condition of planetarity.

What the cosmodern is in the U. S. and the Euroatlantic world the planetary is or is becoming for the world at large. As I have maintained in *Cosmodernism*, the world that wants to become one – the fast-worlding world – has simply reset the clock of presentness, so much so that critics and historians will have to own up to it sooner or later and revisit their timelines accordingly. In all likelihood, *contemporaneity* no longer means what it did thirty years ago. For a long while, the contemporary covered the post-WWII era, with postmodernity, chiefly in the West, designating that period's last two decades. This is no longer the case. We are seeing *that* present in the rearview mirror of today's culture. I define the contemporary, instead, as the time elapsed since 1989, with postmodernism spilling over the 1989 mark but only to demarcate a transitional intermezzo, a passage to a new moment and perhaps a new paradigm.

Spatially, one registers, at the same time, a compensatorily amplifying and juxtaposing "positional" pathos that unpacks the historically discontinuous category of "here" and the attendant notion of self so as to set forth "in our midst," in our immediate proximity – or in the mediate, at-distance propinquity – the effective presence of those once upon a time "out there," not "from around here," or not like "us." In that sense, the big world shrinks at the same time the little world, the immediate, dilates. My point is not simply that David Harvey's "time-space compression" covers just a slice of a more complex world subject to a range of simultaneous, spatio-temporal contractions and expansions, but that what sets our epoch apart is a radical geosocialization of places and of place generally. Even though its intensity and cultural markers shift from one place to another, this process obtains on a scale as conspicuous as it is planetary.

Granted, there are exceptions to this phenomenon. But, because what I want to underscore, is the worldwide, documentably topocultural dominant, it is worth stressing that this planetarization or planetary spatialization stands out as a defining reality of the third millennium: our time, the contemporary, is marked by it. What our hyperconnected world has been "specializing" in, and also what distinguishes it, is worldly spatialization itself, which bears on how we are in this world, what we do in it, and what we make of it. A perennial attribute of Heidegger's *Da-sein*, being-in-the-world, with others, has been heightened by the accelerated "de-distancing" of the world's places, people, and cultural practices. Thus, as previously disconnected or loosely connected regions have brought closer together modernity's world *en miettes*, the spatiality (*Räumlichkeit*) tied

into Being *ab origine* has now become planetary spatiality. Already instituted – rendered present – by the Heideggerian *Welt*, presence sets itself off and is legible in planetary co-presence. Marking as it does the demo-cultural spatiality of our time, this co-presence defines our present and shapes the historical identity of the contemporary.

University of North Carolina, Greensboro