

PAULA GEYH

## Introduction

In the late 1960s, the young American artist Bruce Nauman created “A Cast of the Space Under My Chair,” a concrete materialization of a “void,” negative space made positive. On the concrete block, one can see the imprint of what was rarely, if ever, seen – the underside of the chair, the inside of its legs, and, above all, that seemingly empty space below, now filled, the absent made present. And, although the sculpture might not look entirely comfortable, one could sit on it, too.

The story of postmodern American fiction could also be seen as the making present of that which was absent throughout the previous history of American literature. The first of the two most significant new presences was that of the author within the narrative itself, which was a formal, metafictional development (admittedly one with precursors). These authors, initially mostly white men, stepped onto the pages of their metafictional narratives, joining their characters and reflecting on what was happening. This development went hand in hand with other early postmodernist formal experiments. The second new presence, crucial for postmodern literature and culture alike, was that of the multiple “others,” authors who moved from the margins of literature to its, now in turn multiple, centers. These “other” authors – women in historically unprecedented numbers, and then Native Americans, African Americans, Latina/o Americans, Asian Americans, and more – emerged as major creative forces and joined the ongoing conversation that is American literature, a process that has continued ever since. These new voices *changed* this conversation by telling the stories of those who had always been on the margins of or absent from American literature, and thus gave presence to these absences in turn.

This proliferation of narratives from below and from outside can be seen as one of the manifestations of the “incredulity toward [grand] narratives” that, as the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard argued, defined the “postmodern” in general, the cultural formation that arose because of the

PAULA GEYH

transformation of knowledge in postindustrial, computerized societies.<sup>1</sup> The extraordinary range and power of postmodernism's challenges to traditional structures of knowledge, and to the social and cultural hierarchies that define these structures, dominant in the post-World War II world and still in place now, explain many of the controversies still surrounding postmodernism, beginning with those over the term itself. The debates among literary scholars and critics about what the term meant, or whether it meaningfully designated anything at all or was merely another word for "late modernism," began early on and persist to this day. In the meantime, "postmodernism" became widely used, especially in the mainstream media, as a general term of disapproval for contentious aspects of both academic and popular culture. In one form or another, then, the term "postmodernism" and the phenomena associated (for good or bad reasons) with it have been around for nearly half a century now. Indeed, recent academic debates concerning postmodernism are often about whether it has ended, and if so, when, and, inevitably, "what it was."

This book is not likely to settle these debates about postmodernism. I hope, however, it will lend support to the view, assumed here, that "postmodernism" remains our best overarching designation for the most characteristic and significant aspects of the American and (although this exceeds this volume's purview) European literature and culture of the past five decades. With this half-century mark, we have also now arrived at a point where it is possible, with a reasonable degree of confidence, to demarcate and survey the field of postmodern American fiction. Although its canon is still fluid and new works are likely to be added to it, there is a substantial critical consensus on the essential authors and works of postmodern American fiction, and on its key ideas, thematic preoccupations, and stylistic hallmarks. This *Companion* aims to offer an engaging guide to this fiction, to highlight its achievements, supply illuminating frameworks for understanding it, and provide concise, compelling readings of many of its most important works.

Before I outline the content of this volume, I shall define some key terms, beginning with "postmodernity" and "postmodernism," and lay some conceptual groundwork for this outline. Postmodernity is a historical category designating the period that is generally agreed to have begun in the late 1960s; its endpoint is a matter of no small dispute, but, for reasons to be explained below, this editor's view is that we are still somewhere in its midst (a view shared by many, even if not all, of the volume's contributors). Postmodernism, by contrast, is a cultural and conceptual category that refers to the literature, art, and culture of postmodernity, and its defining ideas and modes of thought. Postmodernist is the adjective that applies to these works,

## Introduction

although “postmodern” is often used, as in this volume’s title and in several of its chapters, interchangeably with it.

Admittedly, these definitions may be too broad and somewhat simplified. “Postmodernity,” in particular, may ultimately be more useful as a periodizing term referring to cultural (including literary) and intellectual history than as a general, historical term encompassing the last half-century’s events that began, in the advanced industrial and now postindustrial countries, with the political upheavals of the late 1960s. (It is noteworthy that professional historians generally do not use the term, except occasionally when negatively referring to some trends associated with it.) At the same time, as many scholars – perhaps most prominently Lyotard and Fredric Jameson – have argued, there are profound relationships between literature and the political, social, economic, technological, or other, as they are sometimes termed, “dominants” of its historical era. These relationships may be more oblique and reciprocal than Jameson’s Marxist schema of the (economic) base–(cultural) superstructure suggests, but the historical context within which postmodern American fiction has developed is important. Thus, the equal rights and social liberation movements of the past half-century undoubtedly helped to bring about the opening of the canon of American literature, making it fully inclusive and representative for the first time. Reciprocally, the works of women, African Americans, and all the other “others” mentioned above gave voice to their experiences and helped to define these movements and their guiding ideas. These ideas became, in turn, integral parts of postmodern thought.

At the same time, an examination of some of the key works of postmodern American fiction could easily lead one to conclude that, rather than being simply the mirror of its time, it is often remarkably ahead of it, as if conforming to Oscar Wilde’s famous statement, made long ago, that “Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, in a remarkable scene in Thomas Pynchon’s 1966 novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, its heroine Oedipa Maas stands on a hillside in Southern California, looking down at the vast sprawl of San Narciso, with its “ordered swirl of houses and streets,” which makes her think “of the time she’d opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit.”<sup>3</sup> Pynchon’s startling and subtle metaphor introduces the emerging landscape of postmodernity, already suggested by his immediately preceding description of San Narciso as “less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts.”<sup>4</sup> The printed circuit will evolve into the microchip, making possible the personal computer and the Internet, two of the defining technologies of postmodernity. Later, but still years before the Internet went public (1991) and Netscape (1994) enabled us to navigate the emerging World Wide Web, William Gibson coined the term “cyberspace”

PAULA GEYH

and imagined it in his 1984 cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* as “a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system.”<sup>5</sup>

Computerized information and communication technologies have profound effects on how we experience and understand the postmodern world. Indeed, as Lyotard argues, the postmodern shift or even revolution in the nature of knowledge has largely been brought about by these technologies (which were still in their early stages when he wrote *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979). This revolution in thought is, I believe, still underway, which is why I think that we are still in the midst of the postmodern era. Bio-engineering and cyborg technologies are also part of this postmodern transformation, and they are changing our senses of subjectivity and even of what it means to be human. Perhaps, as N. Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, and others have argued, we are already “posthuman,” insofar as our subjectivity is not defined merely phenomenologically but instead, as it were, technophenomenologically. Postmodern literature depicts these new ways of thinking and experiencing the world, enacts them through its formal and conceptual structures, and helps us to make sense of them. As the world changes, new experiences demand new modes of thought and forms of expression. What Frank Lentricchia wrote of Don DeLillo’s novels is largely true of all postmodern novels: they “could not have been written before the mid-1960s,” and they are remarkable for “the unprecedented degree to which they prevent their readers from gliding off into the comfortable sentiment that the real problems of the human race have always been about what they are today.”<sup>6</sup>

As indicated earlier, some theorists of postmodernism deem it to be reaching its end or even to have already ended. Brian McHale, who has done much to help to establish postmodernism as a literary and cultural category (he is among the most-quoted theorists in this book, along with Lyotard, Jameson, and Linda Hutcheon), begins *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (2015) with a chapter entitled “What Was Postmodernism?” He argues that “perhaps the only consensus that has ever been reached about postmodernism has to do with its end: postmodernism, it is generally agreed, is now ‘over.’”<sup>7</sup> McHale aims to locate the end of postmodernism in historical events and suggests 9/11 as “a convenient shorthand for postmodernism’s endgame.”<sup>8</sup> If, however, postmodernism is defined (as I assume it to be) less by historical events than by revolutions in thought and modes of existence, by epistemologies and ontologies that emerged in the late 1960s and do not yet seem to have played themselves out, then we still live in the postmodern world, or, rather, in many postmodern worlds. Postmodern literature continues to reflect on, shape, and illuminate these worlds.

## Introduction

I now turn to an outline of the book's chapters, which explore in greater depth and detail the subjects just considered, beginning with different definitions of and perspectives on postmodernity and postmodernism. The book's organization is defined by several key interrelated problems and themes.

The first three chapters situate postmodern American fiction in its relation to, and as, literary history, on the one hand, and in relation to global literature, on the other. In Chapter 1, Jonathan P. Eburne considers the history of the definitions of postmodernism and their relations to different trajectories of modernism. He argues that postmodern writers create their own literary pantheons of precursors across periods and use literary-historical categories like postmodernism "as part of their very medium of experimentation." In Chapter 2, David Cowart traces the development of postmodern American fiction over three generations, from the late 1960s through the present. He surveys its characteristic forms and key ideas as they have been worked out by the successive, yet interrelated, generations of postmodernists, including the "aesthetic dissent" of several very recent authors. In Chapter 3, Caren Irr explores the networks of connections between postmodern American fiction and global literature, and how "a quest for affiliations and affinities scattered across a global landscape unifies late postmodern writing as its practitioners work to make sense on a human scale of transformations wrought by global capital."

The next two chapters on theory and history address key issues in postmodern thought and how they shape – and are shaped by – postmodern fiction. In Chapter 4, Arkady Plotnitsky examines paradigms of postmodern thinking, found in theory and literature alike, that define and are defined by "the postmodern condition" and explains their relations with preceding modes of modern or (a separate category) modernist thinking. Using Thomas Pynchon's and Don DeLillo's novels as examples, he demonstrates how literature engages with scientific conceptions of chance, contingency, and probability. Postmodern thinking and skepticism extend far beyond science, however, to virtually every other discipline of knowledge, including history, and they have, as Lyotard put it, "altered the game rules" for all of them in some way.<sup>9</sup> The postmodern skepticism, or incredulity, toward the received (and grand) narratives of the past and traditional notions of history is explored by Timothy Parrish in Chapter 5. Noting the preoccupation of postmodern American fiction with "how history is made, received, and understood," he looks at how the critical awareness of the constructed nature of both literature and history has informed the ways this fiction reimagines the past and rewrites history from previously marginalized or absent perspectives.

PAULA GEYH

The advent of postmodern forms of subjectivity constitutes a decisive break or paradigm shift from earlier forms, particularly from the Cartesian or Enlightenment subject, which was assumed to be unified, fully self-conscious (at least in principle), and, not incidentally, male. This “Cartesian subject” could, however, hardly be claimed to be universal, given that it was constructed in opposition to female, racial, or ethnic “others,” who were considered as lesser beings, neither sovereign subjects nor selves in any philosophical or political sense. Postmodern subjectivity or, rather, subjectivities are, in contrast, inherently fragmented, contingent, and “positional.” They emerge at the intersection of diverse and fluctuating subject positions as nodes of interacting forces of language and social constructions, such as those of gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Beyond, but relating to all of these transformations, are the technological changes that challenge the very definition of “human” and the lines we have drawn between human and machine, and human and animal. The next three chapters explore how postmodern fiction depicts – and participates in – the construction of these new forms of subjectivity, and, moreover, imagines others beyond them.

In Chapter 6, Sally Robinson examines how postmodern American fiction contests and disrupts traditional ideas of gender and sexuality by questioning the master “narratives that script us as masculine and feminine” and as heterosexual or homosexual, and equally importantly, how these works provide alternative conceptual frameworks that go beyond such binary constructions. She also considers works, particularly science fiction novels, that envision new forms of gendered and sexual subjectivity that are not constrained by these inherited and limiting binaries. In Chapter 7, Dean Franco explores the ethnic and racial diversity of postmodern fiction as “an insurgent body of work that radically challenges social norms and stories of national formation.” He looks at how these works both add new racial and “ethnic geographical itineraries and historical trajectories to traditional [narratives]” of American history, while at the same time positing “simultaneous yet incommensurate histories and geographies ... bringing forth the uncanny and the irresolvable plurality of nations within the nation that constitutes the United States.” In Chapter 8, Elana Gomel argues that our scientific and technological advances profoundly affect not just how we live, but also “the way we are,” and that postmodern fiction, especially science fiction, develops new narrative techniques to depict these “new ways of being” in the posthuman world. She considers such sci-fi figures as the cyborg, alien, AI, and zombie as icons of new postmodern subjectivities, and shows how they emerge in concert with postmodernism’s philosophical, political, and ethical critiques of humanism and the human subject.

## Introduction

The last three chapters focus on postmodern fiction's ongoing experimentation with form and style. In Chapter 9, Patrick O'Donnell surveys postmodern American fiction's experiments with language and narrative form, and the ways in which they challenged traditional assumptions concerning the relationship between readers and texts. He focuses in particular on reflexivity, encyclopedism, and pastiche – hallmarks of early postmodernism – and explains how these features waned over time or evolved into new types of experimentation.

The history of postmodern culture has also been marked by constant renegotiations of the connections and boundaries between literature, the visual arts, and electronic media. These renegotiations are the subject of the final two chapters of the volume. Chapter 10, which is my own contribution, explores the relationships between word and image in postmodern fiction. The chapter specifically considers three types of works: those that experiment with typography and other visual and material aspects of the book itself; those that incorporate visual images into the text; and finally graphic novels, an important new genre of postmodern fiction. Rather than merely illustrating the written text, the chapter argues, the images in these works “are integral to the narrative,” and they produce effects that demand new approaches to reading and literary interpretation. Postmodernity's omnipresent information and communication technologies are having profound effects on postmodern literature, spurring the creation of new, “digital-born” genres. In Chapter 11, Astrid Ensslin traces the development of these new genres, including interactive fiction, hypertext and hypermedia fiction, app fiction written for smart phones and tablets, and literary (video) gaming, and also examines the new forms of reading and reader interaction they produce. Finally, she offers a speculative vision of the future of digital fiction and of literary “reading” itself.

Whatever is the future of the debates concerning postmodernism or of postmodernism itself, this volume makes a compelling case for the extraordinary value of what postmodern American writers have accomplished over the past half century. Few previous periods in the history of American literature have given us works that could rival the richness of postmodern fiction – the diversity of its authors and cultures, the complexity of its ideas and visions, the multiplicity of its subjects and forms. While one might be uncertain about the fate of postmodernity, which one day must be replaced by a different cultural formation, one may be reasonably confident that postmodern American fiction will live on, whatever name the future will give it.

PAULA GEYH

## NOTES

- 1 “Grand narratives” are narratives – philosophical, scientific, religious, political, economic, or other – that seek to provide a totalizing worldview through particular legitimating historical or political teleologies and that rely upon some form of purportedly universal and transcendent truth. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). In this text, Lyotard’s term is translated as “metanarratives,” but to avoid confusion with the genre known as metafiction, “grand narratives” is the generally preferred term, which will be used throughout this volume as well.
- 2 Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998), 448–468, 461.
- 3 Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Bantam, 1966), 24.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984), 52.
- 6 “Introduction,” in *New Essays on White Noise*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 6.
- 7 Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 171.
- 8 Ibid., 175.
- 9 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii.