

TIBOR TÓTH

**PATRICIA WAUGH: PRACTISING
POSTMODERNISM READING MODERNISM¹**

Patricia Waugh's *Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism* is an excellent book in defense of Postmodernism. She suggests that postmodernism could be comprehensively approached through the comparative analysis of the romantic, modern and postmodern aesthetic strategies. The first part tentatively entitled 'Reading Postmodernism, Modernity and its Discontents' defines Postmodernism as an aesthetic and body of thought, as a late-flowering of Romanticism. Her suggestion is that Modernism itself can be loosened from its traditional limitations by viewing it as transition between Romanticism and Postmodernism. Waugh's suggestion is that Postmodernism cannot be comprehensively explored without problematising the construction of Modernism. While emphasizing the inadequacy of radical break theory of the relation of Postmodernism to earlier aesthetic practice and theory, she does not ignore the dangers of naive evolutionism. A central idea is that continuities and discontinuities offer the possibility of perceiving new relationships. She argues that Postmodern theory can be understood as the latest version of a long-standing attempt to address social and political issues through an aestheticised view of the world, though it may be more thoroughly aestheticising than any previous thought. Patricia Waugh approaches the problem of Postmodernism and cultural pessimism through Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, refuting the interpretation of modernity as the expression of an existence whose foundations seem to be on the verge of imminent collapse, interpreting it instead as a proliferation of value which offers new forms and contexts for our power of self determination. Acknowledging the dangers of abandonment of Enlightenment thought, Waugh emphasizes that the above strategy may release us from the hidden tyrannies of universalising modes of their invisible exclusionary tactics. Postmodern is interpreted as Apocalyptic against the Judeo-Christian tradition of a Last Judgement in its sense of crisis. She notes that 'post' modernity suggests the idea of a break, but this break is illusory since Nietzsche's idea of temporal consciousness and his

¹ Waugh, Patricia: *Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism*, London: Edward Arnold, 1992

view of history as a progressive movement towards a redemptive moment out of time and one of epoch as constituted by revolutionary moment in time, still inhabit the notions of temporal crisis articulated within Postmodernism. Through the assessment of Kristeva, Lyotard, Foucault, Deluze and Bataille, Waugh states that the aesthetic remains the prime vehicle for the epiphanic moment of transgression and it explodes its logic of the other into the world of the logic of the Same. Positioning Romantic Irony in Shelley and T. S. Eliot against Postmodernism's parody of the earlier text, Waugh tackles the problems of pre-existing textuality and the matter of decreation. Patricia Waugh contradicts the definition of Postmodern apocalypticism as expressing absolute fragmentariness, stating that it is as much concerned with reconciliation and reintegration as it is with their impossibility.

Starting from the idea that Postmodernism makes explicit a number of paradoxes which are rather more implicit in Romantic thought, she states that the idea of the autonomy of the artist is central to Schiller and Kant, and Postmodernism is often identified exclusively with such an aestheticist position, and in this respect it can be interpreted as late-Romanticism rather than simply a mode of counter-Enlightenment. Tradition and innovation are interpreted through Kant's and Schiller's idea of select autonomy, marking the Romantic shift from definition of freedom through reason to its definition through imagination. She discusses the transfer of autonomy from self entirely to the work of art itself conceived of as an internally coherent, self contained system that culminated in the New Critical construction of Modernism. Waugh concludes that Romanticism and Postmodernism both articulate a critique of Enlightenment faith in the purely rational.

Writing on situatedness in Romanticism to Postmodernism, and radical fictionality, Waugh discusses Heidegger's and Nietzsche's views on the topic. Waugh connects the notion of situatedness with Gadamer's hermeneutics and the notion of tradition developed in the criticism of T. S. Eliot, and argues that the orientation of the Romantic connection should be conceived as Wordsworthian, finally stating that as it moves towards the Postmodern, there is an increased emphasis on situatedness in language. The other tendency discussed is towards a projective, radical fictionality, where the self exists in its ability to work within the fragments available to it and from them to project onto the world new fictions by which to live. Analysing Pynchon, Coleridge, and Nietzsche, Waugh directs our attention onto the postmodern self which for all the proclaimed absence of metaphysical ground is still recognisably Romantic in its form. She states that Heidegger's interpretation leads to an ethics of passivity and acceptance, while Nietzsche's interpretation of the self destroys both self and other in its

imperialistic violence and Postmodernism, in spite of the obvious political and aesthetic dangers posed by both interpretations. In the section entitled 'The Poetics of the Sublime, Presenting the Unpresentable,' Waugh concentrates on Lyotard's essay 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' and Lyotard's interpretation of Kant's concept of the representational act of imagination. Her suggestion is that Lyotard turns the premises of Kant's concept of the sublime against itself to argue for a postmodern version which recognizes that the sublime is the unrepresentable in presentation itself. The interpretation that the outside space identified by Lyotard has to remain sublime, serves as a starting point for Waugh's parallel analysis of Kant and Lyotard.

In the section entitled 'Enlightenment, Exhausted or Incomplete?' Waugh discusses Habermans's project to reinvent reason in order to complete the 'unfinished' Enlightenment. She argues that though Habermans is anxious to refute postmodern aestheticism, his critique of the dominance of narrow expertise and the fragmentation of human powers, actually borrows from the Romantic critique of industrialisation developed from the writing of Rousseau and Schiller. Waugh concludes the section by discussing Haberman's 1980 talk demanding that the aesthetic should be freed from the grip of the institutionalised, professional critics, and goes on by discussing the art of the unrepresentable in the section entitled 'Terror and Sublime.' Introducing Lyotard's reaction to Habermans's particular call for an integration of the aesthetic into the 'lifeworld', Waugh invokes Kant's concept of the beautiful. She quotes Kant's view on the beautiful as pleasure formulating our common response of the shared basis of human understanding and the existence of harmonious, intersubjective experiences of value, and the sublime as the experience leading to recognition of the inadequacy of the values produced by the conceptual thought. Waugh concludes that Lyotard sees in the postmodern as in the Romantic, the expression of sublime, a form of resistance to the banal and automating effects of modern life, and the sublime remains a never to be realised beyond. Waugh refuses to accept the idea that Postmodernism has exhausted its usefulness. In the section 'The Concept Versus the Luminous Detail, Against Totality' she states that Lyotard intends the elaboration of a philosophical position which implicitly refuses available paradigms within the tradition of analytical philosophy and this position is easy to turn back on itself. She argues that the postmodern condition envisaged by Lyotard, Rotry, Foucault, Deluze and Fish is itself simply a totalisation, an invention of theory as it denies the possibility of theory in a contemporary version of the ancient Liar Paradox. When postmodernism tries to formulate a critique of Enlightenment, she argues, it can't step out of the thing it examines and

has to 'totalise'. To offer critique can only be to challenge from within through rhetorical or narrative disruption. Examples taken from the works of Salman Rushdie, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Eliot, Pound and Joyce lead Waugh to state that postmodernism reminds the reader that any perceived order can only be an arbitrary construction of the human mind.

When trying to periodise the Postmodern, Waugh attempts to construct the dominant elements of the Postmodern. Starting from Roman Jakobson's definition of dominant in a specifically aesthetic context, 'the focusing component of a work of art' which 'rules, determines and transforms the remaining components', dominant comes to be linked with periodisation. Waugh states that Postmodernism shows us that the periods make history manageable, but they inevitably raise questions of genealogy, value and power. Discussing Freud, Kermode, Daniel Bell and the Marxists she comes to refute Eagleton's interpretation of Lyotard stating that the distinction between Modernism and Postmodernism starts to break down as soon as we examine actual works of art. The cultural logic of Jameson's and Eagleton's idea of Postmodernism is introduced through discussion of 'Periodising the Sixties' asserting that we can no longer talk about culture in a 'media society.' She quotes Jameson's argument asserting that if Postmodernism is the cultural logic of Late Capitalism, Late Capitalism is a totality which cannot be thought. Waugh's analysis of Jameson's argument shows that Jameson has overgeneralised from his own sense of the loss of the individual vision of the moderns and the weakening of the grand narratives embedded in his own Hegelian thought. Similarly, she states that Jameson ignores the Bakhtinian insight into the multiaccentual nature of cultural symbols which suggest that no economic mode can in fact ever entirely colonise meaning and value. Next Waugh analyses Charles Jencks' interpretation of Postmodernism in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*; she speaks of the opposition between 'universal grammar' and the postmodern 'neo-vernacular.' Waugh demonstrates that Jencks accepts the dominant which Jameson uses to describe Postmodernism but offers an alternative evaluation of it. After discussing Bell's definition of Postmodern as the axial principle of postindustrial society where theoretical knowledge assumes exclusive centrality, Waugh states that periodising is an impossible task, but to work with Postmodernism is to begin to be aware of the way in which our preconceptions about the aesthetic, including concepts like period, shape what we see in individual texts.

The section entitled 'Postmodernism as Aesthetic Technique,' attempts to describe some of the preoccupations and formal characteristics of postmodern literature and re-examines the issue of its cultural value from other perspectives. It analyses parody, irony, self-reflexivity, and playfulness

as characteristic aesthetic forms. Linda Hutcheon and Barthelme are discussed in details. Waugh concludes that fictionality becomes central and goes on to present this playfulness in novels like Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*, Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*. Waugh believes that instead of defending Postmodernism as an authentic response to the exhaustion of other modes of art or knowledge or attacking it as inauthentic capitulation to commercial culture, we should see it as an attempt to modify the past through reformulation of its modes in the light of present, in which recognition of the pervasiveness of consumer culture is not, necessarily, total capitulation to it.

Reading Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Waugh sets out to prove that postmodern books do not necessarily involve an abandonment of traditional forms of thought or aesthetic expression, since although in the novel there are no fundamental disruptions of the physical laws of nature, there is no ludic or self-reflexive authorial voice, the novel is clearly informed by the mood of the postmodern.

In the section tentatively entitled 'Rising the Dead,' Waugh is concerned with bringing back the author refuting the idea of the murder of the Author by Postmodernism. Reviewing Roland Barthes, Jorge Luis Borges, Georges Poulet and Julian Barnes, Waugh concludes that such postmodern texts do not annihilate subjectivity unless one is working with a reduced and restrictive concept of it.

The final chapter of the theoretical section of Waugh's book discusses Postmodern as the 'Critique of Enlightenment'. Starting from Kant's essay 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment,' the problem of self-determination is interpreted as setting up impossible problems about self-determination, self-grounding and self-legitimation which can be seen to surface acutely in the self-referential obsession of much modern art. Waugh sees the postmodern critique of Enlightenment as an extension of insights provided by a philosopher generally regarded as its fullest embodiment and states that Postmodernism effectively extends the formal self-reflexivity of Kantian idealism to a limit where there can be no position outside the instrument of knowledge with which to offer a critique of them. The postmodernists tend to offer their critique of Enlightenment 'grand narratives' by showing that the concept of transcendent 'metanarrative' is a convenient fiction.

To the question 'Is Deconstruction a Postmodernism,' Waugh's answer is that although the two are often conflated they should not be identified. The analysis of Derrida, Lyotard, Norris and Habermans concludes that both Haberman's reading of Derrida's 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Societies' in his *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* and Norris's

defense of deconstruction against itself are misleading. Modernity is discussed as the critique of instrumental reason, where technology is interpreted as threatening the world with annihilation. Waugh states that following Foucault postmodernists refer to the 'iron cage' of rationalisation without reason as the violence of the logic of the same, viewing their activity as an attempt to preserve difference, reject universalisation, praise the local, the particular event, the specificity of the contingent. Analysing *The Waste Land*, Waugh reaches the conclusion that all experience and knowledge is absorbed into the process of the habitual capital and what Marx had called alienation is the normal condition of existence, in which the recommendation to 'only connect' is carried out to satisfy biological urges. Waugh states that although Eliot abandoned faith in reason as the instrument of knowledge, Eliot shores his fragments against his ruin, hoping to make them cohere through the discovery of a deep aesthetic logic expressing universal mind in some version of collective unconsciousness. If the lifeworld has become even more thoroughly instrumentally rationalised than the response of the postmodern to Eliot's idea of redemption through art is continued through postmodernist response to it, Waugh argues. Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor* is used as an example of the fictional critique of Enlightenment, as the novel asserts our fundamental need for love, shelter, nurturance, our formation out of an interdependence with other human beings based on such needs. The novel's apocalypticism reveals how, in rationalising the lifeworld without due care for the range and complexity of these needs, we may have starved the human race altogether. The projected world of the semi-humans is born out of the failures of over-rationalised logic. The violence of instrumentality of the Enlightenment and Imperialism and the rationalist discourses of modern liberalism are explored by novels belonging to the modernist period, and Patricia Waugh analyses Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* in this context.

In the chapter dedicated to feminism, Patricia Waugh argues that an examination of alternative feminist models of identity can add further dimensions to the debates considered earlier about the construction of Modernism in terms of formal autonomy. She argues that the exclusion of gender from postmodern discussions has left its theorists largely blind to the possibilities of challenging autonomy through a relational concept of identity. Because women's sense of identity is more likely to consist of a more diffuse sense of the boundaries of the self and their notion of identity should be understood in relational and intersubjective terms, they are more representative of a sense of connections to others.

The volume ends with a reading of T. S. Eliot on tradition and James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Waugh's volume offers its readers a contemporary history of an extremely controversial period. This volume is accompanied by a reader offering genuine critical and philosophical material discussed in her present book.²

² Waugh, Patricia ed. : *Postmodernism: A Reader*, London: Edward Arnold, 1992