

REVIEWS

How Many Postmodernists Does It Take?

Robert David Stacey, ed. *Re: Reading the Postmodern: Canadian Literature and Critics After Modernism*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010. xl + 394 pp.

It seems like only yesterday that Postmodernism and I were knocking back retro-cocktails together on a Montreal terrasse (“Pomo” was then nothing more than an affectionate school nickname): in those days the chitchat was all *clinamen* and *pastiche* rather than *climate change* and *pre-emptive strikes*. How heady is the nostalgia, then, scented while reading this collection of essays, so unabashed at using a term many now utter only with embarrassment and/or qualification, yet so reluctant to say definitely whether we are at last past the post. The contributors, who gathered at a conference on this subject in Ottawa in 2008, are undecided whether they came to praise or to bury, and many try a postmodern gesture of having it both ways. While Linda Hutcheon, most-cited doyenne of the subject, concludes her valedictory contribution, “The Glories of Hindsight,” by demonstrating that it’s easier to hedge one’s bets in French with the proclamation, “*Le postmodernisme est mort; vive le postmodernisme*” (51),¹ Christian Bök, best-selling dauphin of the avant-garde, chides Canadian literary criticism of the past two decades for being insufficiently post-modern. It is perhaps not that surprising that “the postmodern impasse” (a concept frankly discussed by, respectively, Herb Wylie in a reassessment of Hutcheon and Jennifer Blair in connection with Guy Vanderhaeghe’s novel *The Englishman’s Boy*) may ultimately assume its most crucial (and contentious) form as the question: does postmodernism itself have closure? Are we still inside the whale?

The history of the Canadian critical discourse of postmodernism, the self-referential dimension to most of these essays, is a strength but also occasionally something of a weakness in *Re: Reading the Postmodern*, in as much as the question of, say, who was reading Derrida when can make for useful epistemological context but it can also signal oneupmanship, a partisan peacock flash: my postmodern is more postmodern than your postmodern. In his introduction, Robert Stacey acknowledges both the long shadow of Hutcheon and her notion of “historiographic metafiction”

and a “radical split in Canadian postmodernist criticism between the study of poetry and the study of fiction” (xxxii). This is not only a salient point for the venue of this review but a pressing, ongoing problem in Canadian literary studies, and it is nice to see that the collection’s concluding essays by Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy focus specifically on poetry (and, tellingly, those essays offer closer, more nuanced readings of particular texts than most of those on either fiction or postmodernism). Frank Davey’s “shuffle-text” essay, “Canadian Postmodernisms: Misreadings and Non-readings,” the form of which enacts the multiplicity of his title, goads his audience, “What if most postmodernist writing has been done—as it has been in Canada—in poetry?” (24). What if, indeed!—what exactly is being asked here?

Maybe, as Sylvia Söderlind argues, not all postmodernism is quite post-modern; maybe there is a pre-postmodernism, a phenomenon she calls “ghostmodernism,” which, if I understand it correctly, falls between modernism’s *I can’t possibly express that because it’s inexpressible* and post-modernism’s *I’m not going to express that not because it’s inexpressible but because I am so done with that shit*. (These aren’t Söderlind’s own terms, but her essay has its blue language, too, so I don’t think she’ll mind the translation.) The ghostmodernist “is faced with his or her own simultaneous desire for and fear of claims to mastery over language” (289) and the specific “battleground” on which ghostmodernism contends with language is allegory (277). Besides being playful, Söderlind’s essay charts an intriguing route along the river of modernism but away from the plunging falls of fascism (of which determinist allegory is, in this view, the prime mode of expression). It would be interesting to hear what she would make of Vanessa Place’s recent thoughts on conceptualism as allegory, and whether conceptualism might be counted as a “ghostmodern” form of struggle against allegory or as something more dire. Moreover, the essay prompts the student of poetry to contemplate how allegorical a given poetics is constrained to be, and is worth comparing with Bök’s argument that being postmodern means “language can no longer signify an existent referent beyond itself, so much as actuate an infinite diegesis within itself” (90).

Bök’s complaint that scholars “often rally around the least weird texts at the expense of much more subversive innovation” (98) has some genuine validity – despite, it must be added, the apparent equivalence of “weird” with “innovation” and the implication that even if the former term isn’t objectively defined (maybe even having forgotten its scare-quotes at home), the latter somehow is—but it is made with less pomp and greater

precision by Jason Wiens, who documents how one book by George Bowering (*Burning Water*) has claimed far more attention and acclaim than another (*A Short Sad Book*) which can be seen to be “undermining a Canadian cultural mythology determined in and for central Canada” (305). No less provocative than Davey or Bök, Wylie offers plausible reasons for the narrowing of postmodernism’s pluralist promises: “increasing concentration in the [publishing] industry and an increasingly corporate, profit-oriented sensibility. With publishing houses increasingly contained within larger, diversified corporate structures, the emphasis is less on supporting innovation and fostering cultural diversity and more on moving product” (188). It is precisely such material concerns that trouble the distinction Bök proposes between postmodernism and postmodernity so as to mitigate if not elide Fredric Jameson’s critique. Modernism is understood as a reaction against modernity (“an old bitch gone in the teeth,” according to the orthodontist Ezra Pound) but of course its integrity is compromised by its own participation in that ongoing modernity (and Pound again makes a vivid example, striving to contain history in a poem as botched as its subject, drawn to recast history in fascist folly). The distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity likely remains to be made, but made carefully and without ready exonerations of the former for just those less savoury accomplishments and effects of the latter, and this backward glance at modernism ought to warn against trumpeting the “end of history” and “mission accomplished.”

Gregory Betts, taking up a suggestion by Brian Trehearne in his 1989 book *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists*, proffers a “transhistorical” understanding of postmodern poetics (exemplified by the sound and visual poetry of Steve McCaffery, Bill Bissett, and Judith Copithorne) as a form of “Decadence.” Betts makes a far-reaching and attractive argument, yet there are unexplored ethical problems attendant upon both the general invocation of this “transhistorical” view (which here seems to mean simply a non-linear history) and the specific suggestion that Canada is no longer subject to a “colonial lag” (153) in its artistic evolution but, in the wake of its “supplying American troops with horrifying weapons” (170) in the Vietnam War, has now achieved some sort of respectable sovereignty, even as it operates the same booming business in arms sales to American (and other) wars (see McKie). There seems little need to follow the assertion that avant-garde writing (self-professed or otherwise) remains for critics to explore for a fuller grasp of postmodernism with the suggestion that doing so effects a transcendence—but it is probably worth remembering that Bök and Betts are themselves avant-garde poets.

Yet another such poet, Stephen Cain, traces a contrary “second wave” to Canadian postmodernism that rejects what he calls “happy pomo”: those “ludic, libidinal, and liberating” texts that celebrate their own capacity to subvert and ironize oppressive master narratives, injustices of representation, and so on (104). Although his central examples of “pessimistic pomo” are fiction, novels by Daniel Jones and Lynn Crosbie, he shows how the argument extends to poetry written after the mid-1980s and points to Damian Lopes and Nancy Dembowski (106). In addition to Cain’s essay, Alexander MacLeod’s investigation of regionalism and Deborah C. Bowen’s of realism help sound out some of the further limits of literary strategies problematized by postmodernism.

Every forum of this kind has its omissions and oversights, though one wishes that non-Anglo Canadian writers weren’t so thoroughly ignored. Drama gets a nod in the inclusion of Jenn Stephenson’s essay on ontological shifts in “millennial” plays by such writers as John Mighton and Judith Thompson. Although there is a palpable feeling of dissension from the canon of writers underscored by Hutcheon’s *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988), most notably Robert Kroetsch (“Mr. Canadian Postmodern,” as she dubbed him [160]),² Hutcheon and Kroetsch are the single two most-discussed writers in the book, and both are themselves contributors. Deserved attention is given to writers who should, in time, get more still, such as Jeff Derksen and Rita Wong, but Anne Carson and Gerry Gilbert get nary a mention, a cavil only worth mentioning because Davey calls out to know where the papers are on Hiromi Goto and Nancy Huston, among others (33). Of the various critical topics not discussed (e.g., queer writing in Canada, which Butling observes seems to remain somehow outside of the postmodern considered as such) the most surprising for its absence is technology. Time was that “hypertext” was the postmodern vehicle of promise, yet despite the fact that most literary journals are now online, none of the essays here takes up the question of how new media have changed Canadian literature.

The number of easy reiterations of the “always already” theme notwithstanding, *Re: Reading the Postmodern* has much to offer students of Canadian literature precisely because of the “radical splits” and divisions it presents and debates. The index is muddled and confusing—italics appear on titles but also on some names (“*Wah, Fred*”), concepts (“*victimhood*”), and phrases (“*utter red herring*”—four listings!), and some references are qualified as being “about” that given index subject (as opposed to *what*, one wonders)—but on the whole the book is well-edited and the arrangement of the essays is particularly discerning and useful.

Notes

- 1 How curious that *postmodernisme* is masculine, and *postmodernité* feminine.
- 2 Robert Kroetsch passed away during the writing of this review. *Ave atque vale*.

Works Cited

- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988.
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