

voted to propagandising his mission make interesting footnotes to the many assessments, that year, of Columbus's arrival in America. In a quotation from Irving's *The Adventure of Captain Bonneville*, Greenfield also offers a poignant extension of Pratt's analysis of the bird's-eye view as imperialist perspective; here, the spectator usurps Native traditions to legitimize his undertaking:

For a time the Indian fable seemed realized: he had attained that height from which the Blackfoot warrior, after death, first catches a view of the land of souls, and beholds the happy hunting grounds spread out below him, brightening with the abodes of the free and generous spirits. The captain stood for a long while gazing upon this scene, lost in a crowd of vague and indefinite ideas and sensations. (159)

*Narrating Discovery* is a fine book, reminding one that much groundwork for the analysis of imperialist discourse has been accomplished in American Studies, a perhaps paradoxical situation not always sufficiently acknowledged in postcolonial criticism.

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Brian McHale. *Constructing Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1992. pp. xii, 342. \$49.95; \$16.95 pb.

As Brian McHale points out in his introduction, *Constructing Postmodernism* seeks to overcome the substantialist reading of postmodernist fiction that (some have thought) he advances in his first book, *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). In that work, although claiming constructivist biases, McHale outlines a rather formed view of modernist and postmodernist fiction. Modernist fiction is preoccupied with questions related to knowing: "What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; . . . What are the limits of the knowable? And so on" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 9). Whereas modernist fiction is marked by this *epistemological dominant*, postmodernist fiction is concerned with *ontological* issues related both to the nature of fiction itself—as seen in the proliferation of parodic meta-fictional texts—and to the nature of the worlds constituted by narrators and characters.

In *Constructing Postmodernism*, McHale is sufficiently circumspect to realize that he has fallen into a self-"constructed" trap of sorts, though certainly he is not alone in this among students of postmodern literature and philosophy. This particular problem was captured long ago in a Greek paradox, the one involving a Cretan who claims that all Cretans are liars. Though explicitly endorsing the relativism and contingency that is at the heart of postmodernity—see, for example, McHale's admission of constructivist biases in both of his books—postmodern scholars ultimately betray themselves by speaking authoritatively, definitively, uncontingently, about matters postmodern.

As McHale wisely notes, this sort of self-contradiction among post-moderns is more than merely a rhetorical problem, i.e., our inability—short of paradox or Derridean erasure—to say two contradictory things at the same time. In his introduction, McHale cites the work of Siegfried Schmidt and others on the *constructed* nature of knowledge, and therein probably contends with his own (not entirely contingent) biases about as well as one can. In the main, however, *Constructing Postmodernism* is not so much a philosophical meditation on the nature of knowledge as a series of critical readings of works drawn from the author's own canon. *Postmodernist Fiction* sought—or “seemed to propose”—to define the field in terms of an “inventory of features or characteristics” (*Constructing Postmodernism* 2). The later book is structured differently. It devotes itself to detailed examinations of post-modernist writers—Pynchon, Eco, Joseph McElroy, Christine Brooke-Rose, and practitioners of cyberpunk science fiction—though McHale starts off with a consideration of the post/modernist elements in Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Like its predecessor, *Constructing Postmodernism* is concerned with literary historiography, with discerning those differences that help to define modernist and postmodernist fiction. Each book proposes what is, effectively, a non-synchronous view of periodicity. Although traditionally viewed as “modernist” works, *Ulysses* (in most of the second half) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (in Chapter 8) move from an epistemological dominant to an ontological one, and hence are, at least locally, postmodernist works. Similarly, though generally regarded as post-modernist novels, Pynchon's *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*—with their detective-fiction plots—reflect an epistemological dominant and hence are modernist (46, 47, 194).

By defining modernist and postmodernist fiction in relatively restrictive terms, that is, as marked by a particular dominant, McHale gains a specificity or “tightness” that many critics cannot claim for their own “constructions” of these phenomena. There are of course advantages to this, and *Constructing Postmodernism* illustrates these. Taxonomy becomes a relatively straightforward affair. Further, his model allows him to plot with relative ease the development of narrative aesthetics in the twentieth century. Supported by McHale's adeptness at analyzing narrative voice and especially his sensitivity to those subtle shifts of narratorial/characteral tone and nuance that mark much important fiction of this century, *Constructing Postmodernism* argues its thesis with vigour and constancy.

Yet there are, I think, some difficulties both with McHale's thesis and his notions of periodicity. *Constructing Postmodernism* extends the taxonomic project of the first book by offering readings of additional texts, but it does not really advance, or significantly refine, the basic premise that undergirds *Postmodernist Fiction*. In the preface of the first book, the author admits with studied modesty that his is a “one-

idea book" (xii). Well, a particular idea can be quite complicated and hence merit detailed examination. (Indeed, the task of a "monograph" is precisely a consideration of a *single* matter.) Yet McHale's thesis regarding the respective dominants of modernist and postmodernist fiction is not perhaps so complicated as to require additional treatment. Further, and admittedly it is rarely an easy task, the author does not always relate modernist and postmodernist narrative forms to broader social and historical phenomena and, consequently, the historicity of modernist and postmodernist narratives is often neglected.

Additionally, McHale's thesis remains open to the critique he himself anticipates back in the first chapter of *Postmodernist Fiction* (11). It is no easy thing to separate epistemological and ontological concerns, especially in fictional narrative. Of course, we perceive without difficulty that philosophers such as, for example, Descartes and Husserl are preoccupied with epistemology just as, alternatively, Heidegger and Gadamer privilege ontology. Things are rather more muddled, though, in the hands of most novelists, and as readers we are often unable to decide whether epistemology or ontology is being foregrounded. McHale's categorization of two important postmodernist fictions demonstrates the limitations of his thesis. He regards as modernist Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, a work that strikes me and the critics I read as paradigmatically postmodern. Further, he seems undecided as to the precise status of Walter Abish's *How German Is It*, which he classifies contradictorily (151, 300 n. 1).

The most interesting chapters in *Constructing Postmodernism* are the ones that move beyond the book's thesis to consider the cultural origins and cultural significance of specific works. In particular, I would cite the essays—or parts thereof—on Pynchon's *Vineland*, Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, McElroy's *Women and Men*, and cyberpunk "sci-fi." In these readings, one sees that there is more at stake in our reception of postmodernist fiction than an opportunity to engage in the recondite politics of literary taxonomy. On balance, one gets the impression that *Constructing Postmodernism* might well be a transitional work for its author. Concerned mostly with literary history and the aesthetics of narrative form, McHale's first book and the first half of his second often do not effectively bridge the gap between (what Jonathan Culler has called) the "word" and "world." This cannot be said of the original insights McHale later offers, on, for example, Pynchon's treatment of television as a formative social force in postmodern America, or his analysis of conspiracy in *Foucault's Pendulum*, or, indeed, his illuminating reading of contemporary avant-garde science fiction. These chapters not only make a measurable contribution to our appreciation of postmodernist literature but advance our understanding of life in a postmodern age. And, to be sure, we need all the help we can get in *both* areas.

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