

# 1 Shifts and Imbrications

## I. Interrogating the Postmodern

What points of orientation can help us understand contemporary history? In the humanities many commentators who treat our common condition of postmodernity begin with recent social and economic developments, and then compare and contrast the present intellectual climate to the modernism out of which it grew. Clearly, there are never distinct lines of demarcation between any two historical periods. In fact, the very concepts of modernity and postmodernity for Bauman are “important first and foremost (perhaps even solely) in the context of the self-awareness of the intellectuals, and in relation to the way the intellectuals perceive their social location, task and strategy” (227).

Nonetheless, modernity can be broadly, and very succinctly, defined as the evolution of structures of lived realities, such as subjectivity and identity. It is triggered by modernization, a term that denotes the changing modes of production and of distribution, and of new consumption practices consequent to the industrial revolution. Postmodernity, then, refers to the dramatic acceleration of the reshaping of structures of experience precipitated by the extremely rapid advances in information technologies during

the past twenty-five years. Thus, making sense of the present and arriving at a *modus vivendi* within the continuous flow of postmodernity is an arduous task made even more formidable by the difficulty of gaining perspective on the time in which we live and the continuing transformation of our means of appropriating reality.

As Harvey has demonstrated, the revolution during the past quarter century in telecommunications has had a profound influence on the social and cultural organization of the industrialized West. Progress in the sciences has provoked some very dramatic alterations in the organization of capitalism. Rapid improvements in information technology have made possible the switch in the basic production mode from the fixed, Fordist assembly line to one of flexible accumulation, the disarticulation and displacement of capital and production to points all over the earth. The reorganization and globalization of the economy have in turn brought into being a shared condition of postmodernity characterized by modifications in real living conditions and of commonsense conceptions of space and time.

The globalized economy, heralded in the press by the incorporation of ever-larger supranational trading blocs, has abrogated the relative autonomy of social relations and of community inside traditional territorial boundaries, absorbing them into a global village. At the same time, traditional class distinctions within those national boundaries have also been supplanted, to some extent, by the postmodern division of the world into developing, proletarian nations, and bourgeois national economies increasingly based in the tertiary. More importantly, the subject of postmodernity is stripped of a traditional sense of place by postindustrial capitalism's ability to quickly relocate people and investments. Today the work place is a site of rapid change, flux, and uncertainty, where worker apprehensions are heightened by the volatility of markets and rapid shifts in consumption practices. They are compounded by the geographical mobility now forced on them

and their families by the new, more flexible labor processes (Harvey 124).

The alienated, migrating worker of modernity has metamorphosed into its postmodern counterpart, who is fragmented by the loss of a sense of place and community. Workers are now faced with the dissolution of the traditional support system formerly provided by the extended and nuclear family. The weakening of the sense of belonging to a collectivity has left the individual with little to mediate between innate desires and the laws and mores imposed from without. Consequently, the subject of postmodernity is spatially disoriented.

The other defining characteristic of our condition of postmodernity is the shortening of commonsense perceptions of time. The long pasts and futures of our ancestors have collapsed. The influence of the past (the weight of tradition) and of future expectations (because of the electronic speed with which meaningful decisions must be made) are weakened. The loss of temporal bearings supervenes the individual who is now made to live more intensively in the present: the present is all there is. On a less conscious plane, future expectations are lowered further by the angst suffered by the various "Me," "Now," and "X" generations who have had to learn to live with their repressed fears of a future that will be used up before it arrives—either by nuclear holocaust or by the damage perpetrated every day on the environment. The loss of a sense of living and participating in a historical continuity (delineated by traditional values and beliefs) and the collapse of future expectations define the continuous present installed in postmodernity.

The quick and pervasive changes in the material conditions of everyday life caused by the progress and extension of information technology and the move toward a global marketplace have provoked in Western intellectuals a feeling of disempowerment. There is "too much to know and comprehend" (Federman, *Critifiction*). Our single and collective inability to keep pace with, influence, or direct

the course of events has given rise to a "feeling of anxiety, out-of-placeness [and] loss of direction," which, in Bauman's opinion, "constitutes the true referent of the concept of postmodernity" (225). There is also a tacit sentiment of disorientation (I will treat this in my discussion of Calvino) caused by an inability to cognitively dominate the myriad small narratives of the new protagonists who have forced themselves into our collective awareness.

Contemporaneously, a new world order erected on the rubble of the Warsaw Pact must be confronted. Its cultural essence is a phagocytic (Pasolini) American model whose financial well-being depends on its ability not only to export weapons systems but also consumer goods. Older civilizations subject themselves to a cultural hegemony born of a trademark imperialism that is not content to meet needs but must also create new consumerist wants.

Many analysts of the postmodern would have us believe that the legitimation of multiple small narratives is a valid means of resisting homologation of planetary proportions. Vattimo's "heterotopias" are a good example of this type of response. However, the dominant classes are globally organized and more than capable of intervening locally. Therefore, a "postmodern" lack of faith in metanarratives does not justify turning one's back on the general context in which the particular becomes an object of knowledge (Simpson). Syntheses of marginalized discourses (narrations of narrations, so to speak) is the necessary but largely missing element from much postmodernist theory. If empowerment and truly pluralistic democracies are among the goals of postmodernism, then a multiplicity of narrative points of view, able to resist and transform postmodernity, are imperative.

Harvey contends that modernism was characterized by its conviction that "understanding had to be constructed through the exploration of multiple perspectives." However, he is quick to add, it "took on multiple perspectivism and relativism as its epistemology for revealing what it still took to be the true nature of a unified, though complex, un-

derlying reality" (30). Inherent in our condition of postmodernity is the proclivity to undermine modernism's faith in a unified reality. However, the deconstruction of dominant discourse must be more than an amalgam of individualistic and anarchistic acts of micropolitics that perpetuate and intensify the disempowerment of those who "subversively" interpret but do not transform at a macropolitical level. We must go at least one step further and challenge the status quo.

In literature, the limitation of one's efforts to the ludic (Ebert) or ironic parody of the canon through metafictional pastiche nullifies literature's ability to dialectically intervene in the course of history with its own authentic force. Metafiction reflects the fragmentation of postmodern life—but does not aspire to transform it.

Resistance narratives go beyond the simple mimesis of postmodernity and seek to oppose and redirect it. They suggest to their readers points of self-orientation outside postmodernity's compressed space-time coordinates. They enable the reader to critically rethink, outside the parameters of a single world economic system, possibilities for self-determination and self-realization. They restore more human dimensions to postmodern space and time, and permit readers to reorient themselves within them. Their rejection of modernism's faith in a unified reality constitutes an active refusal of the modernist desire to homologate, integrate, and dominate diversity.

Thus, if a polycentric postmodern alternative to the unifying view of modernism is to be promoted in literature, it is necessary to distinguish between two sharply different responses to the present. On the one hand, there is the metafictional retreat from the already subjectivized world of high modernism into an even more private bibliographic universe where the only point of view is that of the writing *I*. On the other hand, oppositional postmodern valorizations of multiple diversities do not give one perspective predominance over all others. Narratives that contest postmodernity

valorize counterdiscourses which place the subject in historical and associational systems of interdependence. They shatter the isolation of the subject of modernity by providing temporal and social points of orientation.

Because of the ubiquitous and invasive nature of postmodernity, any attempt to comprehend a particular writer's place within it must look far beyond the specifically esthetic parameters of a text and consider the social, political, and economic factors that condition writer and work. To reiterate a founding notion of historicist criticism, one must enter into the "zone of mutual transgressions" between writer, text, critic, and society (Bennett 5). For this reason, the point of departure for my textual analyses is a study of the poetics (or, as Binni phrases it, the active consciousness of inspiration) of the authors treated in this book. This reading strategy envisions the text as an integral part of the historical context in which it first appeared and as it interacts today with a reader who is "firmly rooted in existence, [has] a history, a profession, a religion, and even reading experience" (Blanchot 194).

In the chapter dedicated to oppositional postmodern narratives, I use Benjaminian remembrance as a means of recuperating fragments of the past so that they may serve as a guide for praxis. Although the person of letters is often tempted to profess that all that remains of the past is conserved in texts, this is not always the case. In fact, the reinscription in the present of the detritus of history (for example, orally transmitted knowledge of the marginalized and memories repressed in the unconscious) causes the recovered past to dialectically interact with the present.

Thus, remembrance (the recuperation of a temporal depth lost to postmodernity) is a valid means for restoring fragmented electronic time and space to manageable parameters. Benjamin suggests a form of "dialectical thought" that reinserts in the present events written out of received grand narratives of history, which are grounded in a concatenation of causes and effects.<sup>1</sup> Benjaminian remem-

brance can be utilized as a first response to the abbreviated temporal horizons of postmodernity and its lost historical sequence.

With this in mind, we can begin to postulate criteria for distinguishing between modern and postmodern literature. According to many commentators, esthetic or ludic postmodernism—what I will argue is in fact a late form of literary modernism—is characterized by, among other things, self-reflexivity, irony, and parody. When these commonly cited stylistic traits—along with, for example, the mixture of high and low art, indeterminacy and contingency—become ends unto themselves, they prove to be nothing more than a purely formalistic, hence socially passive, reflection of the condition of postmodernity.

The work of John Barth and Calvino fit comfortably within such a description of esthetic postmodernism. Both use metafictional self-irony, but not to decenter the subject. In fact, when compared to that of the high modernists, their work further privatizes human experience and places the individual squarely at the center of a Ptolemaic universe. When we compare the late modernist writings of Calvino and Barth to the oppositional postmodernisms of Morrison, Doctorow, and Tabucchi, the irrelevance of stylistic criteria in establishing a line of demarcation between literary modernism and postmodernism is underscored.

## II. Modern Postmodern

In the chapters that follow I will demonstrate a viable working distinction between late modernist and postmodern fictions. To that end I compare and contrast the work of the mature Italo Calvino (1923–1985) and John Barth (b. 1930), whom I consider late modernists, to the oppositional postmodernisms of Toni Morrison (b. 1931), E.L. Doctorow (b. 1931), and Antonio Tabucchi (b. 1943). I argue that postmodern narratives do not use the writing subject as the



organizing center of consciousness, a strategy characteristic of high literary modernism that also underpins the work of Barth and Calvino.

A significant part of this book will retrace the intellectual biography of a major author, Calvino, over the second half of his career, as it straddles the shift in literary sensibilities from the modern to the postmodern. A close reading of what he produced during the last two decades of his life will rebut the consensus among Calvino's English-language critics regarding the emblematically postmodern qualities of his writings. Calvino's popularity in the Anglophonic world makes his work a very convenient point of access and departure for a comparative study of American and Italian modern and postmodern writings. In addition, his career is in many respects representative of the second half of Italy's *Novecento*. Like the majority of intellectuals of his generation who came of age during the Resistance movement, Calvino felt he had to overcome the esthetic theories of the Idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce that had informed his youth. His first novels were inspired by Neorealism, the most important literary movement in Italy during the decade following the Second World War. Subsequently, he was one of the main protagonists of the deprovincialization of Italian letters and its integration into the European mainstream.

In the 1960s Calvino embraced French Structuralism and subsequently embarked on an epistemological project that questioned the foundations of perceived reality. During this period a gradual shift in focus occurs: his interrogation of the world forsakes the deductive reason of his youth in favor of an inductive approach. Then, roughly a decade before his death, he began to analyze the essence of specific microcosms so that he might discover a general theory of knowledge.

Because of his rejection of a predetermining cognitive model and ultimate perplexity or inability to elaborate a general system, critics such as JoAnn Cannon consider



Calvino a postmodern writer. However, I will contend that the goal of his examination of the particular was to abstract from what he had learned a foundational metanarrative capable of reconciling the myriad small narratives of postmodernity. A constant throughout this process of intellectual and artistic maturation and development, I would add parenthetically, was his modernist insistence on the writing subject as organizing center of consciousness. Thus, my reading of the work of the mature Calvino concentrates on how and why he perceived and interpreted differently during the last two decades of his career, how this modified perspective emanates from his writings, and the relationship between his personal growth as writer and thinker and our condition of postmodernity.

While any discussion of the postmodern must necessarily avoid privileging any one of many conflicting narratives, neither can the close examination of evolving microcosms, or "molecular movement" (Gramsci), be eluded. Rather, the reciprocal effects of the grand social, economic, and intellectual forces on a historically conditioned individual can and must be measured. This awareness motivates the intensity of focus given Calvino in this book.

My attention to the poetics of the American novelist John Barth will help define and clarify why I consider Calvino a late modernist. The juxtaposition is not coincidental: Barth and Calvino read and spoke approvingly of each other's work. Furthermore, my treatment of Barth underscores the radical subjectivity common to the metafiction of both writers, along with their explicit concern for the art and the act of creative writing and the belief they shared in a finite bibliographic universe which can be reconfigured in an infinite number of ways. In response to the postmodern undermining of all strong narratives, both Barth's and Calvino's individual brands of metafiction claim that the perspective of the author is deprivileged and that a more democratic polyphony of readers' responses is achieved when the author self-consciously writes about the act of writing. But,

as we shall see, the radical self-reflexivity of late modernist metafiction forswears dialogic interaction with the reader. It effectively reaffirms the traditional author-reader hierarchy. Metafictionists such as Barth and Calvino do not abdicate anything, rather, they strive to predetermine all subsequent readings by reasserting their status of privileged first reader of the text and preferred interlocutor of the narrating *I*.

Nonetheless, because of the self-reflexive character of their work, the metafiction of Calvino and Barth are often labeled postmodern. One definition of postmodern fiction that currently enjoys purchase emphasizes certain stylistic criteria such as the ludic distancing from the "real" world of social intercourse and the parodic undermining of the literary tradition. For example, Musarra claims that Calvino's later works are postmodern because he uses a "series of devices," which include the deferral of responsibility from writer to reader, self-reflexivity and metafictionality within "framing" narratives (137–38).

However, when we look beyond their narrative strategies, it is impossible to find evidence of a surmounting of the atomization of the individual which characterizes literary modernism. In fact, we find a further retreat from the "thought" world of high modernism toward a "written" one.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, there is a tension common to oppositional postmodern narratives toward a panoptic perspectivism that empowers readers to select and choose from among postmodernity's myriad heterogeneous narratives and propose their own individual syntheses, or narrations, of them. In Calvino's work, this is precluded by the profound alienation of the subject: what is seen as uncertainty, "perplexity" (Cannon) or "nonselection" (Musarra) in Calvino is emblematic of a frustration brought on by his inability to arrive at a metaphysical foundation of knowledge. A literary postmodernism of contestation must coincide with the use of multiple representations which undo the center of narrative gravity, breach the division of self and other, and ap-

proach new unities grounded in interdependence. Therefore, despite the stylistic devices and the chronological affinities, Calvino's and Barth's prose cast their lot decidedly on the side of modernity.

If writers can only represent what they know and if they can know only themselves and what they have read, then the exclusive use of stylistic criteria in determining the extent to which works reflect the present is justified. However, the pertinence of these and similar questions pales when we consider the social and historical context of which literature is an integral part. When we consider how their texts interact with the world around them, the radically subject-centric works of Barth and Calvino prove to have much more in common with those of high modernists such as Pirandello, Svevo, and Pessoa than with those of writers who actively participate in and contest the economic and social realities of postmodernity such as Morrison, Doctorow, and Tabucchi. These three, it must be stressed, use very different narrative strategies to engage postmodernity and actively refuse integration into the continuous present it installs. In contradistinction to the late modernist retreat from the world, their will to resist, interact, and constitute a dialectical presence makes their work postmodern.

The responses to postmodernity gleaned from the works I have chosen for this study as examples of oppositional postmodern narratives diverge greatly. While there is no causal link between them, Morrison and Doctorow both vociferously reject metafictional citationism and argue for the return of the writer to the social arena. Although Tabucchi's refusal is perhaps less explicit, it is equally peremptory, as we shall see in my discussion of his *Angelo nero*.<sup>3</sup> Toni Morrison takes issue with the lack of historical depth to be found in esthetic postmodernism. She believes that literature must aspire to something more than "private self-indulgence." In *Beloved* she uses the multiple narrative perspectives of her chorus of first-person narrators to

create a "sharable world" in which her reader may participate. Tabucchi recuperates from the high modernist Pessoa a process of radical self-examination. However, he restores the subject of narrative to social consortium when he equates the internal other (the hidden, repressed aspects of the psyche) with what is other (everything that is alien and potentially hostile to the conscious ego). His dialogue with the repressed leads him to acknowledge the nonmonolithic nature of the writing I, and then, and more importantly, to acquire the self-knowledge that can be gained only through the interactive mediation of other individuals. This heightened self-awareness provides the basis for the reaffirmation of social bonds. Doctorow does not utilize multiple narrative perspectives. However, he questions the truth value of univocal historiographic representations when he undermines the testimony of his narrating persona and in so doing validates alternative readings of the past.

The composite description of oppositional postmodern subjects limned in the work of these three authors recuperates what was marginalized in the past and strives to overcome dialogically the alienation of the modernist subject and the fragmentation or schizophrenia of its present-day counterpart. It does so not by reverting unto itself, as is the case with high and late literary modernism, but by seeking out objectifying points of reference in what is other.