

Avant-Garde or Lost Platoon?  
Postmodernism as Social Control

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### I

Imagine the worries of a conservative North American university or college professor in June 1970. To him or her, the attitudes, beliefs and behavior of some young people generally and students particularly during the past few years threatens not just the rational operation of a postsecondary institution—negatively impacting the classroom as well as institutional goals and decision-making structures. In addition, off-campus protest activities by young men and women—demonstrations, sit-ins, boycotts—plus the personal appearance and declared viewpoints of a segment of youth indicate an apparent wish by an ever-growing minority to reject all social norms, including legitimate efforts to contain Communism’s spread at home and abroad, and attempts by legally constituted authorities to oversee the participation of North America’s colored population in their country’s economic and social mainstreams.

On campus, this oppositional spirit of some students would seem to our professor to have a disruptive effect far beyond their numbers. Impudent in-class questions with regard to the “relevance” of course content, so-called “teach-ins” regarding social issues such as the Vietnam War or civil rights for Negroes, and production of institutional “anti-calendars” that unfairly and ignorantly critique both individual professors’ teaching abilities and the courses themselves are just a few of the ways the normal functioning of the institution has been hampered or endangered. Protest rallies held on campus to object to this or that policy of the school’s administration, or of democratically elected or appointed off-campus authority at every level, plus the selling or free distribution on campus of agitational left-wing propaganda in the form of leaflets, pamphlets, and “underground newspapers,” also have sought to undermine

postsecondary education's true purpose, namely the pursuit of knowledge useful for the orderly enhancement of a democratic society, and the mental and moral shaping of those young men and women who someday will guide private and public enterprises, not to mention the nation itself, into the future.

Most upsetting in the eyes of our professor is that the disruptive ideas and activities of a small number of students—ironically, many of whom are ostensibly studying disciplines considered part of the “humanities”—has led to a complete shut-down of a campus, as at Columbia University in the spring of 1968 and San Francisco State College that fall. Even Harvard suffered through a student “strike” in April of 1969. And repeatedly campus buildings in many institutions have been temporarily “occupied” by bands of students, who thus deny access to classrooms, laboratories, and faculty or administrative offices to those who legitimately have a right to use them. Such building takeovers—for purposes of general protest, and to prevent military and corporate recruiting—swelled to 313 in the U.S. during the 1969-70 academic year, according to the FBI. A survey of only a tenth of America's 2,000 campuses showed that in the first six months of 1969 more than 200,000 students were involved in protests, with 3,600 of them arrested and nearly 1,000 suspended or expelled (Hayden 393). And so far in 1970 the numbers appear higher.

Our professor is aware that, given the nature of many on-campus protest activities, radical students regard as porous the boundary between an academic institution and the surrounding society. So the danger seems real and immediate that the half-baked ideas of some students might find resonance among disgruntled youth not currently enjoying the privilege of attending a university or college. The May 1968 events in Paris, which saw students and young union militants bring much of the city to a standstill, represent an example of what might yet occur in North America. One group of student activists visible on U.S. campuses is already calling for a “worker-student alliance,” while in Detroit some Negro auto plant workers formed a Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement in spring 1968. An illegal strike of theirs even involved participation by white employees. By last June several such groups of Negro car-factory employees had established a League of Revolutionary Black Workers (Ahmad). How far

this potential insurrectionary contamination of the off-campus world by misguided young people could go is indicated by a group advocating outright terrorism that broke away the previous June from the largest U.S. radical student organization, the Students for a Democratic Society. The breakaway faction, calling itself the Weathermen, managed to kill three of their own this March when a bomb factory in a Greenwich Village townhouse exploded. And in early June a police headquarters in New York was bombed by the group, although no one was hurt.

To our professor, the authorities' counter to date to the burgeoning student and youth unrest represents no solution. Instead of mounting a civilized, vigorous and persuasive intellectual defense of the status quo, or adopting some other morally and scholarly sound initiative to restore the campuses to sanity, the powers-that-be appear to have adopted a Third-World-type escalation of deadly violence. In April this year, a student was shot and killed by police during protest riots in the Isla Vista student district alongside the University of California at Santa Barbara campus. Then in early May, in response to the U.S. invasion on 30 April of Cambodia, announced as necessary to defeat the Communist insurgents in Vietnam, four students peacefully participating in an anti-invasion demonstration at Kent State University in Ohio were gunned down by National Guardsmen, and a further eleven wounded. These shootings prompted a week of nation-wide protest, with more than 300 university and college campuses closed either in response to demonstrations or pre-emptively. Ten days after the Kent State incident, two student protesters were killed and nine wounded by police gunfire on the Jackson State University campus in Mississippi.

When our professor reviews the current crisis facing universities and colleges, he or she rejects as extreme the option of quieting postsecondary institutions by killing any young person who advocates unpopular ideas in a peaceful manner. Instead, our professor dreams of introducing into scholarly pursuits, especially those in the humanities and social science disciplines from which the majority of student protesters have come, a new and different slate of concepts whose embrace by students would result in calming the campus, and hence the surrounding society, where young people have been riled up by agitation originating in postsecondary institutions.

To be effective at pacifying the campus, the professor realizes, the alternative set of ideas would have to simultaneously:

- Convince students that nothing is “true.” Activism begins with a conviction that certain ideas, facts or actions are right, and others are wrong. Undermine this conviction and you undermine the motivation for protest: no one is going to march in the street or otherwise demand changes on behalf of a concept that he or she feels perhaps is not true.
- Undermine the ability of students to speak clearly to the off-campus population about the social, political or economic situation. People with a postsecondary education are, after all, an elite, and, like any elite, should demonstrate this status by employment of a jargon—a kind of insider’s shorthand or shop-talk—as well as references to esoteric knowledge not possessed by the hoi polloi. This component of the new set of concepts can build on some activists’ present use in speeches and writing of Maoist and other revolutionary terminology unfamiliar (and baffling, not to mention off-putting) to a non-specialist audience.
- Counter the sense of solidarity on which any mass movement depends by encouraging students to focus on the needs and wishes of particular societal groups. By encouraging students to narrow their attention to any specific splinter identity in the mosaic or melting pot of North American society, and especially by encouraging students not to link their own situation to those of such off-campus groups, a vision of overall institutional change and/or of social change will become vaguer. As a bonus, if this concept of “identity politics” can spread to the larger society, left-wing solidarity will be transformed from “how can your group and my group mutually aid each other to achieve a common beneficial change?” to “how can your group ensure that my group attains everything it wants?” Lack of solidarity also makes large national activist organizations (coalitions) impossible, whether of dissident students, faculty, or members of the public. Fracturing the opposition is always a good plan for maintaining the status quo. This aspect of the new mind-set can build on how Negro and women’s liberation leaders often are quicker to denounce participants in movements for social

change for perceived shortcomings than these leaders are to protest effectively against the laws or customs that these leaders feel constrain opportunities for advancement of members of their groups.

- Alter students' sense of history as consisting of an agreed-upon progression of events to, as Matthew Arnold called it, a "huge Mississippi of falsehood" (Bartlett 622). Marxism, which has definitely influenced student protesters' view of past, present, and future, claims that history demonstrates that revolution is inevitable: that "oppression" by capitalists will lead to their overthrow by employees. If students' belief in history as a series of events, each with a cause and a consequence, can be undermined, not only will the attraction of Marxism be lessened for them. Lack of a common historical sense will also aid in the fracturing of solidarity mentioned in the previous bulleted item: each splinter of society will be free to construct its own version of the past, complete with its menu of grievances and demands. The resultant endless arguments between splinters that will naturally follow will help ensure that a common front to work toward fundamental social change is unlikely.
- Mock and/or denounce students' empathy for the downtrodden. The challenge here is to induce students to abandon any feeling of kinship with the less fortunate at home and abroad. Such fellow-feeling can lead to a desire to do something to change the unfortunates' situation and, hence, represents a first step toward activism. This stance can be attacked as slumming, or as imposing alien values on people who are probably perfectly happy in their poverty or in what can be misrepresented as misfortune. Students must be convinced that their attempt to understand others' social situation, and, especially, to communicate to the wider world something of another group's attitudes, beliefs, accomplishments, and so on, is a form of theft—stealing the existential essence of such a group. Since young people can have an initial negative response to learning that others lack privileges they enjoy, such impulsive empathy can in the last resort be neutralized to irony. Irony is a stance young people find attractive —after all, it presupposes a sense of superiority toward what the ironist gazes

upon (that which is gazed at does not realize its shortcomings the way the ironist does). Facilitating students' adoption of adopt irony as an attitude toward the world encourages them to safely distance themselves from others' perceived predicaments. Students will probably feel equal distance from the established systems that at present structure society, but with such distance comes a declining inclination to try to alter those structures.

Besides the above parameters necessary for the success of the new on-campus mind-set, our professor realizes that for this cluster of concepts to be effective it must also include:

- Language taken from the vocabulary of left-wing opposition. Adherents of the new approach need to believe their scholarly, creative, and pedagogical activities based on these ideas are revolutionary, in keeping with what they consider to be the spirit of the age and/or a moral imperative, even while the adoption of these concepts restores the campuses to their pacific, detached, time-honored role. By transforming (reducing or eliminating the political content of) and adopting words such as "radical," "innovative," "subversive," "non-traditional," and "resistance," the new slate of attitudes can convince students they are still functioning in a "progressive" oppositional milieu.
- Language that sounds science-y, even while science is denounced. Marxists speak of "scientific socialism," and science is generally believed to be the fountainhead of truth. Hence science must be described in such a way that its claims to veracity are undermined. This is in accordance with the basic tenet of inducing students to believe that nothing is true. Science can be declared suspect as a source of knowledge because it is a product of human beings, who naturally have their biases, and some examples can always be evoked of silly or stupid or wrong-headed scientific claims from the past. Science students know that, in fact, scientific theories are based on the results of reproducible experiments—experiments that can be repeated with the same results by anybody with any sort of bias anywhere in the world. So this new mind-set is unlikely to gain much

purchase among science students or professors. Such a shortcoming is not a serious flaw, however, since most campus protest originates with humanities and social sciences students (the latter field known as the “soft sciences,” where the scientific method is not rigorously followed). Yet students’ general belief in the efficacy of science is unlikely to vanish entirely. Thus some science vocabulary must be employed: a specific stance toward primary material in literary criticism or anthropology, say, can be designated a “theory,” or a confusing compositional strategy in fiction or poetry can be called “experimental.”

- Language that substitutes new words for concepts already described by familiar words. This facet of the new approach is in accordance with the goal of hampering communication between students and the wider public. For instance, “subaltern” can be substituted for “subordinate,” or “interrogate” for “question.” A discussion of how complex an idea is can be said to “complicate” that idea. If a sample of writing is incomprehensible, its goal can be described as “to disrupt” or “to trouble” or “to subvert” ordinary syntax or interpretation. Rather than stating an author or instructor “focuses” or “concentrates” on a subject or viewpoint, if the latter need to be disparaged the statement can be made that the author or teacher “privileges” that subject or point of view. The negative connotations around the word “privilege” is a bonus beyond mere jargonization—the linking of a negative aura to the situation being described is a psychological step toward inducing the reader or listener to regard an action, idea or person with reduced credence.
- A distrust of language itself. Since written or spoken language is the means of communicating ideas, activist students will be less eager to articulate their beliefs to peers or the wider population if they can be persuaded to mistrust or dislike language per se. To this end, latent anti-authoritarianism can be evoked by claiming that grammar—which it is possible to portray as an array of rules undemocratically imposed on people by their language—is intrinsically oppressive. Once history and science (in this case, philology, child development, cognition studies, neurobiology) are disparaged sufficiently in students’ minds,



language can be denounced as inherently hierarchical, and hence racist, sexist, etc.

- Appeals to authority under the guise of anti-authoritarianism. Activist students who proclaim themselves anti-authoritarian nevertheless frequently quote the dicta of Mao or Che Guevara or other revolutionary leaders as authorization for a political position or action. Similarly, students can be induced to reflexively respect authority by insisting they justify their views, however supposedly contrarian, by reference to or quotation from a pre-approved selection of notable contributors to the new slate of ideas. Encouraging this stricture not only channels a student's thinking into prescribed paths, it also blunts critical thinking that can lead to unsound conclusions by requiring reference to a precedent (proof that an idea is already sanctioned by an authority) for any opinion.
- A career path. Real revolution creates an uncertain future, even for revolutionaries. While young people love to regard themselves as adventurous, most attend college or university with the solid expectation of bettering their social and/or economic prospects in the long run. Ensuring that those students who adopt the new mind-set are rewarded with academic jobs—indeed, making proof of an applicant's familiarity and facility with this new collection of concepts a *requirement* for academic employment—will help ensure the widespread acceptance of these precepts.

The bulleted wish-lists above will be instantly recognizable to anyone who has spent time in certain contemporary university departments as the essence of postmodernist thought. Of course, postmodernism was not adopted by postsecondary professors, programs, and departmental and course syllabi at the urging of one conservative professor, or even a cabal of the same. Yet campus unrest was at its height toward the end of the 1960s when North American academics in the humanities and social sciences began to absorb and promulgate the ideas of the linguists, philosophers, psychologists, cultural anthropologists and critics whose writings constitute postmodernist beliefs. And as these ideas were embraced by many professors, and

passed along to their students, campuses were indeed transformed. Postsecondary institutions changed from functioning as lively centres of unbridled inquiry and protest —from which young people fanned out to build local and national social movements opposed to the Vietnam War, imperialism, and racism, and to help raise and expand society’s consciousness about feminism and ecology. Such student engagement with the larger society—whose taxes fund academic life—had been leading, as our professor noted, toward a realization by activist students that how employment is organized enables the daily reproduction of the systems of production and consumption that keep in power the hierarchies that benefit most from capitalism and its handmaidens, global commerce and war.

Today, with postmodernism a significant mode of thought in many humanities and social science disciplines, English-speaking universities and colleges have become placid degree mills where students meekly undergo training in accepting a lifetime of personal debt and in accepting the immutability of existing economic and social arrangements. As governments have dropped the goal of extending postsecondary education to an ever-larger percentage of the population, except with reference to “job skills training,” universities have become increasingly corporatized in terms of funding, self-image, and structure. Despite the self-proclaimed “left-wing” content of postmodernist ideas, faculty have almost as meekly as students acceded to the extension of corporate influence over the priorities and conduct of postsecondary institutions. For all the tens of thousands of classroom lectures, assigned textbooks, academic articles, and student papers filled with anti-capitalist rhetoric, in North America no effective national organization exists of professors or students actively confronting corporate influence on- or off-campus. All is calm on the campuses, except for flare-ups of the office politics that affect every large hierarchical enterprise. Where faculty unions exist, they do blunt the worst excesses of management. But in the absence of social-change unionism, faculty unions, like the rest of the current trade union movement, are essentially labour brokers and enforcers of the labour truce represented by collective agreements.

## II

That postmodernist beliefs constitute a conservative initiative, aimed at pacifying campus and community alike, is no secret (except perhaps to some of its adherents), as a few examples below will illustrate. And postmodernism at its core exhibits enough contradictions, inconsistencies, absurdities and outright falsehoods (despite its protective insistence that nothing is true) to ensure that its impact on academia and literature will not ultimately endure. An exploration of three significant examples of these flaws as they relate to the study and creation of literature—the main focus of the present paper—follows the evidence below of a wide awareness of the reactionary nature of this slate of beliefs. But first, for any reader unfamiliar with the mind-set, a definition and examples will briefly be offered.

The magisterial dean of literary definition, M.H. Abrams, states that postmodernism is a term frequently applied to post-World War II literature and art. “Postmodernism,” he specifies, “involves not only a continuation, sometimes carried to an extreme, of the countertraditional experiments of modernism, but also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional” (176). Abrams adds that an intent of postmodernist authors is also “to overthrow the elitism of modernist ‘high art’ by recourse for models to the ‘mass culture’ in film, television, newspaper cartoons, and popular music.” He states that postmodern literature often “blend[s] literary genres, cultural and stylistic levels, the serious and the playful” and that therefore such writing does not easily fit into traditional literary classification. Abrams includes literature of the absurd in his description of the aim of some postmodernist authors “to subvert the foundations of our accepted modes of thought and experience so as to reveal the meaninglessness of existence.” He thus links literary postmodernism to the poststructuralist approach in linguistic and literary theory, observing that poststructuralists

undertake to subvert the foundations of language in order to demonstrate that its seeming meaningfulness dissipates, for a rigorous inquirer, into a play of conflicting indeterminacies, or else undertake to show that all forms of cultural

discourse are manifestations of the reigning ideology, or of the relations and constructions of power, in contemporary society. (177)

Student or faculty postmodernist literary criticism in practice involves obligatory reference to a narrow band of critics and philosophers. In a characterization that applies to many of these thinkers' works, Stuart Sim describes the efforts of one of the presiding figures of postmodernist criticism, Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), as "notoriously difficult to interpret" (68). No essay, thesis or journal article would be regarded as complete (or sound in argument) without at least a nod to French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). Citation of at least one *pensée* of Derrida's replaces the absolutely required reference in literary essays, theses and articles during the 1940s through 1970s to at least one critical precept of Anglo-American poet *and* critic T.S. Eliot (1888-1965).<sup>1</sup>

In courses, programs, and departments where the postmodernist approach to literature is the dominant operational guide, the ideas of these approved authorities are called "theories." As our professor yearned for in 1970, this science-y term is applied to the notions of the critics and philosophers without being accompanied by any of the rest of the accoutrements of actual science: the articulation of a clear hypothesis, the development of experiments capable of testing the theory, reproducible results, control groups, and so on. But for students in such courses and programs, the ability to adroitly reference these "theories" is vital for academic success. "The final mark for one's work," Sim observes, "will reflect the degree of success in articulating, and then applying, the theoretical 'line' as much as anything else. The last thing one wants is to be accused of in such situations is being 'undertheorized'—that way, low marks lie" (10).

Contemporary poetry regarded as postmodern consists of writing that is paratactic—that is, grammatical and logical connections between words, phrases and concepts are frequently missing. The writing is determinedly non-narrative, non-representational and non-linear, and is essentially conceptual art: the ideas or feelings that the piece is meant to convey are of negligible value compared to the cleverness/obliqueness of the artist's chosen method to present her or his subject matter.

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<sup>1</sup> Besides Lacan and Derrida, other critics who can be invoked include Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984), Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Luce Irigaray (b. 1932), Hélène Cixious (b. 1937), Julia Kristeva (b. 1941), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (b. 1942).

Often a compositional strategy of accretion or collage is employed. For example, here are the first four stanzas of “Any Publicity Is Good Publicity” by Mark Wallace, co-editor of *Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s* (2001):

Won't have to testify about  
pigs guilty on the rotunda. Get packing  
nomad street misunderstanding

in second gear. Catch today  
impersonating tomorrow. Down under  
phone static, what's worth

being a cleaner health inspector  
not wearing a hat? Screwed  
on the cola marriage circuit

and the power's up for gripes  
about who calls who.  
Show me your badge again. (82)

Or here are the first three stanzas from “Summer Triangle” by derek beaulieu, poet laureate of Calgary 2014-16:

four southern regions

rocks leave their own images levels allow left  
& left & the & the mad dash *em* or a single  
feather

birdman points to one grotto (15)

In its entirety, here is “Banish” by Margaret Christakos, University of Windsor's writer-in-residence for 2004-2005:

Banished. Abdehins. Ba ni sh ed. De. Hs. In. Ab.  
B\_\_\_\_d.  
\_anishe\_.  
\_\_nish\_\_.  
\_\_is\_\_.  
Ban\_hed.  
\_an\_he\_.

\_a\_\_hed.  
\_a\_sh\_d.  
\_\_\_\_sh\_\_.  
Ba\_\_\_\_\_d.  
\_\_\_\_she\_.  
\_\_\_\_he\_.  
B\_\_\_\_\_e\_. (49)

Billy Collins, the U.S. poet laureate for 2001-2003, characterizes such poems in the Introduction to his poetry anthology *180 More* (2005) as fundamentally unwelcoming to readers. A clearly written poem can be difficult to interpret, Collins argues, but that is not the same as a poem that immediately blocks its readers' access. "If you need to cut an entrance into a poem, who is going to bother?" he asks (xvi). "If a poem has no clear starting place," he continues, "how can it go anywhere? If a poem does not begin in lucidity, how can it advance into the mysterious" (xvi)? As an example of an unwelcoming start to a poem, he picks the opening lines of a poem, "Up to Speed," by the postmodernist Rae Armantrout, whose collection *Versed* won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize:

Streamline to instantaneous  
voucher in / voucher out  
system. (xv)

Armantrout is associated with the postmodernist literary faction known as the "Language" poets, after one of their publishing venues in the 1970s, a magazine entitled *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. According to the Academy of American Poets, Language poetry operates from the premise "that language dictates meaning rather than the other way around" (Academy). Language poetry also requires "reader participation in the construction of meaning." The critic Robert von Hallberg, in an essay more sympathetic to this kind of writing than Collins, tackles a poem by the Language poet Michael Palmer, who served as a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets 1999-2004, and in 2006 was awarded the Academy's \$100,000 Wallace Stevens Award. The first six lines of his "Construction of the Museum" read:

In the hole we found beside the road  
something would eventually go

Names we saw spelled backward there

In the sand we found a tablet

In the hole caused by bombs  
which are smart we might find a hand (von Hallberg 187)

The concept that the reader must construct meaning from such an apparently-baffling collection of clauses and phrases does not allow, von Hallberg argues, the poem to mean anything any reader unilaterally decides it does, “though this naïve sort of populism is often adduced to support the poetic policies of Language writing” (187). For von Hallberg, the compositional strategy of a poem such as Palmer’s points to “a structure, or poem, behind the poem; the words on the page evoke a poem beyond the page, one that isn’t there, strictly speaking” (186). Poems such as Palmer’s “imply that there is a structure behind the text . . . , a coherence beyond the surface incoherence or disjunctiveness of the words, lines, or stanzas on the page” (187). Von Hallberg traces this approach to poetry back to the American poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972) (and see below for more on postmodernists’ continual evocation of Pound): “Pound’s enormous idealism rested on a faith that the structuring powers of the mind are universal, natural, and effective at identifying orders not marked by the conjunctions that conventionally indicate intellectual relations: if, then, but, because, for, although, however, and so on” (187). Palmer’s parataxis, von Hallberg insists, works because of the coherent poem behind the poet’s apparently incoherent one: “The gap between normative English syntax and Palmer’s syntax itself identifies a utopian conceptual space for the poem: there is an order elsewhere, beyond the page” (188). The critic claims that the “elsewhere” he identifies, the space/place where the “hypothetical coherence” (190) of Palmer’s poem may be found, “resides in conventions established historically in an interpretive community” (188), that is, the conventions employed by ordinary readers of English.

This torturous extraction of coherence from apparent incoherence is necessary, or even to be desired, according to von Hallberg, because “I look to poetry for an extension of conventional patterns of thinking” (190). Yet “patterns of thinking” surely have a cultural and/or neurobiological—hardly a poetic—origin. Moreover, why such an “extension” is necessary or desirable is not discussed by the critic. Nor why poetry, of all human endeavors, should be singled out to bear the burden of this enormous task of mental realignment. Even if poetry were the best route to this goal, von Hallberg does not explain why a particular *form*—specifically, writing that is unintelligible to an average reader—is the preferred route to extend patterns of thought, as opposed to, for instance, bringing to literature new *content*. One thinks of how feminist poetry with a clearly accessible message—witty, poignant, biting, denunciatory—as part of a burgeoning social movement helped change people’s once-conventional thinking about the roles and status of women. And many scholars such as Marshall McLuhan (for example in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*) have made the case that changes in technology—the invention and adoption of certain tools or machines and the resultant economic and social changes that accompany the integration of such tools or machines into society—is actually how von Hallberg’s “conventional patterns of thinking” are altered (Grady 14, 24-25), rather than via poetry.

Although, for postmodernists, poetry is expected to be unwelcoming to a reader—to depart from “normative English syntax” in von Hallberg’s words—the same is not usually expected of prose, however. One hears from postmodernist practitioners and advocates several reasons for employing parataxis (reasons included in our professor’s 1970 wish list). Especially invoked is the assertion that conventional language use, involving rules of grammar and logical construction of thought, is bad (authoritarian, racist, sexist, patriarchal, imperialist, homophobic, and the like). But the defense of parataxis, and the denunciation of conventional English usage is commonly presented using—er—conventional English usage. With prose, the only nod to the supposed crimes and shortcomings of language is found in the frequent turbidity of postmodernist critical essays, with heavy use of jargon substituting for clarity of idea.



In an era when cosmologist-authors such as Brian Greene, Stephen Hawking, and Steven Weinberg can offer lucid discussions of such complex esoterica as post-Big-Bang inflation, string theory, and dark matter, the murkiness of much critical writing about postmodern literature is startling. Here is Jon Paul Fiorentino, the editor-in-chief of Concordia University's *Matrix* literary magazine, introducing his collection of postmodern prairie poetry: "These are poets who unwrite the prairie. I suppose it is not enough to say they are immersed in immersion. The idea of descriptive poetics (as opposed to prescriptive) is key. . . . The anxiety of geography is reshaping the context" (9). What the anthologist means by "unwriting" a geography, or what an author being "immersed in immersion" means, or the difference between "descriptive" and "prescriptive" poetics, or what the "anxiety of geography" refers to is nowhere discussed. Apparently a mere mention of these concepts, which evidently the reader is meant to be appreciative of or to be awed by rather than to understand, is sufficient. This approach pervades Fiorentino's explanation of his book, for example: "If the previous prairie ethic/aesthetic relied on notions of found linguistic material (as opposed to received linguistic material), of an extrapolation of vernacular (as opposed to idiom), of reproaching universality (as opposed to approaching universality), then this project [the anthology] necessarily becomes an extension of that ethic as well as a response" (10).

Missing from any defense of postmodernist approaches to literature is a consideration of the *politics* of obfuscation in literary creation and criticism: who benefits when comprehension of an art form, or of a critical discussion of that art form, is narrowed to an academically trained cohort assigned to, or willing to, attempt the interpretation of deliberately obscure writing? Postmodernists' intentional creation of obstacles to understanding by the larger public or audience indicates a tendency for postmodernism's practitioners to regard themselves as an elite—whether such obstacles consist of the compositional strategies employed in artistic endeavors, and/or of heavy employment of jargon and idiosyncratic re-definition of common words in gestures to explain the merits of such art. Restriction of cultural knowledge to a(n) (elite) few is a conservative agenda, essentially reactionary in that it harkens back to a time before an

educated, involved populace was a proclaimed goal of democratically governed communities.

As mentioned above, awareness that these postmodern beliefs and practice are a tool for conservative social control is no secret, and not just among students, scholars and practitioners of the literary arts. Writing in the *Globe and Mail*, the cultural critic Ian Buruma describes the wholehearted adoption by American Tea Party Republicans of the first item on our professor's 1970 wish list: to instill a belief that nothing is true. Demonstration by experts of the falsehood of statements by former Republican senator Rick Santorum<sup>2</sup> had no impact on his followers, Buruma notes, because, like postmodernists, Santorum's constituency insists that objective truth does not exist.

The first people to argue that all truth is relative, and that all information is a form of propaganda that reflects society's power relations, were far removed from the world inhabited by Mr. Santorum and his supporters. Several decades ago, a number of European and U.S. intellectuals, often with a background in Marxism, developed a 'postmodern' critique of the written word. We might think, they argued, that what we read in *The New York Times* or *Le Monde* is objectively true, but everything that appears there is, in fact, a disguised form of propaganda for bourgeois class interests.

There's no such thing, the postmodern critic believes, as independence of thought. Objective truth is an illusion. . . . The real lie, in this view, is the claim of objectivity.

Buruma notes that followers of Santorum who dismiss, for example, the *Washington Post's* conclusion that "there was 'not a shred of evidence' to back up Mr. Santorum's claims" are perfect postmodernists. "The most faithful followers of obscure leftist thinkers in Paris, New York or Berkeley," Buruma concludes, "are the most reactionary elements in the American heartland."

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<sup>2</sup> Santorum, who was seeking to become the Republicans' presidential nominee, had said that ten per cent of all deaths in the Netherlands are caused by euthanasia, with half of these killings imposed on patients against their will. He further claimed that the elderly in Holland are so frightened by the situation that they now wear bracelets asking not to be euthanized.

Postmodernism's "nothing is true" is also used by employers and real estate speculators to try to neutralize employee or community resistance via a process called "narrative capture." Where employees of an enterprise are proving troublesome—seeking better wages or conditions, or upset by some new management scheme—narrative capture experts are employed to conduct interviews with employees concerning the issue or issues being contested. The resulting study may be presented as an attempt to document the "work culture" of the enterprise. Subsequently, at a meeting of employees the various responses to these interviews are offered, along with management's position. Employees are assured that, via narrative capture, management has listened to their perspective. But since there is no truth, only "competing narratives," employees are informed that their individual view of the flashpoint issue is only one possible way of seeing the situation, of no more or less value than any other. Employees are urged to see management's viewpoint as equally valid as their own expression of a sense of injustice. The hope is that employees will agree that since, after all, management is charged with controlling the enterprise, management's narrative concerning the situation should prevail, and employees should abandon their struggle to improve their working lives. Alternatively, management learns to "spin" their take on a situation in order to refute or defuse the dissatisfactions that inform their employees' narratives (TMiller).

Similarly, a real estate speculator meeting resistance from the community will hire a narrative capture expert, who interviews community members regarding their opposition to some proposed real estate initiative. At a community meeting, the various "competing narratives" are presented. Community members are urged to see that their vision of how their community might develop is only one possible scenario. Since the speculator's view of the situation is held to be equally valid with the perspective of community members opposed to the speculator's plans, and since the speculator is going to "invest" in the community, the hope of the speculator is thereby to undermine community resistance, community solidarity.

Adherence to other postmodernist precepts also results in the mind-set's followers reinforcing right-wing values. Reviewing Bruce Robbins' *Upward Mobility and*

*the Common Good* (2007), Portland State University's Jennifer Ruth notes Robbins' claim that Foucault's opposition to the state leads to a misunderstanding of contemporary power relations. Ruth continues:

Appalled by neoliberal cutting-and-slashing, many leftist critics nonetheless continue to churn out Foucaultian monographs, as if there were no possible relationship between a discourse suspicious of state services and one dismantling such services. In a startling but effective move, Robbins places Foucault not in his usual company of Derrida and Lacan . . . but of social conservatives like Christopher Lasch who see the rise of a professionally-administered state as an assault on individual accountability and self-reliance. Robbins writes, "The complicity of Foucaultian antistatism with Republican free-market enthusiasm for privatization should give pause even to those who are most likely to be skeptical of expanding state surveillance and intervention." (168)

The equivalence of the postmodernist ethos and the beliefs of religious conservatives is explored by the bioarchaeologist Gordon Rakita, writing in the *Society for Archaeological Science's SAS Bulletin*. He decries the "postmodern philosophical underpinnings of the intelligent design movement . . . [and] the commonalities between the critiques of evolutionary theory offered by creationists and many radical postmodernist scholars" (25). The creationist and postmodernist movements both "make the rejection of scientific claims and evolutionary science itself a part of their primary goals," Rakita says. "For those of us who take part in the scientific enterprise or who teach science, such attacks offer constant distractions and distortions." Raikita then introduces and disproves six "common arguments posed by radical postmodernists and creationists," including: that evolution and Social Darwinism are equivalent, that evolution leads to immorality and denies spirituality and human agency, that evolution asserts all change is random, and that evolution does not explain everything. He states that these arguments surface regularly in academia, and that science professors "often confront one version (the creationist) in our classrooms, only to have to face the other (the post-modern) in our faculty meetings. The consistency and consonance of their criticisms is ironic" (26).

The absurdity of postmodernism's warped depictions of the scientific process was most famously underlined by a hoax perpetrated by New York University's Alan Sokol in 1996. The ecocritic Harold Fromm, writing in *The Hudson Review*, quotes Sokol as saying that in the 1990s he became aware of "the phenomenon of postmodernist literary intellectuals pontificating on science and its philosophy and making a complete bungle of both. I decided to write a parody of postmodern science criticism, to see whether it could get accepted as a serious scholarly article in a trendy academic journal" (Fromm 574). The eventual article "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" (Sim 13) was accepted by *Social Text*, "a politically correct cultural studies journal of the left," in Fromm's designation (574), and published in their Spring/Summer 1996 issue. Among other "lunatic" (Sim 13) assertions, Sokol's article proclaims that the value of pi ( $\pi$ ) is not constant but relative to an observer's position. Such extreme relativism has been, as Fromm observes, "increasingly adopted by the conservative anti-Darwinian, Intelligent Design right" (574). He details a New York University philosopher's account of a postmodernist archaeologist who declares that "science is just one of many ways of knowing the world. [The cosmological myth of an American aboriginal tribe] is just as valid as the archaeological viewpoint of what prehistory is about" (575). Fromm observes that "the connections of this [claim] to the Intelligent Design movement need hardly be pressed" (575).

Fromm, always conscious of the ecological crisis that is occurring concurrently with postmodernism's attacks on science, reports that one former postmodernist anti-science crusader, Bruno Latour, had a change of heart about 2004.

Powerfully cognizant of the way in which right-wing fundamentalism and politics have mastered only too well the debunking *mentalité* of "critique" — denial of global warming, endorsement of Intelligent Design, anti-science evasions of law and sideswipings of constitutionality to promulgate a war and reward the super-rich — Latour reversed gears (with a vengeance). (578)

Fromm quotes Latour:

While we spent years trying to detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements, do we now have to reveal the real objective

and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the *illusion* of prejudices? And yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives. (Fromm 578)

The reactionary implications of other postmodernist tenets, beyond denial of objective truth and hence the truths of science, have been identified, for example in an appraisal of identity politics. Reviewing the course of contemporary feminism, *The New Yorker's* Ariel Levy says that “[a] politics of liberation was largely supplanted by a politics of identity” (80). Levy argues that:

if feminism becomes a politics of identity, it can safely be drained of ideology. Identity politics isn't much concerned with abstract ideals, like justice. It's a version of the old spoils system: align yourself with other members of a group—Irish, Italian, women, or whatever—and try to get a bigger slice of the resources that are being allocated. If a demand for revolution is tamed into a simple insistence on representation, then one woman is as good as another. You could have, in a sense, feminism without feminists. You could have, for example, . . . [former American Tea Party Republican vice-presidential candidate] Sarah Palin.” (80)

Responding to an overview of Canadian postmodern poetry by Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy, *Writing in Our Time: Canada's Radical Poetries in English (1957-2003)*, Brock University's Gregory Betts takes issue with the authors' postmodernist appropriation of the term “radical” to define the writing of the authors upon whom the book focuses:

[T]he idea of a “radical” author as presented in this study bears little outward resemblance to the political tradition of radicalism. For instance, the enshrinement of the TISH writers into the mainstream body of Canadian literature presents more of a contradiction to the book's rhetoric of antagonistic

marginality than either Butling or Rudy admit in any of their essays: a contradiction that continues in their extensive list of other radical poets—including such “marginal” writers (144) as Robert Kroetsch (10), George Bowering, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Daphne Marlatt (23), bpNichol (24), Roy Miki (26), and Christian Bök (73). What brings these writers together is not cultural marginality, or even radical activity (in the conventional use of the term to refer to far leftist political agitation). . . . [T]he radical writers mapped out in this book participate in the contemporary Canadian literary mainstream; they are all amongst the most taught, hired, awarded and celebrated of contemporary Canadian authors, and have all consistently been beneficiaries of governmental subsidies. (24-25)

Obviously, calling the mainstream “radical” drains the meaning from both terms, and aids the conservative project of confusing students and others regarding the politically oppositional nature of a radical stance, activity, or organization.

Specialized (including debased, as in the deployment of “radical”) use of ordinary words, along with jargon (such as “implicated” in the following quotation), are partly why some academics question the project of much contemporary literary criticism. Markus Poetzsch of Wilfrid Laurier University muses that a polished critical article can hide a contemporary scholar’s doubts and worries,

worries that what we labour to produce after countless hours of research, grant applications and social isolation will only ever be read by a handful of specialists and the occasional harassed student, worries that the non-academic public is really not interested (or shall we say *implicated*) in these texts, does not seek them out, and would in all likelihood be confused, bored or irritated if invited to read them. Still more troubling is the thought that even academics do not invariably enjoy reading the texts produced by other specialists, colleagues or students; we are not, or at least not often enough, moved by them or bettered in any appreciable way. (128)

Poetzsch quotes the University of London scholar Chris Baldick as stating that contemporary literary studies may at their worst “proliferate impenetrable jargon,

produce gluts of unwanted articles, jump aboard theoretical bandwagons, or disappear into arcane specialization.” The rewards for this behavior, Poetzsch notes, “are by no means paltry”: tenure and promotion. But the academy’s present overwhelming emphasis on “interpretive innovation or distinctiveness” (129) is market-driven, he says, a manoeuvre necessary for increased academic status rather than an activity intended to produce insights that might benefit readers. A critical endeavor required by the current academic marketplace frequently is “not interested in notions of ‘truth’ or ‘validity’ (however complexly these may be framed, articulated or positioned for debate) and in fact makes its object the perpetual deferment of these more traditional goals in order to ensure untrammelled interpretive freedom” (129).

Such desperately unique responses to literature “[begin] to take on the . . . ‘fabricated’ nature of literature itself” (129). Poetzsch refers to the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ characterization of “the vanity of fabricating books” (128), and adds:

Not only do [critics] write (at the best of times) for a numerically limited readership and one, moreover, that is in some sense complicit in the economy of vanity and fabrication, but we do so without a clear sense of, or appreciable regard for, that audience’s needs and interests. Literary criticism is, after all, driven primarily by authorial and institutional needs, not by the needs of its anticipated (and unanticipated) readership. (130)

### III

Far from meeting non-career needs, postmodernist ideas, like the creative works they extoll, function instead as an agent of social repression, furthering a reactionary agenda as the above examples of this mind-set in practice demonstrate. But even if literary postmodernism were a neutral or even progressive influence on the academy and society, the mind-set embraces a number of claims and concepts that do not withstand scrutiny (in addition to the idea that there is no truth, and that therefore science perpetuates falsehoods). Three central literary postmodern assertions are:



- **Postmodern poetry is avant-garde, innovative, and experimental, and forces its readers to think in new ways.**

“Avant-garde” delineates the forefront of a military advance, behind which the massed forces of an army must follow. But the writing called (often self-designatedly) “avant-garde” has so far in literary history been a tangential approach to literary practice, rather than a forerunner or harbinger of the direction literature will take. After four decades of postmodern “theory” and practice of poetry, for example, a glance at the majority of North American literary journals and published collections of poems is ample evidence of postmodernism’s minor influence in the creative realm. Postmodernism is, then, whatever its influence on literary criticism or the social sciences, incidental to the main developments in poetry over the past forty years. An article in the *Literary History of Saskatchewan* by the author of this essay notes:

Non-referential, non-linear writing began in 1915 with the rise of the Dada and then surrealist art movements. Around this time, free verse began to challenge as the defining characteristic of poetry the use of regular patterns of sound (rhyme), rhythm (metre), and stanza. However, whereas free verse blazed the trail most poets since have followed, non-referential, non-linear writing has never been the vanguard of poetic expression, but remains a minority offshoot. (115)

The so-called “avant-garde” is more like a detachment or squad that has wandered away from the main body of the army until out of communication range of the rest of the troops, albeit singing martial songs and shouting fierce slogans by way of keeping up its courage. The lost platoon’s self-bestowed title is a masterwork of spin, like that of real estate speculators who trash natural environments or existing neighborhoods for profit but call themselves “developers.” As Edward Mendelson of Columbia University points out in an article on New York School poet Frank O’Hara (1926-1966):

Avant-gardes claim to create the art of the future. But the “art of the future” generally proves wrong about the real future of art in the same way that the “city of the future” on display at a world’s fair proves wrong about the future of cities. . . . [Nineteenth century French poet Charles] Baudelaire dismissed the avant-garde as a “military metaphor”: until the mid-nineteenth century the word

meant only the front ranks of an army. The avant-garde idea was suitable only to “those who can only think collectively” (“que ne peuvent penser qu’en société”), not to those for whom . . . the only truth is face to face. An avant-garde coterie always prefers a revolution in language and technique to a revelation of thought and feeling. O’Hara recognized this preference as a sign of insecurity, a failure of nerve. (34)

Mendelson quotes O’Hara as mocking the belief in the artistic and literary circles in which he ran that anything excellent “must surely be avant-garde because whatever is avant-garde is also excellent,” stating in a humorous poem: “[I]t’s new, it must be vanguard!”

Curiously, the insistence among the advocates of postmodernism that writers who believe in the cause must be “avant-garde” or “cutting-edge” means these critics have adopted a linear terminology, a linear metaphor. Linear thinking is ordinarily a negative among postmodernists. This apparently is due to believers expanding the opposition of philosopher Jean-François Lyotard to “metanarratives” —sweeping overviews of history that, for instance, describe the rise of political democracy or the colonization of North America as inevitable, a series of steps considered progress toward a goal (Sim 97-98). From regarding all grand narratives with suspicion, the next step was to question and reject any articulation of a sequenced development: linear thinking. Except, obviously, when perception of such a sequence bolsters postmodern claims, such as that paratactic writers are out in front of a mass of all other dutiful follower-writers, or that paratactic writing is the sharp edge of a blade—the rest of the blade consisting of the literature that trails behind the writing that constitutes the working forefront of the art. (Another authorized departure from non-linear thinking is that postmodernism is not a singular cultural event but is rather a direct successor of/improvement upon modernism.)

The term “innovative” as applied to contemporary paratactic art is as dubious a designation as “avant-garde.” After a century of parataxis, there is nothing novel or ground-breaking about yet another work that fractures grammar or a logical sequence of thought. The only way in which parataxis is innovative is identical to how, for example,

every poet not using traditional regular patterns of sound, rhythm and stanza is innovative in what he or she creates: with the advent of free verse, the poet invents the art form each time he or she writes a poem. Decisions regarding lineation, indents, margins, white space, punctuation and more must be settled by the free verse poet each time a new work is crafted. And free-verse poets drawing on image banks new to the art form, bringing new content (subject matter) into poetry, or incorporating a vocabulary not previously found in poetry are also innovators. What good poem of whatever critical school is not innovative in some way? In reality, “innovative” is a synonym for “well-crafted” when it comes to contemporary poetry: every good poem engages us with a surprising aspect to its diction, form, and/or content (although surprise alone does not guarantee literary accomplishment). The only non-innovative poems are those employing clichés of diction, form or content, and such poems can equally be postmodern or free verse.

“Experimental” is as misleading an adjective for postmodern poetry as “innovative,” except for a similar acknowledgement that *all* effective authors of every literary tradition continually experiment—rethink, recast, revise a piece of writing—in order to shape the best possible vehicle to convey their artistic intent. Limiting the descriptor of “experimental” to paratactic poetry raises the implied question: what is the hypothesis the experiment is intending to test? Also: what is the result? As the American poet William Stafford (1914-1993), who in 1970 served as the Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (the appointment now known as U.S. Poet Laureate), says in an interview:

I feel a lot of disquiet about the purposefully experimental. I mean purposeful anything. Purposefully patriotic, purposefully revolutionary, purposefully experimental, they're all leaving the center. They're all forsaking that inner compass that art comes from. The rest is artificial, drawing by the numbers. It disquiets me to see these blurbs on books. “This extends further.” You know, the current trend of the experimental. I don't care where you're experimenting: what are you finding? What's there? (51)

Parataxis' original experiment was to test the conviction by adherents of Dada and surrealism that an encounter with examples of these artistic approaches would alter readers' and viewers' overall perception of the world, resulting in beneficial social change (specifically, the overthrow of the capitalist social order). The hypothesis was that exposure to literary and artistic non-referentiality and non-linearity would induce citizens to comprehend their society's fundamental flaws and the preferable alternative represented by socialism. "Surrealism: the communism of genius?" read one slogan issued by the Bureau of Surrealist Research on Paris' Rue de Grenelle in the 1920s (Hunt 86). In 1962, André Breton (1896-1966), a founder of surrealism, said of the movement's revolutionary beginnings:

We felt that a run-down society, rushing towards its doom could only succeed in prolonging its existence by reinforcing its taboos and multiplying its constraints and we were determined to defy them. But so far that determination had only been passive: now we were possessed by a desire to subvert everything. . . .

During this period we were determined to reply in kind to a society which shocked and disgusted us. (Hunt 84)

But the political nature of surrealist art was central. A "Manifesto for Independent Revolutionary Art," supposedly written by Breton and Leon Trotsky in 1938 and signed by Breton and Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, states:

It should be clear by now that in defending freedom of thought we have no intention of justifying political indifference, and that it is far from our wish to revive a so-called pure art which generally serves the extremely impure ends of reaction. No, our conception of the role of art is too high to refuse it an influence on the fate of society. We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution. (Breton)

Although similar claims are made by postmodernist literary practitioners—that paratactic writing will lead to a transformation in people's political thinking—in nearly a century there is absolutely no evidence that such writing has the desired effect. The experiment may be safely judged a complete failure. As I have observed in another essay, rather than surrealism and its artistic descendants leading to a better world,

surrealism of late has become the favored mode of television advertising. The corporations endorse a non-linear, collagist approach—wrenching items out of their expected context, "defamiliarizing" them, as it were—in the hope of impressing on the viewer's imagination some new or improved product intended to be inflicted upon consumers.

By way of contrast, mainstream lyric and anecdotal poetry has made a demonstrably useful contribution to social activism, providing inspiration and constituting a kind of documentary creative non-fiction. The river of mainstream poetry, rather than the self-lauded rivulet of the non-referential that accompanies it, has also borne into the art form's purview important new content not previously found there: aspects of women's lives, minority experiences, conditions and effects of how daily work is organized, and articulation of community life. (116)

One might expect that "experimental" postmodern writing would be enlisted to prove the validity of postmodernist literary "theories." But Abrams contrasts the concept of literary theory as ordinarily used and as postmodernism has appropriated the term, and shows why, despite the science-y language of postmodernism, no need is felt by its adherents to convincingly demonstrate the validity of a theory. "Since Plato and Aristotle," Abrams states, literary theory has been regarded as "a conceptual scheme, or set of principles, distinctions and categories—sometimes explicit, but often only implied in critical practice—for identifying, classifying, analyzing, and evaluating works of literature" (247). Postmodernist theory, however,

often designates an account of the general conditions of signification that determine meaning and interpretation in all domains of human action, production and intellection. . . . As a consequence, the pursuit of literary criticism is conceived to be integral with all the other pursuits traditionally classified as the "human sciences," and to be inseparable from consideration of the general nature of human "subjectivity," and also from reference to all forms of social and cultural phenomena. Often the theory of signification is granted primacy in the additional sense that, when common experience in the use or interpretation of

language does not accord with what the theory entails, such experience is rejected as unjustified and illusory, or else is accounted an ideologically imposed concealment of the actual operation of the signifying system. (248)

Abrams does not mention that this practice of denouncing evidence that does not reinforce one's belief system—as he, in the preceding quotation, observes postmodernists “often” do—is one of the main responses of people experiencing the mental affliction known as cognitive dissonance (McLeod). The critic *does* remark on the adversarial stance he calls a “prominent aspect” (Abrams 248) of postmodernist theories. Like surrealism's posture, the theories “are posed in opposition to inherited ways of thinking in all provinces of knowledge[:] . . . what they identify as the foundational assumptions, concepts, procedures, and findings in traditional modes of discourse in Western civilization (including literary criticism)” (248). In an interview, Abrams refers to how this suspiciousness towards the wisdom of everything before postmodernism allows one to “look at old poems and come out with new readings” (Williams 78)—that academic-market-driven obsession with generating new interpretations of literature that Poetzsch refers to above. “I'm always suspicious of a theoretical construct that undertakes to persuade you that what people have always taken a poem to be about is not only wrong but the opposite of the truth,” Abrams says. “That tends to be the paradigm for all sorts of recent theories of literature. . . . I've been skeptical from the beginning of all attempts to show that for hundreds of years people have been reading wrong, or have missed the real point” (Williams 78).

Meanwhile, one hears repeatedly from adherents that contemporary paratactic writing, composed like postmodernist literary theory in opposition to received concepts of written communication, effects a transformation in its readers' thought processes or political ideas by means of *force*. The recurrent claim is that parataxis “forces the reader” to think or undertake some other act. Oppressive political systems are to be denounced because they force an ideology and certain behaviors on the members of a society. But postmodern writing is good because it supposedly—er—forces readers to change their minds, to think henceforth in a better way. Yet, except in classrooms, and especially in graduate seminars, can anyone really be *forced* to think? Don't civilians, when faced

with impenetrable texts, simply stop reading? And even in classrooms, do the afflicted really *think* about the material they face, or do they simply construct a response they hope will be acceptable to the authority figure who assigns their grade? An example of how, against all common sense, we are informed repeatedly that postmodern writing *forces* readers to respond in a predetermined way to the incomprehensible text in front of them occurs in an interview in the literary journal *Contemporary Verse 2* with the Canadian postmodernist poet Rachel Zolf. The poet says:

As Shoshana Felman writes, “The more a text is ‘mad’ —the more in other words it resists interpretation—the more its specific modes of resistance to reading become its ‘subject’ and its literarity.” In other words, in all my books I try to enact situations where the reader feels uncomfortable, dislocated in their own skin, and is forced to think about why they feel that way. (Foster 10)

Answering the next question from the interviewer, Zolf speaks of a book by another author entirely “made from the words in a two-page legal document.” When the book is read, Zolf says, “you are there with her . . . , encaged in history, forced to think through what responsibility means” (Foster 11). Changing the verb slightly, Zolf speaks later of “the effects you can create by using beauty to draw and jar the reader into consciousness.”

As always with postmodernist assertions, no evidence is provided that, after reading a sample of paratactic writing, any reader engages in self-questioning, or adopts a changed value structure or political stance. Indeed, the contemporary postmodernist poet Jeff Derksen observes in a note on his poem “Forced Thoughts” that his title is “a term for a symptom of migraines in which the migraine sufferer is unable to shake a particular thought or progression of thoughts” (127). Derksen states that his poem is intended to echo a poem by a U.S. poet that to Derksen manages “to uncannily capture and comment on [a] capitalist tension and its contradictions” (126); Derksen’s work aims to, he says, “approach the contradictions of a particular social moment” (127). The poem begins:

perceived accepted suffered  
merely naturally unites  
veils cultures call  
time annihilates space

jobbers thoughts press  
lobes I've always  
valves wavered lost  
parasite pure person

federal pattern of  
feral worker free  
family the state  
that is whose (53)

The piece continues for a further fifty-four, four-line stanzas of a similar content (53-62). The extent to which reading these lines forces a reader—other than one perusing this poem as an educational chore—to do anything, a reader may judge for him- or herself.

The concept that reading something automatically induces a change in the reader desired by the author is flawed not only from a cognitive science perspective, but also from a political perspective. Using literary revelations of poverty's effects on people as an example, the critic Eric Schocket points out that:

[t]hough one might assume that a textual unveiling of poverty would prompt the reader to repudiation and action, such a result is neither necessary nor necessarily efficacious. There is no requisite link between epistemological realism (which claims to know a poverty heretofore hidden from view) and political radicalism (which takes actions against economic systems of exploitation). The presumption of just such a link (as in the assertion "If they only knew...") is purely idealist. It is idealist in the simple sense that it takes at face value an implied state of previous innocence that is hardly tenable given the broad tradition of unveiling.  
(19)

The presumed link between reading and action is also idealist in a more complex sense, in that those who claim such a link are failing to understand the nature of reality.

"[T]hose who seek to renounce exploitation simply by representing it fail to recognize



the fundamental discontinuity between the real and various attempts to represent it” (19). Schocket feels that a class bias underlies this confusion, and that unless the workings of class considered as a process “shaping cultural frames of reference” are understood, “our political agency will be delimited to pluralistic celebrations or ex post facto denunciations.”

Meantime, two different educational ventures have adopted as a corporate slogan this notion of coerced intellectualism. The University of Calgary Press’ logo uses the tag “Making you think,” while the logo tag of TVO (Ontario’s public television network) is “Makes you think.”

- **Postmodern writing is sophisticated, and is an artistic reflection of how language functions.**

Anyone who has taught postsecondary introductory creative writing has encountered students who do not seek to improve their writing by paying close attention to craft, and thus engage in rewriting. Instead, such a student simply wishes her or his genius to be celebrated. These novice writers reject the idea of substitution or elimination of certain nouns, verbs, or modifiers, or deleting or rearranging passages, in order to generate a more effective communication of their intended subject matter. Students with this attitude, who mostly quickly drop the course, are extremely defensive about their work. Where confusion regarding their intent due to their lack of craft is pointed out, such students will invariably reply: “My writing can mean whatever the reader wants it to mean.” If one mentions that this statement is not true—the piece is not about hunting whales, for instance—their response is to sullenly insist that they are absolutely fine with a reader drawing whatever meaning he or she wants from what they have written. Similarly, an interpretive problem caused by poor word choice, grammar error, change of tense, inconsistent characterization, and the like is met with the statement, “I meant that,” apparently indicating that the creation of such confusion is deliberate. Whatever the student’s original impulse to communicate a specific feeling, idea, or incident presumably meaningful to the student, he or she is willing to abandon that communication rather than have to work to improve the poem or sample of prose

—“improve” in the sense that readers would be able to more easily and deeply perceive what the piece aims to convey.

In an identical manner, postmodern authors protect themselves from any weighing of their mastery—or lack thereof—of the craft of writing. Postmodern writing, as mentioned above, is in essence conceptual art: what is vital is the *idea* behind the form the writing has taken, and not the craft employed in executing this idea. Consider again creative examples previously given, whether Wallace’s

Won’t have to testify about  
pigs guilty on the rotunda. Get packing  
nomad street misunderstanding

or Derksen’s

perceived accepted suffered  
merely naturally unites  
veils cultures call  
time annihilates space

In neither case can one suggest alternative word choice, for example: why is “nomad” a suitable adjective for street? Can one really “pack” a misunderstanding? Two lines both ending in “ing” create a chime for no apparent reason: isn’t this aural effect distracting (the effect is not used in subsequent stanzas)? In addition, is “veils” meant to be a noun or verb? Isn’t “time annihilates space” a cliché, lowering the energy of the poem’s forward motion? Also irrelevant to ask, given that these are conceptual pieces and not intended to be concerned with writing skills per se, is whether either of these poems in its entirety is too long: is the point made early and then repeated and repeated? Nor can one ask whether the mixing of tenses and/or grammatical moods aids or detracts from communicating the poem’s message.

What matters in both poems is the concept that motivated the writing, not the writing itself. Similar to the defense offered by our beginning author, the postmodernist response to any possible critique at the level of craft is that if something doesn’t work artistically, then such a shortcoming is part of the writer’s *intent* to “trouble,” “subvert,”

“destabilize,” “defamiliarize” language. In short, the author is entirely defended. As I have observed elsewhere regarding postmodern writing:

What is important is the *concept* that lies behind the writing—hence the frequent need for an exhaustive prose exegesis for the art to be understood. . . . What is going on in conceptual poetry, including the principles of composition, the content, and much more, is not immediately apparent to a reader, other than a friend or student of the poet. . . . Generally, the more opaque the concept—that is, the more that apparent gibberish is revealed to have a method behind it—the more the writing is to be lauded. The cleverness of the concept is vastly more important than the content too: we are asked to admire the genius of the artist in determining the concept rather than being asked to critique the (often banal) content revealed once the clues necessary for understanding the conceptual piece are disclosed in some manner.

In short, in a conceptual piece the author hides herself or himself from critique either of diction, form or content. These latter are the very grounds on which mainstream poets are scorned by their “postmodern” colleagues. (117)

Conceptual writing finds a counterpart in conceptual fine art installations, where incomprehensible and/or often crudely executed objects (sometimes in various mediums concurrently displayed) are supposedly justified by the artist’s statement that accompanies the exhibit. The statement, if not rendered incomprehensible by the use of jargon, reveals the artist’s concept— “explains” how the sculptural or found pieces, wall paintings and/or videos demonstrate an idea. Critiquing the choice of, or craft involved in creating or presenting, the objects constituting the exhibit is pointless since what is expected is praise for a tangible gesture toward illustrating a concept.

Conceptual art—written or otherwise—is defended art in another sense besides the barrier its practitioners erect against critique at the level of craft. As the adjective implies, conceptual art is head work; it does not proceed from the heart. Ideas, not emotions, are the content meant to be conveyed. At best, irony substitutes for a broad spectrum of human feelings, from disgust to joy. Compared to the wide range of emotions found in narrative, lyric, or anecdotal verse, postmodern poetry is uniformly

flat with regard to feelings: an emotionally detached cognition is all its practitioners allow themselves, and hence allow to their readers. Postmodern writing takes no emotional risks: whatever peaks and valleys of feeling its authors may experience, the relentlessly cerebral tone of their literary productions reveals how these authors hide their emotions from critique.

Robert von Hallberg, in his discussion of postmodernist writing referred to earlier, mentions that adherents frequently defend such literature by making the identical claim our neophyte author does: that what is written can mean anything the reader interprets it to mean. For postmodernists, this claim arises from the seminal 1968 essay by Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author." Abrams explains that what Barthes, and Michel Foucault (the latter in his essay "What is an Author," 1969), deny is the validity of the "function" or "role" hitherto assigned in Western discourse to a uniquely individual and purposive author, who is conceived . . . as the initiator, purposive planner and (by his or her intentions) the determiner of the form and meanings of a text. . . . Instead, the human agent is said to be a disunified subject that is the product of diverse psychosexual conditions, and subjected to the uncontrollable workings of unconscious compulsions. (249).

With the author as a conscious creator out of the way, Abrams notes, the reader is the only one who matters in determining what meaning is communicated by an example of writing. "In the representation of Roland Barthes, the 'death' of the author frees the reader to enter the literary text in whatever way he or she chooses, and the intensity of pleasure yielded by the text becomes proportionate to the reader's abandonment of limits on its signifying possibilities" (250).

This perspective is our beginning writer's dream: if a written work is bad, the fault lies with the reader, not the writer. The author is perfectly insulated from critique. Any perceived shortcomings in technique speak to a lack of reading or interpretive skills in the reader, not to any imperfection in the author's creative abilities. How this stance trickles down to students might be shown by the following sentence in an answer on a 2007 PhD candidacy exam: "Parataxis makes demands of me as a reader to acknowledge that I bring meaning to the poem through my reading, rather than expecting the poem to

deliver the meaning to me by following expected conventions.”<sup>3</sup> The author is absolved of all responsibilities to use words to communicate—if the reader cannot perceive meaning in what the author has written, or fails to enjoy or otherwise respond to the written text, then the *reader* has not brought enough intelligence to the poem. How sweet this arrangement is for any author. Clearly, far from producing sophisticated literature, postmodernist authors embody the desire of the most defended of *unskilled* writers: not to be held accountable for the quality of their writing, or for a reader’s reaction to the writing. The writing is without flaw simply because the author has written it: any failings lie with those who read the writing.

Evidence of the lack of sophistication of such work might also include the absence, after more than forty years of postmodernism, of a defining creative achievement of postmodern writing. That is, certain essays—such as Barthes’ on the death of the author—can be pointed to as a crowning accomplishment of this *critical* approach. Yet no single literary work is uniformly referenced as a significant creative example of postmodern writing, in the way *The Waste Land* or *The Cantos* are commonly pointed to repeatedly as examples of modernist literary art.<sup>4</sup> The failure of postmodernism to produce a widely acknowledged representative masterpiece or masterpieces underscores the shakiness of the critical approach’s claim to either literary (as opposed to critical) significance or status as a literary successor to modernism.

Part of the reason for this failure may be the gap between certain beliefs of postmodernism’s adherents and how reality functions, combined with the extremely adversarial nature of the postmodernist milieu. Students (the next generation of professors) pick up the view that language restricts thought, that grammar is an extension of patriarchal, capitalistic, imperialistic oppression, and that pre-postmodern literature is naïve, simplistic, one-dimensional, and its authors and critics dupes of the power relations of their eras. Moreover, postmodern literature is free from political

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<sup>3</sup> For privacy reasons, the name of the student is not given; candidacy exam document in author’s possession.

<sup>4</sup> By contrast, if one accepts that high modernism begins after World War I, a series of recognized exemplary texts appeared within the first *seven years* of that literary movement. A single year, 1922, saw the publication of “such monuments of modernist innovation as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room*” (Abrams 175). And Ezra Pound published the first sixteen parts of his epic *The Cantos* in 1925 (as *A Draft of XVI Cantos*); Canto 1 had been published in *Poetry* magazine in 1917 (Poetry, “Pound”).

taint, and its authors and critics alone are able to comprehend and navigate moral and social ambiguities and complexities. A postmodern literary critic's task is to denounce the conscious or unconscious complicity with oppression of earlier literature and its authors, and to extol the genius of postmodern texts that only a theoretically informed reader need approach. "The assertion that all poetry must be accessible reinforces patriarchal, capitalist, normative modes of thought in an art that often attempts to subvert these," wrote a student in a 2008 graduate seminar essay. ". . . The type of poetry that is accessible conforms to capitalistic ideals of purposeful diction that can be exchanged for something."<sup>5</sup>

Postmodernist declarations about how language and human perception function have been exhaustively disproved by researchers such as Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker, formerly director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for Cognitive Neuroscience. In a series of books he details the science that shows why postmodernist beliefs about language and the mind are untrue. For instance, far from grammar rules being an oppressive warping of language at the behest of capitalists (specifically, capitalist men), Pinker outlined twenty years ago the research that demonstrates humans are hard-wired for rule-based grammar. Among these studies are ones that detail how the children of adult pidgin-speaking Hawaiian field workers, as well as deaf children who were the second generation of sign-language users in Nicaragua, constructed elaborate grammars that enabled the crude languages the youngsters inherited to become enormously more expressive, subtle, and effective as communication (*Language* 33-37).

Pinker discusses the research that debunks "the famous [Edward] Sapir-[Benjamin Lee] Whorf hypothesis of linguistic determinism, stating that people's thoughts are determined by the categories made available by their language, and its weaker version, linguistic relativity, stating that differences among languages cause differences in the thoughts of their speakers" (*Language* 57). Introducing the science that shows why Sapir-Whorf is wrong, Pinker states:

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<sup>5</sup> For privacy reasons, the name of the student is not given; essay document in author's possession.

The idea that thought is the same thing as language is an example of what can be called a conventional absurdity: a statement that goes against all common sense but that everyone believes because they dimly recall having heard it somewhere and because it is so pregnant with implications. . . . We have all had the experience of uttering or writing a sentence, then stopping and realizing that it wasn't exactly what we meant to say. To have that feeling, there has to be a "what we meant to say" that is different from what we said. Sometimes it is not easy to find *any* words that properly convey a thought. When we hear or read, we usually remember the gist, not the exact words, so there has to be such a thing as a gist that is not the same as a bunch of words. And if thoughts depended on words, how could a new word ever be coined? (*Language* 57-58)

After a detailed examination of how syntax works, Pinker concludes:

Syntax is complex, but the complexity is there for a reason. For our thoughts are surely even more complex, and we are limited by a mouth that can pronounce a single word at a time. . . .

Grammar offers a clear refutation of the empiricist doctrine that there is nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses. . . . Though psychologists under the influence of empiricism often suggest that grammar mirrors commands to the speech muscles, melodies in speech sounds, or mental scripts for the ways that people and things tend to interact, I think all these suggestions miss the mark. Grammar is a protocol that has to interconnect the ear, the mouth, and the mind, three very different kinds of machine. It cannot be tailored to any of them but must have an abstract logic of its own.

The idea that the human mind is designed to use abstract variables and data structures used to be . . . a shocking and revolutionary claim, because the structures have no direct counterpart in the child's experience. Some of the organization of grammar would have to be there from the start, part of the language-learning mechanism that allows children to make sense out of the noises they hear from their parents. The details of syntax have figured prominently in the history of psychology, because they are a case where

complexity in the mind is not caused by learning; learning is caused by complexity in the mind. (*Language* 124-25)

Considering postmodernist notions about language, Pinker says:

The writings of oracles like Jacques Derrida are studded with such aphorisms as “No escape from language is possible,” “Text is self-referential,” “Language is power,” and “There is nothing outside the text.” Similarly, J. Hillis Miller [University of California, Irvine professor and former president of the Modern Languages Association] wrote that “language is not an instrument or tool in man’s hands, a submissive means of thinking. Language rather thinks man and his ‘world’ . . . if he will allow it to do so.” (*Blank Slate* 208)

Pinker notes that some of these claims about language arose because, in a dictionary, words are defined by other words. The deconstructionists consequently argue, Pinker says, that “language is a self-contained system in which words have no necessary connection to reality.” And this belief that “language is an arbitrary instrument, not a medium for communicating thoughts or describing reality” leads postmodernists to a number of demonstrably false conclusions about language’s properties and uses.

Like all conspiracy theories, the idea that language is a prisonhouse denigrates its subject by overestimating its power. Language is the magnificent faculty that we use to get thoughts from one head to another, and we can co-opt it in many ways to help our thoughts along. But it is not the same as thought, not the only thing that separates humans from other animals, not the basis of all culture, and not an inescapable prisonhouse, an obligatory agreement, the limits of our world, or the determiner of what is imaginable. (*Blank Slate* 208)

Pinker’s books discuss these “not”s by describing the science that probed and disproves such claims. Pinker also shows how the postmodernist art world’s confusion between *images* and thought, like the literary world’s confusion between words and thought, has produced deleterious effects (*Blank Slate* 213-18). He quotes art critic Adam Gopnik (“whose mother and sister are cognitive scientists”): “The view that visual clichés shape beliefs is both too pessimistic, in that it supposes that people are



helplessly imprisoned by received stereotypes, and too optimistic, in that it supposes that if you could change the images you could change the beliefs" (*Blank Slate* 217).

The theory of perception that both modernism and postmodernism endorse was long ago bypassed by studies of how the sense organs and the brain function, Pinker states (*Blank Slate* 412).

When we perceive the products of other people's behavior, we evaluate them through our intuitive psychology, our theory of mind. We do not take a stretch of language or an artifact like a product or work of art at face value, but try to guess why the producers came out with them and what effect they hope to have on us (as we saw in Chapter 12). Of course, people can be taken in by a clever liar, but they are not trapped in a false world of words and images and in need of rescue by postmodernist artists. (*Blank Slate* 412)

In concluding his assessment of postmodernism, Pinker outlines why cognitive science and cognitive neuroscience are "indispensable to the arts and humanities for at least two reasons." The first is that "the real medium of artists, whatever their genre, is human mental representations" (*Blank Slate* 417). The words, paint, sounds, and so on that any artist employs cannot affect the brain unimpeded. Rather, their effect depends on "a cascade of neural events that begin with the sense organs and culminate in thoughts, emotions, and memories." Research into vision, acoustics, linguistics, mental imagery, and intuitive psychology can illuminate how art tangibly impacts people. "And evolutionary aesthetics can help explain the feelings of beauty and pleasure that can accompany all of these acts of perception" (*Blank Slate* 417). The second reason why science, and not postmodernism's anti-science attitude, is vital to understanding the arts arises because the attraction of art "is not just the sensory experience of the medium but its emotional content and insight into the human condition" (*Blank Slate* 418). And the various aspects of "the timeless tragedies of our biological predicament" that in total constitute the human condition are, as Pinker observes, the manifold "topics of the sciences of human nature."

- **Ezra Pound's dictum "Make it new" refers to the need to craft new forms for writing, and justifies such formal developments.**

Postmodernism's defects consist not only of misapplied descriptors for paratactic writing, unsubstantiated claims of forced cognition, an artistic practice that embraces an unsophisticated novice's highly defended stance, and assertions about language and perception that science has shown are false. Weirdly, for adherents of a critical mind-set that positions itself as antithetical to capitalism, a catch-phrase propounded by a Fascist aesthete is repeatedly invoked in essays, theses and critical articles: Ezra Pound's dictum "Make it new."

Louis Menand, the winner of the 2002 Pulitzer Prize in history, in detailing Pound's commitment to Fascism,<sup>6</sup> concludes that Pound's politics permeate his literary work. "Italian Fascism is integral to 'The Cantos,'" Menand asserts; two cantos that for many years were left out of the New Directions "complete" edition specifically laud Fascist ideology (124). The section of the poem called "The Pisan Cantos" — published as a book in 1948 and awarded the 1949 Bollingen Prize for Poetry (Poetry, "Pound") — "is, formally, an elegy occasioned by the death of Mussolini at the hands of Italian partisans" (124). Menand quotes a section in which the poet "may sound repentant, but it is not the poet speaking to himself in the second person. The lines are addressed to the American Army ('Half black half white'): the prisoner is raging against his captors. Pound laments, but he does not regret. 'The Pisan Cantos' is a Fascist poem without apologies" (124-25).

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<sup>6</sup> Menand dates Pound's increased attraction to anti-Semitism to his interest in Social Credit beginning about 1920 (124). In 1927 Pound met the founder and leader of Fascism, Benito Mussolini, and "came up with the idea of enlisting Mussolini as a patron of the avant-garde. . . . Pound concluded that Mussolini had an intuitive grasp of the significance of his poetry" (124). *Making It New*, Pound's book of essays, is published in 1934 (Poetry, "Pound"). "In 1941," Menand writes, "Pound began delivering broadcasts from the Rome studios of Ente Italiana Audizione Radio, attacking the Jews, [then-U.S. President F.D.] Roosevelt, and American intervention in the war" (124). In 1945, Pound was charged with treason, and imprisoned by the American army. Thanks to lobbying by friends, Pound was never tried but confined in a Washington, D.C. mental hospital until 1958, when he returned to Italy. "When he walked off the boat, in Naples," Menand notes, "he gave the Fascist salute" (124).

Conservatism and anti-Semitism are a central aspect of modernism,<sup>7</sup> despite the writers' and painters' willingness to stretch artistic forms in previously uncommon directions. Perhaps this is why postmodernism's adherents continually quote a Fascist poet by way of authorizing their choices of form. Still, as Menand observes, although several modernist writers were reactionaries "very few" except Pound "were actually Fascists" (124).

And yet Pound's prescription "Make it new" is relentlessly referenced as support for compositional choices made by whoever has invoked the phrase. For instance, the poetry submission information for the (now defunct) *Vancouver Review* cultural journal (which flourished in the opening decade of the 2000s) states:

*VR* publishes one poem per issue. The subject should be local, in that it relates to BC or Vancouver in some way. "Make it new" was the credo of Ezra Pound, a poet often credited with ushering in 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry that shelved Victorian artifice and sentimentality in favor of diamond-sharp imagery and harder truths. It doubles as *VR*'s call to poets to help us revision this part of the world.

(*Vancouver*)

Regarding those "harder truths" of Pound's, how easy to pretend that Pound had two brains: a Fascist brain which can be safely ignored, and a different brain he inserted when he wrote poems and important critical pronouncements.

But what does Pound's pronouncement mean? In critical essays, articles or theses at any level, most who refer to the injunction appear to believe the pronoun "it" refers to "literary form" or "critical concept." William Wenthe observes, however, that

[p]ersons who repeat that phrase as an insipid slogan of the avant-garde think that the "it" refers to some broad abstraction like "art" or "culture." But for Pound, who knowingly quotes the phrase from a Chinese emperor of the 18th

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<sup>7</sup> T.S. Eliot famously summed up his outlook in 1928 as "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion" (Stallworthy 2289). Poems of his such as "Gerontion" (1920) and "Burbank with a Baedeker; Bleistein with a Cigar" (also 1920) are unabashedly anti-Semitic. W.B. Yeats, like Eliot a friend of Pound, wrote marching songs for the Irish Fascist group, the Blueshirts (Allison 8). In the fine arts, critic Peter Schjeldahl notes that "the godhead of modernism," Paul Cézanne, "though not an outspoken anti-Semite like [Edgar] Degas and [Auguste] Renoir, sided against the supporters of the [Jewish] Army officer Alfred Dreyfus, who had been falsely convicted of treason" (78).

century BCE . . . , the “it” refers to the concrete and familiar, refreshed by daily attention (the emperor wrote the phrase on his bathtub). (34-35)

In short, the phrase has to do with perceiving the ordinary world with a freshness, an intensity—the latter qualities being an achievement of all good writing. The directive has *nothing* to do with paratactic form or any of the other postmodernist ends the “it” is variously conscripted into representing.

But even if the phrase *was* a clarion call to write paratactic or other formally unusual verse, why would a Fascist sympathizer issue such a call? That is, how might Fascism benefit from Pound’s stance? More accurately, how might the phrase as Pound *intended* it to mean relate to the goals of Fascism? Is something that is “new” automatically improved, better for people, as in the “new and improved” succession of products that capitalism has found necessary to promote in order to ensure continuing profits?

The ideology of Fascism, like its German counterpart, National Socialism, depended on a falsification or obscuring of the past in order to justify the “new” authoritarian state and its economic and social order. Today we see globalized corporate capitalism wholeheartedly espouse the “Make it new” doctrine via planned obsolescence, the promotion of previously unknown anxieties for purposes of increasing sales (“ring around the collar” being the classic), the introduction of incompletely tested defective products (Thalidomide, or Microsoft’s succession of Windows programs), the never-ending stream of the latest “must have” luxury goods and services, and so on. The falsification or obscuring of the past, in order to replace history’s specific achievements and understandings with the “new,” has its counterpart in postmodernism’s attacks on and/or rejection of the literary canon. Who benefits socially and economically when a community or a nation’s literary past is disparaged, expunged or rewritten?

#### IV

Given postmodernism's evident usefulness to reactionaries of many stripes, and given its internal flaws and contradictions, what is its likely future? Certainly once it passes out of academic fashion it will have an afterlife, in the way scholars trained to venerate the critical precepts of Eliot continued to teach and publish from that perspective for decades after his ideas were superseded as a primary font of critical ideas.<sup>8</sup> Conceptual art, including paratactic poetry, will continue to be produced, even if its academic status wanes. The poet, psychologist, and professor Charles Harper Webb sees the production of such art as a tiny subset of Darwinian fitness indicators: "By evolving to favor fitness indicators, members of a species favor mates most likely to produce viable offspring" (60). Webb quotes the evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller as believing that artists, conceptual and otherwise, display their fitness to reproduce "by making something that lower-fitness competitors could not make" (60). And such indicators apply to consumers of art as well:

The ability to understand good poetry constitutes . . . a fitness-indicator *for the reader*, showing that he/she can perform the required mental feats, as well as keep up with the poet's (presumably first-rate) mind.

Such displays of mental fitness increase the reader's sense of status, self-esteem and overall desirability. (60)

However, the bad news for postmodernists is that Miller believes that a poem fails as a fitness display unless the work strikes a balance between being too obviously comprehensible and too hard to grasp. "If the poem is too difficult to understand, readers can't judge the poet's fitness, and may lose self-esteem in the process. They feel stupid, dense, insensitive, out of the cultural loop—anything but intellectually fit. Even

<sup>8</sup> A graduate student in literature today, scanning through Derrida's prose to find the perfect quotation to bolster a paper the student is writing and to thus please the instructor, would likely be astonished to learn of the former veneration of Eliot's critical acumen. The Poetry Foundation's summation of Eliot's career quotes the American poet Delmore Schwartz, writing in the *Partisan Review* in 1949: "When we think of the character of literary dictators in the past, it is easy to see that since 1922, at least, Eliot has occupied a position in the English-speaking world analogous to that occupied by Ben Jonson, Dryden, Pope, Samuel Johnson, Coleridge and Matthew Arnold" (Poetry, "Eliot"). Writing in 1956, Rene Wellek, a founder of comparative literature studies and a historian of criticism, concluded: "T.S. Eliot is by far the most important critic of the twentieth century in the English-speaking world" (Poetry, "Eliot").

when readers know the writer is at fault, they feel frustrated and annoyed" (61). Of course, as long as postmodernism is regarded as a valid critical pursuit, and in some professors' and academic programs' eyes as the dominant one, some students will take advantage of this to engage in fitness display. "I watched a student writer transform himself," Webb says, "from a plain-spoken neo-Bukowski [a reference to maverick U.S. author Charles Bukowski] to a cryptologist-in-verse, blatantly seeking to carve a niche for himself in my class, and increase his cachet with female students. His strategy worked, too!" (66) Yet Webb sees a difficulty with using postmodern art to demonstrate evolutionary fitness:

Because some modern poems are difficult works of genius, some poets write difficult poems in hopes that they'll be works of genius too. But the poem that withholds too much in order to protect the poet's ego and/or to appear impressive and "deep," is not just difficult; it's as poorly made as (and may be synonymous with) the poem with garbled syntax, inept pacing, wavering tone, botched imagery. . . .

"Experimental" poems may intentionally thwart reader expectations for such qualities as closure, emotional engagement, and identifiable meaning. The theory behind such strategies . . . gives rise to poems that are self-consciously, proudly, and impenetrably difficult. Poems arising from these strategies use extreme withholding—discontinuity, opacity, indeterminate syntax and diction, and whatever else they can do—to confound and shift reader expectations. (62). The problem arises, claims Webb, because as long as postmodernism basks in academic approbation, postmodernists' fitness displays are those of an elite. Such displays may successfully function for a time, but their legitimacy must be questioned (62). "How do we account for the professional success of poets who actively strive for obliquity, opacity, indeterminacy, and in some cases, boring monotony, and whose own work bears out their assumption that meaning does not exist" (62-63)?

He quotes Miller as stating that "elite esthetics concerns the objects of art that highly educated, rich elites learn are considered worthy of comment by their peers" (63). Whereas regular aesthetics focus on craft, elite aesthetics focus on "the viewer's response

as a social display" (63). Elites "often try to distinguish themselves from the common run of humanity by replacing natural human tastes . . . with artfully contrived preferences . . . [by which they] can display their intelligence, learning ability, and sensitivity to emerging cultural norms." Such a fitness indicator is based on social *status*, however, rather than artistic achievement, according to Webb. "The preference for extremely difficult poetry may enhance the status and self-esteem of the elite; but, like bound feet, elite aesthetics encourage poems to develop in grotesque ways, leading to the literary equivalent of a whole court hobbling because the queen is lame" (63).

Webb acknowledges that given the spectrum of human taste, some individuals will savour writing or reading extremely inaccessible poems. Such an activity, though, is bound up with a dubious morality.

[T]he difficulty of telling bad-difficult from good-difficult advances the strategy of the elite, inadvertent and unconscious though that strategy may be.

"Most people want to be able to interpret works of art as indicators of the artist's style and creativity," Miller states. "Certain styles of art make this difficult to do." Most readers must either reject these styles, or rely on the judgment of critics and professors: the elite. (63)

The latter choice is spelled out by Webb:

[M]any readers . . . can't tell the difference between difficult good and difficult bad poems. Here the Emperor's New Clothes Syndrome comes into play:

Poet A wins the Formidable Prize. Reader Z can't understand A's poems and doesn't like them. However, Z recognizes and applauds the many competing aesthetics in American poetry, and does not wish to appear narrow-minded, intolerant, judgmental, or dense. And what is Z's judgment worth, compared to that of the Judges who chose A, and have won Formidable Prizes themselves? Fearing to reveal incompetence as a reader, Z casts his lot with the experts, convinces himself that he loves A's book, and feels a lot better about himself. (64)

So paratactic poetry will continue to be written, whatever the future of the postmodern aesthetic, even if such poetry overall "makes a poor fitness indicator, since its success as poetry is so difficult to judge" (64). Advantages for the writer remain, if not

evolutionary ones. As Webb notes: “Difficulty erects a screen between writer and audience, protecting the writer from self-revelation, and deflecting criticism. Incomprehensibility may confer invulnerability” (63). Moreover, there are non-evolutionary advantages for a consumer of postmodern art, even though, as Webb remarks, “[f]or all the theorists’ talk of training a new kind of reader, few have emerged” (65) in the past four decades. Postmodern art offers its audience a chance to engage in one-upmanship. “[A]s Adam Gopnik has pointed out, the political messages of most postmodernist pieces are utterly banal, like ‘racism is bad[,]’ [b]ut they are stated so obliquely that viewers are made to feel morally superior for being able to figure them out” (*Blank Slate* 416).

Yet the continued existence of the postmodernist mind-set offers a more malevolent potential than the small pleasures of vanity that a sense of moral superiority provides. In the struggle to oppose those practices of corporations willing in the name of maximizing profits to sacrifice the ability of the biosphere to sustain human existence, literature—literary nonfiction, and, yes, even poetry—has been playing a role. We can currently observe literary postmodernism’s adherents being mustered to try to derail this struggle, to quieten literature’s involvement in the fight against the causes of climate change, even as postmodernist ideas helped quiet social activism among college and university students. The anti-science attitudes promulgated by the postmodernist mind-set, along with the effort to ensure postsecondary students and graduates cannot effectively communicate to ordinary citizens, are a help with this latest reactionary project.

An overview of approaches to ecopoetics in a recent essay by the Maine poet Arielle Greenberg illustrate the postmodernist strategy to shift writers’ and readers’ focus away from a clear expression of love of the earth—surely the only sustainable means to endure the long-drawn-out combat that will be required to end globalized capitalism’s despoiling of our planet. Greenberg quotes approvingly a 2011 list attempting a definition of ecopoetics prepared by Jonathan Skinner, the founder of the journal *ecopoetics*. Besides the expected constituents of the field, such as “poetry of wilderness and deep ecology,” we are told that for some readers



ecopoetics is not a matter of theme, but of how certain poetic methods model ecological processes like complexity, non-linearity, feedback loops, and recycling. . . . Or how poetic experimentation complements scientific methods in extending a more reciprocal relation to alterity [jargon for “a difference from a worldview or state of existence considered to be the norm”]. . . . Or even how translation can diversify the “monocrop” of a hegemonic [jargon for “predominant”] language like English. (27)

Greenberg’s essay goes on to feature poems incorporating “ideas and strategies . . . refusing, rebutting or subverting some of the traditional or historic modes of writing about our habitats” (27). Thus non-linear writing of any kind, along with “experimental” poetry on any subject, plus poems that intend to attack the canon of nature writing, and even translation on any subject all can qualify—through the magic of postmodern theory—as ecological. How this plays out in more concrete terms might be demonstrated in a recent graduate English program application. The student applying for admission was proposing to

extend [Mark] Wallace’s definition [of “postlanguage” poets, that is, postmodernist poets coming after the original Language poets (Mukherjee)] to five Canadian poets—Erin Mouré, Christopher Dewdney, Lisa Robertson, Fred Wah and Dennis Lee<sup>9</sup>—showing how their work suggests positive ways of speaking about nature, by enacting the inextricable relationship of nature and language.

Needless to say, the proposed discovery of a link between nature and language would not involve a scientific approach. “My dissertation will also deprivilege lyric poetry as the dominant vehicle of ecopoetics.” A supporting statement from a junior faculty member<sup>10</sup> at the student’s current institution assured adjudicators of the application that the student’s “project promises to contribute to the task of defining which bodies of Canadian Literature stand to be studied in relation to the environment, disrupting the assumption that it is self-evidently those in which nature figures at the level of content.”

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<sup>9</sup> Mouré and Robertson are full-fledged postmodernist writers; the other three write in varying degrees of inaccessibility.

<sup>10</sup> For privacy reasons, the names of the student and the faculty member are not given.

Eliminating a consideration of nature from the content of writing intended to oppose governments and corporations for not enacting measures designed to minimize or reverse the degradation of the biosphere is just one of the ways the postmodernist ethic can help protect the status quo.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the social restructuring necessary to tackle climate change must be argued for in a milieu of spin, “expert” jargon, advertising, propaganda, social distraction (celebrity journalism and government-funded spectacles such as the Olympics or foreign wars) and outright lying by authorities. Postmodernism’s vaunted ambiguity and lack of closure, along with its abandonment of linear narrative structure and clear referentiality, fit in well with globalism’s insistence that any narrative of its impairment of the quality of daily life must be blurred or otherwise obscured. Postmodernism’s adherents thus by default assist globalization to convince the public that there’s no such thing as societal values or societal well-being except as transnational commercial enterprises define them (unambiguously, repeatedly and resoundingly).

The twenty-first century so far is off to a start as horrendous and murderous as the twentieth: continual wars, fanatical ideologies, imperialism (albeit now under a trade mark as often as under a flag), extremes of wealth and poverty. If climate change is factored into the analysis, perhaps the current century is off to a worse start than the previous one. The set of ideas and derivative artistic creations that constitute postmodernism is, for reasons discussed above, not likely to help achieve a happier, more democratic personal and collective existence for human beings, nor to end the transformation of the biosphere.

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<sup>11</sup> An awareness that literary postmodernism poses a threat to an ecological awareness, despite the critical approach’s claims to the contrary, is not a new idea. D.M.R. Bentley, of the University of Western Ontario, noted in a 1990 essay that “insofar as certain strains of critical theory have stressed the importance of language to the exclusion or near-exclusion of other matters, they have done literature a disservice by placing it in a realm remote from its physical, emotional, and moral contexts” (88). Bentley notes that poems cannot be divorced from the physical. “The eye that reads, the voice that speaks, the ear that hears, the brain that perceives, comprehends, interprets, and remembers: all are physical, as, of course, are books, and pages, and print.” He argues that a truly “ecological approach to Canadian poetry offers resistance to any and all forces that participate or cooperate in disprizing environments, people, and poems of their diversity by threatening to obliterate their unique, local, regional, and national characteristics” (87). Observing that “what is at stake is nothing less than the survival of terrestrial life,” he concludes that “an ecological poetics is opposed to any system, be it multinational capitalism, architectural postmodernism, or deconstruction, insofar as that system contributes to the homogenization of nature and its creations, be they physical or linguistic.” Bentley is aware of modernism’s failure as well to adopt an ecological outlook (89); he calls for ecological writing that is not postmodern but “past-modern”(103).

Art ultimately is self-expression, and the politics of narrowing access to producing and comprehending academically approved acts of self-expression to a small, specially trained cohort does no credit to the artists or cheerleaders of this development. Lauding as “innovative” artists who take academically pre-approved “risks” in their compositional strategies is a minor part of the debasement of language that is postmodernism in practice. In our era the ability of political and economic power structures to employ words to mislead, confuse, and ultimately oppress citizens has been vastly increased by a century of trial, error, and advances in understanding how the mind and emotions function. Surely what would be beneficial to our communities would be an academic movement promoting clarity of expression along with critical thinking about how words can so effectively manipulate people to their detriment—critical thinking that incorporates the relevant scientific discoveries.

In terms of literary studies, we can do better than to promote a mind-set bristling with negative rectitude, one that encourages contempt for the literary achievements of the past and for the majority of contemporary authors, while lavishing unqualified praise on the few writers producing “theory-based” literature. Which adherents of postmodernism express *delight* in reading literature? And yet, likely this joy in the written word was what brought them into English studies, or creative writing, in the first place. Regarding as the only worthwhile writing that which must be approached as a puzzle to be solved (or which a reader is “forced” to solve), while simultaneously hunting through accessible creative works for a reason to castigate the author (often for the fault of having been born before our enlightened current age), is not a route to encouraging people to discover literature’s pleasures and insights.

In this century, perhaps due to the influence of television and the new media so hysterically promoted by the corporations, attention spans are shrinking (Keyes, Liu) along with the capacity to imagine (Bly 186-87; Ouellette), read for enjoyment (Zaki), and empathize with others (Zaki). Given these developments, would preferable literary studies not be ones that entice students to experience the wonders found in reading, to become acquainted with the spectrum of emotions and other vital knowledge imaginative literature can offer—an approach to literature that opens up the world?

Would more astute and more up-to-the-minute literary studies not be ones that welcome what the sciences of our age have to teach, rather than reiterating long-ago-disproven pronouncements from certain individuals, bromides without any evidence to support their claims?

Like the surge in fundamentalist religion, in reactionary politics, in assaults on the gains women have achieved during the past half-century, and in acceptance of an ultra-wealthy social class, postmodernism is an understandable reaction to a world that seems to some people to be changing frighteningly fast. But less backward-looking critical stances are needed if the production and study of literature is to help our communities safely navigate this difficult passage in human history.

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