

Introduction: Postmodernism and the Question of Literature

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In the two decades since it first consciously began to define itself, postmodern criticism has chosen to be worldly. Not that it is urbane; this is not a world in which one can or should too easily be at home.

Jonathan Arac

Strictly speaking, the term postmodernism is traceable to the literary revolution called “Modernism”, characterized by literary figures such as Pound, Yeats, Eliot and Woolf. What they had in common was a revolt against Aristotelian poetics, particularly the belief in a linear plot, in which a sequence of events moves logically towards a resolution. Postmodernism should more correctly be called “supermodernism” in that postmodernism does not break with, but extends the projects and dissatisfactions of modernism. The critique of linearity becomes a rejection of causality, a dissatisfaction with essence, object, the transcendental, and the idea of non-problematic signification. Modernism began as a tremor, and postmodernism became the earthquake. The term “post” is appropriate insofar as modernism’s critiques were hesitant and scattered, whereas postmodernism has produced an assault on the whole metaphysical traditional of knowledge. A quantitative difference, in the extreme, becomes a qualitative difference. Postmodernism is far bolder, more thorough and more sustained an attack of dominant Western ideas and values, and far exceeds modernism, but its boldness would be unthinkable without the prior critiques initiated by modernism.

The idea that postmodernism is an intensification of modernist unease (thereby having the appearance of an historically verifiable progression of thought) works well in the case of literature. The nineteenth-century respect for the well-made and linear formal literary object as a vehicle for expression became an obstacle to the canonized modernist writers. In turn, the so-called postmodernist writers (such as Beckett, Pinter, Coover, Pynchon and Barth, for example) regarded the vehicle-turned-obstacle as an abomination. In short, as a literary-critical category, postmodernism is relatively unproblematic. The shift from modernism to postmodernism is seen as one of degree, which has the backing of the popular conception of history as a logical progression, a causal chain of sheer explicability. (It is not my intention to analyse such a story of history. However, it is worth noting that those literary critics who describe the emergence of postmodernism in terms of linear progression of thought are relying on a version of history quite at odds with postmodernist attitudes to versions of the past.)

However, postmodernism is no longer simply a useful term for post-graduate researchers of recent literary narratives – it has surfaced in a variety of discursive modes (psychology, sociology, culture theory, theology, history –

even science and mathematics). It has become a slogan, an indication of commitment, a statement of allegiance, an ideology and a surge. Lyotard says, “‘Postmodernism’ simply indicates a mood, or better, a state of mind” (1986/7: 209). And William Spanos explains how the postmodernist rejection of traditional literary plot structure is indicative of the entire postmodernist intellectual response:

What I am suggesting is that it was the recognition of the ultimately ‘totalitarian’ implications of the totalizing Western structure of consciousness – of the expanding analogy that encompasses metaphysics, art, and politics in the name of the reassuring logos of empirical reason – that compelled the postmodern imagination to undertake the deliberate and systematic destruction of plot – the beginning, middle and end structure of representational narrative – which has enjoyed a virtually unchallenged privileged status in the Western literary tradition ever since Aristotle or, at any rate, since the Renaissance interpreters of Aristotle, claimed it to be the most important of the constitutive elements of literature.

(Spanos, 1987: 26)

In short, postmodernism is a crisis of legitimation. When knowledge is seen as historical and as the reified effects of the promotion of this or that ideology, the transhistorical and unimpeachable nature of inherited “truth” is questioned. Legitimacy, as a combination of the processes of vested interest and habit is seen as a skilful cultural manoeuvre and not a trans-ideological authority. J. Margolis makes the following general remark, one which is applicable to postmodernism:

It may be said, with some prospect of being not altogether idiotic, that the global philosophical question of our age concerns the possibility of legitimating the conceptual grounds for legitimating claims about anything.

(Margolis, 1987: 37)

Ihab Hassan asks the question, “But what is postmodernism?”, and proceeds to address the question in this way:

But what is postmodernism? I can propose no rigorous definition of it, any more than I could define modernism itself. For the term has become a current signal of tendencies in theater, dance, music, art, and architecture; in literature and criticism; in philosophy, psychoanalysis, and historiography; in cybernetic technologies and even in the sciences. Indeed, postmodernism has now received the bureaucratic accolade of the National Endowment for the Humanities, in the form of a Summer Seminar for College Teachers; beyond that, it has penetrated the abstractions of ‘late’ Marxist critics who, only a decade ago, dismissed postmodernism as another instance of the dreck, fads, and folderol of a consumer society.

(1986: 503–504)

One way for postmodernism to constitute itself is as a permanently minority discourse. If the aim of postmodernism is the disabling of majority discourses (those which effectively shut down discursive options by constituting them-

selves as truth), while not itself becoming a majority discourse, then it must rigorously insist on its own marginal status. Sylvia Wynter describes minority discourses as “Ontological Others” and reveals their importance at the present time:

It is from our shared identity as the systemic set of negative Ontological Others and from our complementary systemic role that we can derive potentially innovative contributions to the de-objectification of our present systems of theoretical absolutism and to the urgently needed transformation of our present episteme and its now objectified mode of rationalistic knowledge.

(1987: 235)

However, the majority/minority opposition exists precisely because of the existence of self-constituting discourses of “truth”. The cultural habit of nominating one discourse to stand for the whole must be overcome. At that moment, the majority/minority opposition will dissolve, and become an empty discursive formation.

“Totalization” has become a key term in postmodernist vocabulary as a generic term referring to a variety of practices – intellectual, cultural and political – which are authoritarian, repressive-coercive and marginalizing. Totalization is the process whereby monopolies are created, forcing disparate activities, discourses and practices into docile variations of the One in power. Totalization is a process of amplifying the world and its phenomena, to impose structure, order and conformity in order to stifle difference, rebellion and minority activity. Totalization is the drive towards sheer explicability, or the final answer to all problems – political, socio-cultural and epistemological. In order to achieve a totalized condition, much shoving, re-arranging and pruning of the basic material is necessary, and “basic material” often means human lives, cultural practices and group interests. In short, totalization is the glorification of the authorized at the expense of everything else, or the escalation of the dominant by means of repressing and homogenizing everything else. William Spanos discusses the phenomenon in this way:

Despite, therefore, the terrible historical lessons of the twentieth century, especially the genocidal holocaust perpetrated by German nazism in the name of ‘the final solution’, the diagnosis of the existential phenomenologists, and even the science of indeterminacy of the new physicists, it is still the ‘disinterested’ (Heidegger would say ‘care-less’) positivistic frame of reference – the totalizing methodology of ‘object’ inquiry – that determines the questions and answers, that delineates ‘everyday’ Western man’s image of the universe and produces his/her values. From the governing bodies and the scientific-industrial-military complex through educational and religious institutions to the working class, it is still this ‘well-made’ world, the world pointing toward a materialist utopia, towards a Crystal Palace end, that appears real.

(Spanos, 1987: 38–39)

Disinterestedness, objectivity, order, authority – these are the mechanisms invented to stand supreme, to totalize and to impoverish by repression,

coercion, and homogenization. Particular ideological clusters have taken on weight, demarcating what is true and acceptable, and demarcating even what kind of questions are to be asked. The field of inquiry (in intellectual activity), the field of possibility (in artistic activity) and the field of permissibility (in cultural-political activity) have become inscribed to the extent that the mind believes that constraints are freedoms. This is the effect of totalization, and this is the focus of all postmodernist oppositional practice.

The totalized condition against which postmodernism reacts is not only the result of self-interest disguised as disinterestness ("my way" masquerading as "the way"), but by something far less sinister but equally as dangerous – tradition. Every act of questioning or opposition can be seen to be already inscribed, even as it is uttered. One cannot, as Derrida repeatedly observes, move beyond the field of Western metaphysics because one's questions are conditioned and framed, situated and enclosed. The postmodernist interpreter is forced to burrow beyond each question to escape its cultural-epistemological frame, in the attempt to get beneath tradition in order to ask the unconditioned question. As one strips away the constraining frames, the question becomes more potent as an oppositional query, but language (for so long believed to be subservient, the pack-horse of true intentions) is the ultimate constraint:

Expressing their thoughts in words of which they are not the master, enclosing them in verbal forms whose historical dimensions they are unaware of, men believe that their speech is their servant and do not realize that they are submitting to its demands.

(Foucault, 1973: 197)

Cultural-epistemological silt increasingly narrows the course which all human inquiry must take. The postmodernist struggle is not solely against those who have a vested interest in maintaining cultural and/or political power (thereby reifying tradition, making it truth) – it is against the powerfully reductive and stifling effects of institutionalized – traditional behaviour. Heidegger says:

Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence; it blocks our access to those primordial 'sources' from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part genuinely drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that they have had such an origin and makes us suppose that the necessity of going back to these sources is something which we need not even understand.

(1980: 43)

To continue the sediment metaphor, silt is compacted until it achieves the hardness of rock, and is rock. Today's ideology, if sufficiently tenacious, becomes tomorrow's truth: dust becomes rock. The postmodernist thinker wishes to dig towards the place where questions are unconstrained, or freely inquisitive (without, of course, sedimenting his/her own discursive and cultural habits).

Jonathan Arac, in *Critical Genealogies*, identifies a strong point of intersection between new forms of Marxism and postmodernist criticism:

This new Marxism and postmodernism share the conviction that literature and theory and criticism are not only contemplative, not mere superstructure, but active; they share commitments to human life in history.

(1987: 281)

It is clear that, as strongly oppositional discourses, Marxism and postmodernism are driven by idealism or the will to expose and explain that which chooses not to be exposed or explained. In this sense they characterize themselves as responsive (pointing to the dark patches on a garden already landscaped by prevailing discourses) and responsible (serious, even righteous in their endeavours). And perhaps it is also true that the basic similarity between the discourses of Marxism and postmodernism ends here: at the imaginable point at which Marxism succeeds in disenfranchising the hegemonic discourse, it ceases to be oppositional, and has faith that its own institutionalization will herald an era of discourse quite unlike its predecessor. Gramsci's identification of "hegemony", the Frankfurt School's insistence that culture is a means of domination, or Althusser's recognition of "ideological state apparatuses" are all employed with the aim of upsetting current cultural power, but only in order to refill the emptied arenas of power with something better. By contrast, postmodernism's cynicism is fundamental to its programme, and is (ideally speaking) unaffected by history. For postmodernism, every dominant discourse is, by definition, the tainted victor in a struggle which has necessarily brutalized the opposition. The postmodernist dictum is not "Power corrupts" but "For a discourse to have come to power, corruption must already have occurred". Corruption here must be taken to mean the process whereby a discourse, ignoring its ideological and interested origins, claims to be disinterested and "the truth". To be disinterested and to be the truth is what it means to be a hegemonic discourse, and the task of postmodernism has been to show that these are terms invented to give priority to one discourse, perspective or account over others.

In short, then, the very existence of a discursive cluster which is deemed to be "knowledge" (something objectively true, quite untouched by and beyond the historical circumstances of its coming-to-be) can, according to the project of postmodernism, be regarded as evidence of the reification of a discourse at the expense of all those who are prevented from reification. The subtle strength of postmodernism is its insistence on perpetual vigilance and its wish to prevent any discourse from grasping power by making truth-claims. And for postmodernism to fulfil this task, it has continually to undermine its own truth-claims, lest it find itself reified and accorded truth-status, and be in the very position (that of hegemonic discourse) it strains to discredit (as its first principle). One of the most persistent critiques of postmodernism has been that it is a typically late-capitalist bourgeois activity, because it is an effete, elitist, self-enclosed game played only for the gratification of its participants, and of no relevance to the rest of society. One cannot deny that the activity of

postmodernism is prone to the “clever-game” syndrome, especially if one includes not only the principal postmodernist theorists but everyone who has ever written on postmodernism. However, the postmodernist task of excavating so-called disinterested, objective and self-evident hegemonic discourses is complicated, requiring elaborate strategies, because the inscription of these discourses has been a complicated and elaborate affair. Second, as an exposure of the way in which dominant practices, habits and discourses have come to power and have retained power, postmodernism challenges the foundations of authoritative structures while trying to prevent itself from becoming authoritative itself. In this sense, it struggles to be a nomadic discourse, refusing to settle into a reified corpus or a solid block of knowledge. Linda Hutcheon articulates this as “provisionality”:

I want to argue that postmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) use and abuse, install and then subvert convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality . . .

(1986/7: 180)

While this self-consciousness and self-scrutiny is entirely necessary to the project of postmodernism, it tends to project itself into the discursive arena as inordinately precious and over-refined, lacking the simple robustness required if a discourse is to compete effectively in the marketplace. But, as I have said, postmodernism is a discourse of response (to the self-glorification generated by discourses in power) and is therefore only as complicated as it needs to be: if one's objection is to the complicated procedure required by postmodernism, then one must acknowledge that the permanent disabling of hegemonies is complicated by the nature of the strategies of those hegemonies.

The rise of literary theory, from the 1960s to the present, is no more or less than an often blind and imperative response to the stifling effects of an institutionalized method, no longer either dynamic or investigative. The cultural legitimization of close analysis, leading to its participation in the exercise of cultural power, was ultimately costly to the discipline because, in order to retain that cultural power, it was forced to become authoritative and unassailable, that is to say, rigid, inflexible and self-preservatory. The method of close analysis became increasingly synonymous with the domain of literary studies, thus securing the market and creating a complete monopoly. However, as it drew more and more young men and women, it was becoming less and less capable of providing a site which younger generations could make their own. In short, in order to achieve cultural prominence, the methods of close analysis were forced to become reliably stable and inert, which had the effect of turning the temple into a prison. Newer architects could add and subtract little – the form of the temple had become monumental and immovable. If all one can say of cultural history is that it moves, then tents are more appropriate than temples if the domain of literary studies is not to be characterized by a process of shattering monuments only to build others which will

be shattered in turn. The discipline found itself to be stiff from instability, culturally anachronistic and static in its repetition of old habits. Literary theory, in its various voices, was a cultural-intellectual response to the sheer rigidity of a monumental modernist method. The discourse of postmodernism is, in a sense, the self-conscious articulation of the impulse we call literary theory, an impulse against indifferent and repetitive habits of hegemony.

Truth definitely is a linguistic affair, and so it is correct to suggest that the postmodernist, in his/her desire to trace the mechanisms whereby persuasive/coercive discourses are elevated to the unimpeachable plane of truth, will focus on the specific instances of the rhetoric of truth – in short, he/she will concern himself/herself with words and the strategies of power they entail and permit. But the postmodernist becomes a rhetorician not to remove himself/herself hereby from the field of cultural politics: an understanding of the powers of language leads to an awareness of the languages of power and how they have been put to use. Hegemonic cultural practices need to be dislodged precisely because their existence as habits-reified-to-the-position-of-truth causes a massive shutdown of other discourses. The existence of a “strong truth” within the cultural-intellectual domain (such as, for example, the position of variations of New Criticism in Western literary studies during much of this century) is simultaneously evidence of a uniformity of belief and action, as if current practices were all that were possible. Strong truth performs strong repressive actions on any other intellectual practices – the stronger the truth, the greater the uniformity. Postmodernism aims to expose the mechanisms whereby particular ideologies/“interested” discourses rose to the position of “truth”, not in order to institutionalize a strong counter-memory as a new truth, but to disable totalizing discourses. The only truth available is to be found in the way discourses come to positions of cultural power – a rhetoric of truth reveals that truth is a cultural practice rather than a principle beyond time.

Of course, the central problem confronting postmodernism is not, as some people maintain, that it is unmindful of the “real” world of specific historical situations, or that it entails dizzy overcomplications (the epitome of effete bourgeois wordiness), but that it runs the risk of being already inscribed within hegemonic practice. In the 1970s, a number of theorists/critics observed that Marxist literary criticism was, in effect, no more than an inscribed variation of hegemonic practice, and was pitifully removed from the world of cultural politics. In fact, it is probably true that all the major oppositional discourses imported into literary studies in the last thirty years (from structuralism and semiotics, to deconstruction and feminism) have gradually come to look more and more like the monolithic discourse they purport to challenge, and meekly offer new postures for close reading. Oppositional inquiry can submit to the pressures of providing “useful” (meaning “institutionally acceptable”) critical commodities. The following statement by William Spanos, describing the recent fate of deconstruction in the American academy, might serve as a warning to all oppositional discourse:

What was originally a mode of inquiry intended to interrogate the impulse of

traditional logocentric discourses to reduce language, history, culture, society to the certain and useful same becomes an institutional technology devoted to the indifferent business of 'producing' criticism for consumption and promoting its practitioners in professional rank.

(1987: 289)

However, the increasing theorization (in the last decade) of the arena of literary studies is a step forward for the postmodernist enterprise, for theorization exposes the principle which governs one's critical practice, and principles have cultural origins and cultural aims. William Spanos makes a similar remark concerning the emergence of literary theory:

... , theory has forced the invisible will to power and the policing praxis that informed the interested discourse of 'disinterestedness' into the worldly arena of the free play of criticism.

(1987: 278)

The disabling of "truth" and objectivity are already underway in the domain of literary studies: even those who, in an effort to preserve peace, endorse critical pluralism are acknowledging an arena of competing cultural practices, rather than Truth and a host of Others (as minority discourses).

In short, the existence of a strong truth serves only to obscure the "truth" of how a discourse came to power and maintains its power. And the retrieval of this cultural "truth" whereby discourses enable themselves at the expense of disabling others is the project of postmodernism. For Jonathan Arac:

Postmodern critics, new-fashioned scholars, can carry on a significant political activity by relating the concerns once enclosed within 'literature' to a broader cultural sphere that is itself related to, although not identical with, the larger concerns of the state economy.

(1987: 308)

The increasing theorization of literary studies serves the postmodernist purpose of promoting the self-conscious scrutiny of the cultural mechanisms which create truth. The project of postmodernism is aided in another way: the recent interest in literary studies as a *profession* functions as a kind of practical postmodernism – the oppositional counterpart to the so-called practical critic whose task it is to unlock significance from the canon yet again. Instead of tinkering with texts, the "practical postmodernist" tinkers with the "attendant machinery" of the profession, which Stanley Fish identifies as

... journals, newsletters, articles, monographs, panels, symposia, conventions, textbooks, bibliographies, departments, committees, recruiting, placement, promotion, prizes, and the like.

(1983: 373)

Of course, the recognition that one needs to examine the mechanisms of cultural production in order to arrive at a correct understanding of its product

– cultural knowledge – did not originate with Stanley Fish. Pierre Bourdieu (1983 and elsewhere) for example, provides detailed “user manuals” for those who wish to explore the practical origins and maintenance of truth-production. The profession whereby literary knowledge is produced needs to be subjected to an organizational analysis. The first step is to examine procedures pertaining to recruitment and promotion because the composition of the academy of literary studies is not a chance affair. It is obvious that those in power will hire and promote like-minded individuals (that is, those with the same vested interest in the canon and hegemonic critical procedures, masquerading as disinterestness). This is a fact of cultural life (one which is frequently overlooked), and it creates a substantial degree of homogeneity. The various prizes, committees, panels and symposia complete the circumscription of the arena of literary knowledge production.

David Bleich makes a proposal for the whole of literary theory, one which co-incides with the procedures of a “practical postmodernism”:

Literary theory should contribute to the changing of social and professional institutions such as the public lecture, the convention presentation, the classroom, and the processes of tenure and promotion. Theoretical work ought to show how and why no one class of scholars, and no one subject (including theory) is self-justifying, self-explanatory, and self-sustaining.

(Bleich, 1983: 411)

The postmodernist-as-theorist functions to propose and outline an archaeology of cultural knowledge; the postmodernist-as-technician functions to examine the machinery of “interestedness”, or the particular ways in which vested interests and cultural habits are given the status of transhistorical truths. These truths are distinctly cultural products, and not rational/universal entities. Arif Dirlik makes the following important remark:

The radicalism of the issue of culture lies in the fact that culture affords us ways of seeing the world, and if the latter have any bearing on our efforts to change the world, then it is essential that we confront our ways of seeing. The idea of culture has developed historically in juxtaposition to the idea of reason. However, it is also the only basis upon which we may comprehend the world rationally (if reason is to have any bearing on the world of the living) and make it more reasonable. Culture, in other words, is also a way to comprehend the rational, not an abstract rationality divorced from the world of living people and set against the latter as its judge, but the rationality of the living. To avoid the question of culture is to avoid questions concerning the ways in which we see the world; it is to remain imprisoned, therefore, in a cultural unconscious, controlled by conditioned ways of seeing (even unto rationality), without the self-consciousness that must be the point of departure for all critical understanding and, by implication, for all radical activity.

(1986/7: 13–14)

The solution to such imprisonment “in a cultural unconscious” is to uncover the mechanisms and rules whereby (cultural) knowledge comes into Being.

For Lyotard, this postmodernist urge is consistent with the enduring philosophical ideal of discovering what the rules are and who makes them:

I would like to say in closing that the rule of the philosopher's discourse has always been to find the rule of his/her own discourse. The philosopher is thus someone who speaks in order to find the rule of what s/he wishes to say, and who by virtue of that fact speaks before knowing the rule, and without knowing it.

(Lyotard, 1986/7: 214)

I will end this discussion of the possibilities of postmodernism in the manner in which I began it – with an excerpt from Jonathan Arac's *Critical Genealogies*:

Since we come late enough not to confuse ourselves with the modernists, we can accept our condition as postmodern. No doubt this was not the name one might have independently chosen; as we have seen, it was originally a pejorative from those who attributed to others a belatedness that was also their own. Finding ourselves, as if from birth, in the academy, we can work there without the shame of ivory tower isolation or the euphoria of being at the nerve centre of a brave new world. We will not transform American life today, or tomorrow, but what we do to change our academic habits and disciplines, the questions we dare to ask or allow our students to pursue, these are political and make a difference too, for the academy itself is in the world.

(1987: 314–315)

This issue of *JLS/TLW* is the first of two special issues on postmodernism and literary studies. This privileging of postmodernism does not reflect an editorial bias. The response to a call for papers to be delivered at a SAVAL conference on postmodernism was far greater than the conveners had anticipated, and a number of excellent papers were submitted. This first special issue contains a selection of more theoretical articulations of the phenomenon of postmodernist literary studies, while the second special issue (volume 4, number 4 of 1988) will focus more specifically on interactions with “primary” texts.

Joris Vlasselaers, in “‘Postmodernism’: A Challenge for Literary History” aims to assess the suitability of postmodernism as an epistemological/methodological model for literary history. This article serves as an excellent introduction to the current widespread use of “postmodernism” in the humanities, because Vlasselaers meticulously reviews some of the major articulations of the term in the attempt to locate an aim, procedure or commitment common to all exponents of postmodernism. Vlasselaers concludes his inquiry by offering a series of crucial topics to be investigated in the interests of a useful postmodernism.

Wilhelm Liebenberg, in “Postmodernism: Progressive or Conservative?” explores the viability of various definitions of postmodernism and, like Susan van Zyl, regards postmodernism as symptomatic of the present rather than being a solution to present narrative/theoretical propensities. Moreover,

Liebenberg repeats Lyotard's observation that postmodernism is a feature of highly developed countries, and calls for a worldly postmodernism. Here, Liebenberg's contribution is remarkably similar to Vlasselaers' call for an "integration of the literary discourse into the encompassing social discourse" and Olivier's insistence that postmodernism exists as a narrative of "social change".

Bert Olivier's "The Critical Difference: Deconstruction and Postmodernism" is, like the articles by Vlasselaers and Liebenberg, concerned with problems of definition, and his investigation thus proceeds with an historical investigation of modernism and modernity. Moreover, Olivier clarifies the connections and differences which exist between Derrida's various projects and the ideals of the central postmodernist theorists.

Susan van Zyl's "Narrative and Narratives: The Incoherence of Postmodern Pluralism" subjects Lyotard's insistence that postmodernism constitutes a crisis in narratives to rigorous re-assessment, proposing that the "answer to the master narratives is not the trivial tale".

Gouws's "Bluff Your Way in Postmodernism" shows no mercy towards the sheer faddishness and the often uncritical, excited rush which heralds a new cultural-intellectual mode or paradigm. And, to my mind, it is Gouws's humour (rather than his exposure of the postmodernist production-line) which makes this a very memorable essay, but the register shifts frequently, from the witty and entertaining, to an intensely serious and dark humour which attempts to laugh away the entire enterprise of postmodernism. This constantly sliding register, from gentle parody to dismissal-by-way-of-black-humour allows the more serious business of the essay to be camouflaged by Gouws's skilfully light touch. And it is bad manners to interrupt a funny joke by probing the joker's motives. Nevertheless, if Gouws is intent on having the last laugh (whereby the joke is on this special issue on postmodernism), then one must be reminded that the impetus of postmodernism is against totalizations, tyrannies (whether discursive, cultural or whatever) and the sinister implications of power mechanisms. Put simply, postmodernism is a gesture against authoritarianism, captive markets and the way in which "truth", as a term, is employed as a legitimating device for dominant ideologies. I would like to "read into" Gouws's essay, beneath the wit and ridicule, an allegiance to the genuinely oppositional powers of postmodernist discourse. Perhaps Gouws delights in the stance of the bemused cynic, watching the pageant of successive cultural-intellectual displays, but I prefer to regard the impetus and structure of "Bluff Your Way in Postmodernism" as articulate in "the best postmodern way".

I conclude this introduction to the first *JLS/TLW* special issue on postmodernism with the observation that literary-theoretical discourse in South Africa has achieved maturity in a remarkably short time. In as little as ten years, literary theory in South Africa has developed considerably: from a few isolated and tentative remarks concerning what may, and may not be, appropriate literary-critical practice in South African universities, literary theory has become a powerful narrative, equal in interpretive power and subtlety to much that is written in France, England and the USA. Moreover, literary

theory is no longer content simply to rejuvenate traditional critical habits – postmodernism (among other recent discourses) reveals that oppositional intellectual activity performs a crucial role in reconstituting literary and cultural life. South Africa is in the process of unprecedented change; newer and more appropriate models of cultural activity are required, and postmodernism offers one of such alternatives. The five contributions to the present special issue offer, I believe, some of the best that literary theory can provide to a changing literary criticism in South Africa, and to a changing conception of cultural life and cultural value.

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