Fact and Fiction in Postmodernist Writing

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Summary

In this article the concept of Postmodernism as "nothing makes a difference" and "anything goes" is rejected in favour of a reader's decision to construct himself a difference in accord with his cultural or historical knowledge and his ethical position. Postmodernist texts are characterized by a plurality of voices which do not constitute a figuration of hierarchical dependencies, but which form, nevertheless, a communicative figuration. Although fact and fiction are no longer clearly distinguishable and although the notion of fact or factual relation is being replaced by the concept of mental or social creation, the communicative figuration of postmodern novels may call our attention to the historical discourse which is part of them. In my reading of The White Hotel (D.M. Thomas) and Die letzte Welt (Christoph Ransmayr), I propose to take into account the historical intertext of the Holocaust. I conceive of it as a strong voice in the signifying interplay of narrative elements which, to a certain point, is capable of undermining the non-hierarchical relation of fact and fiction.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word die konsep van Postmodernisme as "niks maak 'n verskil nie" en "enigiets deug" verwerp ten gunste van 'n leser se besluit om vir homself 'n verskil te konstrueer in ooreenstemming met sy kulturele of historiese kennis en sy etiese posisie. Postmodernistiese tekste word gekarakteriseer deur 'n veelvoud van stemme wat nie 'n figurasie van hiërargiese afhanklikhede konstitueer nie, maar wat, desnieteenstaande, 'n kommunikatiewe figurasie vorm. Alhoewel feit en fiksie nie meer duidelik onderskeibaar is nie, en alhoewel die gedagte van feit of feitlike relasie vervang word deur die konsep van intellektuele of sosiale skepping, mag die kommunikatiewe figurasie van postmoderne romans ons aandag verg vir die historiese diskoers wat deel daarvan vorm. In my lesing van The White Hotel (D.M. Thomas) en Die letzte Welt (Christoph Ransmayr), is ek van plan om die historiese interteks van die Holocaust in aanmerking te neem. Ek beskou dit as 'n sterk stem in die beduidende wedersydse spel van verhalende elemente wat, in 'n sekere mate, in staat is om die non-hiërargiese relasie van feit en fiksie te ondermyn.

By discussing the subject of Postmodernism and (actual) history I am engaged in a cultural debate rather than in the scientific study of literature. Both activities, as we have tried to explain in *Literatuurwetenschap en cultuurover-dracht* (1992), are necessary and legitimate domains for professionals dealing with literature. By contributing to the construction of the concept of Postmodernism, I act as a participant of the literary system, being fully aware of my personal, normative concern.

It is not my intention here to discuss exhaustively the concept of Postmodernism. Douwe Fokkema and I elaborated on it on other occasions. I shall concentrate exclusively on the question whether postmodernist texts may have a political dimension. By answering this question in the affirmative, I reject a concept of Postmodernism where "nothing makes a difference" (Barth) or "anything goes" (Federman).

To make my point clear I want to highlight two aspects of the discussion about the concept and the constitution of a postmodernist canon.

In trying to establish consensus about the concept, at least one element is agreed upon by everybody working in the field. It is the insight that our

knowledge of the world – to a higher degree than we were prepared to admit
– is a textual knowledge. This means that our access to reality is for a large
part guided by texts presenting segments of reality and at the same time
interpreting them, or to quote Nietzsche: "Gerade Tatsachen gibt es nicht,
nur Interpretationen" (Nietzsche 1960: III, 903). If we accept this, it becomes
clear that the distinction made between fact and fiction is less definitive than
we have learned to conceive of it. Historical facts, for example, are accessible
to us only via textual records (as linguistic presentation of experiences), which
are invested with meaning – they are in no way "pure" facts.

The same holds for actual facts, which are recorded by journalists,
politicians, TV producers. Perhaps you are familiar with the question: did the
Gulf War really take place? This question is symptomatic of a strong belief in
the meaning producing power of the media.

The other consensual aspect of the concept of Postmodernism has its basis
in the philosophical contribution of Jean François Lyotard (1979) who has
argued that our postmodern epoch is characterized by the loss of a grand,
legitimating narrative *(métarécit)*. Instead of one grand narrative there are
many little stories *(petites histoires),* which are all of equal importance and
value and exist alongside each other without any possibility of coming to
terms with each other. Lyotard's conception of "petites histoires" has been
freed from its possible nihilistic consequences by Wolfgang Welsch (1987)
who interpreted it as a radical plurality of voices. Although these voices do
not constitute a figuration of hierarchical dependencies, they form, neverthe-
less, a communicative figuration. It is evident that the relationship of fact and
fiction is also afflicted by the philosophical views of Lyotard and Welsch.

More striking than the above-mentioned developments is the introduction
of the notion of fiction into the domain of scientific thinking. Physicists
nowadays are interested in metaphors and use the word "chaos" to indicate
that the movement of a wing of a butterfly in Brazil influences the climate in
Amsterdam. This has been an inspiring thought for writers, and philosophers,
although we should be aware of the fact that uncertainty or chaos in the
sciences has a well-defined position. In points to still unexplained turbulencies
in a well-explained network of theoretical and experiential certainties.

Let me first mention a number of theoreticians who have exercised a
considerable influence on the development of the concept of Postmodernism
with respect to the notion of factuality.

A clear distinction between fact and fiction in historical studies is refuted in
the theoretical reflections on history, in particular by Hayden White's
(1973) concept of plot-structure-selection in historiography, by Alexander
Demandt's (1986) proposal of imaginary history as a method of historical
research, and by Michel Foucault's discursive determinism in social life.

Let me, in the first place, mention the fact-fiction relationship as it
transpires from Hayden White's selective plot-structure. Nobody will object
to the idea that some data can be considered facts, in literary history as well
as in general history. The question is, however, "do they have any signifi-
cance?" (Fokkema 1990: 31). In other words, the meaning of a fact remains
empty unless a cognitive interest, an emotional impulse or an ideological

commitment constructs a system which makes that fact into a historical "event," and, at the same time, into a narrative. Hayden White puts it as follows: "a specifically *historical* inquiry is born less of the necessity to establish *that* certain events occurred than of the desire to determine what certain events might *mean* to a given group, society, or culture's conception of its present task and future prospects" (White 1986: 487).

Models for the meaning construction envisaged by Hayden White are available in the repertoire of literary genres, such as tragedy, comedy, epic etc. In principle, the historian may select a "plot-structure" of his liking, although certain historical facts are more likely to be shaped as tragedy than as comedy. This remark relativizes in a sense the arbitrariness of the historical construction. On the whole, however, Linda Hutcheon is right, when she observes that a "shift from validation to signification, to the way systems of discourse make sense of the past" has taken place (Hutcheon 1988: 96). Our interest is less to find out whether an event really occurred in history, but rather which meaning can be attributed to it.

In his *Ungeschehene Geschichte,* Alexander Demandt advocates a historical reflection in which events and actions which did not occur, play an important role. Once, these not-realized events were "real possibilities". This happened at a moment in time when the future was open to a number of alternative choices out of which *one* was selected.

Another theoretical impulse which weakens the strong rules for separating fact and fiction is, as I have already mentioned, the discourse theory of Michel Foucault (1969). In the philosophical framework of Foucault, discourse produces its object. It does not refer, but is a practice that systematically creates its entities. Foucault's method of research – his "archeology" – is neither conceived of as a science (there are no causalities to be discovered or constructed), nor as a discipline of the humanities (there is no subject attributing meaning to a text or a phenomenon). The archaeologist describes the discourse practice of an historical epoch.

It is not my intention here to criticize the discourse theory of Foucault, nor the other theories I mentioned, although this certainly could be done for various reasons. My only aim is to point to the element of fictionality in literary theory which appears to exercise its influence at the very moment when the notion of objective facts or factual relations is being replaced by the concept of mental or social creation. In his well-known book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward W. Said relies heavily on Foucault when he tries to show to what degree the concept of the Orient is a discursive creation of the European cultural elite and as such has a long textual tradition. Said writes: "such texts can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe" (1978: 94).

In Derridean Deconstructivism the notion of factuality dissolves together with the notions of identity and stable meaning. The relative stability of meaning, achieved by convention and transmitted by socialization, is considered suspect by the Deconstructivists. The concept of identity based on agreement about points of orientation in time, space, and language has been sacrificed in favour of the idea of the primary autonomy of language. The

absence of a transcendental signified has extended the field and the play of signifiers to infinity (Derrida 1967: 411). Presence and absence, the conceptual pillars of factuality, are denied ("Le jeu est toujours jeu d'absence et de présence, mais si l'on veut le penser radicalement, il faut le penser avant l'alternative de la présence et de l'absence" 1967: 426). The non-existence of a centre of orientation is not any more felt as a loss ("perte"), but, following Nietzsche, as a play "sans sécurité," as a possibility, an adventure in' the search for traces ("l'aventure séminale de la trace" 1967: 427).

If we consider the theoretical development outlined so far, a considerable expansion of fictionality (as opposed to factuality) has taken place culminating in the extreme statement that all reality is nothing but fiction. What, in earlier times, was a prerogative of writers, which they defended against the serious claims of factual reality by means of concepts such as verisimilitude and its variants, has now become normal practice. The Dutch contemporary writer of fiction, Louis Ferron, feels happy about it: "The boundaries between imagination and reality should be abolished, because there is nothing but imagination" (Roggeman 1983: 19). This statement fits perfectly well into the international poetics of postmodernism.

We should, however, be careful not to jump to the conclusion that the development goes only in one direction, viz. the subverting of the concept of reality. If, on the one hand, the possibility has been opened for fiction to enter into theoretical thinking, factuality, on the other hand, may legitimately enter into literature. That means that the theoretical self-awareness of fact and fiction as mental constructs plays a crucial role in contemporary poetics as well. Via self-awareness and reflection factuality enters into fiction.

There is no longer any need to prevent facts from entering into literature, since factuality has undergone an important transformation resulting from the shift from validation to signification and the recognition of the cognitive efforts in the construction of reality.

In postmodernist fiction, the factuality of the historical discourse is one of the areas which call for attention. The fictional environment is well-suited to give significance to historical events. This explains why history enters into postmodernist fiction even as documentary intertext. The signifying interplay of fact and imagination is at its best in this constellation.

The documentary intertexts I wish to focus on are what I call the "Holocaust-discourse", the record of the murder of the European Jewish community in Nazi-Germany during the Second World War. Predominantly in the late nineteen seventies and nineteen eighties a generation of writers who had not been witnesses to the Second World War learned what had happened during the war via documents. These documents were part of the infinite amount of written information about the world, past as well as present, which they had to process. The question they had to answer for themselves and for the community they wanted to address, was: How does "Holocaust-discourse" fit into the cultural discourse of Germany, of Europe? Is there any possibility of coming to terms with the documents of this crime?

The radical pluralism of voices in postmodern writing enables the documentary intertext of the Holocaust to communicate with other intertexts.

During this process of communication, meaning attributions take place which would not have been realized if – as a document – the Holocaust-text were to stand on its own.

I wish to support my argument by focusing on *The White Hotel* by D.M. Thomas (1981) and *Die letzte Welt* (1988) by Christoph Ransmayr. My interpretation of *The White Hotel* is guided by the question: Are the two main intertexts which are responsible for the semantic content of the novel of equal importance or do they stand in a hierarchical organization, notwithstanding the often uttered credo that in postmodernist literature "anything goes" and no selections are made? I offer you my answer to that question first and then will try to give an analytical account of it. The "Holocaust-discourse" in *The White Hotel,* the documentary intertext of the fifth chapter, which D.M. Thomas borrowed from Anatoli Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar,* in my opinion, functions as a falsifier of Freudian theory, the other important cultural intertext in the novel, and therefore plays a dominant role.

In the fictional context of a highly poetic and metaphoric narrative, in which restrictions of logic, causality, chronology, and referentiality are often negated and cultural conventions are regularly violated, the theoretical text of Freud and the historical text of *Babi Yar* are the competing "factual" elements. The report ascribed to Freud, provides us with the scientific explanation – within the framework of psychoanalysis – of the history of the disease of the young lady, the main character, a child of a Jewish-Roman Catholic intermarriage. The process of her growing up was highly conditioned by the death of her mother in a burning hotel and by the unexpected reservations of her father with respect to his daughter after the death of his wife. Her marriage resulted in a divorce and she was neurotically afraid of becoming pregnant and bearing a child.

Although Freud's analysis is hampered by a lack of honesty and by avoidance on the part of his patient, he is nevertheless convinced of being very close to the truth. The truth of Freud runs as follows: his patient must have a strong feeling of guilt with respect to her mother because she wanted her death. The reward, however, to be loved by her father, did not materialize. Moreover, she has been seriously hurt by the sailors' talk in Odessa, which made an end to the illusion she held about her mother. Her unhappy partnership is regarded by Freud as an evident consequence of this constellation of circumstances.

Freud's analysis is supported by the images of the prose poem written by the patient: the hotel being a place of hospitality and destruction at the same time; sexual phantasies as the result of her relational problems; the strong attachment to her mother which is the source of her being afraid of having a child.

In the fourth section of the novel, which tells the story of Lisa Erdmann, corrections of earlier untruthful statements are made in a letter to Freud. These corrections are the first "falsification" of Freud's theory insofar as they deny the psychoanalytical explanation based exclusively on sexuality.[1] The theory is considerably adjusted by non-sexual circumstances: antisemitism at

the shipyard in Odessa, antisemitism also on the part of the husband, the denial of her Jewish origin on the part of Lisa.

The adjustment of the Freudian theory is followed by the insertion of Anatoli Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar,* reporting the historical event of the German occupation of Kiev on September 29, 1941. After this occupation the so-called evacuation of the ghetto took place. The evacuation, in reality, was a mass execution of the Jews under inexpressible circumstances. This part of the novel contains the denial of fictionality and poetic imagination. This, however, is not the final word. The last chapter describes an utopian way of life after the catastrophe in the promised land. At this moment and in this place Lisa observes that she would be forced to say to Freud, if she were ever to meet him again, that she now has even more doubts about the correctness of his analyses than she has ever had.

This renewed "falsification" has shattered the Freudian theory beyond repair. All efforts to discover the truth about a personality by means of the psychoanalytical procedure are declared invalid in the face of the annihilation of any personality in Babi Yar. Reporting documentary truth is a commitment even for the postmodernist author. The pretext of Babi Yar leaves no room for counterfactuals and fictionalization. On the contrary, the historical event which is reported, defictionalizes as it were the phantasies and transforms them into a counterpart of those who are victimized in reality. The text does not force this interpretation on us. In conformity with postmodernist discursive strategies the fictional and the factual narrative elements are presented in a non-hierarchical order, sometimes supporting, sometimes undermining each other. It is up to the reader to decide whether and at what point the documentary text undermines the fictional discourse. His/her decision will largely depend on the weight he/she attributes to the factual report. Those who are familiar with the discourse of the persecution of European Jewry will likely be disposed to construct a hierarchy in favour of the factual.

In postmodern literature there is no doubt that the past existed; but, to quote Linda Hutcheon, "its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality" (1988: 16). Like D.M. Thomas, Christoph Ransmayr in his novel *Die letzte Welt* creates a textual framework which also enables "Holocaust-discourse" to penetrate into a fictional world. This world is related to a highly canonized work of European culture, namely Ovid's mythological poem. The most prominent intertexts in this novel are *The Metamorphoses,* a fictional text, and *Tristia: Epistolae ex Ponto,* an historical autobiographic text by the same author.

The geographic centre of the novel is Tomi, located on the coast of the Black Sea and called "the iron city." It is characterized in opposition to Rome. Tomi, where Ovid has been deported, is described as a centre of horrifying diseases, crimes, and of the most grotesque and frightening natural phenomena. There are no boundaries between dream and reality; it is a world-in-between, where the laws of logic are no longer valid (human beings change into stones). If incidentally there is a glimpse of beauty, as is the case with the girl Echo, this beauty is afflicted by a severe dermatitis. The inhabitants of Tomi are totally insensitive, dull, indifferent and rough. No

event is capable of awakening the emotion of compassion. "Man is a wolf." This dead metaphor is filled with new symbolic meaning in the context of *Die letzte Welt*. The Latin "Nec formas servat easdem" (no form remains the same), the Leitmotiv of the Ovidian metamorphoses, is interpreted by Ransmayr only in one direction: the changes occur from human to non-human, from "man" to "wolf", from bad to worse.

Postmodern anachronisms which interfere with the Ovidian period are expressed mainly in two ways. Firstly, by the introduction of cinematographic presentations and by the technical jargon of the twentieth century, and, secondly, by a protagonist who is called Thies, the German. Thies (a free translation of Dis) is responsible for the integration of the "Holocaust-discourse" into the world of Roman antiquity. He has been one of the oppressors during the Second World War, in his function as a warder in a concentration camp. At a certain moment he deserts and arrives in the iron city of Tomi, where he is a gravedigger and where the remembrance of the systematic extinction of the Jews causes him nightmares. It is said of Thies that he has had an "unprotected heart" ever since. When the story of Thies is told, a documentary intertext is inserted, one of the fragments of the Auschwitz trials in which the agonies of the gas chambers are reported (p. 261).

The document fits into the narration in an inconspicuous way; only those readers who are familiar with either the experience or the historical report of Auschwitz are able to identify the scene. Those readers, at the same time, will no longer read *Die letzte Welt* as a future apocalyptic threat, as is proposed by many critics, but above all as an inescapable recollection of one of the most inexpressible forms of inhumanity in the recent past. My reading is supported by a number of dispersed anticipations of which I will give a few examples: (1) The refugees coming from Odessa (the city which is known for its large Jewish population and which also plays a role in *The White Hotel*) are badly received by the inhabitants of Tomi, "not because they are aliens or because they are suffering, but because their poverty recalls the past of the citizens of Tomi" (p. 255). (2) Tomi is called "Durchgangslager" and "Straflager". (3) The burning of books is a central motive in the novel. (4) When Ovidius Naso (nose!) has been forced to leave his Roman home, people steal his silver.

I admit that my personal recognition of "Holocaust discourse" in *The White Hotel* and *Die letzte Welt* had a strong legitimizing effect on my judgment of the moral strength of both novels. But at the same time I admit that this is not a necessary effect.

Although the majority of those who reviewed the novel expressed a favourable opinion, they nevertheless experienced difficulties with the post-modernist setting. The great admiration they have for the theme and the structure of the novel makes them hesitate to call it postmodernist. I have analyzed sixty-five reviews in different languages which – with few exceptions – had explicit reservations about the possibility of applying the concept of Postmodernism to *Die letzte Welt*. The critics' argument was: it is not a postmodernist novel because it is too serious, it goes beyond the playful

irresponsibility of Postmodernism. One of the exceptions was a French critic who qualified the novel as a "chef d'oeuvre de la postmodernité".

My proposal is that we should shape our concept of Postmodernism in such a way that there will be ample scope for including narratives which write or rewrite recent history. Whether the documentary intertexts of recent history "falsify" other intertexts (as in the case of D.M. Thomas) or whether they form a kind of analogy and surpassing of other cultural intertexts (as in the case of Christoph Ransmayr), they are nevertheless highly concerned and responsible works of literature. They offer the readers a contextualization of historical facts in an unexpected way, which challenges their cognitive and moral efforts without forcing them to accept the specific juxtaposition of voices.

Notes

1. The term "falsification" is only partly related to the scientific procedure known by this name. It is restricted to the setting of the novel and to the mental experience elicited by the text. It does not mean that a novel or even a war is suited to falsify in a methodological sense a (semi)-scientific theory.

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