What Was Postmodernism?

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thread: fictions present
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Brian McHale looks back on the movement in "What Was Postmodernism?" He contrasts postmodernism's canonization with critical constructions of modernism, and moves through contemporary painting to reflect on intersections between the violence of recent history and postmodernism, as the postwar world lived "in the ruins of our own civilization, if only in our imaginations."

1.

Let me begin by quoting from a novel written by a friend of mine, Raymond Federman. Raymond will turn 80 in 2008. Though his name is much less recognizable today than it once was, back in the '70s Federman was relatively famous, or notorious, at least in some literary circles, as a member of the first generation of American postmodernists. By a great irony of history, Federman's writing is better known today in Europe, especially in Germany, than it is in the States. Though I call Federman a postmodernist, Raymond himself preferred to call the kind of writing he did surfiction, a coinage that never really caught on. Let me quote from his novel, Aunt Rachel's Fur (2001). The premise is this: an aspiring novelist, obviously a version of Federman himself, returns to his native country, France, 10 years after he has left it to emigrate to the United States. Internal evidence indicates that the year is 1958, but somehow the Federman character knows all about the rise and fall of postmodernism, which wouldn't happen until decades later. This isn't the only deliberate anachronism in this novel; in fact, deliberate anachronism is one of the features that marks it as a postmodernist novel. At one point, the Federman character unleashes a tirade against the assistant editor of a French publishing house, named Gaston, who has just turned down the manuscript of Federman's first novel because it is "too postmodern" - a term that wasn't yet current in 1958. The Federman character says:

So you find my novel too postmodern, wrong again Gaston, you've arrived too late, we are already beyond postmodernism, it's dead, dead and gone, don't you know, it's been buried, where have you been, and that's precisely the problem for literature today, now that postmodernism is dead, writers don't know how to replace it, the disappearance of postmodernism was devastating for the writers, but it was not surprising, it was expected

to happen for some time, the last gasp happened the day Samuel Beckett changed tense [Dec. 22, 1989 - BMcH] and joined the angels, I can give you an exact date if you want to, postmodernism died because Godot never came...

[...]

It was sad to see postmodernism disappear before we could explain it, I kind of liked postmodernism, I was happy in the postmodern condition, as happy if not happier than in the previous condition, I don't remember what that was called but I was glad to get out of it, and now here we are again faced with a dilemma, what shall we call this new thing towards which we are going, this new thing I haven't seen yet, did you see it Gaston, what can we call it, postpostmodernism seems a bit too clumsy, and popomomo not serious enough, I thought of calling this new condition The People's Revolution Number Four [...] but I'm afraid that Gallimard or some other big bookseller already has these names under copyright, in any case I think the name of this new condition that's about to descend upon us should have the word new in it, what do you think, Gaston...

[...]

How about The New Novelty [...] or maybe The Postnovelty, or better yet The New Post-future, somebody suggested Avant-Pop, I find that too familiar, you see the difficulty, if we must name that beast looming in front of us [...] we better hurry, otherwise it'll be too late and we'll already have reached the next new post-condition, the one that will follow what we are unable to name... (245-46)

I don't know whether Raymond is right about postmodernism being "dead and gone." I'm not even sure whether he's serious about this; or rather, I'm sure that he isn't serious, but I'm not sure in what way. But Raymond is certainly right about one thing: it would be sad to see postmodernism disappear before we tried to explain it.

For the sake of argument, let's assume along with Federman that postmodernism, like Samuel Beckett, has "changed tense," so that the question becomes the one in my title: "What was postmodernism?" It's a trick question. For one thing, it has been asked before, probably many times, but certainly by the literary historian John Frow, in an essay from 1997. Moreover, Frow's title, and therefore my title, too, alludes to at least two previous essays, one by the comparative literature scholar, Harry Levin, "What Was Modernism?" (1960); the other by the architecture critic Charles Jencks, "What Is Postmodernism?" (1986). (I warned you that it was a trick question.) We could try approaching postmodernism by way of these three essays, taking them in chronological order: Levin's, then Jencks's, then Frow's.

For Harry Levin in 1960, modernism has changed tense. He looks backward from the perspective of 1960 at the accomplishments of modernist writing around the year 1922. 1922 was the year in which Joyce published Ulysses, Eliot published The Waste Land, and Rilke published Sonnets to Orpheus; it was the year of Brecht's first play; it was the year that Proust died, leaving behind the manuscripts of the remaining unpublished volumes of his huge novel, In Search of Lost Time. 1922, in other words, was something like the

high-water mark of literary modernism. In characterizing the modernism of 1922, Levin accomplishes several things. He signals that modernism is history (as we say nowadays): it's no longer "now," no longer contemporary; he turns it into a historical period. Levin periodizes modernism, and at the same time canonizes it, in at least two sense: he locates modernism in the canon of literary-historical periods, after Neoclassicism, Romanticism, and Victorianism; and he identifies the writers who deserve to belong in the canon of modernist literature.

What's notable here is the forty-year time-lag: modernism can "appear" as a period with a canon of its own only forty years after the fact, around 1960. Actually, there's nothing very out-of-the-ordinary about this. Periods in cultural history are typically constituted retrospectively. Writers around 1922 - Joyce, Eliot, Brecht and the rest - might have thought of themselves as "modern," in the everyday sense of being up-to-date, or even as "moderns," but they rarely thought of themselves as "modernists," and, apart from such notable counter-examples as Laura Riding's and Robert Graves' A Survey of Modernist Poetry (1927), few thought of what they were doing as "modernism." All of this comes into focus only much later, after the action has died down, and the academic literary historians are able to move in and sort things out to their own satisfaction.

Now, this is strikingly not the case with postmodernism. Almost from the beginning, whenever that might have been, and certainly from about 1975 on, people doing postmodernism could think of themselves as postmodernists (even if, like Federman, they preferred a different term), and as belonging to the postmodern period. From the very outset, postmodernism was self-conscious about its identity as a period, conscious of its own historicity, because it conceived of itself as historical, coming after something, namely modernism - a historicity encoded in the very term "postmodernism." Postmodernism periodized itself; it did not need to wait for a Harry Levin, looking back from a forty-year retrospect, as in the case of "modernism." And since it conceived itself as coming after something, it also imagined itself being superceded by something yet to come, as in the Federman passage I just read. Paradoxically, the question "What was postmodernism?" could have been asked, and was asked, almost as soon as the term "postmodernism" had emerged into general circulation in the mid-seventies, not because it was already over, but because it knew from the very outset that it would one day be over.

In the meantime, in the interval between modernism's change of tense and the anticipated change of tense that postmodernism would someday undergo, somebody had to ask the question, "What Is Postmodernism?" and many people did, especially in the 1980's. Charles Jencks, one of the people who asked that question, sometimes claimed to have coined the term, at least in the architectural context. (There are other claimants in other contexts.) He even dared to date precisely the onset of postmodernism in architecture: July 15, 1972, 3:32 pm, when part of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project in St. Louis was demolished. Pruitt-Igoe had been built in accordance with principles of the modernist International Style, and its manifest unlivability marked the failure of high modernism in architecture.

Needless to say, other people favor other dates. The cultural historian Andreas Killen, for instance, in his recent book, 1973 Nervous Breakdown (2006), thinks that, for various reasons, Jencks is off by a year, and points out that the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe complex wasn't finally completed until 1973. Other historians of postmodernism, notably Fredric Jameson, also favor 1973, mainly because of the world-historical events of that year, especially the Middle East war, the Arab oil boycott, and the beginning of the unraveling of the Nixon administration. Myself, I like to think of 1966 as year zero of postmodernism (but that would be a different talk). Obviously, this identification of particular years as the year zero of postmodernism is only a kind of game; cultural change doesn't really occur overnight, or even in the course of a year, but gradually, over the course of a number of years. But it's a serious game, not a trivial one; a game with consequences. When Virginia Woolf famously wrote that "On or about December 1910, human character changed" (70), she was kidding, of course, but she wasn't only kidding; she was also calling our attention to the unprecedented experience of newness undergone at least by some people in Europe and the Americas in the years before the Great War.

Now, when Woolf specified, "On or about December 1910," we can be sure that her show of precision is really mock-precision. I wish we could be sure that the same is the case with Jencks and July 15, 1972; unfortunately, he might not be kidding. Jencks seems to think that one can speak with a great deal of precision about postmodernism - not only about when it began, but about what it is, and who belongs to it. He invests much energy in his little pamphlet, "What Is Postmodernism?" in policing the boundaries between modernism and postmodernism, admitting only certain buildings, texts, art-works, etc, and excommunicating others, declaring them to be not really postmodernist but only "late-modernist." Of course, anyone who proposes to draw period distinctions makes inclusions and exclusions, but Jencks seems to take his inclusions and exclusions very seriously - too seriously.

Jencks began as far back as 1977 by characterizing postmodernism in architecture. In "What Is Postmodernism?" he extends his terminological "big tent" to include other art-forms, especially painting and fiction. Key to his definition is the concept of "double-coding": postmodernist buildings (or art-works more generally) appeal to two audiences simultaneously: at one level to an audience of architectural (or art-world) insiders, able to appreciate the architect's innovations in the light of architectural history; at another level to a popular audience, who actually find the building comprehensible and enjoyable. By way of analogy, think of how animated feature films have operated ever since the Disney studio perfected the formula, around the time of Aladdin: animated features appeal to children through slapstick and cuteness, and to their parents through pop-culture allusions and double entendres that go right over youngsters' heads. That, in a nut-shell, is double-coding.

Outside of the architectural realm, Jencks's notion of double-coding resonates especially with theories of postmodernist literature, where the layering of popular appeal and avant-garde experimentation has all along been recognized as characteristic of postmodernism. It is double-coding in Jencks's sense, or even more radically, the collapse or telescoping of the hierarchy of high and low culture, that is said to explain such phenomena as the

postmodernist novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Italo Calvino, or postmodern historical fiction such as Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose or the novels of E. L. Doctorow. Later on, in the '90s, writing about a later generation of postmodernists, the critic Larry McCaffery proposed to call this double-coded literature, "Avant-Pop": the double-coding is right there in the term. (This is the term that the character in Federman's novel finds "too familiar," you'll recall.)

Now fast-forward thirty years to John Frow's essay, "What Was Postmodernism?" (1997). For Frow, the changed tense indicates, not that postmodernism is "dead and gone," over and done with, but that it continues to obey the modernist logic of innovation and obsolescence. Postmodernism, in his view, is "precisely a moment of the modern" (36). Modernism is driven by the imperative to innovate, and every innovation is rendered obsolete by the next one, so that modernism is constantly distancing itself from its own most recent manifestation, which then "slides into the past" (31). Eventually, this relentless logic of superceding oneself requires that modernism itself become obsolete, necessitating a successor - a postmodernism.

If postmodernism is modernism's successor, made necessary by the very logic of modernism, then how does it differentiate itself from its predecessor? Since modernism's determining feature, according to Frow, is its form of temporality - its ever-renewing newness and "nextness" - then postmodernism can only differentiate itself by adopting a different temporality from modernism's (36). One option might be to adopt a temporality of stasis in contradistinction to modernism's dynamism - either in the form of a static neoclassicism (a version favored by Charles Jencks in his various accounts of postmodern architecture), or in the form of apocalypse and the end of history (which are recurrent topics of postmodernist theory and practice alike, as we'll shortly see). Alternatively, postmodernism might attempt to outstrip modernism by adopting an even more frantic pace of innovation and obsolescence, speeding up the cycle until it approached the seasonal rhythm of fashion (Frow 38).

There is evidence of all of these temporalities in postmodernist practice: stasis, apocalypse, speed. But there is also compelling evidence of yet another alternative, that of multiple and uneven times, or non-synchronicity (Frow 9, 42). Despite being each other's contemporaries in the everyday sense, we are not all postmoderns; some of us are, but others of us are moderns or pre-moderns; perhaps some of us (or all of us?) are all three at once. Modernisms, postmodernisms, premodernisms, perhaps para-modernisms all co-exist. This approach sharply contradicts certain formidable theorists of postmodernism, including Charles Jencks, whom I've just discussed, and especially Fredric Jameson, in his enormously influential book, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991). These theorists seem to hold the view that postmodernism is a sort of blanket condition (a term, you'll recall, that Federman mocks) - that it constitutes a really "big tent," extending right across the whole culture, affecting all genres and media, all disciplines of thought, all forms of practice and behavior in our time. Reading these theorists, you might think that everyone in the world had all joined hands and stepped across the same threshold all at the same time into postmodernity. But this is certainly not the case; just look around you at the unevenly postmodern world in

which we live in Europe and North America, let alone the rest of the world, where the further one ventures, the less synchronized and "contemporary" the world seems, despite the inroads of Americanization and globalization.

The alternative view involves not across-the-board, blanket transformation, but uneven development. Just as the world's regions are in some respects out of synch with each other, so too are different cultural domains even within the same region. Not every domain "postmodernizes" itself, and even the ones that do, don't all do it at the same time or in the same way. Some fields postmodernize sooner, others later, after a lag, others not at all. There is no a priori reason to assume that "postmodernism" means the same thing from one domain to the next, that it is one and the same everywhere. This is because, even if it is driven by the (presumably uniform) "cultural logic" of a historical moment, cultural change is also driven by the internal dynamics of specific fields, differing from field to field. In some fields, postmodernisms emerge early and decisively, in the sense that the use of the term postmodernism in discussions of the field becomes more or less mandatory; architecture and dance might be examples. A rule of thumb might be that fields where modernisms have been sharply-defined, conspicuous, aggressive and successful give rise to comparably well-defined postmodernisms. In other fields, those with heterogeneous and contested modernisms, such as film, painting, or literature, the term "postmodernism" is correspondingly optional, dispensable, or problematic.

2.

This is where I come in. My own intervention in the conversation around the question, "What is postmodernism?" came in the years between Jencks and Frow, in books I published in 1987 and 1992. In those books, I took a different position from Charles Jencks's. Jencks appears to believe that postmodernism "exists," in something like the sense that (say) Mt. Rushmore exists: as an object in the world. Its existence is verifiable; it has definite characteristics; it even begins on a specifiable date. This is not my position: I don't believe that postmodernism exists in that sense. In these matters of periodization and categorization, I am a constructivist; for me, postmodernism exists only as a category that we construct, one that we could (and do) construct differently depending upon the work we hope to do with it. If postmodernism is a "big tent" under which we assemble various observable phenomena, it is a "tent" that we can strike and move to another site and erect differently, over a different collection of phenomena. Period terms like postmodernism (and modernism, for that matter) are strategically useful; they help us see connections among disparate phenomena, but at the same time they also obscure other connections, and we must constantly weigh the illumination they shed over here against the obscurity they cast over there. From the moment when the obscurity outweighs the illumination, and the category in question becomes more a hindrance than a help, we are free to reconstruct or even abandon it.

My position also differs from Jencks's in another respect. Jencks's "big tent" version of postmodernism implies that everything has become postmodern, that postmodernism extends right across our culture, from wall to wall. As I suggested just a minute ago, my own view is that "postmodernization" is an uneven development - that some fields have

"postmodernized," but not others, or not to the same extent; and that every field that has postmodernized, has done so in its own way. Where Jencks strove for maximum scope for his theory of postmodernism, my own scope was more modest. In the '80s and early '90s I sought to construct a workable distinction between modernism and postmodernism in a single field - the practice of prose fiction. My distinction seemed satisfying enough, as far as it went - or satisfying to me, anyway; but exactly how far it went beyond the field of prose fiction remained an open question. I think now that the distinction may not be generalizable across cultural fields; but we'll come to that.

This is the distinction that I developed. Modernist fiction was preoccupied with what we know and how we know it; with the accessibility and reliability of knowledge; it explored epistemological questions. Postmodernist fiction, by contrast, explored ontological questions - questions of being rather than knowing. It asked questions like those the Fluxus artist Dick Higgins once posed: "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" Obviously, the distinction was not absolute: modernist fiction also asked ontological questions alongside its epistemological questions, and postmodernist fiction continued to ask epistemological questions alongside its ontological ones. The difference was one of priority, or of dominance: in modernist fiction, epistemological questions take priority over ontological ones; in postmodernist fiction, it's the other way around. So the change-over from modernism to postmodernism isn't a matter of something absolutely new entering the picture, but of a reshuffling of the deck, a shift of dominant: what was present but "backgrounded" in modernism becomes "foregrounded" in postmodernism, and vice-versa, what was "foregrounded" in modernism becomes "backgrounded" in postmodernism.

Rather than continue to talk in the abstract, it would be better to illustrate with concrete cases. So let me pick an exemplary modernist novel and an exemplary postmodernist one, and briefly describe them in terms of my distinction. For a modernist case, consider William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury. The Sound and the Fury was published in 1929, seven years after the year that Harry Levin identified as the high-water mark of literary modernism; nevertheless, in itself it represents a high-point of modernist achievement. In three of its four chapters the novel dives into the interior monologues of three brothers, one of them a mentally retarded adult, another an obsessed and suicidal adolescent, the third a crook and a liar, utterly unreliable. Interior monologue is one marker of the novel's modernism. Another is its dislocation of time: the first chapter occurs on April 7, 1928, the third chapter on the day before that, the last chapter on the day after; but the second chapter flashes back eighteen years, to 1910 (the year in which "human character changed," according to Virginia Woolf). It's pretty clear, even from this cursory description, that The Sound and the Fury poses special challenges for the reader; in fact, it is notoriously difficult to read. It taxes our ingenuity and interpretative resources to the utmost; we must read between the lines, fill in the gaps, link up widely dispersed details, solve puzzles, and distinguish solid clues from red herrings.

If this sounds like a detective novel, that's not a coincidence. As it happens, there's a crime in The Sound and the Fury, in fact more than one: a niece steals money from the crooked brother, but it is money that ought to be hers to begin with, and that her uncle has been

withholding from her. But getting to the bottom of this superficial crime isn't the point; the point, for the reader, is trying to fathom the novel's deeper mysteries: the mystery of Benjy, the retarded brother's, inconsolable sadness; the mystery of Quentin, the suicidal brother's, obsession; the mystery of Jason, the crooked brother's, deceit, self-delusion, and self-loathing; the mystery of the missing sister's hold on all of them. A modernist novel like The Sound and the Fury is a detective novel, in a sense, but the detective is the reader. It is a novel about the difficulty of knowing anything for sure, or anything at all; it's an epistemological novel. (And it's no coincidence that the detective novel, in both its "classic" and its hard-boiled form, is an exact contemporary of the highbrow modernist novel; the detective novel is modernist fiction's disreputable twin brother.)

Now consider this postmodernist novel: a novel about the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the development of the V-2 rocket in the Third Reich, and the victorious Allies' scramble to obtain the German technologies and expertise that would form the basis of their space programs, and of the prolonged nuclear standoff we call the Cold War. I am talking, of course, about Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, published in 1973 (year zero of postmodernism, according to Andreas Killen). Like The Sound and the Fury, Gravity's Rainbow involves multiple quests for knowledge, but two in particular. A number of characters are trying to find out what happened at the last launch of a V-2 by a rogue German rocket commander in the waning days of the war; while the novel's hero, an American lieutenant named Tyrone Slothrop, is trying to find out what was done to him in his infancy when he was handed over to a behaviorist psychologist for experimentation. Other people are also interested in Slothrop's childhood conditioning, so the "detective" in one of these epistemological quests is also himself the object of an epistemological quest. But something strange happens to all these quests for knowledge in the course of the novel: they bog down in a proliferation of possibilities and alternatives; they dissolve in ambiguity and uncertainty; they lose their way. Responsibility for this petering out of the novel's epistemological quests rests with the instability of its world. The world of Gravity's Rainbow is riddled with secondary worlds and sub-worlds, little enclaves of alternative reality, so many of them that in the end they fatally weaken and overwhelm the novel's "main" world. We fall into characters' hallucinations and fantasies, often without knowing that we've done so until much later; we mistake subjective realities for the outside world. We slip in and out of movies and staged performances, plays-within-the-play, so to speak. You know you're in trouble when a major character, a British intelligence officer named Prentice, comes equipped, like a comic-book superhero, with a special talent - a talent for having other people's fantasies, for literally taking over their fantasies and managing them for them. Prentice is a "fantasist-surrogate." You see the difficulty: once Prentice enters the picture (which happens literally on the novel's first page), we can never be sure which episodes might be fantasies that Prentice is managing on someone's behalf; worse, we can't be sure whose fantasy he might be managing.

Under such conditions, it's no wonder that quests for reliable knowledge run aground. The novel's various detectives lose themselves in thickets of alternative reality and hallucination. The chief quester, Slothrop, who wants above all to solve the mystery of his own past, literally disintegrates; by the novel's end he can no longer even be "'found' [...] in the conventional sense of 'positively identified and detained'" (712). Slothrop, Pynchon

writes, "was sent into the Zone to be present at his own assembly - perhaps, heavily paranoid voices have whispered, his own time's assembly - and there ought to be a punch line to it, but there isn't. The plan went wrong. He is being broken down instead, and scattered." (738)

Quests for knowledge succumb to the proliferation of worlds; questions of epistemology give way to questions of ontology: "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" Now, that's what I call a postmodernist novel.

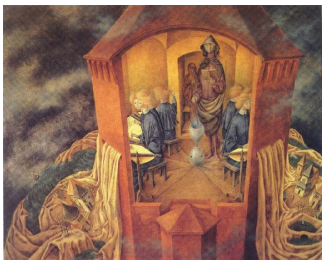
As I've said, I was pretty satisfied with the distinction I was able to develop between modernism and postmodernism in prose fiction, even if not everyone was persuaded. But subsequently, when I tried to extend this kind of distinction to poetry, I had my first lesson in what I've been calling "uneven development." Postmodernist poetry proved to be less amenable to the kind of analysis that I had applied to novels. It was harder to identify the same kind of "shift of dominant" in poetry, and in the end, instead of the relatively clear-cut criteria that I was able to develop for postmodernist fiction, I had to settle for a looser, less integrated bundle of features to characterize postmodernist poetry. This didn't prevent me from writing a book about it, though, called The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole. (I'm very proud of this title, which I stole from the architect Robert Venturi; I'm not sure whom he stole it from.)

But I don't want to talk about poetry here. Instead, I would like to look at a few paintings as a way of broaching the issue of the difficulty of generalizing about postmodernism across cultural fields.

3.

To talk about postmodernism in paintings at all might be self-contradictory, in the sense that one aspect of postmodernism in the visual and plastic arts is precisely the displacement of painting from the pinnacle of the hierarchy of art production which it occupied in earlier periods, including modernism. Postmodernism in the fine arts, it has plausibly been argued, is characterized by art's dematerialization - by the demotion of art practices that result in the production of discrete, moveable and saleable objects, and their replacement by art practices that leave few if any material objects in their wake - by installation art, performance art, conceptual art. If we accept this argument, then the art of painting, which certainly results in the production of material objects, ought to be excluded from postmodernism by definition, and postmodernist painting ought to be an oxymoron. The funny thing about painting, though, is that no matter how vigorously it has been expelled, it refuses to stay expelled; it keeps bouncing back. It certainly bounced back in the 1980s, the peak decade of postmodernism, and it seems to have bounced back again at the end of the '90s and in the first years of the new millennium. So if there's one sense in which painting can't be postmodern, by definition, there's another sense in which we can't talk sensibly about postmodernism in the fine arts without at least mentioning painting.

With that caveat in mind, consider Bordando el manto terrestre, by Remedios Varo.



This is not a postmodernist painting, but it is good place to start anyway because it has been used in a postmodernist way. This is manifestly a Surrealist painting, and Surrealism is one of the avant-garde movements, one of the isms, that flourished alongside and within the modernist movement in the first half of the twentieth century. Varo, the painter, Spanish by birth, was intimately associated with the European Surrealists; indeed, she was married to the Surrealist poet Benjamin Péret. She painted this picture, whose title translates as Embroidering Earth's Mantle, very late, in 1961, when she was living in permanent exile in Mexico, only a couple of years before her death in 1963, and long after the heyday of Surrealism. The relevance of this picture for us lies in the fact that it is mentioned and described by Thomas Pynchon in the novel that he wrote before Gravity's Rainbow, The Crying of Lot 49, published in 1966. (By the way, this is one of the reasons that I favor 1966 as year zero of postmodernism, instead of 1973.) Pynchon's heroine, Oedipa Maas, has been "rescued" from her suburban Californian existence by a rich boyfriend, Pierce Inverarity; he is her knight in shining armor; she is his Rapunzel. They escape together to Mexico:

In Mexico City they somehow wandered into an exhibition of paintings by the beautiful Spanish exile Remedios Varo: in the central painting of a triptych, titled "Bordando el Manto Terrestre," were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. Oedipa, perverse, had stood in front of the painting and cried. No one had noticed; she wore dark glasses [...] She had looked down at her feet and known, then, that what she stood on had only been woven together a couple thousand miles away in her own tower, was only by accident known as Mexico, and so Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there'd been no escape. What did she so desire to escape from? [...] If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else [could she do]? (11-12)

This is a pretty exact description of this painting, I think you'll agree. While it edits some details out - for instance, the sinister masked figures who oversee the production of the tapestry - it focuses appropriately on the central paradox of the painting: the embroiderers in the tower produce the world in which the tower itself stands. This is a "strange loop," akin to topological paradoxes such the Möbius strip or the Klein bottle, familiar from certain etchings by M.C. Escher, as well as from postmodernist stories such as the Argentine Julio Cortázar's "Continuidad de parques," or "Continuity of parks." In other words, Varo's Bordando el manto terrestre produces a visual equivalent of the kind of ontological paradoxes that one finds in postmodernist novels - paradoxes based on the

running-together, in a logically impossible way, of different levels of reality. Pynchon calls our attention to this paradox in Varo's painting, and builds it into his heroine's experience of entrapment in a world of strange loops. He will go on to construct other such strange loops in Gravity's Rainbow and his subsequent novels.

Here, then, is a painting that does seem compatible with the kind of postmodernism that I have attributed to postmodernist novels - the postmodernism of ontological questions. The fact that this painting itself belongs to one of the modernist avant-gardes, and has only been framed by a postmodernist novel, may or may not be problematic. Let's fast-forward now to the 1980s, which I have called the peak decade of postmodernism, and to a painter who flourished in that decade, but whose reputation has ebbed a good deal since then: Robert Yarber.

The Tender and the Damned is a painting of Yarber's from 1985. The first thing you need to know about it is that it is huge, six feet tall by eleven feet wide (1.8 by 3.4 meters). I have a photograph of my daughters standing in front of this painting when they were eight and five years old, and the figure on the bed is as long as they are tall. The painting is clearly meant to evoke the scale and proportions of a movie-screen; and of course the movie associations don't stop there. Its figures are cartoonish, evoking animated features. Its colors recall the Technicolor of, say, Fifties Hollywood movies, just as its title, The Tender and the Damned, recalls Hollywood melodrama and television soap operas. Its content, too, is manifestly melodramatic. This is narrative painting; it obviously tells a story, or part of a story anyway, maybe its catastrophic climax. This is noteworthy, because narrative is a feature that modernism sought to expel from painting; but narrative in painting, like painting itself, refuses to be expelled, but keeps bouncing back, as it does with a vengeance in this painting, and in Eighties painting generally.

One way of framing The Tender and the Damned as a postmodernist painting, then, would be to emphasize the way that it collapses together high and low art - cutting-edge painting and Technicolor melodrama, or even animated cartoon. Charles Jencks might call this a doubled-coded picture, appealing simultaneously to the knowledgeable art-world crowd and to viewers who enjoy a good story and a melodramatic situation. Larry McCaffery might call it "Avant-Pop."

So Yarber's painting is certainly compatible with some versions of postmodernism, even if it isn't necessarily compatible with my version. Before we move on, however, I want to point out one way in which it does converge with my version of postmodernism, as well as a detail that takes us into areas of postmodernism where we have not yet ventured. Have a look at the right side of the painting, just about the sleeper's head. It only takes a moment to realize that this must be a wall-size mirror, in which the leaper's suicidal leap is reflected. But it is also sort of a scale-model of The Tender and the Damned itself, a painting within the painting, somewhat simplified, scaled down, and edited (the sleeper

has been edited out). This structure, that of the painting-within-the-painting - or the play-within-the-play, the story-within-the-story, and so on; in other words, mise-en-abyme - is another one of those ontological paradoxes, akin to the strange loop of Bordando el manto terrestre, that keeps turning up in postmodernist fiction.

Let me call your attention to a particular detail of this reflection. Notice that the "real" woman (as distinct from the mirror-image one) is wearing a nightdress that billows around her, and that she is obviously falling. Now look at the reflected image: because of the simplification of the figure, the billowing nightgown appears to be a pair of wings, and she appears to be taking off rather than falling. In the mirror-image, she isn't a suicide about to plummet to her death but a flying figure - something like an angel.

Remember angels? Angels used to be everywhere in postmodern culture, high and low, especially in the Eighties and Nineties, but beginning as early as the Sixties. Apart from all the angel imagery that we used to encounter everywhere on all kinds of paraphernalia - on t-shirts and jewelry, in advertising, on television, in tattoos, etc. - there are, for instance, a number of angels, of a particularly fierce demeanor, in Gravity's Rainbow; when the performance artist Laurie Anderson wrote a song and dedicated it to Pynchon, she called it "Gravity's Angel." There are also angels in Salman Rushdie's novel The Satanic Verses (the one that got him into so much trouble), in James Merrill's epic poem The Changing Light at Sandover, in Tony Kushner's epic play Angels in America, in music videos such as the one for R.E.M.'s "Losing My Religion," and in Wim Wenders' and Peter Handke's European art-film Wings of Desire, remade in Hollywood as a Nicholas Cage/Meg Ryan vehicle called City of Angels. I could go on. (A tiny trace of this angel motif even appears in the passage from Raymond Federman's novel that I quote at the beginning, where Federman speaks of Samuel Beckett "join[ing] the angels.") Yarber's paintings of the Eighties have only a few angels as blatant as the one in The Tender and the Damned, but they have many figures in free-fall, ambiguously floating or falling - figures clearly affiliated with the angels of postmodernism.

Whatever happened to all those angels? While they didn't disappear completely, either from popular culture or from cutting-edge art, they do seem to have subsided a good deal since the beginning of the millennium - or perhaps we should say, since 9/11. The renewed success of Tony Kushner's play Angels in America when it appeared as a television mini-series on HBO in December 2003 might be taken as an indication of angels' continued vitality, but in fact many commentators observed at the time that, while everything else about Angels in America still seemed up-to-date after ten years, its angel imagery seemed a bit dated. We might hypothesize that angels "belong" in some sense to postmodernism; certainly, their huge upsurge in popular consciousness, and in the mass marketplace, coincides with the peak years of postmodernism. It follows, then, that if the angels have come and gone, maybe that means that postmodernism itself is "over," here at the beginning of the twenty-first century - a possibility to which we will return shortly.

First, though, consider one last picture, a painting by Alexis Rockman, ironically entitled Manifest Destiny.

Commissioned by the Brooklyn Museum, and executed in 2003-04, it is even huger than The Tender and the Damned, measuring eight feet by twenty four feet (2.4 by 7.3 meters) - two feet taller than Yarber's painting, and more than twice as wide. It is a visionary image of the far future: Brooklyn, looking eastward from Manhattan, several thousand years from now, after rising sea-levels have drowned the city. The foreground is filled with creatures from southern seas that have migrated to northern waters as the oceans warmed. On the right are the ruins of the Brooklyn Bridge; in the background, the ruins of Brooklyn itself. The style of the painting is easily recognizable, I think: it is the style of popular-science illustrations, such as you might find in National Geographic magazine, or in the murals and dioramas of museums of natural history - appropriately enough, since Manifest Destiny actually is a mural in a museum. So, like Yarber's painting, Rockman's fuses cutting-edge fine art with popular art - in this case, not big-screen Hollywood movies, but natural-history illustration.

Of course, Manifest Destiny also has cinematic associations, but not with Hollywood melodrama, as in The Tender and the Damned. Instead, its associations are with apocalyptic science fiction films and disaster movies like The Towering Inferno or The Poseidon Adventure. Looking at Rockman's image of the Brooklyn Bridge in ruins, I defy you not to think of the closing scene of the original Planet of the Apes (1968), when Charlton Heston, as an astronaut returned to Earth from his travels in space and time, discovers the ruins of the Statue of Liberty, half-buried in the sand. In other words, Rockman's mural taps into what Susan Sontag once called the "imagination of disaster" in American popular culture. John Frow might say that Rockman is illustrating a peculiarly postmodern form of temporality: the vision of apocalypse, of the end of history.

Rockman's imagery of ruin also weirdly taps into another tendency in postmodernism, which is particularly visible in postmodern architecture: its fascination with fake ruins. As you might be aware, back in the eighteenth century, and persisting well into the nineteenth, European culture succumbed to a Romantic fascination with ruined buildings - Greek and Roman ruins, of course, but also ruined medieval castles and abbeys. The fad for ruins reached the point that wealthy landowners who did not actually possess real ruined buildings on their property would commission architects to build fake ruins for them, so they could experience the "ruin sentiment" like everyone else. The ruin fad did not have quite the same impact in the United States, for the simple reason that we did not yet have very many ruined buildings to obsess about. So it seems odd that in the postmodern era, American architects would sometimes deliberately evoke the "ruin sentiment" in new buildings, in effect constructing fake ruins. One example might be the Wexner Center for Arts, right on the Ohio State campus in Columbus, designed by Peter Eisenman to resemble a building either still under construction and surrounded by scaffolding, or one already falling into ruin.

But there is a much clearer example: the Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans, designed by Charles Moore.

The Piazza d'Italia was one of Charles Jencks' favorite examples of postmodern architecture; he gave it pride of place in several of his books. It was designed to be the focal point of the redevelopment of a downtown New Orleans neighborhood that had a historical connection with the Italian community. It is obviously a fake Roman ruin, souped up with neon lighting and modern materials. If anything is double-coded in Jenck's sense, it's the Piazza d'Italia: on the one hand, a kind of goofy Disneyworld experience for popular consumption; on the other hand, an in-joke for architects and others in the know.

I'm sure you have already picked up on the terrible irony that would overtake Moore's Piazza d'Italia. Built in the late Seventies, it is a fake ruin in a city that would be reduced to real ruin in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Actually, the ironies of the Piazza d'Italia are even worse than that: for, years before the reality-check of Katrina, the city fathers of New Orleans abandoned the urban redevelopment scheme of which the Piazza d'Italia was supposed to be the centerpiece, and shifted the city's redevelopment energies to the Riverwalk along the Mississippi, so that the Piazza was allowed to slip into neglect, becoming a haunt for the city's homeless. Reduced to a real ruin, it was eventually demolished. And only then came Katrina.

A similar sort of irony has engulfed Rockman's Manifest Destiny. If, looking at its imagery of Brooklyn in ruins, it is hard not to think of Planet of the Apes, I suppose it's ever harder not to think of the ruins of September 11, 2001. But the destruction of the World Trade Center was not one of Rockman's intended references. It couldn't have been: though the painting wasn't executed until 2003-04, it had already been commissioned and planned before 9/11. In the same way that history, in the form of the failure of urban redevelopment, and then the failure of the levees, caught up with the Piazza d'Italia, so history in the form of the attacks of 9/11 caught up with Manifest Destiny.

These are not cheap ironies, but painful and revealing ones. What they tell us is that all along, long before the actual catastrophes of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, we have been imagining such catastrophes - staging them, rehearsing them in our imaginations and in our art-works: in apocalyptic movies, in paintings, even in works of architecture. As many commentators have observed, what was especially shocking about 9/11 was not so much that it caught us by surprise, but that it didn't: we had already seen such disasters before, at the movies and on television; in The Day After and Independence Day and The Towering Inferno and, yes, even Planet of the Apes. We had composed scenarios of the end of civilization, and life among the ruins, not only in popular science fiction novels but in demanding literary novels like Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, which is set in London under the rocket blitz and in the war-ruined cities of Germany, but which obviously and

self-consciously refers to the projected future ruins that our own cities would be reduced to if the intercontinental ballistic missiles, the heirs of the Nazis' V-2 rockets, were ever launched.

Throughout the entire second half of the twentieth century, we have been living in the ruins of our own civilization, if only in our imaginations. Is this another version of postmodernism? I'm not sure; perhaps it's a foretaste of what comes after postmodernism. Maybe on 9/11 history finally caught up with our postmodern imagination of disaster, and we are now living in the aftermath of postmodernism, in what Raymond Federman calls (maybe jokingly) the New Post-Future. Perhaps we're already living on past the end of the postmodernism that began back in 1973, or 1966, or whenever.

This sense of "living on after the end" is a striking motif in Thomas Pynchon's latest novel, published December 2006, the massive Against the Day. Weighing in at 1085 pages, Against the Day is set in the years between 1893 and the Great War of 1914-18, with a brief post-war coda. Among many, many other things, Against the Day is about the inevitable approach of the Great War, and about the difference that war made to global civilization. On at least two different occasions in the book, characters talk about the Great War as the end of our world - the "end of the world as we know it," as R.E.M. used to sing - and of the whole post-war twentieth century as a kind of aftermath, or even afterlife.

This aftermath experience is mentioned first about half-way through the novel (on page 554!). The year is 1904; Miles Blundell, one of the boy-adventurers at the center of the novel, a sort of Tom Swift figure, goes on a bicycle tour of Flanders with a young man named Ryder Thorn who claims to be a time-traveler, visiting from the future. When they stop for a break, Thorn asks:

"[...] Do you know where we are right now?"

"On the road between Ypres and Menin, according to the signs," said Miles.

"Ten years from now, for hundreds and thousands of miles around, but especially here - " He appeared to check himself, as if he had been about to blurt a secret.

Miles was curious, and knew by now where the needles went and which way to rotate them. [In other words, he's trying to provoke Thorn. - BMcH]

"Don't tell me too much, now, I'm a spy, remember? I'll report this whole conversation to National H.Q."

"Damn you, Blundell, damn you all. You have no idea what you're heading into. The world you take to be 'the' world will die, and descend into Hell, and all history after that will belong properly to the history of Hell."

"Here," said Miles, looking up and down the tranquil Menin road.

"Flanders will be the mass grave of History."

And of course Thorn's right, in a sense: Flanders, the cockpit of the Great War, would at least be the mass grave of the nineteenth century European order.

The second version of this conversation occurs almost 500 pages later, a few pages before the end of the novel. It's retrospective, this time; an American woman, Dally Rideout, living in Paris, has a conversation with an old friend about the war that they have just come through:

She bought him a cognac. They sat and watched the lighted boulevard. Policarpe worked for a Socialist newspaper. Death had not taken up residence in his eyes but had visited often enough.

"We're in Hell, you know," he said conversationally.

"Everybody thinks we're finally out of there," she said.

A shrug. "The world came to an end in 1914. Like the mindless dead, who don't know they're dead, we are as little aware as they of having been in Hell ever since that terrible August."

"But this" - gesturing round at the blossoming city - "how could this - "

"Illusion. When peace and plenty are once again taken for granted, at your most languorous moment of maximum surrender, the true state of affairs will be borne in upon you. Swiftly and without mercy." (1077)

What is all this about living in Hell? I don't think we can take Pynchon literally here; he is not being eschatological, not talking about the End Times in any Book of Revelations sense. What he is talking about here is, precisely, "the end of the world as we know it": the experience of passing through a wrenching, maybe catastrophic, transition in human history; the experience of aftermath. Nor do I think that he is speaking here only, or even principally, about the Great War and its aftermath. We need to bear in mind that Pynchon himself has been a resident of New York City for a number of years, and that on September 11, 2001 he was presumably in Manhattan, at home. I take Against the Day to be a sort of coded representation of the experience of 9/11, displaced onto the Great War of 1914-18. Or, if that's too limited and simplistic a reading, then Pynchon is at least trying to capture what it means, what it feels like, to "change tenses," as Raymond Federman puts it - for instance, to change tenses from "What Is Postmodernism?" to "What Was Postmodernism?"

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“The End”

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McHale's reference to R.E.M.'s angel imagery in the "Losing My Religion" video is spot on, but the band is a complicated touchstone in McHale's discussion of the persistence of narrative in the postmodern period. Larry McCaffery in his essay for ***ebr***, "White Noise/White Heat, or Why the Postmodern Turn in Rock Music Led to Nothing but Road," argues that R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe [not to mention Laurie Anderson, David Byrne, Captain Beefheart, and Brian Eno] takes a sculptural, as opposed to narrative, approach to songwriting.