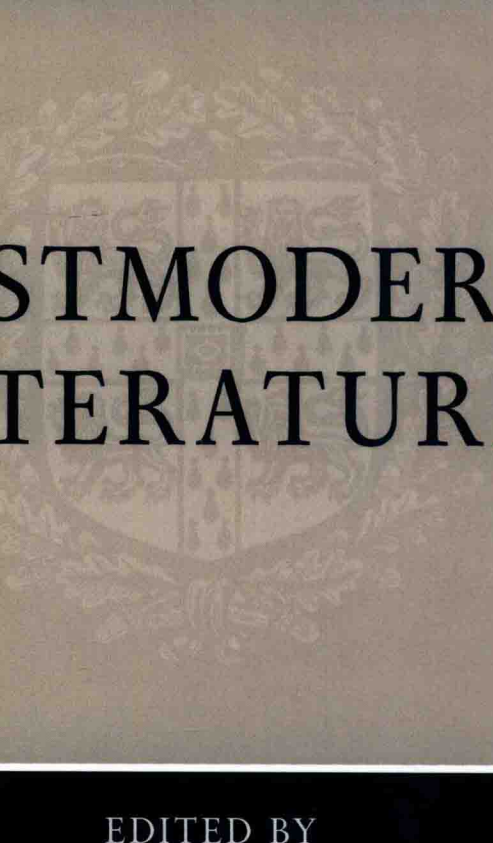


THE CAMBRIDGE
HISTORY OF



POSTMODERN
LITERATURE

EDITED BY
BRIAN MCHALE
AND LEN PLATT

THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF POSTMODERN LITERATURE

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THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF POSTMODERN LITERATURE

The *Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature* offers a comprehensive survey of the field, from its emergence in the mid-twentieth century to the present day. It offers an unparalleled examination of all facets of postmodern writing that helps readers to understand how fiction and poetry, literary criticism, feminist theory, mass media and the visual and fine arts have characterized the historical development of postmodernism. Covering subjects from the Cold War and countercultures to the Latin American boom and magic realism, this *History* traces the genealogy of a literary tradition while remaining grounded in current scholarship. It also presents new critical approaches to postmodern literature that will serve the needs of students and specialists alike. Written by a host of leading scholars, this *History* will not only engage readers in contemporary debates but will also serve as a definitive reference for years to come.

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General introduction

Brian McHale and Len Platt

History/postmodernism

The concept of postmodernism is problematic enough in itself. There are the cliché confusions over terms (*postmodernity/postmodernism*) and old problems with definitions of a concept once used as everyday currency. It is not at all hard to understand why in an entry entitled “A Brief History of Postmodernism,” a website simulacrum of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy: Earth (hsg2)* constructs a notion so hugely overused in “the last fifty years” that “it is now difficult to take . . . seriously as a sociological or philosophical concept.”¹ But then, from this potential endgame, *hsg2* effects something of a rescue through the difficult-to-ignore argument that the importance of the term *postmodernism* lies precisely in the one-time ubiquity of its usage. This was what made it so key, so defining of “an age,” if only in the sense that it once framed the way so many people formulated themselves in or perhaps against the world. That by itself guarantees return to the term in the future, a return inevitably made manifest as historiography, or at least made in relation to the historiographic – as, indeed, *hsg2* illustrates. It is itself an example of historiographical return, a contemporary reconstruction, albeit a half-joke one. Written in the form of an imagined future and place, this interactive fanzine dedicated to and parodying Douglas Adams’s 1970s mock travel guide is distinct, but not entirely separate from, the “palpable” postmodern once embodied for Andreas Huyssen in quite different form – as art objects on display at Documenta 7 (1982).²

There are, of course, certain ironies to rethinking the postmodern in retrospect. Not least, the postmodern has had issues with historiography – these so fundamental that they were once central to the definition of postmodernism. Important interventions imagined the postmodern as being somehow “outside” history, famously positioned at the end of ideology. Just as modernist manifestos talked of a clean break, so postmodernism

was often understood as being decisively torn away from its past. From a privileged point “beyond” history, versions of the postmodern made an assault on the very idea of historical narrative, reconfigured now as contaminated master narrative and reinserted as wild fabrication and myth of modernity. It may have been “safest,” as Jameson announced in the early 1990s, to imagine postmodernism as “an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten to think historically in the first place,” but postmodern cultures were not greatly interested in safety. Jameson himself seemed ambivalent. At the very moment of appearing to seek refuge in historicism, he visualized the postmodern in more destabilizing, dazzling ways as “what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good.”³

Unsurprisingly such versions of the postmodern had a powerful impact on the discipline of history itself at the time, and the rumblings carried on well into the new millennium.⁴ Mainstream historians seemed willing to recognize that postmodernism had brought something significant to the practice of historical research, but only up to a certain point. An online website, *Butterflies and Wheels*, specifically set up to counter what it called “pseudo science and epistemic relativity (aka postmodernism)” carried an article in late 2002, well past the heyday of postmodern proper, which outlined the value-added of postmodernism – or at least of a soft, easily assimilated version of it. According to the author of “Postmodernism and History” – Sir Richard J. Evans, Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge – postmodernism had the beneficial effects of encouraging historians to

take the irrational in the past more seriously, to pay more attention to ideas, beliefs and culture as influences in their own right, to devote more effort to framing our work in literary terms, to put individuals, often humble individuals, back into history, to emancipate ourselves from what became in the end a constricting straitjacket of social-science approaches, quantification and socio-economic determinism.

But things didn’t end there. Making a historian’s distinction between “moderate” and “radical,” the latter taking its cue from “poststructuralism,” the article continued on in rankled tones to worry away at what postmodernism in the extreme version might have done to historiography. Still mindful of postmodernism’s potentially “corrosive” effect, it looked back to earlier skirmishes when figures such as Keith Jenkins, historian of the French Revolution, Alan Munslow, and Hans Kellner had led the postmodern charge inside the domains of academic history writing. Under the influence of Jean Baudrillard, Michel de Certeau, Robert Berkhofer,

Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Ernesto Laclau, Jean-François Lyotard, Richard Rorty, Hayden White, and so on, such historians, so the argument went, had deskilled the history project – or, rather, all possible history projects. Here history writing became reduced to “just ideology,” professional objectivity was rendered as farcical fantasy, historians wrote about “it” as though, paraphrasing Kellner, “it” were as real as the text which was “the object of their labors.” Whatever reconciliatory noises could be made in 2002, Evans’s article constructed a “radical” postmodernism that at its worst had threatened to condemn the past to the realms of the unknowable, with the result that all we would ever get to were “historians’ writings.” This was the vanishing point at which History disappeared, leaving us with nothing but “historiography as a species of literary endeavour.” Here postmodernism rendered any generalized version of the past both irretrievable and irredeemable as humanistic science.⁵

In fact, great swathes of postmodern critical culture once tackled such issues without ever giving up on poststructuralism or history, or necessarily losing out in terms of radical edge. For many conveners of the postmodern in the seventies, eighties, and beyond, the point was not to keel over from the initial onslaught of a conservative academy but rather to argue the case for a history, politics, and ethics already “embedded” in contemporary aesthetics. Linda Hutcheon’s influential formulation, for instance, famously responded to the charge that postmodern culture was both ahistorical and ethically withdrawn by constructing an ambivalent complexity obsessed with its own textuality at the same time as it reached out to a much wider politics of contemporary culture and society. Her term for this kind of high-status textuality – *historiographic metafiction* – seemed to confirm the fear that history was in danger of becoming nothing more than a species of “literary endeavour,” at the same time as it challenged the notion of postmodernism as decontextualized intellectual faddism.⁶ For all these problematics and qualifications, however, one knows full well what Evans was getting at in his broadside and how from some perspectives *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature* will, even now, appear as a doubtful endeavor indeed, a text that claims to produce a cultural history using methods once unraveled by postmodern criticality – although the central focus of study here is postmodern cultural practices rather than postmodern critical theory.

Preempting such criticisms, we would want to emphasize that now, in the early twenty-first century, things really have genuinely, rather than notionally, moved on – much further on than Evans thought in 2002.