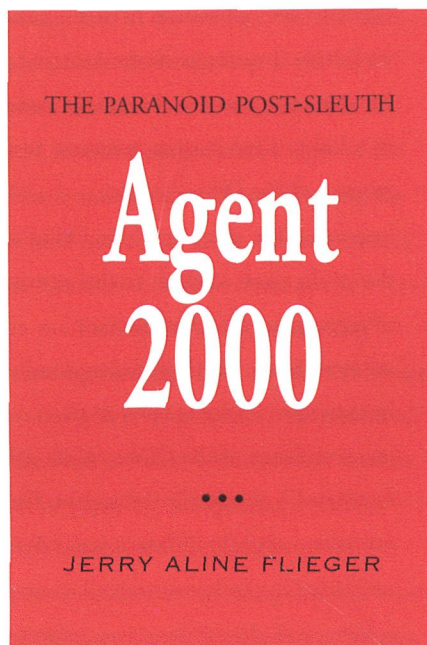


TERRITORIES

Perhaps by the time the silver apple drops on Times Square at midnight year 2000, we will have reached a consensus on what postmodernism *was*. But in the late twentieth century, about to become "the late" as in departed, we are still tracking the term and its implications, as a function of what Theresa Brennan, Jean Baudrillard, Slavoj Žižek and others have characterized as the Age of Paranoia. To be sure, postmodern writing seems to bear witness to the presence of a supervisory Other, an eye in the sky who tracks our movements, perhaps a reflection of reality in the new world order (the data bank, the spy satellite, the global corporation), perhaps a phantasmal projection of the anxieties of postmodern, pre-millennial, para-modern life on-line, on the brink, on the spot. I suggest that this feeling of a watchful Other reflects a "projective" sensibility at the core of the postmodern literary esthetic, manifest in two narrative modalities: a paranoid thematic and structure; and an obsession with a problematic quest for answers, conspicuous in the theme of the detective's search for truth through reason (no doubt a symptom of nostalgia for a time when things were "elementary, my dear Watson;" or reducible to "just the facts, ma'am").

Borrowing from the time-honored conventions of the detective/mystery novel, the postmodern novel implicates *the figures of the sleuth, the paranoid, and the spy/adventurer of the espionage*



tale. Sometimes the postmodern protagonist is herself a spy of sorts, tracking others (Oedipa Maas in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*); sometimes the post-protagonist feels spied upon, tracked, the object of surveillance or global plot (Gibson's classic cybersleuth, aptly named Case, in *Neuromancer*). In the more futuristic of millennial texts, this "spy" motif undergoes another mutation or graft, becoming a "techno-thriller" or cyber-adventure of sorts, informed by the information era. In all these avatars, the paranoid protagonist is identified, by projection, with the persecutory "other" whom he tails, his alter ego: the post-sleuth is trying to stop him(self) in his tracks.

1) *Tracking the postmodern*

But to discuss the postmodern in fiction, we must first try (yet again) to define it

- researching clues to the "post"-aesthetic that has been the site of so much commentary and debate. We may take the "Who's buried in Grant's Tomb?" approach and say simply that postmodernism is the sensibility that follows modernism, influencing much of the literary production of the second half of the century. More problematically, postmodernism is at once a break from and a nod to modernism, evoking the various connotations of the word "post." For my own vantage point, I will borrow a simple and serviceable maxim: William Kerrigan and Joseph Smith (in their introduction to Derrida's *Mes Chances*) assert that literary postmodernism is "the embrace of the uncertainties of discourse." Jean-François Lyotard (*The Postmodern Condition*) also casts the postmodern as *an effect of uncertainty or skepticism*: postmodernism is the "lack of belief in metanarrative" (totalizing metaphysical systems like Marxism, Idealism, even psychoanalysis). In spite of different emphases, these formulae - the celebration of the unreliability of discourse, and the disbelief in a guaranteed authoritative metanarrative, are consistent with a certain paranoid vision. For the paranoid refutes the consensual "normal" version of reality, immersed in an alternative plot.

I will leave it to the reader to flesh out these clues, and cut to the chase, *presenting my own "resolution" of the enigma of the postmodern: in literature.*

I think it may be apprehended in a cluster of characteristics. 1) Postmodern writing is self-consciously iterative, driven by the compulsion to repeat, obsessed with citation and recursive narrative; it problematizes origins and the original. 2) It is preoccupied with aftermath, remainder, excess, fragment, citing conventional style and cliché, redeploying cultural artifacts; or its cultural detritus seems to bear witness to a global catastrophe, psychological, historical, or aesthetic, including the splintering of the Cartesian subject. 3) Post-writing reflects a profound crisis of legitimation, including the authority of language as referent, questioning its capacity to account for the world it both creates and confronts. 4) Post-fiction gravitates towards the comic mode, its slippery linguistic antics often serving to undermine authority (many postmodern texts are, if not actually funny, decidedly wry). 5) The postmodern narrative reflects a pandemic paranoia, in its theme, its structure, and its configuration (where the reader is never sure of what she "witnesses").

All of these characteristics converge around the sleuth/mystery/spy motif; although at first glance it might seem surprising that postmodern literature would elect to quote a "modern" form like the crime novel, which extols the capacity of reason and the reasoner, and purports to discover an underlying truth or fact through deduction. But it is this capacity for solutions, precisely, to which postmodernism gravitates and which it targets through its "unoriginal" citation of the mystery novel form; through recursive narration and repetition (the sleuth discovers that the criminal he is

tracking is none other than himself); through a preoccupation with excess (the post-sleuth gets lost in a maze of proliferated clues); through ironization or humor (the postmodern crime novel is often a romp which plays havoc with the reason it putatively honors). And the sleuth is the paranoid par excellence, suspecting everyone, constructing a final narrative that explains what has "really" happened. Postmodernism, then, purloins the form of detective fiction, even while undercutting the very notion of epistemological certainty or telos (by withholding the 'Aha!' which solves the case).

We find a paranoid thematics in many postmodern writers - obvious in the work of writers such as Pynchon, Auster, Eco, Murakami; the protagonist feels watched, surveyed by a monitor, in the grip of an ineffable conspiracy of global proportions, or haunted by the chatter of "white noise" (DeLillo's title) from unseen sources. Unlike their modernist predecessors, the post-writers do not rehearse the vicissitudes of self-referentiality. Rather than being absorbed in the sublimity of their own interior world -however tormented - the post-protagonists of these writers seem to be menaced from without, haunted by cryptic characters, at once ubiquitous and maddeningly elusive, sinister shadows which the hero can't quite figure, or finger. The minds of these protagonists take on the riddle of life, and are persecuted by it, not with a metaphysical modern nausea, but with the detective compulsion to figure things out. But this very obsession for system, this need to list, to discover, to account, more often than not causes the investigation to careen off-course, and

the novelistic or theatrical scenario with it - Julian Barnes's literary historian (*Flaubert's Parrot*) discovers that Flaubert's icon has an innumerable series of "originals;" Ionesco's *Amédée* has a giant corpse under wraps, who bursts out of the closet at importune moments. Barthleme's Lilliputian hero (*The Dead Father*) drags a gigantic paternal corpse cross-country, feeding on it en route. Aha! - a paternal corpse - psychoanalysis sets the stage for the paranoid postmodern scene. But what is "paranoia"?

As psychoanalysis clearly suggests, paranoia differs from fear or *angst* in its intersubjective identification mechanism, blurring the boundary between the fantasy and the real, protagonist and antagonist, even reader and writer (is what I see real or imagined? is what she is saying really so?).

II) On Schreber's Case

In his famous analysis of Dr. Schreber's writing (1911), Freud tells us that paranoia is a narcissistic state, whereby one's libido is turned inward, or fixed on a like object. This is a strategy of adaptation: the psyche wards off homosexual attraction by projecting the libidinal impulse outward, from whence it returns transformed as aggression, rather than amorous capture. Schreber's persecutory fantasies are accompanied by fantasies of omnipotence, the compulsion to create a complete cosmological system, and an end of the world fantasy. In Schreber's narrative, the persecutor is God himself, who communicates directly with Schreber, whom He takes as his concubine, and

then as His victim. This is a prime example of projective thinking - Schreber's projected libido returns as systemic hostile energy, in a cosmic agony of nerves and rays.

Interestingly, our postmodern media universe, overseen by a monitoring "eye," is strikingly like that constructed and projected by Dr. Schreber, who sits motionless and rapt for hours at a time, in a state of intense excitement, as he contemplates the vast network of nerves that he calls God. Tormented by a barrage of inner voices, he hallucinates a complete cosmological system (he is, in effect, "wired," on-line with God). In Schreber's case, "God" himself is a terminus linked to a subject in ecstasy; He is an overseeing eye who is sinister and hostile, rather than the giver of Law or value. Thus projective thinking becomes the motor of fantasy, and of psychotic delusion. Many Freudians, indeed, have stressed the *primacy of projective thinking in paranoia*, rather than the instance of persecutory fantasy, insisting that paranoia is not only an illness, but also a "normal" mode of perception and thought by which we anticipate and identify with the responses of others, in advance. This is of course the technique of the sleuth - Poe's arch-sleuth Dupin (a postmodern icon, thanks to Lacan) or the prominence of Sherlock Holmes in postmodern consciousness; but it is also the strategy of the writer herself. Lacan even suggests, in the third seminar, that *all knowledge has a paranoid register*. For we learn by identifying with others and their perceptions of us, in a mimetic gesture which projects our thoughts onto them, and internalizes our perceptions of their

perceptions of us. In other words, projective identification allows us to think analogically, "as if" we were in the other's place, seeing through Other eyes. (Dupin, for instance, sees the purloined letter, because he is able to think like his adversary.)

Indeed, as my brief examples signal, all of Schreber's symptoms persist in postmodern writing: fantasies of persecution, the construction of elaborate systems, the projection of internal reality. Overseen by the floating eye, the post-heroes are driven by a demonic urge to read the clues inscribed in the landscape, and then - perhaps - to salvage themselves, or even to wrest the world from the grip of a global plot.

Among the "paranoid" preoccupations of post-fiction we find: cosmological hallucinations, or the 'end of the world' fantasy (as in Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*; Vian's *L'Ecume des jours*, Queneau's *Les Fleurs bleues*; Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Beckett's *Fin de partie*; Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*); the centrality of a hated persecutor, once loved (the absent mother of Pynchon's *Vineland*, Barthelme's *Dead Father*); the construction of an exhaustive encyclopedic cosmos or system (Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa*; Perec's *Life: a User's Manual*; Barnes's *The History of the World in Ten and a Half Chapters*); an obsessive attention to detail and a proliferation of sheer data which becomes menacing (as in Ionesco's theater; Pynchon's *V* and *Gravity's Rainbow*; and Sarraute's compulsive descriptions in *Planetarium*). Indeed, many post-protagonists are haunted by unexplained "background"

noises (the theme of DeLillo's *White Noise*), which are actually projected internal noises (like the pulse of Freud's female paranoid, who mistakes her own orgasm for the clicking of a hidden camera); the "chatter" to which Beckett refers is the sound of the post-hero's own wheels spinning.

In a similar vein, the capacity to attend to detail becomes obsessive in post-fiction, and is the plague of many post-heroes, like Robbe-Grillet's detective (*Les Gommés*) or Auster's investigative journalist (*New York Trilogy*), or Perec's disembodied narrative eye (*Life: A User's Manual*), a kind of floating camera that enters into a linguistic maze as it describes the contents of various apartments joined by a staircase, and explores the interlocking jigsaw puzzle of the tenants' life-stories. The Latter-day Oedipus of all of these writers make an uncanny discovery, deciphering clues that are often inscribed in writing: they each finally discover, in different ways, that the culprit they are tracking in the encoded urban labyrinth, the suspect they suspect, is none other than themselves. Here the investigator is in fact a private eye, a persecutor whose inculcating gaze is turned in on himself.

III) *The Postmodern Private "I"*

Little wonder, then, that the postmodern sleuth has lost his vainglory; like the self-effacing Detective Colombo, he works with a certain humility, simply by dividing his attention, passing it out to his objects of study, seeing from their point of view. The divided subject of postmodernism can be the keenest of

sleuths, because he is *only* a perspective or point of view: there is little that is idiosyncratic in Agent 2000. In any case, judging from the perennial popularity of the likes of Carver and Christie, our species continues to harbor an age-old proclivity for mystery: *Oedipus Rex* is itself perhaps the first whodunit.

In fact we may detect a resonance of Oedipus in many an enigmatic postmodern tale, where a dead or silent father - Godot or Knott - presides or hovers, however absently, over the novel's events, or lack of them. In psychoanalytic terms, this hovering over almost seems like the residue of the super-ego, the remainder of the slain father, the paternal corpse that refuses to go away even after his Law has been exploded, eluded - or worse, replaced by a value-free postmodern code, the cybernetic rules of sheer performativity. It is as though this lost father, this anchor, has been expelled from the subject, in an act of disavowal or casting out (Freud's *Verwerfung*), only to return as a looming threat, a hovering eye that monitors the scene, in the panopticon, the telescope, the microscope.

But even if postmodern narrative is arguably "Oedipal" in nature, mimicking the time-worn conventions of detective stories, it nonetheless differs from its models: for in postmodern fiction, the emphasis is on the enigma, the maze, not its resolution. A case in point is Siri Huvstedt's frightening novel *The Blindfold*, which works like a detective tale on many levels: when Iris, a New York graduate student, is hired by a mysterious man (Mr. Morning) to catalogue a murdered woman's possessions in minute detail, she begins to have the uneasy feeling that she is

working for a criminal, not a cop; and there is more than a hint that it is her own internalized guilt that is stalking her. But paranoia is more than a thematic device for Huvstedt; the text itself functions as an allegory of the act of writing as projective thinking, anticipating and playing upon the response of the reading 'other' to create its uncanny effect, in alternating narratives concerning Iris and her alter-ego Klaus (the sadistic character in a novel she is translating). Klaus becomes Iris's nocturnal other, as she cross-dresses, and prowls New York dressed in a seedy men's suit. Like a dreamer of sorts, she inhabits her oneiric creation, in a relation of identification and aggressivity that bears an unmistakably paranoid resonance.

Even Iris's former protector and mentor seems compelled to mime Iris's sadistic projections, finally blindfolding and raping her. And at the novel's end, Iris once again catches a glimpse of the sinister character who has no real name and who seems to show up wherever she is, a sardonic incarnation of all the men who have abused her, and a projection of her own guilty desire.

Like so much postmodern fiction, this novel fails to provide a linear outcome which would solve the mystery; indeed the novel *begins* with a scene of *aftermath*, immersing the reader in the ambiance of a sinister after-effect: "Sometimes even now I think I see him in the street or standing in a window or bent over a book in a coffee shop." This suggests how paranoia enters the dynamic of reading itself, drawing the reader into a lurid psychosis; the nightmare veers into the fantastic without warning, and yet is utterly

absorbing - the question of "reality" aside. As her first shady employer, Mr. Morning, suggests: "I mean that you've invented the story yourself. It belongs to you, not me. You've already chosen an ending, a way out."

Iris does indeed survive these events: the fact that the descent is mitigated as narrative, transmitted to a reading Other, evokes Lacan's affirmative concept of "paranoid knowledge," suggesting that because we are always aware of being in the Other's field of vision, we may "know" from new angles.

V) *Millennial Mysteries*

So what is the status of the detective in the millennial moment, in post-postmodernism? We need to note the nostalgia that inhabits the term "postmodern," which is already looking back: the century that prided itself on its Modernity, and for which the 21st century seemed like the furthest of futuristic horizons, is, to its amazement, actually drawing to a close - the year 2000 looms, close and ominous. But the waning postmodern century casts a backward glance, even while on the brink of the future.

For our millennial moment also has a futuristic, forward-oriented aesthetic, with its own built-in problems. Bruce Sterling remarks that the cyberpunk generation is the first to live in an age where science fiction may be realized not long after it is written; it seems (like the journal *Mondo 2000*) to come with an expiration date; the year of *Bladerunner* is less than two decades away, the year of Kubrick's *Space*

Odyssey is on the heels of the millennium. (Some of us remember when 1984 had a doomsday ring.) We live in a world of science fiction, where daily discoveries clamor for our attention and reshape our lives, contributing to the exponential growth of techno-savvy. In this ever-shifting world, we are "sized up" - or down - by the infinitely vast, as in the space adventure, or by the infinitely minute, as in the nanotech mission (where tiny machines enter the body, in an infinitesimal "space odyssey").

In any case, the detective/spy narrative is going strong as we head for the third millennium, as evidenced by the predominance of the motif in futuristic classics like *Bladerunner* (adapted from Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*) and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (where two human-cyborgs, programmed to sleuth, break into a compound in cyberspace, to uncover a global plot). The paranoid tonality is actually strengthened by the addition of unfamiliar technology, which makes it impossible to keep track of who is "real" and who is "replicated," what is image and what is matter in cyberspace. Things are even further complicated for the cybersleuth by time travel, in such works as Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (where time travel allows the computer age to arrive in the middle of the industrial revolution, creating havoc; computer chips are objects which "someone" is willing to kill for). In works such as Tom Holland's *Attis*, or George Gaylord Simpson's *The Dechronization of Sam Magruder*, post-millennials shuttle back from the future; sent by their bosses to solve a mystery or

fathom a clue, they often meddle with history (as in Kay Bee Sulaiman's political thriller *Looking for the Mahdi*, where cyborgian spies are by definition double agents, robotic and human.)

Does the millennial techno-thriller partake in the postmodern epistemic shift, questioning narrative authority itself? I think not: although techno-thrillers reflect "paranoid" scenarios (the replicant cannot even trust his memory, implanted in chips), the postmodern novel "proper" is generally more radical in form, both suggesting and enacting a skepticism toward solutions; even while its content remains deliberately mundane, foregrounding recycled cultural debris. (Formal complications abound, however: Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night A Traveler* makes You the Reader a character, chasing six narrative threads in search of the "plot;" Barthelme's *Snow White* inserts a questionnaire midway, asking the readers what they think of the book so far.) The postmodern form is performative, enacting a critique of order itself, in something like *A Wild Sheep Chase* (Murakami) which eludes the closure of definitive solution. As Perec's jigsaw narrative shows (*Life: a User's Manual*), solving a puzzle always leaves out a critical piece.

The postmodern twist comes in a perceptible epistemic shift from positivism to "difference," where the endings, such as they are, loop back to beginnings, refusing to close the case: pomo takes a devilish delight in messing up the certainties of method. Nothing was ever less elementary, my dear Watson.

But the pre-millennial techno-

thriller creates an interesting chiasmus with the postmodern novel. Millennial classics - such as *Neuromancer*, *The Difference Engine*, the stories in *Mirrorshades* - are composed of hyperbolic futuristic motifs, walking the line between the just familiar enough and the weird or outlandish (Case the cyber-cowboy of *Neuromancer* still stays at the Hyatt); in the techno-thriller even the paranoid thematics is a function of what is described, not how it is described. The narrative depicts age-old themes: a search for self-knowledge, looking for love in all the wrong places; or a teleological odyssey, looking for home in alien spaces.

The Brave New World does foster a paranoid atmosphere of disorientation - like the mirrored lenses of *Neuromancer*'s Molly ("shades" of *Ulysses*), cyberspace is an elaborate self-perpetuating grid which leads everywhere and nowhere. But the narrative has a beginning, a middle, and there is always an end as well, however bleak. All the apparent innovation is window-dressing for the perennial human activities of figuring out whodunit, who's gonna do it, or who wants to. Perhaps in this age of uncertainty, we want fiction to tell us that Kasparov can beat Big Blue, that we can come back to our "home page." So the sleuths of millennial sci-fi do "find themselves," guilty as charged, in the objects they seek. The Replicant hunter "finds" a past that did not exist, implanted, just as Oedipus learns that his childhood in Corinth was "staged" in a sense. Like the ancient Greek of the polis, the millennial citizen of the universe finds that the spy-glass is a mirror.