

# What is Postmodernism?

By Eva T.H. Brann

THE QUESTION PROPOSED IS: "WHAT IS Postmodernism?" What kind of question is it? We may ask: "What is a human being?", for there *are* natural human beings, and the question invites us to define their essence or to analyze their existence or to describe their characteristics. It is a question worth asking because our lives depend on the answer. We may ask: "What is a work of art?", for we can point to an example and meet rational opposition: "That's not art, it's ..." That question has recently acquired even a cash interest, since some members of Congress want public funding to go only to those who produce acknowledged works of arts.

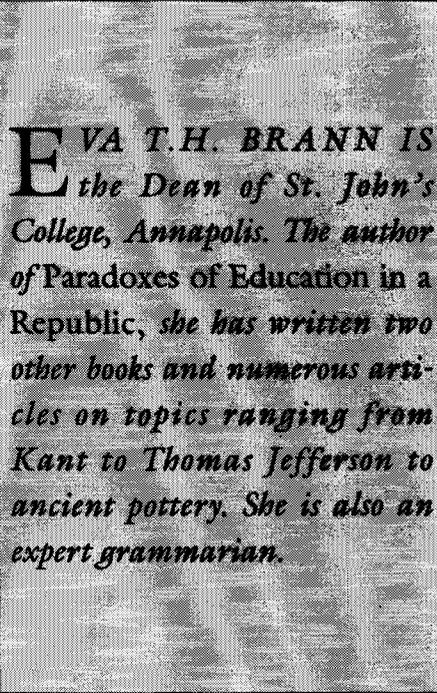
Postmodernism, however, is not a *natural kind* nor a *material artifact*. It isn't even a *theory*, that is to say, a work of intellectual architecture, free-standing and well-founded. Instead it bears the signature of an intellectuals' movement: the "ism" ending. We speak of the Theory of Relativity, and then again we speak of Relativism. That pair exemplifies the distinction I mean.

Hence when we are asked about "Postmodernism" we are asked not about an object of thought but about what a number of people are thinking. Probably only some are thinking while others are following the trend by repeating language, that is, by letting their vocabulary do their thinking.

In such cases the "What is it?" question seems to me to have three profitable approaches. We may go to the writings of the masters of the movement and ask what the texts mean. Then we may ask what the wider implications of the chief of these are. And at some point we must ask whether the thought-complex is invented or discovered, created or found, constructed or contemplated. In the old days invention was the business of rhetoric and discovery the part of philosophy. Since we are said to live in an era of when rhetoric has absorbed philosophy, we may suppose that Postmodernism is a construct.

If it is a construct, and if it is well-named, then to deconstruct the name should be helpful. It is tripartite: Post-modern-ism.

The ultimate element is the above-mentioned "ism" or the personal form "ist." It is a Greek and Latin ending, connoting the adoption, often perverse or specious, of the habits of a group. For example, barbarism is behavior like that of those who babble inarticulately, and a sophist is one who looks like a wise man, a *sophos*, without having or loving wisdom, in opposition to a *philosophos*. Whether for good or ill, "ism" connotes running in droves, and an 'ist' is an intellectual assimilationist.



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The penultimate element, “modern,” is a coinage of the sixth century A. D. It comes from the Latin word *modo*, “just now, this moment.”<sup>1</sup> It is a word needed, now as then, when an epoch is felt to have been superseded by the present, the up-to-date. It betokens a sense of having left something behind and of being on the cutting edge of time. It is a term of temporal self-location.

There have been many modernisms: theological, national, esthetic, literary, architectural. In fact, one might say that modernity is the propensity to modernisms; I mean the urge of elites not only to be continually displacing the late by the latest, but to induce “movements,” that is, tendentious drift, in followers.

One modernism important to the shaping of Postmodernism was articulated by the literary Modernists, among them Proust, Joyce and Eliot, particularly in their avoidance of the linear temporality, the straight, progressive narrative, of Realist writers. The Modernists were in rebellion against all sorts of determinism, and they subverted the simple temporal causality of physical time by using flash-backs, by cutting back and forth, by introducing timeless revelatory moments. The effect sought was a panoramic mythical temporality. It was sometimes criticized as ahistorical, but it was really rather panhistorical: All times were available in their atemporal essence.

The modernism most immediately relevant to Post-modernism was architectural.<sup>2</sup> Architectural Modernism meant an incessant search for the new by a creatively original architect striving to find universal, technologically valid rules. This Modernism was indeed more than ahistorical, it was on occasion overtly antihistorical. It trashed the past.

Both literary and architectural Modernists eventually came under attack for their personal elitism as well as their intellectual universalism. It was in architecture that the term Post-modernism first gained currency.

**T**HE FIRST — AND MY FINAL — ELEMENT OF Post-modernism is its first syllable, “post.” “Post” in this context does not mean simply “after” in time, as period prefixes often do. Think, for instance, of the designation “Presocratic.” The “Presocratic” Heraclitus, for example, is not essentially a precursor of Socrates; in fact a claim has been made that he still had access to something Socrates had lost: the *Logos*.<sup>3</sup> If that is so, Heraclitus is not working “up to” Socrates. “Presocratic” is a merely chronological term.

Not so “Postmodern.” The “post” in this term, says Lyotard, one of the leading definers of the movement, intends the Greek preposition *ana*, which as a prefix can mean “back again,” as in *anamnesis*,<sup>4</sup> re-collection. Recollection is not mere recall, but effective reappropriation of memory. Lyotard goes further. “The *post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).”<sup>5</sup> He means that in a postmodern work the future comes “after” the “just now” in the sense that such a work is not composed in accordance with any previous universal rules, or, as he calls it, any metanarrative. It has no antecedently present conditions. “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.” This definition is made with reference to the term “modern” which designates “any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse — such as the dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning,” or, I might add, the shared rationality of minds.<sup>6</sup> Thus the “post” makes reference both to the readmission of history by

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*anamnesis* and to the definitive exclusion of metaphysics and its derivatives.

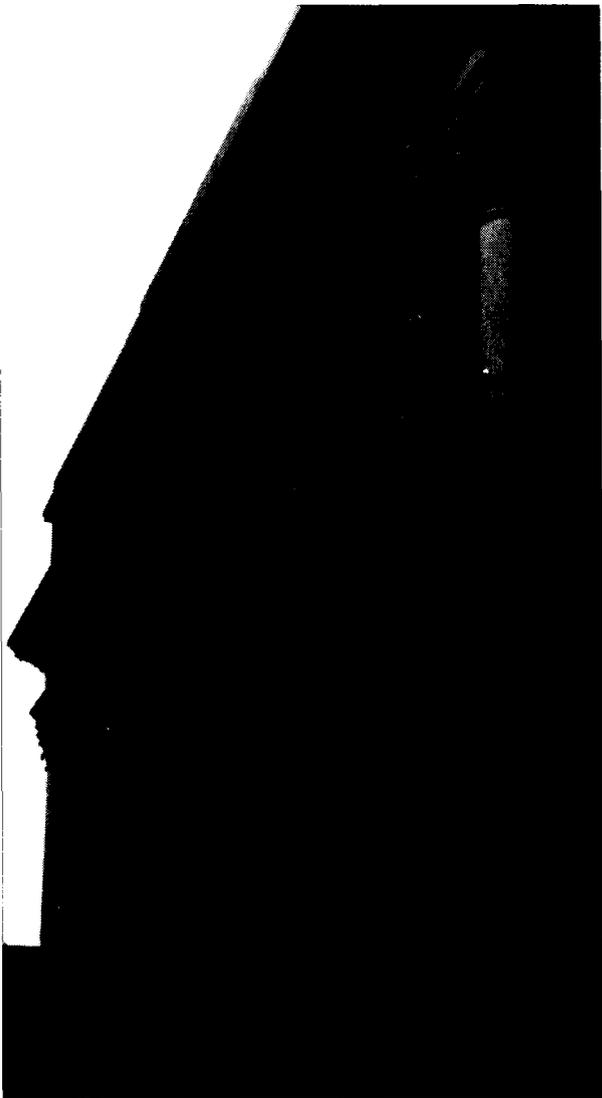
The sawing through of the perch we sit on, the undermining of the structures we rely on, is to be taken in the most total sense: Nothing is to support anything. In the realm of the imagination, for example, this regime has the most drastic results. Traditionally the peculiar product of the imagination, the image, is in its very being derivative from an underlying original.<sup>7</sup> The Postmodernist image is regarded as entirely cut off from any original, from any supporting base. Images image images. Like facing mirrors, they reflect nothing but each other. Their infinite play expresses nothing. They are without any “referential depth.”<sup>8</sup> Andy Warhol’s serigraph of twenty-five Marilyn Monroes is emblematic: The cumulative effect of the mechanical iteration is meant to obliterate the sitter.

This definition of postmodernism need not be written with a capital P. Just as there is Romanticism, a movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and romanticism, a disposition that can show up at any time, for example in the hazy distances of Pompeian wall paintings, so there is postmodernism, the fundamental disposition — Lyotard discerns it in Montaigne’s essays — to let the rules be emergent from the work rather than to work to antecedent standards.

The recall of history is intended to cancel the antihistoricism of Modernism and its rage for the New. In fact, one might say that postmodernism has to modernism a relation similar to that which every romanticism has to its ever-anterior rationalism, a relation of reaction and return. However, the particular modes of this round of Postmodernism are dictated by the particular Modernism which it sublates. As the technological universalist Esperanto is superseded by a folksy local vernacular, the Postmodernist work becomes, “radically eclectic.”<sup>9</sup> This eclecticism treats the past as a flea market where one can easily acquire old functionless things: Bricolage is the technical term for this browsing in the Postmodernist literature. We engage in it all the time, as when we buy an old inoperative Singer sewing machine as a piece of decoration. So did the ancients. In late antiquity the great monuments of the past were taken apart for small present purposes. And even then this parasitism was not always felt as a sign of meager times. It must be said that bricolage is the most effective kind of preservation available, and a lot better than another late ancient habit, that of throwing antique marbles into the lime pit to make plaster for new hovels — a habit whose modern analogue is the wrecking ball.

There is, of course a dissonance between Postmodernism (capital P) and postmodernism (lower case). If postmodernism is a universal human disposition — the propensity for now and then knocking away all given supports and for finding compensation in raiding the past — then Postmodernism loses some of its force as the singular apocalyptic vision for which it takes itself. It is, after all, so named as to make a next epoch unnameable (though I have heard “Postpostmodernism”). What can possibly come after the time when the “just now” has itself been pushed into the past, when we are said to be already living ahead of our own present?

Perhaps such namings are attempts to tempt fate, or rather to propitiate history, to turn her whimper after all into a bang. they are perhaps whistlings



in the dark, creative construals of neediness into glamour. I mean this: In the straight talk of *ex post facto* history, an epoch that defines itself against its predecessor is called reactionary. An epoch that is sawing off the branch on which it sits and digging a hole beneath itself is called perverse. An epoch that has no originals for its images is called antic and untethered. An epoch that is bored by what is established is called ephemeral. An epoch that lives off borrowings is called indigent. An epoch suffering from acute cultural fatigue is called decadent. But an epoch that legitimizes all these tiring torments and takes then to its bosom may be said to be whistling in the dark, to be turning to sophisticated theory to fill the empty throne of substance.

But I should be ashamed of talking as if epochs did and suffered things. A time, a culture, a society, a movement are and do nothing. All there is, is people believing things about their temporal location and persuading others. The question proposed, "What *is* Postmodernism?", runs the danger of positing as a being what is only a movement — and movements are to the human intellect what inertia is to material bodies, a relative motion without an innate force.

**W**HAT EACH HUMAN BEING REPORTS AS A PERSONAL CONVICTION IS always to be taken seriously. When anyone speaks impersonally of intellectual happenings or uses a collective "we" about thought, an inquiry into the meaning of that companionable pronoun is called for. "The idea that we are in a 'postmodernist' culture has been a commonplace since the mid-seventies" says a commentator.<sup>10</sup> Who here is a "we"? The same author says: "Picasso is no longer a contemporary or a father figure; he is a remote ancestor, who can inspire admiration but not opposition. The age of the New, like that of Pericles, has entered history." For whom? Go see the painting; read Thucydides. Picasso may not be a toothless lion to you, and Pericles may turn out to have more life than many a present politician. Not everyone is equally affected by the current deep recession of the temporal economy. An individual opinion is justified by the force of its arguments. A single insuperable flaw can do it in. A movement is validated by the irresistible force of its influence. Hence one principled staunch resister can do *it* in: It isn't the history of my time unless I affirm it. The huge facts of our present that Postmodernism tries to interpret — the fast dispersion of the intellectual center, the rapid supersession of the present, the vast propagation of the electronic image — are undeniable. But I think that their human meaning and our response is to be shaped by our individual understanding and our personal will, not by any inherent dynamic attributed to them. They are, for all their enormity, dead forces until a thinking human being imparts to them their *vis viva*.

What is Postmodernism? 1. A set of sophisticate revealing texts to be gotten to when all that preceded them have been properly studied. 2. The latest "ism" and the last on the long list of recommended inquiries for a young lover of wisdom. φ

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter*, Bern: Franke Verlag (1948), p. 259. *A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1984), p. 81.
- <sup>2</sup>Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1988), pp. 349-354, 403. <sup>6</sup>*Ibid.* pp. xxiii-iv.
- <sup>3</sup>Martin Heidegger, "What is that — Philosophy," translated and annotated by Eva T. H. Brann, Xerox, St. John's College, Annapolis, MD (1991), p. 19. <sup>7</sup>Eva T. H. Brann, *The World of the Imagination: Sum and Substance*, Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield (1991), pp. 389-96.
- <sup>4</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, "Une Note sur le Post", in *Le Postmoderne*, Paris: Galilée (1986), p. 125. <sup>8</sup>Kearney, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- <sup>5</sup>— "What is Postmodernism," in *The Postmodern Condition*: <sup>9</sup>Charles Jencks, in Kearney, *op. cit.*, p. 349.
- <sup>10</sup>Robert Hughes in Kearney, *op. cit.*, p. 24.