

THE PLAYS AND PLOYS OF POSTMODERNISM

Maxine Greene

Teachers College, Columbia University

In a novel called *Flaubert's Parrot*, Julian Barnes tells the story of a British physician obsessed with discovering the truth about the nineteenth-century novelist, Gustave Flaubert. He travels back and forth to Rouen and the surrounding country where Flaubert spent much of his life; he visits the hospital, the local museum, what is left of Flaubert's homes and his lovers' homes. He reads everything from Flaubert's letters and journals to contemporary British criticism. Although the novelist died more than a century ago, the doctor, Geoffrey Braithwaite, realizes that "all that remains of him is paper. Paper, ideas, phrases, metaphors, structured prose which turns into sound."¹ He studies everything that survives, nonetheless, hoping to reach beyond the texts at least to the extent of identifying a stuffed parrot as the "real" one that stood on the writer's desk and served as model for Felicité's parrot in "The Simple Heart." He examines a statue of Flaubert that is ostensibly a reliable semblance of the "real." It turns out that there are three identical parrots left of fifty that looked almost the same. There are three statues of Flaubert, each one a second impression, a replacement of the original, each one lacking something — a thigh, a mustache, an arm. To make it harder, six North Africans are playing *boules* around the statue in Rouen, suggesting a multiculturalism that enhances the uncertainty. The doctor devises a number of chronologies of Flaubert's life; each is from a different vantage point; each is, to some degree, "true." The doctor asks how we can ever seize the past. He remembers that, when he was a medical student, some pranksters at a dance released into the hall a piglet smeared with grease. "It squirmed between legs, evaded capture, squealed a lot. People fell over trying to grasp it, and were made to look ridiculous in the process. The past often seems to behave like that piglet."² And so, given what we see happening today, does what we used to call "objective reality." It does occur to me, however, that there *was* an actual pig.

I begin this way in part because the novel (like so many good novels) not only enables us to order the materials of our own experience in accord with the "as/if" disclosed in the work. Lending Dr. Braithwaite's quest our lives until his questioning becomes our questioning, we are likely to rewrite some of our narratives as we begin to wonder about slippery pigs and textual realities and communities of interpretation and multiple points of view. One of my problems with Clive Beck's beautifully and coherently drawn version of postmodernism is that he seems to want to integrate what he calls "postmodernist doctrines and practices" into his life-story without altering that life-story in any significant way. It is not accidental that he talks of those doctrines and practices "intruding" into his life. As we all know, no one can be more courtly or courteous with intruders than Professor Beck. I can see him inviting some of them to his dining room table, making them feel quite at home. Indeed, he may be doing precisely that at this Philosophy of Education Society meeting. Why make Foucault, Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Derrida feel like outsiders? Let them join the remaining analysts, existentialists, idealists, and pragmatists and feel included, accepted members (French accents despite) of the community.

This suggests some of the difficulties I have with the Presidential address, scholarly and authentic as it is. I cannot but recall Nietzsche's Zarathustra in the presence of the tightrope walker, viewing the human being as a rope over an abyss. "A dangerous across," he says, "a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping."³ He is speaking of those who are

never finished, whose lives are always an “overture.” He is speaking of those who live to know and who want to know, but who recognize (as those touched by the postmodern mood cannot but recognize) that there is no net under the tightrope. There are no rational frameworks in which all conflicts can be resolved; nor are there time-tested authorities to offer resting points.

Clive Beck is apparently troubled by the extremity of such claims and responds by recalling visible continuities, commonalities, and startling glimpses of stable realities. He does not mention the erosion of faith in the so-called “Enlightenment Project,” that linking of rationality with human promise and the conviction of ongoing progress in the years to come. We are aware of modernist and pre-modernist challenges to Cartesianism and merely abstract formulations. We need only think of Blake and the Romantics, Wordsworth, Emerson, Kant, as well as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, William James, and John Dewey. The full force of instrumental rationality (that distortion of classical notions of reason to the wedding of science and technology) was felt with the discovery of the concentration camps in Germany and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The idea of perfectly rational men (yes, ordinarily men) deciding calmly and systematically to destroy other human beings because of their race, religion, sexual preference, or nationality clearly served to open the way to the rejection of master narratives like the myths of progress and reason’s claims to privileged insights into what is true and valuable. The suspicion has become so widespread that it has even been applied to the work of Jurgen Habermas because of his belief that consensus can still be achieved by means of disinterested communication among groups of competent speakers. There are echoes, it is said, of the old reliance on the image of a patriarchal, always clear-thinking figure permanently installed on the sixth or seventh stage of development, free of the chores and concrete distractions of the private sphere. (I suspect that many of the doubts and the unanswerable questions are now being aroused in those reading about the rapes of Bosnian women, sometimes by perfectly rational professional men. There was a nurse, some of you recall, who described her violation by a doctor she had always looked up to, whom she called “a golden man.”)

Feminist theory, hermeneutics, new approaches to psychoanalysis, studies of texts and textuality, speech-act inquiries, explorations of the “dialogic imagination,”⁴ a cultural pluralism that now has broken through the silences of the long oppressed, long colonized, long subordinated people: these have led to an interest in situated knowing. Contingencies are being recognized; so are the diversities in vantage points and perspectives. We can grant with Clive Beck the importance of interactions between ideas and experiences of the world. We certainly can agree with him on the present fascination with reality as a human construction. Once we allow, however, for the unprecedented multiplicity of constructions due to the breaking of silences, traceable as well to the opening of different cultural realities due to media, travel, population movements, we cannot forestall what Beck calls the loss of strict definitions. Nor can we do much better than strive for some reciprocity among incommensurable ideas and points of view.

Disturbed as we all obviously are by the loss of reference points and the challenge this poses to democracy, Clive Beck remarks that there is “no center” for postmodernists. He seems to connect this with the critique of what is called the “canon” because of its exclusion of such a large part of the world’s populations and their literatures. Given the surging interest in margins and borders, however, I would disagree. Reading Cornel West, Henry Gates, Jr., and Toni Morrison, I have been helped to see dimensions of a center never noticed before, and largely because they are consciously looking from the border.

Toni Morrison, for instance, points to efforts to erase an Africanist presence, and how that presence “informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American Literature.”⁵ Like others who have been excluded, she is not denying the human quests of American writers nor the basic issues they have probed. She is simply making us *see* more, seeking the kind of repleteness of interpretation that is only achieved when works are read from multiple perspectives. So it is with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, helping us come in contact with “decolonized space” and the importance of “as yet unreadable alternative history”⁶ that crisscrosses so much of western history

that it does not and cannot erode or destroy what we think of as ours. Feeding new visions from the margins to the center, the formerly disqualified on the borders are likely to enrich, complicate, and thicken what we construct (without warranty) as the center of all things.

Understanding all these as instances of knowing informed by value, I do not disagree with Clive Beck on the importance of calling attention to the impossibility of neutral or neutralized cognition. Still, I do not agree with his brief mention of Michel Foucault under that rubric. Foucault's conception of power as dispersed through our discourses, our examination systems, our ways of designing institutions seems to me to demand more attention, especially since he is disposed of here with the statement that "he has perhaps an overly conspiratorial view of knowledge." His interest actually is, Foucault writes, in "detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony... with which it operates at the present time."⁷ Like John Dewey and Hannah Arendt, he calls for reflection on the rules that govern discourse at particular moments of time, and on the assumptions that underlie it. Speaking of thought much as they do, he says that thought "is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question its meanings, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects upon it as a problem."⁸

As I suggested, there are continuities; but I would still want to insist that Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, yes, and Rorty (with all their own claims to connections with Nietzsche, say, or Wittgenstein, or Heidegger, or Searles, or Lacan, or Freud, or the pragmatists, or the neo-Marxists) are being read at a moment of history marked by distinctive shifts of sensibility on all sides. Some associate them with the overcoming of Communist systems, with the overtaking of democratic commitments by free-market ideals, with the changes in our economies, with the so-called "simulacra"⁹ created by the media and surrounding us all. I think it must be said, in the face of the demographic changes taking place, that there is an important effort within postmodernism to break with the category thinking Dr. Beck criticizes, in part by raising questions about representation that have seldom been raised before.

It is not simply a question of whether discourse functions to represent some pre-existing, objective "reality," whether (to move towards deconstructionist thought for a moment) consideration of a play of signifiers must replace familiar notions of signifiers referring to objectively existent instances of the signified. It is also a matter of recognizing that representation, for many postmodernists, is ordinarily arbitrary and dependent upon false assumptions. This applies not only to the taking for granted of the referential status of words, images, symbols, and the like. It also applies to any person's being representative somehow, of the Asian people, the South American, the Afro-Americans, the Native Americans, the female gender, as if indeed there were "essences" to be embodied or exemplified.

This leads me to a last dimension of critique. It has to do with lack of attention (beyond mere mention) to the postmodernist shifts in feminism and feminist theory and the important impacts these have meant for postmodernist thinking about essentialism, perspectivism, difference, the self, and the whole matter of theory. Certainly, the idea of situated knowing has been emphasized and developed in considerable detail in feminist writing.¹⁰ The challenges to essentialism have connected with the complex problem of difference. The question of whether the self is obliterated by being entangled in and, perhaps, created by discourse relates to larger questions about the possibility of autonomy for any self in the traditional individualist sense.

Both women and men are increasingly talked about in contexts or in the midst of dialogues, or in complex meshworks of relationship. At once, at a moment when the dissolution of epistemology seems to characterize so much of postmodernist thinking, feminist scholars are discovering or rediscovering epistemology from their own situated points of view. Sandra Harding, working as a feminist scholar in the domains of the sciences, speaks about the development of a feminist

empiricism that primarily challenges the incomplete manner in which scientific method has been utilized, even as it complies with many of the traditional norms of science. Still rejecting the universalizing “ideal knower,” Harding also draws attention to standpoint theory, which emphasizes the importance of grounding knowledge in experience.¹¹ It also attempts to overcome the distorted and limited orientations to social experience common to traditional science, so focused on men’s experience from which so much of it derives.

Not only does this expand the scene against which theories of knowledge are tested and examined; it indicates that Rorty is not the primary theorist among postmodernists, or even the one most interested in theory. Pastiche and the unexplained do indeed characterize those thought of as skeptical postmodernists, who often posit an equivalence of pluralist views and see theory as nothing more than a set of linguistic conventions. There are more affirmative postmodernists who still see truth as relative to particular communities, but who go on to talk of theory in connection with the local, the daily, or the narrative. As we have seen, there are feminist theorists who, for very good reasons, are reaching beyond the purely textual in a modest return to the empirical world. I cannot but think again of the Bosnian women and of how difficult it is to affirm that all is discourse or text. Similarly, in spite of the generally felt groundlessness where moralities are concerned, in spite of recommendations that we rely upon “shared beliefs,”¹² since there is no way of universalizing or objectifying values, there appears here and there in postmodern literature a reaching out for principle, if only as perceived as a shared fiction, or what Joseph Conrad calls a “necessary fiction,” a barrier against nothingness.¹³

Going back to Julian Barnes’ Dr. Braithwaite and his unfinished research into Flaubert’s life and art, I need to say that there is — secreted in the text until the end — what is called a “pure story.” It is the story of the doctor’s wife’s attempted suicide and of his having to turn off the life-support machine. “We were happy,” he writes, “we were unhappy; I miss her.” And then he quotes Flaubert again: “Is it splendid, or stupid, to take life seriously?”¹⁴ Later, he wonders whether there is any point to him, to his life. He does not want to negate himself in the face of those who seem more interesting. And then:

But life, in this respect, is a bit like reading. And as I said before: if all your responses to a book have already been duplicated and expanded upon by a professional critic, then what point is there to your reading? Only that it’s yours. Similarly, why live your life? Because it’s *yours*. But what if such an answer becomes less and less convincing?

Pondering risk-taking, he says that you cannot change humanity, you can only know it. “Pride makes us long for a solution to things — a solution, a solution, a purpose, a final cause; but the better telescopes become, the more stars appear. You cannot change humanity; you can only know it.”¹⁵

This, for me, is a postmodern ending, articulated by someone whose narrative I somehow achieve as meaningful against my own lived life and through my reading, which is forever incomplete. I make this a tale of a search for meaning while walking the tightrope, trying — in a world without benchmarks — to keep moving, to keep asking, to keep trying to create an identity. Of course, as Clive Beck tells us, this has to have implications for pedagogy. As he puts it in his fine third section dealing with pedagogy, there is the need for a dialogical approach, as there is a need to look through different perspectives. Perhaps by means of looking through diverse perspectives at the same books, the same environment, the same world, young persons will constitute something in common among themselves. Their teachers can make the materials, the ways of knowing available and accessible. They may then go on, teachers and learners, through and beyond the overture, taking their lives seriously, resisting thoughtlessness, renewing a world.

¹ Julian Barnes, *Flaubert’s Parrot* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 12.

² Barnes, 14.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spake Zarathustra: First Part," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), 126.

⁴ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1981).

⁵ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 46.

⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Who Claims Alterity?," in *Remaking History*, ed. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), 259.

⁷ Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1980), 132-33.

⁸ Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations: An Interview," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 388.

⁹ See Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981).

¹⁰ See Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹¹ Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 24-27.

¹² Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?," *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 23.

¹³ Joseph Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," in *Great Short Works* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 261.

¹⁴ Barnes, 163.

¹⁵ Barnes, 166.

©1996-2004 PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION SOCIETY
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED