POSTMODERN | POSTWAR — AND AFTER

Rethinking American Literature

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THE CURRENCY OF THE CONTEMPORARY

What exactly is contemporary about contemporary literature? Beneath the various strands of recent history that scholars of contemporary culture are currently working to unravel, a different sort of problem shadows the field. However we define the contemporary period, we must acknowledge that it is unlike any other kind of historical period—for the simple reason that, as something that is current, immediate, or ongoing, it is not yet historical. The contemporary is contemporary *to us*, meaning close to us in time, meaning always possibly too close. This ineluctable proximity makes historicism—that miracle of hindsight—a more delicate affair. At least since Hegel, for whom historical knowledge "always comes too late," the lack of critical distance that distinguishes the present has been taken as an obstacle to historical understanding (xxx). The *Annales* historian Fernand Braudel was particularly attuned to the present's limited self-perception. "What would the explorer of the present-day not give," he mused, "to have this [historical] perspective (or this sort of ability to go forward in time) making it possible to unmask and simplify our present life, in all its confusion—hardly comprehensible now because so overburdened with trivial acts and portents?" (36). What is meaningful about the present, according to Braudel, cannot be expected to be "comprehensible" to those *in* the present, burdened as we are by so many trivial occurrences and portentous

nonevents. This is why, Braudel concludes, our "conscious" understanding of our own moment is just as likely to be "delusory" (39). To prove the point, Braudel invokes Marx: "'Men make their own history, but they do not know they are making it'" (39). The present, in other words, is a product of those who know not what they do. The moment that's right in front of our noses turns out to be too close to see so well after all.[1]

This widely accepted critique of the present's limited capacity for self-comprehension implicates all of us who study the literature and culture of the contemporary moment. And it demands a response. Yet we intrepid "explorers of the present-day" have spent precious little of our present time reflecting on the methodological challenges of the present. This short essay is an attempt to correct that: to think about what it is we do when we study the present, and what it means to do so under the increasingly ubiquitous sign of "the contemporary." In light of the assumptions we tend to make about immediacy and history, the notion of the contemporary may seem nothing but a temporary placeholder: a recognition of our inability to properly name or recognize the present. I propose we see it as something else. The aim of this essay is to read the historical concept of the contemporary within the historical context of its emergence—a context in which the problem of what Braudel calls "conscious history" becomes an increasingly conscious and reflexive part of the larger culture. This heightened mode of historical self-reflection constitutes both the historical backdrop and, I'll suggest, the literary form of the field we call, with ostensibly resigned vagueness, "contemporary literature."

The emergence of contemporary literature would seem to be the warp and woof of a cultural logic that encourages constant self-assessment and self-reflection. This is the culture of what Mark McGurl, following Ulrich Beck, calls "reflexive modernity"—the "'compulsion for the manufacture, self-design, and self-staging' of a biography and indeed, for the obsessive 'reading' of that biography even as it is being written" (12). Reading a history that is still in the process of being written: this is also a pretty good definition of what we do when we study the contemporary. Yet the concept of the contemporary is as hedgy as it is historical, as opaque as it is self aware. As such, it offers an unexpectedly complex response to its own reflexive cultural context. The contemporary, we will find, is less an injunction to study ourselves than a way of tracking what happens when we do so: what it means to think of ourselves as historical under particular historical

conditions. Well, what *does* it mean? The following pages seek to answer that question by reading the contemporary as a term that concatenates the discipline of literary studies, the context of late capitalism, and the imaginative work performed by fiction itself. Ultimately, I'll argue, the contemporary proves to be an especially vital way of both situating and unsettling the special brands of presentness and presentism through which late capitalism has, of late, made its presence felt.

A Condensed History of Contemporary History

The temporal phenomenon of "contemporaneity"—the relational fact of being "together in time"—is surely as old as time. The historical category of the contemporary, on the other hand, is a more recent invention. It is not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that "contemporary" acquires the meaning of "characteristic of the present period."[2] This shift in the word's meaning, which doesn't become commonplace until the middle of the twentieth century, has much to do with its relation to another indexical-turned-historical marker: "modern." After 1945, Raymond Williams observes, " 'modern' shifts its reference from 'now' to 'just now' or even 'then' "; "modern" becomes a thing of the past—specifically, the period of modernism —while " 'contemporary' may be contrasted for its presentness" (qtd in Osborne, 2013 12).[3] The periodization of the modern goes hand in hand with the institutionalization of the contemporary. As Peter Osborne points out, the first center for contemporary art—the ICA in London—was opened in 1946, with other contemporary art museums following in the 1960s and flourishing in the '80s (2013 16, 219n2). At almost exactly the same time, the contemporary became a codified framework for literary studies, most explicitly with the founding of the journal *Contemporary Literature* in 1960—and more broadly, from the 1960s to the '80s, with the unprecedented attention given to the categories of "contemporary literature" and the "contemporary novel."[4]

The development of contemporary literature as an official field of study dovetails both historically and thematically with what McGurl has called the "Program Era" of American fiction. With the postwar development of the creative writing program, McGurl argues, American literature began to conceive of itself as something produced both in and for the university. The teaching of creative writing led to fiction that saw itself as written to be taught. For McGurl, "the metafictional reflexivity of so much postwar

fiction" is partly a result of "its production in and around a programmatically analytical and pedagogical environment" (47–48). But both the writing program and the writing it produced were part of a larger set of cultural transformations surrounding consumption, commodification, and social organization. This is the culture of reflexive modernity, a moment when the completed processes of capitalist modernity become "a matter of reflection across broad swaths of social life, indeed a matter of constant *worry* . . . structuring the life of 'free' persons as an endless process of self-monitoring —am I healthy? do people like me? have I found my voice?—and offering them a continuous stream of expert advice and consumer products designed to help them be who they want to be" (365). If what you teach under reflexive modernity is how to turn your personal experience into writing (how to find your voice), then what you study ought to be the very writing that you and others like you have produced. Thus does the very *field* of contemporary literature seem continuous with the program era, making it possible not just to write our experiences but to read that writing as expressive of the broader experience of a shared present.

Yet the category of "contemporary literature" works as much to complicate as to fulfill this reflexive imperative. Through it, individual self-consciousness and "metafictional reflexivity" shade into something slightly different: historical reflection. What period are we in? What defines our immediate present? These supplementary forms of self-reflection—rooted less in individual experience than in the abstract realms of the collective and the historical—are questions whose source and solution are, strangely, one and the same thing. The contemporary is both the question and the answer. It codifies our historical moment in order to authorize its study; yet to study it is inevitably to be returned to the question of what history the contemporary names, what its boundaries really are, whose moment we're actually talking about.

In this way, the contemporary carries us from McGurl back to Braudel—from the postwar desire for self-reflection to the conceptual limits of reflexive history.[5] For it is impossible not to notice that, as an official form of historical self-reflection, the idea of the contemporary is markedly deficient. The term is historically imprecise and temporally indeterminate. The contemporary doesn't so much delimit history as drift across it. The frustrations of this drift are what the art historian Richard Meyer has discovered in his

attempt to teach older conjunctures of contemporary art: "The students in the class understood the designation 'contemporary' differently than I had expected. Rather than referring to art since 1945, art since 1960, or even art since 1970, 'contemporary' meant to them the work of artists exhibiting today and in the immediate past" (12). The same disagreements shape literary studies, as Gordon Hutner observes: "For 40 years or more, the postwar period was still going on, and until the fall of the Berlin Wall, one could not say for sure whether the postwar era was even over, leading various anthologies to describe the contemporary as post-1950, -1960, -1970, or even post-1980" (420). As a drifting deictic rather than a fixed measure, the contemporary—product of a concrete historical context—is not necessarily a reliable way of historicizing.[6]

So the contemporary has its problems. It is a periodizing term that doesn't exactly periodize; a measure of history that fails to designate a specific literary or historical period. In this sense, the contemporary may merely be the best of a bad situation. Perhaps, as Amy Hungerford concludes, there is nothing to call ourselves *except* contemporary (418). Yet the term has a more positive, if paradoxical, set of implications. The contemporary is not merely a problem. It is better to think of it as a problematic: one that directs our attention to the abiding tensions between immediacy and history, between experience and explanation—and between the seemingly timeless category of the present and its particular fate, and particular urgency, in the more drastic circumstances of the present day.

Perpetuating the Present

The history of the late capitalist present can be understood, in part, as a history of changes to how we think about the present. Everyone knows that capitalism means that time is money. The time that is most like money is the time that is immediate, accessible, and manipulable: it is, in other words, present time. One of capitalism's central paradoxes is that it seeks both to extend the present (through constant production) and shrink it (through faster circulation). Starting in the second half of the twentieth century, this paradox has found itself realized in increasingly tangible ways: the rise in productivity that has occurred since the 1970s means that more is being produced faster, while the stagnation of wages in the same period means that many workers must work more, and more intensely, for less (while others

cannot work at all).[7] Such changes to the fabric and the framework of the present—in the experience of consumption, in the system of production, and in the organization of labor—are at the heart of the era we consider contemporary.

The effects of late capitalism have been leveled on the category of the present itself, turning it into something at once perpetual and precarious—sped up, overworked, underpaid, highly leveraged. The basic historical conditions of the present thus begin to alter our sense of what counts as present. This is what Fredric Jameson noticed when he diagnosed postmodern culture as a present that was at once harder to escape and harder to describe. "Our entire contemporary social system," he wrote, "has begun to live in a perpetual present," while at the same time, we become "incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience" (1984 143–44, 135). This extended yet obfuscated present was, for Jameson, a concrete consequence of the peculiar dynamics of late capitalism, which made the accelerating rhythms of production, consumption, and flexible accumulation feel like exactly the opposite: stasis and endlessness.

Attention to the accelerations and perpetuations of present time has remained a central feature of more recent histories of the present. Take Jonathan Crary's account of what he calls the "expanding, non-stop life-world" of "24/7" capitalism (8). In Crary's telling, the "uninterrupted operation of markets, information networks, and other systems" turn the present into "a principle of continuous functioning" (9, 8). Apparently, we'll sleep when we're dead. In the meantime, "since no moment, place, or situation now exists in which one can *not* shop, consume, or exploit networked resources, there is a relentless incursion of the non-time of 24/7 into every aspect of social or personal life" (30).

For Crary and Jameson, the consequences of late capitalism are visible in "an ever more congealed and futureless present" (Crary 35). This cultural symptom, however, doubles as a methodological dilemma. How does one historicize such a present? In the parallel diagnoses offered by Jameson and Crary, we find divergent ways of dealing with the methodological problem of the present's history. One word for that problem is, of course, "postmodernism"—which, in the complaints and frustrations that have marked the concept from its inception, offers one illustrative example of how unsatisfying it can be to periodize your own present. Indeed, post-

modernism even has a surprisingly tenuous place in *Postmodernism*. In the introduction to his seminal study, Jameson defends his use of the term in rather tepid terms: "I will argue that, for good or ill, we cannot *not* use it" (xxii). The double negative (an early version of the more famous first maxim of *A Singular Modernity*) suggests that postmodernism recognizes the limits of reflexive history even as it attempts to get beyond them; that it exemplifies the unavoidably inadequate, necessarily incomplete work of historicizing our immediate historical moment. Yet the inadequacies of a pseudo-periodizing term like "postmodernism" (which we can at best "not not use") may still be better than the alternative: abandoning the problem altogether and surrendering to the isolated experiences of everyday life. Crary at times appears to have chosen the latter option. The "pseudo-historical formulation of the present as a digital age," Crary argues, "perpetuates the illusion of a unifying and durable coherence to the many incommensurable constituents of contemporary experience" (36). Is the historical coherence of a period only an illusion? For Crary, the speed of twenty-first-century life guarantees that we will misread it: "In retrospect, what were most often identified as essential were temporary elements of larger constellations whose rates of change were variable and unpredictable" (38). Echoes of Braudel echoing Marx: the present—with its "transient flux of compulsory and disposable products" (39)—is ultimately too fleeting to get any historical perspective on. As it turns out, such perspective is sometimes lacking from the very examples that make up Crary's book. On a single page, for instance, Crary laments the dangers of "biometric and surveillance intrusion," of "toxic food and water," and of "the many bestselling guides that tell us . . . the 1,000 movies to see before we die" (60). Lost among so many transient, disposable trees, Crary appears to conclude that the forest no longer exists.[8] In the sleepless world of 24/7, the history or totality of the present becomes, if not an outright illusion, at least something of a dream.

Era Prone

Can we, then, dream ourselves a different way of grasping the history of the present? The question is one that echoes not only in the corridors of cultural criticism but in the forms of contemporary literature. Here, for instance, is how one of our foremost chroniclers of the debasements of self-consciousness pivots to confront a different sort of self-reflection. David

Foster Wallace begins his collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* with an extremely short short story titled "A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life." Here is the whole thing:

> When they were introduced, he made a witticism, hoping to be liked. She laughed extremely hard, hoping to be liked. Then each drove home alone, staring straight ahead, with the very same twist to their faces.
>
> The man who'd introduced them didn't much like either of them, though he acted as if he did, anxious as he was to preserve good relations at all times. One never knew, after all, now did one now did one now did one. (n.p.)

Here, in miniature, are many of Wallace's hallmark concerns: the inauthentic performances that underlie social relations; the self-defeating self-consciousness about those performances; and the alienation that ensues from self-consciousness. But the story frames these concerns in a surprising way: as the question of how the experience of social life described in the story relates to the economic history referred to by its title. In asking us to contemplate the mysterious relation between the title and the story, Wallace draws our attention to the apparent gap between observation and periodization, or what we can now recognize as the defining dilemma of contemporary history: the tension between the onslaught of everyday experience ("hoping to be liked," "driving home alone") and the systemic logic of the historical era.

But if the contemporary does open a gap between the individual and the historical, Wallace's story may appear simply to have fallen into it. There is, after all, no evidence of the postindustrial in "A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life." The story seems almost perverse in its refusal to be about anything economic at all; in its suggestion that postindustrial life is a description not of the economy but of the personal exchanges we have at parties. Yet this perversity is simply a quality of the ideology of postindustrialism itself: the fantasy of having left behind—in the ostensible wake of financialized value and immaterialized labor—the crude concerns of the productive economy, if not the explanatory logic of capitalism as such. The defining characteristic of "postindustrial life," in other words, is precisely the disappearance of the economic and the systemic, and their replacement by the autonomous individual floating freely through a free market—where all one can do is *hope to be liked*, and exercise the freedom

to like or dislike other things. In Wallace's story, then, the absence of systemic understanding turns out to be the defining symptom of the system itself. The tension between Wallace's text and its title is a tension endemic to the ideology of postindustrialism. It is the dilemma of how to theorize the systemic logic of an age in an age when shared history—or the very idea of capitalism as a system—is what our postindustrial lives strive to convince us does not exist.

Wallace's story responds by insisting on the illusion of something else: the comforts of individuality. Up to its final lines, the story relies on the anonymity of generic nouns and pronouns, which produce pseudo-characters without specificity, empty shells of individuality ("they," "he," "she," "the man"). Yet the haunting last sentence switches from individualizing anonymity to a more paradoxical generalization: "One never knew . . . now did one." What does one never know? The obvious answer is: other people. But the statement collapses under its own irony: if everyone experiences the exact same sort of alienation—if the social anxiety of "preserving good relations at all times" produces "the very same twist" to everyone's "faces"—then one absolutely *does* know, doesn't one, what others are experiencing. The ironic revelation that comes at the end of "A Radically Condensed History" is that this story about individual isolation has ended up showing us that there is nothing individual about it. In Wallace's story, what one never knows is how the logic of individuality blinds us to the shared historical conditions that are, from a different perspective—that, say, of fiction itself—not at all impossible for us to know.

If the idea of postindustrialism does not directly appear in Wallace's story, that is because it does not directly appear in lived experience either; because it is not an experience at all, but *an idea* (one that can only flicker at the edges, or in the title, of an age otherwise ruled by experience and immediacy). "A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life" is finally not so much about the particular features of deindustrialization as it is about the methodological problem of summing up the present itself. This is the problem that the story dubs "condensed history." The phrase cuts two ways. Condensation sounds like a contraction. But it is also a coming together. While Wallace's title seems to suggest an alarmingly abbreviated version of contemporary history, we may also hear it as a call for something else: for the need—as urgent as ever—to condense individuality into collectivity, to fuse our numberless, atomized personal experiences into the singular, abridged

form of the period marker. Responding to the antinomies of totality in the age of postindustrial individualism, Wallace's story makes condensation or periodization a fundamentally political act: one that contracts immediacy into abridgment in order to organize individuals into a shared era.[9]

Wallace's condensed history is thus not merely a description of the contemporary moment. It is also an explanation of what is at stake in the category of the contemporary itself. No meaningless placeholder, "contemporary" is the most common form of the condensation that allows us to imagine social life as a shared structure—in an age that would otherwise have us believe there are no longer such things as structures or societies. As the vanishing mediator between the individual and the economic (between "good relations" and "postindustrial life"), the contemporary is a crucial strategy for bringing the two together. It is an indispensable mode for conjuring collective history in a time of isolated self-reflection. If the contemporary continues to seem a sort of misrecognition, that is only because it does not necessarily rely on empirical observation; because it may not match up with the perceived evidence of everyday life. As in Wallace's story, the gap between present experience and historical perspective persists. To close it, finally, depends not on the positivism of lived experience but on a measure of imaginative or conceptual work. For Wallace, this is work that is not represented *in* the story precisely because it is performed *by* the story. Here we see, in short, how the conceptual task of the contemporary becomes bound up in the formal workings of contemporary fiction. In its permanently skewed, always distanced relation to what is more immediately visible in a text, literary form offers an indispensable starting point for thinking differently about the contemporary—for seeing it not as the life we are unknowingly immersed in, but as the form, the framework, or the *conception* of that life that stands to be collectively formulated.

Wallace's version of condensed history thus gives us one example of how the more familiar forms of postmodern fiction might be repurposed to confront the formal dilemma of contemporary history. Reflecting on the ways that we simultaneously *can* and *can't* know the late capitalist present, Wallace's story returns us to the question of historical error—of misperception or "delusion"—that Braudel so pointedly posed for us at the start. For Braudel, the thing to know about the contemporary is how little we can know about it. This is the "problem," Braudel suggests, that "Marx's formula pinpoints . . . but does not explain" (39): *they do not know that they are making history.*

Yet there is one last thing to know about Braudel's version of Marx's formula: it is itself a mistake. Few readers probably need reminding of those famous lines from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in which Marx says not that people do not know they are making history but that they do not make it "under circumstances chosen by themselves" (595).[10] I do not point out this stray adventure in misquoting simply to shore up the conventional wisdom that one should always double-check one's sources[11] (nor even to suggest that everyone ought to read their Marx). I mention it, instead, in order to show how Braudel's unwitting error helpfully complicates the idea of the present's unwitting history. It is possible to be mistaken even in the belief that we are bound to be mistaken about our present. The self-canceling error recalls not only Jameson's dialectical double-negative but also the paradox of Wallace's "Condensed History": what "one never knows" individually is the imaginatively shared perspective that makes the present known. This paradox of reflexive history—the unexplained, unexpected leap from individual mistakes to collective and conceptual understanding—is, today, the formation we tend to call "the contemporary."

All periodizing terms are fictions. The contemporary is no different.[12] But as a fiction that allows us to grasp the paradoxical dynamics of reflexive history—and one that remains intimately tied to the imaginative work of fiction itself—the contemporary emerges as a creative corrective to the mistakes that haunt the history of the present. The contemporary may be the coin of our current realm. Yet its value, I have been arguing, lies precisely in the questions it raises about currency and immediacy: about the lures of the ephemeral and the experiential under a regime of late capitalism. Describing the well-nigh literary process by which time becomes "the times"—by which a flood of fleeting moments is turned into a shared historical moment—the contemporary arrests that familiar sense of "the present as a swift-running stream" (Jameson, "Afterword" 281) or, you could say, resists the ideological pull of the current.

NOTES

1. On some of the particular "misrecognitions" that "pose a radical limit to a history of the present," see Clover 109. On the need to return to the recent history of postmodernism "to consider what might have been taking place under our noses for some time," see Hoberek 240.

2. The *OED* dates the first example of this meaning to 1866; its second example is from 1924. See "Contemporary," A4.

3. For more on the relation between "modern" and "contemporary," see Rabinow 1–5.

4. According to a Google Ngrams analysis.

5. These limits are an inescapable part of contemporary literary studies. As Hungerford points out, some scholars of post-1945 literature continue to "evince[e] discomfort at writing about the literature of the late century" (418).

6. That's not the only problem. On the contemporary as a "geopolitical" problem, see Osborne, *Anywhere* 25. On the "multeity, adventitiousness, and inequity" of the contemporary, see Smith 9. For a more wide-ranging and often whimsical account of the "untimeliness" of the contemporary, see Agamben. And for a much-needed critique of Agamben's "messianic" understanding of the contemporary, see Erber.

7. For a meticulous account of how late capitalism values and devalues people's time, see Boltanski and Chiapello.

8. This corresponds with Terry Smith's claim that "there is no longer any overarching explanatory totality that accurately accumulates and convincingly accounts for" the features of the contemporary (9).

9. Not coincidentally, *condensation* is also the term that Althusser uses to describe the process by which we become politically aware of the social contradictions that dominate and shape a given moment. See Althusser 87–128 and 161–218.

10. My sincere thanks to Jami Eaton for helping me compare the *Reader* translation with the original German.

11. Braudel's source in this case was not actually Marx but Levi-Strauss, who cites this apocryphal version in *Structural Anthropology*.

12. According to Peter Osborne, "the contemporary is an *operative* fiction>" (*Anywhere* 23; emphasis in original).

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