

1-1-2017

The End of Postmodernism

Ralph Clare
Boise State University

CHAPTER 6

The End of Postmodernism

Ralph Clare

Appearing at the start of the millennium, Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001) features Monk Ellison, a writer who is questioning his one-time embrace of postmodern aesthetics and who raises the ire of "innovative" writer and fellow member of the *Nouveau Roman* Society after delivering a conference paper, *F/V*, part parody of and part homage to Roland Barthes's *S/Z*. Becoming belligerent, the writer proclaims to Ellison that postmodernists did not "have time to finish what we set out to accomplish" because any art which "opposes or rejects established systems of creation . . . has to remain unfinished."¹ His unsuccessful attempt to punch Ellison lands him in an azalea bush. Suffice it to say that the blow delivered at the 1991 Stuttgart conference on "The End of Postmodernism," which included such literary luminaries as John Barth, William Gass, and Raymond Federman, was of a different variety. That such a conference dared to ask its esteemed speakers whether postmodernism was over and done with, thereby suggesting it was, encompassed a telling moment — one in which, as *Erasure* has it, literary postmodernism appeared to have reached an end that by its own theoretical premise it could never reach. Added to this was a new generation of writers who were consciously trying to break with the literary postmodernism they had been raised on, often critiquing its supposed aesthetic and philosophical weaknesses, as David Foster Wallace did in his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," in which he claimed that postmodern metafiction had run its critical course and been co-opted by mainstream media and the market. Literary critics, following suit, began to distinguish these younger writers from the former generation by asking what might be emerging after postmodernism.² For many, literary postmodernism had indeed reached an end point.

It is tempting to propose that 1989 marked the beginning of postmodernism's end. Samuel Beckett, one of its grandfathers, died that year, as did Donald Barthelme. Most famously, of course, it is the year the Soviet

Union collapsed, a year Frances Fukuyama famously pronounced initiated the “end of history,” arguing that state-centered economies had failed for good and that liberal humanism and capitalism had won the day. While Fukuyama’s claim remains objectively debatable, the sense that something had ended was subjectively lived and felt by a rudderless Generation X that remained cynical regarding this professed victory during a decade that served as a kind of caesura between the so-called end of utopian ideology and the rise of the tech-driven New Economy. In contrast, and despite the critique of literary postmodernism’s narcissism and textual game playing, the irreverence of texts such as John Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* (1977), and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) thrived off the kinds of functioning, if faltering, Cold War-era grand narratives that their own meta-narratives questioned. In short, not only could it be argued that postmodernism had become a codified style by the 1990s – in both the highest artistic circles and the lowest consumer discount stores – it could also be said that postmodernism as a means of upsetting the establishment, whether literary or political, no longer made the same kind of sense that it did in decades prior.

Whether they accepted postmodernism’s ending or not, the early postmodernists had nevertheless begun to reflect upon the value of their art and their place in literary history that suddenly seemed, unaccountably to those in the supposed vanguard, to be passing them by. Such a passing is heralded by Barthelme’s posthumously published *The King* (1990), which features a historically displaced King Arthur who, surrounded by his Round Table and court on the eve of World War II, realizes that his chivalric values are outdated, worries about his future obituary, and rewrites Merlin’s prophecy of his demise to assure longevity and victory in war. Even the genre-blurring *Federman A-XXX: Recyclopedia* (1998), an edited, page-bound, hypertext-style biography of Raymond Federman that is equally a biography of literary postmodernism and poststructuralist theory, feels very much like a playful obituary for both the author and the postmodern surfiction he had long championed. In both texts, the concern with aging, legacy, and (re)writing a literary-historical (con)text might serve as an allegory for the position that many first-generation postmodern writers found themselves in during the 1990s.

During this decade, John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, David Markson, William Gass, and William Gaddis all produced novels that feature a writer reflecting upon his writing, that consider the nature of time and aging, and that continue to practice some form of self-reflexive fiction. However, while many of these works could be considered the most aesthetically

self-conscious examples of each author's oeuvre, they are, remarkably, the most explicitly autobiographical as well. In the 1990s, then, first-generation postmodernists would answer the long time complaint of critics that postmodern literature was only concerned with textual and narcissistic game playing. At a time when self-conscious fiction was no longer in vogue, these writers responded by emphasizing the ways in which their worlds were woven into text as much as text was woven into their worlds. Collectively, the result was a number of novels that anchor self-reflexivity in an array of direct and indirect autobiographical techniques and strategies. Reflecting upon their own mortality and the fast receding promise of literary immortality, these writers would self-consciously return to an autobiographical body of memories, desires, and concerns that would help to revive a body of work that appeared to be a terminal case. All told, the 1990s would come to signal if not the actual death of postmodernism, then its virtual transformation into a kind of posthumous postmodernism.

Out through the In Door

John Barth's *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera* (1994) comprises the single most self-involved evaluation of the literary life and potential critical death of one of postmodernism's greatest American writers. The book, Barth claims, is a "memoir bottled in a novel" and thus "not the story of my life, but . . . a story thereof."³ While Barth sometimes cameos in his works as a character, he is the sole protagonist of *Once Upon a Time*, wherein he is drawn from a sailing expedition with his wife into a "fictitious literal voyage" (384) similar to the night-sea journeys and narrative labyrinths experienced by so many of his characters. Typical to his vision of postmodern textuality in which word stands in for world, Barth submits his own life-history to language, becoming a fictionalized version of himself, writing "a story of my life, by no means *the*" (8–9).

Structured like an opera, *Once Upon a Time's* true impetus is not to sketch Barth's biography – much of which appears in his *Friday* essays or in *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) – but to jumpstart his present state of complacency and to avoid what appear to be inevitable endings – death and the end of his career. Barth begins the Overture by proclaiming the century to be "gone" and accounts "for the restless air of this overture" (17) by pointing to what he calls the "close-outs" of history, from "the Cold War thawed, [and] Germany reunited" to "the new Persian Gulf crisis" that will "midwife a new world order or . . . abort it" (11). But if history is supposedly at a standstill, so is Barth, who finds himself in a

mid-life-writing-crisis and stuck in “a terminal but far from interminable holding pattern” (59). Such concerns with physical mortality join with those of literary immortality when Barth peruses his latest notebook, remarking that the “blank space after 1991 – looks disagreeably grave-like” (10) and when he mentions the deaths of fellow postmodernists Italo Calvino, Barthelme (14), and Beckett (20), as well as the general decline of postmodern literature’s stock, the “slippage in our muse’s credit rating” (121). Even Barth’s infamous declaration about the cultural necessity to resuscitate literature becomes a personal lament about suffering the “empty interval between imagination’s exhaustion and replenishment” (12). Worst of all, he fears that *Once Upon a Time* will be his “Last Book” (382), which would essentially mean his death because although “[o]ur lives are *not* stories, . . . we may make stories of them” (169), and since life is meaningless, we must “make or find meaning in the form of *stories*” (170).

If Barth’s postmodern solution to perceived narrative ends had been to turn them back upon themselves, then the way out of his own predicament would mean turning one version of his life story against its projected ending. Barth thus recycles his own postmodern method and extends it into new “nonfictional” territory. The result is at once the most straightforwardly autobiographical of Barth’s fictional works, but also one of the most elusive as well, for Barth’s life story plays out in a “fractal funhouse” (226) that mixes fact and fiction; contains numerous suspended passages, sudden time leaps, and meta-commentaries on different narrative temporalities; and insists by the book’s end that life escapes narrative. This funhouse serves as a kind of textual time machine – not one bent on a Proustian recapturing of time, but one attempting to thwart its logic and twist it back upon itself. Barth’s plan involves setting “the action of this narrative not in ‘real’ time but in an imagined future that the present will presently overtake, and further . . . to conceive as its plot vehicle a voyage out of the time of its imagining and writing into the time imagined and written” (127). The obvious paradox that one can escape real time through the creation and manipulation of narrative time is as complicated and suspect as one of Zeno’s, a favorite of Barth’s. Further, the story, or “[t]ime’s funhouse” (57), is often a dizzying and confusing place, even for Barth himself (180–181), and the reader may feel trapped in a vortex. Yet, for Barth, the inescapability of the funhouse-time-paradox is not cause for despair, but the means of salvation. As he puts it, echoing his moral from *Chimera* (1972), “[n]o adversary, this labyrinth, but a resplendent arabesque, a chaos

most artfully structured. Not the . . . hazard-path to some treasure, but the treasure itself" (324).

It is for this reason that the book's operatic structure is never properly concluded – it contains an abbreviated Act Three (which would contain the last two decades of Barth's life) and a two page Epilogue. Thwarting narrative closure, Barth has planted a water-message from the (narrative) past containing the two decades of his life that he will not recount, creating a kind of narrative time loop that protects Barth and his wife from ever revealing or reaching their narrative ends. The fat lady cannot sing, the show must go on, and it will never be curtains for Barth. In keeping with Zeno's paradox of the tortoise that Achilles can never catch, the closer we seem get to the present time of Barth's telling (to the "real" Barth himself or to the end of the story), the less is actually concluded, for "the point must come . . . when the writing present overtakes the written present and leaves it behind. I anticipate at that point something like a narrative Doppler-shift" (20). Barth thus goes to great lengths to conceal elements of his real life, suggesting that language may weave *a* world but not *the* world, challenging the misconception that postmodernists see *the* world as simply text.

Barth, in response to the perceived end of postmodernism, actually doubles down on his metafictional funhouse method. Whether this is Barth's slimy retreat into the protection of a familiar conch shell narrative, or more proof of his virtuosity in adding another elegant spiral to an endlessly elaborate structure depends upon one's view of postmodernism in the first place. Taking the long view of Barth's career, however, *Once Upon a Time* marks a moment of crisis in the 1990s that Barth would ultimately overcome by self-consciously dramatizing it via the very postmodern tactics that many considered to be all used up.

Of Tomes and Tombstones

William Kohler, the middle-aged history professor and protagonist of William Gass's *The Tunnel* (1995), is the embittered foil to the self-satisfied Barth, but the cynical Kohler is equally concerned with the fate of his work and the legacy of his academic career. When Kohler, who is unsuccessfully attempting to write a preface to his latest book, wonders at the novel's beginning, "[a]m I postponing the end because endings are my only interest?"⁴ one might ask the same question of Gass himself, who famously spent thirty years writing the book he considered would be his most important.⁵

Gass's work-in-progress would span the entirety of that other work-in-progress, postmodernism itself, and embody many of its virtues and vices, ironically arriving in time to make it fittingly both a postmodern tome and a tombstone for postmodernism.

Gass has long argued for the postmodern axiom that fiction creates a world of its own and is in no way referential to a "real world," for "[t]here are no events but words in fiction."⁶ *The Tunnel* takes this notion to its extreme as it addresses the problem of historical representation in that Kohler's book, *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*, appears to be an attempt to exonerate the Nazis of blame for their actions since "neither guilt nor innocence are ontological elements in history; they are merely ideological factors to which a skillful propaganda can seem to lend causal force" (13). Indeed, the novel is not actually about the Holocaust or political fascism, but about the power of fiction and the "fascism of the heart" (366). Thus, from the postmodernist point of view, Gass's work can be seen as the high point of what self-conscious literary language and form can achieve in fiction, but from another it can be viewed as the most egregious example of postmodernism's self-involved formalism in which reality is trumped by text, and the horrors of history itself are reduced to nothing but the play and effects of figurative language.

The postmodern form of *The Tunnel* is evident in its shuttling between order and chaos. The novel is without plot yet is structured via twelve arbitrary "Phillipics," which are Kohler's rants mixed with reminiscences. Kohler's rambling takes on visual and spatial dimensions too, as the novel contains drawings, comics, limericks, concrete poetry, puzzles, and even ink-smudged pages. Such experimental textual play is classically postmodern and can be found in Gass's own *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1966) and in various works by Federman, Ronald Sukenick, and B. S. Johnson. Thus, though it is carefully structured, Kohler's twisted personal narrative feels as though it is spontaneously and randomly emerging on the page.

However, *The Tunnel* contains a tacit critique of postmodernism as well. Much like the actual tunnel Kohler is digging in his basement, all of his textual and formal play functions as an avoidance tactic. To be sure, Kohler's tunnel is the antithesis of Barth's funhouse for it is haunted, a place of despair from out of which he shapes "this prison of my life in language" (3). Although Kohler digs up his past and recreates it through literary language – which is often as beautiful and lyrical as it can be crass and pedantic – he also intentionally revises and distorts it. He is shifty regarding his involvement in Kristallnacht as a student in Germany, and it is often

unclear whether his colleagues, with whom he argues about historiography, are real. It is as if Gass were suggesting that Kohler is a “bad” postmodernist, a cynical relativist deconstructing truth as a way of denying its existence entirely. For there is no reason to believe that Kohler, a narrator reliable mainly for his bitterness, has actually written *Guilt and Innocence*; his preface may well be only the endless deferral of the book that he cannot write, a preface that becomes *The Tunnel* itself, which is the real meditation on guilt and innocence and comprises Gass’s meta-commentary on the potential misreading and abuse of postmodern theory.

The Tunnel, then, self-consciously puts postmodernism itself on trial around the very time when it would be critically condemned. Considering the novel’s ability to critique its own vision, it is also perhaps no surprise that *The Tunnel*, like Barth’s *Once Upon A Time* and other 1990s postmodern novels, contains a good deal of autobiographical content, however refracted. Gass would use much of his own childhood and family history when creating Kohler’s brutal Depression-era youth, creating some of the most powerful passages in the novel.⁷ Despite Gass’s own claim regarding the non-referential fictional world, then, the fragments of a real world still nestle deeply in the figures of his words and can cut and draw real blood, accordingly.

The Last of Some Things

Whereas Gass’s thirty-years-war with his magnum opus would end in victorious publication, the thirty-plus-year struggle of his longtime friend William Gaddis with both a Civil War play, *Once at Antietam*, and a history of the player piano would end in more of a truce. In lieu of their publications, Gaddis would recycle these would-be failures and incorporate them into his final two novels, *A Frolic of His Own* (1994) and *Agapē Agapē* (2002), respectively. Gaddis, then, would do what so many of his colleagues were doing in the 1990s: self-consciously dramatize the aging writers’ dilemma, thereby producing not only his most metafictional works to date but his most autobiographical as well.

A Frolic’s meeting of metafiction and biography occurs in Oscar Crease, an aging junior college instructor/writer who is suing a film director for stealing the idea for a Civil War blockbuster from his unproduced play *Once at Antietam*. Crease’s play is actually Gaddis’s real-life unfinished one, and several of its scenes are reproduced in the novel, along with several legal opinions, a transcript of a deposition, letters, and newspaper headlines. Gaddis is able, then, to “fold” his play into “Crease,” who sits at the

novel's center, whether in his Long Island home or in a hospital bed, amidst a dizzying swirl of legal documents and official visitors, which is formally reproduced by the novel's frantic pace. Moreover, the play motif highlights – perhaps even more so than does *J R* (1975) and *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985) – the linguistic construction of characters that Gaddis's dialogue-driven novels always suggest. *A Frolic* solidifies the Yoknapatawpha-like metafictional element in Gaddis's Long Island novels, as Christina mentions the fate of Liz Booth, the protagonist of Gaddis's *Carpenter's Gothic*, and several other characters too.

Thus, even as literary postmodernism was ending, Gaddis would write his most explicitly meta-textual novel that ponders whether, as one of the legal decisions puts it, “reality may not exist at all except in the words in which it presents itself.”⁸ Like Gass, Gaddis is fascinated by language's world ordering and world destroying potential, but also by the fact that language is a system that gives rise to and underpins all social systems. *A Frolic's* main theme centers on the differences between justice and law and the abuses of a legal system that, as Oscar puts it, “that's all it is, language” (284). The danger is that if “every profession protects itself with a language of its own” (284), then each becomes much like one character's critique of art theory as merely the “self referential confrontation of language with language and thereby, in reducing language itself to theory, rendering it a mere plaything” (34–35). Gaddis thus takes up the critique of post-modern language play, but turns it toward America's institutions instead. Regardless of Oscar's defense of his play's artistic integrity, his play can only “speak” as potential evidence in a copyright lawsuit because money is “the only language they understand” (422). Gaddis's suggestion in the deposition transcript that literature is a language premised on sharing and developing ideas, not creating them for private profit, provides a different communicative model than that of the capitalist system, but it is not one that holds much sway in this world.

Gaddis's most explicit coming to grips with endings, however, comes in the novella *Agapē Agape*, which was prepared in manuscript before Gaddis's death in 1998, though it was not published until 2002.⁹ Gaddis, suffering from ill health in the late 1990s, returned to writing his monumental history of the player piano, yet instead fictionalized this last attempt in *Agapē Agape*. Much like Edward Bast's opera that ends up a simple cello suite in *J R*, Gaddis's vast history would shrink to a final, concentrated novella.

The protagonist of the novella, who delivers a long rant directly to the reader, is the most autobiographically raw of any of Gaddis's characters. Like Gaddis, he is a terminally ill writer trying to get his documents (thus

his life) in order, since “we don’t know how much time is left and I have to work on the, to finish this work of mine while I . . . get this property divided up and the business worries that go with it.”¹⁰ The narrator is also concerned with his literary legacy, that he gets his ideas “written down before my work is distorted misunderstood turned into a cartoon” (28). To that end, the narrator’s real desire, as is Gaddis’s, is to finish his history of the player piano, which exists in a welter of notes, clippings, articles, and various papers that he tries to put into a coherent narrative. Gaddis’s familiar theme of the struggle of order against chaos is here more personal and urgent than ever.

As in Barth’s *Once Upon a Time*, the writer’s body of work is synonymous with his physical body, the skin of which is like “dry old parchment” (11). But if it is true that “[g]etting old your only refuge is your work” (19), then the textual tornado that envelops the narrator both sustains him and threatens him. Failure to arrange the “whole trash heap over the floor go down and I’d be part of the trash heap” (72) is thus the narrator’s failure too because his work has always been “about the collapse of everything” (28). A specific part of that “collapse” in the 1990s that Gaddis is responding to is changing literary tastes. The narrator grouses over the “[f]act that I’m forgotten that I’m left on the shelf with the dead white guys in the academic curriculum” (48). The physical body thus collapses with the forgotten body of work. As women writers and the multicultural novel began to fulfill the pluralistic, non-hegemonic promise of postmodernism in different ways, even Gaddis realized that high literary postmodernism was finished. Yet, despairing though it is at times, the carefully orchestrated chaos of *Agapē* *Agape* is Gaddis’s most self-revealing example of his artistic process and an assertion that a better self can be created in the face of inevitable failure.

Around the Block and Back Again

While the 1990s novels of Barth, Gass, and Gaddis extended their commitments to a postmodern aesthetic, it could be argued David Markson’s *Reader’s Block* (1996) is his most radical postmodern novel, though it arrived at a time when postmodernism was at an end. *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* (1988), Markson’s most critically lauded novel, represents the formal breakthrough in his work that would come to characterize the late style of his writing – as *Reader’s Block* puts it, a “[n]onlinear . . . Discontinuous . . . Collage-like . . . assemblage”¹¹ or “[a] novel of intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak minus the novel” (61, 137). *Reader’s Block*, however, could be said to take the modernist Eliot-like aesthetic of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* and

make it more properly postmodern. Yet it too features an aging author obsessed with endings and self-consciously reflecting on the value of his life's writing.

Although *Reader's Block* runs on the most metafictional of premises – it is about a writer writing about a writer writing – its bare-boned, allegorical characters, Reader and Protagonist, are partly autobiographical. Similar to many a Beckett narrator who creates a series of fictional selves to flee, find, or maintain a self through storytelling, the narrator of *Reader's Block* invents Reader, the “main” character, who spends the novel wondering how to create Protagonist. All three characters are practically one and the same, however, for at times “Reader is essentially the I” (10) and must decide “[h]ow much of Reader's own circumstances or past [to] give Protagonist” (12). Haunting this novel “of no describable genre” (140) or “poem of sorts” (166), then, is the consideration that the narrator/Reader is “in some peculiar way thinking of an autobiography” (137, 41). In this sense, *Reader's Block* is “a seminonfictional semifiction” (140). As Markson once stated in an interview, “How much of myself is in there? It's all me.”¹²

Despite certain ambiguities, a general picture of Reader/Protagonist emerges as an aging, lonely man, who is either without family or estranged from his children, has suffered or is suffering from cancer, and who once had a literary career that is all but forgotten – in short, he is the familiar figure of the aging author in 1990s postmodern fiction. All told, we are offered the barest of plots, in which Reader is staying either at a beach or near an old cemetery and where he watches a mysterious woman who reminds him of his own failed romantic relationships (60, 73, 186); and we learn only the skeletal detail of his life, including an inventory of mementos, such as a baseball “hit foul by Ted Williams at Yankee Stadium” (60), a portrait of Dante (50), and a human skull (55). Not surprisingly, Reader's thoughts are often morbid, as when he wonders, “[d]id it ever, once, enter even Protagonist's bleakest conjecturings that he would finish out his life alone?” (188). Reader, true to his name, even wonders what book will be “the last he ever read” (181).

But the transformation of autobiography through postmodern metafiction that pointedly occurs in 1990's postmodern novels is put to different ends in Markson. Barth, Gass, and Gaddis employ autobiography to flesh out character, provide backstory and setting, or for thick, realist description. Where they add, Markson subtracts. If Reader, like Protagonist, “has come to this place because he had no life back there at all” (9) – “back there” being the space of pre-narrative non-being, the outside of (the) text – then,

by extension, so has the narrator and Markson himself. The self in Markson is a kind of fiction intricately tied up with the act of reading, of connecting with other texts, and this self comes into being through language. To be sure, the linguistic self is a motif in many a postmodern text, but rarely is it treated as if so much is at stake. Intertextuality in Markson is not simply a formalist game of texts at play with each other, but a portrait of how the self is informed by, and in intimate dialogue with, those texts as well.

Thus, Markson's minimalist autobiography is incomplete without joining the biography of art and literature itself, which *Reader's Block* offers in a way. The biographical and anecdotal fragments, for instance, become a kind of protagonist too. The fear, much like in Gaddis's *Agapē Agape*, is that all of these fragments have been consigned to the "[w]astebasket" (the novel's last word) of history, yet in constructing his allusive mosaic-novels Markson delays the very ending of culture and history that he fears. For *Reader's Block*, as its title suggests, is concerned with overcoming (Reader's) writer's block. As such, the novel succeeded wildly, for it is the first book in what could be considered a tetralogy along with *Vanishing Point* (2001), *This is Not a Novel* (2004), and *The Last Novel* (2007). Markson, much like Barth, turned a possible ending into a new beginning by metafictionally considering to what ends he could put "the ending."

Time after Time

Unlike Barth, Gass, Gaddis, and Markson, Kurt Vonnegut's works had, as early as his third novel *Mother Night* (1961), incorporated autobiographical elements, and not in a veiled way but directly so. Like Barth, Vonnegut sometimes appears in his novels, such as in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), yet he also began a number of his novels with an autobiographical preface that helped to create the "character" of Vonnegut that so many readers would grow to know and love. Although the postmodern author was supposedly dead (merely an author function or an ever playfully shifting signifier), Vonnegut managed to flesh himself out in a way that appealed to readers. Nevertheless, even Vonnegut's professed final novel *Timequake* (1997), like other 1990s postmodern novels, displays an overt concern with aging, literary legacy, and is, by far, Vonnegut's most metafictional and autobiographical novel.

Timequake is a novel about writing, repetition, and failure. Its premise, a postmodern twist on Nietzsche's notion of "eternal recurrence," is that in 2001 the world plummets back in time ten years, and everyone is forced to act exactly as they did over the ensuing ten year span while being unable

to change or stop what occurred. When time and free will finally return to the world, science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout (Vonnegut's long-time "alter ego"¹³) attempts to awaken the world from its funk. Despite, or perhaps because of this premise, the novel contains almost no actual plot or action. Instead it repeats or recycles two of Vonnegut's familiar themes and his most famous character, Trout, and puts Vonnegut center stage. Further, the novel is constructed via a loose collage of short autobiographical pieces, family history, political commentary – much of which Vonnegut has written about before – as well as literary and artistic references, historical anecdotes, jokes, poems, and numerous stories by Kilgore Trout. The mix of these fragments and sparse plot gestures to Markson's work (Vonnegut mentions Markson's *Reader's Block* [40]), and the fact that time seems to "stand still" as Vonnegut reviews his past recalls Barth's manipulation of time in his fictional funhouses.

Vonnegut's metafictional temporal play is a formal feature of the novel as well. In a move similar to Gaddis's inclusion of his "failed" texts into novels about writers who are failing to write them, Vonnegut picks apart the failed draft of *Timequake*, which he refers to as *Timequake One*, in order to write *Timequake Two*, or the very novel that we are reading. Once again, the postmodern novel shows itself capable of turning perceived endings against themselves. In fact, for Vonnegut such failure is necessary to write the novel in the "first" place. *Timequake Two*, for instance, is not merely a newer draft of *Timequake One* but "a stew made from its best parts mixed with thoughts and experiences during the past seven months" (xii), and Vonnegut usually begins a story in the narrative by attributing it to *Timequake One*. Thus, *Timequake* is as much about *Timequake One* as anything, and *Timequake Two* ironically ends up being the "first" and "original" novel predating its "earlier" incarnation, to which it ironically gives the title *One*.

Vonnegut's ability to rework the old into something new, however, does not quell his concerns about the death of literature and literacy itself. Though he defends the fact that Trout, like himself, "created *caricatures* rather than characters. His animus against so-called *mainstream literature*, moreover, wasn't peculiar to him. It was generic among writers of science fiction" (63), he still fears that the Internet is making books irrelevant (157). One of Trout's stories tells of the Booboolings, who are so enamored of television that "[t]hey would look at the printed page or a painting and wonder how anybody could have gotten his or her rocks off looking at things that simple and dead" (18). In postmodernism's heyday, *Slaughterhouse-Five's* Billy Pilgrim tellingly interrupts a radio broadcast about "whether the novel

was dead or not,"¹⁴ but roughly thirty years later Vonnegut truly worries over the possibility.

Ultimately, Vonnegut bids goodbye to his fictional world, much like William Butler Yeats does in "The Circus Animals' Desertion," as he caps his novel-writing pen for good. Metafictional to the last, Vonnegut stages "a clambake on the beach at Xanadu" for his fictional characters and real-life friends (199). However, if Yeats's circus ends with a realization of "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart," the usually melancholy Vonnegut models his big-top finale after "the last scene of *8 1/2*" (Federico Fellini's meta-film about a director struggling to make his ninth film), in which the movie set is revealed and the all of the film's characters dance in a circle together (199). Similarly, in *Timequake* Vonnegut chooses to finish his career in a celebration of the intricate play of life and art and to accept the ending of the performance as an apotheosis of sorts.

After Words

What the critical afterlife of literary postmodernism will be after its few remaining originators pass on is an open question. After the canon wars, the end of the "linguistic turn" in literary studies, and the rise of post-postmodern literature, the presence of first-generation postmodern literature, despite its initially strong institutional ties, has largely waned inside the academy. Outside the academy, the story is essentially the same. With the exception of the bestselling Vonnegut, the *Library of America* series, a kind of barometer of popular canonized authors, has yet to admit a well-known postmodernist novelist, such as Barth, Coover, or Pynchon, into its ranks, whereas this generation's more realist-based contemporaries, such as Philip Roth, John Updike, and Saul Bellow, have all received multiple volumes.

Despite this trend, however, postmodernists have continued to write and to publish. Since 1990, for example, Barth and Coover have produced works on a fairly regular basis, and even the once sporadic outputs of Pynchon and Gass have nearly doubled that of their early careers. In an act of literary audacity, in 2014 Robert Coover would publish *The Brunist Day of Wrath*, the sequel to *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), arriving nearly a half-century after its predecessor. Once again, an apparent ending became grounds for a postmodern beginning, suggesting that perhaps the postmodernists have been playing posthumous all along.

For Al Greenberg

NOTES

- 1 Percival Everett, *Erasure* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), 36–37.
- 2 See Ziegler (“The End of Postmodernism”), Harris (“PoMo’s Wake”), McLaughlin (“Post-Postmodern Discontent” and “Post-Postmodernism”), Andrew Hoberek (“After Postmodernism”), and especially the introduction to Stephen Burn’s *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (2008).
- 3 John Barth, *Once Upon A Time: A Floating Opera* (New York: Little, 1994), Program Note. Further references are parenthetical.
- 4 William H. Gass, *The Tunnel* (New York: Harper, 1995), 15. Further references are parenthetical.
- 5 “William H. Gass,” Interview by Carole Spearin McCauley, *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative Writers*, ed. Joe David Bellamy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 42.
- 6 William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (Boston: Nonpareil, 1979), 30.
- 7 Heide Ziegler, *Introduction to The End of Postmodernism: New Directions, Proceedings of the First Stuttgart Seminar in Cultural Studies, Aug. 1991*, ed. Heide Ziegler (Stuttgart: Verlag, 1993), 17.
- 8 William Gaddis, *A Frolic of His Own* (New York: Poseidon-Simon, 1994), 30. Further references are parenthetical.
- 9 Joseph Tabbi, *Afterword to Agapē Agape* by William Gaddis (New York: Viking, 2001), 102.
- 10 William Gaddis, *Agapē Agape* (New York: Viking, 2001), 1. Further references are parenthetical.
- 11 David Markson, *Reader’s Block* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1996), 14. Further references are parenthetical.
- 12 Quoted in Francoise Palleau-Papin, *This is Not a Tragedy: The Works of David Markson* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2011), xxvi.
- 13 Kurt Vonnegut, *Timequake* (New York: Putnam, 1997), xiii. Further references are parenthetical.
- 14 Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five: Or, The Children’s Crusade* (New York: Dial, 2009 [1969]), 263.