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Postmodernist Poetics and Narratology: A Review Article about McHale's Scholarship

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Biwu SHANG

Postmodernist Poetics and Narratology: A Review Article about McHale's Scholarship

If there were such a thing about the genealogy of scholars working in the field of postmodernism, people would generally mention such names as Jonathan Arac, Matei Călinescu, Hans Bertens, Leslie Fiedler, Douwe Fokkema, Ihab Habib Hassan, Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard, and Brian McHale, among others. I first came to know McHale's work by reading his 1987 book *Postmodernist Fiction* when I was conducting my Ph.D. studies at Shanghai Jiao Tong University and later continued with his 1992 *Constructing Postmodernism* and his 2004 *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole*. When preparing my review of McHale's work, I began with a survey of his scholarship in postmodernist poetics and found that his work on postmodernism is cited often although in my view it is unfortunate that more often than not references occur to his work on postmodernist fiction and less on his contributions to the study of postmodernist poetry.

I think, to a large extent, it is the general lack of scholarship on postmodernist poetry that leads to lesser attention to McHale's scholarship of postmodernist poetry. For example, in Fredric Jameson's more than four-hundred-page Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism there are only three pages devoted to poetry, namely Bob Perelman's "China." McHale has changed this situation in a number of significant ways and this is the focus of my review of his work. At issue is how to define postmodern poetry? Unlike scholars who usually draw a chronological order, McHale makes a distinction between modern poetry and postmodern poetry by employing narratology. He argues that modernist poetry is marked by "its adherence to a ban on narrative in poetry" while the postmodern poem is "little constrained by the modernist prohibition on narrative in poetry" (The Obligation 3), although its narrativity is rather weak. The subtitle of The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole is Postmodernist Long Poems and according to McHale "Modernism marks a crisis in the long poem: it interdicts narrative modes of organization and submits the long-poem genre to a general 'lyricization.' The result is a form of long poem lacking any continuous narrative, but instead made up of lyric fragments strung together in sequence" ("The Weak" 162). I think this is indeed the case. He further argues that "With postmodernism, narrativity returns, but with a difference. Where modernist poets recoiled from the tradition of the narrative long-poem, postmodernists recoil from the modernist recoil" ("The Weak" 162). By weak narrativity in postmodernist poetry, McHale means "telling stories poorly, distractedly, with much irrelevance and indeterminacy, in such a way as to evoke narrative coherence while at the same time withholding commitment to it and undermining confidence in it" ("The Weak" 165) or just the narrative fragments or minor narratives contained. Take Lyn Hejinian's 1991 Oxota: A Short Russian Novel as an example: the poem lacks a clear master narrative and, instead, it seems to be proliferated by a number of minor narrative genres: anecdotes, gossip and hearsay, jokes, dream narratives, ekphrases of paintings with a narrative content. What is more, as McHale observes, the poem "fragments these minor narratives and disperses them across noncontiguous lines or even noncontiguous chapters, interleaving alien materials" ("The Weak" 162). Thus, as readers we cannot but wonder what we are going to do about postmodernist poetry.

To this question, McHale proposes two alternative models: "first, the model of the postmodernist novel; and second, that of postmodernist architecture" (*The Obligation* 3). Postmodernist poems and postmodernist novels share some similar features, the most striking of which is the shift of dominance. Compared with their modernist counterparts, both postmodernist poetry and postmodernist fiction are dominant genres. McHale lists the following repertoire of devices bearing on characteristics of postmodernism so far as the fictional worlds are concerned: 1) the pluralization of fictional world by juxtaposing this world and the world to come, 2) by creating ontologically heterogeneous worlds by interrupting into the world of beings of different ontological order, 3) the making and un-making of worlds through the proliferation of narrative levels by embedding, stacking and erasure, 4) the wedge between text and the world, and 5) the explosion of the ontological grounding of fictional worlds. From his perspective, McHale argues that "Even if one is generally skeptical of cross-genre comparisons, it's hard to deny the *heuristic* value of approaching postmodernist long poems in the light of the postmodernist novel" (*The Obligation* 5).

When coming to the second model—postmodern architecture—McHale claims that "Postmodern architecture has a special status in the public perception of postmodernism—it is, after all, the form in which most people are apt to encounter postmodern aesthetics ... But it also has a special

status in theories of postmodernism; it is, in a sense, the privileged model, to which all other manifestations of postmodernism are referred" (*The Obligation* 6-7). Even more so, in the era of postmodernism writing is acknowledged to "play an integral role in architectural practice" (*The Obligation* 7). Viewed in this light, there exists a kind of possibility for us to read postmodernist poems by employing the model of postmodernist architecture. Therefore McHale believes that "The postmodern rapprochement of architecture and discourse has enhanced the potential of postmodernist architecture to serve as the model for the contemporary long poem" (8). Thus McHale proposes two sub-models derived from postmodern architecture: the semiotic or historicist model (referring to approaching architecture as language or code) and the deconstructivist model (referring to the building-as-text approach to architecture).

In reading and analyzing postmodern long poems, McHale combines the two models (namely, the model of postmodernist fiction and the model of postmodernist architecture). For example, when investigating James Merrill's 1982 The Changing Light at Sandover, McHale focuses on the issue of factual and counterfactual worlds by comparing it with Tony Kushner's 1990 play Angels in America. In McHale's view both Angels in America and The Changing Light at Sandover emerge from "the same matrix of postmodernist aesthetics" (The Obligation 19). They do share such similarities as the pluralization of worlds, the mingling of characters of different ontological statuses, and the locations within a gay subculture. With reference to the model of postmodernist fiction, McHale examines the complex narrative structure of *The Changing Light at Sandover*, namely the fragments of the lost novel and the juxtaposition of real events and real people with the fun-house mirror of fiction. What this poem displays is the feature of de-narration or a "poetics of disruption, of fluid and destabilizing figurality, of 'now you see it, and now you don't" (The Obligation 33). The model of postmodernist fiction has been frequently used in McHale's analysis of other postmodernist long poems and noteworthy is the way he reads postmodernist poems across the span of postmodernist fiction. For instance, in reading Melvin Tolson's Harlem Gallery and Edward Dorn's Gunslinger, McHale compares them with Ishmale Reed's novels Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down and Mumbo Jumbo and connects them with the black arts movements.

With reference to the model of postmodernist architecture, McHale makes insightful readings of postmodernist poems. For instance, he unpacks such features as jarring juxtapositions, *mésalliance-s*, and the oxymoronic structuring of characters in *Harlem Gallery*. These features, in McHale's opinion, make the poem "a version of the motley society" (*The Obligation* 74). For instance, with its multiple forms of spacing and elision, Armand Schwerner's "The Tablets" projects iconic gaps corresponding to protagonist's erasure:

Consider Geoff Hill's *Mercian Hymns* as an example. Two sub-models of postmodernist architecture are best used to approach the poem's "vertical dimension of language", "organization on the paradigmatic axis at the expense (to some extent) of its syntagmatic organization", and "diachronic existence in time at the expense of its synchronic systematicity in the present" (*The Obligation* 107). John Ashbery's "The Skaters" is another example that McHale uses the model of postmodernist architecture to analyze postmodernist poem. In this poem, the first-person pronoun proliferates, which is more or less like an indeterminate signifier. All these autobiographical "I"s are rather

elusive. As McHale's observes, at the end of the poem, "the larger verse blocks of preceding sections give way to a multiplicity of short, disconnected fragments, most of them cast in the first person, and many of them apparently mutually incompatible, as far as their respective worlds of references are concerned" (*The Obligation* 150). To illustrate his argument, McHale quotes the following lines:

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This is my fourteenth year as governor of C province.

I was little more than a lad when I first came here.
Now I am old but scarcely any wiser.
(IV. 220)

I have spent the afternoon blowing soap bubbles
And it is with a feeling of delight I realize I am
All alone in the skittish darkness
(IV. 221)

I had thought of announcing my engagement to you
On the day of the first full moon of X month.
(IV. 222) (Ashbery qtd. in McHale, The Obligation 150-51)
```

Owing to the proliferation of the first-person pronouns, the stability of the referents and the worlds built up gets deconstructed.

Although McHale believes that there is no umbrella model for covering all features of postmodernist poetry, he still attempts to and succeeds in compiling a list of recurring elements of postmodernist poetry, which include "Poetry under erasure: construction and deconstruction," "Hip-pop poetics: sampling and the 'found," "Poetry and person: 'you' and 'I'," "The replenishment of narrative," and "The spatial turn" (*The Obligation* 251-61). McHale confesses that the "repertoire of recurrences and tendencies is not exhaustive in any sense. It exhausts neither the features of the poems discussed in this book [*The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole*], nor the elements of postmodernist poetry generally" (261), the features listed do serve as handy references for investigating postmodernist poems.

A close look at the McHale's readings of postmodern poems reveals that there is always of a specter of narratology contained within, which can be accounted for two reasons. First, nearly all the poems that McHale has so painstakingly investigated in Toward the Obligation of the Difficult Whole are more of less of narrative type. McHale pays attention to narrativity displayed in postmodernist poems. For instance, when comparing Harlem Gallery and Gunslinger McHale argues that both these poems are of narrative types, although the sources of their narrativity are different. Harlem Gallery is a residual narrativity while Gunslinger is an emergent narrativity (64). In general, McHale assumes that postmodernist poems outflank the modernist interdiction of narrative on two different fronts: "First, postmodernism adopts, to a degree unprecedented in "high-art" poetry, the conventions of popular narrative genres-science fiction and gothic, the western and the adventure story, comic books and animated cartoons, soap opera and pornography. Secondly, it strives to recover, through pastiche and parody, narrative modes that flourished before the imperialist expansion of lyric that reached its peak with high-modernist imagism, including the modes of early-nineteenth-century novels-in-verse, of Renaissance and medieval romances and dreamvisions, and of ancient epic. Some postmodernist poems combine or superimpose the two approaches" (The Obligation 258).

McHale is an experienced narratologist: "I have been a narrative theorist since the very beginning of my career" (McHale qtd. in Shang and McHale forthcoming). As early as during his PhD work McHale was drawn to some classic narratological issues and he worked on postmodernist fiction by using the tools of narrative theory, in particular the tools derived from possible worlds theory (e.g., Doležel; Eco; Pavel; Ryan, etc.). Reflecting upon his postmodernist poetics, McHale says that "It seems to me that anything of value that I have contributed to the scholarly conversation about postmodernism has been narratological in inspiration" (McHale qtd. in Shang and McHale forthcoming). Thus McHale's interest in and expertise of narratology paved the way for his exploring narratives in poetry.

Despite the fact that narrativity in lyric poetry "has long been problematic and controversial," McHale perceives that "longer poetic genres, the epic and its heirs, have always exploited narrative modes of organization" ("Weak Narrativity" 161). Admittedly, there is a crisis of narrative in modernist poetry. However, in postmodernist poetry there is the narrativity turn, although it is in a weak form. In his opinion, narrative in poetry is ubiquitous encompassing such distinguishable

phenomena as "continuous narrative forms," "quasi-narrative sequences," "implicit narrative situations of lyric poems," and "narrative materials 'folded into' basically lyric poems" ("Narrative in Poetry" 356-57). To McHale's regret, "poetry has been relevantly neglected in recent narrative theory" ("Narrative in Poetry" 356) and "Contemporary narrative theory is almost silent about poetry ... Some scholars specialize in narrative; others specialize in poetry; few specialize in both" ("Beginning to Think" 11-12). I agree with McHale when he says that "if oral literature is taken into account, then the majority of the world's *literary* narratives are poetic narratives. In this perspective, contemporary narrative theory's relative neglect of poetry appears not so much an oversight as a scandal" ("Beginning to Think"12).

To deal with such a "scandal," McHale proposes three general areas worthy our attention, namely "world-building," "the counterpoint of narrative and verse form," and the "relation between narrative and figuration" ("Narrative in Poetry" 357-58). In doing narrative analysis of poetry, McHale makes use of Rachel Blau DuPlessis's hypothesis of poetry as segmentivity and John Shoptaw's analysis of counter measurement, which are considered as contributing "meaningfully (for better or worse) to the structure of poetic narrative" ("Beginning to Think" 18). McHale illustrates the application of segmentivity and counter measurement to narrative in poetry by using four different translations of the same passage from The Iliad. In his opinion, poetic narratives' own segmentation "interacts with the segmentation 'indigenous' to poetry," which produces "complex interplays among segments of different scales and kinds" ("Affordances" 277). These interactions have become the focus of his work on narratives in poetry. In his most recent essay "Affordances of Form in Stanzaic Narrative Poetry" McHale explores a wide range of complex stanza forms which contain interlaced end-rhymes like the ottavarima, rhyme royal, the Spenserian stanza, and the Onegin stanza. He assumes that "Each of these stanza forms offers different affordances, different potentials for use; each encourages or discourages certain interactions with narrative segments" (277).

Largely owing to the efforts by Monique R. Morgan, Peter Hühn, Jens Kiefer, McHale, and other scholars, narratology in poetry is now becoming an emergent field. For its future studies, McHale seems to suggest moving towards the interaction of poetry and narrative: "There is much we do not yet know about the interaction of poetry and narrative" ("Beginning" 23). Peter Hühn and Roy Sommer also compile a list issues for future investigations: "the relation of the various event types with different historical epochs and with different cultures and cultural traditions; comparison between poetry and prose fiction in their various genres with respect to the schemata used, event types and the degree of realization of events" (Hühn and Sommer 238). To the list above, I would like to add the following points of departure: the discursive features of narratives in poetry, the multiple approaches to narratives in poetry, the communication between narrative theory and theory of poetry, and narratives in different genres of poetry like epics, lyric, etc. (see Shang, "Transgeneric" 14-22).

In conclusion, despite the fact that the high tide of postmodernism is gone, its "after-life" can be found in intermedial and transmedial art forms such as comics or graphic novels which combine visual and verbal art or in forms which spill over from one media platform to another and such new forms request literary scholars of postmodernism "have to become media scholars (see Shang and McHale, forthcoming; see also Vandermeersche and Soetaert

http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1806). Does that mean future scholars of postmodernism will have to possess the cross-disciplinary knowledge? The answer is positive and can be evidenced in the work of McHale, who covers a wide spectrum of fields such as literary theory, architecture, film studies, narratology, visual arts, etc. In short, his scholarship of postmodernism is all embracing as postmodernism itself is. In an "Afterword" to the recent volume devoted to postmodernism, McHale argues that "Postmodernism was a phenomenon complex enough to be multiply overdetermined, externally as well as internally" (358). To parody this statement, we might say McHale's contribution to the study of postmodernism is valuable enough to exert its influence globally.

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