

OFF THE POST

A FRIENDLY EDITOR recently remarked on the annoying prevalence of the slash/solidus/virgule in my writing. Why not, I thought? And then, later, why? One answer, one self-justification, lies in an appeal to the *times*. The post-modern climate is either/or, and both at the same time. Many of us are on this knife-edge in our criticism and our writing, between a nostalgia for the order and sense of the New Criticism in which we were trained, and the lure of creative word-playing in semiotic/deconstructionist methods. We want to be pluralistic, to accept coexisting alternatives, to acknowledge in our *syntax* that we too could be (would like to be thought of as) poets. Syntax reflects politics; pullulating slashes may mean we are trying to learn to live with indecisiveness, or we are retreating from political activity to an apology for our own confusion. I, for one, am enough caught in the post-modern psychology that I want to argue *for* the solidus, which used to be a long f, and was good currency under Constantine. To abandon it would leave the artist in his too visible maleness: I would rather honour the poet in the *jouissance* of his/her solecisms.

Beleaguered by the tyranny of exact definition, scholars have run with enthusiasm to the term post-modern. Having resisted for centuries the imprecision of such terms as romanticism and realism, literary critics understandably embrace a term which inherently, absurdly claims to be meaningless. This journal recently published an essay which spoke of “old,” “new,” and “traditional” post-modernism. In architecture post-modern seems to describe any building with circles cut out of its façade: the streetscape of zeros. In photography, by contrast, post-modernism highlights the use of the vernacular of the snapshot. Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodern (the hyphen disappears) “as incredulity toward metanarratives.” The perplexing verbal loop of that definition reminds us how post-modernism has come to describe any element of the self-reflexive anywhere.

Charles Neuman is particularly effective at heading us off at the tautological impasse: “As opposed to the Modernist effect of shocking an audience, the Post-Modernist often seems content to infuriate it by letting everybody off the hook.” Whether you’re a pragmatist or a theorist, Neuman’s *The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation* (Northwestern University Press) is a

provocative essay, both for its aphoristic energy, and its broadening sense of the social, cultural, political, and especially economic contexts into which author and critic can fit. The book gives us time to think about what we don't often take time to think about — about our own critical biases and how they are fired by TV's "25,000 volts of phosphorescent light per second," or dulled by "special-occasion packaging" of books.

Reading Neuman makes it understandable that Charles Russell can't quite decide, in his *Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries: The Literary Avant-Garde from Rimbaud Through Postmodernism* (Oxford University Press), whether the post-modern is *avant-garde* or not. In Russell's more sober and more scrupulously historical assessment, the

ludic spirit . . . is as double-edged as any aspect of postmodern creation. For some writers, it signals a creative freedom that allows writers to demystify society's codes of meaning and value in order to rip free for their personal use the images and linguistic styles out of which new creations will be made. For others, there is something demonic and restrictive about the forced constraints of game. It suggests that art can be no more than self-reflexive entertainment, and that the anarchic spirit manifest in this belief that the individual can truly achieve a state of creative independence may, in spite of its deconstructive sophistication, belie the degree of our shaping by social codes.

Neuman and Russell are both sceptics about post-modernism. Their scepticism, and the contrasting ludic spirit of improvisation which they both identify with post-modernism, double-edges me toward Canadian literature amidst the technologies of infinite replication. Are we photocopying our way back to a new unswervingly referential Realism? Or is it that in the post-industrial electronic age we can think about form and language only when forms and languages are parodied, when art adopts the superficiality of TV? "Silent stoic forbearance," according to Neuman, "tends to crumble under Post-modern levity"; but in the culture of Mrs. Moodie and Mrs. Bentley can this be a problem, as Neuman seems to conceive it? I wonder if one reason why *The Sacrifice*, *Under the Ribs of Death*, *The Betrayal*, or *Obasan* (fine as each is) seem like warm-ups for the great immigrant/ethnic novel is that they have almost no sense of humour, no sense of their own absurdity? Could Ralph Fasold's examination of *diglossia* — where "two varieties of a language exist side by side throughout the community, with each having a definite role to play" — in *The Sociolinguistics of Society* (Basil Blackwell) explain this limitation? Could Fasold's enquiry into dialects, official languages, *diglossia*, and multilingualism frame an understanding of the way Canada words itself? In post-modernism's climate of intense self-consciousness about language, such questions play on/with our minds.

On the subject of ways of knowing in the face of inadequate linguistic means of expression, Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Uni-

versity of Minnesota Press) has crucial connection to Canada: it is a translation of the French philosopher's report to the Conseil des Universités of the government of Quebec. This book is filled with the elliptical jargon which makes a reader want to take a sabbatical to learn how to read it. Within its density lies an important questioning of *scientific* narrative; Lyotard contemplates the technology of knowledge as product, and its implications for social structures and educational institutions: the challenge of the book's difficult argument seems particularly worth meeting in a nation of telephone-talkers, in a country which, at least according to Robert Kroetsch, missed out on modernism.

The ludic spirit let loose in our presbyterian and jansenist codes has the same appeal that has given post-modernism its strong hold in recent critical discourse. Post-modernism is a logical contradiction: there can be nothing *post-to-modernism*. We are drawn to a term whose meaning does not, as usual, dissolve over time, but which begins without a meaning. Its implicit absence is its appeal. The play of the virgule contains/releases difference and similarity and compounding in the same word/sign. It is making the reading of Canadian literature/criticism a much more exciting place to be. I'm convinced. I'm not so sure.

L.R.

AUTUMN SONG

Geraldine Rubia

when all the world was green and blue
and you were young and clever
you wisely waited for the who
would be your all forever

the dandelion went to seed
the sun kept on blaspheming
bereft you fed the lesser need
said you had just been dreaming

then after all who blazed in sight
so young and wise and clever
and now you lie here in the night
more alone than ever