



## Review

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*Reconsidering the Postmodern. European Literature beyond Relativism*, ed. Thomas Vaessens and Yra van Dijk (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

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Through this collection of articles, Thomas Vaessens and Yra van Dijk attempt to gauge the current state of postmodern literature in Europe. Besides an important introduction by the editors, which I will discuss at length, the volume contains twelve separate essays. Ten of these chapters concern the modern situation in specific European literatures: we are offered vistas of Russian (Ellen Rutten), British (Sebastian Groes), Dutch (Thomas Vaessens), Italian (Monica Jansen), French (Sabine van Wesemael), post-Yugoslav (Guido Snel), Norwegian (Suze van der Poll), Flemish (Sven Vitse), Polish (Arent van Nieukerken), and German literature (Ewout van der Knaap). Two additional essays deal with Spanish and Spanish American literature (Brigitte Adriaensen and Maarten Steenmeijer) and American literature (Allard den Dulk), thus establishing what the editors call a 'transatlantic connection'. The contributors – almost without exception born in the 1960s or 1970s and working in the Netherlands – are specialists in their respective fields.

The twelve chapters about specific literatures are intended to conform to the same basic design. Each contributor is expected to describe how postmodernism has manifested itself in the literature in question and how it has been criticised, and to exemplify what came after postmodernism by introducing and commenting on the work of three representative authors. Using this strategy, the book as a whole aims to 'explain literary texts and authorial strategies by analyzing them as parts of the search for a Third Way in literary and cultural politics: a new position that tries to reconcile postmodern and pre-postmodern, humanistic elements'.<sup>1</sup> Experts on the respective literatures will no doubt find much to discuss – for my own part, I will not attempt to comment on the essays one by one, or even highlight one or two of them for special scrutiny. This is partly due to my own lack of competence – I am not a specialist in postwar European literature or in any of the literatures presented in the collection – and partly to my feeling that the essays are fine and interesting when taken on their own and not as parts of a larger plan. It seems clear to me that the collection offers a rich and fascinating mosaic of images of developments in European (and transatlantic) literatures. What I find [86] most worth discussing is the distinctive overall interpretation of the literary-historical development offered in Van Dijk and Vaessens's introduction and, to some extent, the relationship between that interpretation and the individual essays. Those aspects of the collection will form the centre of attention in my review.

The editors' leading idea is that postmodernism in literature has developed into something that could be called late postmodernism. Late postmodernism is described as having moved away from some of the characteristic positions of postmodernism, for example its irony and relativism, and as using postmodern techniques for more constructive purposes. Van Dijk and Vaessens observe that postmodernism has been questioned by many writers and critics, but maintain that such criticism has largely been concerned with certain effects of postmodernism rather than with central postmodern ideas. In their understanding, postmodernism has had 'unpleasant side effects', such as 'relativism, cynicism, and noncommittal irony',<sup>2</sup> and there is now a 'reorientation towards humanism'<sup>3</sup> in European literature. According to Van Dijk and Vaessens, authors today tend not to accept the validity of an ironic stance, not to foster 'a negative independence from all things'.<sup>4</sup> Instead, one can find a new interest in narrative and stories about real life: historical, documentary and autobiographical novels abound, and there is a return of political commitment. Novelists also 'choose accessible and conventional forms more and more often: postmodern experimentation is on its way out'.<sup>5</sup> In many cases, writers seek to open up to their audience by taking up the role of the public intellectual. In addition, there is much reflection among authors 'on the task and function of literature and its impact on today's world'.<sup>6</sup> The editors find strong connections between these six characteristics ('the problematizing of irony, the blurring of boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, increasing social commitment (*engagement*), neo-realism, reflection on the use of literature and a new relation to the audience'<sup>7</sup>).

Let me say in passing that the subtitle of the collection, 'European Literature beyond Relativism', has unsettled me from the start. Vaessens and Van Dijk no doubt want the formulation to express that European literature has developed away from relativism, viewed by them as a less desirable aspect of postmodernism, but I find the idea that European literature has moved beyond relativism both doubtful and hazy. Relativism about values, or relativism about what? And relativism in what sense? The formulations in Van Dijk and Vaessens's introduction (see in particular pp. 17-8) do not really make that clear. Anyway, I cannot see that the essays in the collection warrant the generalisation that European literature has moved beyond relativism (nor, for that matter, the generalisation that it has not), for the question of the relativism or non-relativism of the literature under consideration is not really an explicit issue in the essays. And if European literature has in fact moved beyond such kinds of relativism as relativism about the ontology of values, I tend to deplore that fact, not greet it with satisfaction like Vaessens and Van Dijk. The only real alternative to relativism about the ontology [87] of values appears to me to be objectivism about the ontology of values – the belief that values are *there*, independently of what we think or say, like the material world is *there* (*pace* ontological idealism) no matter what we think or say, so that statements about values can be simply true or false just like statements about the outer world – and I cannot see a change from relativism to objectivism about the ontology of values as an intellectual or moral step forward.

Relativism apart, I do not doubt that one can point to processes like the six developments described by Van Dijk and Vaessens. However, I am not convinced by their overall interpretation of the situation as testifying to the emergence of a new kind of postmodernism, 'Late Postmodern Literature',<sup>8</sup> or by their assurance that 'it is precisely notions of the postmodern which have shaped both literature and commentary after the "death" or end of postmodernism'.<sup>9</sup> My spontaneous reaction is that this must be a gross overestimation of the importance of postmodernism, but I freely admit that I am not prepared to sketch an

alternative picture of what has happened in European literature over the last few decades. I find it rather obvious, though, that Van Dijk and Vaessens's account can be questioned in at least three respects.

First, Van Dijk and Vaessens do not define what they mean by 'postmodernism'; they do not fill their concept of postmodernism with any definite content. The two editors characterise postmodernism as a discursive field rather than a coherent concept,<sup>10</sup> and that may be true as far as it goes. Yet, if postmodernism is to be used as a key concept in one's research, the matter should not be left at that, for if one's key concepts are not coherent, what is said when making use of them will by necessity also be incoherent. If one is to generalise about postmodernism, one will have to define what is meant by 'postmodernism', or else the generalisations will be too diffuse to be of value. If there is no definition at hand that appears suitable, it will have to be formulated. It is true that no definition of postmodernism will fit every context where the term is used, but the aim is not an impossible universal definition. The one thing expected is that the author of a book or article chooses what the word is to mean exactly and then to explain this.

The concept of postmodernism can in fact be said to be employed in varying ways in the collection: in a narrow sense, about literary and cultural phenomena called by the name of 'postmodernism' by contemporaries, and in a wider, rather unclear sense, about a kind of modern critical thinking about the world. Some of the authors of the individual essays comment explicitly on what has been discussed as postmodernism, under that name, in the literatures they write about. They find that postmodernism, in that sense, was a very visible phenomenon in the literature in question, but also a more or less marginal one (see, for instance, Groes about Britain or Van der Poll about Norway). In several other essays in the collection, however, there is a tendency to view all markedly sceptical or experimental literature after the Second World War as postmodern (a tendency particularly pronounced in Van Wesemael's article on French literature) and to speak of [88] 'the postmodern era'<sup>11</sup> or to refer to postmodernism's dominance over European literature.<sup>12</sup> The reader is likely to get the impression that, after all, postmodernism (in some unspecified sense) filled the European literary space for some time, and that newer developments can be understood as a conscious reconsideration of postmodernism, still remaining under the postmodernist umbrella in the guise of late postmodernism. The latter perspective is expressly affirmed by Van Dijk and Vaessens in their introduction: 'From the moment postmodernism was considered to belong to the past', they write, 'writers and critics have searched for new paths. Young authors increasingly situate themselves by means of a critical discussion of their postmodern predecessors. Older authors, who themselves were seen as exemplary postmodernists in the 1980s and 1990s, are wondering what answers postmodernism can give to today's questions.'<sup>13</sup> One obvious problem with this statement is that no clear meaning has been given to 'postmodernism', but I shall leave that theme aside from now on.

A second notable difficulty with the generalisations in the introduction about the role of postmodernism is that they are not really corroborated by the literary-historical overviews in the individual essays (or in any other way). Most often, the larger part of each separate article is devoted to the three literary authors specially highlighted, which tends to foreground the many literary works dealt with and push the larger literary-historical patterns into the background, and there is consequently little evidence in the essays that a conscious rethinking of postmodernism has been a driving force behind the literary development. On a more principal level it deserves to be pointed out that the general idea behind the collection of articles tends to make the articles unsuitable as evidence for the role of postmodernism on the larger scene of

European literature. The essays are supposed to concentrate on postmodernism and only in some instances do they aspire to offer something of a general overview of the literature in question. (I do find it helpful when the contributors sketch a larger picture of the literary situation in the literature and fit postmodernism into that picture, as is the case in the essays by Groes, Vaessens, Van der Poll and Van Nieukerken, but those examples are exceptions.) It is true that *Reconsidering the Postmodern* is a book 'about the postmodern legacy in European literature of the last few decades', as the editors point out,<sup>14</sup> but the general literary role of that legacy cannot be adequately perceived except against the larger background of contemporary European literature as a whole. To substantiate the interpretation of modern European literary history proposed by the editors, an overall consideration of post-1970 (or post-Second-World-War?) European literature would have been necessary as well as a broad evaluation of the role of postmodern features in that literature and of the reasons for their use.

Thirdly, I also believe that Van Dijk and Vaessens pay too little attention to possible alternative causes behind the literary-historical developments and to the role of non-postmodern schools of thought in the modern intellectual development in Europe. They tend to disregard or caricature non-postmodern modes of [89] thought and to paint a historical picture where postmodernism successfully overcame essentialism and that is all you need to know. In the literary arena, for example, the only contender of postmodernism to get mentioned in their introduction is 'Liberal Humanism', presented as the belief in the timelessness of literature and the greatness of the canon,<sup>15</sup> but in my recollection it was rather Marxism and Structuralism and strongly politicised left-wing literature that were being challenged by the rise of postmodernism in literature, literary criticism and literary studies in the late 1970s and the 1980s. Speaking of the wider intellectual field, Van Dijk and Vaessens view postmodernism as having replaced 'Theories of Everything': 'Postmodern thought evolved parallel to and under the influence of French post-structuralist theory with protagonists such as Barthes, Derrida and Lyotard. It rose against the great Theories of Everything which we had begun to take for granted in our modern Western world as the bedrock of our thinking and behaviour. These theories seemed universal in scope, but postmodernism revealed them to be ideological constructs that needed interpretation and deconstruction.'<sup>16</sup> But relativism has a long history in Western thinking, and if we are considering the period after the Second World War specifically, relativism has been an important philosophical theme quite apart from its conspicuous place in postmodern thought – think, for example, of such well-known instances as Wittgenstein's conceptual relativism and Sartre's relativism about values. The role of postmodernism in modern European intellectual history may be important enough, but once again the larger scene is viewed in a perspective that I find it difficult to endorse. The world of contemporary European thought has got more to offer than postmodernism and essentialism.

Despite my reservations concerning the literary-historical picture presented in Van Dijk and Vaessens's introduction, I do admire the idea behind the collection: I am highly sympathetic to the ambition to document a contemporary literary-historical phenomenon by means of a carefully coordinated collection of articles by experts and to analyse the phenomenon on that basis. I found the introduction challenging, and I very much appreciated the engagement and expertise that went into the writing of the individual essays. I profited much from reading the essays, with the perspectives that they open up on specific national literatures and, taken together, on comparative issues in modern European literary history.

## Notes

1. Reconsidering the Postmodern. European Literature beyond Relativism, ed. by Thomas Vaessens and Yra van Dijk (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), p. 23.
2. Vaessens and Van Dijk, p. 8.
3. Vaessens and Van Dijk, p. 18.
4. Vaessens and Van Dijk, p. 19.
5. Vaessens and Van Dijk, p. 21. [90]
6. Idem.
7. Vaessens and Van Dijk, p. 19.
8. Vaessens and Van Dijk, p. 18.
9. Vaessens and Van Dijk, p. 14.
10. Vaessens and Van Dijk, p. 9.
11. Vaessens and Van Dijk, p. 42.
12. Vaessens and Van Dijk, p. 134.
13. Vaessens and Van Dijk, p. 8.
14. Idem.
15. Vaessens and Van Dijk, pp. 9-10.
16. Vaessens and Van Dijk, p. 9.