

POSTMODERNITY IN AMERICA AND SRI LANKAN WRITING

I. WHAT WE ARE UP AGAINST

Academics like to argue over what is already done. Even worse, we want our favorite "good old days" and we revive *their* Thinking Machines to contest *this* age. Misrecognizing the past, or misrecognizing the present, is like looking the wrong way when the shooting starts, dodging echoes rather than the bullets. So I think it is dangerous for those who dislike contemporary life to cite Universals as their refuge, to retreat behind the Humanist barricades and seek to neutralize the ever-differentiating grain of History. Things are *not* always the same, in all places, and "people" are not the same in all times and places. Whatever may be shared, we and our heritage, our past, are constantly being recoded and fitted into revised patterns of significance, revised interpretations of humanity, and revised values--all of which we can then turn around and read back into the timeless version of history, better called myth, or ideology, or world-view.

Which means that even if you suppose you have revived Matthew Arnold or Aristotle or Vivekananda, such an icon is changed by your hand holding it, the words and ideas shift a bit as they are inflected in your quotation, and what you have excerpted from its contexts becomes a powerpoint in your own construction. Academics have a history of waging war on the present with these fabrications from the past. But this amounts to dodging shadows behind cardboard--it is a kind of closet theater.

I think people everywhere are restless about the Present, and almost everywhere I talk with people, across the world map and class spectrum, I sense a helplessness against the size and pervasiveness of the problems. I see this panoply of conversants as points on a great grid, a matrix if you will, in which everyone is now connected to each other in all manner of unequal relations, and over which no one exercises real control. These connecting relations may submit to almost any kind of structuring, from the obvious power relations of class, gender, region, and armed force to the more subtle relations embodied in the roles and self-images of cultural myths, customs, and "common sense"--whatever serves as the limits within which a person lives, thinks, acts, imagines. We take shape as human beings according to these social forms in which we are born.

In the shorthand of theory, this is a constructivist paradigm and it prepares us for understanding with necessary clarity the changed historical ground on which we stand at the end of the twentieth century. Thinking of ourselves as the products of a new global culture, thinking of our consciousness as the effect of our position on that great grid of relations--such measures shift us away from a thinking machine that arose in an earlier era when people and their society were, well, different.

In order to make sense of all this, then, I need to make use of the distinction between two terms that, despite their problems, have passed into the public domain, namely Postmodernity and Postmodernism.¹ We will need to talk about Postmodernity in a moment, because it is the fundamental ground of economic reality, the Real against which all the cultural stuff plays, all the stuff we most like to think about, all that stuff that we have to call, for lack of a better word, Postmodernism. Which term, in other words, means the whole range of responses symptomatic of life in this age of postmodernTY. This explains why it is a sort of useless word--it includes everything from the most mercenary effort to cash in on change to the most radical or most creative attempts to counter the disturbing effects of Postmodernity; New Age cults and Reactionary Ranting also signify as responses to Postmodernity. But it also has to include, and does include, out there in Magazine Land, things like "postmodern" architecture, "postmodern" pop, "postmodern" fashion, "postmodern" typography. The one useful contribution of the term is that it reminds us of the sheer variety with which humans can respond to huge historical changes engulfing them. "Postmodernism," then, means cultural responses to the economic facts of historical life. To be or do Postmodern, then, means only that one is alive and kicking in the era of Postmodernity.²

Now there are learned treatises on how to understand Postmodernity as the historical and economic backdrop of the Age. But we are looking here for economy, if not glibness, and so I will give you a neat formula, only a little bit too neat, for Postmodernity. It is what you get when you mix Multinational Consumer Capitalism with the Electronic Media.

We all know about Multinational Consumer Capitalism, though we do not like to think about it too much: and I will picture it as the Superman of the Avant-Garde, the latest incarnation of the only real avant-garde we have seen for 150 years, namely capitalism, if by "avant-garde" we mean something which has gotten out in front of us all, changing things in ways we do not yet know how to think, and grinning while we try to catch up only to find, of course, that *it* has moved on, again, or moved in to our most private internal spaces and changed the way we relate to Time, History, Self, Other. Multi-national capitalism, to return to Superman, is more powerful than a Soviet Union, faster than any nation's legal bullets, able to leap tall trade-barriers with a single bound. It splits the nuclear family into two wage-earners of a Domestic Consumption Unit; it shortens the half-life of career-training to five years and exchanges job security

1. The standard reference to a discussion of this distinction is to Linda Hutcheon's book, *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1989 26ff.

2. In a related essay, I argue why academics *like* to remain confused over postmodernism as a term, then go on to suggest what is wrong with prevailing notions of postmodernism among literary critics, and conclude with some meditations on the peculiar logic of postmodern rhetoric. In "Postmodernism™," *Modern Fiction Studies* 41.1 (Spring 1995), pp. 165-194.

for forced mobility, ever more frequently downward. It changes the nature of jobs from making to managing, we fabricate not with raw material but raw data, and it replaces company loyalty with citizenship in a virtual corporation with international branches. It exceeds the control of anybody or anything--and every form you throw at it will either be bought out or seized upon, massproduced, and marketed at trade fairs in every national pavilion.

And the Media Age? Look at your Majestic City Children: they are ad-clones, their history erased, their attention spans atomized to thirty-second glances, their sense of structure reduced to the throb of ambience and the punch of a one-liner; not books, but videos, not letters but phone calls, not libraries but Internet, not debate and oratory but soundbites and slogans, not Sri Lankan but pan-Asian or pan-generational. This is the Monster that Ate Chicago, it is eating you now, this nation slops around in the jaws of the Godzilla that sprang to life from the underground tests of the Postmodernity Bomb: one atom of commodity form, one atom of the electronic media's Look.

Now I am trying to be a bit light and amusing, but this is deadly business we are talking about here, because I am arguing that a global economy based upon consumer-buying supplies the muscle to the cultural effects of media, and that one of those effects is a startlingly different consciousness and a seismic shift in the social landscape in which that consciousness rides around. One of the key casualties in this makeover is, shall we soundbite? The Death of Content. By which I mean that the content conveyed matters less than the connection that is made.

What matters even more than that this process functioned by, say, selling Ronald Reagan to the electorate he beggared, is that it functioned at all, stroking, coaxing, and conducting a population into the Virtual Mass of "America." What *really* mattered to his audience is that Reagan *connected* them at a time in History when daily economic and social realities disconnect them from anything, including themselves, and decode everything "of value." This is, then, the culture of the Virtual Image, a massed population floating on their umbilical wires to the Source (as one of our Online Services is called).

II. WHERE AMERICAN POSTMODERNS ARE GOING . . .

What I have tried to suggest in the first part of this essay is what I take to be the essence of the issue: that the point of contest is the sublime ease with which we are massaged into complicity with the Media Machine, the Commodity Life it purveys, and the consequences upon our minds and souls of its *forms*--its overly neat brief narratives, advertising's heroin hits of sound-image-lifestyle capsules, and all programming's pellet processing of Issues and Emotions into instant consummables. As someone unhappy with this state of affairs, nothing disappoints me more than old, sometimes very old, solutions to this distinctively new problem. Failures to connect with the era are legendary at all points along the political and cultural continua. Bluntly put, my view is that no cultural activity that does not engage this Form, that does not engage its

ground in the nexus of consumer capitalism and centralized media--no such Art has a chance of helping us out of our position as unhappy subjects of the virtual multinational state.

But if I have argued that any counter-culture thrown at Postmodernity will turn into Berkeley 90510, a lifestyle to be accessorized and marketed so that we all become the Newest Barbie Item, if any "platform" gets eaten as the latest Political Soundbite of mainstream parties on their way back into Business As Usual--then what IS one to do? I want to describe a series of strategies that characterize the most interesting--to me--American Art of the 80s. I will not say much about all the art and fiction that perpetuates modernist *forms* already so displaced and emptied by History that they serve the function of private fantasy booths in the Historical Sideshow.³

I think of such activities the way I do monastic retreat from the world. I may well admire the results of the exercise, but I do not believe it serves to counter historical forces at the collective level of altering, significantly, what is happening to us all. I cannot summon up any particularly militant antipathy toward such individual or private practices, but I am very interested in some American experiments in reinventing a more collectively oriented response to History than the purely personal therapies that dominate late modernist aesthetic forms. Hence I will pair visual and literary artists in a series of four steps toward a *productive* response to Postmodernity.

First Step: if you are going to break the hold of a culture that subtly normalizes you to a certain range of thoughts and expectations, even desires, you have to *denaturalize*. We are fooled only by tricks we do not recognize as such--if we are a naive audience of a magician, we live in a world of Magic Realism. If we know what is going on, we relish the art of illusion-making. To "denaturalize" is to reverse the process by which we grow so accustomed to a belief, a custom, or a convention that we come to think it natural, normal, common sense--Nature itself.

My illustrative visual artist is Richard Prince.⁴ In 1977 he began re-photographing media images, a practice that has by now included among its subjects Marlboro cigarettes' cowboys, entertainers, rock bands, travel shots, bikers' girlfriends, wrists wearing watches, and advertising models in recurrent poses. Prince "ganged" (his term) these appropriations, so that viewers would see a number of very similar shots from different magazines all at once. Prince explains what he calls the "cumulative

³. A (much) longer earlier version of this attitude is to be found in my book, *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and the Fiction of Insurgency*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

⁴. A representative selection of his work can be found in *Richard Prince*, New York: Barbara Gladstone Gallery, 1988. His work of fiction is *Why I Go To the Movies Alone*, New York: Tanam Press, 1983.

density" of these image series in an interview: "The recognition of cultural patterns, of 'the same within the different,' is a big part of all my work. These patterns--for example, the generic quality of rock star photographs--are initially disbelieved and then sometime later, perhaps very much believed. What's strange or disorienting is that a lot of us are not used to believing media, advertising or editorial images."⁵ At some point these images kick in and structure perception, experience, even identity itself, and that initial disbelief is eroded under the constant flow of media repetition. "Reality" is replaced by these simulations, these models of reality, these stylizations of experience--and they are the stuff of our own identity, behaviors, mannerisms, quips. Perhaps young writers take modern fiction's stylization of reality as their sense of the Real, rearranging it a bit, draping the latest names and trends on their characters. Prince foregrounds in his own actions just that role of the artist/writer--not as the Demi-urgic Creator, but as the Arranger. By foregrounding that rôle, by foregrounding the *seen* itself as always already the pre-arranged, it is all *denaturalized* as an overlay of slick surfaces on a lost reality. The writer/artist is thus in a different game, one of tipping the planes of simulation at odd angles to one another so that they can be seen as what they are, so that the process of seeing can be conceived in this complex way, so that artist/viewer, writer/reader can be players in Postmodernity's juggling act instead of sitting passively in Postmodernity's version of Plato's Cave--that darkened living room where the one light is the flicker of TV imagery on the blank retinal walls of Postmodernity's Bartleby.

Prince began writing fiction in order to find a form which was not subject to five-digit financial speculation, the way his visual art could be: littérature, the superbly, sublimely, UNcommodity. In one scene, his character sits in a restaurant near Times Square whose windows are the shape of oversized television screens--big squares, recessed window wells, framing the Action outside like episodes of some racy urban crimebeat TV show. The window pane silences "all the movement and hustle" out on the street and "makes the obnoxiousness smart and stylish."⁶ The window of the restaurant functions like television, realist fiction, bourgeois ideology, radical chic, or any other cultural frame to style reality to its "smart" location in the cultural matrices. "What I see there," the character muses, "is somewhat fragmented and additionalized onto something more real,"⁷ but in some undecidable way: the "more real" of the street action is forever lost in the Great Media Effect--its reality is sliced and diced and reprocessed, then shrink-wrapped onto the ghost of the real we know is *there*, but without ever *directly* knowing it. As we move through Prince's fiction even the Self begins to become spectral, suspicious of its own desires as recycling energies channeled

⁵ Jeffrey Rian, "Social Science Fiction: An Interview with Richard Prince," *Art in America* 75.3 (March 1987), p. 91.

⁶ *Why I Go to the Movies Alone*, p. 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

through the media-*ted* (a word that nicely contains "media") forms of mass culture. He is a mass with "counterfeit-memory," as Prince calls the internal image-repertoire. The "natural" "inner" world comes to be seen as an internalized sampling of the constructed media simulation. By denaturalizing that counterfeit interiority, Prince enables the game to restart with the player more aware of the rules.

Second Step. Once you have denaturalized all the cultural forms around you, recognizing them as constructs that arise in an Postmodern ecology, then what? You must, I think, step beyond Prince's work and begin to see what is implicit in the cultural forms of advertising, television, movies, computer world. Nobody soaks in such entertainments to be preached at, or even merely diverted, and so it is not on their surface that one finds the frustrated desires these forms feed on, the anxieties they pretend to assuage, the profound historical contradictions they finesse into illusions of order or resolution. You must read these forms symptomatically, as symptoms that is. You *desublimat*e this symptomatic linkage between our unsatisfying experience of Postmodernity and the forms with which we distract ourselves from that unsatisfying feeling, exploring the implications of the pleasures that draw our investments, the horrors that transfix us, the anxieties these forms pretend to address.

For an example from the visual arts, let us think a moment about the work of Barbara Kruger, who left quite a successful career as a magazine designer to turn that stock and trade against the kind of world it fed. Kruger became quickly known as her guerilla works began to show up on the fence boards, mixed with posters for rock bands, performances at downtown clubs, poetry readings, furniture for sale. One work, showing a woman leaning over with tacks pinning her body into place, says, "We have received orders not to move" in bold white letters against a red banner. Kruger unveils the process of the graphic artist, the image of woman visibly tacked into place rather than presented as, supposedly, Natural. Her text makes explicit the connection between advertising and gendering: selling commodities by entwining them with women's bodies is part of gendering identities by constricting Women to a role or image in a male psychohistory. Asked about another of her graphics (a headshot) with the legend, "Your gaze hits the side of my face," Kruger explains: "Being only the object in that subject/object relation, when I say that I want to construct a female subject, I want in some way to have women look at that work and say, 'That's the way it is,' knowing then that they can deny that address because they are hip to certain constructs."⁸ The word "desublimat" is shorthand for making viewers "hip to certain constructs" so that they can accept, displace, refuse, or recode those constructs as well as their own interior self that has been shaped by them.

In literature, I think it is the work of San Francisco based Kathy Acker that carries desublimation to its narrative extremes. And extreme her work is--at first glance, on some pages, almost obscene. Line drawings, bad language, and profane vignettes of

⁸. *East Village Eye*, January 1987, p. 29.

world leaders--it can be strong stuff. But as I think back over a decade of students confronting her work, I can say with confidence that it is not the blatantly sexual passages that unsettle them--they see too much of that these days already. And it is not the sacrilegious or the disrespectful. . . . It is the fragmented character of narrative that confuses, until they realize that the quick cuts and the detours and the massive shifts in tone and narrative mode--these are like their lives, like channel surfing, like walking down a street, like keeping mental track of all the things we must track, daily, to stay alive in Postmodernity. And then there are the narrative segments themselves, which are hard for them to read until I tell them to read them aloud: they are written in spoken English, not Literary English. And then, thirdly, there is the strangeness of the segments themselves: something is wrong, it is hard to see what is happening because there is all of this Talk Talk Talk going on--until I explain the word "desubliminate" to them, until I explain the idea of a "subtext" to them, a word that reminds us that all our polite narratives and interoffice memos and conversations across the back fence depend upon a subtle play of forces, under the surface, a script of roles and relative Power, a lexicon of permitted and proscribed topics and words, and those frameworks of "let me tell you what happened" and "I thought you ought to hear this" and a hundred other frames for holding words and experiences together. And having said these things to my students, I tell them to read that opaque passage again, only this time, do not expect the polite and conventional surfaces of literary form and cultural proprieties: expect, this time, the subtext to be desublimated, to be written all over the surface of the events that are taking place in the tenuous literal narrative of Acker's novel.

And then, I am happy to say, they have an easier time: they have had to shed their preconceptions about the novel's form, about literary language, about the hidden layers beneath the civil surfaces of public prose. But Acker, now, they understand. They understand the scene where Janey, age 10, is talking in filmscript format with "Father," and what they are talking about is sex and their breakup as lovers.⁹ "Sex with a ten-year old," my student begins to ask before remembering the cues and, looking again, realizes that Acker is writing the story of how women deal, finally, with the emotional after effects of ambivalent relationships with their fathers--but not until their relationships with boyfriends, lovers, teachers, and all those other later men who take up the Father's position in the gendered script of Patriarchy.

Take that scene as one strategy, then, for making women "hip to constructs" that shape their psyches. But not all such constructs, of course, come from *The Father*, literally: sometimes they come from the Cultural Father. As another strategy, then, consider what happens when, as you follow the adolescence of a character, she begins writing as Hester Prynne and her identity struggles are suddenly taking place in the context of Puritan Authorities, Arthur Dimmesdale (renamed in a fit of impatience as

⁹ Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School*, New York: Grove Press, 1984 (but written 1978).

Arthur Dimwit), scholar-husband Roger Chillingsworth, and the forest beyond town limits that strikes her as the one place to escape Discourse long enough to discover a bit about herself, as ambiguous as those discoveries may be. "At this point," she says, "politics takes place at the level of language"--and she struggles to wrest her self away from being constructed by the discourses of Puritan heritage and Hawthorne's classic.

The husband, a scholar, makes Janey-Hester see Education as a policing of the mental limits, a channeling of intellect along the main highways of society and away from the open fields and dark forests of Desire. The Lover makes Janey-Hester interfile bits of *Scarlet Letter* narrative with dream segments about her father and her lover--a nesting of literature, dream, and life that makes explicit the strata of selfhood and the subliminal shaping Acker wants to think out into the open. Acker's Janey lives through this Hawthorne masterpiece the way everyone in culture lives, vicariously, the shapes and forms of intelligibility that Culture gives to experience. But Acker writes onto the surface of this novel the interaction between writing, having read the classics, and having lived the life. Acker makes her readers see what goes on under their hoods, so to speak--what goes on as we grow into the models laid out before us.

When, after these dramatic subtexts and rewritten classics, you *do* get a narrative episode, it is likely to be a bit confusing in Acker, as in a novel where the protagonist is suddenly the captain of a pirate ship with a crew of dogs for company. But already you have guessed it, I will wager--if we have no being of our own, only that allotted to a sometimes UNbenight culture, we have to steal usable pieces with which to make one up. If you find yourself stuck with fiends and zombies, you have to assemble your own nest of relationships (even if they are with others who have been reduced to a dog's life). You have to journey constantly, nomadically, if you feel no "home" in a materialist, ruthlessly gendered and hierarchical society. And so this kind of narrative proceeds by making literal all those metaphors that carry a thread of awareness of our anxieties, frustrations, and general puzzlement. Making them literal, acting out the implicit narratives embedded in a metaphor like "dog's life" or pirating other texts (the way Acker appropriates and rewrites everything from classics to pornography to Japanese monster movies): these are strategies of desublimation that teach a postmodern audience how to see what is going on, how to catch up with their place in a game that has always already begun before they ever have a chance to realize that Something is in Progress.

For the Third Step, after Denaturalize and Desubliminate, the keyword is *demystify*. My favorite example from the visual arts is the work of John Fekner, who went around New York in the early 80s stencilling in huge letters a slogan that offered an alternative version of recent history. There is, for example, a famous news photograph of President Ronald Reagan addressing a Photo-Opportunity in front of a leveled lot in one of the urban waste zones of New York. There in the photo, behind the President and his Men, in man-sized letters on an abandoned tenement building, was Fekner's demystification of political rhetoric about the inner cities: "BROKEN PROMISES." I think it must be the most sensational failure by advance men in the

history of media politics. The papers ran it, gleefully perhaps, and there, for all of the newspaper readers to see, was an example of demystification--a performance that puffs away an inadequately considered myth or discourse and makes it almost impossible to ever see it quite the same way again.

My literary example of this is, dare I say it, poststructural theory. Now I refer to the writing of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Roland Barthes, not because I am going to drag you through the intricacies of their extended examinations of what we have actually done in our philosophy, our psychology, our institutions, our literature. But because they are unpopular with those who have not read much of them: unpopular because their writing does not just come out and tell you what they think--and that reticence is a vital part of their attempt to demystify philosophy, itself never all that luminously clear to begin with. You have to watch them do this performance art in words, this staging of what they think we should be doing instead of the classic philosopher's mission of telling us outright what to think. They do not try to tell you the Truth, because they consider that all of philosophy, all of discourse, all of our thought, is despite itself like performance art, theatrical stuff that stages a world for us to live in, intellectually.

Plato's dialogs function the way the *Republic's* exiled poets function, giving pictures of The Action rather than the plain truth simply said, unadorned with the tropes of rhetoric and the forms of fiction. Plato, the poststructurals say, indeed all philosophers, fails finally to keep out the "pollution" of language, the literary. Plato is full of fictional dramas we are reading, metaphors we are living by; his is a performance of the way to think, woven out of the materials at hand--a teacher named Socrates, the wily sophists, the patrician windbags. Read Derrida like an essay, and you will go mad. Read his essays as if they were T.S. Eliot's poetry, and they begin to unfold before you, leading you into an experience of philosophy that is different from courses in the History of Western Thought where systems are to be mastered and errors are to be purged. How *do* we build a world of the mind to live in? And what on earth is so wrong with demystifying philosophy and seeing it as play, as A Play, as a way to keep revising the Cultural Bubble we live in as our life-circumstances change across the sweep of history.

We read Lawrence Sterne and Rabelais when we want to see pompous orthodoxy brought down to earth, even earthiness. And I think that many academics and litterateurs get angry about poststructural theory because it brings intellectual orthodoxy down to its roots. It is all about how we live in the stories we write, collectively, as cultures blending and weaving our worlds of words. If it seems sometimes hard to read, I think it has a lot to do with the Performance quality of the writing, with its refusal to pretend that one stands outside it all and sees, then says, Truth itself. We must find ourselves in relation to the conversation that poststructural texts carry on with the History of Thought and Form in the Tradition, expecting them to sound like other philosophers, or political scientists, or historiographers rather than like television commentators who are too "clear" to matter. Texts, after all, mean in relation to other

texts, not in any direct way to some raw world of pure experience or absolute truth. We are in and of language, and the Derridas and Foucaults of the world study how we have made ourselves, and show us a bit how they too are making themselves in words, and how we, as well, as readers, are hunting for a home in words. They want us to see that the home we find *is* words, and I think ultimately they are willing for us to realize that it is not so bad living in words, through words, as long as we know that is what we are doing and do not confuse the word "home" with any false assurances about what it is we sleep in at night. I have, elsewhere, called this a *reflexive* awareness.¹⁰

My last step after Denaturalize, Desublimite, and Demystify, is *Decamp*. This one is about folding the tents and stealing away in the night . . . I relish the philosopher Gilles Deleuze's playfulness about the Nomadic life as a way to keep moving, even if you are moving in place, mindful of these structures within you, these thinking and living machines internalized from the shelves of the Culture Mall we all cruise throughout our lives. The life of the Nomad is a metaphor for thinking, writing, and reading far beyond the comforting confines of Closure--the word "closure" meaning that comforting structure of System, of Ultimate Truth, of a Final Conclusion that serves as the End we see from the Beginning. Deleuze always suspected, I think, that every version of Closure was a way of killing the adventure of life, the movement that kept one from being claimed and colonized by some principality or another from The Olde World, and I find myself admiring those fiction writers who continually transcend their own categories, their own last books, their own guesses about where they were going when they last looked around themselves.

For a visual artist of decamping, perhaps I would nominate Jenny Holzer, whose "Truisms" began showing up as stickers on pay telephones and parking meters and then, much more sensationally, on the giant message board in New York's Times Square. There she displayed messages incongruous for that costly advertising medium: "the abuse of power should come as no surprise," "fathers use too much force," "private property created crime." On the casino marquee at Caesar's Palace she displayed, "protect me from what I desire." Shifted out of appropriate places into these hearts of capitalist freneticism, Holzer's slogans slice open vectors along which the imagination can escape the daily routinizing of its boundaries and begin shifting the deep allegiances, affiliations, and investments of the political unconscious.

In literature, I think of the case of Lynne Tillman, a New York writer and filmmaker: one movie, three novels, a collection of short stories, and a series of *Art in America* reviews and essays under the pen name, Madame Realism. Each novel is quite different from the last: repeatedly in her work, she takes up The Form and "makes away" with it--a pun which claims she "kills" the form, she "steals" it for her own uses, "and she uses it to make a way for us *to think* again about the life experience that has

¹⁰. In *The Politics of Reflexivity: Narrative and the Constitutive Poetics of Culture*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

become encrusted in conventional formulas and intellectual banalities. Her first novel, *Haunted Houses*, mixes the stories of three young women coming of age.¹¹ But by mixing up their stories, rather than following the format, say, of Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, Tillman makes us all but lose the thread of individual identities and focus instead upon the mesh of family relations, empowered figures, education, and all the other little instances of cultural machinery tooling them in ways that each of the three women tries to expose for herself and to thereby escape. No longer the classic bildungsroman in which the Hero learns to take His place in society, but its converse, in which three women learn to extract themselves from the role prepared for them.

In the review essays collected as *The Madame Realism Complex*, Tillman undoes the cool distance of the critical voice and its disciplinary home in Art Criticism.¹² Distractions to "proper" essays become crucial means of her effects, including conversation overheard at exhibitions, pop culture associations between Freud and Coney Island amusement park or between the blockbuster exhibition of "Treasure Houses of Britain" and TV's DYNASTY, urban realities outside the museum, the psychodynamics of collecting and exhibiting . . . Tillman "makes away" with the Review in order to discover how "Art" is placed in our culture, how it is used by its institutions like Museums or Reviews: what is done with and through Art that says more than just the individual visions or aesthetic highs.

Or take her filmscript for *Committed*, the not-for-Hollywood study of 50s filmstar Frances Farmer, which exposes not her body (the way Hollywood's Jessica Lange version does), but the body of discourses in which she is caught--a nexus of sexism, McCarthyism, and the case history of Psychiatry as an exercise of power over a silenced woman).¹³ Farmer's lobotomy becomes a crushing symbol of what culture can do to one's intellectual or aesthetic nomadism.

Tillman's most recent novel, *Cast in Doubt*, allows one to repeat the reading error of its modernist narrator, Horace, a mystery writer who expects life to follow his plot form back to primal scenery he can possess in masterful knowledge.¹⁴ He wants to find out what happened to this woman who moved in next door, but "what happened" is mainly that she does not live in his old world, she is not *really* the "girl next door"

¹¹. New York: Poseidon, 1987. The novel has just recently been reissued by Serpent's Tail.

¹². New York: Semiotext(e), 1992.

¹³. Found in *Absence Makes the Heart*, London: Serpent's Tail, 1990.

¹⁴. New York: Poseidon, 1992.

in any way he might understand: Postmodernity happened to her and she does not "add up" for him. The postmodernist young Helen is for him unreadable in her own terms--his encounter with her tour-de-force diary is a comedy in incommensurability--she is uncontainable in his terms. Horace is both endearing in his intensities and comical in never quite understanding how out of place his thinking machines are. And some reviewers have read this novel utterly through Horace, repeating his mistakes, wondering who this elusive lost Helen actually might be. This mystery novel form, which fails to solve its mystery or even recognize what it is hunting, is itself part of Tillman's subject matter: particularly the expectation that life is in the form of a Mystery with a Solution. "Helen" is present in the novel only as her diary, an anthology of the excerpts of which Helen's consciousness, as a postmodern girl, is woven.

I suppose I have laid out this career, my final Example, in order to suggest the mobility of a writer as distrustful of the forms of writing as she is of socio-cultural forms or structures. Neither she nor her protagonists "get away" from these forms to some Free Zone--that would be the illusion of liberation, a myth of utopia at hand. But she and they write themselves into a constantly moving, talking, making, that keeps them current, that keeps them in a current, that makes them A current of agency keeping clear of the comforting but illusory closures of established forms. They are knowing players of the Postmodern Game: it is the only game in town, you cannot *not* play it, but if you are not wary, it can play you, make you its plaything. Not good, not wise, not, finally, ethical in the world of these writers I admire. Denaturalizing culture, desublimating what its forms make of us, demystifying the master narratives by which we grandly theorize ourselves, and decamping from these mental closures in quest for the fluency of alternative languages and the skill of living by one's wits--this is what Talking Back to Postmodernity looks like, American style.

III. THE SRI LANKAN TURN

Relating Lankan authors to what I have written thus far may tax the imagination a bit at first, because this South Asian nation is at a different place and moment in the *process* of Postmodernity. American culture, by contrast, has already been assimilated and recoded to Postmodernity. There are comparatively few residual traces of the grain of life in an earlier America, and they are mostly to be found in the nostalgia markets (old photographs, Norman Rockwellese) or as industrially processed style markers of Made-in-America Postmodernity--no longer working class trousers, but Genuine Levis.

Because tradition has functioned more recently in Sri Lanka, and because media is only now catching up to American levels of psychic saturation, I am not surprised to see my four tactics take somewhat different forms in the Sri Lankan arts. I anticipate fast changes in how Sri Lankan artists respond to postmodernity, as the latter muscles into the microtexture of family relations, styles and kinds of work and work patterns, and the web of associations, habits, expectations, and pressures that constitute individual consciousness.

Lankan culture is contesting its twilight by redeploying itself while the memory of tradition is still alive. Consider the hard solid thump of ethnicity in Sri Lankan culture. Sinhalese chauvinists and Tamil terrorists are symptomatic of Postmodernity's erasure of traditional culture and identity. In the form of multinational capitalism's marketing macho and its local neocolonial affiliates, a sort of IMF reprogramming of social textures takes place everywhere in South Asia. Tradition is displaced by the busyness of business and the manner of the Modern Ethnicity is a tool used to rescue a sense of identity from the dislocation of historical change, even if that sense is highly reductive, like the BJP's cartoon sketch of Hindu complexity.

This is not some foolish argument that Tamil-Sinhalese tensions did not exist before MTV began broadcasting via satellite across South Asia. Scarcely a page goes by on the Op-Ed pages that someone in some paper thumps on the table about this 2000-year-old rivalry. But that thumping is, perhaps, part of my point. That it has to be said at all remind us that this present incarnation of ancient hostility feels somehow different. History does not often work by cataclysms that wipe clean the slate of social reality. It recodes, or reterritorializes, or transforms, or whatever you might choose as your favourite metaphor for this process by which present forces take over historical forms and fit them into a new configuration. They are changed in that refitting; they perform different functions benefitting different sectors of the population. Perhaps strong elements of the past persist; perhaps they even carry on very old patterns alongside newly emerging patterns and forms that use the same elements in a different way. History is not simple, in other words, but in its process all time is inflected with a different accent and stress system. I am quite serious in arguing that ethnic conflict is one destination of collective angst over the stunning changes in our economic, social, and personal ecology. Anything like millenia-old antagonisms feels like a hot wire into a past with purpose and coherence and identity. We need to understand the new intensity to these old feelings, because the ethnic segregation that might have worked a thousand years ago will not work in the age of global (let alone island-wide) integration.

When Jean Arasanayagam recovers Tamil village life in *Peacocks and Dreams*, or when Carl Muller and Michael Ondaatje reconstruct fables of Burgher culture, we see one of the more obviously symptomatic responses to Postmodernity.¹⁵ The need for the "authentic" past expressed in these works and the intensely personal responses the authors have received from their readers together signify how lost these histories seem. Even when characters are at their breeziest, one senses the seismic resonance to the lostness of tradition. In K. Jayatilaka's *The Death of Punchirala*, for example, Renuka

¹⁵ New Delhi: Navrang, 1996. Muller's books include *The Jam Fruit Tree*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993; *Yakada Yaka*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1994; *Once Upon a Tender Time*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1982.

is quite surprised when a friend just returned from a year in England recites folk poems and tales.¹⁶ "We are Sinhala village women! Whether we go to England or America can we forget our culture? The poems and stories that I learnt then on my grand-mother's lap I remember better than the ones I learnt yesterday. What a time it was then!"¹⁷ Global citizens cruising in their new Benz, they still idealize that strand of lost tradition and weave it through their up country tour; their children are another matter, refusing to stay at a circuit bungalow unless the plumbing is functioning and toilet paper is provided. Traditional folk culture seems to have been replaced by hygiene and dependable mechanics.

Also telling as to the intensity of this need to embalm tradition with the fluids of prose is the sheer distance across which these writers reach. Jean Arasanayagam, for example, is married to a Tamil but not herself one; this Tamil past is, as she calls it in her rich opening chapter, "mythologies of childhood," since, one realizes, any contemporary narrative of village life is necessary an act of myth-making. At the same time, Carl Muller is just recently home from the Middle East expatriate community on the force of his childhood memories of the now dispersed Burgher communities of his childhood. Lushly and explicitly nostalgic, his trilogy draws its intensity from the sharp-eyed, keen-eared young Carloboy on whom nothing was lost. And Michael Ondaatje reconstructs his family through interviews and papers from the cultural distance of a Canadian life. I make these obvious statements to harp on the less obvious distance from which writers approach something that feels real enough and vital enough to serve as the material for serious fiction, a project that exerts a powerful moral imperative to "save" the daily textures of these past lives before they are forever lost in the Present.

In fact, it is an interesting exercise to compare these projects recovering ethnic identity with others by the same writers--Jean Arasanayagam's *All is Burning*, for example, or Carl Muller's *Colombo*.¹⁸ In these novels of (mostly) present life, we see the opposing register of Postmodernity all too clearly laid out in narratives capturing the dislocation and disruptions of recent history. Whether it is Carl Muller's accounts of the sexual abuse and murder of poor children in Colombo or Jean Arasanayagam's bitter-edged portrait of the fat-walleted antique dealer prowling the homestead hoping to merchandise memories and family identity, one finds the critical complement to the mad Burgher vitality and deeply interwoven traditional lives of proverbial South Asian village life.

¹⁶. Trans. Tilak Balasuriya, Colombo: Lake House Investments Ltd., 1995.

¹⁷. K. Jayatilaka, *op.cit.*, p. 112.

¹⁸. Jean Arasanayagam, *All is Burning*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995. Carl Muller, *Colombo: A Novel*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995.

Consider just a pair of passages from Arasanayagam's work, for example. *Peacocks and Dreams* rescues her husband's Tamil childhood from oblivion. She writes, in its evocative opening,

He comes from the grove of his childhood, tucking the sleepy birds into his ears, his hair alight with the coloured beetles, the golden ponwandu settling like jewels into midnight; the millipedes are striped with crimson and argent glittering where his feet scuttle and in his brain little pockets of resonance catch the echoes that travel from the village across the fields.¹⁹

Paragraph after paragraph evokes, lyrically, the intensities of "his childhood" before the prose subtly shifts the pronoun to "you." Perhaps the pronoun is meant to address the "T.A." in the chapter's dedicatory title, but it also calls the reader into empathetic identity with an increasingly nostalgic and pained elegy for lost glories. "You remember the table spread with red hot porials and the fresh keerai leaves piled up for cutting," as even the lexicon slices like an "arnwharl" through the learned English to his natal Tamil. "[B]ut the years passed and the pettagams hissed with emptiness, the starving weevils creeping about in the residual dust left behind from the harvested years, the fields sold off, one by one,"²⁰ the land changed and gone literally out of possession. Perhaps the intensity of this remembrance compensates for the lack of foresight with which childhood is received by the young Arjuna, and given by his parents, for Arasanayagam makes explicit those forces more ruthless even than Time: "No one in that then childhood, traversing the veedhi peers into time to see slaughter in the fields or groves, the landmines going off, the flesh showering like dragonfly wings aflame, then cindered, skimming the air."²¹

The same paragraph connects the present Tiger insurgency to the women of Arjuna's boyhood whose eyes are "glittering with greed, sharp, flamelike," the folds of their sarees concealing their thefts of temple offerings. Arjuna saw that theft, at least, for what it was, but it is Arasanayagam's book that sees the theft of village life by the ethnic conflicts of postmodernity. That is, her next paragraph shifts the "you" suddenly from rich boy to impoverished old man: "Where, oh man, are those silver trays now and what are the offerings you have for the pooja, so meagre is the small change clinking in your pockets."²² The simple faith, the reassuring rituals, and by extension the bounty of the lost golden age, are all now "as distant as a madman's mutter

¹⁹ p.2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

wandering through its own confusions as shells fly cracking the roofs, skullblows smashing the bone into smithereens."²³ It is noteworthy that fading memory, insanity, shattered roofs and smashed skulls should so economically concatenate four different causes for the loss of this village idyll. It is painful enough in the great South Asian village myth for the citizen of the world to feel his or her own change from exuberant child to jaded sophisticate. But then to add this erasure of the village--for even the village to have changed as history is fired into its compounds--this is the new chapter of the village idyll inscribed by postmodernity.

This chapter recurs--in Jayatilaka's *The Death of Punchirala* Nandana wants to engineer his return to his childhood village properly, but his Sinhala neighbors have burned to death the Tamil doctor who was Nandana's great contribution to village development, and returning domestics from Dubai have the cash to buy him out of his ancestral home. There is nothing for it but to use the money to finish building the new house in the new workplace. And Muller's Burghers have moved to Australia and Britain, stretching the Lankan Burgher community so thin that only the crusty narrator, it seems, remains to create the record.

In her collection of stories set resolutely in the present, *All is Burning*, Jean Arasanayagam sets against her luxuriant Tamil village idyll the troubled, frenetic, devalued life of contemporary Sri Lanka. The title story heads a cluster about the war, another cluster details the consequences of the Sri Lankan diaspora, another cluster makes explicit the postcolonial theme, but most of the stories are relatively quiet moments in which the fracture lines of contemporary life come into focus. "A Fistful of Wind," for example, shows a mother and daughter shopping, but it also shows the insight that emerges from jostling on the pavement, undergoing the gaze of the wealthy passing by in their cars, encountering former students now much richer in the age of enterprise than the teacher who narrates the story and is angling for an affordable bit of cloth--for her Christmas outfit--from the sidewalk discounters. The title comes from the crowds gazing at shopwindows full of imported consumer goods, "overcome by a powerful urge to possess at least a few of them. But what can they do if their pockets are empty--only grab at fistfuls of wind."²⁴ The fist is formed but sublimated, but this economic pressure lines up with evidence of the dislocations of a changed economy and work world to provide the preconditions listed by Sudhir Kakar in his anatomy of the longing for collective identities in *The Colours of Violence*.²⁵

²³. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁴. p. 265.

²⁵. New Delhi: Viking, 1995. Kakar discusses Hindus and Muslims, most specifically in Hyderabad. He argues that "what we are witnessing today is less the resurgence of religion than (in the felicitous Indian usage) of communalism where a community of believers not only has religious affiliation but also social,

She passes a newly-wed young student "without the slightest knowledge of what will please [his bride]. All he has is the money to purchase whatever she wants,"²⁶ as if he were the real incarnation of the neocolonial Santa Claus perched on the sidewalk. She is haunted by how changed the social grammar has become in response to the reconfigured economy. When a former student tells her, "Teacher, I am grateful to you. I am what I am because of you," she recoils and spots the change: "I too had spoken like this to my old teachers, but in a different context. I meant that they had helped me to learn. But my students mean something different. I have helped them to become successful. This is of much greater importance to them. I have never thought of success in this way."²⁷ But she must consider it now that she feels that "I remain behind" while they venture out into the cash flow of managerial positions.

She begins to explain the "something else that was keeping me back [from immigration]-roots, the deep roots that stretched and snaked their way through the corridors and classrooms, through the acres beside the river" to the wilderness beyond,²⁸ but the paragraph breaks apart as the dream of "roots" dissipates in the harsh sunlight. A steady drumming of small scale economic humiliations wears away her reserve as she hunts for cut pieces of cloth to stitch together, eyes the used clothing piles, watches the vendor Shariff contend with the crowd tossing his cloth about, and finally begins laughing at the "revelation of utter futility"--"We are all so serious about things that do not merit any seriousness,"²⁹ and she compares her behavior to "laughing beside a newly-dug grave."³⁰ I suspect this grave is that of her unwary complicity in the great conspiracy of consumer capitalism, the channeling of desires toward

economic, and political interests in common which may conflict with the corresponding interests of another community of believers sharing the same geographical space" (p.240). But his own project is to complement this traditional economic explanation of communalism with themes more dear to a psychoanalyst's heart, and which are quite germane to my argument, namely "the identity-threat which is being posed by the forces of modernization and globalization to peoples in many parts of the world" (p.240).¹ His book is an interesting speculation about the psychological resonances that bridge the gap between the economic pinch and the threat to individual and communal selfhood.

²⁶. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

²⁷. *Ibid.*, pp. 266-67.

²⁸. *Ibid.*, pp. 266-67.

²⁹. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

³⁰. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

commodities and the individual's assimilation to "the masses of humanity."³¹

Her laughter embarrasses her daughter because it is both socially inappropriate and uncontrollable--it is thus a symptom of what can be understood but not very usefully said. The laughter deflates the "different language" that separates her from those masses of which she truly is one before her laughter. Its content veers between the religious overtones that hover at the edges of these pages and what gets the last word in this story, namely her daughter's witty irony, that trope which alone is capable of holding together both awareness and complicity as the precise diagnosis of life in postmodernity: "Beneath a tree sits a thin young beggar woman with a newly born infant in her arms. We bend down to give her our gifts. 'Gold, frankincense and myrrh for the Hope of the World,' my daughter utters as we count out the coins."³² And a merry Christmas to all.

IV. FINAL REFLECTIONS

All is, indeed, burning, including the connection to "roots" and "vocation" and any sense of self that is not driven to so intense a weave of postmodern ironies. The story's last line leaves little "Hope of the World," though one can never underestimate the energy of recording and the shedding of one's own nascent recoding as a target market. It does not at all surprise me that the collection ends with a story ("Fear: Meditations in a Camp") that plays against this Christmas irony. A teacher is interned in a camp following communal violence and is pursued by nightmares of ruined houses and pursuers, and ultimately with the implications of his recognition that "all time is a reconstruction of events,"³³ fictions constructed as the bubbles of belief and ideology shielding us from history's deadly bacteria. The story's final paragraph quotes Buddha's definition of Asamkhata, Absolute Truth as the "extinction of desire, extinction of hatred, extinction of illusion."

But since the context is a camp where one is rendered a "non-person," struggling to be content within the territory of a cell, perhaps even this most Buddhist of conclusions is menaced by the ironic possibility of suicide being the meaning of the final lines: "Here, in this camp, within its narrow confines, it was perhaps possible to take the path that would lead to the end of all illusion, craving, pain and sorrow."³⁴ The narrator loses agency as she is hustled about by the police, she loses personal space as she is denied all privacy in the large group with which she is imprisoned, she loses

³¹. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

³². *Ibid.*, p. 289.

³³. *Ibid.*, p.388.

³⁴. *Ibid.*, p. 417.

"humanity" when she "turned to stone," and even the nirvana she speaks of seems negative, a scene of history encroaching upon her space rather than of the expansion of spirit into the deep resonance of Buddhist Emptiness. The strain on the reader is unbearable, the struggle between affirmation and its negation by history's context precisely that struggle which the narrator describes in the story's final pages. I am fascinated by the suspension of closure by a writer skilled in the mastery of form, obviously drawn to powerful centers of traditional belief, but a sensitive seismometer to the interior shifts set off by historical upheaval.

To demystify nostalgia in the act of its practice achieves at least the sense of current history as a process which has pushed the past into anthropology and memory into an analgesic strategy. Desublimating the quotidian economic frustrations forces to the surface the assimilation of being and desire to the lifestyle of what the Kenyans call the "Wabenzi" tribe (of Benz drivers and overachieving hyper-consumers). And perhaps the unleashing of irony against absolute truth and narrative closure--including the deceptive closure of irony which functions only to keep itself forever open--perhaps this use of irony serves to denaturalize the machinery of religious and aesthetic Answers. Perhaps it serves to decamp from the simplistic forms of their appeal marketed by the all too postmodern gurus and politicians whose engagement with contemporary history lacks the rich resonance of all these writers and artists.

We would be wrong to separate *Peacocks and Dreams* from *All is Burning*, for both clearly mark their formal affinity with mythologies, reconstructions, the profoundly reflexive fiction whose most concise form is the ironic trope. Irony is that turn which simultaneously animates its rhetorical world and emphasizes its rhetorical rather than ontological standing. It knows it both is not the world (because it is myth, reconstruction, fiction) and is (we have no access to one any more foundational, especially in the increasingly brief halflives of Media's representational isotopes). These fictions do not pretend to "solve" the problem(s) of history. They do restore the viability of fiction as a sufficiently resonant and ironic medium for keeping one line ahead of Postmodernity's omnivorous appetite for whatever pauses. Irony, by suspending closure, keeps the nomad moving just ahead of those enclosures that all too readily serve as postmodernity's detention camps. These movements and transformations are the Lankan corollary to the specific effects of American postmodernism described earlier. It may startle some to hear me claim that a "postcolonial" literature has so much shared ground with the American arts, but I do so because I think postmodernity and postmodernism, once clarified, are the terms that bring us closer to history's turning wheel.

I have crossed media and cultures in this essay because I do not want to lose the sense of cross-fertilization among the art forms nor the particular character of the positions typifying different cultures. I want to see how these varied forms of cultural activity respond vigorously to the deadly effects of Postmodernity. I want to get a sharpened sense of how artists are still engaging with the mixture of daily experience and the need for vital values by which to live,--but are also profoundly engaged with the coercive and subliminal effects of form, any form, and view, any view. I desire this

effect all the more because pundits sometimes claim, falsely, that New Theory or New Art have somehow abandoned Reality or the enduring human need to make sense of the changed grounds of History. These people I have talked about do these things, and do so in a way that turns the most insidious and most powerful mechanisms of that History against the bleak void of vain Power, empty wealth, narrowed vision, and that greatest of dangers—a loss of collective will to contest all that seeks to empty us of what we most aspire to be.

The message we are meant to believe is that the script is locked, we live in a disaster film, reality is lost. But there is, I think, a very vital pulse in our cultures that confronts what Postmodernity has made of traditional life, that confronts what feels missing from life in the age of media and commodified lives, and that finds ways to leave, imaginatively, the City-State of Postmodernity for the windswept plains of possibility, unknowable and unforeseeable, but out there beyond the TV coverage and the Photo-Opportunities. Such, I think, is a postmodern response to Postmodernity—neither a retreat into the past nor an acquiescence in its present.

ROBERT SIEGLE