The Postmodern as Premodern: Why the Ancient Story of Lam-ang is Postmodern

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Almost anything goes with postmodernity. And almost anything goes with the word 'postmodernism'. Defining it is like drawing a line on water to demarcate two adjoining oceans . The word has, in Andrew Ross' words, "accumulated an abundance of sedimented meanings" (x), and so abundant it is used in a variety of ways, often mutually exclusive, even contradictory. In the late 1950's such word was used by a certain Irving Howe and a certain Harry Levin "to lament the leveling off of the modernist movement" (Huyssen 184-5). And then again in the 1960s by literary critics *"who held widely divergent views of what postmodern literature was"* (Huyssen 184-5). In the 1970s the term "gained currency, encompassing first architecture, then dance, theater, painting, film and music" (Huyssen 184-5) — a gain too big to manage, currency too wide for comfort that starting a coherent conversation about postmodernism is not so easy. Edmund Smith has articulated the pivotal problem.

> It has become fashionable to apply the word 'postmodernist' indiscriminately to a variety of cultural, intellectual and social practices. Several critics in various fields have of course attempted to provide definitions, yet no single definition has gained widespread currency of acceptance. It is evident that no consensus exists regarding either the parameters of postmodernism or the precise meaning of the term (1).

Partly responsible for the liquidity of the word in question is that by and large postmodernist scholars (or however these people should be called), while seemingly confident about what postmodernism is *not*, are hardly enlightening when dealing with what it *is*.[1] Some in fact are indifferent to, even facetious about, the variety and incompatibility of the notions of what postmodernism is.[2]

Some may not consider that a problem. Those like Ross

would argue that postmodernism has after all demonstrated that "terms are by no means guaranteed their meanings and that these meaning can be appropriated and redefined for different purposes, different contexts, and more importantly, different causes" (x). But this argument confuses *terms* with *words*. The latter are any letters or groups of letters that are *in any way* used in constructing sentences for conveying statements; the former are *denotative* words that *have been* appropriated in certain discourses, and have been given *special* and *precise* meanings which are commonly accepted recognized by those who participate in those discourses. Words, even denotative ones (*i.e.*, nouns, verbs, and adjectives), have to have many, often mutually exclusive meanings, and, so long as they are continually used, take on more meanings. The *potential* of words to bear meaning is almost unlimited. In this sense one may say justifiably that words are not guaranteed their meanings. But when words are recognized for their *actual, special* and *precise* meanings *in a particular discourse* their meanings are guaranteed.

Key concepts in academic, highly intellectual discourses — and presumably cultural and literary studies are examples of such — are supposed to be well-delineated, vital words precisely defined. The academics and the culturati, to whom the word 'postmodernism' is almost a shibboleth, are supposed to be agreed on the meaning of that word. The need for it is not just "to preserve the incorruptibility of some pet postmodernist practice" as Ross claims (x). There is one less sentimental and more practical need for it: a commonly recognized definition is necessary if one is to know what postmodernist talkers are talking about. But it seems the only agreement among them is on what postmodernism is supposed to be up against: it is *contra*-modernism. In effect, postmodernism's identity is parasitic to modernism,[3] perhaps a symptom of its conceptual vacuity.[4]

The problem is inevitably carried over to literary theory and criticism: what *postmodern fiction* really is. Bryan McHale, in his own way, delineated postmodernist fiction, and in a manner consistent with the contention of not a few critics that description of postmodernism is parasitic to modernism: He describes

postmodern fiction by first calling to mind modernist fiction. One may expect that he has provided pointers that would enable one to identify postmodernist texts, or see how they look like.

For modernist fiction, so his thesis goes, the *dominant* – the "focusing component of a work of art... (which) rules, determines and transforms the remaining components... that (which) guarantees the integrity of the structure (such as a poetic structure)" (Roman Jakobson qtd. in McHale 6) – is *epistemological* (McHale 9). A modernist narrative is focused on directing the reader to something *beyond* the narrative: deeper meanings, hidden messages, answers to questions borne of reading the narrative, and so on. In short, it elicits interpretations. The reader's foremost engagement with such text is on knowing what goes on in that world, or behind the happenings therein. And such is the case because certain strategies are deployed "which engage and foreground questions such as... How can I interpret this world which I am a part? And what am I in it?... What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it?; And to what degree of certainty" (McHale 13)? A typical modernist narrative's content is nothing but those objects and situations modeled from the natural and the familiar, even banal world-- that is, the characters, setting, events, though fictional, are very much like those found, or could possibly be found, in the real, everyday-experienced world; and its narration so conventional, even bromidic.

On the other hand, in postmodernist fiction, the dominant is *ontological* (McHale 10). A postmodernist narrative describes "*a* universe... not.. *the* universe... describes *any* universe, potentially a *plurality* of universes... *other* universes, including 'possible' or even 'impossible' universes – not least of all the other universe, or heterocosm, of fiction" (McHale 10; his italics). The reader's foremost engagement with such a text is on the sheer display of *preternatural* spectacle, apparently for its own sake. "Foregrounding ontological concerns," asserts McHale, "*is common to all postmodernist writers, and that to accomplish this foregrounding all postmodernist draw on the same repertoire of strategies*" (27; italics added). And these strategies are deployed

to answer questions like: "Which world is this?; What is to be done in it?; Which of my selves is to do it?... What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?" (McHale 10).

But the ontology-as-dominant distinguishing characteristic of postmodernist fiction is an unanchored buoy drifting on an open ocean. By McHale's own account science fiction is "perhaps *the* ontological genre *par excellence,* one that could be thought of as postmodernism's noncanonized or 'low art' double" (59; his italics). Save for some occasions, both postmodern fiction and science fiction "have advanced along parallel literary tracks" (McHale 62). Postmodernists have extensively borrowed ontological motifs from science fiction (McHale 62). And science fictionists have borrowed postmodernist stylistics (McHale 62) (probably a penchant for deliberately defying grammar and logic in sentence construction). This notwithstanding, McHale maintains distinctions between the two. "On the whole," he declares, "postmodernist writing has preferred to adopt science fiction motifs of temporal displacement rather than its spatial displacements, projecting worlds of the future rather than worlds in distant galaxies" (66). (So if a story is about the state of the earth in the 25th century being attacked by mysterious robotic bugs and scientists program cryogenic frogs to eat the bugs, that's not science fiction — or is it?). And it seems that from his very own words the distinction is too precarious to maintain. For one, he contradicts himself in a span of a few paragraphs, and in a single page.

First he says that:

> In constructing future worlds, postmodernist writings tend to focus on social and institutional innovations which are stereotypically associated with science fiction... Often, postmodernists seem content to borrow science fiction's most hackneyed 'advanced technologies', using them simply as backdrops and not taking them very seriously.... In general... post-

> modernist writers are more interested in the social and institutional consequences of technological innovation, the social arrangements these give rise to, rather than in the innovations themselves (66).

Then he declares: "Actually this has been true to much of the science-fiction writing of recent decades as well" (66). (Damian Broderick makes the same observation: [science fiction] is often crucially concerned with the strictly unforseeable social consequences of scientific and technological innovation" [4; italics added].) Says McHale furthermore: "*Most postmodernist futures... are grim dystopias -- as indeed most science-fiction worlds of the future have been in recent years*" (67; italics added). So, what difference is there between science fiction dealing with social arrangements resulting from technological innovations from postmodernist fiction with backdrop borrowed from science-fiction? And what makes a story whose setting is on the moon, or in Mars, and showing everything a technological visionary could conceive and narrated in "postmodernist style" (whatever that might be) more science-fictions than postmodernist? Alas, there hardly is a working idea on the difference between science fiction and postmodernist fiction anymore.

The same is true with postmodernist fiction vis-à-vis fantastic fiction. It is not clear what is a formally fantastic fiction and what, according to McHale, is postmodernist fiction diffused with fantasy. Fantasy, he declares "no longer seems to be the exclusive property of texts which are identifiably fantastic in their ontological structure; generalized fantastic effect or 'charge' seems to be defused throughout postmodernist writings, making its presence felt in displaced forms in texts that are not formally fantastic at all" (81).

McHale defines the *fantastic* as one that

> involves a face-to-face confrontation between the possible (the real) and the impossible, the normal and the paranormal. Another world penetrates and encroaches upon our world... or some representative of our world penetrates an outpost of the other world, the world next door.... Either way, this precipitates a

> confrontation between real world norms (the laws of nature) and otherworldly, supernatural norms (75).

And among those which he identified as postmodernist fiction of the fantastic kind are Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude:*

> The India of *Midnight's Children* is a world thoroughly pervaded by miracles -- so thoroughly indeed, that the miraculous comes thoroughly routine. Similarly, in Garcia's Macondo, supernatural beings and happenings, including ghosts and apparitions, supernatural plagues of insomnia or amnesia or dead birds, and so on, are all accepted quite matter-of-factly (77).

Why these works are postmodernist McHale does not explicitly show. But he points out that a "banalization of the fantastic," that is, an insouciance about the strange and the bizarre is a characteristic attitude among postmodernists (76). Big deal! One can see banalization of the fantastic in most non-Western folk and ancient literature.

The story of Lam-ang, which antedates postmodernist chatter probably by four centuries and far removed from the centers of postmodernism by thousands upon thousands of miles, treats the fantastic as matter-of-fact. The day Lam-ang was born he acquires the ability to speak. As a young man he fights innumerable Igorot warriors who rain spears at him and slays them all. He washes his hair on a river and the animals therein die. He duels with Sumarang whose eyes are as big as plates and nose two feet long and sends him flying over nine hills with a single blow.

No trace of wonder or amazement could be discerned from the rich suitors of Ines Kannoyan, some of them Spaniards — so many of them that "one could walk on (their) heads without touching the ground" (Yabes 32) — who witnessed Lam-ang's rooster who demolishes the Kannoyan outhouse by flapping its wings, and Lam-ang's dog who restores the outhouse to its former state merely by growling. When Lam-ang's white, yellow-

legged cock answers Ines' parents with eloquent praises and propositions, they keep to their conversation unimpressed and unaffected, even boasting to Lam-ang about their wealth. A *berkakan* eats Lam-ang and Marcos is sent to dive and recover the bones and the rooster crowed and the dog growled and the hen flapped its wings and lo, Lam-ang comes back to life. And the first thing he does is to speak: "My wife... I am now very eager to be with you" (Yabes 52). And, like typical Grade B movie, they, says one version, locked "in a madly tight embrace... so weakened by their happiness/That on the ground the spouses fell"(Yuson 67; verse 199). And furthermore, "Lam-ang couldn't hold his passions high" (Yuson 67)! Not just banality here, but also slapstick melodramaticism.

And if beyond banalizing the fantastic Gabriel Garcia Marquez goes further to fantasticize the banal, so does the Lam-ang text. It was not Lam-ang's ability to invoke the winds to blow flames, but the thick smoke that elicited the wonder of the people of San Juan. It was not his supernatural powers which he boasted to Ines' parents, and not those powers that caught their fancy, but the very earthly fishponds, the very worldly gold and porcelain, the ordinary ships. All these banal things turn out to be fantastic.

And that *temporal displacement* postmodernists texts are so well known for, one with a little philosophizing imagination would find in the Ilocano epic. Lam-ang boasted to the Kannoyans about his "fishing grounds on Igorot zone." Amado Yuson, one of those who translated the epic, argues:

> If Igorots have fishing grounds as the story says, it must have been at a very remote time – at a time when the more civilized Polynesians came during the protohistoric period. Our best reason would make us believe that these fishing grounds were along the sea for there are certainly no fishing grounds in the mountains (73).

But oh, those ancient Ilocano folks, in Lam-ang and Ines' wedding they danced the *pios* and *sagamantika*, along with the

fandango, the *curacha* and the *waltz* (possibly to the music of *The Beautiful Blue Danube*)! And Bathala knows what those spurned *pre-Magellan* Spanish suitors of Ines did (they probably sung the *blues*).

And even if one goes against his best reason and (make)believes there are fishing grounds up the Cordillera mountains, then indeed one can argue justifiably that the Lam-ang creator(s) did employ the very postmodernist strategy of *interpolation*, which "involves introducing an alien space *within* a familiar space" (McHale 46; his italics). What could be more alien to the Cordillera slopes and cliffs than fishing grounds that are, in Yuson's translated words, "limitless in breadth and size" (Yuson 47; verse 193)?

Or perhaps what is employed is the strategy of *superimposition*, where "two familiar spaces are placed on top of the other, as in photographic double exposure, creating through their tense and paradoxical coexistence a third space identifiable with neither of the two original one" (McHale 46) – like the fishponds of Dagupan with their famous *bonuan* bangus superimposed on the picturesque rice terraces of Banaue and Bontoc.

Or perhaps the strategy of *misattribution*, that is, "displac(ing) and ruptur(ing) automatic associations (in common wisdom and conventional knowledge), parodying the encyclopedia and substituting for encyclopedic knowledge... *ad hoc*, arbitrary, unsanctioned associations" (McHale 48) – like the rice terraces producing bonuan bangus.

Well, in postmodernism anything goes anyway. Anything can go with postmodernism. As a John Mepham had observed, "the postmodern is forever unearthed in surprising places and will no doubt soon be discovered in Homer (in fact, *The Odyssey* would surely be postmodernist in McHale's criteria)" (153).

And why not *Ti Panagbiag ni Lam-ang*, too?

NOTES

[1] Thus one can read such quasi-mystical statements as "I will not try to explain what postmodernism is, for it is not one thing. Indeed, from a postmodernist perspective nothing is simply itself and no thing is one thing" (Mark Taylor qtd. in Berry, *et al.* 11)

[2] There is, for example, a certain Jochen Schulte-Sasse who dares declare: "The inflationary and often contradictory use of the term 'postmodernism' does not have to concern us, as long as it is understood that postmodernity and postmodernism refer to qualitative changes in society and their cultural manifestations" (qtd. in Kuspit 53).

[3] And postmodernists scholars do not at all hesitate to show it. For Andreas Huyssen, for example, "The term '*post*modernism' should guard us against (defining it) as it positions the phenomenon as relational. Modernism as that which postmodernism is breaking away remains inscribed into the very word which we describe our distance from modernism" (183; his italics).

[4] About this point Ferenc Feher makes a most appropriate comment: "The first and most conspicuous problem with giving any working definition of postmodernism consist in its own negative self-definition. Postmodernism, like many of its conceptual brethren... understand themselves not in terms of what they are but in terms of what they come after. This constellation shows a marked difference to the emergence of modernism. Modernism made its appearance with much fanfare and, sometimes, bombastic manifestoes. The latter can in retrospect be refuted bit by bit; the substantiality, the truth-claim and the feasibility of each and every postulate can equally be disproven. And yet no retrospective critical campaign will change the fact that the modernists were clearly aware of the positive contents of their intentions. They knew what they stood for and what they wanted to achieve. Once actors, or those who speak in the name of actors, sum up their message by pointing to the fact that they locate themselves 'after' something, they unambiguously indicate their "otherness", their alienness to the spirit of the previous period, and the authenticity of this message should not be questioned simply because of the absence of a positive program. However, a self-description of this kind also reveals the actor's uncertainty about his or her own self-identity and this gives the observers a dangerously wide latitude of arbitrary interpretation.

"A second problem lies in the fact that a *substantive criteria* through which the postmodernist syndrome can be approached are equally *negative in nature*. Postmodernists do *not* intend to accept the hegemony of the other spheres over unrestrained activity of the aesthetic sphere. they are *not* prepared to put up with prefabricated theoretical requirements. They do not tolerate closed artworks and their inherent standards nor do their bare with the presence of

paradigmatic personalities (either in the form of representative art-works or of representative artists). They are *against* tradition for it is an oppressive authority, they are equally *against* modernism for it has 'sold out the arts to the museum,. And whenever interpreters venture any further and try to establish *positive* principles by which to identify the postmodernist artwork, they invariably end up empty-handed... Interpreters of an allegedly positively definable postmodernist art-work are every bit a s sophisticated as their predecessors but the fundamentally negative character of the elusive phenomenon they are dealing with takes revenge upon them. As a seminal reading of *The Crying of Lot 49* by David Bennett testifies, the microscopic scrutiny of supposedly modernist feature yields categories which could have been gained from an analysis of any art-work from the whole post second world war period....

"There is no distinguishable artistic or literary groups or individuals which would call itself 'postmodernist' albeit many of them make vague references to postmodernism whenever they want to make use of an unrestrained *poetica licentia* in some respect or another. Artists and writers keep identifying themselves through the use of modernist terms of group cohesion such as minimalists (in music or painting), abstract expressionists, neo-naturalist, concept art and the like. Critics do use the term 'postmodernism' extensively without identifying themselves with it for the very reason that they, perhaps better than anyone else, know how difficult it w uld be, if pinned down, to accept in a *positive form* for what they e ivocate" (87-9; his italics).

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