

Understanding John Barth's "The Literature of Replenishment"

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Abstract: John Barth, born on 27th May, 1930, is a prominent and leading contemporary postmodernist. He is an American novelist, short story writer and essayist, who has redefined fiction in America. John Barth's two landmark essays, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980), includes the most prominent ideas of John Barth on Literature and writings. Since many misread his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion", and had mistakenly assumed that John Barth meant that literature is useless, he wanted to bring clarity and also reconsider some of the statements he had made in the 1967 essay and hence published "The Literature of Replenishment" in 1980. Many misread or misunderstood John Barth because of his language which is quite complex. The aim of this research paper is to demystify the language of Barth and thereby help in the understanding of his essay "The Literature of Replenishment".

The Literature of Replenishment:

The essay "The Literature of Replenishment" was published in 1980, which is thirteen years after the publication of "The Literature of Exhaustion" in 1967.

E. P. Walkiewicz in his book "John Barth" states that the essay "The Literature of Replenishment" is a companion piece to "The Literature of Exhaustion" in which John Barth "makes the most of hindsight and new insights gained from both reading

and writing to reclarify some of the statements made and reconsider some of the issues raised in the earlier essay” (11). Since many misread his essay “The Literature of Exhaustion”, and had mistakenly assumed that John Barth meant that literature is useless, he wanted to bring clarity and also reconsider some of the statements he had made in the 1967 essay.

John Barth expresses his yet another important purpose in writing the essay “The Literature of Replenishment”, which he wrote in the headnote of his twin essays, “My purpose was to define to my satisfaction the term *postmodernism*, which in 1979 was everywhere in the air” (193). Hence, John Barth while bringing clarity to his 1967 essay aims at defining the term postmodernism by finding answers for the questions what is modernism and what is postmodernism. Edward M. White in a review of “The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction” says that John Barth in “The Literature of Replenishment”, “defines

his “modernist” predecessors and his “post-modernist” contemporaries (including himself) in original ways that help us understand the literature of our century” (25).

In order to actualize his aim of defining ‘postmodernism’, John Barth begins his essay by highlighting the popularity of ‘postmodernism’ which has gained currency especially in the literary works during 1960s and 1970s, by stating that

The word is not yet in our standard dictionaries and encyclopedias, but since the end of World War II, and especially in the United States in the latter 1960s and 1970s, “postmodernism” has enjoyed a very considerable currency, particularly with regard to our contemporary fiction. (194)

Although it is very difficult to exactly pinpoint the origin of ‘postmodernism’, it is commonly understood that ‘postmodernism’ gained its popularity after World War II. This is what John Barth has reiterated in the beginning of his 1980 essay. Here, he

particularly focuses on postmodern fiction and postmodern literature and also highlights the fact that during 1960s and 1970s, when postmodernism was gaining popularity, universities had incorporated the American postmodernist novel in their courses and even a quarterly journal was devoted to postmodernist literature. He further adds that there were even annual meetings conducted by Deutsche Gesellschaft fur Amerikastudien and Modern Language Association with themes such as 'America in the 1970s' with special focus on American postmodernist writing and 'the self in postmodernist fiction' respectively. All these activities suggested the presence of postmodernism in the academic circle though the word 'postmodernism' did not find its place in the standard dictionaries and encyclopaedia then.

Following this, Barth enters into a serious discussion of being labelled as a postmodernist and also highlights the fact

that being labelled as a postmodernist completely depends on "the critic's view of the phenomenon and of particular writers" (194). Hence in order to identify who the postmodernists are, he lists the postmodern writers who are commonly included in the canon, other than himself, William Gass and John Hawkes, namely, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Stanley Elkin, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, Raymond Queneau, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Robert Pinget, Claude Simon, Claude Mauriac, John Fowles, Julio Cortazar, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Italo Calvino. (195)

Having listed the postmodern writers, John Barth further explores into understanding and defining the term 'postmodernism'. He questions, "...do the writers most often called postmodernist share any aesthetic principles or practices as significant as the differences between them?" (196). This

question arose in Barth mainly because of the critics' confusion in labelling the writers as modernists or postmodernists. Barth clearly expresses the critics state of confusion in the following paragraph:

Indeed, some of us who have been publishing fiction since the 1950s have had the interesting experience of being praised or damned in that decade as existentialists and in the early 1960s as black humourists. Had our professional careers antedated the Second World War, we would no doubt have been praised or damned as modernists, in the distinguished company listed above. Now we are praised or damned as postmodernists. (196)

This confusion among the critics could also be because of some characteristics in writing that is shared by both modernists and postmodernists.

John Barth, discusses the views of certain critics on postmodern writers. First of all he talks about his Johns Hopkins colleague,

Professor Hugh Kenner, who in his study of American modernist writers titled *A Homemade World* published in 1975, puts "modernists and postmodernists together without distinction" (196-197). Barth also quotes yet two other professors, one namely Gerald Graff of Northwestern University who is similar to Professor Kenner in his views on postmodernism, which is very evident from two of his essays titled "The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough" and "Babbitt at the Abyss" that were published in *Tri-Quarterly* 26 and *Tri-Quarterly* 33 respectively. The second one, whom Barth quotes is Professor Robert Alter of Berkeley who also wrote in *Tri-Quarterly* and subtitled his essay on postmodernist fiction as "reflections on the aftermath of modernism". Both these critics consider the postmodern programme as that which "is in some respects an extension of the program of modernism, in other respects a reaction against it" (197).

Further, John Barth, summarizes Professor Graff's checklist of the characteristics of modernist fiction and Professor Alter's differing characterizations of postmodernist fiction. John Barth says that according to Graff,

The ground motive of modernism... was criticism of the nineteenth-century bourgeois social order and its world view. Its artistic strategy was the self-conscious overturning of the conventions of bourgeois realism by such tactics and devices as the substitution of a "mythical" for a "realistic" method and the "manipulation of conscious parallels between contemporaneity and antiquity" (Graff is here quoting T. S. Eliot on James Joyce's *Ulysses*); also the radical disruption of the linear flow of narrative, the frustration of conventional expectations concerning unity and coherence of plot and character and the cause-and-effect "development" thereof, the deployment of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions to call into question the moral and philosophical

"meaning" of literary action, the adoption of a tone of epistemological self-mockery aimed at the naïve pretensions of bourgeois rationality, the opposition of inward consciousness to rational, public, objective discourse, and an inclination to subjective distortion to point up the evanescence of the objective social world of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. (199)

John Barth finds the above checklist by Graff quite reasonable and to that he adds two more characteristics. One being that of the modernists' insistence, in which the artist plays an alienated role in his society or outside it, like James Joyce's hero who is priestly, self-exiled artist and Franz Kafka's artist who is anorexic or bug. The second one is the modernists' use of language and technique which is in total contrast to the traditional content which is quite straightforward.

Next, Barth turns his focus on postmodern characteristics and says that for Professor Alter, Professor Hassan and others

Postmodernist fiction merely emphasizes the “performing” self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness of modernism, in a spirit of cultural subversiveness and anarchy. With varying results, they maintain, postmodernist writers write a fiction that is more and more about itself and its processes, less and less about objective reality and life in the world. (200)

In simple words, postmodernist writers write more about writing a fiction or about the process of writing a fiction rather than objective reality and life.

John Barth strongly opines that if postmodernist writing has no other purpose other than those listed by the Professor critics, then it would just mean that postmodernist writing is kind of weak art that has reached its final decline. Further, according to his view,

...the proper program for postmodernism is neither a mere extension of the modernist program...nor a mere intensification of certain aspects of modernism, nor on the contrary a wholesale subversion or repudiation of either modernism or what I'm calling premodernism: “traditional” bourgeois realism. (201)

John Barth seems dissatisfied with the enlisted definitions or characterizations of postmodernism and postmodernist writings. He feels that postmodernism and postmodernist writings cannot be constrained within a shorter circle or boundary. Rather, postmodernism does not have a boundary. Hence, he believes that “A worthy program for postmodernist fiction...is the synthesis or transcension of these antitheses, which may be summed up as premodernist and modernist modes of writing” (203). Here, John Barth expresses his strong belief that postmodernist fiction as a programme can become worthy or valuable or meaningful only through the

synthesis or transcension of the premodernist and modernist way of writing. In other words, postmodernist writings could become successful through the combination of the premodernist and modernist way of writing and not by merely rejecting them. He thus adds that “My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents” (203). By calling modernists and premodernists as parents and grandparents respectively, Barth means that postmodernists writing is built on the platform called modernism and premodernism. Since postmodernists writing has its roots in the modernist and premodernist writings, it cannot be disconnected completely from its predecessors.

In order to understand this postmodern synthesis, John Barth provides examples of two postmodern writers and their works which he considers do replicate this

postmodern synthesis. The first one Barth considers is Italo Calvino, an Italian journalist, short-story writer and novelist, and his work *Cosmicomics* (1965). Barth quotes John Updike, who comments on *Cosmicomics* that “whose materials are as modern as the new cosmology and as ancient as folktales, but whose themes are love and loss, change and permanence, illusion and reality, including a good deal of specifically Italian reality” (204). This is the kind of synthesis that John Barth wants for his postmodernist programme. A combination of the old and the new, illusion and reality, all mixed together to deliver something new and innovative, but an innovation that is always rooted in the past. Hence, Barth calls Calvino a true postmodernist because he satisfies this postmodern synthesis by keeping “one foot always in the narrative past—characteristically the Italian narrative past of Boccaccio, Marco Polo, or Italian fairy tales— and one foot in, one might say, the

Parisian structuralist present; one foot in fantasy, one in objective reality, etc” (204).

The second example that Barth gives is Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who was a Colombian novelist, short-story writer, screenwriter and journalist. Barth considers Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a masterpiece from a master storyteller. Barth finds in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, “the synthesis of straightforwardness and artifice, realism and magic and myth, political passion and non-political artistry, characterization and caricature, humor and terror” (204). This postmodern synthesis in the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Italo Calvino has helped them in making their works great masterpieces in literature and has also become splendid of that splendid genre from any century.

Finally, John Barth, through a serious discussion on modernism and postmodernism, lists the characteristics of

modernist writing and postmodernist writing, also presents his views on postmodernist writing, and opens his heart to clarify his much misread 1967 essay, “The Literature of Exhaustion”. Barth says that he had lot of concern, during that apocalyptic place and time of the later 1960s, for the condition of narrative fiction. His main concern in the 1967 essay was that ...the forms and modes of art live in human history and are therefore subject to used-upness, at least in the minds of significant numbers of artists in particular times and places: in other words, that artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work. (205)

This genuine concern of Barth, over the possibility of used-upness of the various forms and modes in literature, was misunderstood by many including Jorge Luis Borges, that Barth meant that

“...literature, at least fiction, is *kaput*; that it has all been done already; that there is nothing left for contemporary writers but to parody and travesty our great predecessors in our exhausted medium” (205). Here, in this essay “The Literature of Replenishment”, John Barth clearly makes a corrective statement by saying that, “That is not what I meant at all” (205) and also adds that

let me say at once and plainly that I agree with Borges that literature can never be exhausted, if only because no single literary text can ever be exhausted— its “meaning” residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space, and language. (205)

In conclusion, John Barth, after a dozen years since the publication of his 1967 essay, admits that in 1967 the term ‘postmodernism’ was scarcely in use and he hadn’t heard it then. But in the later 1970s, the term ‘postmodernism’ has gained

popularity and during 1979, it seemed to him that the essay “The Literature of exhaustion” was about “the effective “exhaustion” not of language or of literature, but of the aesthetic of high modernism” (206). Barth hopes that the ‘best next’ thing after modernism which is called postmodernist fiction may one day be thought of as a literature of replenishment.

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