

THE TRANSCENDENTALIST TURN OF THE NEW POST-POSTMODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

EL GIRO TRANSCENDENTALISTA DE LA NUEVA LITERATURA ESTADOUNIDENSE POST-POSTMODERNA

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Resumen: Este artículo responde al debate que se produce en el campo de la teoría literaria en torno a la naturaleza de la novela estadounidense postmoderna. Mientras que algunos autores afirmaron a principios del milenio que la novela estaba muerta, una nueva generación de jóvenes escritores estadounidenses fueron responsables de un nuevo compromiso con el género por parte del público. Con esto en mente, este estudio busca arrojar luz sobre la naturaleza de la literatura escrita por estos novelistas que buscan distanciarse del callejón sin salida del posmodernismo. Nuestra premisa es que durante la crisis de principios del siglo veinte, que provoca un replanteamiento del concepto de posmodernidad, los jóvenes autores estadounidenses volvieron su mirada hacia las ideas del trascendentalismo estadounidense como una herramienta para recuperar el proyecto inacabado

de la modernidad interrumpido por el postmodernismo.

Abstract: This article responds to the debate in the field of literary theory around the nature of post-postmodern American novels. While some authors claimed at the turn of the millennium that the novel was dead, a new generation of American writers were responsible for a new engagement with the genre on the part of the public. With this in mind, this study seeks to shed light on the nature of the literature written by young novelists seeking to distance themselves from the dead end of postmodernism. Our premise is that during the crisis that brings about a rethinking of the concept of postmodernity, the young American authors turned their gaze towards ideas from American transcendentalism as a tool to recover the unfinished Project of modernity.



Palabras clave: transcendentalismo estadounidense; postpostmodernismo; proyecto inacabado de la modernidad; literatura estadounidense.

Keywords: American transcendentalism; post-postmodernism; unfinished project of modernity; American literature

One of the points in common to all the theoretical proposals for the taxonomy of the new paradigm at the beginning of the twentieth century is the fact that the direction of change is yet to come to fruition. Within the world of literature the situation presents the same appearance, and there many literary critics who have dedicated themselves to assessing the state of affairs, either generally or in a more inductive way, analysing the work of a few paradigmatic authors, in order to generalize about the new cultural phase in a broader sense.

At the end of the twentieth century, scholars wondered about the future of the novel in an age that was focused on technology and in a society in which there was less time for reading. Jonathan Franzen painted a bleak picture in a quote that has been repeated countless times since its publication in 1995 in *The New Yorker* magazine and compiled in the book *How to Be Alone: Essays* (2003):

For every reader who dies today, a viewer is born, and we seem to be witnessing the final tipping of a balance. For critics inclined to alarmism, the shift from a culture based on the printed word to a culture based on virtual images—a shift that began with television and is now being completed with computers—feels apocalyptic. (165)

A little later in the text, he talks about the “apocalyptic” era in which computers will be indispensable for every American. Franzen draws a future of island individuals—an image reminiscent of Lipovetsky’s “hypermodern times”—, who are entertained at the same time by the pervasive media—the hallmark of which is institutionalized irony, Wallace would add, who would probably agree with his friend Franzen. In the article, Franzen mentions various authors who were also alarmed by the coming of the digital apocalypse—a negative reminiscent of Kirby’s digimodernism—, although with many differences. Among them, he names Nicholas Negroponte and his work *Being Digital* (1995), in which, says Franzen, Negroponte “sees a ‘mathematically able and more visually literate’ generation happily competing in a cyberspace where ‘the pursuit of intellectual achievement will not be tilted so much in favor of the bookworm’” (169), and ends with “The novel is dying because the consumer doesn’t want it anymore” (171). Sven Birkerts expresses the same sentiment in *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (1994) of the fact that nobody had mourned the death of the novel worldwide (172). Interestingly, Enrique Vila-Matas ends the era of the printing press in his novel *Dublinesca* (2010) with a symbolic tribute to *Ulysses*. In the book, the characters arrange a funeral in Dublin for the late

“Gutenberg era,” emulating the famous scene from the cemetery of the book by James Joyce. They mourn the death of the novel, and they write symbolically that “Gutenberg elegy” to which Birkerts referred.

For Birkerts, fiction can only survive if it refers to the eternal postmodern present in which potential readers live. However that is not enough for novelists; it is, in fact, unsustainable. However, Franzen advocates that the death of the novel is not final:

Sooner or later, all social organisms move from anarchy toward hierarchy, and whatever order emerges from the primordial chaos of the Net seems as likely to be dystopian as utopian. The possibility of terminal boringness looms particularly large. But even if the digital revolution evolves into a free-market version of the Stalinist totality to which the Bolshevik revolution gave rise, the perverse effect may be the elevation of reading’s status. (178)

Indeed, Franzen predicts a revolution, and that is precisely what occurred in the late twentieth century as a response to the crisis of the postmodern paradigm, the Kuhnian crisis that favours savage thinking caused by the multiplicity of proposals of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Jeremy Green’s *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (2007) is a study of the nature of the new American novel. It talks about the works produced by great figures of the postmodern narrative at the end of the last century, such as Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon or Philip Roth. He also considers figures who had carved a niche in the world of the novel since the second half of the nineties, writers who provide a vision with a sensitivity different from that of the previous generation, mentioning among them Jonathan Franzen or David Foster Wallace. Green’s thesis is that at the end of the twentieth century there was a change in the world of narrative. He points out that there were works that deserve special attention because of the change they represent. Initially, Green also reflects on the supposed decline of the novel in an increasingly technology-imbued society, but he also speaks of the resistance of the novelist “working from a perceived marginality” (8). This novelist represents minority identities that oppose the “hegemonic structure of power” (9). This idea evokes Franzen’s position, trying to overcome the solipsism created by the rupture between what the novelist’s work traditionally entails and the frenetic activity of an individualistic mass that moves in an eternal consumerist and hedonistic present.

Peter Boxall also talks about the novel of the new millennium in *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (2013). Boxall indicates that the change in the way we perceive reality provokes a response from the writers, and makes a kind of literary canon that he calls “world community of writers” (6). He does not relate them because their fiction is similar or follows the same channels. Instead, what they share is an attitude of response to the crisis of the beginning of the Twenty-first century. In some ways, Boxall agrees with Franzen

and Green that storytellers have to transform in order to create a space for their fiction in what Bauman calls “unmapped territory” (as cited in Boxall, 2013, p. 6). Paul Auster uses a very similar image in *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006): “We are more than two thousand miles from the capital here, overlooking the unmapped expanses of the Alien Territories” (10). Interestingly, Auster is one of the authors of the Boxall canon who tries to respond to the moment of crisis.

The experience of what it means to be part of a particular culture on a global level has changed with the passing of the twentieth to the twenty-first century—and it continues to do so. According to Peter Boxall, a change is taking place in the perception of time and space as a flow. In *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, to support this hypothesis, he relies on Zigmunt Bauman’s ideas. During the passage to the new millennium, affirms Bauman in *Liquid Modernity* (2000), there has been a strong change, which he analyses in terms of speed: “The long history of modernity, Bauman argues in his 2000 work *Liquid Modernity*, is the history of gathering speed, and of the human capacity to modify the relation between time and space as a result of such acceleration” (Boxall, 2013: 4). Variation in the speed of global information exchange through new information technologies has caused a new way to spread power, says Boxall, which is now moving at the speed of light. In this era, the relationship between space and time is blurred. This creates an impossibility to continue using the strategies that had been developed in previous times in order to adapt the two parameters to the reality of each culture. In a time of paradigm shift in which everything accelerates, cultural identities are also transformed.

Indeed, one of the signs of this sense of flux, of shifting geopolitical conditions, is the international nature of the contemporary novel itself, its emergence from a global cultural matrix. Where the story of the novel has tended in the past to be told in terms of discrete national traditions, it is increasingly the case . . . that the novel comes into being in an international, cosmopolitan space, which exceeds the boundaries of any single cultural domain. (Boxall, 2013: 7)

Aliki Varvogli holds a similar point of view in *Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction* (2012). She analyses a corpus of American novels whose plot takes place outside the borders of the United States. The book includes essays written by various authors on works by authors such as Dave Eggers, Russell Banks, Amy Tan or Jonathan Safran Foer. According to Varvogli, these novels help us know where the United States is in the world today. The configuration of the planet through the new speed of data flow makes the identity of individuals reconfigure within an increasingly globalized world.

The postmodern American individual was lost in their own lack of a stable identity. This was reflected in a self-referential and self-contained novel that deals with the individual struggle of the characters to find an identity in a reality dominated by the relativism of the language games. On the other hand, The

post-9/11 narrative, informed by the icebreaker of David Foster Wallace's work, approaches society in the way Tom Wolfe claimed that the novel should—in his article/manifesto “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast” (1989), where he heralded a recovery of realism during the zenith of postmodernism. In line with Terry Eagleton's critique—Expressed in *After Theory*—of the change of focus suffered by the theory during postmodernism, the narrative seems to want to recover a certain humanism, an ethical relationship with reality. This desired restoration of a referentiality involves getting rid of the multitude of representations of the post-modern self. In her book *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (2010), Nicoline Timmer speaks about the new post-postmodern literature—represented in the novels of David Foster Wallace, Mark Z. Danielewski and Dave Eggers—and affirms that, “[a]lthough these novels at times still ‘ironize’ and ‘caricaturize’ a popular post-modern culture just like postmodernist fiction did, they seem to do so with less disdain, with less distance” (303). This statement reflects the sense in which these new generation of writers uses postmodern techniques that can lead to very different layers of reality. Reality is atomized and the levels of representation are multiple, so the literature that aspires to realism has to make use of techniques that echo it. However, they must do it in a different way than that of the previous generation.

THE TRANSCENDENTALIST ALTERNATIVE

The different alternatives to postmodernism presented by theorists during the first years of the twentieth century are either a continuation of it, a return to enlightened values, or a nuanced return to the unfinished project of modernity.¹ Metanarratives were being considered again to try to unite the different language games that postmodernism had created. In order to do this, it would be useful to analyse how a transcendentalist illusion is used through values inherited from American transcendentalism.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Lyotard points out that the reconciliation with metanarratives, as explained by Habermas, leads to terror, as the history of the 20th century has shown. To overcome this problem, Tim Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker propose an oscillation between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony in their article “Notes on Metamodernism” (2010)—or, as Tom Turner points out in *City as Landscape: A Post-Postmodern View of Design and Planning* (1996), “To temper reason with faith” (9).

¹ Some examples of this the last two alternatives are the ‘hypermodern times,’ as explained by Gilles Lipovetsky; the seminal ‘metamodernism,’ suggested by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker; Jeffrey T. Nealon’s ‘post-postmodernism’; Charles Jencks’s ‘critical modernism’; or Alan Kirby’s ‘digimodernism.’

The difference between how postmodern and post-postmodern authors treat transcendentalism rests on the different use of sincerity. When dealing with the ontology and epistemology of the new paradigm, Vermeulen and van den Akker talk about the emergence of a neo-romantic sensibility. This has been reflected in the art world through a revival of ancient values that can be traced back to the romantic stage. The change is influenced by the experience of everything that has happened between Romanticism and neo-romanticism. What remains is a return to an old paradigm to build a new one that provides solutions to the current crisis, albeit balanced with the baggage of postmodernism. Vermeulen and van den Akker point, for example, to cinema, with the concept of “Quirky new wave” —a term coined by James MacDowell—; the visual arts, with the works of David Thorpe, Gregory Crewdson, or Olafur Eliasson; or architecture, with buildings such as the De Young Museum in San Francisco, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis or the CaixaForum in Madrid. Almost all the examples that Vermeulen and van den Akker give, in one way or another, deal with the concept of nature. All this can be seen, as they indicate in “Notes on Meta-modernism,” for example, in the work of Justine Kurland, where the Romantic influence is evident. Her subjects and her way of making photography with classic compositions, approaches the resurgence of the romanticism of the sixties and seventies, since she photographs communes of rural America that are intimately linked to the hippie movement, which in turn could be seen as heir to transcendentalism. Laura Owens’s paintings turn to natural symbolism with a Romantic origin as a theme, using language inherited from postmodernism. Catherine Opies also uses photography, and her approach to Romanticism through transcendentalism reminds us of the Romantic paintings that speak of the immensity, of the sublimity of nature dwarfing the human being, as occurs in the paintings of Thomas Cole.

The oscillation capacity of Romanticism is perfectly adapted to the needs of the current era:

The Romantic attitude can be defined precisely by its oscillation between these opposite poles. Romanticism is about the attempt to turn the finite into the infinite, while recognizing that it can never be realized ... but for our purposes, this general idea of the Romantic as oscillating between attempt and failure, or as Schlegel wrote, between “enthusiasm and irony”, or in de Mul’s words, between a “modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony”, is sufficient. (Vermeulen y van den Akker, 2010)

This oscillating attitude is what guides the attempt to search for identity of writers who were born in a postmodern world and it is reminiscent of Laffoley’s description of its term for the next cultural phase, “bauharoque”: “[t]his phase of modernism will be characterized by the utopian impulse of the Bauhaus School united with the theatricality of the Baroque.”

Enthusiasm and irony carry many associated concepts, and the current debate is largely restricted to these two concepts. Post-postmodernism is the period of the intensification of indolence created by the dissociation produced between knowledge and a humanized project, together with postmodern irony, which, as Lipovetsky points out in *Hypermodern Times* (2005), lead “directly to a form of neo-nihilism” (37). However, post-postmodernism is also a period of enthusiasm linked to the concept of sincerity: “concern for the truth” (37), as Lipovetsky explains, although this is not flatly opposed to the fragmentation of knowledge, since it uses dogmatic knowledge. The postmodern inheritance warns of the dangers of this monist way of thinking and, for this reason, grand narratives are not embraced again blindly. Recovering Romanticism without taking into account what has been learnt is too risky. As Wendy Wheeler says in her entry on Graham Swift in *Postmodernism: The Key Figures*,

Romanticism, with its inclination toward the moment of symbolic closure and completion, is not without its own problems. Undoubtedly the most ghastly example of the mix of modern scientific and bureaucratic method and Romantic “closure” is, of course, Nazism and the “Final Solution.” After World War II, it became increasingly difficult to remain sanguine about either scientific “progress” or Romantic solutions, and it is in this context which the growing crisis of modernity must be understood. (298-299)

This is why oscillation is necessary. As Isaiah Berlin explains in *The Roots of Romanticism* (1999), Romanticism is, largely, the movement that constitutes the personality of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

The importance of Romanticism is that it is the largest recent movement to transform the lives and the thought of the Western World. It seems to me to be the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West that has occurred, and all the other shifts which have occurred in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appear to me in comparison less important, and at any rate deeply influenced by it. (2)

Many of the Romantic values that Berlin breaks down in his influential book then go on to transcendentalism. Among those values are integrity, the willingness to sacrifice and fight to the death for what they believe in, immolation or the preference for minorities. In the recent surge of confessional autobiographies, for example, this desire to sacrifice oneself is central. However, the core characteristics are others that, Berlin points out, belong to Romanticism—and are an integral part of transcendentalism—: sincerity, purity of soul, and the disposition of the Romantic person to pursue their ideals no matter what they are. The reason why Romanticism in the form of transcendentalism is probably the best way that contemporary American authors have to construct that identity is that the essence of the American identity lies there. It makes sense, there-

fore, that the writers and creators turn to this movement, which, as Harold Bloom states in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (2004), represents the American religion of self-confidence: “What matters most about Emerson is that he is the theologian of the American religion of Self-Reliance” (190). That fact that transcendentalism can be considered as the religion of the United States has a bigger scope in a globalized world than it may seem at first sight. The ubiquitous American culture is exported through, above all, its popular culture. Postmodernism has been the era of the Americanization of the world and that has made the world see reality through the eyes of American culture. That is why it is so important for post-postmodernism worldwide that the new American generation of writers turned their gaze to the precepts of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau or Walt Whitman to obtain the transcendence they needed to build a new paradigm.

Nigel Wheale states the following in *The Postmodern Arts* (1995):

In the course of the twentieth century, Modernity has been increasingly described as an irresistible process of the ‘Americanization’ of the entire World, as the United States displaced Europe as the most powerful region. This process is defined as the remorseless triumph of production and consumption values developed in the United States, together with the adaptation of American mass or popular culture which displaces the cultures of localities. (8)

This Americanization is later presented by Wheale as an event that can be liberating—with more liberties and possibilities—or oppressive, because it imposes a certain monosemous understanding of reality. In a more recent book, *Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction* (2012), Alike Varvogli also draws our attention to how “globalization continues to Americanize the rest of the world” (xiv). Nevertheless, she also introduces the change in attitude that the writers of the new generation adopt about it. In *After Theory* (2003), Eagleton refers to the Americanization of Europe through mass culture in the 1960s and 1970s and the anxiety that this caused, probably, because these cultural manifestations had a great capacity for influence:

By the 1960s and 70s, however, culture was also coming to mean film, image, fashion, lifestyle, marketing, advertising, the communications media. Signs and spectacles were spreading throughout social life. There were anxieties in Europe about cultural Americanization. (25)

As Peter Conrad indicates in the first sentence of his book *How The World Was Won: The Americanization of Everywhere* (2014), such is the influence of the United States that he has to remind himself often that he is not American—he is Australian. It would be impossible to imagine postmodernism as we know it without American culture, without the equalizing element that its popular culture brings. Transcendentalism has always been at the centre of that influence.

In the digital age, most of the instantaneous information comes to us from companies that are based in Silicon Valley and that drink directly from transcendental thinking to develop products that end up penetrating an increasingly Americanized world. Steve Jobs himself broke down the Emersonian ideals in a popular speech he gave at the beginning of the 2005 course at Stanford University. It is impossible not to be, though perhaps unknowingly, influenced by Emerson's thinking. What Bloom called the American religion is part of both the cause and the solution of the problems posed by postmodernism. The individualism promulgated by transcendentalist philosophy is behind the hedonism that caused both the post-modern hyper-consumption that Lipovetsky speaks of and the alternatives proposed by the American writers themselves. As Bloom says in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*,

I am much happier thinking about Emerson's effect upon Whitman and Frost, Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane, than upon American geopolitics, but I fear the two arenas are difficult to sever . . . Semi-literate as the Bush bunch are, their vision of the Evening Land imposing ideas of order upon the universe has an implied link to Emersonianism" (190).

Transcendentalism, in a way, could be read as both the cause and the proposed solution to the crisis.

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