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Lorna Milne and Mary Orr, eds., *Narratives of French Modernity: Themes, Forms and Metamorphoses*. Bern: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers. 2011. 353 pp. \$73.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN-13: 978-3039110513.

Review by Melissa Panek, George Washington University.

This collection of essays, dedicated to the influential David Gascoigne, is grouped around the theme of metamorphoses as the driving force of the thematic and formal changes that have transpired during the Modern era. The essays emphasize and explore the transformative processes at work in these texts and the unique ability of each writer to expand the reader's experience with the text in new directions. In so doing, the indisputable mechanisms of deconstruction and play are accounted for yet, in these essays, grouped under the larger framework of modernity. The emphasis on the metamorphoses of the narrative level of these texts supersedes the chronological classification inherent to the labeling of "modernity" or "postmodernity." Indeed, in this collection of essays, modernism and postmodernism are two aesthetic movements of the twentieth century, an avoidance of categorization based solely on a chronological framework. These essays explore the processes through which the writers engage their readers by projecting their own vision on a textual form. From the poetics of Apollinaire to the literary representations of the horrors of World War II, the tension between the modern and the postmodern is firmly grounded in profound studies of the textual, narrative and symbolic transformations in these examples of French literature.

I would argue that the term "postmodernity" and the subsequent forms it manifests in postmodernism is itself a process, one which encompasses metamorphoses rather than the contrary. Postmodernity is not merely a chronological classification, it itself is a process of which play, self-reflexivity and deconstruction are a part, tools used to subvert the all-encompassing narrative forms such as rationalism, the wisdom of the adult, the colonial power, the complicity of the perpetrator. To speak of the postmodern is to speak of the mechanisms in the text which unravel and through the voicing of the individual narrative, the *mini-récit*, create a new truth which is uniquely individual rather than collective. Each one of these essays demonstrates just such a deconstructive tendency, inverting established binary pairs and collapsing boundaries creating a space for the individual. It is from this perspective that I undertake this review.

Perhaps we could say that that which is postmodern is a mechanism used to undermine, deconstruct and destabilize established ideologies of which the term 'modernism' is illustrative. In his study, "Apollinaire's Voluptuous Calvary: Lexical Fields, Generic Conventions and Narrative Space in *Les Onze mille verges*," Peter Read examines how Apollinaire's scandalous implementation of the profane and of sexual deviance is a means of upturning established norms characteristic of modernity, and may be suggestive of the postmodern. Even in 1913, through his textual insurgence, his literary violence, Apollinaire destabilizes modernity and allows a postmodern interpretation. His *jeu* of violence is transgressive in the sense that the text is self-referential, yet when immersed in the readers imagination, its shocking force arouses questions and creates a revolt against the controlling modernism. Indeed, as Peter Read observes, his individual narratives are quite similar to the notion of the *mini-récit* as

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described by Lyotard. Or rather, was this work a transgressive gesture, one which incites and destabilizes the reader, a postmodern trait?

In Michael Tilby's essay, "Céline, Invective and the Dismantling of Narrative: *Casse-pipe*," it is language itself that is deconstructed, the distortion of character and language destabilizes the text. In Michael Kelly's essay, "Mounier Multivocaliste: Towards a Multiple Articulation of the French Experience of Black Africa," it is the binary pair of the master/slave that is challenged. Kelly notes that Emmanuel Mounier's "L'Éveil de l'Afrique noire" constitutes a critique of several of the founding narratives of modernity: education and civilization. [1] Through the sampling of other voices textually, Mounier integrates the voices of the subjugated other, a sort of fragmented chorus of the suppressed, forming what Barthes refers to as "*tissu de voix*." The dialectic exchange and the presence of binary pairs such as white/black, civilization/barbarism or the predominant rise of the child, the symbolic black Africa who rises up against its father, colonial France, are indeed postmodern tendencies. Kelly rightfully praises Mounier's *Éveil* as exposing the limitations of the modernist narrative with its claim to clarity and progress. This undermining, this whirring cog that destabilizes the all-encompassing metanarratives of modernity speaks of the postmodern.

Robin Mackenzie's study of the role of the border in Julien Gracq's *Le Rivage des Syrtes*, evokes the literal form of transgression as it is most commonly understood: the passing of borders. The metaphor represents the unfamiliar and the unknown. That which is destabilized in Gracq's text is the narrative of representation. This established ideology that the text can represent a reality and convey meaning is challenged. This static approach is undermined, the use of metaphor as transgressive once again speaks of the postmodern, a whirring cog fracturing and destabilizing established doctrine. Yet Mackenzie questions the individual's ability since it is dominated by collective and historical forces. Gracq's exploration, albeit perhaps unintentional, of the text's ability to represent and of the subjectivity destabilizes realist fiction. Therefore, its postmodern quality is its ability to question or undermine a given, all-encompassing ideology, such as realism, which affirms the text's ability to represent a reality.

Anne Chevalier's study of the role of childhood in Chamoiseau's works provides a rich example of the collapse of traditionally held beliefs and norms typical of the modern era. Chevalier explores in-depth the role of the child as an essentially liberating force which allows the adult to regain his lost youth. The thematic of the childhood consists of the mask and the double face of the characters which exert a subversive role in the text. For *le jeu*, or the game inherent to childhood play, this hide-and-seek, allows the hero in Chamoiseau's texts to regain his lost youth. In this regard, this game of hide-and-seek illustrates Caillois's interpretation of *le simulacra*; the reappearing in disguise proves to be a destabilizing force. The role of the childhood according to Chevalier is yet another example of a thematic dissolution of longstanding binary pairs. In this case, the lines between reality and imagination, youth and age, dissolve. The metanarrative of the rational adult and the wisdom inherent to him disintegrates under the subversive force of the child who dominates the symbols.

David Evans offers an insightful look at the transformation of the poetic space in his study of Michel Houellebecq's poetry. He notes that the poem's metric forms are reminiscent of nineteenth-century poetry, yet through the use of the *vers libre* or free verse, the poem provides a textual space in which the poet's isolation, this *vide* or emptiness can transform itself redemptively. Evans notes that Houellebecq's poetic form constitutes a renovation of the poetic *ennui* expressed by Baudelaire. It is at once a deconstructive and reconstructive gesture which, according to Evans, places his poetry squarely in the Modern era. Yet, this double gesture of dismantling and re-mantling is quite suggestive of the postmodern, for ultimately this process of change unravels the poetic construct in which it takes forms. Through the dissolution of the textual spaces noted by Evans, the poem allows the isolated poet to create a safe, comforting textual space in which he may voice his own narrative, that is to say he may script his own life. As such, this seizing of existing structures in order to rebuild them to his liking

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seems to favor the *mini-récit* as envisioned by Lyotard. Therefore, I would argue that Houellebecq's poetry questions and challenges Modern poetry instead of exemplifying it.

The essays dedicated to Michel Tournier including Mairi Maclean's study of the philosophers and friends who exerted an influence on Tournier's philosophical fiction, notes many of the essential elements of Tournier's writings. His reworking of myth in order to subvert established meaning, the importance of intertextuality as a means of enhancing the meaning conveyed and his use of philosophy as fiction are studied in comparison with other works. I would argue that this subversion of established means is suggestive of the postmodern and as such, Tournier demonstrates a postmodern attitude towards the all-embracing modern narratives rather than being examples of them. This demarcation of postmodern is helpful in contextualizing Tournier's works.

The essays referring to Tournier most commonly treat the myth of Robinson Crusoe. Gifford, in his study, traces back to Paul Valéry some of the elemental themes of Tournier's most famous novel. Gifford draws on Valéry's "M. Teste" as a model of Cartesian thought. Yet Tournier, as does Valéry, attempts to reinvent this rationalism by emphasizing the psychic processes through which Robinson creates order and civility out of chaos. Thus, Tournier's propensity towards mysticism is rooted in Valéry's psychic and sexual eroticism.

This reworking of the myth of the island proves to be fertile ground for Susan Bainbrigge's study of Pierre Mertens's *Terre d'asile*. Bainbrigge treats the theme of asylum, both political and psychological through the optic of Tournier's *robinsinade* myth. Themes of isolation, alienation, and displacement dominate and she hails the myth of Robinson Crusoe as one which has survived the delineation of modernity and postmodernity and is, in fact, fertile ground for common trends in contemporary literary theory such as diaspora.

Mary Orr, in her essay "The Metamorphoses of Forms," articulates the aesthetic influences of Flaubert on Tournier's writings, in particular, those between Flaubert's *trois contes* and *Le Roi des Aulnes*. Orr emphasizes the symbolic relevance of one of Tournier's preferred mythemes, the monster. Through its abnormality, the monster challenges established norms and as such has its roots in Flaubert's *La Légende de saint Julien l'Hospitalier*. The metamorphoses, the intertextual evolution of these central figures such as the monster, *la femme de l'ogre*, the body and the grotesque, and then Tournier's subsequent inversion of these reworkings are explored in depth from Vorgaine to Flaubert.

The narrative structuring around the salt mine is the common point from which Lorna Milne elaborates her comparison of Tournier's *Gaspard, Melchoir et Balthazaar* and Michel Nimier's *Celui qui court derrière l'oiseau* in her essay: "Deep Space, a sojourn in the salt mines with Michel Tournier and Michel Nimier." The symbolic strength of the purification of salt is shared between the two writers. In both the works cited the space of the salt mine is a labyrinth, disorientating and above all, below the real world. In her concluding remarks, Milne keenly notes that the use of myth as a narrative source for intertextual reworkings can be concurrently considered modern or postmodern, challenging a chronological classification.

The mystical questioning inherent to the writings of Tournier and of Valéry, that of Man's condition in the face of the ever silent God, receives new eminence in Alain Goulet's study, "Les Nuits de Sylvie Germain et le pari de Pascal." It is against the war-ravaged backdrop of humanity, of Man's plight in the darkness of postwar existence absent of God's salvation, that Goulet notes the transcendence offered in the narratives of Germain and Pascal. Through the use of a symbolic motif of light and darkness, these authors open the way for, perhaps, the realization of an individual destiny.

Toby Garfitt continues the study of Germain and of her ability through the use of legends and folklore to explore the opposing forces of good and evil, with a minimum of explanation. To Garfitt this is

highly anti-modern in that it does not rely on a highly analytic approach, but rather on a primal, childish, desire to accept. The traces of intertextuality found in Germain's work, the *echolalia*, create what Genette has described as literature of the second degree.

The concluding essay brings to a profound closure the larger narrative questionings undertaken in the previous essays. That the Holocaust be the defining moment of passage from the modern to the postmodern has been helpful in clarifying the cultural shifts and the subsequent literary manifestations. Margaret-Anne Hutton uses it to frame her study of three authors' works: Maud Tabachnik's *La Mémoire du bourreau*, Michel Rio's *Leçon d'abîme* and Sylvie Germain's *Magnus*. Hutton examines such themes as the perpetrator and victim, the role of the historiography and the historian and the possibility of creating "truth" of the "past" in each of these texts. She explores the narrative strategies which allow these authors to examine textually representations of World War II and the Nazis' occupation of France. Tabachnik's narrating of events through the perspective of the Nazi perpetrator is risky and her destabilizing of the victim/perpetrator binary pair is seen as postmodern in Hutton's view. She offers a profoundly stimulating conclusion to this collection of essays, by exploring texts which challenge one of the long-held beliefs of Modernity, that of a text's ability to represent a historical truth.

Through the use of narrative techniques such as play and subversion of binary pairs, each of these authors draws in the reader and suggests the complicity of the individual, rather than confirming the text's ability to represent an objective historiography. Through subversion, deconstruction, chronological disruption, and inversion of common truths pertaining to historical texts, these works represent the self-reflexivity of the postmodern. That is to say that the "truth" of the text, and in particular ethical truths as hailed by the Modern era, are impossible to represent in a narrative form. Rather, in keeping with the postmodern emphasis on the individual narrative, the *mini-récit*, what results from this process of transformation, from this metamorphoses, lies within the reader and results in the text's ability to engender its own history. It is in that perspective that I wish to bring closure to this summary of these stimulating studies, that the self-reflexivity, the processes through which the narrative is transformed, lies within our own critical capacities which find themselves transformed as well.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

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Margaret-Anne Hutton, "Is France Post Post-war? Judging the Nazi Past in Recent Novels by Maud Tabachnik, Michel Rio and Sylvie Germain"

"David Gascoigne: Publications"

#### NOTE

[1] Emmanuel Mounier, *L'Éveil de l'Afrique noire* (Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 2007).

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