

The Concept of Postmodernism

Le Huy Bac, A.*

I. Introduction

At the end of the nineteenth century, many people were shocked by Friedrich Nietzsche's declaration 'God is dead' (Nietzsche 1974). In the mid-twentieth century, mankind was shocked again when some researchers said that 'Man is dead.' The world was presented as something which is based on nothing. When spirit (God) and reasoning (people) is declared not to exist, human beings begin to panic. Following these two declared deaths (God and man), researchers declared additional deaths: the death of the subject (Michel Foucault), the death of the author (Roland Barthes), the death of the reader, the death of language, the death of the novel. Such deaths were declared anywhere one looked.

But, ultimately, no one died. God is as alive as he ever was, and people are still alive and optimistically singing about freedom, happiness and independence forever. The church bells in the Vatican continue to resounding and scientists, led by the famous British physicist Stephen Hawking in the early twenty-first century, asserted 'God did not create the Universe'. This observation is an antithesis, and in the perception and thinking of many postmodern human beings,

* Professor, Hanoi National University of Education

God is still present and dominates their lives. All human effort that uses reasoning to identify problems is foolish because it should all be put into the hands of God.

Opposition to God is nothing, and nothingness is a category which Friedrich Nietzsche preferred. Thus far, Stephen Hawking uses 'nothing' to explain how the universe began. He asserts in his book *The Grand Design* published in September 2010 that due to gravity, a universe can materialize from nothing. The physicist concluded that 'there is no need to invoke God to set the Universe going.'

Another concern of this physicist who turned seventy (Stephen Hawking was born in 1942) is how the human mind developed. And, can feeling substitute for perception? And what is the logical conclusion of reasoning?

From the Medieval up to the beginning of the twentieth century, God almost was not opposed to nothing except the devil. This represented kindness versus evil, good versus bad, and there were many people who still believed in God and took God as the fulcrum for their thinking and actions. In postmodern times, perception expanded by reasoning has lead people to a deeper understanding of the physical universe, the nature of life and existence. Good and bad are terms now concept only of individuals or communities. The perception of *God* and *nothing* varies globally and individually according to the awareness of logic and reasoning and relative importance of emotion.

The nature of this nothing does not lend itself to central tenet review. It opposed to disguises and institutions of powerful language which has been abused for a long time. Nothing is what generated things (close to the philosophy of Laozi) and this will be understood someday.

II. Literature review

Postmodernism proposes looking for the self of human beings and the universe, to find the foundation of knowledge and a means to identify existence. It is an attempt to explain what it means to be free and happy. It promotes the expansion of human knowledge through the use of science and technology as the basis for action, and it proposes an multiple view of life which frees people from obsolete institutions which have hindered progress. Many researchers believe that postmodernism appears during periods of crisis, and so of course it is not the product of the twentieth century, but of a much earlier time.

One of the early postmodernists, Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998), in *The Condition of Postmodern*, said that postmodernism has an intimate relationship with modernism in the twentieth century and he did not see postmodern as a result, offspring or denial of modernism but rather a reformulation of some features of modern in an attempt to use science and technology as a basis for freeing mankind.

The philosopher Jean-François Lyotard presented the *Grand Narrative* and the *Petit Narrative*. The grand narrative is what has been shaped and molded into principles that map out ways to guide human activities. It is used to justify thoughts, social ideas and any perspective of life. The petit narrative is that which is in the process of formation, but which is not a model, suggestion or possibility of truth or principle of action. Grand narrative belongs to the time of modernism and before. Petit narrative belongs to the postmodern era. Discourse of grand narrative is always spectacular, full of confidence and very coherent and logical. Grand narrative raises the whole. Meanwhile discourse of petit narrative is shy, skeptical and usually fragmentary. Petit narrative throws light on differences.

If grand narrative accepts centrality and absolutely raises the role of an individual or a certain belief, petit narrative decenters all centers,

accepting the role of periphery, building many peripheries to influence the center. If grand narrative recognizes a natural state and the belief that everything can be explained by use of reason, postmodernism denies it. *Simulacra* (Jean Baudrillard's word) is a simulated product which is man-made for the purpose of profiteering. Petit narrative has a devotion to randomness and rejects ordered arrangement.

The Condition of Postmodern by Lyotard is skeptic of all grand narratives. From this view, postmodernists avoid building theories to avoid grand narrative. It is apparent that most postmodernists choose a field but suggest few concepts. If one wants to understand postmodernism it is necessary to combine fragments from philosophers (such as Jean-François Lyotard, 1924-1998 and Jacques Derrida, 1930-2004), sociologists (Jean Baudrillard, 1929-2007), historians (Michel Foucault, 1926-1984) and literary critics (Roland Barthes, 1915-1980 and Julia Kristeva, 1941-present) and then make one's own interpretation.

Thus, with regards to postmodern literature and art, a team of great intellectuals of the era gathers randomly and each makes his own contributions in his field through the expression of different *petit* concepts. Moreover, the majority of scholars are multifaceted, as were the ancient Greek scholars. For example, Julia Kristeva: a postmodernist, feminist, philosopher, literary critic and novelist.

Postmodern is a term used to denote a high stage of development in economics, science, technology and the humanities. It was born when modernism became old hat and establish as the grand narrative. Jean-François Lyotard wrote, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great

dangers, its great voyages, its great goal.” (Lyotard 1984, xxxiv).

Postmodernism was born in postmodern times. This is an open concept because defining its internal function and the time of its birth seems to depend on the subjective intent of each researcher. The United States of America is a nation in which postmodernism developed. But the fundamental theories of postmodernism were first iterated by French scholars. From the French it spread not only throughout the West European countries but also Russia, China and Japan. Every economic and cultural center in the world is familiar with the term ‘postmodernism’. In this era of globalization, even poor countries with low levels of science and technology accept the appearance and existence of modernism. In summary, the current world is in the postmodern era. The view of just what postmodernism connotes depends on the specific characteristics of each country.

The concept of postmodernism has been no stranger to highly educated Vietnamese people. However, few works have been written in Vietnamese on this subject. Of the postmodern literary works which have been written, compiled or translated, almost all have appeared after the year 2000.

Very little indeed has been written when this is compared with the millions of books on postmodernism that are available outside Vietnam. Moreover, postmodernism is still thought to be a controversial issue by the Vietnamese. Meanwhile, the social itinerary and literature in Vietnam are moving along the road of a Vietnamese-style postmodern.

The very concept of *postmodernism* is not simple. Until the 1980s, the concept had not been included in the *Encyclopedias* of England and the United States due to an unwillingness of critics and theorists to accept this concept. This is due not only the nature of the game in the eyes of postmodernists but also the skepticism which is part of the nature of us, the postmodern people. However, individual studies in England and the United States commonly refer to this concept.

“Over the last two decades,” David Harvey wrote in *Postmodernism* (Harvey 1989, 39), “Postmodernism has become a concept to be wrestled with, and such is the battleground of conflicting opinions and political forces that it can no longer be ignored.”

“The culture of the advanced capitalist socialist,” announced the editors of *PRECIS 6* (1987), “has undergone a profound shift in the *structure of feeling*.”

But there are still many who do not accept the concept of postmodernism. A writer has been classified as a postmodernist is John Updike. However, he said he is uncomfortable to hear talk of postmodernism because he believes that we all are living in a modern time and modernity is always one step ahead of us.

Another way to deny the concept of postmodernism is to not make use of the term in studies. In 1961, when writing *An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (1961), Marlies K. Danziger and W. Stacy Johnson did not use this term in their book. And, in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, theoretical works such as *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (Guerin et al 1992) and *American Literary Criticism form the 30s to the 80s* (Leitch 1988) did not mention postmodernism. However, these are just a few publications and these authors were famous in the 1940s and 1950s.

Their objection might be just the name of the concept because whether they liked it or not, postmodernism has existed with all its aspects. It is the time of its birth and the connotation of concepts are controversial.

For a literary phenomenon to become a ‘tendency’ or to be identified, it has to meet two basic criteria: historical and conceptual connotations. Although researchers now generally consider the birth of postmodern literature to be in the 1980s, concept appeared in 1934 and perhaps even before that. Ihab Hassan in *Toward a Concept of Postmodernism* said about the origin of the concept, “Whence this term? Its origin

remains uncertain, though we know that Federico de Onis used the word *postmodernismo* in his *Antología de la poesía española e Hispanoamericana* (1882-1932), published in Madrid in 1934; and Dudley Fitts also made use of it in his *Anthology of contemporary Latin-American Poetry* of 1942.”(Hassan 1998, 587). In addition, Arnold Toynbee used the term in his work in the years 1947 and 1959, and in 1960 both Irving Howe and Harry Levin studied postmodernism.

The introduction of postmodernism in literature would coincide with the time when the postmodern age was born. Jean François Lyotard, the one who gave birth to the postmodern theory, in his *Introduction of The Postmodern Condition* presented the concept of Postmodern and its connotations, ‘The object of this study is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. I have decided to use the word *postmodern* to describe that condition. The word is in current use on the American continent among sociologists and critics; it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have alter the game rules for science, literature, and the arts. The present study will place these transformations in the context of the crisis of narratives.’(Lyotard 1984, xxiii).

Many researchers consider the time of the explosion of information technology as the early postmodern time: about the late 1930s and early 1940s. Thanks to computers, all distances of space and time have narrowed and people are more solitary.

Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury in *From Puritanism to Postmodernism, A History of American Literature* also attempt to identify postmodern times. They point to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 which drew the United States into World War II with the Allies, thereby opening a new chapter in human history. According to these researchers, many outstanding leaders of modernism died in the 1940s: Scott Fitzgerald in 1940, Sherwood Anderson in 1941 and Gertrude

Stein in 1946. The authors assert, “Modernism itself seemed almost over, even though some important figures, from Faulkner to Eliot to William Carlos Williams wrote on.”(Ruland et al 1991, 373).

Differing in opinion from these researchers, Barry Lewis not only gives a time for the appearance of postmodernism, he also marks the end of it. He wrote, “The dominant mode of literature between 1960 and 1990 was postmodernist writing. A few inaugural and closing events can be aligned with these dates (give or take a year or so either way).

“The assassination of John F. Kennedy and the *fatwa* degree against Salman Rushdie.

‘The erection and demolition of the Berlin Wall.

‘Philip Roth’s essay ‘Writing American fiction’ (1961) and Tom Wolfe’s ‘Stalking the Billion-Footed Beat: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel (1989).’ (Lewis1999, 121).

Since 1990, Lewis suggested that post-Postmodernism be referred to as Post-Pomo. Whether the postmodern era ended in 1990 or not, and even what is it or was is still in dispute.

In my opinion I believe that postmodern didn’t end in 1990. With modernism, the beginning and end of a writing trend could be determined by the artists. For example, James Joyce (1882-1941) and Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) began modernism while Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) and William Faulkner (1897-1962) ended it. However, with postmodernism we can not concretely find a specific group which mark its beginning and end. This is so due to the petit narrative of the writers belonging to this trend. They can not be identified under a single light or be dominated by an *episteme* (Foucault’s concept). Their writing style did not form around a fixed principle. Each composition has transformed in diverse and complex ways. Some writers go towards pseudo-detective (Paul Auster), others go towards a magicalism (Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Don DeLillo) and some go for minimalism (Raymond Carver). We can say that every postmodern writer is a *form*,

as well as a *combination of styles* with many unpredictable variables. For example, Don DeLillo could be classified in the groups producing magicalism, mythical parodies or pseudo-detective novels. Thus postmodernists in their creative process deconstruct their styles.

Corresponding to postmodern times is postmodern literature. However, we can not deny that giving a timeline is relative due to the rule of artistic creation. In modern times we saw the emergence of postmodern (Dadaism, for example) and in postmodern times composition is built upon the modern trend. The important thing here is to determine the interior functions of the concept.

In 1985, Ihab Hassan (Hassan 1998, 591) compared modernism and postmodernism in order to differentiate the two trends.

Modernism	Postmodernism
Romanticism/Symbolism	Pataphysics/Dadaism
Form (conjunctive, closed)	Antiform (disjunctive, open)
Purpose	Play
Design	Chance
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Mastery/Logos	Exhaustion/Silence
Art Object. / Finished Work	Process/Performance/Happening
Distance	Participation
Creation/Totalization	Decreation/Deconstruction
Synthesis	Antithesis
Presence	Absence
Centering	Dispersal
Genre/Boundary	Text/Intertext
Semantics	Rhetoric
Paradigm	Syntagm
Hypotaxis	Parataxis
Metaphor	Metonymy
Selection	Combination
Root/Depth	Rhizome/Surface
Interpretation/Reading	Against Interpretation / Misreading
Signified	Signifier
<i>Lisible</i> (Readerly)	<i>Scriptable</i> (Writerly)
Narrative / <i>Grande Histoire</i>	Anti narrative / <i>Petit Histoire</i>
Master Code	Idiolect
Symptom	Desire
Type	Mutant
Genital/Phallic	Polymorphous/Androgynous
Paranoia	Schizophrenia
Origin / Cause	Difference Difference / Trace
God the Father	The Holy Ghost
Metaphysics	Irony
Determinacy	Indeterminacy
Transcendence	Immanence

His comparison table refers to the basics of composing each of the two trends singling out language, narrative form, artistic concept, small dependent trends and creative philosophy. And he also noted that the difference between the two is relative and it is difficult to distinguish between the two forms of writing.

Umberto Eco had an open idea about postmodern. He said, ‘in the same artist the modern moment and the postmodern moment can coexist, of alternate, or follow each other closely. Look at Joyce. The *Portrait* is the story of an attempt at the Modern. *Dubliners*, even if comes before, is more modern than *Portrait*. *Ulysses* is on the borderline. *Finnegans Wake* is already postmodern, or at least it initiates the postmodern discourses.’(Eco 1998, 623).

In 1990, Katie Wales composed an entry *postmodernism* into *A Dictionary of Stylistics*. Wales defined the concept, ‘Coined in the 1960s to describe a current literary movement which is a progression from modernism which flourished in Europe and America in the early years of this century until the 1930s. Like modernism, post modernism challenges literary traditions and conventions, but more radically. In the novels of American writers like Barth, Nabokov and Pynchon and of British writers like D.M Thomas and Fowles there is considerable undercutting of realism and of unity and neat resolutions. Writing is highly self – conscious ware of itself and of the reader reading it.’(Wales 1990, 166).

In 1996 in *Literary Theory, An Introduction*, the Marxist postmodern critic Terry Eagleton wrote, “The typical postmodernist work of art is arbitrary, eclectic, hybrid, decentered, fluid, discontinuous and pastiche-like.’ (Eagleton 1996, 201)

Another important factor that helps us to establish the concept of postmodern is the authors. In *Postmodernism and Literature*, Barry Lewis made a list: “Postmodernist fiction is an international phenomenon, with major representatives from all over the world: Gunter Grass and

Peter Handke (Germany), Georges Perec and Monique Wittig (France), Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino (Italy), Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie (Britain), Stanislaw Lem (Poland), Milan Kundera (former Czechoslovakia), Mario Vargor Llosa (Peru), Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Colombia), J. M. Coetzee (South Africa); and Peter Carey (Australia).’ (Lewis 1999, 122–123).

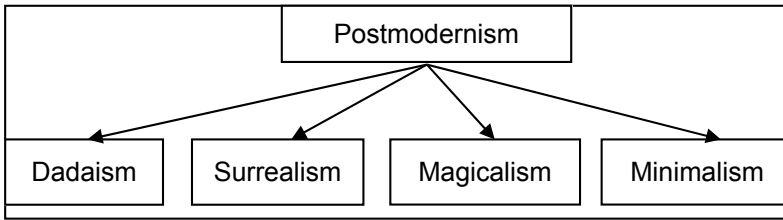
Of course, the American writers dominate: John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Don DeLillo, William Gass, Paul Auster and Tim O’Brien. As we can see, the writers of the period 1940 to the present are not pure postmodernists at all. Postmodern literature can be subdivided into many trends.

When studying the characteristics of postmodern fiction, Barry Lewis refers to the following aspects: temporal disorder, pastiche, fragmentation, looseness of association, paranoia and vicious circles. All these are very important for both the writer and reader of postmodern works.

A review of research that has been done to determine the time of the birth of postmodern literature shows that opinion places its existence from 1940 to 1980, and postmodernism followed modernism. Naturally, within every major trend are some subtrends. For example, within the range of modernism are Expressionism, Socialist Realism and Consciousness Literature. We can say that James Joyce and Mikhail Sholokhov are modernist writers and we can also say that Mikhail Sholokhov is a Socialist Realist and James Joyce wrote Consciousness Literature if we want to place their style within a narrower range.

In postmodern literature, there is Dadaism (1916-1922), New Novels (1950s), Magicalism (after the 1960s, this term replaces Magical Realism) and Minimalism. They can be represented using the following diagram:

www.kci.go.kr



Considering all of the above factors, we propose a conceptual understanding of postmodern literature as follows: Starting from the late 1910s with the poetry of Dadaism (1916), Franz Kafka's prose (*Metamorphosis* 1915) and drama by Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot* 1953), postmodern literature coexists with modern literature and is a thriving form from 1960 on. Postmodernism is opposed to modernism in nature in that it accepts *nothingness, chaos, games* and *intertextuality*. It tries to solve some difficult problems of modernism making use of science to free people from a life of darkness and dogma. Postmodernism is associated with the information technology revolution, an economic, scientific and technological boom and rapid urbanization. It can be seen in poetry, theatre and narrative with its use of multi-values, magic, mosaic, fragments, minimalism, non-centrism, non-coherence, minimizing the role of narrators, regardless of plot, and drama and prose which has many poetic features.

Postmodernism accepts differences and there is a tendency to tolerate a combination of differences, not with the intention to unite them but to differentiate them.

The combinatorial can be seen first with the mixed genres. One example is short stories, with the basic characteristic of the genre (being short) being similar to a poem (also short). This is also a common attribute of modern prose in the twentieth century. The cause is historical. Aristotle divided literature into poetry, drama and epic and, at that moment, the boundary which divided the categories was relative. For example, *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are narratives but they were

also written as poetry. At that time, the one *borrowed from the other without absorbing the other*.

In the centuries that followed, borrowing of every kind took place. William Shakespeare wrote dramas that were both prose and verse. Honore de Balzac and Victor Hugo wrote fiction in the dramatic style with five components: presentation, opening segment, development, climax and ending. If in the nineteenth century there was a development of prose with dramatic features, twentieth century literature is dominated by prose imbued with poetic aspects: no drama, gaps between words and presented in the form of a poem or a combination of words in poetic style. The stream of consciousness in modern masters' works such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and William Faulkner at the beginning of the twenty-first century showed this clearly.

In postmodernism, these characteristics are developed even further. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's magical poetic creations are full of nostalgia and regret, but also deep irony. The poetry in Marquez's works is expressed as happy and sweet roses, and aworn and dry land with no women, but it is also reflected in magical images such as an old man with enormous wings arising from a storm who brought happiness to a poor couple but then he was humiliated, suspected, rejected and treated with ingratitude so that he flew back up into the sky.

Jacques Derrida, who initiated *deconstruction*, a field of postmodernism, wrote the famous saying, 'There is nothing outside the text.' He noted the combination of differences in postmodern writing, however, the basis of such differences was done in Dadaism much earlier.

Tristan Tzara claimed in *How to Make a Dadaist Poem* that composers simply cut random words from any text, put them in a hat, and then picked out any words which were arranged into verses and a poem was born. When asked about the meaning of the poem, a Dadaist would reply it was not his work. The poet's task is not to create meaning in his poems. That job falls to the readers. This *antimeaning* attitude is

shown righteously in the name of the school: *Dadaism*. In French this means a wood horse and also the babbling of a child. That name is was chosen randomly. However, the side-by-side and random techniques of Dadaism were the most innovative and powerful used in literature throughout the twentieth century.

III. Conclusion

In the postmodern era, many philosophers and literary critics eloquently stated the arrival of many deaths: subjects are dead, authors are dead (Roland Barthes) and even readers are dead. These deaths are all in a metaphorical sense. This means that the dead are obsolete and no longer relevant to postmodernism. Nowadays, society always comes to need something new, a replacement. And this allows the writing to continue to flow forever.

Anyway, postmodernism will also becomes a ‘grand narrative’ even though that is not what postmodern practitioners wanted. Both natural and social movements are sudden, following the law that every random occurrence will be legitimized and everything will return the starting point. A grand narrative will be born and then it will, of course, be ‘deconstructed.’

So, will the concept of postmodernism be lost?

No one knows. But, we have reason to believe that the concept will always exist. This is because before postmodernism there was modernism, a concept widely used since the Renaissance, and so far it hasn’t died. Its connotations have changed over time but the concept remains. And so we can believe that after this postmodernism there will be another postmodernism, and another, until God and nothingness stop denying each other.

Bibliography

- Danziger, M. K. and W. S. Johnson. 1961. *An Introduction to Literary Criticism*. Massachusetts: Heath and Co.
- Eagleton, T. 1996. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Eco, U. 1998. From Postscript to the Name of the Rose. In *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Guerin, W. L., E. Laborand, L. Morganand, J. Reesmanand, and J. Willingham. 1992. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, D. 1989. Postmodernism. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Hassan, I. 1998. Toward a Concept of Postmodernism. In *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Hawking, S. 2010. *The Grand Design*. American: Bantam Books.
- Leitch, V. B. 1988. *American Literary Criticism Form the 30s to the 80s*. New York: Columbia Press.
- Lewis, B. 1999. Postmodernism and Literature. In *Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*. Stuart Sim, ed. New York: Routledge.
- Lyotard, J-F. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. 1974. *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.
- Ruland, R. and M. Bradbury. 1991. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*. American: Penguin Books.
- Wales, K. 1990. *A Dictionary of Stylistics*. London: Longman.

Received: Oct. 20, 2012; Reviewed: Nov. 28, 2012; Accepted: Dec. 05, 2012

<Abstract>

The Concept of Postmodernism

Le Huy Bac, A.

Professor, Hanoi National University of Education

This study explores the concept of postmodernism in literature. There are many ideas which have conflicted with each other, but now postmodernism is real concept. We cannot deny. By researching papers of Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Ihab Hassan etc. we find out many characteristics of postmodernism. From that, we propose a conceptual understanding of postmodern literature as follows: Starting from the late 1910s with the poetry of Dadaism (1916), Franz Kafka's prose (Metamorphosis 1915) and drama by Samuel Beckett (Waiting for Godot 1953), postmodern literature coexists with modern literature and is a thriving form from 1960 on. Postmodernism is opposed to modernism in nature in that it accepts nothingness, chaos, games and intertextuality. It tries to solve some difficult problems of modernism making use of science to free people from a life of darkness and dogma. Postmodernism is associated with the information technology revolution, an economic, scientific and technological boom and rapid urbanization.

Key Words : Concept of postmodernism, Postmodern literature,
Postmodern narrative, Postmodern language