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Bringing Peirce to Postmodernism, or: A Theory of Replenishment

- Katrin Amian, *Rethinking Postmodernism(s). Charles S. Peirce and the Pragmatist Negotiations of Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and Jonathan Safran Foer.* (Postmodern Studies 41) Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi 2008. IX, 239 S. [Preis: EUR 53,50]. ISBN: 9789042024151.

1. Context: Pragmatism as a Panacea for Postmodernism?

Current debates about the state or the future of literary theory are characterized by a certain exhaustion. While not all of those participating in the discussion would go as far as proclaiming an age of post-theory, as, for example, several scholars in film studies have done, it nevertheless seems that, to many, poststructuralism as well as the culturalist approaches it helped bring about are history. Of those scholars that do not wish to get rid of theory altogether but only aim to purge their disciplines of the poststructuralist paradigm, a considerable number has turned to pragmatism in recent years. Christian Kohlröß, for instance, whose *Literaturtheorie und Pragmatismus oder Die Frage nach den Gründen des philologischen Wissens* (2007) Jan Urbich recently reviewed for *JLTonline*, argues that there is a teleological development inherent in literary theory towards a superior pragmatist approach to literature. By contrast, due to »its affinities with open, liberal, multicultural societies,« Ihab Hassan, one of the leading theoreticians of early postmodernism, has repeatedly projected pragmatism as a remedy for postmodernism's, and, by implication, poststructuralism's, playful nihilism.¹

Katrin Amian uses this later position as a point of departure in her ambitious and highly innovative study *Rethinking Postmodernism(s): Charles S. Peirce and the Pragmatist Negotiations of Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and Jonathan Safran Foer*, which was published as volume 41 of Rodopi's renowned Postmodern Studies series last year. Going beyond the rather simplistic binary of »good« pragmatism and »evil« postmodernism constructed by Hassan and others, Amian explores »the specific sites of convergence and critique that emerge once we confront Peirce's pragmatism with the textual practices of literary texts written under the auspices of a shifting postmodern paradigm« (6). In other words, without aiming at a synthesis of these two diverse movements, she stages a dialogue between the two in which the strengths of each one are to even out the weaknesses and blind spots of the other. This approach enables Amian to arrive at persuasive re-readings of classic postmodernist literary texts that bear larger implications for the future of criticism and theory.

Whereas the recent turn to pragmatism has mainly been a turn to John Dewey and William James, the pragmatist thinker Amian draws on is Charles Sanders Peirce, because »Peirce grounded his pragmatist philosophy in an elaborate semiotic theory [...] that proves highly valuable in returning to [his] pragmatist language after the linguistic turn [and that] does not lend itself easily to the anti-theoretical rhetoric of much recent pragmatist scholarship« (14-15). Aware of the huge differences between Peirce's and other semiotic theories, Amian stresses, however, that Peirce's pragmatism is »first and foremost a theory of meaning« embedded »in a complex system of epistemological thought« (14). She also stresses that there are almost as many approaches to and thus versions of Peirce as there are Peirce scholars, since the unsystematic and fragmentary nature of his writings allows for a plethora of different readings.

The approach to Peirce that Amian initially chooses, but quickly transcends is the one taken by Americanist Susanne Rohr in her books *Über die Schönheit des Findens. Die Binnenstruktur menschlichen Denkens nach Charles S. Peirce* (1993) and *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung: Wirklichkeitskonstitution im amerikanischen Roman 1889-1989* (2004). Amian acknowledges her debt to Rohr frequently and dedicates the larger part of her first chapter to Rohr's reading of Peirce. In *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung*, according to Amian, Rohr employs a Peircean theory of reality constitution in order to investigate how literary texts from realism via modernism and postmodernism to neorealism reflect and represent cultural assumptions about the nature of reality. For this, Rohr investigates how specific texts stage the various »moments of frailty« (31) in the constitution of reality that arise from, among others, Peirce's triadic model of the sign or his privileging of abduction over deduction and induction. The former triggers a process of infinite semiosis in which every sign is »an interpretation of another sign and must be translated into a subsequent sign to fulfil the sign's interpretative condition« (36). Closely connected, the latter turns cognition into an endless process of formulating, revising, and reformulating hypotheses about the nature of reality. Thus, for Peirce, as Amian sums it up, »reality is constantly in the making, allowing the process of its cognition to emerge as a genuinely creative act of constitution« (33). This act also entails a social dimension, as the provisional results a subject arrives at are communicated or revised due to receiving new information from other subjects. »[T]ruth, meaning, and reality« are thus not idiosyncratic but »social products« (33). What a particular society regards as true at a certain historical moments is the result of consensus as much as of creativity.

2. Close-Readings: Consensus and Creativity

»Consensus« and »creativity« are the key concepts in Amian's own Peircean approach which she outlines in the second part of the first chapter. She sets out from the premise that these concepts have not fared well in postmodernist literature and poststructuralist theory, as, for example, Lyotard's critique of a Habermasian consensus and Eagleton's critique of a Romantic notion of creativity show. Amian emphasizes that »Peirce's pragmatist rendering of the language of creativity and consensus [too] cannot escape this critique as it remains firmly tied to the modernist conception of ›man‹ and ›rational society‹ that Peirce remained committed to and worked to bring about« (55). And yet, because Peirce's model of creativity relies on »an ordinary process of continued *re*-creation« and since he regards consensus always as a »frail, provisional moment, in which the flow of infinite semiosis is arrested with the need for action impending,« she holds that »Peirce's language reaches beyond modern notions of creativity as an exceptional, godlike power, and beyond progressive notions of consensus as the regulative principle of rational societies« (55; Amian's emphasis). As a consequence, she argues, the specific Peircean variant makes it possible to talk again about creativity and consensus without forgetting the insights of postmodernism and poststructuralism into the problematic nature of these concepts.

Employed with this critical vocabulary, Amian stages what she calls – and what indeed are – »nuanced critical encounters« (63) between Peirce's theory and three postmodernist novels in the following chapters. The novels she interprets are Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963) as an example of the early or classical postmodernism of the 1960s, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) as an example of the emancipatory postmodernism or postmodernism of difference of the 1980s, and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) as an example of the late or »post-«postmodernism of the present. In different, yet related ways, she argues, these novels »critically engage the Peircean language of creativity and consensus. They stage the workings of creativity, explore the (im)possibility of consensus, and reach for new ways of performing creative (inter)subjectivities in a post-postmodern world.« Thus, they »confront

Peirce with postmodern notions of power, difference, and performativity while calling for nuanced re-readings of the founding discourses of postmodernism at the same time« (63-64). Contrary to Rohr, then, who sees the literary texts she interprets *reflect* a Peircean process of reality constitution, Amian asks how creativity and consensus as concepts central to Peirce are *negotiated* in Pynchon, Morrison, and Foer. And what her Peircean approach brings to the fore is that these concepts, shunned if not neglected completely by poststructuralist approaches, are indeed absolutely central to the texts in question and engaged in highly complex ways. As a consequence, Amian's convincing interpretations lead to new interpretations of the novels and exposes some problematic dimensions in the pragmatist framework many see as a panacea for the diseases of postmodernism and poststructuralism.

As the details of Amian's interpretations are probably of interest mainly to scholars in American studies, I will not recapitulate them at length here. Instead I focus on the larger theoretical implications of her argument which Amian herself already hints at in the individual chapters and then spells out in her conclusion. The chapter on Pynchon's *V.* – entitled »Creativity and Power« – describes how »*V.* pushes the capricious force of creativity to an extreme as it confronts its readers with the destabilizing effects of guesswork gone wild and reveals what happens if the subject's creative efforts are no longer counterbalanced by and socially limited by intersubjective exchange.« Moreover, as *V.* furthermore brings to the fore that elements of control are inherent in all acts of creation, the novel »reveals a troubling dimension of the very notion of creativity that Peirce does not account for« (70). This »conspicuous coexistence of play and control« (108) does not only point to a blind spot in the pragmatist framework uncritically hailed by so many today. It also allows Amian to reconsider and re-evaluate what Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1987), one of the most important books on early postmodernist fiction, called the »contradictory« nature of postmodernism (qtd. in Amian 108). Hutcheon famously argued that (early) postmodernism is paradoxical as it is entirely self-reflexive and simultaneously grounds its plot in a historical context without synthesizing these two dimensions. Drawing on Peirce, Amian, by contrast, manages to show that »[p]lay and control go hand in hand« (111) and cannot be separated. Accordingly, her interpretation powerfully challenges »the privileging of either ›play‹ or ›power‹ in critical approaches to postmodern fiction,« thus implicitly calling for re-readings of an entire body of texts that seemed to be exhausted.

In similar fashion, Amian's chapter on Morrison's *Beloved*, aptly called »Consensus and Difference,« complicates both the Peircean notion of consensus and previous readings of the novel that have tended to solely highlight the text's politics of difference. For Amian, the novel negotiates »the (im)possibility of consensus« (118). She arrives at this conclusion by way of offering what might be the most convincing interpretation of the novel's final scene in which a motley crowd of women confronts and eventually defeats the novel's eponymous heroine who might or might not be a ghost returned from the dead to haunt her mother who killed her to spare her a life in slavery. This scene has always puzzled critics as the women cannot agree on who or what *Beloved* is, nor does their coalition persist after she has disappeared. For Amian now, this scene dramatizes a Peircean notion of consensus, as it demonstrates »how the paralyzing thrust that lies at the very heart of ›endless‹ signifying processes [i.e. the women's attempts to make sense of *Beloved*] might – at least provisionally – be overcome, how action might be possible – at least temporarily and on volatile grounds – and how frail moments of meaningful and empowering intersubjective exchange might be conceivable« (116). However, as the novel also reveals consensus to be »extremely dangerous as it relies on the erasure of difference and the affirmation of pre-existing power positions,« the novel at the same time »works against the normative aggrandizement of the Peircean notion of consensus« (118). Again, then, the postmodernist text benefits from being approached from a Peircean perspective, but speaks back to the theory by bringing a contemporary understand-

ing of difference and power to bear on the pragmatist idea of consensus and thus exposing its limits and pitfalls.

In her final chapter, »Creativity and Consensus,« Amian interprets Foer's recent but already highly acclaimed novel *Everything Is Illuminated*. Combining V.'s delight in boundless creativity with *Beloved*'s simultaneous longing for and abhorrence of consensus, Foer's novel, according to Amian, positions its reader as »both witness and participant in the strikingly Peircean process of collectively reading and writing the world into being« (158). Unlike early postmodernist texts, *Everything Is Illuminated* is no longer primarily interested in destabilizing historical accounts and unveiling them as subjective constructions. Taking this notion for granted, the novel instead explores ways of establishing and stabilizing an entirely invented version of the history of the small Ukrainian shtetl Trachimbrod – an attempt Amian calls the novel's »will to believe anyway« (191). As in Peirce, then, and in a move that restores agency to those involved in the process, reality emerges as both entirely made up and intersubjective. This restitution of agency is even taken further, as one of the protagonists finally moves from writing, and thus from an endless and selfreflexive chain of signification, to confronting his abusive father. Similar to other post-postmodernist texts Foer's novel expresses a longing to move beyond metafictional reflection toward subjects that feel, act and communicate, thus getting around the solipsism in which so many characters in classical postmodernist texts remain caught. However, unlike some other contemporary texts, *Everything Is Illuminated*, as Amian shows, does not fall back onto a naïve understanding of identity. The novel may »reclaim the subject« (178), but it also »resists the impulse of a nostalgic retreat by never ceasing to openly display its reliance on a postmodernist textual performance« (180). The novel returns to Peircean notions of creativity and consensus, but confronts them with a postmodernist concept of performativity, showing that it is indeed possible to speak, in Peircean fashion, about subjects and agency again – without falling back on the overcome and problematic notions entailed in Peirce's nineteenth-century understanding of these concepts.

3. Critique: The Larger Implications of Amian's Argument

Amian's study, then, leaves behind the familiar and overtired language of difference and hybridity in favour of the language of consensus and difference. However, it does so not by simply discarding with the valuable insights of postmodernist writing and poststructuralist theory such as the insistence on the mediated quality of experience or the subtle workings of power through language. Confronting the weaknesses that have made approaches based entirely on such assumptions extremely predictable by now, she does not resort to a naïve and outdated pragmatism that carries a lot of unwanted baggage such as an outmoded belief in an entirely rational and, more or less explicitly, male subject. Instead, she takes the best both from both realms and brings it to bear on another, bringing to the fore how much postmodernist texts are concerned with issues of creativity and consensus and thus with topics almost entirely neglected by criticism so far. If there is anything to be criticized about this book – apart maybe from the fact that, while she writes beautifully, Amian's sentences should sometimes be cut in half – then it is that the book has no index. This is unfortunate indeed as the surprising alliances between diverse thinkers as well as texts usually placed in different traditions that emerge over the course of the book might be easier to track with an index, especially if one does not want to read the whole book.

Rather than dwelling on this little disappointment, however, I would like to quickly elaborate on three of the larger implications of Amian's important book that I have already hinted at along the way. To begin with, *Rethinking Postmodernism(s)* challenges the compartmentalization prevailing in approaches to postmodernist literature. Postmodernism, we all learned while growing up, is a highly diverse cultural movement that resists any effort at homogenization.

As a consequence of this theoretical position and the institutional specialization of literature departments especially in the United States, authors such as Pynchon and Morrison are hardly treated together anymore. They are assigned to different sections in anthologies and different syllabi for the classroom. Amian's study questions this way of thinking by highlighting the common ground their novels tread and thus calls for a major re-writing of at least American, if not all, postmodernism.

Second, Amian's book, as she herself self-confidently declares, »reveals what may be gained by moving beyond the easy antagonism between consensus and difference that contemporary theory has set up« (217). Her reading of *Beloved* promotes what might be called a postmodernist Peircean model of talking about meaning-making and social action that incorporates and transcends both the efforts of those that emphasize exclusively either consensus such as Rorty or Habermas or difference such as Derrida or Butler. In similar fashion, Amian's argument also allows for a rethinking of the relationship between agency and subjectivity, as the version of the subject that she constructs vis-à-vis Peirce and Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* is one that insists on a subject's ability to arrest the incessant process of semiosis and act – without falling back on modern ideas about a pre-linguistic, rational and tacitly male subject.

Finally, the book brings to the fore the possibilities and pitfalls of a pragmatist approach to literature and culture. Amian makes perfectly clear how pragmatism may help in overcoming current theoretical impasses and thus revitalize both the practice of interpretation and the discourse of theory. But she also makes perfectly clear that »current pragmatist scholarship will go nowhere as long as it fails to acknowledge and engage important insights of postmodern theory and culture« (204). What is needed, then, Amian concludes and I agree, are studies that do not position pragmatism in antagonism to postmodernism and poststructuralism but that engage these movements in a dialogue.

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Notes

¹ Ihab Hassan, From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: The Local/Global Context, *Philosophy and Literature* 25 (2001), 1-15, 10. While it is of course highly problematic to conflate postmodernism and poststructuralism this is exactly what has happened in American literature departments over the last forty years. Amian is aware of this problem and addresses it straightforwardly early on in her study, concluding that, as she challenges American conceptualizations of postmodernism, she has to »acknowledge the nationally specific history of [its] fusion« with poststructuralism (12). Thus, while she mainly speaks of postmodernism, her study tackles a specific variant of poststructuralism as well.

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