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Tony Jackson



Postmodernism, Narrative, and the Cold War Sense of an Ending

As the Cold War moves into the past, we steadily gain more and more opportunity to make historical arguments about the period and its characteristics. We come to see more precisely the ways in which the “war” that never really happened affected all manner of nonmilitary life. Here I want to look at the Cold War in relation to the history of ideas, two related ideas in particular—postmodernism and narrative—that have been central to the decades after WWII. For it is, I would argue, neither simply coincidence nor historical development that finds these ideas appearing to the world as they do during the Cold War. I begin with a discussion of the emergence of what I take to be the more general idea, postmodernism, in order to move on to my discussion of the emergence of narrative. By “emergence” I mean the appearance of each on this particular historical stage. With both postmodern conceptuality and narrative we can, of course, trace a kind of historical movement from earlier understandings to Cold War understandings of each. The usual suspects—Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, for instance—came up with kinds of thinking that, in retrospect, led to postmodern conceptuality. Similarly, we can trace a kind of historical progress toward the emergence of our present understanding of narrative, beginning most likely with Vladimir Propp and the Russian Formalists. But though the work of these earlier thinkers may have been necessary to give rise to the later ideas, that prior work was not sufficient. This is especially true with our understanding of narrative. Narrative has, after all, been an active subject for discussion since at least Aristotle. All manner of thinkers have weighed in on the idea of story in a great variety of ways. But only with the Cold War era were conditions adequate to or even demanding of narrative as the kind of concept that it has become. Again, this same kind of case can be made for postmodernism in a more general sense, and we will see that

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the emergence of narrative and the emergence of postmodernism are closely related conceptually. Though many historical elements had to combine to create some kind of sufficient conditions for this historical appearance, I will show how Cold War nuclear anxiety, which is to say the Cold War sense of an ending, is one most important such element. Since we are considering concepts in the history of ideas here rather than literary works, our primary texts will be literary-critical: primarily two, one from later and one from earlier in the Cold War.

First we turn to the larger concept of postmodernism and to our later critical text. How, we may ask, is postmodernism conceptually an element of the Cold War context? This question was, one way or another, most famously addressed in the early eighties in a special issue of *Diacritics* on "Nuclear Criticism." There Jacques Derrida's insightful 1984 essay "No Apocalypse, Not Now" discusses certain key postmodern concepts in relation to the anxiety that is closely associated with nuclear war. It is not surprising that one of the primary theorists of the textuality of human being and knowledge saw a relationship between nuclear war and the kinds of ideas toward which his own thinking had been so regularly steered. In effect nuclear war becomes a model deconstructive concept, "a phenomenon," he writes, "whose essential feature is that of being *fabulously textual*, through and through" (23). The simple fact is that no matter how many bombs and missiles, how much rhetoric and saber-rattling, how much anxiety and belligerence, the war has not happened, has no precedent, and so is a "non-event" (23). He rightly argues that the end of WWII was not a precedent, for it "ended a 'classical,' conventional war; it did not set off a nuclear war" (23). Further, the idea of nuclear war that most matters, the idea that "conditions every discourse and all strategies," is not some possible limited nuclear exchange but total thermonuclear war, which in most people's minds meant the end of what we take to be the world. Derrida is writing in 1984, and the devastation from a full-blown thermonuclear exchange by this time is more fully and widely understood than ever. Thus we have with nuclear war "the possibility of an irreversible destruction" of those things most central to human culture, in this case "the basis of literature and criticism" (26). The "destruction would take place for the first time and it would lack any common proportion" with other great destructions in human history (27). Then, he explicitly relates his own most famous concept to the Cold War context:

The hypothesis of this total destruction watches over deconstruction, it guides its footsteps; it becomes possible to recognize, in the light, so to speak, of that hypothesis, of that fantasy, or phantasm, the characteristic structures and historicity of the discourses, strategies, texts, or institutions to be deconstructed. That is why deconstruction, at least what is being advanced today in its name, belongs to the nuclear age. (27)

Further, he stresses the role that the concept of chance plays in making nuclear anxiety an unprecedented form of apocalyptic fear. The kind of chance that comes to light in relation to "total destruction," or what I will call an absolute ending, is not merely a concern with "factors of undecidability or incalculability that function as

reservations in a calculable decision" (29). Rather it is "the aleatory element that appears in a heterogeneous relation to every possible calculation and every possible decision" (29). Now these are crucial ideas, but as is perhaps typical, Derrida remains at a fairly abstract level of explanation. He says correctly that this "unthinkable element [chance] offers itself to (be) thought in the age when a nuclear war is possible" (29), but his explanation of why this should be the case, as with why deconstruction should become possible in the light of total destruction, is rhetorically ornate without being as clear as it might be.

Why should the nuclear sense of an ending make certain kinds of understandings—the peculiar conceptuality of deconstruction, the radical version of chance—so compelling? We will ask this same question about the emergence of the Cold War understanding of narrative. For none of these are unprecedented realizations, and yet it seems plain that the Cold War marks a period in which these and other, related understandings thrived in a distinctive historical way. To approach an answer to these questions we begin, as we must, with deterrence theory. Deterrence took off from the idea that the only way to prevent the apocalypse of nuclear war was for each side to have an equal ability and willingness to destroy the other, which is to say, to *use* its foremost weapons. Given this, then, assuming the other side had a rational sense of self-preservation, it would not attack for fear of bringing about its own destruction. This is deterrence in its most ancient and simple mode. But thermonuclear weapons, being absolute weapons, weapons capable of what amounts to absolute destruction, make a difference. In this context "deterrence . . . can guarantee security only by threatening total annihilation" (McCanles 17). This fact ratcheted up the importance of the idea of rational opponents. The presumption that no sane person would ever use the bombs against any enemy who could successfully retaliate in kind was a fundamental tenet of nuclear deterrence. Even limited retaliation would be so devastating that, in theory, no one in his right mind would be willing to pay the price for making the first strike.

But of course for deterrence to work, the weapons had to be armed, ready to use, and dependable. Further, each side had to make sure that the enemy believed that it was quite willing to make a rational and conscious choice to use them, given the right situation. Otherwise the weapons would *not* act as deterrents, and someone would actually use them, which might well lead to destruction on a scale so large as to be hardly imaginable. Given all this, there appeared to be no choice but to maintain a "balance of terror" in weaponry between the two superpowers. In fact taken to its extreme—and it is the nature of nuclear-deterrent thinking always to drive to the extreme case—deterrence strategy had to conclude that, paradoxically, "it [was] in the interest of the United States for *Russia* to have an invulnerable retaliatory force and vice versa" (Kahn 17 my emphasis). The most powerful weapons ever made quickly became apocalyptically self-canceling, designed and intended (officially at least) to prevent their own use, and yet at the same moment they had no other purpose than the utter destruction of the enemy. This is the most general description of what Stephen Weart and others have called the "insoluble paradox in deterrence theory" (234). Called the principle of mutually assured destruction and commonly known by its perfect acronym, MAD, it was "the keystone of policy" throughout the

Cold War (Weart 235). But of course as Michael McCanles has pointed out, the idea of a perfectly opposed *balance* of nuclear forces is not all that deterrence in fact requires. "The only way in which deterrence can be maintained is through the superiority of one side over the other, because only such superiority is capable of being a credible threat. Consequently, deterrence must be understood theoretically as well as practically to entail both equilibrium and its negation" (15). Especially when absolute destruction will likely be the outcome, each side must feel it has the upper military hand, and yet each side must claim, credibly, to be only equal or inferior to the other. But at the same time, given the stakes, to feel only equal is automatically to feel inferior, unable to pose a real threat to the enemy, as any look at the nuclear arms competition between the superpowers will show. So deterrence in the nuclear context is essentially, unavoidably paradoxical. As a result mind-wrenching self-contradiction became a basic, if eternally confusing, part of the public discourse of defense. Because in this case what was being deterred was nuclear devastation, the significance and effects of such paradoxes took on a much larger weight than in any previous historical example of deterrence thinking. Absurdities of the kind described above were the foundation of strategy. Even though, or rather, especially because these absurdities were arrived at through regular processes of reasoning, they could only look to many people like the triumph of madness over sanity.

What I have just described is perhaps the central example of the way in which "total destruction watches over deconstruction" (Derrida, "No Apocalypse" 27) and postmodernism in general. As I have argued elsewhere, the necessity to arrive at an unresolved, unrejected paradox (and other "absurd" concepts) is an identifying logical element, if not *the* identifying logical element of poststructuralist thinking and the thinking that has followed after it (Jackson). Our quick discussion of MAD has shown how in the relatively nonphilosophical realm of military strategy paradox was also unavoidable. It is in this way that from early on in the fifties a certain atmosphere emerged as a result of the creation of weapons that could bring about an absolute end. I do not claim that deterrence thinking straightforwardly *caused* poststructuralist (or more broadly, postmodern) conceptuality to emerge, but I do hold that the Cold War atmosphere was instrumental in enabling such conceptuality to appear and thrive as it did. And then, of course, such thinking in its turn has enabled us to conceptualize the Cold War in terms other than just political, economic, and military. In a sense, the meaning of the Cold War gets changed by the kind of conceptuality produced in its context. Thus, the *Diacritics* issue of 1984 from which I have quoted Derrida and McCanles is an example of the way in which the thinking that was enabled by the Cold War then turned round and reformulated the nature of that which it had been enabled by. Much of what I am here claiming about the affects of nuclear anxiety is of necessity itself derived from Cold War conceptuality. And hopefully as a result the "Cold War" will be an at least slightly different historical event after my discussion.

Before turning to the concept of narrative, let us look at two other, closely related elements that were unavoidable outcomes of thinking about the absolute ending: chance and infinite regress. If one scenario seemed more menacing than willfully starting a nuclear war, say for political reasons, it was the possibility of ac-

cidentally starting a nuclear war, what strategists call “inadvertence” (Blair 2). This led, of course, to elaborate mechanical and political fail-safe systems. Because the stakes were absolutely high, it was necessary that, with respect to both hardware and strategy, every possible contingency be considered. To speak of hardware first, once you have technology that “unleashes” nuclear energy, you must automatically have technology that will ensure the unleashed energy remains, in fact, leashed in very precise ways. More than for any other human production, nuclear technology must discover and eliminate the possibility of any “inadvertence.” The result is, of course, back-up systems for back-up systems, fail-safe systems and contingency plans of ever-increasing complexity. Since missiles could deliver warheads within fifteen to thirty minutes after lift-off, there must be elaborate and precise early-warning systems that would instantly alert those in command, thus giving them as many seconds as possible to decide if the alert were not simply a chance malfunction on our end, and then if the launch had been intentional or only a mistake on the other end, and then how to respond (just to give a brief sample of what that tiny stretch of time would require). There came to be, in fact, a “launch on warning” defensive strategy in which the launch of one side’s missiles more or less automatically caused the launch of the other side’s missiles. In one way this “symmetrical launch . . . lends stability to crisis interactions between rationally calculating actors” (Blair 174) because each knows that the other can respond instantly in kind. Thus, there can be only one rational reason for launching missiles: because the other side has already done so. But on the other hand, the chances of mechanical or human mistake become ever more apocalyptic as a result. Further, in order to ensure that there will always be missiles to fire, there must be not just ballistic missiles but anti-ballistic missiles, and then anti-ballistic missile defense systems, and finally a system—Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative—that, God-like, hopes to envelope the entire planet. In effect technology must hope to corral as completely as possible that which of its nature cannot be corralled: contingency. The back-ups and defenses would have to go on infinitely to do what they most want to do. As long as they are finite, there remains an element of chance no matter what precautions we take. This is what Derrida means by “the aleatory element that appears in a heterogeneous relation to every possible calculation and every possible decision” (29). Further, because the nuclear ending will be absolute, there comes to be a bizarre equalizing of the stories by means of which the end arrives. The story of the valiant Americans launching the strike to preserve freedom carries no more weight than the story of a faulty switch or a goofy mistake. The end is the same in any case. Again to one degree or another all this was public knowledge, and it is in this way that the idea of chance mushrooms into the Cold War mindset in general. As Bruce Blair writes, of the two ways a war could begin—failure of deterrence or inadvertence—a “failure of deterrence was by far the dominant model” as far as strategists and planners were concerned (2). But in the popular mind, as films such as *Fail Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove* show, inadvertence seems to have been at least as great if not the greater fear.

Infinite regress most strikingly shows itself in the details of deterrence thinking about human actors. The most dangerous actor—the madman—was, of course, the one that deterrence theory could not really consider because it was outside the limits

of calculability. Still, as Doris Lessing eloquently put it in 1957: “We are haunted by the image of an idiot hand, pressing down a great black lever; or a thumb pressing a button, as the dance of fiery death begins in one country and spreads over the earth; and above the hand the concentrated fanatic stare of a mad sick face” (Lessing 9–10). This most real possibility aside, we find interestingly enough that the infinite regress appears in what we could call the textbook scenarios, the considerations based upon “calculating decisionmakers” acting rationally in the interest of national self-preservation (Blair 2). This event was relatively determinable, its variables being curtailed by definitions of rational behavior and by long-established notions of politics, economics, and military strategy. This is the kind of thing Derrida means when he mentions chance as “factors of undecidability or incalculability that function as reservations in a calculable decision” (29). And yet again, because absolute destruction is involved, infinitely regressive thought is unavoidable. To prevent somehow inadvertently stumbling into catastrophe, strategists had to imagine all the possible scenarios that *might* escalate to a nuclear exchange, and to do this they had to imagine all possible moves and motives of the enemy. Not just the enemy’s obvious goals, desires, and actions had to be considered, but equally the most likely reaction of the enemy to one’s own actions. So, for instance, Herman Kahn in his (in)famous book *On Thermonuclear War* speaks of what was called “the reciprocal fear of surprise attack.” In this scenario “each side imputes to the other aggressive intentions and misreads purely defensive preparations as being offensive” (16). If, in fact, defensive action by side X was perceived incorrectly as aggressive by side Y, then side Y would feel compelled to strike first, which would require quick retaliation on side X’s part, which would bring on a reciprocal retaliation by side Y, etc. etc., each event augmenting the necessary force of the following one until the original misperception had erupted into maximum war. So each action one took required an assessment of how the *other* side would perceive that action. And further it would always be the case that the other side was considering one’s own actions and perceptions in the same manner. Given this, one had to assess whether a given action by the other side was being intentionally carried out in such a way as to cause one to see that action as defensive when, in fact, that action was going to be aggressive. Or vice versa. And so on. Ad infinitum. “There are,” Kahn continues, “unfortunately many postures possible in which a disastrous train of self-confirming actions and counter-actions could be set into motion” (Kahn 16) without anyone having ever intended to start anything.

Thermonuclear bombs, the limit-case weapon, the weapon to end all weapons, constantly forced limit-case thinking, which, paradoxically, means thinking in a way without limits. The absolute weapon constantly forced thinking to go as far as it possibly could in imagining the beginning and middle that could possibly lead to the absolute ending: apocalyptic war. But this particular kind of limit-case thinking always cycles into logical impasses. The consideration of oneself, the other, how the other perceives oneself, how one perceives the other perceiving oneself, etc., is an example of infinite regress, and yet it seems necessary to carry thinking this far in order to avoid destruction. In combination with the paradox of self-canceling ultimate weapons, this kind of thing only augmented the madness of MAD.

We have seen how certain consequences of absolute weaponry may be related to the central concepts of such key post-WWII thinkers as Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction and postmodernism more generally, then, we may call Cold War conceptualities. But how may all this be related to the emergence of our present understanding of narrative? With this question we turn to an earlier, exemplary Cold War work of literary criticism: Frank Kermode's still-excellent book, *The Sense of an Ending*. Published in 1967, this book was originally delivered as lectures in 1965: more or less right in the middle of the long Cold War, which begins about 1947 and ends with the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989.¹ The book is a broad consideration of the part endings have played in both literary and life narratives. Kermode starts off by "discussing fictions of the End" (5); the ways "we have imagined the ends of the world" (5). He explains "naïve apocalypticism," which is the traditional, typically religious sense of imminent world-destruction. The plot of this original, paradigmatic story involves a Transitional period of crisis and destruction followed by a new and better birth. But by the mid-1960s, Kermode writes, none of these most conventional apocalyptic imaginings "can ever again be useful except as fictions patiently explained" (27). Kermode uses "fiction" in relation to "myth." From the perspective of the present (the Cold War), these earlier imaginings of the end are clearly fictions, stories created by human beings in order to fulfill certain recurrent human desires and to offset certain recurrent human anxieties. But they were not taken as fiction at the time. Kermode does not want to belittle these stories by describing them as simply false in relation to our present truth, so he explains that what is fiction to us, was myth for earlier ages, that is, taken as given truth, taken as factual (we might now say ideological) truths instead of the fictions they actually were. "Fictions," he writes, "can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive . . . Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were" (39). A sign of the post-WWII era is the spreading conviction that even our most fundamental understandings, understandings so basic that they have not heretofore appeared *as* understandings are myths of this kind, which is to say again that they are, in fact, now emerging as fictions.

Modern times, Kermode says, have made the mythical era of transition, the period of last times in the traditional apocalyptic scenario, into an age unto itself, an age of perpetual crisis; and it is in just this way that "the paradigms of apocalypse continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world" (28). So though we in the mid-60s are no longer *naïvely* apocalyptic, Kermode pointedly says that the contemporary world is *not* significantly different from the past as far as the basic feeling of living in last times. We are wrong to "think of our own crisis as pre-eminent, more worrying, more interesting than other crises" (94). We simply have a secularized sense of apocalypse. It "would be childish to argue," he writes, "that nuclear bombs are more real and make one experience more authentic crisis-feelings than armies in the sky" (95). But Kermode's book itself belies this claim.

In a way the book's most general aim is to show that the present sense of an ending is really only the latest version of a recurrent phenomenon. The clear desire is that we should take comfort in such a thought. But, of course, why should such comfort be needed in the first place? What is it about this time in history that would call

forth the need to write just this explanation of endings? At the same time that he downplays the historical difference of nuclear anxiety, Kermode does admit that present times are in “no need of spurious apocalypses,” such as the earlier ones have all been (15). And in speaking of the way millennial thinking always revises its dates when the end does not come, he says we “may be sure that the failure of 1964, or even, so far, of 1965, to produce atomic war” (15) would be no problem for a proper millennialist thinker. This is the late fall of 1965, and Kermode is evidently experiencing the nuclear sense of an ending in such a way that he will not simply make a positive statement about reaching the new year some weeks away. Stressing the basic human need for “concord” or a pattern of temporal continuity, Kermode claims that we must keep changing “concord-fictions” because times are always changing. But then, no longer clearly speaking of fictions in general as opposed to the immediate present, he says that fictions “change because we no longer live in a world with an historical *tick* which will certainly be consummated by a definitive *tock*” (64). Kermode wants to convince us that the contemporary sense of an ending is comfortably familiar, but it is not really that way at all.

In fact, the Cold War sense of an ending was historically unprecedented for at least three reasons.² First, this was to be a final destruction that was not, apparently, going to be regenerative or redemptive, at least not in any way that would matter. Understanding of this outcome grew steadily across the period, becoming powerfully amplified as the destructive force of hydrogen bombs became widely known. Somehow Kermode manages to ignore this most serious aspect of the thermonuclear apocalypse. He argues, for instance, that post-WWII apocalypticism is not really very different from the historically recurrent *fin-de-siècle* apocalypticisms or from the modernist apocalypticism of Yeats. But, of course, the Cold War sense of an ending in the sixties is decades away from any calendar-marked, millennial-type boundary. And as Kermode admits, Yeats, like Nietzsche, longed for destruction that would bring renewal, a movement into a new historical gyre. In the Cold War the hoard of science fiction stories about life after nuclear war appeared as a means of trying to imagine just what seemed so unlikely, a rebirth; and, of course, more than a few of these were forced to imagine starting over on a different planet.

Secondly, unlike all other apocalyptic scenarios the nuclear ending was physically possible at the present moment as a function of human manipulation of the material world. Thermonuclear war was, as Derrida pointed out, fabulously textual simply because nothing like it had ever happened. But, on the other hand, it was fabulously textual in an entirely new way. The agent of destruction was in its raw materiality neither supernatural nor theoretical: examples of it were being tested and photographed for all to see. It needed no religious or political or scientific interpretive apparatus to explain the basic fact of its destructiveness. Because of the bomb’s purely material nature, there was no compelling moral or spiritual or even political element to the ending it would bring. Of course, there were moral positions taken on either side, and taken by many with the fervor of spiritual or religious commitment; nonetheless, once nuclear weapons came seriously to mean mutually assured destruction, any compelling sense of morality was constantly drowned in a sea of suicidal and homicidal madness.

Thirdly, unlike other, basically supernatural apocalyptic scenarios, nuclear war might not happen at all: nuclear war was not a necessary, prescribed ending in any grand narrative. In traditional Christian or even Marxist stories of the end, the question is never *whether* destruction of the present order and the birth of the new will occur, but when this will occur and what exact form it will take. With nuclear weapons the one certainty is the form of annihilation, and the great uncertainty is whether the event will actually happen. And here we focus on the Cold War sense of chance from yet another angle, one less directly in the realm of strategy, but more directly in the realm of everyday life. For the certainty of the kind of destruction and the uncertainty of whether destruction will actually happen made the idea of chance more generally and potently present for more people than ever before. Needless to say, all humans confront chance regularly in life, but the idea of chance in relation to a nuclear ending was different because it was the chance of an epic catastrophe, it was known to so many people, and it was a product of human invention. In other words, a community of people living on a threatening but dormant volcano might have a shared, pumped-up sense of the chance that their lives could be destroyed. But while there is a chance that the mountain will not blow up, even if it does blow up, it is only natural that it should do so. Volcanoes occur in nature, and sometimes they explode. In this sense the event is not really random. The other extreme of a natural catastrophe is something seeming to happen entirely out of the blue; some version of what we call a freak accident. Cause and effect can be established for such an event, but still, from the perspective of the victim, a freak accident is as random as we can get. And yet even this is rawly natural in its way. We understand that the occasional intrusion of randomness into our otherwise more or less ordered lives is an expected part of existence. Nuclear destruction is not random in the usual way of natural catastrophes, because in a fundamental sense it is consciously, willfully self-produced, in fact is in some ways one of the apical creations of will and thought. It will not happen out of the blue in any freakish sense because everyone knows what it is, how it has come to exist, and that it may happen at any time. And yet it may not happen at all. It is difficult to overstress the importance of this sense of chance.

So both in terms of actual strategy and in the basic understandings of everyday life, chance or contingency became compelling in a powerful and historically distinctive way, became an element of the conscious and unconscious atmosphere of that period we call the Cold War. The idea of chance, which always has its times of more or less importance in human thought, became strikingly foregrounded as a result of nuclear anxiety, and the emergence of narrative took place in the context of this foregrounding of chance. We find this hyperawareness of contingency in relation to narrative surfacing in theoretical works that are now widely taken as canonical. Many of the most influential writings that bring about the historical emergence of narrative take off from a consideration of history. For example, the early writings of Thomas Kuhn, Hayden White, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, Alexandre Koyré, among others, as well as many postmodern novelists, may all be understood as conceptualizing narrative in the mode of the Cold War affect of contingency. This is not to say that all these thinkers overtly stressed chance in the way that I am doing here, though some do. But one relevant way to explain the generic

similarities among these thinkers (and so many who have followed) is through the way chance gets included in their ideas about change over time. All of these writers take the extreme (that is, postmodern) skeptical position that human understanding of time and of cause-and-effect, are, like all other human understandings, products of desire and ideology in general, and of humanly created diachronic narrative structures in particular. There are no beginnings, middles, and ends in the world, apart from what narrative understanding provides. In other words, the very idea of beginning, middle, and end is what Kermode would call a fiction. Apart from this fiction, we have only, so we must assume, chaos and randomness. If we become convinced of these truths, then we are led to ask, as Hayden White famously did, what is at stake, "what wish is enacted, what desire is gratified by the fantasy that real events," which do not of themselves occur in narrative form, nonetheless appear to humans as having the "formal coherence of a story" (4). In fact, it now appears that it is chance that things work out as they do, but humans employ (and are employed by) a constitutive fantasy (or myth in Kermode's terms) of narrative ordering as a means of understanding, or more specifically, giving value to the world. Given this new concept of narrative, our analysis of human knowledge and being can begin with the way story structures (fictions) have managed successfully to present chaos and chance as systematic and orderly (myth). Foucault's critique of diachronic histories, de Man's arguments in "Literary History and Literary Modernity" and elsewhere, Kuhn's explanation of scientific revolution, as well as more recent thinking such as Stephen Jay Gould's explanation of evolution in terms of punctuated equilibrium, all one way or the other take off from a historically distinct awareness of the reality of chance; and they all attempt to explain the way narrative structures produce order.

Rethinking historiography in order to include chance in an adequate way (for, of course, historians had never simply ruled out chance) produced at the same moment nonlinear, synchronic versions of history and the revelation of what traditional narrative history had until that moment actually all along been. As we know, synchronic or, as we might now call them, Cold War historiographies (for instance, those of Foucault, Kuhn, Gould) stress abrupt, massive change that occurs for more or less arbitrary reasons, or, in any case, reasons that are not adequately described by gradualist, diachronic histories. This kind of historical narrative obviously provides, in a bleak way, for the kind of change that nuclear war would visit upon the world. It makes sense that such histories would seem compelling in the context of nuclear anxiety. But I would argue that *the way* chance is attended to is the more significant inclusion. Foucault, of course, is famous for writing a nondiachronic history, explaining epochs in terms of unifying traits, and offering no explanation for why one epoch should follow or precede another: large-scale historical change just happens. Gould tries to show how any explanatory narrative in which human beings are the necessary end of a developmental story is an anthropomorphic fantasy. "Perhaps," he has written, what appears to be a gradual, narrative of development toward more complexity and toward humanity "is only Lady Luck in disguise" (48). The emergence of humanity in fact, according to this understanding of evolution, happened by chance, but narrative operating as myth enables us to ignore this unsettling truth.

In short, the fear of total destruction, the nuclear sense of an ending "watches

over,” as Derrida would put it, the emergence of what we now mean by narrative in the same way that it watches over deconstruction. The forms of narrative are revealed not simply as being an aesthetic means of representing an already present (albeit problematic) reality in time, but rather as being a fundamental means of constituting reality *as* temporal to begin with. With this conception, there is not first action in time, and then narrative, but rather the other way around. Said yet another way, the mapping of conventional cause and effect stories of beginning, middle, and end onto reality only works because the actuality of contingency is unconsciously shoved under the rug, not by any particular narrative, but by the structure of narrative in general. If we seriously try to include contingency in our understandings, and just this becomes unavoidable in the context of nuclear anxiety, then it begins to become apparent that in our own anthropomorphic way we have been preserving what amounts to a supernatural or mythic ground in the guise of the everyday, “natural” category of narrative. Narrative itself becomes apprehensible, not just as any old myth, but rather as one of the primary myths, in fact a kind of ur-mythic structure.

Typically, all these rethinkings deal much with the way the nature of endings has heretofore unconsciously determined what is perceived as necessary, and therefore not simply random. This might seem a contradiction: I am stressing the historically distinct, nuclear sense of an ending, but arguing that the emergence of narrative involved a powerful questioning of the idea of the ending. But this is just the way it works. It can be explained using Kermode’s terms. Kermode’s discussion makes the ending important in a new way precisely in the act of making it (the ending) graspable as a concept, which is to say revealing it as a fiction: but when the ending is revealed as a fiction, it loses its status as a myth, as a natural aspect of narrative. The recognition of the ending as a fiction means that, in one sense, the ending will no longer have that most potent of all powers: the power to be taken for granted, the power to be so obviously part of the nature of things that it need not be discussed. The same holds for narrative more generally. The recognition of how the fiction of narrative has been operating as a myth means that, in one sense, narrative will no longer have the power of being taken for granted as a natural part of the world. So the conscious, willed construction of weaponry that may possibly end the material world induces the understanding that “endings” and, therefore, narrative are unconscious human constructions.

Kermode’s elaboration of all this takes a revealing turn when he comes to what he calls the two modernisms. Both modernisms are apocalyptic, he says, but in different ways. The modernism of the early part of the century, no matter its other kinds of revolutionary qualities, was “emphatic about its living relation to the past” (114). But the current, 1960s modernism is what Kermode calls schismatic, and—using Beckett and Robbe-Grillet as examples—he tends to disapprove of it. The older modernism saw the past as a source of order, while the newer, says Kermode, feels the past ought to be ignored. Both modernisms react to a “painful transitional situation,” he says, “but one in terms of continuity and the other in terms of schism” (122). But he goes on to point out how this kind of schism will not work. “Schism is meaningless without reference to some prior condition; the absolutely New is simply unintelligible” (116). It is with these kinds of comments that *The Sense of an Ending*

takes its own place as a transitional text into the conceptual realm of postmodernism. For there are schismatic modernists who do see themselves as radically overthrowing all that has come before, but the historically primary schismatic modernism, which is to say what we now call postmodernism, does not really hold such a position. Kermode has explained in detail how narrative itself is a fiction and not just any fiction, but the primary fictional means by which humans construct themselves in time. He has done this in such a way that anything based on narrative structure will also now be understandable as a fiction. But having established the fictional nature of narrative understanding itself, he does not fall into the nihilist trap of thinking that he has somehow destroyed narrative, that he has opened the way to the revolutionarily true by exposing the perniciously false. In fact, just Kermode's understanding—of the nature of endings, of narrative in general, *and* that newness, truly revolutionary change of the kind we most want is not possible—becomes central to both postmodern fiction and postmodern historiography.

In another example of this, Kermode discusses the way works such as Alain Robbe-Grillet's novels "attempt . . . a more or less Copernican change" in the nature of plotting (23). But Kermode points out that, fictional or not, we cannot simply destroy or overthrow the basic diachronic, cause-and-effect-over-time paradigms: "In some sense they must be there to be defeated" (20). We can only get "constantly changing, constantly more subtle, relationships between a fiction and the paradigms" of diachronic plotting (24). This kind of understanding is being expressed at exactly the same time by Jacques Derrida, who in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" writes that "the passage beyond philosophy does not consist in turning the page of philosophy (which usually amounts to philosophizing badly) but in continuing to read philosophers *in a certain way*" (1122). This kind of move beyond philosophy will not, then, annihilate philosophy. Twenty years later, Linda Hutcheon will say that in postmodernism generally, "[h]istory is not made obsolete: it is . . . rethought . . . as a human construct" (16). Postmodernism makes plain its "contradictory dependence on and independence from that which temporally preceded it" (18). She writes of what she calls historiographic metafiction, a primary postmodern fictional form, that "its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs . . . is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (5).

So in the act of trying to tame down the historical difference of the nuclear sense of an ending and the historical difference of the "schismatic" modernism that has arisen in the Cold War context, Kermode in fact ends up defining what is most historically distinctive about postmodernism in general: its theoretical self-awareness, given what it claims about the nature of history and fiction. If a basic motive in all this has been his altogether generous desire to provide some kind of comfort to a world haunted by nuclear anxiety, it seems that he has created a similar comfort for himself and the presentation of his own ideas on narrative. In other words, he has managed to generate a postmodern understanding of the nature of narrative while ostensibly aligning himself with modernism and thereby in principal maintaining his "living relation to the past." With postmodern narrative as with the nuclear ending and as, for that matter, with his own insights about narrative, Kermode's desire to

preserve a historical continuity seems to prevent him from seeing historical differences. For not all relations with the past are the same. His own thinking about endings can, of course, be installed in a historical line of thinking about endings, just as nuclear deterrence theory can be installed in a historical line of deterrence theory. But a simple series does not in itself constitute a meaningful continuity. The significance of deterrence theory changes fundamentally when what is being deterred is the material destruction of the world. The significance of narrative changes fundamentally when it begins to be understood in the way Kermode understands it. This fact is born out by the explosion of writing about narrative in the following decades.

As Paul Boyer wrote in the late eighties, in some ways a “history of ‘nuclear’ thought and culture [becomes] indistinguishable from a history of all contemporary thought and culture” (xx). By considering the most important nuclear thinking, which is to say the nature and implications of mutually assured destruction, we have seen how postmodernism and the understanding of narrative that became dominant during the Cold War are different names for a generic, historically definitive conceptuality. Now the question may be asked: what is the relationship of the present essay to Cold War conceptuality? In one sense, everything I have said is a Cold War consideration of the nature of the Cold War. Thinking about things in the way that I have is an example of Cold War affect. In another sense, I have to one degree or another moved to an edge or border of this affect in such a way as to be able to make generalizations about it, as if it had been a myth that is now being revealed as a kind of fiction. The nature of just this kind of revelation, though, entails the self-undoing of the argument that has brought just this truth to light. In other words, given this kind of conceptuality, any argument that reveals as a fiction what has heretofore been a myth is itself establishing what will have been a fiction in light of some later reaching of an edge or border. So we are at another infinite regress. But even so, if both material history in the usual diachronic sense and the processing of dialectics in the realm of ideas have both churned along to the point where we may successfully speak of the Cold War as a past historical epoch, then we may have reached some boundary that places us at the beginning of a next epoch. But, of course, that will have been true only when the next epoch has reached its ending.

ENDNOTES

1. I take Kermode as exemplary not because of what he said, so much as when he said it and the way he said it. The burgeoning of narrative theory from the sixties to the present hardly needs citation. Certainly, with respect to the particular way that Kermode comes at narrative—that is, from one of its constituent “parts,” the ending—other thinkers on narrative in the following decades could be considered in terms similar to the ones I am using here. In general the paradigmatic Cold War concept will be centered on an infinitely regressive dialectical relationship; so texts that set out to explain how (or take for granted that) narrative is one way or the other a never-quite-stabilized dialectical process will be examples of Cold War conceptuality. Still to my mind one of the clearest and most concise examples of what I mean would be Jonathan Culler’s essay “Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative.” And if Kermode is an early flowering of this kind of thinking, Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot* is the blossom opened wide. Edward Said’s *Beginnings* would be especially interesting for consideration as a Cold War critical text. That project may be explained as a demonstration of how our understanding of

beginnings gets changed, given the present possibility of an absolute ending. After all, one of the most well-known unsynthesized dialectics in narrative theory has been the idea of the end determining the beginning and vice versa. A regularly occurring aspect of deterrence thinking was the realization that in any case of inadvertence, the ending would appear to come out of nowhere. But this would always entail some sequence of cause and effect, however unlikely, that had to lead to just this ending. The sequence could only be discovered by working backward from the ending, and the beginning, once found, would appear at once both absurd, because it would bear no relationship to the human political and economic worlds that had caused nuclear weapons; and also utterly necessary, contingently necessary we might say. The distance in kind between the inadvertent, beginning cause and the apocalyptic, ending effect is so remote from the discourses of politics and economics that the story seems at once purely random and utterly necessary. (Not coincidentally, what I have just explained can also serve as a general description of chaos theories of change in the physical and biological sciences, which also flourished during the Cold War.) With this thought in mind arises the paranoia that the beginning has already begun, that the absurd sequence of causality leading to the absolute ending is always already underway, but we cannot recognize it even though we are presently in it. Further, the discovery of the beginning could only ever be imagined because the apocalypse would remove all of the human world that had brought it about. Therefore, all we can really do is imagine what will have been the beginning after the later event causes the earlier event to be, precisely, the beginning. This kind of thinking, with its paradoxical interpretation of causality, its moving toward the tension of the future anterior, though again hardly unprecedented, distinctively characterizes the Cold War, narrative theory, and postmodernism in general.

2. Plainly, as of the time of this writing, it is wrong to speak of the nuclear threat as simply in the past. In 1998, for instance, India and Pakistan set about playing the old, very dangerous game of nuclear brinkmanship. Who knows? It is entirely possible that the world may once again find itself in the midst of another epoch of overt, daily-experienced nuclear fear. For right now, though, the reduction of nuclear fear is justified in a way it never was during the Cold War. So I write in past tense and hope that tense will remain accurate.

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