

Preface

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**Writing History as a Prophet: Postmodernist innovations
of the historical novel**

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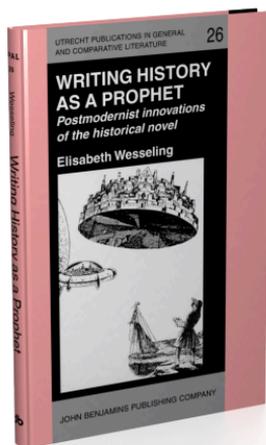
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Preface

In the course of its approximately twenty-five years of existence, the concept of postmodernism has evolved from a term of literary periodization into a name for the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, producing a tremendous amount of debate and controversy along the way. The debate on postmodernism functions as a focal point for our attempts to come to terms with nothing less than the post-war cultural condition. By now, not only literary critics, but also writers, artists, architects, art historians, social scientists and philosophers have formulated theories of postmodernism.

As a literary scholar, I feel more at ease with the early use of the term. For me, "postmodernism" primarily stands for a specific collection of contemporary literary texts. This book deals with a subdivision of postmodernist fiction, namely postmodernist "historical novels," as I choose to classify these novelistic adaptations of historical materials. By confronting postmodernist representations of history with preceding forms of historical fiction, I have attempted to gain some insight into the historical dynamics of this literary genre. As one always first has to construct the (literary) past before one can refer to it, this book pays considerable attention to the classical nineteenth-century model of the historical novel, as well as to modernist innovations of the genre. I have come to understand literary change as a process of generic hybridization, which combines elements of previously separate literary kinds into new forms. Simply put, new literary genres derive from old ones. This also applies to the historical novel, which is itself already a hybrid combination of literary and historiographical features.

I have divided twentieth-century innovations of the historical novel into a "self-reflexive" and a "uchronian" variant. The first enlarges the generic repertoire of the historical novel with strategies that turn epistemological questions concerning the nature and intelligibility of history into a literary theme. Self-reflexive historical fiction not only represents the past itself, but also the search for the past, and can be regarded as a conflation of the historical novel and the detective. Self-reflexivity is a dominant feature of innovative historical fiction from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards. Postmodernist novelists, however, also depart from the traditional historical novel by inventing alternate versions of history, which focus on

groups of people who have been relegated to insignificance by official history. In this way, unrealized possibilities that lie dormant in certain historical situations are brought to our attention ("What would have happened, if . . .?"). These apocryphal histories inject the utopian potential of science fiction into the generic model of the historical novel, which produces a form of narrative fiction one could call "uchronian."

Regarding postmodernist adaptations of historical materials as a crossbreed between the historical novel and science fiction has drawn my attention to the political implications of these deliberately counterfactual stories about the past. In the course of my research, it struck me that various influential postmodernist writers do not alter history at random. Rather, they rewrite history from the perspective of the losers of historical struggles for power, which expresses an involvement with emancipatory causes. Although the apocryphal histories of postmodernist writers have frequently elicited the charge of gratuitous eclecticism, it seems to me that a simple "anything goes" no longer suffices for characterizing postmodernist attitudes towards history.

My inquiry into the politics of postmodernism touches upon a hotly debated issue which has wide repercussions and is certainly not only relevant to the literary domain. Postmodernism (in the extended sense of the word) has often been defined as the cultural condition following upon "the end of ideology." Postmodernist thought supposedly attempts to avoid all forms of totalization and essentialism. It is said to deconstruct the categories of gender, race, and class which we have inherited from the great nineteenth-century ideologies, and to be critical of universalizing, essentialist notions of truth, knowledge, power, the self and language. In short, postmodernism entails the elimination of all big theory, according to its theorists. Facing the demise of all these strongholds, however, a problem which now forces itself upon us is the question: How to act within the postmodern condition? Is political commitment possible when we do not have a shared view of history and cannot arrive at a consensus about the future we want to head towards? I hope to point out that some postmodernist writers have come up with a partial and provisional answer to this question.

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