



Constructive Postmodernism: Toward Renewal in Cultural and Literary Studies

Martin Schiralli

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Are indeterminacy and relativism the only possible consequences of embracing the uncertainties of the postmodern era? Are other less deconstructive options to be found embedded in postmodernism's many ambiguities? In arguing affirmatively to both questions, this study points—in a constructively postmodern way—toward renewal in literary and cultural theory.

Divided into two parts, this book first examines the two distinct sources—constructive and deconstructive—of the postmodern attitude. The first, exemplified in the work of Derrida, Lyotard, and Baudrillard, is presented as a reaction against the reductive excesses of 20th-century modernism and is characterized by ambivalent and indeterminate approaches to uncertainty. The second source is more subtly discerned in the rejection by Wittgenstein and Dewey, among others of the Cartesian or modern conception of rationality in favor of more situationally complex, naturalistically grounded accounts of experience. Although the two approaches overlap in their acceptance of uncertainty and complexity, constructive postmodernism is shown to offer more scope for productive and cumulative study of meaning and value.

The second part applies the principles embedded in constructive postmodern thinking to the field of literary theory and criticism. The constructively postmodern pursuit of ever more richly observed and detailed, more ordinary and transparent situations is shown to be of particular relevance to literary studies. What precisely does the achievement of a writer like Jane Austen or Henry James represent, if not pointedly detailed observations of densely complex social and interpersonal relations, mediated by a painfully acute and sophisticated sensibility, and imaginatively represented as works of fiction? The answer to this question is presented by exploring the concepts of social and emotional intelligence in the novels of Austen and James among four other novelists.

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