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The Crisis of Representation: Post-realism, Postmodernism, Magical Realism

When ontological doubt, uncertainty about what is (fictively) real and what fantastic, insinuates itself into a Modernist text, we might well prefer to consider this the leading edge of a new mode of fiction, an anticipation of Postmodernism. For the ontological stability of external reality seems basic to Modernist fiction.

—Brian McHale, “Modernist Reading, Postmodern Text”

I. The Ruins of Representation

Brian McHale’s celebrated thesis situates the transition from modernist to postmodernist fiction at that very moment in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* when Quentin and Shreve stop trying to remember and start to invent. “It is incredible,” laments Quentin Compson when trying to make sense of Sutpen, Henry, Judith, and the others. “They are there, yet something is missing” (124). When their historiographical endeavors are fully exhausted, both characters’ recreation of and belief in an imaginary world out there rescues them from the tyranny of time remembered. They “replenish” the “missing” something in their narrative by violating ontological boundaries, insomuch as their retelling crosses into another, alternative world, a time imagined, where the narrative can be successfully completed. It is at that particular moment in the text, if we follow Brian McHale and John Barth, that the exhausted perspectives of modernism and classic realism are transcended through the introduction of a third element, an alternative fictive world that contains the two preceding literary forms in paradoxical tension.
This newly replenished world, which according to Barth should have García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* at its very center, is the world of postmodernist fiction. The mixture of straightforwardness and artifice, realism and magic and myth, is in Barth’s account what identifies an inevitably synthetic postmodernity. For Barth, as, in a way, for Brian McHale years later, the postmodern moment comes about not as an extension of modernism, nor as a wholesale subversion of it, but as a combination of the most deliberately experimental forms of modernism with the straightforwardness of traditional bourgeois realism. While premodernist culture overemphasized the world of objective reality, deliberately minimizing human participation in its construction, modernism blinded itself to the ontological “thereness” of the physical world. It is only in the postmodernist moment that the two worldviews come to stand side by side, simultaneously supplementing and undermining each other, as prefigured in that celebrated final twist in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*

A parallel instant, and equally relevant, pervades the last passages in African American author David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident*. In this undeservedly neglected novel, much in the vein of what Linda Hutcheon terms “historiographic metafiction,” Bradley offers an African American take on the now classic topic of the literary reconstruction of history in an era when history itself is deemed inexorably gone. Pennsylvania author Bradley undertook the writing of *The Chaneysville Incident* after his mother, back in 1969, discovered the existence of thirteen unmarked tombs on the property of a white landowner in Bedford, Pennsylvania. Bradley also came in contact with a popular legend in the area that told about twelve runaway slaves who, when they were about to be captured by the slave catchers, committed suicide. In order to historicize the untextualized story of the twelve slaves supposedly buried in the unmarked graves, Bradley depicts a black narrator cum historian, John Washington, who traces back the steps of his father, Moses Washington, and his great-grandfather, C. K. Washington, whose life stories are closely connected with those of the unknown slaves. By the end of the narrative, exhausted after his frustrated historiographical efforts to reconstruct the story of the runaway slaves, protagonist John Washington stands alone at the crucial crossroads Quentin and Shreve faced in the Faulkner novel: the need to imaginatively re-create the