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ESSAYS BY

T. Eagleton, C. Norris,  
J. Radford, A. Usandizaga,  
C. Knellwolf, C. Baldick,  
E. Pujals, M. Palacios

# Modernity, Modernism, Postmodernism



EDITOR  
Manuel Barbeito

UNIVERSIDADE  
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Postmodernism**



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## INTRODUCTION

### **Modernism and Postmodernism: some ethical and political implications**

The essays contained in this volume are based on the papers read at a conference on 'Modernism and Modernity', which took place at the University of Santiago de Compostela in March 1997. The general discussions all concerned the necessity of rethinking the meaning of modernism, particularly in so far as it provides a point of departure for postmodernism. Among the topics high on the agenda at the conference were: the politics of modernism; the diversity of modernisms; the relationship between the work of art and reality in modernist poetics; also that between modernism and tradition, modernism and the Enlightenment, modernism and modernization, modernism and postmodernism, postmodernism and the Enlightenment, and modernism and the avantgarde. These topics, in turn, threw up the related problems of autonomy, meaning, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, ethics and the theory of science. Such diversity of interest led me to alter the original title of the conference to 'Modernity, Modernism, Postmodernism', which I think more accurately reflects the richness of the debate the book contains.

The different aspects of modernist discourse are dealt with here both in relation to the rejection or development of them by other movements, and in the context of the postmodernist and the modernists own reaction to modernity. One of the main issues of the modernity/postmodernity

debates concerns the relationship between the different spheres of human life: between theory and practice, the aims of reason and political theory, history and politics, knowledge and ethics, scientific knowledge and its socio-cultural context, society and aesthetics, knowledge and imagination. The concept of autonomy is central to modernist discourse and figures prominently in these debates; it therefore provides a good starting point for discussion.

Beginning with the realm of art, we might want to ask whose 'autonomy'? We can speak variously of the material and moral autonomy of the author, or of the autonomy of the work of art, the main tenet of New Criticism, or in structuralist terms, of the relative autonomy of art, or of the autonomy of language which achieves its fullest realisation in the modernist text (Ackroyd 1976). Alternatively we can talk of autonomy in terms of independence from patronage, ideology, other forms of expression, tradition in general or, more specifically, literary precursors; above all, however, autonomy with respect to reality. Reality itself is a complex concept and can be referred to in different ways, for instance, as the material conditions of production –in Marxist terms– or, in rather disparaging fashion, as something 'transcendent' - the ultimate fiction of realist discourse according to postmodern thought. There is a curious inversion here: whereas the Marxists think of material conditions as the touchstone of reality, for postmodern thinkers to rely on any referent beyond discourse is to reproduce the old philosophical error which distinguished appearances from a transcendent reality.

When dealing with appearance and reality, though, it should be remembered that Marxism itself superseded this old philosophic opposition.<sup>1</sup> Not to realize this is to run the risk of identifying the binary of infrastructure and superstructure with the reality/appearance dichotomy. Marxism has shown that the formulation of this dichotomy, at least in traditional terms, is inadequate to explain the effects of ideology because it itself is a product of that ideology. This argument has implications for the concept of the autonomy of the work of art in as much as this can be said to provide a last refuge for the possibility of criticism.<sup>2</sup> Marx and others showed

<sup>1</sup> Though I here use 'Marxism' in the singular, one should bear in mind its complexity. Terry Eagleton (1996) discusses the distance that poststructuralist leftist theorists and critics have taken from some of the main tenets of Marxism.

<sup>2</sup> This is, for instance, Adorno's position. For an explanation of Adorno's thought on modernism, see for instance Astradur Eysteinnsson (1990).

that the old 'real' values were no longer tenable criteria for judgement. The modernist radical criticism of liberal humanism follows from the rejection of precisely those values that provided intellectuals of the latter persuasion with a 'true' perspective from which the subject could judge and criticise. Radical criticism involves quite literally going back to the roots in order to displace the subject from its privileged position at the centre of the production of meaning. No such criticism can be made from within the liberal humanist tradition.<sup>3</sup> Autonomy then, in its modernist sense, means independence from the values which had acted as cornerstones of the traditional representation of reality, those very values that made the discourse of traditional criticism possible. As we shall see, in the case of modernism, liberation from those values, does not mean that they have disappeared without a trace.

Poststructuralist criticism of liberal humanist modes of representation was inspired by modernist texts, in their suspension of referentiality and in their decentering of the subject, although some poststructuralists soon warned that this might lead to a negative theology.<sup>4</sup> Postmodernism took the poststructuralist move to its extreme and argued that the modern explanation of the external world was either irrelevant to human moral affairs or even that any hope of advancing beyond ideological discourse was doomed, thus declaring the end of modernity (with what authority? Terry Eagleton wryly asks). Such a development can be questioned on the grounds that it is one thing to criticize the kind of representation which entirely depends on a narrow system of beliefs or on the fatuous narcissistic subject, and quite another to reject the existence of any adequate theoretical representation of the world.

The postmodern pantextuality thesis deeply affects the field of politics, ethics and philosophy of history: it implies that the impossibility of stepping outside the discourse of one's own community precludes the possibility of making ethical judgements on practices internal to another community. Any such judgement coming from the outside is thought invalid. The outside is defined in cultural terms, but it may be also reinforced by

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<sup>3</sup> W. H. Auden (1977) justifies Yeats illiberalism on these grounds.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Norris (1994) welcomes Julia Kristeva's change of emphasis. Michel Foucault and his new historicist followers are the main target of this book, but according to Norris, in his later work Foucault returned to the ideals of the Enlightenment. Edward Said would also have undergone a similar change. See also below Norris on Jacques Derrida. On the modernist link between the work of art and reality under a mode different from referentiality, see C.K. Stead (1964) and Eysteinnsson's thesis (op. cit.) that could be formulated as 'referentiality without referent'.

simple spatial or temporal categories. Thus, as an example of how this argument runs: if you were not actually present, you cannot have any direct evidence of what really happened in Nazi extermination camps; if you were, however, and somehow managed to escape extermination, it may be the case that your particular interests cause you to distort the 'facts' in your report of events; the conclusion being that it is not really possible to provide a reliable objective history of these camps. To accept such a thesis is to concede that all one can in fact aspire to do is to tell a story according to one's own values and the interests of one's time and place. This is an extreme example and should not prevent us from recognizing the important moral principle expressed by the postmodern relativist position: that of due respect for the realities of other communities. This principle comes into play when considering those communities who have been subjected to western imperialism with the excuse of enlightening them with western 'universal' values. However, postmodern relativism is by no means the only criticism of imperialist practice: although 'rational' efforts were sometimes made to justify colonial enterprises in modernity (John Locke, for instance, justified the colonization of Virginia in overtly ethnocentric terms), the 'rational' criticism of colonialism also helped to expose imperialist practice (Jonathan Swift's scathing irony in the last chapter of *Gullivers Travels* on the distorted use of reason is a good example). There is a further problem with the postmodernist position in that, as has been demonstrated by anthropological studies of non-western cultural practices, notwithstanding the general principle of respect, successfully explaining other practices in terms of their social function does not necessarily provide the kind of moral justification that is implied in postmodernist relativism.

Modernity has released powerful and creative but also destructive energies, which helped either to emancipate or to subject human beings. This certainly warns against an uncritical application of the idea of progress to historical development, but also against the opposite idea that the communitarian consensus should not be altered by anything new that history brings with it.

## **I. Autonomy and history**

In the opening lecture of the conference entitled "The Contradictions of Modernism", Terry Eagleton provided a diagnosis of modernist discourse. According to his analysis, the modernist complex consists of: nostalgia,

anxiety, bulimia and anorexia, euphoria and wretchedness, schizophrenia and paranoia. This diagnosis is explained through a discussion of the economy of the work of art, the energies invested in achieving autonomy, in breaking with the values inherited from the immediate past, in decentering the subject, and in gaining independence from commodification.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Eagleton argues that definitions of traditional problems have undergone significant modifications. The question of truth and its relationship with beauty, has become transposed into the vexed question of authenticity; freedom is no longer opposed to determinism, but becomes displaced in this binary by chaos in the context of capitalism; the features of the Kantian subject are displaced onto the work of art. It is at this level that the relationship between modernist texts and the material conditions of production are analysed, since these displacements, as well as the psychic costs of certain modernist achievements, can be accounted for in terms of changes in material conditions and of the changing relations of art to them.

Responding to his own challenge to leftist postmodernists who too soon gave up the study of the ultimate determination of the superstructure by the economic forces, because, he thinks, they have found this a nut too hard to crack, Eagleton offers a variation on the theme of mimesis, and an explanation of what the Marxist idea of what determination by economic forces means (Eagleton 1992, 1996). Contradiction becomes one main feature of the modernist psyche, in the same way as the modernist work of art is obsessed with its autonomy from the material conditions of its production. The critical power and political impotence, the freedom and determinism that ail the autonomous Kantian subject are contradictions that are transferred to the modernist work of art; ironically enough, since it itself triumphantly claims to have deconstructed the autonomous enlightened subject. The work of art reacts against these contradictions which stem from the very material conditions of its production, making use of various defences always displaying a kind of psychic labour without taking account of which it cannot be understood.

Criticism of modernism has been generally caught between two stools, an attempt to find the spirit of modernism incarnated in a characteristic common to all modernists and an emphasis on diversity of modernisms. Eagleton's approach makes it possible for him to show the tension between the irreducible aspects of modernism as a distinctive feature of its psyche.

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<sup>5</sup> For the analysis of autonomy in the context of the general aesthetization of the fields of knowledge and ethics that has taken place since the Enlightenment, see Eagleton (1992).

This can be illustrated by way of a political evaluation of modernist aesthetic experience. Adorno and Lukács can be taken as representative of opposite evaluations of such experience.<sup>6</sup> According to Adorno, the modernist radical break with the familiar representation of reality and with mass culture frees art from commodification, thus making possible an aesthetic experience which offers a glimpse of truth and of a transformed subjectivity which is impossible in an unfree society. Lukács, on the other hand, criticizes modernist pessimism and its chaotic representation of the world which, offering no alternatives, causes an ontologic degradation of the subject at the same time as it privileges subjectivism.

Eagleton agrees that the autonomy of art makes radical criticism of convention possible, and is itself evidence of the possibility of freedom and beauty, but its lack of social function, and therefore the absurdity of its proposing alternatives, leads it to seek refuge in the house of language, instead of confidently exploring new political worlds. As a consequence, the exaltation felt at the deconstruction of convention has anxiety and wretchedness as its psychic counterpart: anxiety caused by the internalization of the contradiction between critical power and political impotence; wretchedness caused by the realization that euphoria at the decentering of the subject is more a rationalization of, and compensation for, the homelessness that is characteristic of capitalist cosmopolitanism, than a justified reaction to its philosophical achievement.

Autonomy, then, in the house of language. Autonomy here means more than detachment from conventions. This kind of autonomy requires suspension of referentiality and a meaning independent from intentionality. The relationship with the external world thus becomes problematic, and self-referentiality becomes a substitute for referentiality in the work of art. The relationship with the external world also becomes subjectivist, reduced to impressions without an organising subject or an object to determine their form. Immediacy becomes the rule, ephemeral moments the only reality (Levenson, 1984). All this may be seen to correspond to the experience of a changing contemporary world, but as Eagleton explains, it further echoes the freedom of market exchange, which has the determinism of impersonal market forces as its counterpart. Freedom here is merely a euphemism, loaded with ideological implications; rather than freedom, we should now talk about chaos in order to express the displacement of the individual from

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<sup>6</sup> For the contrast and a possible compatibility between Adorno and Lukács, see Eysteinnsson (op. cit).

the field of the problem and to underline the opposition between the chaos of the market and the impersonal forces which determine it. This is not inscribed in the work of art directly without the work of reflection either; thus the chaos of impressions is balanced by mythical order, and schizophrenia has paranoia as its counterpart.

The scope of Eagleton's essay is not limited to modernism, it is also concerned with postmodernity. Awareness of the modernist predicament and its troubled relation to modernity leads to reflection on the contradictions of postmodernism and on the displacements that it effects: the chaos/determinism opposition shifts in postmodernist discourse to that between anarchism and authority, cosmopolitanism and homelessness to the contradiction between the local and the global. Modernist fragmentation, which the autonomy of the work of art was able to contain, is now replaced by the postmodernist autonomy of practices, which produce fragmentation, but which also lack a basis. Postmodern art is no longer obsessed with autonomy, neither is there any longer a question of a cultural elite with its often dangerous political attitudes; rather, there are, at best, re-vindications of respect for the practices of different communities and, at worst, temptations of fundamentalism and intolerance with tragic consequences. In short, the modernist criticism of a single Grand Narrative has become a call for a proliferation of narratives in postmodern times (Ironically, one of these is a sort of postmodern Grand Narrative which rejects linearity of history and at the same time places itself at the end of that line. This narrative, as Grand Narratives tend to do, ignores the multiple aspects of reality, for example, the way in which modernity has been emancipatory in some respects, or that modernity may not have finished everywhere at the same time). Jean François Lyotard defends the proliferation of little narratives and the principle of respect for them; for Eagleton discrimination between narratives is possible (Eagleton 1996), and he also denounces as dangerous those narratives which pretend to provide a transcendent basis for practices and which are unable to engage constructively with the problem of human suffering.

## **II. Autonomy: Truth, Intersubjectivity and Ethics**

Christopher Norris' essay also engages with the problem of postmodernism, but in the context of Enlightenment, Deconstruction, and also the Philosophy of Science; his main concerns revolve around the

question of truth, which figures defiantly in some of his titles (Norris 1993, 1994, 1996), subjectivity, the possibility of emancipatory critique, the dangers of extreme relativism. These are not just specialized questions, but a matter of providing the best resources to respond to our contemporary world. The inheritance of the Enlightenment is central to the contemporary philosophical debate. There are two kinds of arguments against the project of the Enlightenment launched from postmodernist quarters: one is that postmodern culture proves that history has left the Enlightenment behind, the other, that its very philosophical foundations were illusory.

Even at the risk of overlooking the richness of the essay, I am going to concentrate on Norris's criticism of Lyotard, because I think this, together with his consideration of Jürgen Habermas's idea of the unfinished project of Enlightenment, both makes clear Norris's philosophical stance, and helps to understand the place he assigns to Derrida in relation to the Enlightenment and postmodernism, the manifest object of his lecture as it is stated in its title. Thus simplified, the essay follows two main threads: one defending the possibility of emancipatory critique, represented by Kant, Edmund Husserl, Habermas and Derrida, and the other displaying the consequences of relativism. Apart from Lyotard's reading of Kant which I will discuss here, Emmanuel Levinas's ethical turn, the strong sociology of knowledge, and the narrativist turn in history and anthropology are also offered by Norris in the course of his paper as examples of relativism.

While recognising the acuity of Lyotard's readings of Kant, Norris argues that Lyotard fails to recognise the intention of Kant's whole project, as expressed in *The Critique of Judgement*, and thus pursues a line of destructive deconstruction which Norris contrasts with Derrida's style of thought.<sup>7</sup> The writer's intention, considered, like truth, an old fashioned concern in many quarters, is not so for Norris (1997). He admits that neither truth nor intention are to be written in capital letters, but this does not mean that objectivity is renounced, simply that no recourse to any transcendent ground is needed. His analysis belongs strictly to the Kantian tradition, whose project is recovered in the face of three major 'turns': the Nietzschean hermeneutic turn, the linguistic turn, at least in some of its forms, and Levinas's ethical turn.

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<sup>7</sup> See Norris (1990) for his defense of Kant's project as a whole. Norris criticises the centrality that Lyotard gives to the notion of the sublime, and his emphasis on the split between Kant's speculative and cognitive reason. In the chapter 'Derrida and Kant', Norris defends his position that Derrida belongs in the Kantian tradition.

The foundation of intersubjectivity in the recognition of the other as an end in him or herself who collaborates in the exploitation of nature can be taken as a synthetic expression of Kant's intention.<sup>8</sup> Intersubjectivity emerges as a central problem right from the beginning of modernity, just when the medieval 'humanitas' is left behind. 'Humanitas' had both a transcendent basis, God, who had endowed human beings with humanity, and an immanent basis, found in the general consensus that all human beings are so endowed. The Christian medieval consensus, though, collapsed with the arrival of modernity: the Reformation, the discovery of the New World, social and economic changes, and the new science and philosophy, which ushered in the Enlightenment. One current reaction to the consequences of this historical change is that of MacIntyre and other communitarians who lament this loss and propose the recovery of consensus against the project of the Enlightenment (Padgen 1997).

The communitarian consensus is contrasted in Norris's paper with the 'sensus communis'. These two concepts are clearly distinguished by way of an examination of their respective relationships to truth and tradition. For the former, truth is what a community holds to be true, which is the basis for the coherence of the social order. The 'sensus communis', on the other hand, is defined by Norris as "the idea of agreement arrived at through an enlightened, democratic, participant debate on issues of shared concern for humanity." This is an updated version of the idea of the co-operative project with which Bacon inaugurated a new sense of 'tradition'. The enlightened debate is, democratic, firstly, because it allows us to discriminate between reality and fantasy, so preventing "the dogmatic imposition which forbids us to distinguish, for instance, between witchcraft and science"; and because it is a debate on the problems that concern us as human beings, so providing a horizon of interest for science.

Norris has no difficulty in recognising the sociological phenomenon of postmodernism; what he attacks is the extension of this phenomenon into a postmodernist epistemology. The central question here is twofold: is rational knowledge possible and if so, is it relevant to human moral affairs?

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<sup>8</sup> This follows one of Kant's formulations of the ethical imperative: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in another, always as an end, and never as only a means". I shall also refer to the formal formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time consistently will that it should become a universal law". There is a famous ecological reformulation of this by Hans Jonas, to which my argument is related: "So act that the effects of your action be compatible with the permanence of an authentic human life on the earth".

Lyotard's reading of Kant provides the philosophical starting point for the discussion. Norris points out Lyotard's focus on what for the latter constitutes the unbridgeable abyss opened by Kant's two critiques, which Lyotard interprets as making knowledge about the world irrelevant to issues of ethical or political judgement.

Separation between the theoretical and practical discourse is necessary for, if physical laws determine human behaviour, then no talk of morals is possible. Freedom has its condition of possibility for Kant in the autonomy of the will with regard to any external constraint, be it the laws of nature or religious or secular law. In Kant's astonishing revolution, no constraint is taken into account by the free subject other than his or her own self-determination as a rational being. The moral mandate is directly given to reason, there is no room for the deliberation that is central to Aristotle's ethics (Aubenque 1993). Knowledge therefore doesn't seem to have any relevance to human moral affairs: this is where Lyotard's emphasis falls.

But this ignores the work of the imagination to which Kant dedicates his *Critique of Judgement*. Cognitive and practical discourses have a common root, which is unknown as it doesn't have a corresponding discourse.<sup>9</sup> Kant devoted his third *Critique* to showing how the 'unknown common root' of knowledge appears in the work of the imagination. Imagination is the faculty of synthesis that works at conceptualising sensible data before the concept as universal representation is detached from the common root. This is what the formula "conceptuality without concept" means. Thus the link between cognitive and practical knowledge, which cannot take place at the level of discourse, lies at the level of conditions of possibility. Conceptuality is the condition of possibility of both practical and theoretical discourses: as with the entities that constitute nature (understood as objects of possible knowledge), it is also necessary that the entities that constitute the field of my possible actions can be expressed in concepts, so that one can ask whether they contradict the form of the universal law or not.

This formal level of analysis already allows us to measure the consequences of Lyotard's criticism, which are that if the radical break between theoretical and practical discourse leads us to ignore the common root, that is, conceptuality, the very condition of possibility of both discourses

<sup>9</sup> I am following Fernando Martínez Marzoa (1987) in showing the formal thread of Kant's ethics. For both Martínez Marzoa and Norris the *Critique of Judgement* represents Kant's attempt to overcome the dicotomy between practical and cognitive knowledge established by the two first critiques. Norris starts from the distance between the universal imperative and the particular action; Martínez Marzoa from the distance between cognitive and practical discourse. Martínez Marzoa focuses on the formal level; Norris takes content into account, as we shall see.

of understanding and practical reason disappears. Conceptuality, or the possibility that the entities belonging to both the fields of understanding and practical reason be expressed in concepts, is the basis of universality; once rejected, both practical and theoretical knowledge are, first, left at the mercy of relativism, to return then to the fusion of the representation of the world and ethics within communities or interest groups: all knowledge then depends on the group's 'consensus' based either on interest or belief, all behaviour is justified by the moral laws intimately related to the group's representation of the world. This is why it is essential for Norris to recover the notion of truth based on the adequacy of concept and object.

Apart from the difficulties with the application of the categorical imperative to particular cases, the problems with this formal level are that the emphasis falls exclusively on the individual moral agent's responsibility before the moral law and that, as a consequence, intersubjectivity disappears from the horizon. If, instead of pursuing the formal thread as above, we attend to the link at the level of contents between sensibility and understanding that the aesthetic experience establishes, intersubjectivity again becomes central, since the judgement of taste provides an analogy of intersubjective understanding (Norris 1990). In order to maintain the vocation of universality of the judgement of taste that the formal level of analysis makes clear, it is essential to maintain the concept of an enlightened 'sensus communis' as defined by Norris, and its difference from common sense understood as the sum of the prejudices of a particular community. Here we can see the importance for Norris of Habermas's ideal speech situation, which is presided over by the vocation of rational consensus and of communication across cultural differences. Husserl's lifeworld is the other decisive concept here because the knowledge of the lifeworld provides the basis for human relationships.<sup>10</sup> Thus both Husserl and Habermas return intersubjectivity to its central place in Kant's project.

If we recognize the emancipatory effects of the rational explanation of the world, understanding becomes a moral response to the challenge "sapere

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<sup>10</sup> One may compare Norris and Ackroyd's reading of Husserl. Ackroyd, *op. Cit.*, situates Husserl in the antihumanist tradition and points to his superseding of the subject-object division in the intentional act. According to Ackroyd, the humanist tradition, or "classic modernism", used language as an instrument, that is, both as a vehicle of the experience of the subject that invests the world with their narcissistic values, and as a means to refer to objects thus invested. In modernist literature, on the contrary, the non referential nature of language is made manifest (a "new literature (that) may simply be the lacuna between word and object", *op. Cit.* p. 22). Norris emphasizes the objectivity of the lifeworld the knowledge of which is the basis of intersubjectivity, and therefore the importance of communication. See also his *New Idols of the Cave*, *op. Cit.*

aude”, “dare to know” (Kant 1784), which further requires of us a moral engagement in extending the public sphere where the rational debate takes place. Co-responsibility in knowledge becomes thus the basis of an ethico-political attitude.

### III. Alterity and Ethics: The Other as Jew

In order to avoid the subject-object opposition in intersubjective relations, Levinas proposes to start with an absolute Other which can in no way be reduced to identity. But there can be no Other absolutely external to the same, as Derrida shows, unless it becomes objectified, precisely what Levinas wanted to avoid. Levinas’s emphasis on radical alterity leads, according to Norris, to relativism, and his ethical turn is, in the end, incompatible with intersubjectivity.

The lesson of relativism is its warning against the danger of taking as universal what is only the projection of a parochial or ideological construct. But Norris insists that it may also turn into a council of despair if this leads us to give up any possibility of recognizing a common humanity. If the other is to be recognised as an alter ego and not reduced to an object, he or she cannot be completely separated from the subject. We can add that, if on the one hand, there is no human relationship without the recognition of common humanity, on the other, there may be no recognition whatsoever if the otherness of the other person is not respected. Actually, the recognition of common humanity is recognition of both identity and difference in particular cases. For the ideological strategy with the social other (be it of sex, class, religion, race, or nation) is to invest him or her with our own prejudices, and to judge them accordingly. This both annihilates the others’ difference and their similarity to oneself. Therefore, the recognition of similarity in this case is an exercise in alterity as regards conventional ways of fixing the other, and is also a condition of the respect for their difference.

Jean Radford’s ‘Face to face with the Other: Levinas and Elizabeth Bowen’s *The House in Paris*’ is the first of a group of three essays dedicated to the analysis of single works in this book, and offers a discussion of the function of the work of art in the light of Levinas’s category of the ‘Other’, with reference to Adorno’s aesthetic theory. Bowen’s *The House in Paris* is read as a challenge to the reader to ‘know’ history. I take this as a version of the “dare to know” challenge, which provides a link with Norris’s defence of the necessity of knowledge of the lifeworld as the basis for intersubjectivity.

Radford's essay interprets Bowen's novel as a "crystallization of history", in Adorno's terms, as a positing of a history separate from and outside scientific discourse. She begins by defending the use of the category of the Other for purposes both of political intervention and cultural analysis; and in response to recent criticism of the abstract nature of this approach, she shows that abstraction can be countered by focusing on the actual relevant historical context. This historization is achieved in two ways: the novel is a speech act that must be re-enacted in the process of reading; in addition, the possibility of this speech-act is conditional on knowledge of the relevant history. This knowledge is partly offered by the novel itself (the artist becomes the "unofficial historian" of his time), but his does not exclude, rather it requires, I think, the reader's 'objective' knowledge of history that enables him to fully grasp the novel.

It is necessary for the reader of texts such as *The House in Paris* to know history in order to understand their emergence as particular speech acts at a particular time, and also to grasp fully the theories they put forward and the situations which are represented in them. The reader is here faced with a treatment of alterity that is not only to be considered in general terms, but as a specific reaction to historical circumstances. Bowen's *The House in Paris* presents to the reader a wide spectrum of intersubjective relationships, most of them frustrated. Here Bowen lays down the way in which personal relationships are 'normally' determined by ideological constructions; and also the way in which the conjunction of these with particular historical circumstances may result in violence. Nevertheless, this 'normal' state of affairs is punctuated with moments of real encounter with the Other, and in these moments the characters experience their selves differently. The importance given to alterity by Bowen (building on Buber and Levinas) can be understood in light of the necessity of reacting against ideological violence, seen here in the context of the rise of fascism and the failure of liberal democracy to oppose it. In this context, the search for a new kind of subjectivity became extremely urgent, as well as the necessity to find it beyond the tradition of modernity, which had led to liberal humanism.

The dare to know challenge materialises in the demands made of the reader in terms of their response to the novel: Radford underlines the points in the text where the reader's intellectual activity is required as much, and even more, as that of the characters, for instance, when the possibility arises that the text could follow a different route from the one that it chooses at a particular moment. An example is the way in which some situations find echoes in others, so that if in one of them a personal relationship is

frustrated, each of the characters confirming their imprisonment in their conventional selves, another situation will throw a light on that relationship that opens up to the reader the possibility of an alternative development. The text acts here as the reader's 'Other' that engenders these echoes in their mind, and to which they must respond moving beyond convention.

The reader is also challenged to confront the issue of their knowledge of history, in so far as it concerns the conditions of possibility of an encounter with the Other. Generally, the problem with this encounter, from a rationalist perspective, is its mysticism, evident in the 'epiphanic moment' which Modernism translated into aesthetic terms. Bowen makes use of this 'moment' to show the extra-ordinary fact of the encounter, but its conditions of possibility are dealt with in a logical rather than mystic manner.<sup>11</sup> Radford emphasises this logical impulse even at moments when the text seems to forget it. The lovers, Karen Michaelis and the Jew Max Ebhart, speak a different language, on account of their different experiences, but in spite of this, love makes their union possible. The language used to describe their respective positions seems to indicate love as the condition of possibility of their sharing different interpretations of history. Radford, however, points, firstly, at the knowledge of history as the condition of possibility of their mutual understanding, and then goes on to explain how knowledge of history is necessary if we as readers are to understand a literary text of the past and especially the way in which it represents alterity. In the same way that the reader is asked to view a particular situation in the light which others throw on them, and probe the possibilities thus opened up, here the "dare to know" challenge is also shifted from character to reader.

Reader and character then are united in the necessity of responding to the challenge of knowledge: the knowledge of the other's socio-historical predicament allows both of them to come to an understanding of their own attitudes and thus opens up the possibility of change. Karen and Max do not have anything to share at the level of personal experience, nothing has the same value for them; their contact takes place at the level of history, which not only provides past events as theme of conversation but constitutes the context of present events that surround them. The fact that these events do

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<sup>11</sup> Thus Leopold can encounter his mother beyond his own imagination only because she refuses to play the part he had imagined for her: "Her refusal became her, became her coming in suddenly..." 'Suddenly' is one of the traditional marks of the epiphanic moment which signals its opposition to the rational process of achieving knowledge. What prompts it here, though, is not something transcendent, rather the resistance of one character to the wishes of the other, which is taken as a condition of love: "She (the mother) set up the opposition that is love."

not surround them in the same way is what constitutes the historical basis of alterity, which can turn into an insurmountable barrier if the relationship is based on ideological prejudices (such as those attached to the kind of liberal humanism represented by the Michaelis) instead of a responsible attitude to knowledge, whether this is fuelled by love or respect. The emphasis on the Other means that this responsibility is actually a response to the demand of the Other, which prevents the fixation of the other person into conventional categories. Even the conventional category of the human itself must be revised, and radically new conditions for the emergence of a new subjectivity are necessary (this is what the literary use of the “moment” points to). But the production of these conditions cannot be just based on an abstract ethical call. To make it historical involves recognising the other as human and their right to share in human rights with us, which directs the ethical call to the construction of the material conditions where this ‘recognition’ will become normal.

#### **IV. The Other as woman. The politics of tradition**

Through her analysis of the treatment of the Jew in *The House in Paris*, Radford is able to distinguish deep divisions in modernist critical attitudes to modernity, contrasting Bowen, Dorothy Richardson and James Joyce with, for instance, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. The social treatment of the Jew in the first half of the twentieth century is shown by Bowen to frustrate the hopes of freedom and equality of the French Revolution. But the Jew is only one of the ‘others’ whose treatment helps to show the diversity of modernist attitudes to modernity. As Radford also points out, feminist studies have emphasized the patriarchal construction of woman as object and consumer of mass culture; Peter Nicolls (1995) adds the woman is properly the Other in the context of the modernist poetics, since she represents nature as against the Dandi’s concentration in artifice. Therefore women should try to counter not only patriarchal representations of women in general, but also more specifically the poetics of modernism as a whole, by producing an alternative tradition, which they do, among other strategies, through their creative appropriation of genres from the dominant masculine tradition.

**IV.1.** Aránzazu Usandizaga’s essay ‘Gender and Genre: The Genres of Modernism’ can be placed in that line of feminist studies which promotes

the recognition of the often overlooked efforts that women have made to produce an alternative tradition, and to resist the temptation to subsume their work in a uniform Great Tradition (a temptation to which, as Chris Baldick's essay shows, English modernists have fallen, each of them tending to produce his own Great Tradition, and all of them prey to the common fallacy of simplifying history).

To tell the story of the New Woman both as a lover and a writer involves a necessary transformation both of the convention of the love plot and of the *Kunstlerroman*. Usandizaga discusses how, at the end of the nineteenth century, Sarah Grand appropriates the *Kunstlerroman* for a new poetics that paves the way for future women writers, and that moves away from dominant masculine poetics in several respects.

First, the novel reacts against realism in favour of the imagining of new possibilities. Usandizaga compares Sarah Grand and George Gissing to argue that the latter's realism leads him to reproduce the idea that no unconventional woman can have a happy ending, traditionally represented by marriage. Grand, on the contrary, is able to imagine a possible happy ending for her heroine. This shift does involve a certain amount of inconsistency in the novel, but this, Usandizaga argues, should not make us undervalue it. She admits that Gissing's novel is better constructed and more consistent, but adds that it is not as groundbreaking as Grand's.

Second, Grand eschews the lament of the isolated artist, in favour of a narrative where the education of the woman artist revolves around her joy in the awareness of her own capacities. Usandizaga's essay suggests an interesting link between two traditions of feminist studies, and also criticizes the generalization of some ideas about women writers of the turn of the century. In her personal and artistic growth, Grand's heroine goes through several different stages represented by rooms of her own. From one angle, Elaine Showalter has warned against the risk of idealising women's enjoyment of the sort of independence such rooms provided because it also diverted them from exploring their own experience of social reality. The French tradition, however, tends to emphasize the irreducibility, and therefore disruptive potential, of this joy. Where these two types of criticism converge is in the portrayal of a joy in the recognition of a new identity which is in line with the possibilities of transforming reality.

Male poets may afford the luxury of isolating themselves on Prospero's islands or in Penseroso's towers, but not women if they are to transform a social reality that discriminates against them. Here *The Beth Book* has to be taken at two levels: a representation of the life of the protagonist as a New

Woman, and the book itself as an institution. The representation of the life of the protagonist, and particularly the role played in it by the act of recognition, can in turn itself be seen at a personal and at an institutional level. At an institutional level, the phenomena of the women's emancipation movement involves a great deal of social change; at a personal level, the aim of the narrative is to measure the satisfaction that this change gives the individual. That these two aspects may be incompatible is often ideologically reinforced (for example, in the idea that feminists are no more than frustrated, unsatisfied women). This is why it is necessary to promote the idea of the possibility of positive personal realization that the new historical circumstances open up for women, an aim that the book as a social institution may help to achieve. In this sense, Usandizaga sees *The Beth Book* as part of the struggle against the discrimination of women, and as contributing to a cultural transformation aimed at changing the ideology that reproduces it.

Finally, the great Wordsworthian theme of solitude as the proper context within which the poet realises his strength is significantly modified in Grand's novel. There is a clear contrast between the young poet's epiphany in *The Prelude*, which takes place at a moment of his isolation from the rest of the young people at play, and the epiphany of her own beauty that Grand's heroine enjoys (joy being deeply significant in Wordsworth as well) in a communal experience of recognition of the beauty of her body, after bathing with the 'common girls' in the sea that Wordsworth dreamt of as immortal and distant. In Wordsworth, the poet's relationship with himself passes necessarily through solitude; only this makes possible the passage from "I" to "we" which structures 'Intimations of Immortality'. In Grand's novel, by contrast, the communal experience of sensual enjoyment becomes part of the growth of the poet's mind. For Grand, then, the intersubjective context of recognition must be seen as complementary to the rooms of her own where the protagonist realizes her capacities.

The struggle for recognition takes place both at a social and at a personal level, between social forces and between individuals. Grand never forgets that personal relationships take place in social contexts. Thus, towards the beginning of the novel, she alludes to her heroine's probable destiny of being objectified by the gaze of convention: "People admired her bright eyes without realising that she could see with them..." A whole cultural transformation has to take place if this conventional view is to be changed; in other words, if participation in social interaction on equal terms is to become a possibility, and personal recognition is to be achieved, recognition at the

level of an institutional struggle is also required.<sup>12</sup> The end of the book, hence, must avoid the danger of providing an extra-ordinary singular solution to Beth's personal situation and thus ignoring the real historical circumstances which make this solution either emancipatory or repressive.

Usandizaga analyses the different moments in which intersubjective recognition takes place in Grand's novel. Two masculine figures play the key roles at the beginning and the end of the novel: the father and Beth's fellow artist. The idea that a father is able to recognise the qualities of his daughter better than the mother and is more willing to support her is not unrealistic, if we take into account the fact that fathers were in more contact with the changes in the public sphere than mothers were; however, he can only help her so far: the heroine, being unsupported by the masculine public sphere, must face her difficulties alone; this condemns her father to disappear from the scene, though not before he has left to her the legacy of recognising her potential as a writer.<sup>13</sup> At the end of the novel, a sort of inversion of a fairy tale takes place where, the young man, Beth's fellow artist, is saved by his capacity to recognize goodness and beauty beyond the appearance of ugliness. Thus he is transformed in so far as he recognizes that the woman who has helped him is not the witch that conventional perception in the person of his (male) friend declares her to be. The danger of this reading is that it displaces Beth as the heroine and places her at the service of the transformation of her male colleague.

The book is not prepared to give up the traditional values used to subjugate women. Critics have rightly pointed out that many women writers of the turn of the century were trapped in conservative ideology. But there is another way of looking at the problem: Grand does not give up the objective of rescuing the abnegation traditionally required of women from conventional interpretation. In order to achieve this objective, the recognition must take place in Beth's own terms, which allows her to become a true protagonist. Usandizaga defends Grand on the basis that the lover is made to recognize not only what the heroine did for him out of true love,

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<sup>12</sup> As Nancy Fraser (1996) suggests, the category of gender provides a link between the distributive and the recognitional idea of justice: the struggle for recognition is essential for distribution in so far as the possibility of participation in equal terms in social interaction is at stake. But this can only be so if recognition is taken at the level of an institutional struggle.

<sup>13</sup> One may contrast the father's advice in this novel with the advice to revenge that Hamlet received from his father. In the case of Beth, the advice is actually a voice that comes from the future. In the case of Hamlet, the advice belongs to the past and becomes therefore ghostly (Barbeito 1998).

but also Beth as an independent woman with artistic qualities, and in so doing, he distances himself from her two early lovers. This is perhaps what makes it possible for him to look beyond the conventional prejudice of his friend and recognize the real sense of her action. In this way, the book resists a conventional interpretation of Beth's goodness: only in so far as abnegation is considered a quality of a New Woman, its sense can be appropriated from the ideological role it traditionally played as a test of the good submissive woman.

**IV.2.** Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper', is also concerned with the possibility of a new self-consciousness for women, and their creation of an alternative tradition. This story argues for the incompatibility between the submissive woman and the woman artist, and instead of joy in self-recognition, it presents us with a hair-raising scene displaying the heroine's collapse as a consequence of her attempt to gain an identity different from the patriarchal stereotype that is imposed on women. In this narrative, then, the danger is not that of falling into the "prison house of language", but of stepping out of it into madness. But the story should not be taken just at the level of representation. Christa Knellwolf, in her essay 'Madness and Interpretation in "The Yellow Wallpaper"', shows that the careful construction of the autobiographical narrative, in which the protagonist gains more control as narrator the more she seems to lose it as a heroine, introduces an ambiguity into the representation of madness, in that it can be read not only as a psychological state, but as itself interpretation, both in the theatrical and critical sense. Thus the question of whether madness is the only alternative to the silence imposed on women is taken seriously, in that the idea of madness as a psychological state details clearly what a woman risks in stating her difference, but also answered in the negative, in that madness can be used to parody patriarchy such that it succeeds in providing a rational criticism of patriarchal discourse.

Women live a paradoxical situation in language indeed, since they have to speak and gain self-consciousness in a patriarchal discourse that tries both to silence them and to impose on them an image that reduces them to the role which patriarchy has allotted women. The question then follows whether it is possible for women to speak for themselves at all and to achieve an identity different from that projected onto them by patriarchy. The idea of "the prison-house of language" makes this impossible, but according to Knellwolf, Perkins Gilman gives a positive answer to this question by

managing to produce a parody of the basic ideological opposition between reason and emotion, and of the subsequent projection of emotion onto the feminine. The enactment of self-consciousness in the schizophrenic game played by a sane narrator and a possibly mad heroine deconstructs patriarchy, for the woman writer neither escapes into madness as the only form of resistance for women, nor renounces reason.

A consuming critique of patriarchal ideology ensues from the deconstruction of the violent binary, through which ideological mechanisms of repression are exposed. To begin with, the narrator tells the story of her double whose desire to shake off the bonds of convention results in madness, conventionally thought of as the natural state of such women. But the game of identity and non identity between narrator and heroine deconstructs the nature of this madness and reveals it simply as the brand with which ideology marks difference and particularly women that break away from their 'true' emotive nature (no wonder, then, that their attempt ends up in emotional excess and rational disorder): the narrator identifies with the heroine's desire to break away from patriarchy, but not with her madness, her control emphasizing that difference is not madness and also her ironical attitude towards ideology. Naturalization of madness is shown to be an ideological strategy that hides the sociological causes that either drive different individuals mad or lead others to label them as such. Further, the game of schizophrenia is a parody, which throws ironic light on the gendered split reason/emotion.

Perkins Gilman appropriates traditional devices for her social criticism. The contrast between Gulliver's madness at the end of his adventures and his sanity at the end of the book, is the first to come to mind. 'The Yellow Wallpaper' also plays with gothic narrative elements transforming the transcendent ghost into an image that floats free from the subject's control. This is what Catherine's image does in *Wuthering Heights* driving her mad. But in Perkins Gilman's story there is a sense in which the controller of the image projected onto the wall is not really the woman, but the man. Hence, it is the husband-doctor that loses his senses when he sees his wife's embodiment of the patriarchal image. He sees her reduced to the state of animality, a condition that is frightening for him but also exerts an irresistible fascination. The wife for her part is full of ambiguity, after all she has only given up her role as man's delegated controller of her own image.

## V. The politics of tradition. Attitudes to modernity and the canon making

As Bridget Elliot and Jo-Ann Wallace (1994) point out, the interpretation of the historical moment at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century is not the same for women as for male modernists. We have already seen how Eagleton exposed the postmodernist tendency to declare the end of modernity for everyone and everywhere. This historical moment cannot be taken as an impasse or as the end of history for those whose history is beginning; nostalgia, pessimism are the dominant feelings in one case, optimism, or looking forward in the other. Even before the modernists had begun to establish their tradition, giving themselves a proper past that served to found their criteria of relevance for present and future, women had already started to move in a different direction. Women's participation in the creation of an alternative new tradition, which does not renounce involvement in real life, inevitably breaks away from the modernist canon, in as much as this was constructed with the aim of justifying a new elitist aesthetics.<sup>14</sup>

The diversity of attitudes to modernity during the modernist period is also notable in the contrast between the avant-garde radical break with tradition and the modernist construction of the canon: Chris Baldick and Estaban Pujals study, respectively, the strategic interventions in the history of art and literature made by modernists in the first quarter of the century, and by artists and art critics of the 1950's and 1960's, as expressions of different attitudes to modernity.

In his essay, 'Modernist Criticism and the English Literary Canon', Baldick argues that, in order to understand the modernists' attitude to modernity, it is more fruitful to look at modernist writings on other authors than at their own explanations of their poetics. The modernists' campaign to promote themselves, which specifically involves a readjustment of the canon, is in conflict with the idea that T. S. Eliot put forward in his 'Tradition and Individual Talent' that the canon automatically becomes restructured with the appearance of a new work of art.<sup>15</sup> T.S. Eliot's is a penetrating and very influential idea. Baldick does not reject it altogether, for he is not questioning whether the appearance of a new work of art may not open up

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<sup>14</sup> For the difference between what the modernists wrote about themselves -the ideas which New Criticism adopted- and the aesthetics of their poetry and fiction, see Eysteinnsson, *op. cit.*.

<sup>15</sup> For the modernists efforts at institutionalising modernism, see Levenson, *op. cit.*

the possibility of rereading the art of the past. Nor is he saying, in a postmodern manner, that any truth is relative to the group that believes in it, or that his own analysis is just another story with no pretensions to truth. What Baldick makes clear by historicizing modernism is that the rereading of the art of the past is a historical activity: it develops strategies to promote itself for reasons that can be ascertained.

Unlike the Italian futurists, who rejected tradition, the modernists were deeply involved in the construction of the canon, which was determined by their idea of history. Though modernists differ in their choices of precursors, they coincide in the simplification of history that they effect in making use of a pattern of splendor, decadence and revival which serves each of them as a frame for their own remaking of the canon. Thus they choose different aspects of modernity in order to date the moment of the downfall of culture (the appearance of capitalism, Reformation, Rationalism, Victorianism), but they concur in labelling mass culture, and more specifically journalism, the epitome of the evils of the modern world. In this way, modernist poetics was defined by opposition to what its authors considered the distinctive features of journalism and mass culture, these features being summarized by W.B. Yeats in his poem 'Hic et Ille':

“The rhetorician deceives his neighbour  
The sentimentalist himself”

The emphasis on this opposition to popular culture privileged poetic language, and particularly the image, considered to be the distinctive feature of poetry. The privilege of the image is at least as old as Aristotle's philosophy for whom it constitutes the entelechy of the successful metaphor (Rodrigo 1998). For the modernists, the image was the expression of immediate perception of an observer free from prejudice and from the forces of popular consumerism. Here we can see the modernist conception of the image become distinct from Aristotelian poetics: Aristotle does not oppose metaphoric language and rhetoric; but the modernists, in spite of the fact that in common language they are obviously mixed, regard this opposition as the cornerstone of their poetics. This move is, of course, linked to their cultural politics: in order to avoid commodification, a clear-cut separation should divide their language and its uses from common language.

The modernists' attitude to journalism was in sharp contrast to that of their contemporaries, the Edwardians, who wrote for the press. The modernists preferred the 'little reviews' addressed to their select readership,

but their relation to the press was, to say the least, uncomfortable, as Eagleton and Baldick point out, since the journalism they despised in poetic terms provided them with financial support. The Edwardians wrote some of the best sellers of the time, did not feel themselves to be priests of the 'art for art's sake' persuasion, and their canon admitted non fictional prose. Hence they provided the modernists with good reasons to despise them and exclude them from their canon.

## **VI. Avant-garde vs modernism. Politics and utopia**

The criteria for the autonomy of art involved the exclusion, not only of Edwardians, but also of part of the artistic movements of the early twentieth century, for which formalist critics of the 1940's and 1950's (Greenberg, Barr...) were responsible. These formalist critics told the story of the individual artist's heroic overcoming of nineteenth century mimetic representation, and considered that autonomy –as achieved through self-referentiality of the work of art– was necessary to rescue art from kitsch and consumerism. In his essay, 'On Reading Considered as One of the Fine Arts: Collage and Modern Writing', Esteban Pujals concentrates on the late 1950's and early 1960's revival of Dada's proposals which had been superseded by formalism, and which he sees as an attempt at reintroducing politics into art, in reaction against formalist depolitization. This repolitization goes hand in hand with the attention paid by artists to the problem of meaning and the engagement of theory with semiosis. Indeed, Duchamps's five minute public statement on readymades and modern painting in 1961 is taken both as a symptom of the change that was then taking place (anticipating, according to Pujals, what happened in the art of the second half of the century) and as a prelude to deconstruction.

Collage, or assemblage, effects a displacement from artistic object to reader which phenomenon is explained by the editors of the Group Mu as the result of the heterogeneity of collage which "imposes itself on the reading as stimulation to produce a signification which could neither be univocal nor stable." In this way, the opposition writer/reader is deconstructed. This can be clearly seen in Duchamps's statement that all traditional art is collage, which can only be true if the reader performs this tour de force seeing all art as collage. Furthermore, Pujals argues that collage is the manifestation of the 'gram' or principle of difference at the level of discourse, since the assembled fragments are traces of traces, thus never simply present or absent.

The title of the essay itself is an exercise in palimpsest and collage: it bears the trace of Thomas De Quincey's 'On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts', itself referring back to Swift's 'A Modest Proposal', and at the same time it is inspired by Duchamp, so that this is, in its author's very words, "a writing that is a reading that is a writing". This sounds like an invitation to reading-writing. The substitution of "Reading" for "Murder" aims at a further displacement of the violence suggested by the previous titles, but also at its appropriation by reading. This is a deeply ambiguous operation, for, on the one hand, it can be understood as an attempt to make heard the utopia of an art which is part of a community excluding violence, but on the other hand an echo may be heard in it of Derrida's interpretation of collage as "an operation' that goes the way of 'the blade of a red knife'".

In the first case, the idea of peaceful community that figured strongly in the utopianism of the 1960's could be criticized as the reproduction of the opposition community/society used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where the 'community' is defined in terms of personal relationships, and 'society' in terms of reified norms and conventions; this opposition ignores the effects of social substructures such as class or gender. However, Pujals focuses on the difference between the politics implied in the idea of the dissolution of art into community relationships and that of modernist autonomy, so that we can see the difference between the modernist aesthetic utopia of an order kept within the work of art in the face of the chaos of the modern world, and this avant-garde utopia which pursues an art which is part of life.

Pujals argues that the artists of the 1960's were more interested in the spirit of collective revolt embodied in the social movements of the early twentieth century than in the formalist myth of the individual artist hero. Without trying to establish a cause-effect connection, Pujals points to the relationship between the revolution in aesthetics and theory of meaning, and the events of May 1968. It is this kind of conceptual link that makes us think about the difference between a kind of revolt which takes place in the artistic field, and which may well be kept within the limits of art if it is content with the proposal of ideal communities, and the kind of art and criticism which is part of the political intervention of a social force such as feminism. For it is through the latter that a different kind of politics, opposed to that generated by the principle of autonomy, can be fully realised rather than just dreamed of.

If we follow the line provided by the second interpretation, however, violence remains, and turns reading into a "murderous activity", the reader

into a sort of “castrator”, as the collage artist that cuts conventional or, in Derridean terms, the phallogocentric discourse, in order to reorganize its fragments in a different medium. This cutting can be taken as an exercise in deconstruction of those ideological oppositions that engender violence. Again the realization of the displacement of patriarchal order in socio-political terms, and of a reorganization of traditional society into a new order, perhaps a sort of collage, can be said to appear in feminism. The binary presence/absence of violence is here apparent: those who have suffered violence throughout the history of mankind attempt a peaceful transformation of society, which is nevertheless experienced as a form of violence (castration) by patriarchy.

The conference ‘Modernism and Modernity’ included two panel discussions on ‘Tradition and Modernity’ and ‘Modernism and the Turn of the Century’, which are discussed by Manuela Palacios in the last chapter of this book, ‘A Squint Look at Modernism: the Tradition and the Aftermath’.

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# Contradictions of Modernism

Terry Eagleton

## I

Modernism seeks to go beyond realism (indeed what else unites the motley forms of modernism, from symbolism to Surrealism, Futurism to Minimalism, that this common antagonism?), but like any transgression it is dependent on the very norms from which it deviates. If modernism parodies realism, disfigures it, puts the skids under it, shatters it to bits, it can do all this only by continually reminding us of the realism it seeks to transcend, and so undoing itself in that very act. There is no fragmentation without the idea of integrity. In this sense, a true modernism would be one which had travelled beyond modernism itself, beyond the whole modernism/realism opposition, and this of course is exactly what postmodernism claims to have done.

Modernism proper is old enough to remember a time when there was still truth, reality, foundations, a coherent subject, the possibility of freedom and justice, and is still haunted by a nostalgia for this alluring world, not least in the way the modernist work of art still strives for unity, turning around an absent centre or glimpsing a dim foundation which disappears as soon as you look at it straight. Joyce's *Ulysses* may be a grotesque parody of totalisation, but it's a totality nonetheless. Postmodernism, with its breezy Nietzschean amnesia, is too young and brash and buoyant even to remember all that, however much Jacques Derrida may sternly remind us that centres, oppositions and metaphysics are utterly inescapable.

But if you can get along without centres and foundations in culture, you certainly cannot get along without them in society as a whole. It is all very well to preach the end of history or philosophy or modernity or metaphysics in Duke or Berkeley or Cornell, but the White House is well enough aware that our social practices still stand in need of some metaphysical legitimation, even if –and here is the irony– those very practices themselves, in their remorseless this-worldliness and relativity and rationalising, continually bring into disrepute the very sorts of metaphysical rationales which they still stand in need of. It is too risky to believe that our practices just stand on themselves, rather like the modernist work of art, or indeed like the Kantian subject. This is all very well in the sphere of the disco and media and shopping mall, but as far as teaching and voting and child-care and jury service and declaring war go, the old-fashioned autonomous self-responsible subject is just as necessary as it ever was. Hence the contradiction of modern social orders, pitched between fragmentation and fundamentalism, *Forrest Gump* and *Pulp Fiction*, the anarchy of market forces and the authoritarianism of the state, the claustrophobically tribal and the abstractly transnational each feeding off the other, pressing the other into a monstrous parody of itself.

## II

Another contradiction: Modernism guiltily confesses its complicity with the very social order –that of modernity– it seeks to escape. Modernity has allowed art to become for the first time autonomous: it has to be an end in itself, since it sure does not seem to have any other sort of function any more. And this aloof autonomy is the condition of its new status as critique. But the very same autonomy –the disabling distance of the work of art from the rest of what we do– is bound to strike that critique fairly impotent. And this contradiction is internalised by the literary art-work itself, which becomes anguished, self-brooding, self-divided, anxious to transcend language –since language is what ties it to the degraded social world– while knowing that if it did it would just disappear into its own shimmering vacancy. All it can do is try to crowd language out or slim it drastically down, become as it were either bulimic or anorexic, cram itself with multiple meaning to the point of sheer opacity, or alternatively shed as much weight as it dare, hover as near to the edge of a pregnant silence that it can.

The guilt and scandal is that art still exists in a social order which has absolutely no time for it, and this –the near-impossibility of art– then invades and infiltrates its very forms, so that the art-work inscribes on its own very body, in its very letter, its dismally unpropitious social conditions. It takes on board, in its very forms, the historical impasse at which it has arrived. Just by existing, art testifies to the truth that freedom, autonomy, beauty and sensuousness are still possible in a commodified world; but this testimony is also a seductive lie, for if the truth of modernity is alienation this just cannot be true. To attain some frail authenticity, then, the work of art must somehow internalise this alienated condition as well, but how, then, can it still remain art? All it can do to be authentic is therefore to name, self-ironisingly, self-reflexively, its own inevitable inauthenticity, to calculate this as it were into the equation, to flaunt the shameful fact that, in a world without necessity or foundation, it might just as well never have been, that its existence is entirely contingent. To this extent, the modernist artwork includes a kind of meta-reflection or miniature theory of itself within itself, so that art becomes theoretical just at the point where theory is becoming aesthetic.

But for art to wax theoretical is to put its own sensuousness at risk, and so, once more, to risk being self-defeating. It has to choose between truth -commenting ironically on its own status -and beauty, which are no longer the synonyms that they were for Keats. Since it has no given foundation, it has, like the Kantian subject, to legislate its own basis into being, but the sheer arbitrariness of this continually enervates it. The art-work's existence can only be secured, guaranteed, by some law which exists outside it, otherwise it's plunged into the circularity of just giving the law to itself, as a kind of private law ('privilege'). Yet if there was anything outside itself, it would jeopardise its jealous autonomy ('auto-nomos' = law unto itself). Since the world itself for modernism is no longer story-shaped, as it was for classical realism, the modernist work can tell any story it wants; but this exhilarating freedom is too close for comfort to sheer gratuitousness or absurdity -negative rather than positive freedom, as the political theorists might say. If anything can exist, then nothing has value.

In seeking to hold out against a commodified culture –and let's not forget here that modernism and mass culture were born historically together, at a stroke, the one partly as a reaction to the other–, the modernist work of art withdraws into itself, empties itself of content, purges itself of meaning, since meaning is what chains society to its own degraded condition like a galley slave chained to his oar. That bit of modernism we know as the avant garde believed that the one thing the bourgeoisie couldn't swallow was not

radical meaning, since as long as it was any kind of meaning it felt fairly secure, but a concerted assault upon meaning itself. Dadaism is one way of doing this, but so also is formalism, whereby the work of art comes to take its own forms as its content, in a narcissistic sort of way, where words come to be about words, paint about paint and stone about stone. By thickening its textures and garbling its narratives, it hopes to resist being too easily consumed, so that modernist obscurity is a kind of politics all of its own. The contradiction of this is that in putting up this resistance to the commodity in the sense of exchange-value, mere abstract consumable stuff, the artwork highlights its own autonomy, flaunts its own material being, to the point where it becomes a kind of fetish, and so, ironically, succeeds merely in imitating the commodity form itself, which is also of course a fetish. So it really can't win this particular game at all. Just by existing, art bears witness to the fact that even in this degenerate society there's something which is still not for sale. But though this is true, it's also a lie; just as classical art was at once illusion and reality, but rather less problematically so.

### III

Modernism occupies a particular moment within modernity - the moment, roughly speaking, of the transition from classical *laissez-faire* to international monopoly capitalism, the moment of imperial wars and political insurrections, of social crisis and upheaval, all of which is of course registered, either euphorically or gloomily, by modernist art itself. The years of high European modernism are the years of the threatened crack-up of high liberal enlightened modernity itself, under the impact of both left and right-wing forces. Perry Anderson has argued that one condition for modernism is political turbulence, while another is the novel impact of modernisation on still traditionally hidebound societies which haven't yet absorbed and domesticated the thrill of the new. This is maybe one reason why, astonishingly, the only bit of what were then known as the British Isles to produce a flourishing modernism in the early decades of this century was the most chronically backward bit, Ireland, a highly traditional social order with only a thin heritage of cultural realism, which just at that point was undergoing a national revolution and the emergence of a modernising middle class. Otherwise the English had to import their high modernists from abroad - James, Conrad, Pound, Eliot, Wyndham Lewis - just as today we

have to import most of our critical theory from the continent, checking it out at Dover for the bits which are most suit our native requirements and sending the rest back to Calais. England's long heritage of empiricism in philosophy and realism in culture insulated it for the most part from the modernist assault, whereas neither realism nor empiricism had ever taken root in idealist heroic mythological agrarian Ireland. England was able under its own steam to produce only two home-grown major literary modernists, but one was a radical woman askew to the cultural establishment, and the other was the son of a provincial coal-miner. The great names of the twentieth century *English Literature* are a Pole, a bunch of Americans and a handful of Irishmen

Modernism, then, was part of a great cosmopolitan migration, as men and women turned their backs on what they thought were clapped-out national traditions and clustered instead in some polyglot city like Paris or Vienna or Berlin, with only the lingua franca of art to unite them. Language was now the only place you could be at home, and the émigrés modernist artists crossed from one to another as easily as they passed from one country or art-form or coterie to the next. If you were an exile, robbed of your so-called mother tongue, then you might just as well be dispossessed in all languages as in one. English was in an important sense not the mother-tongue of Yeats and Joyce and Beckett, even though none of them could speak Irish (largely because it's impossible...) This cosmopolitanism was part of modernism's radical impulse, its resistance to conservative national cultures; yet of course it also provided a mirror-image of capital itself, which was now becoming increasingly homeless, stateless, multinational, the great global circulation of commodities thus paralleling the modernists' dizzy circulation of languages, idioms, cosmic archetypes, deep universal structures. Capital is just as aloofly indifferent to the particularity of time and place as the *Cantos* or the *Wake* or *The Waste Land*. For transnational capital as much as for James Joyce, anywhere is everywhere and somewhere nowhere in particular. In this sense, too, then, modernism was mortgaged to the very social order it flouted. (And it was, incidentally, grotesquely mistaken to think that national cultural heritages were exhausted, when the most virulent nationalism Europe has ever witnessed was just about to be born in Germany).

All this corresponds to another contradiction too: to what one might call the manic depressiveness of modernism, which knew on the one hand all the excitements of this new mobility, the euphoria of the decentred subject, and at the same time its miseries and wretchedness, how all this exotic babble

of tongues and forms and idioms was, in part, poor compensation for being bereft of a homeland – a kind of rationalisation of rootlessness. So we have an art on the one hand enthralled by the latest piece of technology, the speedboat and radio and racing car and cosmopolitan café, delighting in its own hybridity, confident that the future has already arrived and that it belongs to the disinherited of the earth. On the other hand, an art ridden with angst, isolation, deracinated, twisted into self-contradiction, brooding upon its own near-impossibility, the product of a human subject who is now not only emptied and decentred but, or so it would seem, the mere function of great impersonal forces which live it far more than it lives them. If the surfaces of life seem random, arbitrary, chaotic, it's also true that lurking beneath them is some inexorable form of determinism, some far deeper structure (whether you call it language or mythology or the unconscious or pure form or mental categories or whatever) which is secretly organising and manipulating all this apparently random stuff we observe around us. A curious combination, then, of the inexorable and the arbitrary, whether in the relations between langue and parole, ego and unconscious, the phenomenal and the noumenal; the freedom of market exchange and the determinism of market forces, the schizophrenia of our impressions and the paranoia of suspecting that they all add up to some sinister but elusive whole, that there's a plot somewhere even if we don't know what it is; or think of the difference between the surface-text of Joyce's *Ulysses* – a random day nosing around Dublin – and its highly structured Homeric subtext.

And all of this corresponds more or less to what it feels like to live in one of these social orders, in which everything seems at once more and more organised and rationalised yet still impenetrably opaque, in which the human subject is at once adrift, cast off, yet shaped to its roots by forces at can never quite control or summon entirely to the light of consciousness. It's thus no surprise that modernism is the period in which structuralism first germinates, or indeed that it witnesses, all over the place, an enormous recrudescence of mythology. For myth is just the kind of closed system, continually shuffling its arbitrary units into new combinations, which captures this new world of commodity production in which everything is a secret version or recycling of everything else, in which difference turns out to be a mere rehash of identity, in which we witness that eternal recurrence of the new which for Walter Benjamin is fashion, or indeed the commodity form itself. "Never-changing ever-changing" as Joyce says in *Ulysses*, fascinated as he was by the fact that a mere fixed twenty-six alphabetic marks could generate an infinity of meanings.

#### IV

This leads to a further contradiction: the vexed relations between modernism and modernity. Recycling mythology is one way in which modernism finds itself excavating the very old just at the point where it thought it was discovering the very new. The slogan 'make it new' has of course a very venerable pedigree indeed –nothing is older than what appeals to start all over again– and the very word modern descends to us from classical antiquity. Modernism is in that sense, among other things, a highly traditional crisis of tradition; and if it worked particularly well in colonial conditions like Ireland, as postmodernism works well in post-colonial conditions today, it was partly because tradition there was itself fragmentary, ruptured, discontinuous. An appeal to tradition in England is conservative, whereas in Irish culture it's quite often revolutionary - one reason among several why the English and the Irish are divided by the same language. Or think of Walter Benjamin's notion of revolutionary nostalgia, in which one breaks through what he calls the empty, homogeneous time of the modern precisely by going back beyond it, by commemorating the dead in Judaic fashion, remembering all the victims and cast-offs of a triumphalist modernity, and so, by hi-jacking the dangerous energies of these dead, enabling ourselves to break through the empty time of modernity to some unprefigurable future. As Benjamin remarks, it isn't dreams of liberated grandchildren that stir men and women to revolt, but memories of enslaved ancestors. So it is that his celebrated Angel of History is propelled backwards into the future with his horror-stricken eyes fixed on that great pile of garbage which we call the past. Or think of the Irish literary revival, which reaches back over the head of a modernity, which for Ireland can only mean colonial rule, to an ancient mythology whose resources will come to your aid in the fight for a political future. It is a kind of short-circuiting of the time of modernity, squeezing it at both ends, a sort of archaic avant-gardism whereby use the past as a springboard to the future which will carry you right over the catastrophe of the present. If the future is unimaginable, a radical rupture with the present, then the only available image of it must be the remote past. For the modernist Freud, in similar fashion, only by confronting and slaying the minotaur of our personal past can we hope for psychic emancipation, looking back and remembering in order to move forward. And if the ancient past was, as mythology would have it, a *collective* one, before the autonomous self-determining starkly isolated bourgeois subject entered into its sovereignty, then this pre-individualist condition provides an image in this way too of a post-individualist future.

Hence, then, the well-known primitivism and atavism of this thoroughly modern current, in which time is made to curve back upon itself just as the individual work of art bends back upon itself and begins to take as its theme its own problematical existence. In striving *beyond* what it sees as an exhausted enlightenment rationality, trembling on the apocalyptic brink of the inconceivably new, modernism punches a hole in linear time which allows all sorts of archaic forces to come flooding up, most of them, it must be confessed, thoroughly unpleasant. Because of course this conjuncture of the very new and the very old, of the atavistic and the avant-garde, is nowhere more evident than in fascism, which yokes a brutally modernising rationality to an orgy of barbaric unreason. If some currents of modernism –the revolutionary avant-garde, for example– catch up the vibrant energies of modernity itself, in their futurist technology and utopian triumphalism, quite a lot more of it represents a wholesale spurning of the modern –of liberalism, science, progress, democracy, mass culture and the rest–, in the name of some regression to the organic past or flight to a higher or deeper sphere. On the one hand, then, we have the cult of the machine; on the other hand the dark gods, the return of the repressed, thinking with the blood and the body, exotic orientalisms and happy peasants.

Politically speaking, modernism is contradictory not only because it includes both Marinetti and Mayakovsky, Heidegger and Brecht, but because its typical politics can only be described, oxymoronically, as radical-reactionary. Many of the great modernist writers are firmly on the far right, but a right which has no time at all for bourgeois liberalism, and so can look at times strangely like the left. Or to put the point another way: in the absence or failure of a left revolutionary heritage in the early twentieth century, the critique of liberal capitalism was handed over to the radical or Romantic right, who were quite as opposed to individualism, bourgeois democracy or technocratic rationalism as the left, but of course for quite different reasons. If a political totalisation was not possible, then a mythological one had to serve instead. This radical right may have been mystified and sometimes pernicious, but the scope and depth and ambition of its project, and not least the fact that its were an *aestheticising* politics, ensured that it was from here, not from the liberal-rationalist mainstream, that the major art of the period got produced. It is Lawrence and not E.M. Forster, Yeats and not H.G. Wells, who were to capture the cultural high ground. For a leftist, then, as opposed to a liberal, there is no particular *embarrassment* in the fact that some of the major literary names of the century

have held quite squalid political views; the fact is itself historically significant, and I think to some degree historically explicable.

A final word on the subject of the so-called end of modernity. If modernity is indeed pronounced to be over, then who exactly has the authority to make such a pronouncement? Is this utterance, which seems to be a purely descriptive one, also in some sense performative, masking a desire, a wish, a revulsion? As someone might announce that it had stopped raining, because they were desperate to get out of the house. If the grand narratives of modernity were illusions anyway, then wasn't it off already? Declaring an end to modernity implies, after all, that there was something real to call an end to, which if it was all just so much metaphysical mystification would hardly seem to be justified. And if postmodernism or end-of-history thinking comes at the *end* of modernity, mustn't it to that degree, and in spite of itself, share something of its linear logic? Is all of modernity over, or just certain bits of it? The universal emancipation of women as well as the universal domination of Nature? The project of liberal tolerance as well as the belief in cognitive absolutes? And who distinguishes here between the various bits? Is modernity off because we were not able to solve its problems, or because they were pseudo-problems, or because the problems were real enough in their day but just are not in question (as Foucault might have said: "in the truth") any longer? If, for example, the concepts of popular revolution, collective subjects, self-determination, epochal historical breaks and so on are just chimeras of some tedious grand narrative we are now thankfully rid of, what exactly was it that happened in eastern Europe, or South Africa, a few years ago? What if modernity is off for us Europeans but not, say, for the Chinese? As for grand narratives: the world seems currently divided between those who believe in them and think them excellent things, and those who do not believe in them and think them highly dangerous. In which case I must belong to that 0.9 p.c. of the population who holds neither view - who believes that there has indeed been a grand narrative, indeed a number of them, some to do with the business of material reproduction, and some with the question of sexual reproduction, but that neither of them has been an excellent thing at all. In fact what is 'grand' about them is just the fact that they both seem to have involved consistent misery, unhappiness and injustice, almost without a break. There are indeed grand narratives around, and more is the pity. The sooner we can bring them grinding to a halt, the better. This, approximately, is what Marx meant by getting out of what he called mere 'pre-history' -everything which has happened to date- and trying to shift into histories proper, in all their

difference and plurality. It is just that, if we think that we can do that by (as the postmodernists believe) ignoring, suppressing or leaping over the head of modernity, we shall quickly discover that, though we might forget about modernity, modernity will not forget about us.



# Deconstruction: modern or postmodern?

Christopher Norris\*

## I

First I want to raise some matters of definition, because these terms –‘modernism’, ‘postmodernism’, and ‘deconstruction’– are used with different senses in different contexts so there is a need for clarification. Many years ago, in the 1920s, Arthur Lovejoy (1948) suggested that there should be a moratorium on use of the term ‘romanticism’ because this word had acquired such a range of conflicting or ambiguous senses that it was now causing great confusion. I think there may likewise be a case for ceasing to talk about ‘postmodernism’ and even, perhaps, about ‘modernism’ until we can sort out the different historical, philosophical, and cultural senses of those terms. So what I want to do now is introduce a few distinctions that will perhaps make it possible to discuss these matters more precisely.

Part of the problem is that we cannot begin to define ‘post-modernism’ until we have some reasonably clear working notion of what

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\* My lecture was improvised for the occasion of this conference and then transcribed from an audiotape recording. The version here published has been lightly edited so as to tidy up the grammar and clarify some points of detail while preserving a relatively informal mode of address. It also incorporates some further relevant material drawn from a series of faculty/postgraduate seminars, which I taught at Santiago during the week following the conference. I should like to thank Margarita Estévez Saá and Manuel Barbeito Varela for their help in producing what I hope is a readable and fairly representative text.

‘modernism’ means, and this term is itself used in so many senses that it is quite hard to pin down. Literary critics and theorists have a fairly good idea of what they mean by modernism: it is the movement that began in the early twentieth century, more specifically after the First World War. It applies to certain fictional and poetic techniques, stylistic devices, modes of writing, experimental procedures, the use of spatial form, stream-of-consciousness, the predominance of metaphor, striking juxtapositions of image and style as in *The Waste Land*, techniques of multiple narrative consciousness, the unreliable narrator, all kinds of highly self-conscious, sophisticated literary experimentation. Music critics also have a pretty fair idea of what they mean by musical Modernism. Broadly speaking it would include the atonal, serial or twelve-note music of Schoenberg and his disciples; middle-period (neoclassical) Stravinsky and other such gestures of revolt against nineteenth-century Romanticism; more complex or challenging techniques of development, formal structure, harmonic progression, etc.; in other words, as Ezra Pound famously said, the desire to ‘make it new’ at all costs and throw off the dead weight of inherited tradition. So to this extent musical and literary critics have a fair working notion of what they mean by Modernism.

But then, if you look at how philosophers and intellectual historians use that term, you find a very different range of meanings and associations. Depending on your chosen historical perspective you could trace modernism back to the seventeenth century and Descartes’s attempt to provide a new foundation for philosophy in his famous declaration “*cogito ergo sum*”, conceived as an indubitable ground or anchor-point for knowledge of oneself and the world. Thus the one thing of which we could be certain is that the human mind (or thinking substance) must exist in and through the act of thought. And from this point –or so Descartes believed– one could start to rebuild the content and structures of an objectively-existent (mind-independent) world whose reality had been threatened by the demon of sceptical doubt. Then again, moving on a couple of centuries, one might date the emergence of ‘true’ philosophical modernism with Kant and his hugely ambitious attempt to provide a transcendently justified account of the various human faculties, that is to say, cognitive understanding, practical reason, aesthetic judgement, and reason in its ‘pure’ or speculative modes. Indeed it can be argued that all the great philosophical debates since then –debates about truth, knowledge, interpretation, the status of the human or social vis-à-vis the natural sciences– all have their origin in various readings of Kant. So Modernism, in this context, is an attempt to define the scope,

the powers, and the limits of the various human faculties of knowledge and judgement. And for many philosophers, at least those working in the continental tradition, this would be one of the defining moments of modernity, the philosophic discourse of modernity, a discourse that has continued (though some might wish to reject or deny it) right down to the present day.

One of the most notable and resourceful defenders of that tradition is the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas who, in many ways, inherits the Kantian discourse, who continues to distinguish the different modalities of understanding, practical reason, aesthetic judgement, etc., since he believes it is very important –not least on ethico-political grounds– to avoid mixing them up in the typical ‘postmodernist’ fashion.<sup>1</sup> He does not entirely endorse Kant’s way of thinking about these issues and seeks to give them a more pragmatic, discursive, or linguistic turn. Thus Habermas (1984, 1987) talks about the “ideal speech-situation” as a kind of implicit *telos* or regulative idea that is built into all our communicative acts, our social life-forms and structures of political representation. But still, in Habermas’s writing there is a deep and principled commitment to Kantian or Enlightenment values, to what he calls “the unfinished project of modernity”. Habermas thinks it vital to conserve that critical impulse because the only way we can work towards a more just, equitable, truly democratic society is by keeping our sights fixed upon the possibility of achieving an enlightened consensus, in Kant’s terms a ‘sensus communis’. This is not just common sense under a fancy Latin name, it is not just a kind of *de facto*, pragmatic agreement on certain matters. Rather, it is the idea of agreement arrived at through an enlightened, democratic, participant debate on issues of shared concern for humanity. Whence Habermas’s belief that we can indeed communicate across cultural differences, or divergences of moral viewpoint, or conflicting ideas of social and political priority, and moreover, that despite those differences we can at least hope to achieve a rational consensus that transcends and reconciles them. This is a deeply Kantian viewpoint: enlightened, critical, progressive, aimed toward extending the ‘public sphere’ of informed participant debate as far and as wide as possible.

So, to repeat: we need to keep in mind this distinction between the cultural and literary aspects of modernism which take rise in a certain period, the early twentieth century, and which encompass a range of artistic,

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Habermas (1972).

aesthetic, and cultural programs, and, on the other hand the philosophic discourse of modernity which goes further back and which involves much larger claims. Now, I think we can draw some related distinctions between various uses of the term ‘postmodernism’. There is a sense of the term in which it figures as a broad, rather fuzzy, ill-defined, cultural phenomenon. This is postmodernism as described by a culture-critic like Fredric Jameson who sees signs of it everywhere and who mostly (not always) likes what he sees.<sup>2</sup> Jameson speaks as a Marxist, but a Marxist with distinctly postmodernist leanings. In his view there is no point criticising, or rejecting, or deploring postmodernism, as if one had some choice in the matter or as if one could simply opt out of it. Jameson views postmodernism as a defining aspect of the way we live now: it affects our life-styles, our styles of dress, the way we listen to music, the way we watch television, respond to advertising. It is the element we inhabit, the sea we swim in, the very air we breathe. It affects and pervades so many aspects of our life that it would be futile for us to deplore it or reject it. Jameson thinks that basically all we can do is to say that there are some bits we can like and some bits we don’t like so much, or not at all. Thus he quite likes the architecture and some of the music, isn’t so keen on a lot of the fiction that gets itself called ‘postmodernist’, but in the end thinks that these are matters of personal taste or individual predilection. After all, the whole notion of aesthetic judgement as appealing to shared (intersubjective or transindividual) criteria is itself just the sort of Kantian argument that postmodernism has left far behind.

Clearly there is a measure of truth in all this. If you happen to enjoy postmodernist fiction, then I could not hope to persuade you otherwise, and indeed wouldn’t want to since I disagree with Jameson in finding it (for the most part) lively and rewarding. I might try a bit harder to change your mind if you profess to enjoy ‘postmodern’ music, or the sorts of music that often get described that way: for instance, the music of minimalist composers such as Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Michael Nyman, and the ‘holy minimalist’ John Tavener. Perhaps I would not really hope to dissuade you or to spoil your enjoyment by coming up with good reasons to think it bad music! On the other hand, I would want to say that the argument does not stop there. One can go beyond saying ‘I like it’ or ‘I don’t like it’, one can remark that much of this music is mind-numbingly repetitive, that it offers no aural or intellectual challenge, requires no effort of “structural listening” (in Adorno’s useful phrase) or ability to follow a complex pattern of harmonic,

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<sup>2</sup> See especially Jameson (1991).

tonal, or rhythmic development. In other words, it does not do what music ought to do, that is, provoke and stimulate the listener by putting up a certain resistance to facile or automated habits of response. Still, I am getting on my high horse here and had better not tax your goodwill any further. At any rate, as I have said, Jameson has a point when he adopts his take-it-or-leave-it line on the varieties of postmodern cultural consumption. For eventually such arguments must have an end and give way to statements of individual preference, even if that stage comes later than Jameson thinks and allows for some worthwhile discussion along the way. However this is not the aspect of postmodernism I want to talk about at any length today.

For there is another aspect, besides the broadly cultural-aesthetic, which I think is more open to reasoned and principled criticism and which can be stated in the form of a few propositions. This is 'philosophical' postmodernism and it extends into ethics and politics, as well as into other areas like epistemology and philosophy of language. The position is set out by Jean-François Lyotard whose book *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) has been perhaps the single most influential and widely read text about postmodernism. Lyotard argues that the philosophic discourse of modernity has come to an end, it is historically redundant, it has been overtaken by too many political, social, and cultural events. Once upon a time, no doubt, it was possible to believe in all those splendid Enlightenment values: in truth, progress, universal justice, perpetual peace, the 'sensus communis', and so forth. Perhaps one could even believe, like Kant, that all the diverse human cultures were destined to transcend their conflicts of interest and achieve some sort of federal world-state -the United Nations as an Idea of Reason, if you like. Such was at any rate the 'grand narrative' of Enlightenment thinking as Lyotard reads it. This narrative of course took different forms and emphasised different details of the picture from one thinker to the next. There was the Kantian grand narrative of reason, democracy, the universal "kingdom of ends" as an ethical and socio-political ideal. After that came Hegel's dialectical conception of history as moving ever onward and up through stages of successive conflict and resolution to the stage where Geist attained Absolute Knowledge and could thus write the book-to-end-all-books book that was Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit. Hegel is actually a better example than Kant of the kind of grand-narrative (or 'metanarrative') thinking that Lyotard hopes we have now left behind with the passage to our present "postmodern condition". A metanarrative is a story that wants to be more than just a story, that is to say, one which claims to have achieved an omniscient standpoint above and beyond all the other stories that people

have told so far. There is also a Marxist metanarrative (or was until recently, Lyotard would say) which seeks to out-Hegel Hegel by inverting his idealist dialectic and introducing such ideas as economic determination “in the last instance”, forces and relations of production, the base/superstructure metaphor, and class-conflict as the driving force in history. And again, this argument is manifestly constructed on grand-narrative lines, again it involves the teleological aim toward an endpoint (after the short-term “dictatorship of the proletariat”) at which all conflicts will somehow be resolved.

However, Lyotard says, we have to let go of these consoling illusions. We can no longer believe in the values that once characterized the Enlightenment project because, quite simply, we cannot ignore all the contrary evidence to date. That is, we have now been witness to so many wars, pogroms, bloody revolutions, counter-revolutions, post-revolutionary terrors, resurgences of ethnic conflict, etc., that the old metanarratives (along with all their values of truth, progress, and universal justice) cannot be sustained unless through ignorance or sheer bad faith. We have seen the suppression of ‘workers’ democracy’, of ‘socialism with a human face’, and of every attempt to carry such principles into practice. We have seen what happened in East Germany (1953), in Hungary (1956), and in Czechoslovakia (1968); also what occurred in the Soviet Union during seven decades of (nominally) Communist rule. In other words, there are too many melancholy instances of failed revolutionary aspirations for us to believe any longer in those old grand narratives –whether Kantian, Hegelian, or Marxist– that placed their faith in the power of reason to extrapolate from past to future events. So we should now abandon that faith, Lyotard thinks, and instead take the tolerant postmodern view that there exist any number of “first-order natural pragmatic narratives”, each of them having a right to express its own distinctive values, belief-system, or criteria for what should count as a ‘truthful’ or ‘valid’ statement. Moreover, we have to recognize –and Lyotard says that this is the one remaining principle of justice in a postmodern epoch– that these narratives are strictly incommensurable, that we can never judge one in terms of another. For we are sure to commit an ethical wrong –an infraction of the narrative ‘differend’– if we apply one set of criteria (i.e., our own) in order to criticize the practices or beliefs of others, or in order to adjudicate the issue between parties who may not (either or both of them) accept our terms of reference (Lyotard 1988). We have to accept the “postmodern condition”, that is, the fact (as Lyotard sees it) that we nowadays need to make sense of our lives in a context of multiple, open-ended, ever proliferating narratives and language-games. We tell many

stories about ourselves, about history, philosophy, the human and the natural sciences, and of course about politics and the various lessons to be drawn from past political events. But the problem, Lyotard says, is that we have to respect the narrative differend and not make the error –the typical ‘Enlightenment’ error– of believing any one such story to possess superior truth-telling warrant.

Now, I take it that this is what ‘postmodernism’ means in the more distinctive (philosophically articulated) sense of that term. At any rate it is useful, as a kind of preliminary ground-clearing exercise, to distinguish this from the other sense of ‘postmodernism’ that in the end applies to such a range of things that it tends to mean just ‘the way we live now’. I agree, up to a point, with Jameson when he argues that one cannot reject or deplore postmodernism in this latter sense because, quite simply, there is too much of it around; it affects too many aspects of our lives. However one can, I think, mount a strong case against the kind of postmodernist thinking to be found in Lyotard and others of a similar persuasion. One can argue that it is philosophically confused, that it has some dubious ethical and socio-political implications, and moreover that it gives a very partial (at times a wholly false or distorted) account of so-called ‘Enlightenment’ thought.

## II

Such is the position that I wish to defend in this talk, having tried to clear the ground of some prevalent confusions. There are three main aspects of postmodernism, and they have to do with epistemology, ethics and aesthetics. These three areas of concern were also of course very important for Kant, as likewise for the critical tradition in philosophy that continued from Kant to present-day thinkers like Habermas (1972, 1984/1987) and Karl-Otto Apel (1985). Epistemology has to do with knowledge, with the scope, that is to say, the powers and the limits of humanly attainable knowledge. This is the realm of understanding and its rule is that intuitions (sensuous or phenomenal intuitions) must be brought under adequate concepts. “Intuitions without concepts are blind; concepts without intuitions are empty.” (1964) It is a question of what we can know and what we can legitimately claim to know. For Kant there were certain kinds of knowledge that were just unattainable: knowledge of matters like (for instance) the nature or possibility of freewill, the immortality of the soul, or the existence of God, along with certain speculative questions about cosmology, time, and

the origins of the universe. He thought that if understanding tried to get a hold on these things, then it would overreach itself, it would run into paradoxes, contradictions and antinomies. So in the First Critique, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant is trying to define the proper scope of understanding (or epistemology) in both senses of the word 'define': to specify precisely what it can achieve and also to delimit its sphere of operation. Thus if we wish to achieve scientific knowledge, or if we want to understand those objects and events that make up the furniture of our everyday world, then it is the rule in such cases that sensuous intuitions be brought under an adequate or corresponding concept. (Of course this is a 'rule' in the constitutive sense that it defines the precondition for possessing such knowledge, and not in the other [regulative] sense of a 'rule' that normally or standardly applies, but which we might just choose to ignore on certain occasions.) So what Kant is setting out in the First *Critique* is a theory of knowledge that also involves a strict delimitation of its scope or proper remit.

For there are regions of enquiry where, if we try to achieve such knowledge, then we straight way run into all sorts of problem. If we seek to understand the nature of the soul, or of God, or certain issues in speculative cosmology ('is the universe finite or infinite?' 'Did time have a beginning?' and so forth), then we strain understanding to a point where it creates insoluble antinomies. For here we have neither adequate (determinate) concepts nor sensuous intuitions of space or time that could possibly serve to ground such knowledge. Kant has a striking metaphor at this point, one of his few really vivid and suggestive metaphors. Imagine a dove that thinks to itself: if only I could soar to a greater altitude where the air is much thinner then my wings would encounter much less resistance and who knows how fast and how high I could climb? But of course, at the limit, those wings would be flapping in a void and hence quite incapable of providing lift or forward motion. So what Kant tries to do in the First *Critique* is demonstrate the sorts of illusion that arise when reason (pure or speculative reason) mistakenly thinks to give itself the rule that intuitions must be brought under adequate concepts. Such thinking is perfectly legitimate –indeed, cannot be dispensed with– when it comes to questions of ultimate import for the conduct of our lives in the ethico-political and religious spheres. We can indeed think about God, about the soul, about freewill, immortality, and other such matters; also -when concerned with the prospects for human moral and political advancement- about Ideas of progress, democracy, perpetual peace, and so forth. However these are Ideas of Reason for which there exists no

phenomenal evidence and which therefore cannot be grounded in the union of concepts with sensuous intuitions. In other words, they involve speculative uses of Reason that go far beyond the limits of cognitive understanding. So for Kant it is a matter of some urgency to establish those limits and thus to draw a line between the spheres of understanding and speculative reason.

In the Second Critique, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant is concerned chiefly with ethical issues and such questions as: how ought we to behave? In accordance with what kinds of guiding maxim or generalized principles of conduct? And how can we apply such universal rules to the various specific situations and complicated issues of choice that we confront from day to day in our lives as moral agents? (Kant 1975). I shall have more to say about Kantian ethics in relation to the reading of Kant proposed by Lyotard and other postmodernist thinkers. Just now, what I wish to emphasise is the problematic gap that opens up between, on the one hand, those high-level maxims (subject to the ultimate Categorical Imperative: act always on that maxim such that you could consistently will it to be adopted by everyone in a like situation) and, on the other hand, the detailed practicalities of real-world moral conduct. For it is a problem often noted by Kant's critics -those who reject his deontological approach to ethical issues- that the maxims don't provide very much useful guidance when one has to choose between different (maybe conflicting) ethical priorities, or where no such rule seems to fit the case. In other words there is a gap between rule and application, universal and particular, moral judgement as derived from abstract prescriptions and moral judgement as it is actually brought to bear in cases that are often more complex and difficult than anything allowed for on the strong universalist view. Among Kant's critics in this regard are the communitarian thinkers who urge that we should drop all that high-level talk of rules, maxims, or categorical imperatives, and recognise that it is only within certain contexts -cultures, traditions, communal life-forms, language-games, shared social practices, and so forth- that moral judgements make any kind of sense.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, there is also an obvious connection here with Lyotard's call for an end to meta-narratives and for a 'postmodern' ethics whose watchword would be: let us multiply language-games as far as possible and accept no restriction on the range and variety of first-order, natural, pragmatic narratives.

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance Sandel (1982); Walzer (1983); Williams (1985).

In Lyotard's case this goes along with a marked shift of emphasis to the Third Critique, the *Critique of Judgement* (1978), where Kant is concerned mainly with issues of aesthetics, though in a sense of that term much broader than its normal present-day usage. For Kant, the aesthetic had to do not only with our response to works of art, our appreciation and evaluation of works of art. Rather, it involved a whole range of issues that included, crucially, the linking-up between sensuous intuitions and concepts, a topic which Kant had first broached in the section entitled 'Transcendental Aesthetic' in the First *Critique* but had left, to say the least, somewhat obscure and under-explained. As we have seen, it is a condition of all understanding that intuitions be "brought under" adequate concepts in the act of cognitive grasp. But the question remains: by what faculty or power of judgement it is that we can bring off this remarkable though everyday feat? After all, an intuition, a sensuous intuition, the phenomenal experience I can have of (say) this table in front of me is a very different thing from my concept of a table. In order to understand what a table is (and perceive this object as a table) I have to bring together my concept of a table and my sensuous intuition of it. But there is a real problem for Kant in negotiating this passage, in explaining how it is that the two distinct orders of perceptual and conceptual judgement can possibly be bridged or reconciled. This is the point at which imagination comes in, and imagination, for Kant in the First *Critique*, is a very obscure thing, an "art buried in the depths of the soul", he says. Kant usually strives for precision in defining his terms, but on this point, he becomes notably obscure and even, one feels, somewhat shuffling and evasive. Anyway the issue is one that is held over for further, more elaborate treatment in the Third *Critique*. For there Kant will take up the question of judgement - aesthetic judgement in the broad sense of that term- as playing a vital intermediary role in the passage from intuitions to concepts.

As we have seen, there is a similar problem in the Second *Critique* concerning the gap between universal maxims and imperatives (which aspire to an order of logical consistency devoid of empirical content) and what goes on in particular, context-specific instances of moral conduct and choice. How is it, one may ask, that we are supposed to bridge that seemingly unbridgeable gap? How should we negotiate the Kantian gulf between high level precepts ("act always on that maxim . . ." etc.) and the various everyday though complex moral predicaments in which we may find ourselves? Again, this requires an exercise of judgement, of imaginative judgement in so far as it cannot be merely a matter of linking up maxims with cases on a one-to-one correspondence principle. In other words, there is always something more

involved than a straightforward matching of precepts with practice, just as there is always something more to the act of bringing intuitions under concepts. In each case that 'something more' has to do with the exercise of judgement and the human capacity to seek out possible ways of deploying our faculties that are not laid down in advance or, so speak, algorithmically derivable from fixed procedures and guidelines.

So there are crucial issues of epistemology and ethics that Kant raises in the first two *Critiques* and which he takes up again for more detailed treatment in the *Critique of Judgement*. As I have said, the Third *Critique* is about aesthetics, but not narrowly, not just about issues of art or our appreciation of artworks. It is about judgement in a far more general sense: how is it that we can form judgements of nature, how it is that we achieve a knowledge of natural objects, processes, and events, given that these are not known to us directly but always via our various faculties of sensuous intuition, conceptual understanding, and 'imagination' as the synthesising power that makes all this possible? So the Third *Critique*, where Kant is discussing aesthetics, is in fact much wider, more ambitious, a cornerstone of his entire critical philosophy. He is trying to explain how it is that the human mind understands nature, albeit primarily under its aesthetic (contemplative or 'disinterested') aspect, but also as regards the very possibility of other, more scientifically or cognitively oriented modes of knowledge. Then again, Kant resumes certain themes from the Second *Critique*, those having to do with the exercise of practical reason as belonging to a 'suprasensible' realm where it is no longer the rule that intuitions should be brought under adequate concepts. For aesthetic judgements are indeterminate (or 'reflective') in the sense that they are always open-ended with respect to the various possible particulars, or items of aesthetic experience, that may fall within their compass. And conversely, those particulars are not so much in quest of an 'adequate' concept as apt, through their very uniqueness and singularity, to evoke novel modes of judgement that apply to one instance and perhaps to no other.

So aesthetics –in Kant's philosophy– is the place where all sorts of problems are raised and receive not so much a definitive solution as a far-reachingly suggestive and speculative treatment. It is in the second part of the *Critique of Judgement* that his discussion broadens out to encompass aspects of Nature –the beautiful and the sublime– that involve some particularly complex orders of aesthetic and reflective response. That is to say, the 'aesthetic' is no longer chiefly defined (as in the First *Critique*) in terms of a relationship –albeit obscure or "buried in the depths of the soul"–

between sensuous intuitions and concepts. Rather, it is conceived in teleological terms, that is to say, as reflecting a certain purposiveness in nature which is intelligible to us in virtue of the kindred teleology that guides our faculties and the relations between them when we respond to nature under its aesthetic (whether beautiful or sublime) aspect. In the case of the beautiful this involves a state of harmonious adjustment between imagination and understanding, such that we enjoy a 'free play' of the faculties as they seek for some indeterminate (reflective) mode of judgement that would do justice to some given particular. In the case of the sublime matters are more complex since here it is a question of our coming up against awesome, overwhelming, or terrifying kinds of experience, or again, of our trying to entertain ideas (like that of infinity or the mathematical sublime) to which no intuition or concept is remotely adequate. Yet even here there is a positive moment, so to speak, when the mind overcomes its initial state of abjection and acknowledges that there must be something in its own nature –its 'suprasensible' nature– that allows thought to transcend the conditions of perceptual or phenomenal experience. What makes this possible, in the case of the sublime, is a complex interplay between imagination and reason, such that we attain to an elevated sense of all that lies beyond the sensory domain, including (most importantly for Kant) the dictates of moral conscience. Where the beautiful assures us of a harmonious relation between the faculties, as likewise between mind and nature, the sublime takes effect rather by disrupting that harmony, forcing us up against the limits of adequate (sensuous or conceptual) representation. Yet we can still take pleasure in the sublime, albeit a pleasure very different –more complex and ambivalent– than that provided by the beautiful. We can do so, Kant argues, precisely because the sublime points toward a realm transcending the limits of phenomenal or cognitive grasp. Thus nature presents aspects which we can somehow comprehend, although it is very obscure to us, very hard to explain just how we comprehend them.

### III

Now, the general point I am making here is that some large issues hang on our interpretation of Kant's doctrine of the faculties. That is to say, it is not just a matter of 'academic' debate, or of mainstream versus postmodernist readings of this or that passage in Kant. Rather, what we make of those passages –and their place within the overall 'architectonic' of Kant's

critical philosophy— has a bearing on issues far beyond that specialized domain. Kant was, for his time, a very progressive thinker, a great advocate of progressive social and political values. Of course one needs to qualify this claim in certain respects. After all, Kant was writing at a time (and in a place) when liberal thought could only go so far, when revolutionary views were better expressed under cover of a mildly reformist rhetoric, and when Kant was himself—in his later years— often subject to tight conditions of censorship by church and state. I should also acknowledge (since the point has been with considerable force by recent scholars) that Kant held some pretty repugnant views on issues of racial, ethnic, and gender difference in relation to intellectual powers.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, I think that one can draw a distinction—an eminently Kantian distinction, no doubt— between these expressions of illiberal sentiment on Kant's part and, on the other hand, the implications of his critical philosophy. He is raising extremely important questions which, after Kant, became central to the whole tradition of critical-emancipatory thought. He is also arguing a strong case for the close relation—indeed one of mutual dependence— between the values of Enlightenment critique and the interests of social, political, and humanitarian progress.

I think those values are open to us still, and I think that the current fashionable anti-Enlightenment rhetoric, such as we find in Lyotard, this kind of rather facile, sweeping dismissal of Enlightenment values is both ethically disastrous and politically retrograde. But of course it is not enough to put the case in these terms. I am not merely saying that I think postmodernism is a bad thing, ethically and politically, but also that it is based on very dubious, very shaky philosophical arguments. Let me offer some evidence in support of this claim, since otherwise maybe you will think it just as sweeping and facile as the sorts of claim I am rejecting. Epistemologically speaking, postmodernism works out as a very deep-laid scepticism about the possibility of knowledge and truth, the possibility of a constructive, cooperative enterprise aimed toward truth at the end of enquiry. This scepticism takes various forms: in Lyotard's case it takes the form of an emphasis on diverse, incommensurable theories and truth-claims, that is to say, the argument that there have always been narrative 'differends' in the sense that these issue from conflicting ideologies, disparate projects, rival conceptions of scientific method, and so forth. Lyotard (1988) would say that we are never in a position to judge between them, because if we try

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<sup>4</sup> See Eze (1997a, 1997b).

to adjudicate the issue and to say one is right and the other wrong, or that both are wrong, or if we impose our own interpretation, we are thereby suppressing the narrative differend and inflicting an injury on one or on both parties. So, for Lyotard, the sole remaining principle of justice, as I have said, is to maximize the range of admissible narratives and strive so far as possible not to adjudicate between them.

Now, on the face of it, this seems a good liberal prescription. It is obviously good to lend a willing ear to as many as possible of the various narratives (arguments, truth-claims, beliefs etc.) that make up the ongoing cultural dialogue. Just as clearly it is dogmatic and doctrinaire to reject other (from our point of view) false, partial, or prejudiced beliefs just because they happen not to fall square with our own way of thinking. So, in a sense, in a very basic sense, there is a good liberal pluralist principle behind Lyotard's thinking. We should be tolerant, we should not force our views on other people, and therefore we should always be ready to acknowledge that ours is not the only possible viewpoint. All the same there are problems when one tries to follow this programme through to its ultimate (postmodernist) conclusions. What are we to say, for instance, when confronted with Holocaust deniers who claim either that the Holocaust never happened or that reports of it were greatly exaggerated? Or even when confronted with the 'moderate' version of this argument which says that we shouldn't treat the Holocaust as something uniquely appalling and barbaric because there have been other comparable atrocities past and present. Are we simply to say, with Lyotard, that there is just no deciding the issue here since the parties to this particular dispute are applying utterly disparate criteria of truth and narrative accountability?

Lyotard comes very close to adopting that line when he writes about the French Holocaust-denier Robert Faurisson. Thus we may wish to say that Faurisson is lying, that he is suppressing evidence, that he has a deeply repugnant ideological agenda, and that this is his motive for denying that the Holocaust occurred. Nevertheless, Lyotard says, we should be wrong, we should be ill advised to adopt that position in response to Faurisson's claims. For Faurisson is working with different criteria, he is simply not beholden to the historian's usual standards of truth, accuracy, factual warrant, and so forth; nor does he subscribe to anything like the liberal consensus-view of what constitutes a decent, responsible approach to such matters. In other words, there is a radical incommensurability – a full-scale narrative 'differend' – between Faurisson's strong-revisionist claims and the kinds of factual and ethical objection voiced by his various opponents. So when

Faurisson says: "Show me one person, one first-hand witness, who can vouch for what actually happened inside the gas-chambers at Auschwitz", then we may well be tempted to treat this demand as based on absurdly fallacious reasoning from false premises. That is to say, Faurisson makes his revisionist case by adopting a wholly inappropriate criterion ('truth = only what we can know on first-hand evidential warrant'), and then using this to re-write history in accordance with his own ideological agenda. But if we take this line, Lyotard thinks, then we are falling into Faurisson's trap. For he can turn straight around and accuse us –his high-toned liberal critics– of ignoring or suppressing the narrative 'differend' and thus placing him (Faurisson) in the victim's role.

Now it seems to me that Lyotard's argument amounts to a wholesale collapse of moral and intellectual nerve. Of course there are different historical narratives, of course historians have different approaches and, very often, widely divergent ideological perspectives. Nevertheless, there is such a thing as historical truth; not Truth with a capital T, not some kind of ultimate, transcendent, all-encompassing Truth, but the sorts of truth that historians find out through patient research, through careful sifting of the evidence, through criticism of source-texts, archival scholarship, and so forth. This debate very often gets skewed because sceptics (postmodernists especially) tend to suppose that anyone who talks about truth must be upholding Capital-T truth, a discourse that is clearly repressive, monological, authoritarian, bent upon suppressing the narrative differend. All the same there are standards, principles, validity-conditions, ways of treating, interpreting, criticising, comparing, and contrasting the evidence which, if consistently applied, will give the historian a fair claim to be dealing in matters of truth. It is this claim that we have to abandon if we endorse Lyotard's deeply sceptical Nietzsche-derived postmodernist idea that historical 'truth' is indeed nothing more than a product of the various conflicting narratives, language-games, 'phrase-genres', etc., that map out the ideological field.

Such ideas find support from numerous quarters of present-day 'advanced' thinking in the social and human sciences. Thus, for instance, similar conclusions are drawn by postmodern historiographers such as Hayden White (1978, 1988), those who argue –on the basis of notions derived from post-structuralist literary theory– that historical discourse is best viewed as a narrative or rhetorical construct. Now, of course these theorists are right up to a point. There is always a narrative dimension to historical writing, at least to any history that does something more than simply list dates

and events in a chronicle-like fashion. Once it passes beyond that stage history-writing becomes a narrative: it has form, it has function, it has a pattern, it involves a certain way of plotting or ordering historical events, and that ordering will surely involve a certain interpretive or ideological slant. Moreover, as White points out, there are many features in common between historical and fictive discourse, among them generic conventions (tragedy, comedy, romance, satire) and the famous four master-tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony) which can be shown to characterize different sorts of historical writing. All these points are well taken and worth consideration by positivist historians, if indeed there are any of the latter still around. But very often they are pushed much further than this, to the point where it is claimed that historical truth is entirely a product of those various discourses, narratives, modes of rhetorical employment, and so forth.

You will probably be familiar with that kind of 'textualist' anti-realism from your reading of literary critics such as Roland Barthes. Barthes's essay 'The Discourse of History' was among the first to advance this idea that realism is just a discursive effect, the product of certain culture-specific (mainly nineteenth-century) codes, conventions, or narrative devices.<sup>5</sup> It is this line of argument that White picks up on and elaborates into a full-scale poetics of historical narrative. But it is not so far from the strain of anti-realism within present-day analytic (or post-analytic) philosophy. This is the argument –to put it very briefly– that there are not and cannot be 'verification-transcendent' truths, i.e., truths that exist quite apart from our current best knowledge or beliefs, or independently or whether or not we possess some method or means of finding them out. Here also –in the work of philosophers such as Michael Dummett– there is the notion that history cannot be 'objective' in the sense of involving an object-domain (a domain of real-world actions and events) which occurred in the past and are therefore unaffected by whatever we currently happen to believe concerning them.<sup>6</sup> Rather, we can make no sense of the idea that there might be truths for which we possessed no evidence, no means of verification, or adequate proof-procedure. In this respect statements concerning the past are on a par with mathematical truth-claims and theories or hypotheses in the physical sciences. For 'truth' we should do better to substitute the notion of 'warranted assertability', since this makes it clear that nothing could count as a real entity, an actual past event, or a valid mathematical theorem except in

<sup>5</sup> See Barthes (1986a, 1986b).

<sup>6</sup> See especially Dummett (1978); also Wright (1987).

so far as we can bear it out by applying the relevant methods of proof or verification.

In mathematics (where the case looks most plausible) this means rejecting the Platonist view according to which there exist abstract entities –numbers, sets, classes, logical relations etc.– that are somehow objectively there to be discovered, quite apart from whether we have yet devised (or could ever devise) an adequate decision-procedure. On the contrary, Dummett (1977) argues: such items ‘exist’ solely by virtue of our knowing some rule, some appropriate method of proof for arriving at definite (decidable) results in any given case. Where we possess no such method –as for instance with certain speculative theorems in pure mathematics– then the Principle of Bivalence fails. That is to say, these theorems are neither true nor false, nor even (as the realist would have it) ‘true-or-false’ in some ultimate, objective sense that may lie beyond our capacities for deciding the issue. For if the meaning of a sentence (a theorem or a statement) is given by its truth-conditions, and if those conditions are themselves fixed by what counts as an adequate proof-procedure, then clearly there is no appeal open to a realm of objective truth-values that would stand quite apart from our current best procedures of proof or verification.

Dummett’s chief sources for this argument are Wittgenstein’s contextualist doctrine of meaning-as-use and Frege’s dictum that ‘sense determines reference’. On this latter view, properly referring expressions are those by which we pick out various items (objects, events, persons, numbers, etc.) in virtue of our knowing just what those expressions mean, their range of senses, semantic attributes, contexts of usage, criteria for correct application, and so forth (Frege 1952). Whence Dummett’s anti-realist position: that truth-talk is redundant, indeed nonsensical with respect to any item for which we possess no such definite criteria. Now at this point the realist will most likely reply: no, Dummett has got it wrong; if there is one thing we know for sure it is that there are many things we don’t know, matters whose truth is quite independent of our existing state of knowledge (or ignorance), things that we might perhaps find out in the long run, or again perhaps not, depending on whether they are ultimately knowable to creatures with our particular sorts of cognitive or intellectual aptitude. Of course there is the standard sceptical meta-induction (or ‘argument from ignorance’) which holds that since we have turned out in the past to be wrong about so many things –scientific truth-claims included– therefore it is a pretty safe bet that we are wrong about most of what we claim to know now. However, the realist will then come back and observe (1) that we are able to

recognise and explain at least some of those past errors; (2) that the sceptic is willy-nilly invoking criteria of truth and falsehood, among them the long-range criterion of progress or truth at the end of enquiry; and (3) that the argument from ignorance can thus be turned around and used to support the realist's case for our knowledge of the growth of knowledge. What it shows is not so much the non-existence of truths beyond our (past or present) best powers of understanding but, on the contrary, the fact that there will always (now and in the future) be matters as to which we can form no judgement but whose truth-value is wholly unaffected thereby. After all, as the realist may further wish to remark, the physical universe (together with its laws of nature) existed long before there were human beings around to observe it and will very likely continue to exist long after those beings have departed.

Now I don't want to suggest that Dummett's case for anti-realism is just another version of those other (e.g., post-structuralist, postmodernist, or 'strong-textualist') doctrines that I have been discussing so far. It is argued with a far greater degree of logical precision and also –especially where truth-claims about the past are concerned– with a much keener sense of the ethical dilemmas that arise in this context. (As one who has played a prominent role in campaigns against racial prejudice and violence Dummett is unlikely to treat these matters to the kind of facile paradox-mongering that typifies Lyotard's treatment of Faurisson and the issue of Holocaust revisionism.) My point is, rather, that anti-realist arguments have a currency –and also a range of conceptual resources– well beyond the sphere of present-day fashionable notions in literary or cultural theory. Where Dummett worries (justifiably so) about their extension to issues of historical understanding or our knowledge of the past, no such anxieties seem to afflict the post-structuralists, postmodernists, or 'strong' textualists. Yet it is here that the counter-argument needs stating with maximum clarity and force. For there is a difference –one that is often blurred in the writing of theorists like Hayden White– between saying that history is narrative and saying that history is fiction. Narrative and fiction are not the same thing, although they are often (of course) aspects or attributes of one and the same text. In the etymological sense fiction means something that is made or constructed. In that sense, yes, history is fictive. But it is not fictive in the more familiar and widespread modern sense of being imaginary, having no reference to real-world characters and events, or being made up as distinct from constructed out of various sources, documentary records, eye-witness accounts, and so forth. I think that Hayden White and other historiographers tend to confuse

these two things. There are differences between fictive narrative and historical narrative, there are different constraints in writing history, constraints having to do with matters of causality, agency, chronology, temporality, narrative sequence, a whole range of different criteria which distinguish history from fiction.<sup>7</sup>

Of course there are nowadays what might be called hybrid or cross-over genres. That is to say, there is a certain kind of historical writing practised by people like Simon Schama, for instance, which exploits fictional techniques such as flashbacks, anticipations, proleptic devices, or forms of multiple narrative consciousnesses. When Hayden White reproaches historians for being so 'conservative' and behind-the times –when he wonders why they haven't caught up with Joyce and the modernists let alone with postmodern writers such as Barth or Vonnegut or Calvino– then one can see why it is felt as a challenge. Historians like Schama want to accept that challenge and produce something more adventurous than the standard modes of historical discourse: something that mixes in fictive techniques and tries to liven things up. After all, Roland Barthes was making this point many years ago that historians were still turning out texts ('classic bourgeois-realist' texts) that traded on all the old narrative conventions and might just as well have been written before Proust came along. So you can see why some historians have become very keen –maybe a bit too keen– to cast off this image of themselves as old-fashioned realists ('positivists' is the usual bugbear term) who haven't yet learned to play by the new rules of the game.

Nevertheless, even in Schama's work –and I am thinking chiefly of his recent book *Dead Certainties* (1992), whose punning title catches the drift very well– even here there is a marked difference between the passages of well researched, solid, historical investigation and the other sections which are more inventive, where he is trying to get inside the characters' minds, or sometimes filling in background detail for which there is no evidence. And I think it is the case that most readers are quite aware when he crosses the line between history and fiction, or those parts of narrative that claim factual warrant and those that are making no such claim. On the other hand there are novels –or texts standardly classified as novels– which incorporate large chunks of often quite detailed and well-researched history, 'real-life' characters, socio-documentary material, and so forth. Linda Hutcheon (1989) has coined a useful term for such texts –I think she calls them "pseudo-historiographic metafiction"– though they are often lumped

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<sup>7</sup> See also various contributions to Jenkins (1997).

together with other sorts of writing under the not-so-useful term 'postmodernist'. Take, for instance, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughter-House Five*, which contains, among other things, a graphic description of the fire-bombing of Dresden, an event that Vonnegut knew quite a bit about, having actually been there at the time and (remarkably) having survived to tell the tale. Other episodes in the novel take place on a planet called Tralfamadore and involve all sorts of surreal or fantastic contrivance such as teletransportation and time-warps. In other words, it is an excellent example of the hybrid genre that Hutcheon is talking about. But again we are aware of the cross-over points, the points at which certain generic constraints (those applying to the narrative reconstruction of historical events) give way to other, recognisably fictive or non-truth-evaluable modes of writing. Most readers are quite good at telling the difference, even in cases like *Slaughter-House Five*—or, to take some other well-known examples, Thomas Pynchon's *V* or E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*—where the novelist has gone out of his way to complicate (if not erase) the boundary-line between fact and fiction.

So we are not, as many postmodernists would have it, now moving into a phase of cultural development where it is no longer possible to make such distinctions, or where 'reality' has given way to what Baudrillard calls the "precession of the simulacrum", that is to say, the stage at which everything becomes an effect of hyperinduced media simulation.<sup>8</sup> Most readers are still capable of distinguishing between fact and fiction or between historical and fictional narrative discourse, even if some postmodernists appear to have lost that basic ability. One problem is perhaps that they are working with a theory of language and representation—a broadly post-structuralist theory—which takes Saussurian linguistics (or its own very partial and dogmatic reading of Saussure) as a licence for wholesale pronouncements of the sort: 'everything is constructed in (or by) language', 'there is nothing outside the text', 'narrative realism is a bourgeois illusion', and suchlike. If you start out from that sort of blanket anti-realist stance then most likely you won't have anything very helpful to say when it comes to the more subtle generic distinctions. Some theorists have recognised this problem and have looked elsewhere—for instance, to developments in modal or 'possible-worlds' logic—as a means of explaining just what is involved in the kinds of intuitive adjustment we make when reading various types of texts, whether fictive, historical, mixed-genre, or whatever.<sup>9</sup> Thus it is a matter of epistemic access,

<sup>8</sup> For a representative sampling, see Baudrillard (1983, 1989, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> See especially Ronen (1994); also Pavel (1986).

of the degree to which such narrative 'worlds' are accessible from (or compatible with) the world that we actually inhabit along with all its objects, events, past history, laws of nature, time-space coordinates, etc. In which case the different narrative genres can be ranked on a scale that extends, roughly speaking, from documentary realism at the one end (where any departures from this-world correspondence will most likely be categorized as errors with regard to matters of contingent fact) to fantasy fiction at the other end (where even laws of nature and space-time frameworks may be subject to controlled variation at the author's whim). This approach seems to me much better –more 'philosophical', if you like, but also more sensitive to important distinctions in narrative theory and historiography– than anything available from post-structuralism or its current postmodernist spin-off doctrines.

#### IV

What I have been discussing so far are some epistemological aspects of the issue between modernism and postmodernism, that is, questions having to do with knowledge, the advancement of knowledge, or the scope and limits of human enquiry when directed toward a better (more truthful or adequate) understanding of the world. Historical understanding is a crucial test case since it is here that sceptical arguments can most easily get a hold. They can then be used as a wedge, so to speak, for other, more wholesale versions of the doctrine such as those put about by post-structuralists, cultural relativists, social constructivists, or proponents of the 'strong' thesis in sociology of knowledge. And at this point epistemological issues may often turn out to have a decisive bearing on issues of ethics and politics. For here again there is a running debate between realists and anti-realists, that is, between those on the one hand who maintain that we cannot make informed moral choices, decisions, or judgements without adopting a realist view of the various situations concerned, and on the other hand those who deny that ethical values can ever be derived from (or justified by) any appeal to factual, historical, or circumstantial considerations.

Thus the realist will typically reject any form of the fact/value or (in Lyotard's terms) the constative/evaluative dichotomy. He or she will typically argue that a judgement such as 'Apartheid is wrong' or 'Slavery is an unjust institution' is a judgement that derives its ethico-political force from a knowledge of the way these systems worked in practice, their effect on the people (victims and oppressors) directly involved, and their real-world

character as practices which led to great human suffering.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, they will view such suffering as itself just the kind of moral consideration that can and should be reckoned into any realist assessment of Apartheid or slavery, along with the various beneficial effects –for human wellbeing and social justice– that resulted from abolishing those practices. So when Nelson Mandela or Abraham Lincoln took their stand on these issues, they were not (or not only) appealing to some realm of transcendent moral values divorced from the grinding day-to-day misery of life in the black South African townships or life in the antebellum US slave plantations. Rather, they were reaching an evaluative judgement (‘these practices are bad!’) based on an accurate realist assessment of (1) the detailed factual situation, (2) its consequences for large numbers of victimized human beings, and (3) the likelihood of radically transforming their lives, prospects, and entitlements if the system could be overthrown. Moderate anti-realists about ethics could probably accept most of this with the caveat that there remain certain problems –logical problems at least– about the passage from factual claims to evaluative judgements. But the case is much worse with postmodernists like Lyotard who raise the fact/value (or the constative/evaluative) disjunction to a high point of ethical principle. For on this view there is just no way of bridging that gulf except by an infraction of the narrative ‘differend’ –the incommensurability of language-games or ‘phrase-genres’– which would itself constitute an ethical injustice toward all parties concerned.

I started out with some elementary lessons from Kant because he, more than anyone, set the agenda for a good deal of modern and, indeed, postmodern debate about just what constitutes knowledge and how such enquiry should be taken to relate to other (e.g. ethical or aesthetic) modes of judgement. It also seemed a good starting-point since the postmodern ‘turn’ in thinkers like Lyotard can be seen as both a turn back to Kant –about whom Lyotard has written on numerous occasions– and a turn away from (or decisively against) certain crucial Kantian arguments and distinctions. These latter have to do with the precise relationship between the various orders of cognitive understanding, practical reason, and judgement in its reflective and aesthetic modes. What Kant seeks to do –and here I am summarizing with brutal rapidity– is bring them into a complex interconnected system (Gilles Deleuze (1984), in his excellent early book on Kant, calls it a system of constantly “rotating chairmanship”) such that their priorities remain distinct, and the boundaries between them sufficiently well-marked, while allowing for at least some degree of mutual dependence and exchange.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Brink (1989) and Lovibond (1983).

Thus, for instance, it is important not to confuse the domain of cognitive understanding (where the ruling criterion is, to repeat, that intuitions be “brought under” adequate concepts) with the domain of ethics or practical reason where no such criterion properly applies, where reflective judgement has much greater scope, and where one cannot expect any one-to-one match between high-level maxims and particular cases. Any confusion here can only have bad philosophical (and moral) consequences since it will tend toward a determinist view in matters where this would leave no room for the principles of human choice, agency, and ethical responsibility. It would thus undermine Kant’s double-aspect theory, his idea of human beings as, on the one hand, physical creatures subject to the laws of natural or causal necessity, but also, on the other, as autonomous agents subject only to those maxims and imperatives that issue from the voice of moral conscience within us. However, it is equally wrong to read Kant as Lyotard reads him, that is to say, as a thinker who absolutely denies that factual judgements (or determinate concepts) can or should play a significant role in matters of ethico-evaluative judgement and choice. For this is just the opposite kind of error, one that flees the bugbear of determinism only to cut moral reasoning off from any possible ground or justification in the contexts of real-world situated human experience.

Lyotard is of course not alone among recent French commentators in pushing this antinomy so hard that it becomes something more like a deconstructive lever for prising the entire Kantian system apart. For instance, there are those well-known passages from Foucault’s early book *The Order of Things* (1970) where he talks about the discourse of nineteenth-century humanism as having taken rise from Kant’s idea of man as a curious “empirico-transcendental doublet”, a hybrid creature impossibly torn between rival (naturalistic and non-naturalistic) conceptions of his own defining attributes. Lyotard is a much better reader of Kant in the sense that he does stick closely to the texts, albeit with an eye for just those sections—especially the ‘Analytic of the Sublime’ in the Third *Critique*—which are fruitful of paradox and whose ‘lessons’ can then be read back into Kantian epistemology and ethics (Lyotard 1994). Anyway the chief point I wish to make here is that postmodernism does have a definite philosophical agenda, and that this involves, among other things, a desire to displace or discredit the ‘philosophic discourse of modernity’ by discovering (or inventing) all manner of problems at its very heart. I should mention also that some of the best recent commentaries on Kant—by scholars such as Onora O’Neill (1989)—are devoted to answering just the kinds of criticism (and resolving

just the kinds of paradox) that are mounted against him by readers of a postmodernist or anti-Enlightenment persuasion.<sup>11</sup>

## V

This brings us to the second main area of dispute between modernist and postmodernist thinkers, namely the issue of ethics in relation to questions of knowledge and truth. Postmodernism is particularly attached to ideas of radical 'otherness' or 'alterity'. The work of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1969 and 1981) has been most widely influential in this regard. Levinas believes that the entirety of Western (post-Hellenic) philosophical thought has been premised on the notion of epistemology –or theory of knowledge– as philosophy's foremost concern. He thinks that from the ancient Greeks on down –from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes, Kant, and Husserl– epistemology has been conceived as 'first philosophy'. For Levinas, on the contrary, ethics is where all philosophy ought to begin, and ethics in a sense that precedes and transcends the sorts of question that philosophers have typically asked even when raising ethical issues. Questions about responsibility to the other person should come before all other questions. So what Levinas wants to do is reverse that traditional order of priority between epistemological and ethical questions. For him, it is the demand of the other person –her or his absolute, intransigent demand upon me– which comes before every other consideration. It certainly comes before issues of epistemology, confined as they are (on Levinas's account) to the sphere of a narrowly 'egological' or first-person-centred theory of knowledge and truth. And that demand of the other person upon me is the demand of absolute alterity. Levinas says that we can never assume –or we should not ever assume– that the other person is like us in her needs, wants, values, requirements, or priorities. The most basic ethical principle for Levinas is to treat the other person as absolutely other, non-negotiably other, in the sense of not sharing (or not being known to share) any of our own ethical interests or notions of the common good. This is the authentic ethical attitude for Levinas, and he says we should never take it for granted that there exists any basic or underlying affinity between our own ways of thinking, our needs and desires, and those of the other person.

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<sup>11</sup> See also Norris (1993).

So the other exerts a kind of intransitive summons, a call to give up all our own interests and priorities, along with our 'egological' ideas of the other as effectively a mirror-image of ourselves. This, then, for Levinas, is the first principle of ethics. Now here, for the first time explicitly, I want to introduce deconstruction. (In fact it has figured tacitly, as a kind of running comparison, in everything I have said so far about postmodernism, but now I want to bring this contrast out into the open.) There is an early essay by Jacques Derrida – 'Violence and Metaphysics' (1978) – where Derrida takes Levinas to task in a critical but none the less respectful and appreciative way. (This is perhaps a good place to remark that Derrida, in his criticism of other thinkers, is never polemical or destructive, never out to represent them as merely mistaken or deluded.) He is not claiming to see through Levinas's arguments or show them up as hopelessly in thrall to some naive 'logocentric' or 'metaphysical' prejudice. On the contrary: he says that Levinas is a very important, indeed an 'indispensable' thinker. But Derrida finds certain problems with Levinas, in particular with this notion of radical alterity (or otherness) as the starting-point of any authentic ethical relation. Thus Derrida raises the crucial question: how could it be possible for me to establish relations with the other, to treat them with friendship, tolerance, sympathy, a due regard for their differences of outlook, of values, interests, concerns, and so forth, if I started out (as Levinas requires) by abjuring any claim to understand the other as a person recognisably like myself at least in certain basic respects? For if the other were indeed radically other, then we would have no reason – no grounds in common humanity – to consider them suitable candidates for that kind of treatment. Certainly we could have no ethical relationship with them, since this presupposes – at very minimum – that we and they have access to a human sphere (an intersubjective lifeworld) of shared knowledge, communal experience, mutual understanding, and so forth. If we didn't assume them to possess at least that much in common with ourselves then, quite simply, they would figure as inanimate objects in our cognitive-perceptual field, objects along with all the others such as sticks, stones and (perhaps more arguably) trees. This is what Derrida means when he says that Levinasian ethics runs the risk of reducing to a kind of empiricism, a view of the self-other relation as dehumanized to the point where it seems to resemble the passive registration of sensory data by an otherwise blank and uncomprehending mind. For what calls upon us to recognise others as persons – persons having a genuine claim on our ethical concern – is precisely this range of essential respects in which they, like us, are animate beings with kindred capacities for certain kinds of humanly distinctive knowledge and experience.

I am putting all this in very simple terms, as you will know if you have read 'Violence and Metaphysics', where Derrida goes some lengthy and complicated ways around in making his point against Levinas's ethic of absolute or radical alterity. However, it is not distorting his argument –one important aspect of his argument– if one construes him as saying that there must be some degree of mutual rapport, some basis of shared understanding or common humanity in order for us to acknowledge the very real differences that exist between human individuals, their needs, interests, and concerns. In short, the other person is an alter ego, and Derrida puts equal emphasis on both words: 'alter' (other) and 'ego' (I, first person singular). The other person is other, irreducibly other, in the sense that we cannot ever claim to know them –to get 'inside' their experience– so as to remove all barriers to perfect understanding. But they are also –like us– human beings with a first-person perspective on the world, a perspective that we can none the less enter into in the way that different observers can perceive the same object from different angles while agreeing to describe it as the same object. This we can do, as Husserl makes clear, on the basis of inhabiting a shared spatio-temporal lifeworld and possessing a shared cognitive-conceptual framework.<sup>12</sup> It is also why, without seeking to impose our viewpoint on theirs, we can nevertheless claim to understand how things must appear to them, not only as concerns objects in the field of perception but also with respect to differing perspectives on the lifeworld of humanly significant meanings, values, and beliefs. This does not mean that we reduce them (the other) to the confines of our own 'egological' knowledge and experience, or that we treat them simply as passive projections of our own all-constituting ego. We can and must take due account of their differences, but we can only understand and interpret those differences by analogy with the kinds of knowledge and experience that we possess by virtue of our shared humanity.

Husserl devotes some of the most demanding and complex passages of his book *Cartesian Meditations* (1973), the fifth section of *Cartesian Meditations*, to exactly this question. If we are always in some sense interpreting the world from our own first-person perspective, then how can we possibly claim to have an insight (a genuine, non-self-centred insight) into other people's thoughts, experiences, modes of being-in-the-world? Now Husserl's answer, and also Derrida's answer –he is, after all, here defending Husserl against Levinas's strictures– is that, yes, we do understand other people on the basis of our own experience. But it is precisely that which gives

<sup>12</sup> See especially Husserl (1973).

us the scope –the range of extended imaginative sympathy– to put ourselves in their place so far as possible, and hence to comprehend how they differ from ourselves. Moreover, Levinas does an injustice to Husserl when he claims that Husserlian phenomenology is merely another, more sophisticated version of the old epistemological drive to subjugate ethics (the realm of absolute alterity) to the sphere of the ‘self-same’ or self-identical in thought, the dream of knowledge pursued by philosophers from Plato to Descartes, Kant, and beyond. For this is to ignore a crucial aspect of Husserl’s thinking, one that is also present in Kant though not developed to anything like the same level of refinement and reflexive self-critical awareness. It is the point, briefly put, that epistemology –in the broadest sense: that branch of enquiry concerned with human knowledge, its constitutive scope and limits– cannot be severed completely from ethical concerns (much less placed in radical opposition to them) since it has to do with the basic conditions for understanding ourselves and others. That is to say, we shall not get very far along the way to an other-regarding ethics unless we start out from the idea of a common (intersubjective) lifeworld, some of whose features –physical properties, causal relations, space-time coordinates, etc.– are just what put us in touch with each other on a basis of shared, mutually intelligible knowledge and experience.

One of Husserl’s main criticisms of Kant is that he never made this connection sufficiently clear. Thus critics could claim –wrongly, I have argued, but with at least some show of justification– that Kantian ethics seemed to belong to an abstract realm of formal maxims, categorical imperatives, etc., quite apart from the detailed practicalities of everyday, real-world, situated moral choice. And there is likewise a problem, from Husserl’s point of view, with the Kantian epistemological requirement which holds that intuitions must be “brought under” adequate concepts without pressing far enough either toward a rigorous apodictic specification of just what this would entail, or toward a wider understanding of the lifeworld –the context of knowledge-constitutive interests, values, and beliefs– that makes up the background of all such enquiry. However, I don’t propose to get drawn into these fine points of Husserlian exegesis.<sup>13</sup> My point is that they offer a strong counter-argument –on ethical as well as epistemological grounds– to the idea of ethics as ‘first philosophy’ in the absolute, intransigent sense of that claim proposed by Levinas and taken up (in a variety of contexts and idioms) by postmodernist thinkers.

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<sup>13</sup> There is some useful discussion of these matters to be found in Tito (1990).

Thus, for instance, his idea of the ethical relation as one of radical 'alterity' very easily translates into Lyotard's idea of the differend, that is, his notion of justice as involving an acceptance that there exist any number of diverse 'incommensurable' narratives or language-games, each of them 'true' or 'just' by its own (strictly immanent) criteria, and none of them affording a vantage-point –a superior 'metanarrative' station– from which to assess or adjudicate the issue. I have remarked already on the problems with this kind of ultra-relativist thinking when transposed from the linguistic to the epistemological and thence to the historical, ethical, or socio-political spheres. What I have also tried to suggest -here and elsewhere- is the fact that deconstruction (contrary to received opinion) is not just another, more sophisticated version of the postmodern-textualist turn against Enlightenment values and beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

## VI

It is worth devoting a bit more time to this currently fashionable talk about otherness, alterity, heterogeneity, difference, incommensurability, etc. In postmodern ethics –in the work of thinkers like Zygmunt Bauman (1993)– it is the idea that other people, other cultures, traditions, or historical periods are so different from ours, for all that we can know, so radically different from ours, that we can never be justified in presuming to interpret their beliefs according to our criteria of truth or justice. But this, I think, is a counsel of despair, or would be if its implications were consistently followed through. For in that case we could never hope to bridge cultural differences, we could never lay claim to the least understanding of past historical periods, or other cultures, other belief-systems, other scientific viewpoints. If indeed it were true that language-games or narratives or discourses differed so fundamentally, then of course there would be no possibility of translation between them. One finds this idea in many quarters of postmodern debate, and also –albeit less dramatically expressed– in various 'post-analytic' schools of Anglo-American philosophy.

The best-known source is Quine's argument –in his essay 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism'– to the effect that what counts as a 'real' (as opposed to a fictive, mythic, or non-existent) object is entirely a matter of our choice

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<sup>14</sup> See for instance Norris (1994, 1996).

between various referential frameworks or ontological schemes (Quine 1961,1969). Thus Quine may prefer (qua 'lay physicist') to accept what present-day science has to say about the furniture of the universe or the ultimate constituents of matters. Nevertheless –qua philosopher with strongly pragmatist leanings– Quine takes it that there is ultimately no reason (in the nature of things or the nature of human understanding) to come out in favour of this or any other candidate scheme. Thus what counts as real –be it centaurs, Homer's gods, numbers, mathematical classes, or brick houses on Elm Street– will always depend upon our chosen ontology and the sorts of object that it picks out or quantifies over. In Quine's pithy statement, "to be is to be the value of a variable".

This goes along with three further arguments, all tending to support the idea of wholesale ontological relativity. Two of them –the "underdetermination of theory by evidence" and the "theory-laden character of observation-statements"– are often deployed jointly to make the same point. That is, they are taken to demolish the case for any realist epistemology that banks on the standard (more specifically: the standard logical-empiricist) distinction between truths-of-observation and truths-of-reason. In Quine's view this is just a bad legacy of the old Kantian idea that one can draw a firm line between the orders of analytic and synthetic judgement, that is to say, on the one hand those that are trivially true just in virtue of their logical structure (of their predicate's being somehow 'contained in' their subject), and on the other hand those that entail something more than mere tautological self-evidence. On the contrary, according to Quine: it is always possible that we might have to revise the so-called 'laws' or ground-rules of logical reasoning in response to some anomaly or discrepant result thrown up in the course of scientific investigation, such as (for instance) quantum nonlocality or the wave/particle dualism. Far better, he urges, to think of human knowledge as a 'fabric' or 'web' of interconnected observations, beliefs, theories, logical axioms, and so forth, some of which (those at the observational periphery) we think of as always revisable in response to new sensory inputs, while others (those at the logical core) we tend to treat as fixed and immutable whatever the pressures exerted upon them by conflicting experiential data. For this image helps us to grasp his point that nothing –not even the best-entrenched logical 'law'– is in principle secure from change or revision should the weight of counter-evidence count decisively against it.

Whence the third argument that Quine brings forward, namely that of meaning-holism. This is the contextualist thesis according to which

statements cannot be assessed for truth or falsehood on a one-for-one correspondence principle but only in so far as they occupy a place in the total fabric of knowledge or belief at some given time. Thus for observation-sentences and theories alike, it is always a question of our claims being tested against the “incoming barrage” of sensory stimuli on the one hand, and the entire existing framework of currently accredited scientific knowledge on the other. From which it follows, on Quine’s pragmatist account, that it will always be possible to save the phenomena –or preserve some cherished theory– by redistributing predicates, redefining certain crucial terms, or (at the limit) admitting some revision to logical ‘laws’ such as those of non-contradiction or excluded middle. No doubt this is very much a last resort, and one that Quine elsewhere seems more reluctant to endorse. (Thus in his textbook (1970) treatment of the issue, one finds him arguing that it could never be rational to suspend those laws or interpret other people –‘native informants’– as applying a different, non-standard or deviant logic).<sup>15</sup> Still it is the position that he takes in ‘Two Dogmas’, an essay whose influence has extended far beyond the specialized philosophical domain. For it is, as I have suggested, not hard to see how Quine’s doctrines of meaning-holism and ontological relativity fit in with a range of current ideas that are often advanced –albeit with different ends in view– by postmodernist, post-structuralist, and kindred thinkers.

Then again, take Thomas Kuhn’s celebrated book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), where he claims (very much in agreement with Quine) that different scientific theories –those on either side of a major paradigm-shift– commit their believers to different (‘incommensurable’) worldviews, ontologies, etc. So, for instance, when Aristotle watched a swinging stone, he saw a piece of matter seeking out its proper place in the cosmos or the order of the elements. Galileo, on the other hand, saw it as a pendulum –possessing a certain mass and subject to gravitationally-induced motion– because he had a different theory to explain what caused that phenomenon. Now, according to Kuhn, we had better not say that Galileo’s theory marked an advance over Aristotle’s in terms of correctness, explanatory power, conceptual grasp, or whatever. For there is just no point in making such comparisons where theories diverge so radically that we lack any means –any neutral language– for translating between them. That is to say, these theories are strictly incommensurable in so far as they assign a

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<sup>15</sup> See also Haack (1974).

different meaning or reference to every term in their respective observation-languages. Thus Aristotle and Galileo (like Newton and Einstein after them) quite literally “lived in different worlds”, worlds that contained different objects behaving in accordance with different laws. The best short answer to this is given by Hilary Putnam. “Suppose,” he invites us,

a terrestrial rock were transported to the moon and released. Aristotle’s physics clearly implies that it would fall to the earth, while Newton’s physics gives the correct prediction (that it would stay on the moon, or fall to the surface of the moon if lifted and released). There is a certain magnificent indifference to detail in saying grandly that Aristotle’s physics and Newton’s are ‘incommensurable’. (Putnam 1995 53n).

I call Putnam to witness here partly because, although once a fairly robust scientific realist, he has now come round (retreated I would say) to a theory of ‘internal realism’ that effectively concedes all the main points at issue.<sup>16</sup> Still he is clear enough about the kinds of absurdity that result from pushing anti-realism through to its logical conclusion. And the same can be said –as I have argued elsewhere (1997a, 1997b, 1997c)– about a good many compromise settlements or halfway stations on the road to anti-realism.

It is not surprising that Kuhn cites Quine as a source for his idea of radical meaning-variance between scientific paradigms, as likewise for his closely connected claim with regard to ontological relativity. For it is only on this holistic account –if the reference of terms is fixed solely by their meaning in this or that context, and the context in question expanded to embrace the entire ‘web’ or ‘fabric’ of currently accepted beliefs– it is only then, as I say, that Kuhn’s ultra-relativist argument begins to look in any degree plausible. Thus, to take another instance, we should have to conclude that there is no question of our now knowing more about atoms than those ancient Greek speculative thinkers (like Democritus, Leucippus, and Epicurus) who happened to hit on this idea for no better reason –or with no better evidence– than an a priori conviction that there must come a point beyond which matter is no longer divisible into smaller and smaller particles. Now we might want to say –in Whiggish fashion– that this was a piece of inspired proto-scientific guesswork, and that later thinkers –rom Dalton to Rutherford, Einstein, and Bohr– worked out the theory in much more detail

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<sup>16</sup> See for instance Putnam (1987, 1990).

and with increasing powers of assisted observation, descriptive accuracy, experimental proof, and so forth. But if one accepts Kuhn's argument then this is a wrong and a naively realist (as well as a smugly progressivist) way of putting it. Rather, those thinkers were all of them talking about different things, from Epicurus's metaphysical doctrine of 'atoms and the void' to Dalton's concept of atomic weight as a means of explaining certain chemical properties and, beyond that, Bohr's early notion of the atom as kind of miniature solar system with electrons orbiting the nucleus. And, in so far as they were talking about different things, there can be no common ground –no shared or fixed points of reference– whereby to compare their theories in terms of progressively more adequate knowledge.

The same applies to Priestley's and Lavoisier's rival theories of combustion, the one involving a substance ('phlogiston') supposedly produced in that process, the other a different substance ('oxygen') whose consumption was thought to explain it. That each performed a series of crucial experiments which appeared to bear out his theory –to generate results perfectly in accord with its predictions– is yet further grist for Kuhn's relativist mill. Thus Priestley showed combustion to produce a quantity of 'dephlogistated air', while Lavoisier accounted for the same experimental phenomena in terms of his preferred oxygen-hypothesis. So we are wrong to suppose, in the wisdom of hindsight, that Priestley was working with a false theory –one that involved the positing of a non-existent substance– while Lavoisier came up with the correct explanation. Rather we should say, here as in the previous cases, that what is involved is a wholesale difference of paradigms, along with their various regional ontologies, causal-explanatory schemes, frameworks of meaning and reference, etc. And in that case we won't be so tempted to talk about 'progress' or the advancement of scientific knowledge in a way that presumptively neglects or overrides the differend between them. I am reverting to Lyotard's idiom here because I think it catches the main point at issue in Kuhn's relativistic philosophy of science as well as in Lyotard's postmodernist conception of justice as an imperative always to maximize the range of language-games, narratives, phrase-genres, and so forth. For they are both committed to the view that any talk of truth –or of progress toward truth at the end of enquiry– is by its very nature authoritarian and aimed toward suppressing freedom of enquiry.

There is also, I would suggest, a comparison to be drawn with Levinasian ethics and its invocation of a radical 'otherness' –a realm of absolute alterity– that exists altogether outside and beyond the resources of Western (epistemologically-fixated) thought. For this again drives a wedge

between ethical judgements and the various sorts of truth-claim (scientific, historical, circumstantial, etc.) that must otherwise be seen as playing a role –an important if not an ultimately decisive role– in the process of thought by which we typically arrive at such judgements. And again this seems to me a counsel of despair, an extreme version of the old argument that there is no passage –no logical passage– from an ‘is’ to an ‘ought’, or (in Lyotard’s postmodern parlance) from constative to performative phrase-genres. In philosophy of science the doctrine works out as a Kuhnian incommensurability-thesis joined to the idea –pushed hardest by Paul Feyerabend (1975, 1978)– that we should abandon all notions of truth, method, reputable (‘genuine’) science, etc., and henceforth adopt an attitude of ‘anything goes’ as the best, most tolerant and liberal approach. But this attitude can have far-from-liberal consequences, as when Feyerabend sides with the Catholic Church against Galileo on account of the latter’s shrewdly manipulative use of scientific evidence, not to mention his presumption in challenging the mores of his time and place. My point in all this is that relativist philosophies may often turn out to place sharp limits on the freedom of thought and enquiry when it comes to questioning their own favoured kinds of argument or evidential sources. Thus Kuhn adopts a thoroughly sceptical-relativist outlook in his treatment of various episodes from the history of the physical sciences. Yet he –like the ‘strong’ sociologists of knowledge– seems to entertain no serious doubts as to the facts thrown up by historical research or by social-scientific methods of enquiry.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, he exhibits a well-nigh positivist confidence that those facts can be used to challenge (or demolish) the idea of real gains in knowledge having occurred in physics, chemistry, and biology. But there is –I submit– something very odd, not to say perverse, about an approach that discounts the massive self-evidence of progress in those fields only to repose on the far more dubious –at any rate, the widely contested– claims of the social and human sciences.

There is a similar case to be made against Quinean and kindred arguments to the effect that meaning-variance between the terms involved in different scientific theories is sufficient to rule out comparison in point of accuracy, scope, explanatory grasp, predictive power, etc. (Rather: any preference can only have to do with a ‘vaguely pragmatic’ inclination to make adjustments to one or another thread in the total ‘fabric’ of beliefs.) For it would seem fairly clear –on any but the most hard-bitten of sceptical

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<sup>17</sup> See especially Bloor (1976, 1983); Barnes (1982, 1985); Latour and Woolgar (1979); Fuller (1988, 1989); Woolgar (1988a, 1988b).

views— that we have better reason to believe in the truth-claims of science (or the achievements of scientific method to date) than to believe in those various semantical theories, such as meaning-holism or the ‘underdetermination’ of theory by evidence, that possess nothing like that degree of rational and evidential warrant. Anti-realist doctrines are in this sense open to the same objection that has often been brought against scepticism with regard to other minds, to the existence of an ‘external’ world, and other time-honoured philosophic foibles. That is to say, such doubts cannot be dispelled by any kind of logical argument, any more than Hume could discover any logical ground for believing in the existence of a causal nexus beyond the mere fact of repeated co-occurrence or observed regularity. Still one cannot be a serious sceptic as concerns these matters without, in the process, rendering so much of our experience wholly unintelligible or mysterious that the case collapses into manifest absurdity.

This argument perhaps succeeds more readily in respect of ‘other minds’ and the ‘external world’, where it takes a good deal of perverse ingenuity to maintain a thoroughgoing sceptical stance. However, the situation is not so very different with regard to scientific realism since here also the sceptic’s case –whether about causality or the existence of those items that figure in our current best theories– is one runs counter to a vast range of evidence supporting the realist interpretation.<sup>18</sup> Besides, there are some strong arguments even from within the ‘semantic’ camp that cast doubt on the Quine-Kuhn theses of radical meaning-variance, framework relativism, paradigm-incommensurability, etc. Hartry Field (1973), for one, has proposed a theory of partial and overlapping reference whereby to explain how terms such as ‘mass’ or ‘atom’ have a certain stability and continuity of usage despite playing a role in very different scientific paradigms. Thus Newton and Einstein were working with conceptions of ‘mass’ that cannot, of course, be directly translated one into the other or straightforwardly compared as referring to one and the same physical quantity. However, it is possible to analyse the term into various, more specific senses –such as ‘rest-mass’, ‘absolute mass’, or ‘relativistic mass’– which can then be assigned to particular uses and particular contexts of argument. In which case there is no reason to accept the ‘strong’ thesis with regard to meaning-variance or any of the consequences that are supposed to flow from it, such as Quine’s ontological-relativist argument or Kuhn’s notion

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<sup>18</sup> For some strong arguments to just this effect, see Devitt (1986); also Armstrong (1978); Bhaskar (1986); Collier (1989); Leplin (1984); Smith (1981).

of radically discontinuous (world-transformative) paradigm shifts. Rather, we can see that Newtonian 'mass' still has a meaning, a reference, and a well-defined scope of application even though it now figures –after Einstein– as valid only for certain purposes or within a certain restricted range of spatio-temporal coordinates.

In short, Field's approach has one signal virtue, as compared with the wholesale relativist view: namely, that it brings semantics into line with what science (or a well-supported scientific theory) has to tell us concerning such matters. Likewise, if one wants to make sense of the history of modern particle-physics then one will have to assume that Dalton, Rutherford, Einstein, and Bohr were to this extent at least talking about 'the same thing', that is to say, disagreeing precisely with respect to the structure, properties, and internal constitution of 'atoms'. On the alternative (Quinean-Kuhnian) view, we should have no warrant –realist prejudice aside– for supposing that science had in any way advanced toward a better, more detailed or adequate knowledge of atoms or anything else. Of course the sceptic may still want to claim that this merely begs the question against relativist, anti-realist, instrumentalist, conventionalist, or social-constructivist arguments since it takes for granted the reality –the perduring ontological status– of whatever it is that scientists have striven to describe or explain with their various theories of the ultimate constituents of matter. As I have said, these arguments range all the way from Dummett's philosophically sophisticated case for the non-availability of evidence-transcendent truths to Lyotard's more free-style postmodern variations on the standard sceptical theme. What they all have in common is a strange disregard for the single most elementary truth thrown up in the course of human enquiry to date, a truth that was well-known to Aristotle but which has often been lost from view in later philosophical debate. It is the fact, simply put, that what renders our beliefs true or false is the way things stand in reality, rather than (a strictly preposterous notion) reality being somehow a product of –or 'constructed by'– whatever we happen to believe concerning it. For if this were the case then there could be no explaining how scientists (also historians and others) can sometimes, if rarely, step outside their inherited paradigms, language-games, conceptual schemes, etc., and make some discovery that constitutes a genuine advance in knowledge.

'Preposterous' in its etymological sense means 'getting things back to front', which is just what happens –or so I would suggest– when theorists take the linguistic turn toward notions of radical meaning-variance or paradigm-incommensurability. For the result of such thinking –if consistently pursued–

is to render scientific progress a miracle (or a species of wishful illusion), and to leave it likewise an ultimate mystery why science should have so often managed to explain what would else lack any adequate, convincing, or remotely plausible explanation. My point in all this (just in case you had forgotten) is that postmodern talk of 'difference', 'otherness', 'alterity', 'heterogeneity', etc., is by no means confined to the fashionable discourse of postmodern cultural theory. It is also very much a leading theme in post-Kuhnian philosophy of science and in other disciplines –such as historiography and sociology of knowledge– that have taken on board some version of the generalized difference-principle. What often goes along with this (most explicitly in Lyotard's case) is a belief that justice can best be served by promoting the greatest possible variety of language-games, narratives, phrase-genres, etc., and thus by rejecting any notion of truth –even the Kantian-Peircean regulative idea of truth at the end of enquiry– as a power-ploy aimed at suppressing or effacing the narrative-discursive 'differend'. And the same applies to Foucault's Nietzschean 'genealogies' of power-knowledge, despite the clear signs in his later texts and interviews that Foucault had come to recognise the problems (chiefly the normative confusions) that resulted from this notion of truth as just a product of power/knowledge differentials.<sup>19</sup>

I have argued that this whole approach is radically mistaken, not only in epistemological but also in ethical and socio-political terms. As applied to philosophy of science it quickly leads on, *via* milder varieties of cultural-linguistic relativism, to arguments of the full-blown Feyerabend type where truth just is whatever counts as such according to this or that belief-system, be it non-standard ('revolutionary') science, alternative medicine, voodoo magic, or the forcibly applied dictates of Catholic orthodoxy *versus* Galileo's heliocentric hypothesis. Now it seems to me –as I argued above with regard to Kant– that this has to do crucially with the way that one construes the relation between epistemology and ethics, between the cognitive and evaluative 'phrase-genres' in Lyotard's postmodernist parlance, or (to adopt a Habermasian phrase) between knowledge and human interests. That is to say, there is the risk of collapsing those distinctions and producing either a determinist outlook that allows no room for human agency, choice, responsibility, etc., or a purely notional (Rorty-style) freedom to 'redescribe' the world in whatever way we choose as if wishing could make it so.<sup>20</sup> (Shades

<sup>19</sup> See for instance the essays and interviews collected in Rabinow (1986).

<sup>20</sup> See especially Rorty (1991).

of American Christian Science and Mary Baker Eddy!) However, there is also a risk –and here we return to Levinas– of construing the ethical ‘relation’ in terms so remote from the human sphere of shared cognitive and intersubjective interests that the ‘other’ becomes absolutely other, and can hence exert no particular claim –no claim as a human being– on my capacity for seeing their point of view or respecting their moral autonomy. Indeed, the Levinasian ethical imperative can often sound disturbingly close to Kierkegaard’s conception of authentic Christian faith as that which at the limit transcends and cancels all human, merely human ties and obligations.

So I think it is important to take the point of Derrida’s essay on Levinas and see that there are dangers in attempting to derive an ethics from the idea of radical otherness, alterity, or absolute difference. Moreover, there is a very real social and political context for this current (counter-Enlightenment) attack on the values of truth, of mutual understanding, of shared human interests across otherwise large differences of language, culture, or belief. For it is far from clear that what we most need to encourage now is a heightened sense of the various factors that divide human beings and cultures one from another and which prevent them (which actually should prevent them, on this incommensurabilist view) from perceiving their common humanity. If you think about the racial, ethnic, religious, and ideological conflicts that are raging all around the world at this moment then you may find reason to reject such a view. Very often these conflicts come about because human beings are successfully indoctrinated with a notion of radical otherness, that is, an incapacity to recognise other people as human beings on account of some ethnic, religious, cultural, or linguistic difference. It is possible, it is terribly possible, for whole populations or ethnic groups to be swung into this way of thinking, to simply discount those others from the realm of humanity, to see them as utterly and incomprehensibly different or alien to themselves.

Of course I am not claiming, absurdly, that Levinas’s thought (or that of his disciples) is some kind of disguised apologia for the current resurgence of ethnic and religious strife in various parts of the world. However I do want to argue that these ideas about radical otherness –so prominent in the postmodern discourse on ethical and political questions– have perhaps been too readily endorsed by thinkers of a liberal-pluralist persuasion. For the trouble with incommensurability-arguments, whether in epistemology or ethics, is that they tend to give rise to an us-and-them outlook which in effect leaves ‘us’ with a choice between two, equally drastic alternatives. That is, we can treat ‘them’ either as utterly opaque (presuming

to understand nothing of their meanings, intentions, motives, interests, values, etc.) or as comprehensible only on our own terms, that is to say, in so far as we must willy-nilly understand them according to our linguistic, cultural, interpretive, or ethico-political lights.

The first may be called the ‘Levinas option’ and should, I think, be treated with caution for the reasons I have laid out above. The second is an unintended consequence of theories –pragmatist or liberal-communitarian theories– which typically argue that meanings, values, and beliefs are ‘internal to’ this or that cultural form of life, and should therefore be judged by their own criteria and not by some externally imposed set of standards. This idea is very widespread nowadays, mainly in the arts and humanities sector though also –via the ‘strong programme’ in sociology of knowledge– as applied to the history and philosophy of science. Its sources include late Wittgenstein (at least on one influential reading) and a range of other variants on the present-day linguistic or hermeneutic turn. Where the unintended consequence comes in is with the point that if this were really the case –if we and other people were talking, interpreting, reasoning, judging, making decisions, and so forth, always by our own ‘internal’ or culture-specific criteria– then we should always ipso facto be understanding them as we ourselves saw fit, or in keeping with our own (communally-sanctioned) ideas of truth and justice. Moreover, if it should so happen that we –and not they– were members of a strongly-placed community or interest-group (such as Rorty’s ‘North-Atlantic bourgeois liberal postmodern pragmatist’ culture) then those others might not get much of a chance to make their voices heard. In which case the tolerant liberal view could turn out to have rather sharp limits when it came to deciding who qualified for entry to the “cultural conversation of mankind” (Rorty 1989).

Of course the Wittgensteinian (or the Rortian pragmatist) can always respond that this would be a distorted conversation and one that failed the liberal test of preserving a genuine open-ended multiplicity of beliefs, values, worldviews, participant voices, etc. But he or she would then be faced with a further choice between two problematical alternatives. The first is difficult for anyone who takes this communitarian line since it must involve something like the Kantian-Habermasian appeal to an enlightened sensus communis (or “ideal speech-situation”) that would act as a context-transcendent regulative idea, and would hence rule against certain forms of merely de facto, i.e. partial or distorted consensus.<sup>21</sup> The second option is to

<sup>21</sup> See Habermas (1984, 1987).

grasp the other horn of this dilemma and deny that such 'external' criticism could ever be justified since it means, in effect, that we have cut ourselves off from any genuine (inward) understanding of the language-game or life-form concerned, and are thus not competent to express any views on the matter. This approach is most familiar from the work of Peter Winch (1958) and other disciples of Wittgenstein in the social and human sciences. However, it offers no adequate response to the problem about imposing our views willy-nilly, as argued above. Worse than that, it very often tends to work out as a dogmatic imposition of the full-blown cultural-relativist view, namely –for instance– the Winchian view that belief in witchcraft is no less 'rational' than the belief in (say) antibiotics as a cure for certain kinds of illness since witchcraft has its role within a certain cultural life-form and we are simply not qualified to judge or criticize life-forms other than our own.

I have perhaps said enough already –in connection with Lyotard– to indicate why I think this a wrong-headed, philosophically confused, and (not to mince words) a morally pernicious doctrine. My point is that the moral bearing of these arguments –whether Winch's about witchcraft, Lyotard's about Holocaust revisionism, or Feyerabend's about the Catholic Church contra Galileo– cannot (or should not) be prescriptively divorced from their status as epistemological claims about the scope and limits of human knowledge concerning matters of scientific truth or historical fact. Any doctrine, such as Lyotard's, that raises the 'differend' between cognitive and evaluative phrase-genres to a high point of absolute (quasi-Kantian) principle is sure to generate normative confusions of the kind that I have remarked upon here. At this point, given time, I would elaborate the various lines of response that offer good reason not to endorse the relativist approach either with respect to 'cognitive' (scientific or historical) truth-claims, or –at least in its strong form– with respect to differences of ethico-political judgement. They would include, for instance, Donald Davidson's well-known argument, in his essay 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' (1984), to the effect that talk of divergent language-games, life-forms, paradigms, ontological frameworks, etc., is strictly unintelligible unless it is assumed –which would seem ex hypothesi ruled out– that we do in fact possess some interlingual or trans-paradigm criteria for making comparisons between them.

On Davidson's theory, those criteria are supplied by the fact that, in order for anything to count as a language, it must exhibit certain qualifying features (devices for reference and cross-reference, for negation, conjunction, quantification, pronominal ascription and so forth) in the

absence of which it could simply not serve for even the most basic expressive-communicative purposes. Moreover, those devices can then be construed as providing a logico-syntactic groundwork that explains how we can (and do) most often manage to communicate across large differences of belief-system, semantic field, scientific paradigm, ‘conceptual scheme’, or whatever. Syntax is thus ‘more sociable’ than semantics, Davidson maintains, in so far as it allows us a whole range of shared conceptual resources which don’t fall prey to standard objections from the cultural or ontological-relativist quarter. Also it helps to make the point that truth –or the attitude of holding-true– is more basic to language (or human understanding in general) than the various localized or culture-specific ‘conventions’ that of course differ widely from one context to another. For since the meaning of a sentence is paradigmatically given by its truth-conditions –and in other, non-standard cases (such as metaphor, irony, or malapropism) by our perceiving those conditions not to hold for some assignable reason– therefore we have no practical choice but to accept this Davidsonian order of priorities.<sup>22</sup> That is to say, truth-related concepts and values are so deeply built into our basic grasp of linguistic performance or behaviour that it makes no sense to reverse that order and argue (in standard post-structuralist fashion) that meaning is purely ‘conventional’, that convention goes all the way down, and that ‘truth’ is thus whatever counts as such according to the local conventions.<sup>23</sup>

However, the more immediate context of debate –at least for our purposes here– is the present-day ‘continental’ tradition rather than its Anglo-American ‘analytic’ counterpart. In that context the issue is most sharply posed by German thinkers such as Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, and Albrecht Wellmer who can be seen as sustaining the philosophic discourse (or the “unfinished project”) of enlightened critical modernity against its mainly French or French-influenced postmodernist detractors.<sup>24</sup> This is, I should acknowledge, a broad-brush picture that elides some significant disagreements within each camp. Still it may be helpful in suggesting that we ought perhaps to draw the line rather differently, that is, not so much between ‘continental’ and ‘analytic’ schools but rather between, on the one hand, those approaches that preserve a commitment to the values of truth-based intersubjective enquiry, and on the other those approaches (whether

<sup>22</sup> See also Papineau (1979, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> See Bennett (1976).

<sup>24</sup> See entries under Notes 1 and 21 above; also Apel (1985) and Wellmer (1991).

postmodernist, post-structuralist, or 'post-analytic') that find no room for such values. I should not wish to claim that Davidsonian 'truth' –defined (after Tarski) in formal terms and non-committal on the realist issue– can be simply or straightforwardly deployed against arguments in the postmodern-sceptical-relativist vein. Nor can it readily be marshalled on the side of an ethico-political project, such as that of Habermas, which requires a more detailed and nuanced account of the various human interests (cognitive, evaluative, aesthetic or 'world-disclosive', etc.) that between them constitute the philosophic discourse of modernity. For it is here, if anywhere, that the two traditions part company: in the analytic stress on technical issues about meaning, truth, and logic, as opposed to the broadly continental emphasis –deriving from Kant– on the complex relationship between those various orders of thought and judgement.

All the same there is a certain alignment of interests between truth-based formal philosophies of language in the analytic mode and philosophies of meaning and interpretation that seek to conserve the Enlightenment commitment to values of truth and emancipatory critique. That is, they converge on this important point about the basic commonality of human knowledge and experience, of what makes sense –what enables mutual understanding to occur– across otherwise large differences of language, thought, and culture. If you look at things from this angle then perhaps you will decide that the real division is not one that falls between so-called 'analytic' and so-called 'continental' philosophy. Rather, it is what separates thinkers who seek to build on that basic commonality –who accept it as an a priori condition of achieving any progress in these matters– and on the other hand those who reject such thinking as a residue of bad old 'Enlightenment' beliefs, that is, a false universalism premised on obsolete (quasi-transcendental, trans-cultural, and trans-historical) notions of absolute truth. It should scarcely need saying –but very often does in the current, sharply polarized context of debate– that this latter typecast characterization is absurdly wide of the mark. With respect to Kant (the usual target here) it involves a massive conflation of distinct arguments, truth-claims, modes of judgement, and value-spheres. Still less can the standard rebuke be applied to present-day thinkers such as Habermas, those who have sought to uphold and defend the "unfinished project" of modernity even while conceding its failures (or limited achievements) to date and the need for continuing refinement, elaboration, and critique.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See especially Habermas (1987).

However I must make good my promise and bring this argument back around to deconstruction and its status *vis-à-vis* the two opposed 'discourses' of modernity and postmodernity. What I wish to say –as you will have gathered by now– is that deconstruction stands very firmly apart from postmodernism. Very often it is treated as just a more specialized, more 'philosophical' sub-branch or variant of postmodernism. I think that they are two quite distinct developments, albeit with certain shared sources (in fact a whole range of common sources, from Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche to Saussure and of course Derrida), but with a quite different way of reading those source-texts and different criteria –I would say, different standards– of valid argument. Deconstruction is often viewed, by its critics especially, as the sort of thing that postmodernists typically get up to when they acquire a smattering of philosophy and don't wish to be put down as cultural or literary theorists. However, as I have argued, there are crucial distinctions to be drawn between (say) Lyotard's and Derrida's approaches to Kant, or between postmodernism's wholesale rejection of Enlightenment values and the far more complex and nuanced relationship that emerges through a deconstructive reading of Enlightenment texts (Norris 1993). One problem here is that the main parties to this dispute –including, regrettably, Derrida and Habermas– have sometimes been pressured by their camp-followers to adopt an adversarial stance that obscures both the real points at issue between them and the extent of their shared interests, values, and concerns. So I shall finish by trying to spell out the issues in a way that so far as possible avoids such distracting polemics.

## VII

There are, I should admit, some additional problems to be faced in addressing this topic of 'deconstruction and the philosophic discourse of modernity'. In part they have to do with Habermas's reading of Derrida, a reading that is sometimes careless, that gets Derrida wrong in certain crucial respects, and which has done more than its share to encourage the recent round of hostilities (Habermas 1987). And Derrida has tended to respond in kind, that is, to treat Habermas with withering scorn as someone who just can't read what is put in front of him (Derrida 1989). However it would be wrong to dismiss the whole issue as just a matter of unfortunate misunderstanding on both sides. For there are several passages in Derrida's

texts where he says quite specifically that deconstruction is not another version of ‘critique’ in the Kantian or post-Kantian mode. Here he seems to think of ‘critique’ as something destructive, polemical, perhaps even violent: an attempt to undermine or discredit opposing views. And Derrida is –with just a few exceptions, among them his responses to Habermas and Searle– an ironic and not a polemical thinker. For the result of a deconstructive reading (as witness for instance his essays on Plato, Rousseau, Husserl, or J.L. Austin) is to draw out hitherto unnoticed subtleties and complexities in the text, rather than to show the text up as merely naive or deluded. This is no doubt why he has certain qualms about annexing deconstruction to the practice or the heritage of Enlightenment critique.

Nevertheless, as I have argued above, that description is by no means wide of the mark if applied to Derrida’s various readings of texts in the Western philosophical tradition. For there is a sense –an eminently Kantian sense– in which ‘critique’ is not at all a matter of polemics, not a matter of attacking or dismissing beliefs that one thinks naive or ill-founded. Rather, it is a matter of posing certain questions that have to do with the conditions of possibility for language and thought in general, conditions that may sometimes conflict with what an author expressly or overtly claims regarding (say) the priority of speech over writing, or nature over culture, or concept over metaphor. These are transcendental questions, again in the strict (Kantian) sense of that term. That is, they are concerned with philosophical issues about thought, perception, language, logic, intentionality, etc., issues which cannot (or should not) be construed in merely polemical terms. So we can take Derrida at his word when he counsels us against the idea of deconstruction as a “simple progressive critique in the manner of the Enlightenment”.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suppose, for that reason, that deconstruction is squarely aligned with postmodernism in its antagonism towards the philosophic discourse of modernity.

This difference comes out very clearly in his essay on Levinas where, as I have said, Derrida makes the case against an ethics of absolute ‘alterity’ or ‘otherness’, an ethics that would somehow bypass the appeal to a shared human realm of concepts, perceptions, meanings, values, modes of experience, and so forth (Derrida 1978). The essay is a critique of Levinas’s thinking in just that sense of the term that I am invoking here. While in no way polemical –indeed quite the reverse– it still draws attention to what can

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<sup>26</sup> On this issue of deconstruction vis-à-vis the discourse of Enlightenment critique, see especially Derrida (1983, 1992a, 1992b).

only be called the ‘conditions of impossibility’ for an ethics conceived as Levinas would wish, that is to say, on a radicalized principle of difference erected into a high point of ethical doctrine. Thus Derrida takes issue with Levinas on the twofold grounds: (1) that his notion of absolute ‘otherness’ is philosophically unsustainable, hence open to a form of deconstructive immanent critique, and (2) that it requires –in the name of ethics– a willed renunciation of just those capacities (of tolerance, mutual regard, sympathetic insight) that enable us to treat the other as an alter ego, and which thereby open a space for the ethical relationship. In short, this essay criticizes Levinas’s thinking, and does so (moreover) through a close reading of his texts which maintains the highest standards of philosophic rigour and ethical accountability. But of course, this presupposes (as Habermas could readily agree) that in order for such criticism to proceed there must exist the basis for shared understanding across and despite the difference of views between Derrida and Levinas. Which is also to say –pace some of Derrida’s more guarded pronouncements– that there is nothing inherently violent or antagonistic about the discourse of ‘enlightened’ critique, whatever its potential abuses when applied in a doctrinaire fashion. At any rate I hope to have laid out some valid arguments for viewing deconstruction as very much a part of the “unfinished project” of modernity.

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# Face to face with the Other: Levinas and Elizabeth Bowen's *The House in Paris*

Jean Radford

*'The category of the Other is as  
primordial as consciousness itself.'*

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir famously invokes the category of the Other in order to discuss the ways in which woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man, so that "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other" (Beauvoir 1949 16). Since that inaugural moment, feminists have developed and applied the category extensively to the representation of women in literature and other forms of discourse. The concept of the Other has also, of course, become central within postcolonial studies. More recently however, and in line with de Beauvoir's claim cited above, the category of the Other has been expanded to address the question of identity and cultural difference in a much wider sense. If identity politics in the 1970s and 1980s was theoretically underpinned by both psychoanalytic and philosophical conceptions of the other, over the last decade the so-called 'ethical turn' in critical theory has, if anything, intensified the focus on otherness and difference. The category of the Other is now invoked, as Diana Fuss (1989 10) points out, as a useful shorthand term to refer to the production of cultural differences in general.

The ethical and political advantages of this move are, clearly, that it brings to light and allows comparison between disparate 'Others' in the face of a dominant 'One', thus providing ground for possible identification and solidarity between individuals or groups who are (although differently) all oppressed or excluded from the dominant centres of power. However there are, equally clearly, disadvantages in using the ontological (or existentialist) category of otherness to describe a range of social differentials including gender, class, race, sexuality and ethnicity. To invoke 'the Other' as a generalised, abstract category is to risk flattening the differences it was intended to represent and may distract attention from the culturally and historically specific agents linked together as Other. The case against an abstract, universalising concept of the Other has been made, very forcefully, by Toril Moi: "...simply to equate woman with otherness deprives the feminist struggle of any kind of specificity. What is repressed is not *otherness*, but specific, historically constructed agents. Women under patriarchy are oppressed because they are *women*, not because they are irredeemably other. Anti-semitism is directed against Jews, and South-African racism against blacks, not simply against abstract Otherness. The promotion and valorization of Otherness will never liberate the oppressed. It is, of course, hopelessly idealist to assume that Otherness somehow *causes* oppression. The fact that the oppressors tend to equate the oppressed group with ontological Otherness, perceived as a threatening, disruptive, alien force, is precisely an ideological manoeuvre designed to mask the concrete material grounds for oppression and exploitation" (Lovell 1990 373).

Despite this dismissal, the Other continues to occupy a central position in critical discussions of identity and it is interesting to note that the abstract, universalist aspect of the concept (which Moi, like Fuss, objects to) has recently been defended precisely because the "resolutely abstract conception of the Other supports a crucial impediment to exclusionary practices based on difference." (Dean 1997 989) My own view is that although many debates around the Other have remained abstract, concerned with an unspecified 'other', this is not always the case, nor need it be. To use the category of the Other may be a totalising or universalising move (with all the attendant risks noted above) but such moves are productive insofar as they generate, either positively or by negation, a new understanding of specific instances. It is not my intention to argue that further here, instead I want to use these debates to frame my reading of a particular modernist text, Elizabeth Bowen's *The House in Paris* (1935), using the concept of the Other developed by the French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas.

## Modernism and Its Others

As many feminist critics have argued, early Anglo-American modernism was constructed and defined in relation to particular notions of woman. In canonical male modernism, women are frequently represented as objects of the male gaze or as consumers of mass culture, as Baudelaire's 'La Passante', Flaubert's Emma Bovary or T.S. Eliot's typist who "lays out food in tins./Out of the window perilously spread/Her drying combinations..." The figure of the woman provided an image for ambivalent reactions to the social and economic changes brought about by modernity. In this modernism, the feminine is the Other (Huyssen 1988, Felski 1995). However, as recent studies by Bryan Cheyette (1993) and Robert Casillo (1988) have established, the reactionary and anti-semitic discourses employed by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot suggest that Anglo-American modernism had not one but several others. The modernist presentation of subjectivity is staged in relation to the figure of 'the Jew' as the racialised 'other' against whom questions of national identity are worked out. The muscular and masculine qualities which Pound calls for in modern literature are thus defined not only against the figure of the woman but also against the figure of 'the Jew' as portrayed in Eliot's *Gerontion*: "My house is a decayed house/And the jew squats on the window sill, the owner,/Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp..."

This element in modernist writing, Zygmunt Bauman (1991) argues, develops in part from counter-Enlightenment positions as old as modernity itself but it also draws on early twentieth-century discourses to actively construct Jewish racial difference as an 'other' which defines their own values and identity. (The "Jew", George Bernard Shaw wrote in *Man and Superman*, was "an exception to all rules") I would argue that in the modernist texts of the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen, Dorothy Richardson, and James Joyce, the figure of 'the Jew' is used in a different way, and expresses a rather different relation between modernism and modernity: a critique of modernity which critically explores the politics and ethics of the Enlightenment project.

Richardson's and Joyce's representation to the Jew have been explored elsewhere<sup>1</sup>, but Bowen's treatment of cultural difference is usually related to her position as an Anglo-Irish writer. *The House in Paris*, like many Bowen's novels is concerned with relations between England and Ireland,

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Joyce and Levinas see Connor, chapter 8; for Richardson see Radford (1998).

power and violence, children and adults. But it is almost unique among her novels and short stories in its reference to the Jewish question. The plot concerns two children who meet for a day in the house in Paris, the eleven year old Henrietta en route to join her grandmother and the other, the nine year old Leopold who has come from Italy to meet his birth-mother for the first time since she gave him up for adoption shortly after his birth. At the end of this section a telegram announces that she is not after all coming. Part two, entitled 'The Past' is a flashback which recounts his mother's love affair with a French-Jewish man called Max Ebhart and his suicide in the house in Paris. The third section of the novel returns to the present to present the children's meetings with the dying Frenchwoman, Madame Fisher, whose house it is. The novel ends with Leopold's departure with his mother's husband, Ray Forrestier, who arrives to rescue/ kidnap the child. *The House in Paris* is a brilliant, densely textured modernist fiction whose narrative organisation reflects a Bergsonian view of memory and temporality. As A. S. Byatt says in her introduction to the novel, "*The House in Paris* is a novel about sex, time and the discovery of identity." In the novel all three are intricately interwoven, but my discussion will concentrate on 'identity' in the light of Levinas' theory of 'alterity'.

Levinas (1906-1995) is the Jewish philosopher who has made the concept of the other central to his ethical concerns and ethics central to philosophy. Born in Lithuania, he arrived in France in 1923, the year in which Martin Buber published *I and Thou*, the book which Levinas discusses in an article entitled 'Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge'. Levinas studied philosophy under Husserl and Heidegger before becoming naturalised as a French citizen in 1931. He argues consistently against a rationalist notion of truth, claiming that there is a form of truth that is totally alien to me, which cannot be discovered within myself nor brought under the mastery of reason. His work on alterity, or otherness, is developed through three major texts: *Time and the Other* (1948), *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). His theory of the other emerges not merely from the philosophical traditions of phenomenology (Husserl and Heidegger) but, like *The House In Paris*, from the historical situation in France during the 1930's. The links between Bowen's work and Levinas', I want to argue, are historically grounded in the rise of fascism in Europe and the failures of liberal democracy to oppose National Socialism and the consequences of that failure.

## Identity in Question

For Levinas, as for Buber, identity –the self– is not a substance but a relation; what he calls the face-to-face encounter with the other is not one in which a Hegelian pre-existing ego/self recognises the other in terms of identification or opposition, sameness or difference. It is the encounter with a radical 'other', before or beyond language, which calls the self into being. Levinas takes the distinction made by Buber between the 'I-It' relation and the 'I-Thou' but significantly gives it a new ethical dimension. In Buber's model, the I-It relation is that where the 'other' is taken as the object of a knowing, perceiving subject, whereas in the I-Thou relation there is a meeting/encounter in which one being encounters an other 'face-to-face'. This implies a reciprocal relation between I and Thou. Levinas on the other hand, given his assumption of the temporal priority of the other, claims that the relation is not one of reciprocity. The ego or 'I' responds to the other, to his obligation to the other, without any guarantees of reciprocity or mutuality. Like unconditional love, the ethical responsibility to the call of/claims of the other, Levinas argues, constitutes the self. Since Levinas posits the 'other' as temporally prior to the self, the time of the other includes a future after the death of the self or ego; the self is constituted as a historical being in the present with an orientation towards, and responsibility for, the other who may live beyond my death. His argument, which derives from Feuerbach, is relevant to Bowen's use of the term 'afterwardness', to Max's suicide in *The House in Paris*, and to the temporal division of the novel into three sections entitled 'Present: Past: Present'.

Bowen stages the question of identity in *The House in Paris* through a complex and responsive account of the ethical relations between self and other. The novel enacts a series of failed relationships – relationships of betrayal, domination, misrecognition, and coercion – which lead to separation and violence and suicide. But it also stages moments of what, following Buber, one might call the I-Thou relation, or in Levinas' term 'epiphanies' in which the I comes face-to-face with something radically other and the experience brings a new self into being.

In Part II of *House in Paris*, 'The Past', the encounter between the English Karen Michaelis and the young Irish woman 'Yellow Hat' on the overnight boat from Cork to Fishguard is one of the most comic episodes in the novel. Although the two women sit face-to-face in the ship's saloon, eating together and sharing a bottle of wine, this is not, clearly, a face-to-face encounter in Levinas' sense. In terms of national identity, each is confirmed

in their pre-existing identities: 'Yellow Hat' plays Irish and Karen the English-looking-at-the-Irish; their shared gender identity, the nominal occasion for their meeting, does not produce a new response. For Karen, it is the category, not the self, which is called into question:

'She and I belong to the same sex, even, because there are only two: there should certainly be more.' (THP 94)<sup>2</sup>

Itself a valid point, one might think. But Karen concludes from this that

'Meeting people unlike oneself does not enlarge one's outlook; it only confirms one's idea that one is unique.' (THP 94)

Here, the ego is defined against the other, the other functions in the Hegelian mode to affirm/confirm the identity of the ego or self. Yet even in this failed face-to-face ('Forgetting to smile, they looked at each other askance, nodded and parted – for ever.' (THP 95)) the text registers an unrealised potential within the encounter:

All the same, in the confusion of such encounters, things with a meaning ring, that grow in memory later, get said somehow – one never knows by whom... (THP 94)

The scene grows in the reader's memory for it points forward to Karen's encounter with someone of the other sex, someone whose hyphenated national identity she has just described in a letter to her fiancé as "that man Max Ebhart, that French-English-Jewish man in a bank" (THP 89). The encounter also takes on meaning from the series of questions posed by Henrietta and Leopold earlier: "If I am Henrietta, then what is *Henrietta?*?" (THP 25) and Leopold's: "Why am I? What made me be?" (THP 67). Both children are continually engaged with questions about the 'why' and the what-ness of being –of who they are and what they might become– in terms of their sameness or difference from others. Henrietta's character has been built up, the narrator tells us, out of "a mosaic of all possible kinds of prejudice..." so that "she had come to associate prejudice with identity"

<sup>2</sup> THP is abbreviation of *The House in Paris*.

(THP 25). Although she has learned from her grandmother Mrs Arbuthnot and her sister Caroline a purely instrumental relation to the other (THP 33) what she learns in the house in Paris, is that there are other possible ways of being 'Henrietta'. The following scene represents a moment of interaction between the two children, in which one kind of self, Henrietta's, dissolves and another is called into being by the claims of the nine-year old Leopold:

Henrietta, meanwhile, felt tears, from her own eyes but not from a self she knew of, rain on her serge dress, each side of the buttons that were pulled a little crooked by Leopold's hand. They stayed like this for some time....

But then she saw consciousness march back into his eyes, which became Leopold's looking at Henrietta. Like a grown-up hand coming between their bodies, something outside them pulled them gently apart. Leopold's arm round her loosened and fell away. Still unalarmed, they stood as they had been standing, but Leopold slid his hands into his pockets; she stared at the clock and the striped wallpaper behind. (THP 197)

What Henrietta experiences might be called an 'epiphany' in Levinas's sense, or, in Buber's terms one might say that this represents an instance where an 'I-Thou relation' momentarily interrupts an I-It relation between the two characters. Bowen dramatises such moments as states beyond the prison-house of language and identity. But she also presents them *as moments*, for both children return to the world of self-consciousness, time and "the striped wallpaper behind".

Leopold, the male child, learns rather different lessons about self and other in the house in Paris, and by different means. First, he learns from his foster-parents' letter, which he finds in Naomi's handbag and reads, about what one might call the regulating power of the discourse, how the withholding (and giving) of knowledge is a mechanism of domination. "We do not consider him ripe for direct sex-instruction yet..." (THP 41). He learns, in short, that his intellectual and emotional development, like his bowel movements, have been subject to surveillance and that his foster-parents' love is an attempt to negate, by assimilation, his difference from them. His violent 'revulsion' from them is presented as a response to what the letter exposes – the violence done to him, the violation of his 'otherness'.

Secondly, he learns from his mother's refusal to meet him that, contrary to the Grant-Moody letter, the other, what is fully 'other', cannot be controlled or mastered.

Yes, his mother refused to come; she would not lend herself to him. He had cast her, but she refused her part. She was not, then, the creature of thought. Her will, her act, her thought, spoke in the telegram. Her refusal became her, became *her* coming in suddenly, breaking down by this one act of being herself only, his imagination in which he had bound her up. So she lived outside himself; she was alive truly. She set up that opposition that is love. (THP 206)

In Levinas' terms, one might say that Leopold here experiences 'radical alterity' and that it is this irreducible otherness of the other that calls love –or a Leopold capable of love– into being. Levinas' metaphor 'face-to-face' relies on what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence<sup>3</sup>; however, in Bowen's presentation of this issue the experience of alterity does not depend on presence but can be produced, as here, by absence.

The meeting at the end of the novel between Leopold and the dying Madame Fisher could also be read as a face-to-face encounter. Madame Fisher does not respond to the child's feelings of pain and misery –she seems to dismiss these– but whether as an act of reparation or because dying, the ego wants nothing for itself from the other; she does give him knowledge: "Nobody speaks the truth when there is something they must have", as Leopold has recognised earlier (THP 61). Madame Fisher, as Hermione Lee points out, is the only adult in the novel who tells 'the truth' about the past to the children in the House in Paris: "She is like the witch in the fairy story who sends the young man with a sword on his way out of the wood." (Lee 1982 102) The novel ends with his stepfather, Ray Forrestier's action – he physically liberates the child from his bondage in Italy after Madame Fisher has spiritually, as it were, given him a knowledge of freedom. Forrestier is in this respect like the woodman who rescues these two babes in the wood but

<sup>3</sup> Derrida's first critique of Levinas is in 'Violence and Metaphysics'. The key point in Derrida's critique is that "the other cannot be absolutely exterior to the same without ceasing to be other" (1978 126). He points to a logical contradiction in Levinas' argument – claiming that it depends on/returns to the kind of ontology Levinas was trying to reject. See also Derrida's second essay on Levinas 'At this Moment in this Work Here I am'. For a different critique of Levinas, which claims that his focus on ethics closes off questions of politics and history, see Rose (1993 211-224), and Osborne (1995).

his actions are again presented by Bowen as a response to the claims of the other, as an overcoming of egotism:

Ray had not seen Karen's child in bright light before; now he saw light strike the pupils of Leopold's eyes. Egotism and panic, knowing mistrust of what was to be, died in Ray as he waited beside Leopold for their taxi to come: the child commanded tonight. I have acted on his scale. (THP 206)

### **An Unofficial Historian**

I want now to move back to the figure of 'the Jew', Max Ebhart, in whom the question of the other is most brilliantly and appositely embodied. V.S. Pritchett (1946 77) claimed that the novelist in this period had become "the historian of a crisis in [a] civilisation": "Without knowing it, often by responding with his private sensibility only, the novelist has slipped into the role of unofficial historian. He has become the historian of the crisis in a civilisation, whether he writes politically (as Koestler has done), as a religious man like Graham Greene, or with the obliquity of those dispossessed poets, Henry Green and Miss Elizabeth Bowen."

I would argue that *The House in Paris* is not just a modernist parable about time, it is very much a novel of its time, a historical novel which reflects upon England and Europe between the wars and on the political history of Paris since 1789. The links between Paris, violence and revolution are introduced early in the novel through the eyes of the child – "Henrietta had heard how much blood had been shed in Paris" (THP 22). Victoria Glendinning's biography (1977) gives few details about Bowen's political position in this period but states that she was reading "a lot of French" during this period – Stendhal, Flaubert, Montherlant and Maupassant as well as Proust. The text of *The House in Paris* is studded with literary allusions but also with 'oblique' historical references – to Napoleon, Shylock, Weininger, Dreyfus, the Stavisky scandals and to Anatole France, the Dreyfusard whom Bowen later decided was the model for Proust's 'Bergotte' in *A La Recherche*. Bowen names the street in which Madame Fisher's pension stands after the character in Anatole France's popular novel *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard* (1881) – a street which, significantly, remains unstained by Max Ebhart's blood<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> The 'crime' committed by Sylvestre Bonnard is to kidnap/rescue a young charge from the pensionnat where she is badly treated. An elderly bibliophile, he sells his books to provide her

The love affair between Max Ebhart, the son of an English Jewish father and French mother, living in Paris, and Karen Michaelis, the daughter of an upper middle class English family living in Regent's Park, is presented as three encounters: in Twickenham, Boulogne and Hythe. Their relation is difficult not merely because each is engaged to another person and they live in different places but because of the cultural differences between them. They speak different languages, literally and metaphorically:

Their worlds were so much unlike that no experience had the same value for both of them. They could remember nothing that they could speak of, and memory is to love what the saucer is to the cup... (THP 143)

Their recourse is to speak of history: "His view of the past was political, hers dramatic, but now they were free of themselves they were of one mind." The passage goes on –

...side by side in the emptying restaurant, they surrounded themselves with wars, treaties, persecutions, strategic marriages, campaigns, reforms, successions and violent deaths. (THP 143)

In the Boulogne restaurant, history seems to offer a way out for these two cultural 'others' but in another sense, the novel seems to suggest, they are indeed surrounded by 'wars, treaties, persecutions' etc. and not simply as topics of conversation. In *The Age of Extremes* Eric Hobsbawm (1994 ch. 4), whom one might call an *official* historian, characterises the between-the-wars period as 'The Fall of Liberalism' and identifies within it three main features:

1. The fall of democratic governments in Germany, Italy, Spain into different forms of dictatorship.
2. That European populations were subject to mass forms of migration, making questions of 'homelessness', belonging, refuge and asylum into subjects of daily news.
3. The emergence of new forms of anti-semitism.<sup>5</sup>

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with a dowry. There are many parallels between France's novel and Bowen's – so it is possible that the naming of the street is also an acknowledgement of this.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hobsbawm (1994) chapter 4.

The weakness of liberalism, migration and anti-semitism: all three developments are textualised in *The House in Paris* around the question of the Other. Karen's family (the Michaelises) and her fiancé's family (the Forrestiers) represent the English liberal tradition after the First World War. The novel offers a detailed critique of this class both at the familial and the political levels:

The Michaelis lived like a family in a prewar novel in one of the tall, cream houses in Chester Terrace, Regent's Park. Their relatives and old friends, as nice as they were themselves, were rooted in the same soil. Her parents saw little reason to renew their ideas, which had lately been ahead of their time and were still not out of date. Karen had grown up in a world of grace and intelligence, in which the Boer War, the War and other fatigues and disasters had been so many opportunities to behave well. The Michaelis's goodness of heart had a wide field: they were not only good to the poor but kind to the common, tolerant of the intolerant (THP 70).

The satirical presentation of Karen's family and class together with the references to 'revolution' throughout the middle section, are testimony not merely to Karen's private revolt against her family values but to a broader "crisis in civilisation", as V.S. Pritchett calls it. 'Revolution', in my reading, refers not just to the nationalist 'revolutions' like that which burned down the family house of her uncle Colonel Bent in Ireland, nor simply to the revolution of 1917 which in Russia attempted to destroy the privileges of the class to which Karen belongs, but to the threatening and actualised revolutions in Germany, Spain and Italy.

It is these historical points which give significance to the identity of Karen's 'significant other'. The description of Max as "French-English-Jewish" (THP 89), echoes that given of his son whom Henrietta sees ten years later: "He had a nervous manner.. She saw a dark-eyed, very slight little boy who looked either French or Jewish..." (THP 27)

Under Jewish law, neither Max Ebhart nor Leopold Grant-Moody is Jewish. They are what Zygmunt Bauman in *Modernity and Ambivalence* calls 'undecidables', those who are 'in-between' categories of national or religious identities: here neither Christian nor Jewish, French nor English but 'either French or Jewish'. The year *The House in Paris* was published was the year in which the Nazi government in Germany introduced the Nuremberg Laws which defined the Jew in a more inclusionary sense – as anyone with Jewish

blood. All such persons were in 1935 legally deprived of German citizenship, made 'homeless' within the German homeland<sup>6</sup>.

The Nuremberg Laws consolidated the Boycott Laws of 1933 introduced the year Hitler came to power in Germany. But the rise of fascism in the early 1930s was not confined to Europe as Bowen well knew: the British Union of Fascists was formed by Sir Oswald Mosley in 1932, the year that Bowen wrote to Virginia Woolf that she had seen "Mussolini on a white horse reviewing police –dogs, bands, tanks– that was awful", while in 1934 Mosley and the Blackshirts staged a mass meeting at Olympia –described by Bowen's anti-fascist friend, the short story writer, A. E. Coppard (Glendinning 1997 75).

Thus, one might say, as Phyllis Lassner has (1996), that Leopold's 'nervousness' is not merely the result of heredity or upbringing, he has something to be nervous about. In a similar way, I would argue that Max Ebhart's situation in Paris –"My lack of a home, of any place to return to, had not only deprived me, it chagrined me constantly" (THP 163)– is not merely an individual predicament, it represents the situation of many Jews in Europe after 1933. Max's Jewish identity, which makes him unassimilable in France, also brings home the weakness of English liberalism. Face-to-face with this Jewish other, the "grace and intelligence" and "tolerance" of Karen's family gives way to stereotypes (Max is "womanish", and "No Jew is unastute" (THP 176)), exposing the particularism within their supposedly universalist liberal values. Mrs Michaelis' genteel anti-semitism is complicitous with the more virulent anti-semitic discourses in circulation during the 1930s, while her techniques of silence and surveillance with Karen ("Nothing was said...Nothing was to be said..." THP 172) link her with the Grant-Moodys' treatment of Leopold; they can also be read to refer to the failure of her family and class to speak to or about events they wish to ignore.

*The House in Paris* engages, very explicitly, with the claims of the other not just as an ontological category but as an ethical issue in a specific historical period. It places the question of the other diagnostically, as it were, as a symptom of the 'Fall of Liberalism', and as the failure of the French Republic to meet its obligations to those whom the Republicanism of 1789 had promised to house. The house in Paris, where Max Ebhart cuts his wrists

<sup>6</sup> Under the Nuremberg Laws the Reich Citizenship Act stated that "A citizen of the Reich is that subject only who is of German or kindred blood"; under the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour, marriages and extra-marital relations between Jews and German citizens was forbidden. (Layton 1992 89).

rather than accept Madame Fisher's definition of him (as the same as her), turns out to be indeed a pension not a 'home' to French-Jewish Max and he dies with melodramatic but appropriate symbolism in an "alley between the two studio walls" (THP 183).

Victor Gollancz, the publisher of *The House in Paris*, wrote to Bowen about the novel: "I wonder if you realise how un-English it is? It will be appreciated most by Maxes, Frenchmen and Jews." (Glendenning 1977 97).

Levinas, whose work on the Other was, as he said, "dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror" might have appreciated it in these terms (Levinas 1976 291). The evidence of his 'presentiment' can certainly be found in the article he wrote for the liberal catholic journal *Esprit*, published in 1934 and entitled 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism' and in another essay *De L'Evasion* published in the same year as *The House in Paris*. His theory of 'the face-to-face', of what is owed to the other is, it seems to me, written directly in "memory of the Nazi horror".

Elizabeth Bowen was criticised by some Left critics of the 1930s for her political non-engagement, for dealing with personal rather than political issues<sup>7</sup>. Levinas, in a somewhat different way, has also been criticised for centring his philosophical work in ethics rather than politics. These criticisms privilege a particular conception of politics or 'the political' over the ethical and ignore the political implications and possibilities contained in the category of the Other which, I would argue, a historicised reading brings back into view.

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<sup>7</sup> Bowen when asked to define the writer's relation to society responded: 'My books are my relation to society. Why should people come and ask me what the nature of this relation is? It seems to me that it is the other people, the readers, who should know.' In *Why Do I Write?* (p. 23).

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# Gender and Genre: The Genres of Modernism\*

Aránzazu Usandizaga

*"...preoccupations with past time are  
actually always revelatory of an  
unresolved conflict about the present."*

(STEEDMAN 1992 102-103)

Any discussion on the modernity of modernism needs to face the subject of the New Woman both as literary character and as author, for since the last decades of the nineteenth century women's voice and women's representation inevitably propose changes in culture and ideology that often break the limits of modernist programs. Critics have defined the conditions of both women's iconography and self-representation at the period in terms of sexual anarchy (Showalter 1991), emphasizing the need women increasingly developed in the last decade of the past century to tell their own stories beyond traditional endings. As we well know, the subject has received plenty of attention on the part of feminist scholars, yet, except for a few authors, women modernists and particularly those writing immediately before them, writers of the fin de siècle, are still far from being well known or thoroughly studied even though their work plays key functions in the understanding of the complex cultural issues of modernism.

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\* I am grateful to the editor of this volume for his many suggestions.

Though convinced of the sterility of defending essential differences between the genders, I do see the importance of recognising actual differences in the female and male writing of a given period, and of analysing the historical, cultural, and literary sources that produced them. As far as modernism is concerned, the acceptance and practice of the unconventional in literature doubtlessly encouraged women writers to try out new plots and to renew old ones in view of the obsolescence of traditional nineteenth century cultural representations of women. This expansion could not take place within the narrow limits of the old genres, and women writers felt the need to broaden them in order to create a formal and imaginative space for themselves. Virginia Woolf is the first woman modernist to explicitly define her desire to write beyond the traditional genres. Woolf's acknowledged uneasiness with the use of standard literary genres provides the first well known imaginative attempt at solving the women writers' tensions with inherited literary forms. It is a well known fact that Virginia Woolf reshaped and invigorated the genre of diary writing, for example. Also, as she writes on several occasions, she felt the limitations imposed by traditional uses of the genres of biography and autobiography, and could find no way of rewriting these genres in her own terms. Particularly eloquent is Woolf's candid recognition in 'A Sketch of the Past' in *Moments of Being* (1985) –the writer's only attempt at the genre–, of her difficulties in the writing of autobiography, a key genre in the acknowledgement and construction of the gendered self: "Here I come to one of the memoir writer's difficulties - one of the reasons why, though I read so many, so many are failures." (Woolf 1985 65) Lacking a consistent background in the practice of the genre, she can only confess her limits.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the most successful by-pass she takes to construct her self as the confused woman artist that she is, mortally wounded by her mother's memory, is to write a Künstlerroman, *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

Contrary to the writing of autobiography, that most difficult of genres for modern women writers,<sup>3</sup> the genres of the Bildungs and Künstlerroman seemed to lend themselves more easily to women's use and manipulation since the last decades of the nineteenth century as can be proved by the

<sup>2</sup> For a useful summary of Woolf's attitudes and practice of autobiography see Georgia Johnston (1996 140-145).

<sup>3</sup> The historical analysis of women's autobiography started in 1980 with the work of Estelle C. Jelinek. Since then many feminist critics have elaborated on the theory of women's autobiography and have defined the cultural difficulties women face in writing the genre. Perhaps some of the most convincing and definite arguments of women's alienation from autobiographical self-expression are provided by Shoshana Felman (1993).

emergence of many late nineteenth and early twentieth century texts written by women. Some of these texts may be seen as of questionable literary value, and critics such as Elisabeth Abel (1983), Rita Felski (1989), and others, have denounced the tendency towards narcissistic self-indulgence in some of women's early attempts at writing their stories. This tendency can be explained in Freudian terms, for as Freud defined: "Narcissism emerges not out of an excess of self-love as is commonly assumed, but rather as a 'militant' acknowledgement of loss." (Freud 1917 239) In Lacan's reading of these words: "[No]thing fruitful takes place in man save through the intermediary of a loss of an object." (Lacan 1988 136) Given the conditions of radical loss in which women lived, this narcissistic impulse becomes culturally explicit in women's literary awakening in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. But this paper aims at analysing other successful aspects of women's literary recovery at the turn of the century: the women writers' ability to appropriate and transgress the literary genres of the traditional Bildungsroman and in particular, Künstlerroman, for new and unknown gendered literary purposes.

Female literary self-representation had been always tentative in Western literature since the eighteenth century for a number of well known reasons, but the lack of a tradition in the writing of the Bildungsroman in the case of women was an important element in limiting women's chances of self-expression. Though Franco Moretti (1987) never refers explicitly to this difference in his stimulating study of the origins and development of the genre of the Bildungsroman in Western culture, Susan Fraiman (1993) defines with historical precision and psychological insight the problems women writers faced when trying to write themselves into the western tradition of the Bildungsroman. In the past women could not have possibly aspired to any kind of individual development, and though living in a culture increasingly dominated by a protestant ideology of public and private improvement, no space had been acknowledged to their aspirations. Radically excluded from the cultural tradition of the 'Lehrjahre', not to say of the 'Wanderjahre', women writers begin to openly and systematically appropriate and transform the genre of the Bildungsroman only in the last decades of the nineteenth century when the traditional fictional plot collapses in the endless rewriting of itself, and it exposes the limits of its psychological and socio-economic frame, as well as the boundaries of the ideological program the novel had set itself to encourage.

Women writers are not the only ones to submit the traditional genres to profound changes at the turn of the century. In his classical study of the

development of the Western Bildungsroman at the turn of the century, Maurice Beeby (1964) also proves that the traditional Bildungsroman, that is, the Bildung story written by men, undergoes dramatic changes with the emergence of modernism. According to this critic, the modernist male writer changes the traditional story of personal adventure into the story of aesthetic adventure, into the story of the artist, and removes himself from everyday experience to the rarefied atmosphere of the 'Ivory Tower'.<sup>4</sup> The end of the traditional novel will have different implications for men and women writers. Women writers at the turn of the century are certainly not ready to retire to an ivory tower of aesthetic distance and contemplation, and, according to her critics, Virginia Woolf proves it in her experimental writing: "For the modernist the lack of belief in their stories leads to despair of something lost. For Woolf, this lack of belief leads to affirmation of something gained...Woolf responds by adapting her aesthetic model, making it more flexible and responsive to change." (Caughie 1990 380-381) In a generalised and often tentative way, women writers of different western cultures slowly appropriate, transform and eventually transgress the genres both of the Bildungs and the Künstlerroman by experimenting with them in their need for self-definition and self-representation. These genres become the arena in which they play out their desire for self-knowledge and self-construction, so that the sad lament of the male artist who stresses his alienation from the world and the world's misunderstanding of his art, gradually becomes the joyful cry of feminine self-recognition and self-assertion. Of course women writers needed to learn the skills of such arts. As Susan Gubar defined in her seminal article, 'The Blank Page' (1981), the consequences of lacking a solid aesthetic tradition, of having to search for one among the left-overs of Western literature in order to find a rhetoric of self- definition, are indeed, often tragic. Yet the horror and anguish of having to steal ways of expression has also created the aesthetics of a new fruitful tradition that has flourished in every country and community in the West but particularly in England and the United States.

The uncertainties surrounding women's self and women's functions in the modern world can be heard in Freud's reference to them as an "unknown continent," or in his exasperation with the psychological mysteries of the feminine which he summarizes in the letter he writes to Marie

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<sup>4</sup> James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man* (1914) is the most eloquent example of such a process.

Bonaparte, 'What does a woman want?',<sup>5</sup> but it can specially be recognised in his impatience with the analysis of women's identity about which he writes only very few studies. Yet though some fin de siècle and modernist writers follow Freud in not wanting to waste much of their time and literary energy in consciously investigating women, many writers prove to be concerned if not obsessed by the New Woman. Thomas Hardy, George Meredith, Henry James and D.H. Lawrence, are among the best known. One of the writers to have more penetratingly focused the need to reconstruct women characters at the turn of the century from a radically new perspective is George Gissing. My purpose is to compare his exploration of women's possible identities, both private and public, in his novel *The Odd Women* (1883, 1st published in 1897), with the work of a less studied but very interesting woman writer, Sarah Grand, who wrote an early Künstlerroman, *The Beth Book* (1880, 1st published in 1897), an already advanced, though tentative, version of what was to become a very fruitful tradition among women writers.

I am certainly not the first person to link Gissing's and Sarah Grand's work. An anonymous reviewer in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (29 May 1893), was the first to compare and connect both authors: "It would have been a real calamity if Mr. Gissing had tried to palm off upon us under the guise of a novel, a treatise, or even a dialogue, on the Woman question... To make a novel pivot on a sociological... motive, is not at all the same thing as to write a narrative tract, after the manner of Mrs. Humphry Ward or Sarah Grand." Three years later, another unknown reviewer discussing Gissing's second edition (1895) of his earlier novel *The Unclassed* (1884), insists upon the differences between both writers: "But the principal idea in the book (*The Unclassed*), though it is not obtruded in Sarah Grand's brutal fashion, is that a man risks no more in marrying a woman that has fallen from grace than a woman risks in the very common case of marrying a man who has repeatedly yielded to temptation." (*Buffalo Courier*, reprinted in the *Literary News*, July 1896 205) Of course these critics are referring to Grand's earlier novels, *Ideala* (1888) and particularly *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), a very controversial New Woman novel which had sold twenty thousand copies in one year.

Gissing's novel *The Odd Women* has been widely discussed by critics. The book was already very well received when it was first published, for though reviewers recognised the author had focused a complex sociological

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<sup>5</sup> "The great question that has never been answered and which I have not been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is 'What does a woman want?'" (Jones 1955 2:421. Quoted by Felman (1993 2)).

problem, the anonymous reviewer of the *Pall Mall Gazette* (29 May 1893 4) argued that "...his people live(d)" and that the story was "The most interesting novel of the year... His book represents the Woman question made flesh." The positive reception of Gissing's novel responded to a practical as well as the ideological concern for women at the time, for as another anonymous reviewer insists in *Athenaeum* (27 May 1893), "The problem of the odd woman and what is to be done with her presents, in truth, a grim enough aspect." Sarah Grand's novel should be read in the context of this grimness, of the extremely "depressing" subject about which there was an increasing concern. Yet in spite of the growing awareness of the condition of women and in spite of the good reviews Gissing's *The Odd Women* received, most novels on the subject were given little critical attention and were soon forgotten. According to Lyn Pykett, "Both the hostile contemporary reception and the later critical neglect of the women's sensation novel and the New Woman fiction may be connected with the fact that these novels were associated with –to (mis)appropriate Raymond Williams's terms– residual or emergent, rather than with a dominant form of fiction." (Pykett 1992 199) Indeed written in an emergent form, *The Beth Book*, considered to be Grand's best novel, is a rich and complex text which investigates the possibilities of the female Bildungs and Künstlerroman, adds to the fictionalisation of a New kind of Woman heroine, and complicates the presentation of the Woman question.

Gissing's novel has become a critical landmark in the past twenty years. Conventional readings such as Lloyd Fernando's (1977) and John Halperin's (1982) who minimised Gissing's presentation in the novel of the need to introduce radical changes in women's lives, have been challenged by feminist critics. Since Elaine Showalter's introduction to the 1983 edition of the book, feminist critics have radically refocused the novel's issues, and they have also responded to the ambivalences and contradictions suggested by earlier critics. The novel's ending seems to have become a central matter of discussion to feminist critics, "...the how and the why a modern feminist reader might actually desire a traditional romantic outcome for the character of Rhoda Nunn, whose struggle between the choices of marriage and career forms the novel's central plot." (Zare 1994 1) In other words, why are the reader's expectations about the fulfilment of the romance between the two main characters in the novel deceived? Why does the passion between them, so finely woven by the author, fail, and who is to blame for it? For Gissing's story seems to confirm the nineteenth century belief in the radical incompatibility between marriage and career for women, yet the

belief does not achieve narrative conviction in the novel either. Everard is indeed depicted as self-indulgent and self-complacent, but he is also presented as sensitive, intelligent, and very capable of understanding and appreciating Rhoda's life and work. He also thinks of marriage in very new terms: "... For him marriage must not mean repose, inevitably tending to drowsiness, but the mutual incitement of two minds." (TOW 201-202)<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Rhoda is a lucid and attractive heroine, in love with Everard, designed as capable of combining love with a career of her own. Yet the writer endows her with a rigid and ascetic turn of character which emerges in her perhaps strained commitment towards her reformist ideas. In the end this rather harsh aspect of her temperament dominates over her genuine need of love, and the reader's expectations about her personal fulfilment are finally deceived. Somewhere between Rhoda's excessive self denial and Everard's pride and natural easiness lies the origin of the conflict that will frustrate their mutual attraction as well as the readers expectations of a happy ending.

Some feminist critics connect the novel's failed romance to Rhoda's lack of compassion and patience towards women of inferior class and understanding. Wendy Lesser admits that "Gissing has succeeded in revealing to us a crucial dilemma of the women's movement," (Lesser 1984 94) by which she refers to one of the most complex questions in the novel: that of the unsolved tensions between class and gender for the feminist heroine, Rhoda Nunn. Rhoda's inability to sympathize with the tragic destinies of both Bella and Monica Madden, and the author's careful attention to these characters, particularly to Monica, undermines the otherwise sympathetic construction of the emancipator Rhoda. Bonnie Zare suggests that, "Solidarity between all kinds of women in *The Odd Women* is... sacrificed to Gissing's suspicion that the poor were primarily responsible for their poverty" (Zare 1994 9) and Rhoda's unsympathetic attitude towards the two mistaken and impoverished women, questions the credibility of the ideas she defends and lives for. The heroine's impatience with the two girls' lack of wisdom and with the mismanagement of their feelings concerning love and marriage, certainly increases the reader's distance from Rhoda. Yet the novel's ending seems unconvincing, for whatever the heroine's limitations, on the whole, the reader is made to finally strongly sympathise with the heroine. The last scene with Rhoda symbolically holding Monica's baby girl

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<sup>6</sup> TOW is short for *The Odd Women*.

in her arms and tragically suggesting the bleakness of women's condition, only adds to the final confusion.

Though perhaps unfairly defined by David Grylls as "...a woman-worshipping misogynist with an interest in female emancipation" (Grylls 1986 141) like most writers of the period, both men and women, Gissing could not imagine a literary destiny for the heroine in which both marriage and career could be fitted. Though the power and intelligence of his characters went beyond the ideological requirements of the love plot, to the point of almost making it inevitable for him to write a radically new ending to the traditional Western love plot, he stopped short of it and finally forced his characters to an expected outcome. The uneasiness of writing traditional endings<sup>7</sup> can be recognised in novels since the middle of the nineteenth century. Maggie Tulliver, the heroine of George Eliot's disguised autobiography, *The Mill on The Floss* (1860), can be seen as one of the best examples of both the writer's and the reader's anxiety with the tension between the fictional conventions of women's representation and the need to redefine the fictional heroine. Despite her moral weakness, and though finally made to die in the story according to the rigorous requirements of the realistic novel which excluded a possible happy ending in the case of a fallen heroine, Maggie remains a rightful and convincing character, as is proved by the book's huge success. Maggie's appeal is such that even though she makes the worst possible mistake a Victorian woman could make, her appeal to the Victorian reader remained unchallenged if not reinforced, and the novel developed a strong subliminal taste for unconventional heroines. It is interesting to remember that *The Mill on The Floss* was Eliot's first novel, and that she wrote it after having unconventionally settled down to live with a married man. The novel denounces the unbridgeable gap between women's lives and desire, as well as the limiting conventions of their fictional representation. Forty years later, Gissing still faces great cultural difficulties in writing the fictional destiny of his heroine Rhoda Nunn.

The literary construction of women's professionalization is, of course, central to the fictional introduction of the New Woman as a heroine, particularly in the case of the *Künstlerroman*. The American critic Barbara Welters (1977) and other scholars of nineteenth-century writing by women have proved that the belief in the incompatibility between love and career for women remained unquestionable both in Europe and in the Americas at the

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<sup>7</sup> Rachel Blau du Plessis (1989) wrote a groundbreaking study on the subject.

turn of the century. It can be read in a key text such as Elisabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857), in George Eliot's heroines, in Elisabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Story of Avis* (1897), in the destinies devised by Henry James for many of his heroines, including Verena Tarrant, or in the tragic lives of Ellen Glasgow's main women characters.

Very few texts dare to break the rule, and this is one of the originalities of Sarah Grand's undeservedly neglected novel, *The Beth Book*. It is indeed too long a text, particularly in its second part; it lends itself to too much theoretical discussion of social, political, literary and religious matters, and some of the male characters presented in it tend to be unconvincing. But having said that, one must immediately add that in spite of its shortcomings *The Beth Book* remains an absorbing story, the kind of book the reader cannot stop reading after having begun. Like other women writers of the period, Frances McFall, under the literary pseudonym of Sarah Grand, appropriated the genres of the Bildungs and Künstlerroman to write what is very much the story of her own life, of the tensions and struggles between her self and those around her, in order to become first a balanced and mature person, and eventually also a writer and a political activist. Unlike other attempts at the female Bildungsromane of the period or of the next few decades, and in spite of its interesting contradictions, Grand's heroine manages to overcome "the poison at the source"<sup>8</sup> of women's lives, and to work out a rhetoric capable of justifying her heroine's survival and fulfilment in the story. The writer's purposes can be read in the very first lines of the book:

The day preceding Beth's birth was a grey day, a serene grey day, awesome with a certain solemnity and singularly significant to those who seek a sign. There is a quiet mood, an inner calm, to which a grey day adds peculiar solace. It is like the relief which follows tears, when hope begins to revive, and the warm blood throbs rebelliously to be free of the shackles of grief" (TBB 1)<sup>9</sup>

The book announces itself as a narrative of recovery and hope for the New Woman whose story we hear next.

Elaine Showalter (1977) was the first critic to denounce the limits of the New Woman novel, and to point at what other critics have confirmed,

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<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Richardson says in *Pilgrimage*. "Life is poisoned, for women, at the very source." Critic Penny Brown names her study of early twentieth-century women writers, *The Poison at the Source. The Female Novel of Self-Discovery in the early Twentieth Century* (1992).

<sup>9</sup> TBB is short for *The Beth Book*.

that indeed “turn-of-the-century women’s writings were trapped in the aesthetic dead end of a conservative ideology.” (Pykett 1992 192) Yet in the case of many New Women writers and of Grand’s books in particular, the writer’s struggle for the construction of a new heroine and for the expression of the heroine’s unrecorded experiences, often upset, to the point of blurring, the limits of the conservative ideology. In order to do so the best New Woman texts, *The Beth Book* among them, must challenge old modes of expression and become highly experimental in introducing the proto-modernist techniques that will pave the way for later modernist and postmodernist women writers. In that sense their forms of writing are indeed ‘emergent’ in the sense in which Raymond Williams uses the term. Grand’s subversive intentions are made explicit early in the story when she forces the reader to a radical change of perspective by referring to the potential of her heroine’s eyes, not only beautiful to look at, but also, and mainly, capable of critical perception:

People admired her bright eyes without realising that she could see with them, and not only that she could see, but that she could not help seeing. (TBB 43)

*The Beth Book*, a roughly autobiographical text,<sup>10</sup> records the emergence of a new woman both to life and art since her birth and childhood, through an unhappy marriage and the development of her literary career, to the discovery of a political vocation and also, finally, to what promises to be true love. Like most New Woman texts, it is torn by the inherent tensions in trying to reinvent the genres of the Bildungs and Künstlerromane, and the outcome is often fragmentation in episode and narrative uncertainty. The first half of Beth’s story is perhaps the most systematically original when the writer narrates in the third person the heroine’s origins and childhood. The heroine’s father is a Naval officer destined in Ireland, with a solidly genteel background and scarce means for the comfort of his large family. The mother, a conventional nineteenth-century victim of her husband’s temperament and career, is unprepared for the hardships of life as well as for the inconveniences of a clever and energetic daughter. But both father and mother become increasingly complex characters as the story proceeds, both subject to the mixture of natural goodness and cultural inadequacy. In the case of the mother, her

<sup>10</sup> This is a well known fact since Gillian Kersley published Grand’s biography in 1983.

innate goodness is increasingly limited by hardship. Also the father's talents are gradually recognised, though sometimes at the mercy of excessive authority. But the father becomes central to the girl, for in the heroine's early years the father seems to suddenly realise his daughter's talent: "Captain Caldwell looked up at her, and it was as if he had seen the child for the first time" (TBB 57) and to become his daughter's best companion and friend. Not only does the father show love and respect towards her from that moment on, he also prevents her mother from further whipping and punishing her, and lets his wife openly know the inadequacy of the education she tries to submit the girl to. In the intense interest he develops for his daughter, the father discovers the child's exceptionality. Realising she has "the vision and the faculty divine" (TBB 75) and aware of his own illness and near death, he advises her:

I want you to remember this. When you grow up, I think you will want to do something that only a few other people can do well –paint a picture, write a book, act in the theatre, make music–... You'll not do it well at once; but try and try until you can do it well. And don't ask anybody if they think you can do it; they'll be sure to say no; and then you'll be disheartened. (TBB 69)

This initial recognition becomes essential to the heroine's development. Her self-confidence and determination are nourished by her father's initial intense encouragement and she is made aware of her unusual potential. Yet like the Madden sister in Gissing's *The Odd Women*, Grand's heroine will have to suffer her father's death very early. The event is intentionally ambivalent in both novels for though it leaves both the Madden sisters and the Caldwells destitute, it also faces the heroines with the need to design a life of their own. In both novels the father's death dramatically determines a new beginning for the literary heroines, yet in Grand's novel, the daughter starts out with the important legacy of her father's recognition and approval of her intelligence and talents. Though gradually and radically alienated from the patriarchal in her search for an independent, creative self, the ultimate utopian nature of Grand's novel links Beth's destiny to male recognition in its origins and to male reconciliation in the end.

Beth's relationship with her mother is complex and never simplified in the story. The daughter's natural intelligence and her extraordinary vitality clash with the mother's late Victorian unchanging ideology of the feminine. Increasingly alienated from her mother, like no other heroine of

her day, Beth is presented as a strong, healthy creature who lives an independent and spontaneously chosen outdoor life, made possible by the family's isolation from conventional society in their Irish destination. Unlike traditional heroines, in this initial stage of her appropriation of male culture through the memory of her father and by daring to follow her own inclinations, she also becomes unusually conscious of her own body and of its appetites, and is also unusually explicit about it. Her need for the outdoor and for exercise which will become permanent throughout her life, begin during her childhood spent in a solitary Irish Western town where she gradually develops a totally independent self. The artist is born in the recognition of natural beauty and in her spontaneous response to it in language in a context of physical and mental isolation. Like other artists' in the romantic tradition, her artistic awakening is connected to her own childhood through intuition and dream:

Beth had the sensation of having been nearer to something in her infancy than she ever was again –nearer to knowing what it is the trees whisper– what the murmur means... nearer to the 'arcane' of that evening... when she first felt her kinship with nature, and burst into song. (TBB 28)

According to critic Lyn Pykett, Beth's subjectivity "...is partly that of the Wordsworthian infant..." (Pykett 1992 178) and indeed drawing from different sources, Grand constructs an original woman artist who records her process of inspiration stimulated by the beauty and power of nature. Though granting her heroine the knowledge of her "further faculty", of her power to transform her epiphanic visions of natural beauty into poetic language, Grand is careful to locate the young woman artist in the hard and difficult environment of the writer's own childhood. The writer thus makes her heroine intensely aware of her material and cultural conditions, from the acknowledgement of her own body, to the awareness of the impossibility of pursuing and enlarging her many talents in a culture where women have very limited access to an adequate education.

The heroine's attention to the sensual and her perception of her own body are some of the points where the novel breaks with the past and where it proves its independence from the literary traditions it has appropriated. One of the many things she interestingly misses and complains about in her mother is that the mother never caresses or even touches her, and, very unusually in a novel of the period, she records her awareness of her own

sensuality as well as of her emerging sexuality. At the age of twelve, for example, on one occasion, she cannot resist the beauty of the ocean and swims in it naked. Yet the moment of pure physical pleasure, the touch of the waves upon her body, is transformed into a spiritual experience of the highest order:

...she went in amongst (the waves), and floated on them... letting them ripple over her, and make merry about her, the gladdest girl alive, yet with the rapt impassive face of a devotee whose ecstasy is apart from all that acts on mere flesh and makes expression. All through her life Beth had her moments... when her higher self was near upon release from its fetters, and she arose an interval towards oneness with the Eternal. (TBB 271)

But the scene doesn't end in such highly romantic rhetorical terms. While she is in the water a number of "common girls" discover her, join her, and they all enjoy themselves together so much that Beth organises future periodical meetings and swims with them. On the one hand Beth's self is partly inspired in the romantic artist, on the other, her art only alienates her from the restrictions her culture imposes upon all women, but never from healthy, natural communal experience of the kind "common women" are also capable of.

It is perhaps worth comparing this scene to Wordsworth's interesting transit from the communal to the isolated, romantic self in *The Prelude* (1799). Wordsworth's young artist is also inspired and made aware of his artistic sensibility by the beauty of nature, but his intuition of the sublime, and his acknowledgement of his artistic self are determined by the young artist's need to disengage himself from the communal, from the group of young men with whom he is skating. The scene begins with the common enjoyment of the sport: "... All shod with steel/ We hissed along the polished ice, in games/ confederate..." (ll.156-8) A few verses later the poet's young alter ego is defined precisely by his need to isolate himself from the group: "Not seldom from the uproar I retired/ Into a silent bay/ ...and oftentimes/ When we had given our bodies to the wind/ ...then at once/ Have I, reclining back upon my heels,/ Stopped short.../ Behind me did they stretch in solemn train/ Feebler and feebler, and I stood and watched/ till all was tranquil as the summer sea." (ll. 170-185) The "summer sea" introduced here as a simile, advances perhaps the "immortal sea" of the 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' where it becomes the symbol of the poet's ecstatic vision: "Our Souls have sight of that immortal

sea/ Which brought us hither.” (ll. 163-4) After acknowledging the beauty of nature, Wordsworth’s young artist defines his access to the sublime in isolation and distance. This early gesture towards poetic isolation will eventually lead him to “the bliss of solitude” of ‘I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud’. Grand’s young female artist follows a different process. Beth also undergoes an epiphanic vision of the beauty of nature that ends in an intuitive acknowledgement of the sublime. But the solitary intensity of her awakening is immediately made to be shared with others.

But there are further interesting differences between both scenes. Beth’s discovery of natural beauty is openly defined in connection to her awakening sexuality:

And presently she began to glow with a great feeling of exultation. It began in her chest, and spread, as from a centre, all over her. The details of her dream recurred to her, the close clasp, the tender kiss, and she thrilled again at the recollection. (TBB 235)

The character’s explicitness distances her from the Wordsworthian hero and advances the openness of later modernist young artists such as Stephen Dedalus. Grand’s decision to account for the sexual in the literary text is further elaborated in the two episodes of the two boys she falls in love with in her early adolescence, and with whom she establishes very unconventional relations. In the first case, she is almost a child when she becomes a neighbour’s intimate friend, a boy far less brave than herself who keeps referring to her as “What a jolly sort of girl you are, Beth!” (TBB 172) Her second lover, Alfred, becomes the much needed companion of her adolescent days until he is violently removed from the scene by his parents. What is common to both episodes is the unconventional and radically personal terms of the heroine’s attitudes and behaviour, the fact that she never assumes the accepted roles of the feminine in her early love relationships. In the end she loses interest in both lovers because neither of them respond to her literary inclinations nor do they accept the idea of her eventually becoming a writer and having a possible career of her own. Their failure to understand that central aspect of her self is the real cause for her ceasing to love and respect them.

The radically personal terms of Beth’s handling of her affections should be connected to the girl’s highly unconventional expression of her awareness of her own beauty. Unlike traditional heroines whose physical appearance tends to be always exclusively described from the perspective of

outsiders, and rarely recognised by the character, Beth is made to openly perceive and respond to the beauty of her own body. At the age of twelve she is made suddenly conscious of her beauty when “a casual remark let fall by a stranger made a curious impression upon Beth... Nice-looking!... She repeated the words to herself again and again, and every time they recurred to her, she lost countenance in spite of herself, and laughed and flushed, being strangely surprised and pleased.” (TBB195) What is innovative at this point is not the accurately narrated process by which she is made aware of her own appearance through the eyes of others, but that the author expresses her character’s interiorization of the process, the explicitness of the character’s self-reflecting consciousness of the stages of her self-recognition through the eyes of the other. Also after bathing in the sea the “common girls” stare at the beauty of Beth’s body:

Then all the girls stood and stared at Beth, whose fine limbs and satin-smooth white skin... drew from them the most candid expressions of admiration. Beth covered with confusion, hurried on a garment... and then, in order to distract their attention from her body, she began to display her mind. (TBB 217).

Following the pattern of the *Bildungs* and *Künstlerroman*, the record of the heroine’s education becomes inevitably one of the main subjects in her story. Grand is understandably obsessed throughout the story, but particularly in this first part, with the limitations imposed on the intellectual development of women by old late-Victorian ideas. The seriousness of her concern forces her to often interrupt her story and insist on it<sup>11</sup> straightforwardly at the expense of the fictional consistency of her narrative. Again Grand’s approach throws interesting light on the problem of the education of women. Few texts of the period convey with such preciseness the tragedy of the undisciplined and unorganised mind. The careful and minute to minute study of the deadly consequences for the talented woman of not having the opportunities to learn given to men, are seen at its most accurate worst. After her father’s death Beth’s education is left to the women around her, and it is to be observed that the character’s *Bildung* is determined by the limitations of the women around her as well as by their specific skills. The first of her models is, of course, the heroine’s mother, but

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<sup>11</sup> Though the subject is presented in the whole novel, pages 114, 119, 125 could be mentioned as examples.

as was the case with many women artists in the past, her mother totally fails to provide the learning and knowledge the young artist requires. In order to describe this failure Grand uses a metaphor that will be heard again in the writings of Virginia Woolf. But unlike Virginia Woolf (1985) who recognises herself in her childhood as a violin being played upon by her mother, Grand uses the metaphor to denounce over and over again the incapacity of her heroine's mother to provide for her daughter's much needed external and internal order, encouragement and self-esteem:

Beth was a fine instrument, sensitive to touch, and, considering the way she was handled, it would have been a wonder if discordant effects had not been constantly produced upon her (TBB 43)

or

Beth was too delicate an instrument to be played upon so roughly. (TBB 88)

Though radically alienated from her mother, the heroine learns from the rest of the people around her, and the novel proposes its own model of the educated person, for Beth, who sets a very high value in intellectual order and training, also sees the need and importance of becoming acquainted with the most humble activities. Thus the heroine not only yearns for a systematic and scholarly approach to her reading and writing, but she also recognises the importance of learning how to cook and manage a household, which she learns from the family's housemaid. Grand's inclusion of domestic culture in the scope of her heroine's *Bildung* advances the political relevance contemporary criticism has attributed to it. Also the writer's treatment of the housemaids is radically original. If traditional novels pay little attention to the characterization of servants, Grand's maids are fully drawn characters who play an important role in the heroine's upbringing. Catholic Kitty, the children's clean and tidy maid of Beth's early memory, dismissed for becoming too strong an influence on their religious education, becomes a very important reference to the heroine. A surrogate mother, her loss is described as a devastating event to the child, both emotionally and intellectually. Also Harriet, the household maid of Beth's late childhood and early youth becomes the heroine's companion in the house. Beth helps her in her chores against her mother's wishes, and Harriet becomes the target of Beth's attention and analysis so that she manages to learn a great deal from both her good and bad nature. None of Beth's sisters or brothers are observed with as much interest as Harriet.

The construction of her heroine's new self forces Grand to submit her young female artist to a long process of learning and evaluation, and to the understanding of herself and of others. The many women who surround Beth as a child, mostly relatives and housemaids, allow the writer to draw a wide scenario of possible patterns of women's attitudes at the time. Always in search of feminine models, the heroine's analytical mind helps her to judge and make her choices among her relatives and acquaintances, and her most significant and comprehensive early feminine model becomes her great aunt Victoria with whom she establishes an extraordinarily intense relation of apprenticeship and affection. Unmarried and old, great aunt Victoria lives with the family, and she is responsible of introducing Beth to a valuable and coherent feminine culture, to a consistent structure of beliefs, and to an organised pattern of behaviour. Great aunt Victoria also looks after the girl beyond her own death for, given the deep understanding between aunt and niece, the old aunt leaves a small income to Beth when she dies, as well as, most interestingly, her own room in the house and all it contains; what will become Beth's most treasured belongings.

Beth's inheritance of Great aunt Victoria's room with all its possessions introduces one of the most perceptive and consistent symbols in the book, for it is the first of the three rooms of her own the heroine will possess in the story corresponding to the three climatic stages in her *Bildung*. This first room, aunt Victoria's room, essential in the heroine's upbringing, represents Beth's inherited legacy from a rich and generous woman's world. But though her most valuable legacy and the first stage in her *Bildung*, the writer recognises its chronological limits and the room will soon become an obsolete symbol of the past in which the heroine cannot remain forever. And indeed, Beth is soon sent away from this first room of her own when her mother is finally made to realise that the little money her aunt has left Beth should not be given further for her brother to waste, but must be invested in the girl's education, and she decides to send her away to boarding school.

Grand is, of course, highly critical of the education her heroine receives at the two schools she attends, but her criticism is balanced out by the consciousness of the heroine's important enrichment for having access to learning, no matter how limited, and in meeting other human beings. Her return home before concluding her educational period, precipitated by her sister's death, opens a new chapter in the character's life and development and a new section in the book, for at the age of sixteen, Beth is pushed by her mother to marry doctor Dan Maclure. Rather than stimulating the heroine's education as was conventionally believed to be the case in well-to-

do marriages during the nineteenth-century, this marriage interrupts the process of the heroine's education, and the heroine is further degraded and isolated by her husband.

If marriage is the key matter in women's life at the time and the only possible destiny available to women, Grand concentrates in providing a profound and rigorous analysis of how, under the present legislation and customs, marriage can easily destroy women. The few critics who have discussed Grand's work have denounced the inconsistency of Grand's male characters, yet Maclure's frivolous egoism, his disrespect for his wife, and his total lack of moral purpose, are tragically convincing. Grand insists on the excessive and often abusive influence of husbands upon wives, and she radically contradicts the Darwinian belief in the superiority of the masculine gender over the feminine. The ideal traditional relationship in which the husband enriches the wife, is subverted in this text in which the author dramatizes the destructive consequences of a man's vicious attitudes and proceedings, and she denounces the impossibility of self-defence for wives at the mercy of adulterous and abusive husbands. Working as a doctor at a Lock Hospital, an institution established "for the special degradation of women" (TBB 398), Maclure represents the lowest and most immoral in his profession. When she understands her husband's support and exploitation of the very contested Contagious Diseases Acts, which excused men from their social responsibility in the transmission of venereal diseases, and when she finds out the morally ambiguous nature of his medical practice, Beth discovers and denounces the magnitude of social injustice and gender abuse.

Though Maclure's extreme greed and baseness almost destroys his young wife, it also helps her see very soon the radical failure of her marriage, and it stimulates her to realise her need to pursue her own life independently of her husband. Beth manages to survive his brutality by hiding for many hours in a secluded and hidden little room she finds in the attic of their house, in the second room of her own that will become the scenario of a new stage in her development and self-construction. As soon as she discovers the hidden room, Beth carefully furnishes it with her aunt's objects, and she spends all her free time alone in it. In this second room of hers the heroine manages to read the books her few good friends lend her, and in it she is able to reconstruct her battered self-esteem and to realise her literary vocation. Yet this second room of Beth's story is, like the first one, read by Showalter as a clear fantasy and a dream: "Given the freedom to explore their experience, they [early women writers] rejected it, or at least tried to deny it. The private rooms that symbolize their professionalism and

autonomy are fantastic sanctuaries closely linked to their own defensive womanhood.” (Showalter 1977 215) Though Beth’s rooms may indeed have been read by several critics as a fantasy bearing regressive symbolic connotations of isolation and defeat, they can also be said to look forward towards becoming a possible representation of initial self-knowledge and self-empowerment. This second hidden room of Beth’s, becomes the symbolic location of the heroine’s professionalization, the imaginary realm where the space and chronology of her lost ‘Lehrjahre’ can be finally recovered. The room can thus be read not exclusively as the ambivalent scenario of women’s torn impulses towards independence and simultaneous isolation and regression, but also as the imaginative space of women’s temporal Bildung. The time of meditation spent in the room allows the heroine to finally understand the differences between human beings not in terms of class but in terms of human quality. Unlike Gissing’s uncertainties with the lower classes, Grand has her narrator justify her reasons for abandoning her husband by referring to her own revised notions of class and classlessness:

(Beth’s mother) never suspected that she had married Beth to a low-born man –not low-born in the sense of being a tradesman’s son, for a tradesman’s son may be an honest and upbringing gentleman, just as a peer’s son may be a cheat and a snob; but low-born in that he came of parents that were capable of fraud and deceit in social relations, and had taught him no scheme of life in which honour played a conspicuous part. (TBB 384)

The heroine’s apprenticeship continues at this second stage to be made compatible with traditional feminine activity, and Beth not only reads and writes in her secret chamber but she also works hard at the embroidery she sells to return her mother the money Maclure owes her. While sewing she meditates on the literary passages she reads, and “Her mind, wonderfully fertilised, teemed again –not with vain imaginings, however, as heretofore, but with something more substantial... and it was thought that now clamoured for expression instead of the verses and stories.” (TBB 357) Her desire to write is reinforced and “... having no one to talk to now, she began on a sudden to record her thoughts and impressions in writing; and having once begun, she entered upon a new phase of existence altogether.” (TBB 357-8) Given her personal experience, the heroine cannot avoid adopting the reformer’s attitudes in her approach to writing:

Art for art's sake she despised, but in art for man's sake she already discovered noble possibilities. (TBB 358)

"Art with a purpose" though highly contested at the time, is explicitly defended by the heroine in a discussion with the aspiring writer, Mr. Pounce, who declares, "It is hardly likely I shall write a novel with a purpose. I leave that to the ladies." (TBB 455) To which Beth answers after having quoted Milton: "Yet there is always purpose in the best work of the great writers of fiction." (TBB 455-456) By this time the female Bildungsroman has become a Künstlerroman, and the heroine, the new woman writer, undertakes the radical step of transforming the love plot into the romance of literary creation:

...inspiration in its higher manifestation is like love –that it is, in fact-love without the lover; there being all the joy of love in it and none of the trouble. (TBB 424)

These words advance what will be a repeated feature among women writers of the twentieth century, the sublimation of the love plot into the Künstlerroman. The story of the recovery of women's voice, of their self-expression, becomes a passionate new plot for women writers which displaces the love plot of traditional writing.

As the story proceeds, the heroine must also leave this second room. Though a refuge from the bitterness of married life, her room is only a temporary shelter, for the heroine will need expansion from the room of one's own into the life of one's own. In the third and last part of her story Beth moves from the secret room of her home to a rented room in London, the possible scenario of the new independent, professional self. Appropriating the realism Harold Biffen proposes in Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1962, 1st published in 1891), the author now sends her woman artist to a cold attic and forces her to face the horrors of the penniless writer. Grand's passion for a "purpose" in writing which she justifies in several occasions in the novel, becomes excessive in this last part of Beth's story, and the structure of the novel suffers. But beyond its excesses, the novel's last part offers complex solutions in the representation of the New Woman. On the one hand this part of the novel proves the literary entrapment in which the writer of fiction is still caught. On the other, Grand's uncertainties also point towards possible ways out of the conventional feminine plots.

Once the heroine settles in her third new room, the writer's emphasis is no longer upon her heroine's isolation but first upon her own work and survival, and next the story focuses upon her young and poor male neighbour artist. It is in this room that Beth realises the political nature of her literary vocation, but the writer's literary and political aims seem to be momentarily given secondary importance when Beth's neighbour, the young artist, is taken ill and Beth generously exchanges rooms with him because her own room is warmer and more comfortable than his. Though this change of rooms may suggest a radically different understanding of the use women could make of the rooms of their own, Beth's offer to him of all her time, whatever energy is left in her and of her money to the last penny, can also be read as a gesture that seems to retrieve once again the old feminine virtues of abnegation and self-sacrifice to the point of near death, and thus apparently re-evaluate the traditional feminine qualities the long novel had worked so hard at rejecting. But in spite of this unexpected and contradictory reappearance of the cultural conventions associated with womanhood, the heroine's exchange of rooms and her kindness towards the ailing young artist also suggest Grand's desire to construct a heroine who looks forward towards a possible reconciliation with the male other. Though the heroine is ungratefully abandoned by the young painter after having saved him, and is herself almost killed in the attempt, in the end the memory of her generosity changes the mind of the young artist who becomes suddenly aware of her real value and returns to her. Though this ending can and perhaps can only be read as utopian, it might also be seen as radical in the sense in which Paul Ricoeur (1986) understands utopia, for in the end the narrative supports the heroine it has so carefully and painfully constructed, and Beth is not obliged to adapt to the world, but the world is made to adapt to her. The suggested happy ending is only made possible by the young man's change of mind.

The young man's mind is made to develop from conventional stereotypical attitudes to women, to the recognition of Beth's personal heroism. This recognition of her heroine's values, initially on the part of the father, furthered next by the character's great aunt Victoria as well as by a number of friends, and finally confirmed by the young painter, climaxes the heroine's development in its different stages. But in the case of the young artist recognition is of the highest importance for it implies his awareness of the radical unfairness conventionally and uncritically used in the judgement of women, as well as the acceptance of the New Woman's desires and procedures. This awareness is made possible only as a result of time and

reflection, after having allowed himself to be convinced by a friend who warns him that:

The girls you find knocking about town in these sort of places are not desirable associates for a promising young man. They're worse than the regular bad ones –more likely to trap you, you know, especially when you're shorn of your strength and have good reason to be grateful. (TBB 509)

When he discovers Beth wears a ring and she tells him she is married, he refuses to hear her story and leaves her room for good, being too careless, prejudiced, and self-indulgent, to realise the magnitude of her effort at saving him. Only some time later, when he sees a painting of her and is told she had even had to cut and sell her hair to survive, is he suddenly made aware of his mistake:

... I've just discovered what a blind fool I am... I've run up an account with her I shall never be able to settle, but at all events I can acknowledge my debt, dolt that I am!... And I thought myself such a gentleman too! Not counting my change and asking no questions, trusting her implicitly: that was my pose from the day you came and poisoned my mind... I was too self-satisfied even to suspect that she might be imposing her bounty upon me... I told you I was wondering she did not answer my letters. I expect she hadn't the stamp. But you said it was out of sight out of mind, and she'd be trying it on with some one else in my absence. If I'd the strength, I'd thrash you, Gresham, for an evil-minded bounder. (TBB 514)

His impressions are confirmed by his return to the rooms of old he and Beth had occupied, and by his conversation with the maid, Ethel Maud Mary, who informs him of Beth's collapse and of her having been saved by a lady friend. The maid's narrative of Beth's life while in the room and of her departure emphasises the character's extraordinary virtue and her disposition to sacrifice herself, but it also and interestingly confirms Beth's social origin and the truth of her story as affirmed by the lady who took her away. Arthur Brock's energetic and determined last words to Ethel Maud Mary before leaving the house, prove his decision:

'I'm going to find that lady -Mrs. Maclure,' he said, jamming his hat down to his head, 'if I have to spend the rest of my life in the search.' (TBB 516)

The male character's change of mind towards a victimised heroine will be repeated in other turn-of-the-century heroes such as Lawrence Selden in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), a hero who also abandons his heroine, Lily Bart, to the cruelty of moral convention, and recognises his mistake too late to save his heroine from death. But in Grand's story the reader knows Beth is by now safe among her good friends, and he/she also knows that the aim of the heroine's life has become the fight for women's cause:

Beth was one of the first swallows of the woman's summer. She was strange to the race when she arrived, and uncharitably commented upon; but now the type is known, and has ceased to surprise. (TBB 527)

The morning after such reflections have crossed the heroine's mind and have provoked the author's comments, she faces the peace and happiness of knowing herself and her purposes in life. Yet she is also made aware of missing something: "Something was wanting. But she did not ask herself what that something was." (TBB 527) And in the utopian context of the pastoral in which the heroine is placed in this last scene, Beth finally sees a horseman approaching. It is her estranged lover, "...between the barley-sheaves", who reminds her of "the Knight of her daily vision." (TBB 527) Defined at this stage as "the son of the morning", the hero looks at her and raises his hat. His act of recognition implies what the reader cannot fail to know by now for certain: that the happy ending can only be understood in terms of the hero's altered perspective on the subject of women, and in his understanding and acceptance of the character's new political self. Grand's ending advances the utopian endings of important twentieth century texts by women writers who try to find new ways of expressing gender integration and reconciliation in a changed ideological context

Gissing's novel is unquestionably better than Grand's, and his failed love plot reveals the writer's uncertainties in finding a possible social and sexual integration for the New Woman in the tradition of the realistic literary text. Writing at the end of a literary tradition, Gissing highlights the limits of an obsolete genre, and his story becomes problematical, dominated by the unsolved tensions of the radical class and gender changes taking place at the time. Grand's daring attempt at trying to find a new genre for the literary construction of the late nineteenth-century heroine is inevitably tentative, and the structure of the novel suffers under the weight of its experimental energy. Further, the collision of the many conflicting subgenres and rhetorics

the writer uses in the re-elaboration of the Bildungs and Künstlerroman, work against its ideological and stylistic unity. But the potential of the new genre provides the story with a powerful literary passion, sometimes disorderly, but always intense. Critic Gail Cunningham saw the relevance of the new genre in the history of the English novel: "The important point is that for this [the 90s] brief period at least the emancipation of women and the emancipation of the English novel advanced together." (Cunningham 1978 3) In spite of its early huge popularity, like most novels written by this early generation of women writers, *The Beth Book* was forgotten with the arrival of modernism. But like other texts of its kind and time, it clearly contributed not only to the emergence of modernist women writers, but also, most consistently, to the more innovative writing of women during the twentieth century.

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## **Madness and Interpretation in *The Yellow Wallpaper***

Christa Knellwolf

In the struggle for equality, women have always had to refute the argument that they were mentally, morally and intellectually inferior. Over centuries, countless critical voices have attacked these notions directly and denounced the injustice on which such claims were based. Because literature works by indirection, women writers have had to find their own ways to engage with the issue and because their first task was to make women's concerns visible, there are numerous examples of mad women in women's writing. Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley* (*Lady Audley's Secret*), to mention just a couple, demonstrate that the conception of a strong woman has always been subject to the misgivings of patriarchy and easily been dismissed as mad. Because the verdict of strong women being a mistake of nature, hence mad, was a view that was imposed from outside, women writers' representation of mad female figures has always been embedded in a complex system of parody. When I read Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* I, therefore, want to examine it from the perspective that it uses irony as a means of questioning the patriarchal discourse which passes this judgement.

*The Yellow Wallpaper* describes a hysteric, who resists all attempts at a cure and is slowly descending into madness. Recent years have seen a reevaluation of hysteria and Luce Irigaray is the prominent thinker who claims that "there is a revolutionary potential in hysteria" (Irigaray 1991 47.

During a hysteric fit, the body finds a way of speaking out against its oppressors and manages to escape from its subjection. However empowering it may be, there are serious problems with this theory, especially if it is appropriated by that ideology which has always declared madness as the natural state of femininity. In my reading of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, I want to point out that the story self-consciously engages with the different possibilities of how to understand the madness which is its theme and I argue that the mental breakdown which concludes the narrative describes the problems of the modern subject. The most remarkable feature of the story is that the subject of the narrative breaks down while the narrating subject retains her full rationality. In what follows, I want to claim that this discrepancy exemplifies what Patricia Waugh describes as “schizophrenia ... a fin-de-siècle parody or caricature of a dualism inherent in the Western tradition of thought where the self is defined as a transcendent rationality which necessitates splitting off what is considered to be the irrational, emotion, and projecting it as the ‘feminine’ onto actual women.” (Waugh 1992 130).

The carefully organised structure of the story counteracts the easy –and in recent years almost trendy– solution that mental breakdown is the only escape from patriarchal subjection. Even if a woman’s loss of psychic stability stands at the centre, it is shown as the result of oppression. In spite of the fact that the female mind is forbidden to get involved in any kind of mental activity, it resists this commandment and there are some signs of intellectual autonomy that are struggling to get the upper hand. *The Yellow Wallpaper*, therefore, marks the beginning of a struggle in which women refuse to identify with stereotypes of female irrationality and insanity, solidified by the received medical discourse. *The Yellow Wallpaper* describes a woman’s difficulties with identifying with her new position as a mother. (Fleenor 1983) It appears to be a case study of what is now called ‘post-partum depression’. But terminological classification is by no means easy since the story approaches the topic of giving birth by asking what the social and psychological conditions are for a woman to become a mother. Giving birth was traditionally thought to be the moment at which the meaning of femininity is fulfilled and this is when the heroine’s search for a new identity faces a dangerous crisis. Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself experienced a breakdown in the context of her marriage, pregnancy and childbirth.<sup>1</sup> I do

<sup>1</sup> The name Charlotte Perkins Gilman itself poses a problem. Conventionally she is referred to as Charlotte Gilman but when she wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* she was still married to her first

not want to reduce the imaginative power of the story to her biography –I only want to mention the amazing range of activities which filled her life.<sup>2</sup>

The heroine of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ is the wife of a physician who is taken into a quiet country house to recover from the strains of giving birth. The story describes how she interacts with the house, or rather how the interior of its attic-like top room (above all the pattern of its yellow wallpaper) wrecks her psychic well-being. She, the first-person-singular narrator, begins the narrative ominously enough:

t is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer.

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity –but that would be asking too much of fate! (YWP 9, my emphases)<sup>3</sup>

She connects three telling adjectives to the house, which together create an ominous atmosphere. The “ancestral hall” is a “haunted house” but she still implies that “the height of romantic felicity” might be reached in spite of its gothic flavour. Coleridge’s “ancestral voices prophesying war” which speak out of “romantic chasms” in the poem ‘Kubla Khan’ ring in the background. For Coleridge the sense of war is unspecified, but the war which Charlotte Perkins invokes is the struggle over the cultural role of gender and the story engages in it at the risk of losing everything in the battle. If the heroine of *The Yellow Wallpaper* reproduces the pattern of the madwoman in the attic,<sup>4</sup> the narrative voice refuses to be identified with the woman who is shown to be increasingly losing her mind. Thus a schizophrenic situation is produced in which the woman who is presented through the narrative is about to disintegrate while the woman talking about her retains her lucidity. The identity which a self-referential description normally posits is denied and it is in this descriptive rift that the radicalism of *The Yellow Wallpaper* has to be looked for.

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husband Walter Stetson and only much later was called Gilman after her marriage to her cousin Houghton Gilman. When I point out that it is anachronistic to say that Charlotte Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* I am highlighting the crisis of identity which is attached to a woman’s marriage when she adopts the name of the husband and thus symbolically identifies with him.

<sup>2</sup> For some insight into the spectacular energy of which she was capable, in spite of her suffering crises of depression and listlessness, see Lane (introd.).

<sup>3</sup> YWP is short for *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Gilbert and Gubar (1979).

So as to explain some of the aesthetic structures at work in *The Yellow Wallpaper* I will refer to de Lauretis who argues that “language is itself a representation of an irreducible contradiction for women in discourse... But a critical feminist reading of the text, of all texts of culture, instates the awareness of that contradiction and the knowledge of its terms; it thus changes the representation into a performance which exceeds the text. For women to enact the contradiction is to demonstrate the non-coincidence of woman and women. To perform the terms of the production of woman as text, as image, is to resist identification with that image. It is to have stepped through the looking-glass.” (De Lauretis 1984 36)

Refusing to identify with stereotypes that are being projected onto oneself is the precondition for an escape from patriarchal hegemony. For that to be possible a new consciousness of one’s self needs to be developed, which is a self-consciousness that is primarily conscious of the self as a site of projections. It converges with the recognition that it is impossible to have a positive sense of oneself as a woman from within the existing patterns of discourse. When de Lauretis states that we should enact the contradiction, she is fully aware of the depressing results which an investigation into the relationship between men and women produces. Therefore she not only says that women have been marginalised in the historical weighting of importance but she points to the fact that women are once again marginalised –or completely excluded– from participating in the discourse which formulates social critiques. Here she refers to the development of poststructuralist theory which, although it holds that meaning is always indeterminate, privileges the existing patterns, the result of which being that all potentially significant changes run the danger of being subsumed under the conventional dominant patterns.<sup>5</sup> The struggle to make language available for the expression of female concerns has led to the conclusion that since language serves the purposes of patriarchy it will inevitably express its interests. Although this is the basic situation, there are some linguistic possibilities which exceed its economy. De Lauretis ends her article with a quotation from Sheila Rowbotham (1973 27-8): “As we begin to know ourselves in a new relation to one another we can start to understand our movement in relation to the world outside. We can begin to use our self-consciousness strategically.”

This quotation is set against the claim that the attempt to gain consciousness is doomed to lead into self-consciousness, owing to the

<sup>5</sup> Cf. “The Technology of Gender”, in de Lauretis (1987 1-30).

inferiority of the female position. The convergence between gaining consciousness and feeling self-conscious, in the sense of embarrassed and insufficient, however, is no logical necessity. Especially not since feeling self-conscious is an effect that is enforced on the female subject from outside. Even if there is no other language available than that which is adapted to expressing the interests of the position of power (patriarchy), a conscious usage of its structures enables women to evade its stringencies to some extent. By giving in to its prejudices it can devalue them and while pretending to comply with the patriarchal imperatives, undermine them from within.

Judith Butler (1990 viii) pursues a similar project when she discusses the intrinsic relationship between being female and being the site of trouble (source and locus where it demonstrates itself): "Consider the fate of 'female trouble', that historical configuration of a nameless female indisposition which thinly veiled the notion that being female is a natural indisposition. Serious as the medicalization of female bodies is, the term is also laughable, and laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism."

Butler focuses on a medically warranted fact which has been used as objective ground to prove that being female conforms to a naturally preconditioned inferiority of the woman. Butler takes that as her point of departure for a study of how women can deal with this situation. She bases her theory on premises, which to some extent differ from de Lauretis's, but she likewise insists on the necessity of triggering off a process of subversion which takes issue with the stereotypical male categories. The underlying assumptions go back to Michel Foucault's central claim in *The History of Sexuality* that power always already harbours its own subversion. Since language is one of the most important tools of power, it is only reasonable to conclude that especially those linguistic statements whose aim it is to consolidate a juridical form of power possess the potential of subverting themselves from inside. The strategy of using the tool of power so as to demonstrate its oppressive potential is a way to break away from its constraints, for it is another of Foucault's central tenets that the prescriptive surveillance wielded by an autocratic ideology can only function if its presence is not perceived. Therefore pointing it out is an essential step towards resisting its force. For de Lauretis this is the starting point for a female position in language and I now want to illustrate this by reference to *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

This short story keeps oscillating between power and powerlessness. The topic on which this uncertainty hinges is that of female madness and the

impossibility of locating the place of insanity with precision. The I-narrator concludes the statement “I’ve got out at last” with an account of her own unquestionably mad behaviour. So the very notion of final release (of a “happy end”) is ironised and subverted. But then escaping into madness is the worst solution possible. When the woman in the story brings up the topic of madness in a discussion with her husband he is dumb-struck:

‘Better in body perhaps –’ I began, and stopped short, for he sat up straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word. (YWP 24)

She is frightened by the severity of her husband’s reaction but at the same time she notices that the threat of madness provides her with a powerful, though uncanny, tool. All of a sudden she recognises that the goal behind the treatment which is slowly driving her crazy is to prevent her literally from flipping over into madness. Earlier on she has passed the time by fancying people walking in the numerous paths and arbours of the garden which her room overlooks and has been warned off because her husband says that:

...with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try. (YWP 15-16).

“All manner of excited fancies” of course refers to an inability to distinguish between what is real and what is not. But on the other hand she also knows it is not for her to analyse and judge the state of things because philosophical distinctions between being and appearance figure as a male prerogative.

The narrator is an artist and she is forbidden to work until she is well again, although she is convinced that “congenial work, with excitement and change, would do [her] good” (YWP 10). So since she, whose profession is writing, is forbidden to engage in creative processes, the distinction between work (producing fiction) and life (dealing with reality) gets blurred. As she is disobeying the ban on writing and has to be “so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” (YWP 10), fiction becomes equivalent to her private self and the boundaries between fiction and reality (that is, her inner reality) dissolve. And both are forbidden to her: it is even possible to pun on the

meaning of “private” by saying that her private self (which is defined by the urge for expression) is that which she has been deprived of.<sup>6</sup>

In medical terms, the heroine of the story stands in a complicated relation to madness. Because she is narratologically equated with the first person singular narrator, whose text is rhetorically impeccable, the situation is extremely complex. It is important to see that the story is crafted very carefully. Therefore I will go back to the opening in full awareness of the end. Right from the beginning, there is a striking discrepancy between the tale of romance which we are led to expect and the refusal to provide the romantic story:

It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer.

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate! (YWP 9)

This is not a conventional gothic story with ‘real’ ghosts. The very insistence of the story that there is nothing genuinely uncanny about the house itself makes it uncanny. According to the fiction, the I-narrator begins by formulating her first impressions of the house and the sinister ending is latent here. It is of course not the house but she herself (her mind and body) which are haunted and we are asked to read the story again from the point of view of “how did the house have this effect?” and not of “in what way was the house indeed haunted?” The identification of the woman with the house, moreover, stands in the background as a literal equation, which makes it clear that getting out of the house –as second body and soul, and as cultural framework that contains her own sense of herself– is an immensely difficult task.

Irony is present from the beginning and it develops subtly. It relies on juxtapositions and serves to indicate that there is something wrong. So the phrase “mere ordinary people” sounds like a style marker indicating a naive speaker, while at the same time it heightens the contrast to the “ancestral

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<sup>6</sup> In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1983 242-243), Raymond Williams traces the history of ‘private’ from its etymological root of something that has been “removed from public concern” to a bourgeois valuation in which the intimacy of secluded family space counts as a desirable privilege.

halls". The clumsy naivete however is subverted when the general remark about the "ancestral halls" leads to a particularised description of their accommodation: "a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house". The text subtly ironises the reverence for impressive (domestically sublime) architecture. Paradoxically enough, those passages which demonstrate the sober realistic perspective of her husband John, so to speak, contain the threatening elements and those stylistic elements which denote a hankering for gothic fictionality belong to a healthy imagination that seems to harbour little destructive potential.

Because she is forbidden any other activity, the heroine thinks about the history of the house; because it lacks a story she feels urged to provide one; because she is forbidden to engage in creative work, she turns herself into the story's central character. When she finds out that the house had remained empty for years as a result of some legal litigation, she says:

That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid, but I don't care –there is something strange about the house– I can feel it (YWP 11).

Although there is absolutely no skeleton to be found in the cupboard and nobody walks in the house owing to some mysterious murder or suicide, she refuses to put up with this imaginative poverty. Life is dull beyond measure and she grabs every straw which might divert her from her boredom. But when she starts to scratch the surface of this dullness and tries to invest it with some life, she recognises that the seemingly peaceful condition has had a horrible subtext all along. The "romantic chasm" which opens here reveals that her rather dull but peaceful life has always concealed a complete lack of control over herself.

Concerning the subject of madness, it was believed that transitory phases in women's lives (puberty, childbirth, menopause) were particularly likely to generate madness. Since the womb was taken to be a typical site of illness, all women were potentially ill, or insane.<sup>7</sup> The husband of the I-narrator, who is a physician, prescribes rest and quiet, following the contemporary belief that activity might trigger off the transition to madness. The "rest cure" had been devised by the eminent physician S. Weir Mitchell of Philadelphia, who is explicitly mentioned in the story (YWP 18). Charlotte Perkins had been sent to consult his advice and had received the harsh

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<sup>7</sup> For an account of the significance of the womb as literal site of hysteria, see Mieke Bal.

injunction to abandon all artistic occupation and to restrict her intellectual powers to the performance of her domestic duties.<sup>8</sup> To her immense regret in later life she had followed his instructions for a while and she blamed her extremely slow recovery on Weir Mitchell's method, which she thought was owing to his hostility to intellectual women.<sup>9</sup> In the story the medical authority is the husband-physician, which increases the difficulties involved in struggling against the instructions imposed by medical supervision, because it takes advantage of the most intimate relationship of trust and love.

In my reading of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, I want to argue that de Lauretis's claim that women should strive for agency by trying "to enact their self-consciousness" had always been considered as a viable option for a female artist who wanted to make an intervention in the ways of conceiving gender distinctions. So let me take a look at the person of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935): she was famous for her feminist work and chiefly for writing studies of women's living conditions. What made her truly famous in her days was her book *Women and Economics* (published 1898) and her lecturing tours in which she demanded that women's (house) work be recognised as genuine labour.<sup>10</sup> From all of her fiction only *The Yellow Wallpaper* is widely known now. When it was written in 1890, it was rejected as a piece of intolerable horror and a revolting perversion of human values, such as shatters the supposed felicity of matrimonial life.<sup>11</sup> Being always an important issue, work is an absolutely central point of debate in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. That "work" almost always means intellectual work, moreover, shows that this story makes a statement about the needs of women's minds.

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<sup>8</sup> Catherine Golden shows that Weir Mitchell did not only hold this view as a doctor but expressed the ideal of the passive woman whose intellectual interest should be limited to good housekeeping in numerous novels. So Charlotte Perkins Gilman did not only attack him as a medical authority but as a then widely popular writer; cf. "Overwriting the Rest Cure": Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Literary Escape from S. Weir Mitchell's Fictionalization of Women.' (Golden 1992).

<sup>9</sup> In her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, she says explicitly that her aim behind writing the story was to prove Weir Mitchell wrong and she also mentions that he abandoned the method after reading her story, without acknowledging her influence, though. (Gilman 1990 121).

<sup>10</sup> For expressions of these views see *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Gilman 1990), as well as *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Nonfiction Reader*. (Ceplair 1991).

<sup>11</sup> A protest addressed to the Boston *Transcript* was headed 'Perilous Stuff' and asked, "Should such stories be allowed to pass without severest censure?" (Gilman 1990 120). The first editor had indeed rejected it with the remark, "I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I made myself"; quoted in Elaine R. Hedges's afterword to the Virago Modern Classics edition of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. (Gilman 1973 40).

In contrast to Charlotte Perkins's helplessness and lack of choice, the I-narrator does not simply submit to the fate of madness but adopts it almost deliberately: she acts it out and parodically engages with the associations belonging to it. She adopts the typical strategy of hysteria to make her body act (and speak).<sup>12</sup> There is a significant difference: the woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* does not primarily express displaced desires but she acts out the malady that is projected onto the female body. Here we have to remember that the I is an artist and that at the stage of just having given birth she is forbidden to engage in mental creativity (what she calls "congenial work"). Giving birth was looked upon as the only proper field in which a woman should be creative, and in order to guarantee that the physical kind of creativity was not disturbed by complications, intellectual creativity was banned as harmful. Since women were not allowed to be creative in the intellectual field their bodies were virtually reduced to their animal functions, and the assumption that women were just animals was not far removed. Madness was likewise defined as a state of human existence which was reduced to bodily functioning. Therefore when the heroine identifies with, or at least enacts, the position of raving madness (and behaves like an animal) she points towards the implicit assumption of her time that the state of being female was close to that of an animal.

In this context we have a dual mystery: we have the I-narrator's quest after the meaning of the pattern of the wallpaper but then we also want to know what she is doing exactly in her attic room which, we are told, is a former nursery. These two mysteries interlock. We hear that the paper "is stripped off in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach" (YWP 12). The children who have allegedly wrought the havoc in the room reach as far as she herself can reach, and the conclusion is that she did it herself. She goes on to explain that "they must have had perseverance as well as hatred" (YWP 17) and we learn that John's rational house-keeping sister found smooches of yellow on all her clothes. The index of the colour yellow as well as the "even smooch" around the wall of the room suggest that she had been faking the existence of the destructive children to explain the effects of her own activity, and as her fraud shines through the narrative, she is convicted of "mad" behaviour. When she remarks concerning these traces, "I wonder how it was done and who did it, and what they did it for" (YWP 29) she is asking a rhetorical question and when she trusts her deepest secrets to

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. particularly the work of Luce Irigaray.

dead paper she is aiming at a conscious split between herself as producer and herself as receiver of news. The non-coincidence between the subject who writes and the subject who is written about is not only a side-effect but an intentional truce for the sake of company. Against this background the last of these questions “what did they do it for?” is transformed from a real question to pass the time, to a rhetorical question, and from there into an ontological question concerning her state of existence.

The ability to formulate a narrative defines her identity and her subjecthood. Not only does the text which the female narrator writes herself constitute a narrative, but her position as author becomes stronger and stronger as her conventional sanity deteriorates. It is an instance of ambiguity whether she really ends up raving mad or whether she just pretends to be so. At any rate it is no easy decision to slip into the guise of madness and there is a terrible danger that it becomes reality. On the other hand authorship entails that she has to describe and analyse her situation and that requires a discourse which is capable of expressing madness. This she does both with her body (her female existence) and with her pen (the conventional tool of male literary authorship). The danger of equating the appearance of her madness with a state of being really mad means that there is no clear separation between the impeccable narrative and the woman who creeps along the mop-board of her room. It inevitably leads to a certain kind of madness to depict madness, but ironically enough the representation of madness is not feasible without the rationality of representation.<sup>13</sup>

The madness of the story makes us conclude that it is impossible to determine what this character’s state of mind is, which has the effect that conventional assumptions as to rationality are questioned. Greg Johnson discusses the discrepancy between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the *énoncé*<sup>14</sup> in terms of the *Doppelgänger* motif, according to which two figures are inseparably related because they are versions of each other. (Johnson 1989) If read in this light it becomes clear how uncannily madness and sanity reflect each other and how little sense it makes to rule one of them out completely. The validity of interpretation is moreover

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<sup>13</sup> This is Jacques Derrida’s argument put forward in the piece ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’ (Derrida 1978 31-63). In this article, he refutes the claim put forward by Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilisation* that it is possible to describe unreason from within the discourse of madness.

<sup>14</sup> The distinction into ‘the subject of the enunciation’ and ‘the subject of the *énoncé*’ is particularly useful because it does not reduce the woman who is the ‘object of the narration’ into a literal object; for a detailed description of the two textual subjects see Belsey (1980 30-31).

discussed with reference to the fact that interpreting the woman's state of health means to pass an inexorable verdict on her, which entitles society to lock her up. Therefore we need to resist that conclusion and have to recognise that it is necessary to reconsider conventional attitudes and assumptions; and first and foremost, to take her seriously as a subject and producer of narrative, whether it conforms to what our social background leads us to expect or not.

The wallpaper is the material object that provokes her narrative. Although it has no intrinsic interest, it becomes important by force of necessity. The heroine is expected to spend a lot of time in the room with that paper while being forced to do nothing whatever. When she is alone she disobeys instructions and writes stealthily but when she is surveyed she takes recourse to interpretation as a substitute for writing. As a result her writing becomes obsessed with formulating the meaning of the wallpaper. Her narrative therefore is an attempt to come to terms with - to interpret — her own situation in order not only to be its object but to become a subject and producer of text herself.

De Lauretis formulates the claims which I have quoted earlier on by reading Calvino's story about the city Zobeide. Calvino's story, like *The Yellow Wallpaper*, contains an intricate pattern and is obsessed with the idea that patterns capture the elusiveness of woman.<sup>15</sup> Both Calvino's and Gilman's stories are concerned with the question of how to enclose a woman, or the ideal of woman, respectively. The notable difference is that one of these stories is written from the male and the other from the female point of view. De Lauretis (1984 14) says that Zobeide describes the plight of women, which is to be caught in the dilemma of being "at once captive and absent". Patriarchal society aims at controlling women (enclosing women in definitions or stereotypes and women's bodies in medical discourse) and thus makes it (almost) impossible for them to become autonomous subjects, the effect being that they are absent from culture and have no access to signification. *The Yellow Wallpaper* aims to depict a state of captivity in which presence, and agency, is nevertheless possible. It therefore is an interpretation of the archetypal story that femininity, or the ideal of woman, always escapes the male attempt to capture it but this story does not stop at an image like that of the city of Zobeide which seems to be peopled only by men. When the I-narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* identifies with her captivity,

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<sup>15</sup> Calvino's story is reprinted in de Lauretis (1984).

she asks that the abstract concept of woman (or femininity) is brought into a meaningful relation to the concretely existing woman. Thus the non-coincidence between woman and women is insisted on and the fact that female identity is prescribed from outside as a seemingly unproblematic equation between the image of woman and the sum of all women is exposed.

When the I of the story says "I will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion" (YWP 19) she rewrites the story of meaninglessness and female absence. In fact she only chooses this method after having unsuccessfully tried to get rid of the pattern, which is also a narrative pattern, which

confuses the eye in following ... and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions (YWP 13).

However, she reports about John's reaction to her misgivings about the paper:

He said that after the wallpaper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then the gate at the head of the stairs, and so on. (YWP 14).

About this he is so right that it almost seems that he is aware that "the 'rings and things' [fixed into the walls of the attic room], although reminiscent of children's gymnastic equipment, are really the paraphernalia of confinement, ... instruments that definitively indicate her imprisonment," as Gilbert and Gubar put it. (Gilbert and Gubar 1979 90) In spite of the rational account that these attributes of the house are protective devices for small children, they transform the house into a prison. If the pattern of captivity is reproduced it will be impossible not to read bars literally as bars, as tools for confinement, irrespective of whether this is supposed to be for the good of the person enclosed. John insists on living in the nursery upstairs and does not follow his wife's choice of one of the downstairs rooms which "had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings" (YWP 12). Moreover, when he, albeit endearingly, calls her "little girl" and "blessed little goose", he reduces her to a child and from the infantile position of dependence there is hardly any difference to that of a captive madwoman and an animal.

She starts by interpreting the repetitive pattern of the paper as “a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern” (YWP 22) and her obsession with the paper leads her to say:

The front pattern does move—and no wonder! The woman behind it shakes it! ... And she is all the time trying to climb through (YWP 30).

Thus she projects her own state and in a complex way symbolises her desire to climb through the ideological pattern which encloses her. She starts to see the bars of ideology and the question mainly concerns whether the act of shaking these bars is simply a madwoman’s behaviour or whether it provides a way out. Madness is a frequent and at the same time hopelessly destructive attack on female psychic autonomy. It is made on account of a divergence from the norm by which madness becomes a term for difference. One of feminism’s most important claims is that difference (of gender, of behaviour, of mind) must be accepted. When the I in *The Yellow Wallpaper* has the courage to be different at the cost of incurring the judgement of being mad, she challenges conventional understandings of what the needs of women are. She does so specifically by acting out and thus overdoing the assumption that femininity and madness are inseparable. The story therefore asks us to rethink the situation of women in a society which enforces standards of female health and mental sanity from outside without consulting women’s own needs.

Those moments in which the incompatibility between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the énoncé are most blatant express self-consciousness about the female condition. It is here that representation and interpretation live out their incompatibility and where this discrepancy opens a space for a more autonomous female psyche. It is a precarious way to get out because the closeness to the discourse of madness renders it liable to collapse into incomprehensibility. Nevertheless it is an approach which offers a viable solution since the goal of subverting patriarchal assumptions by means of irony (or parody) exposes their inhumanity and simultaneously legitimates a female discourse: if it has proved its cogency by formulating an effective critique it has also proved its legitimacy as a genuine alternative to the dominant modes of reasoning.

The scandal of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is contained in its end and I would therefore like to conclude by looking at the final passage:

Why there’s John at the door!

It is no use, young man, you can’t open it!

How he does call and pound!

Now he's crying for an axe.

It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!

'John dear!' said I in the gentlest voice, 'the key is down by the front steps, under a plantain leaf!'

That silenced him for a few moments.

Then he said — very quietly indeed, 'Open the door, my darling!'

'I can't,' said I. 'The key is down by the front door under a plantain leaf!'

And then I said it again, several times, very gently and slowly, and said it so often that he had to go and see, and he got it of course, and came in. He stopped short by the door.

'What is the matter?' he cried. 'For God's sake, what are you doing!' I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder. 'I've got out at last,' said I, 'in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!'

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time! (YWP 35-36)

It is easy to understand why so many (especially male) readers have experienced this as a hair-raising scene. It should not only be seen as a defeat of the personality of the woman described but rather as a defeat of those forces which had restrained and oppressed her. The final triumph is gained at extremely high cost but the story shows that the goal of getting out – or in de Lauretis' terms, of stepping through the looking glass of male projection – is not completely illusory. What is happening to her is not simply an exchange of one kind of silence for another. If the woman was unambiguously identified with the object of the story, that would be the case. But she is at the same time the subject of the narration and as such she is in an in-between state that leaves some space for assuming that her madness is not the end but that she is capable of reflecting on her state and thus also of forcing us to review the conditions which led to her predicament. The impeccable structure of the story therefore acquires an expressive potential. It emphasises the specific conditions which in her case brought her to that mental state and discourages generalisations which might imply that all women are mad. The narrator presents us with the fully rational argument that if the female mind is imprisoned, not only women but also men will have

to suffer. The ironic inversion at the end of the story, when the husband is referred to as a dull-witted “young man” and is himself reduced to the helplessness of a child or a mindless being, shows how destructive the imprisoned female mind can be. (Hedges 1992 229)

It cost Charlotte Perkins Gilman severe mental pains for the rest of her life that she was capable of expressing the dangers attending a woman’s conventional domestic life. The side-glance at biography makes it all the more urgent that we should be cautious about claiming that this short story implies that hysteria is the only means for the female mind to become active. Such a conclusion would prevent us from understanding in what ways the story’s central character embodies the “schizophrenia” resulting from the fact that the Western definition of rationality excludes all qualities associated with women. (Waugh 1992 130) Moreover, it would make it impossible to recognise that this character’s raving is an expression of the struggle for equality. The conclusion that the split between “the heroine writing and the heroine as written” leads to a “subversive notion of decenterment”, which stands for an escape from patriarchy, is really not adequate.<sup>16</sup> First and foremost it is important to recognise the indeterminate significance of the madness with which *The Yellow Wallpaper* ends.

We need to read this story as an engagement with the discourses around the definition of femininity. So as to register its feminist potential, we should conclude that it represents the figure of the madwoman in a parodic manner to fend off the equation between femininity and madness. The story was written at a historical moment when the tradition of the Enlightenment was fundamentally questioned, but it nevertheless is indebted to the idea that it is possible to produce a critique of society and its ideology. Its literary style, of course, adopts a circuitous route and leaves its ironies unresolved. This, however, is not because it succumbs to the dictates of madness but because it suggests that its interpretation should deal with the idea that madness is produced because the female subject is exposed to the contradictory and conflicting claims projected onto modern identity.

To conclude, I want to claim that *The Yellow Wallpaper* has to be read in relation to the historical moment of its writing; it is necessary to read it alongside Virginia Woolf’s description of how she first had to kill “The Angel in the House” before she could be a creative writer. It is a painful experience to get rid of the submissive female who “never had a mind or wish of her own,

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<sup>16</sup> The conclusion is adopted by King and Morris (1989 28, 32).

but preferred to sympathise always with the minds and wishes of others". (Woolf 1979) Metaphorical murder and madness, therefore, are instances of the violence required to deal with the idea that the conventional image of the self-sacrificing woman is incompatible with the production of art. It is the awareness of this background which helps us understand the parodic complexity that characterises modernist and postmodern fiction written by women.

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# Modernist Criticism & the English Literary Canon

Chris Baldick

The literary revolution brought about in and by modernism is commonly understood as a revolution of aesthetic forms, in which the innovators broke up the nineteenth-century consensus that we know as realism in the novel and in the drama, and abandoned traditional metres in favour of free verse. Spectacularly disorienting techniques such as stream of consciousness in prose fiction, effects of collage and juxtaposition in verse, linguistic devices of defamiliarization and macaronism, and the structural techniques of 'spatial form' or of multiple perspective, and the replacement of expository narration with patterns of symbolism and impressionistic notation, are (for good reason) placed in the foreground in our accounts of how modernist writers made it new.

Our view of modernist writing and its distinctive novelty is of course not exclusively one of formal innovation: it encompasses an understanding of modernist thematics, principally the quest of the solitary consciousness (the poetic speaker, or the 'centre of consciousness' in the novel) for a coherent vision of the world, achieved within and against an apparently chaotic world of random or disconnected events and impressions. This struggle for coherence, typically conducted by an artist figure such as Stephen Dedalus or Lily Briscoe, of course involves questions of aesthetic form –which returns us to the notion of literary modernism as essentially a revolution of forms.

There is, however, another dimension of literary culture that was powerfully and perhaps more lastingly remade by the modernist writers; this being the canon of great works of the past, and along with it the related pantheon of great authors. Most of the modernists found that they could not make room for their own innovations without displacing -sometimes aggressively- their precursors, either immediate or remote. In doing so, they brought about, with the help of later commentators, critics and academics, a radical and wholesale revision of the inherited conception of English literature (in some cases American and European literature) -its traditions and continuities, its revolutions and discontinuities, its periods of greatness and of decline.

By far the best-known instance of this canonical revision lies in the critical writings of T. S. Eliot, especially his early essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), which proposes

...what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted... (Kermode 1975 38)

I do not propose to engage in an exposition of this paradoxical and devious essay, or even this central passage in it, except to note in passing Eliot's misleading implication that the old order of art is automatically adjusted by the mere arrival of the new work -as if this could happen without conscious critical effort and polemic. Instead, I want to look beyond Eliot's famous formulations in order to show how extensive this campaign of canonical revision was in literary modernism. I shall be looking both at how the modernists reshaped the canon of literature of past ages, and at how they assisted in the canonization of their own works. And in the course of this survey I hope also to show these various efforts of reCanonization formed part of the Anglophone modernists' complex response to the conditions of modernity.

The modernists' aggressive re-ordering of the literary past is of course not unprecedented. The Romantic writers of the early nineteenth century

cleared a path for their own writings by rejecting the emptiness of eighteenth-century neoclassical conventions, and in some important instances such as Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800/1802) they related the importance of their literary revolution to the problem of modernity as they then understood it—Wordsworth complaining there of the debasement of public tastes by the “gross and violent stimulants” offered by new forms of popular entertainment (Hayden 1988 283). Later in the nineteenth century, some of the practitioners of realism in the novel—notably the Americans Henry James and William Dean Howells—rejected most of the English novelistic tradition of the earlier part of the century (especially Dickens and Thackeray) as inartistic, and constructed in its stead a new international canon of the novel founded upon the work of Flaubert. It may be added here that in general, the American critics—James, Howells, Eliot, Pound—were far more internationalist in their conceptions of literary canons than were the British.

What is truly distinctive about the modernist revisions of literary canons is how persistently they tie themselves to a specific analysis of the ills of modernity, which they present or assume in the form of a drastically simplified social and cultural history of English—sometimes more broadly of Anglophone—civilization. The modernists' views of the truly valuable and truly negligible writers of the past were not, for the most part, random or idiosyncratic prejudices and preferences, nor assessments merely of individual writers' merits, but in most cases structured according to an essentially lapsarian conception of modernity and of cultural history; one that seeks to identify and ultimately to correct some catastrophic Fall into modernity. In this respect, as in so many others, they were continuing the broadly Romantic tradition of cultural critique, which deplores the more recent developments of modernity while idealizing some more remote pre-modern social and cultural order. As Romanticism mutates by various routes into Modernism, this lapsarian history tends to become more schematic. One important phase of this mutation in England is the combined work of the Pre-Raphaelite movement and of its defender John Ruskin, which identifies the moment of the great Fall into modernity with the Italian Renaissance, and (directly or indirectly) with the emergent capitalism of the Italian city-states. It is upon this scheme that some modernist writers, notably Ezra Pound, drew in their later versions of cultural history.

But other modernists, it is important to remember, date this Fall differently: W. B. Yeats and his American disciple Allen Tate tend to associate it with the English Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, and the

subsequent consolidation of the puritan middle class. T. S. Eliot dates his famous 'dissociation of sensibility', in which thought and feeling fall apart, as a process that set in at the time of the English Revolution in the mid seventeenth century, although his remarks on the confusions of Elizabethan culture suggest that he too regarded the Reformation as the larger calamity. D. H. Lawrence, taking what could be called a more orthodox Romantic position, tends to locate the great disaster of Western culture in the scientific rationalism of the eighteenth century (for example in his essay on Benjamin Franklin), although he derives no consistent canonical consequences from this view. Lawrence's sometime disciple John Middleton Murry, an explicitly Romantic modernist, similarly blames the Enlightenment for the ills of modern culture, and contradicts Eliot directly by celebrating the English Reformation as the heroic foundation of modern literature, and the Romantic movement as the great rebirth of its energies. Other modernist writers who have less to say about modernity in general but who do have opinions about when English literature went wrong usually confine their attention to the miserable state of culture in the Victorian period –its prudery, sentimentality, shallow optimism and so forth: this group would include such critics as Ford Madox Ford and writers such as Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey of the Bloomsbury Group, which generally placed a high value on eighteenth-century culture as part of its rejection of Victorianism. Finally, there are some modernists, notably James Joyce, who remain wisely silent upon the whole question, at least in public. Joyce did, however, write an academic essay in 1912 in an attempt to gain an Italian teaching qualification, in which he regretted at least some of the fruits of the Renaissance, summing these up by saying that now "the journalist sits in the monk's chair" (Ellmann 1959 321).

I have given this brief summary of the lapsarian schemes variously held by several Anglophone modernist writers, chiefly in order to stress the degree of possible divergence among them in the chronologies of their conceptions both of modernity and of literary decline: there is no monolithic or unanimous modernist doctrine in which the periods of healthy literary development are clearly distinguished from those of degeneration; nor is Eliot's model of the seventeenth-century dissociation of sensibility, widely adapted and disseminated as it was in the 1930s and beyond, the only influential version of this story, as I hope to illustrate more fully. What should show through beyond these divergences though, is the common willingness among several modernists to impose upon the history of English literary culture boldly simplified patterns of rise, decline, decadence and renewal

which are co-ordinated with certain phases of Western modernity in general. In this, they may help to remind us of the grave problems involved in using today such a term as 'modernity' itself: not just the embarrassing difficulty of not knowing when or where it starts, but the temptations of regarding it as a single process. The term modernity, apart from being in itself indiscriminate, is a standing invitation to further outrages of indiscriminacy in virtually all spheres of historical and cultural analysis. My only excuse for persisting with the term here is, of course, that the writers I am discussing participate in and, in their way, and without using the term 'modernity' itself, help to produce its dangers (some more than others, of course: we must not be too indiscriminate even about modernist indiscriminacy).

One of several problems that we encounter in deploying such a large term as modernity is that we are obliged, such is its scope, to present its various phases metonymically, and commonly by resort to the technological metonym which seems to have become inescapable in this discourse. Thus if we speak of the modernity of the mid nineteenth century, it is not long before we are speaking predominantly of the modernity of the railways or of photography; likewise the modernity of the early twentieth century seems to be presented principally as a modernity of telephones, motor cars, cinematic projectors, aeroplanes, and radios. The problem here is not merely the general one, indicated by Marxist interventions in these discussions, that transformations in social relations are hastily collapsed into a succession of technological innovations. For any adequate consideration of literary modernism, it is also that, at least for the major Anglophone modernists, the immediate problem of modernity with which they are most occupied is not –even in the second or third place– a technological one. It is in the first place linguistic. It is true that the impact of telegraphy, cinema, motorised transport and other recent inventions upon the senses and rhythms of human life does feature (usually fleetingly) in modernist texts such as 'The Waste Land' and *Mrs Dalloway*. But for Eliot and Pound most explicitly, and for other modernist writers too, the true foreground of modernity is occupied by the word, and especially by the debasement of language by modernized forms of public discourse.

Here, before returning to modernist writers and their revisions of the literary canon, I want to propose a thesis that is neither shockingly controversial nor startlingly original, but that may help to indicate certain priorities in considering the modernist writer's engagement with modernity. This is that the most inescapable and pernicious manifestation of modernity in the eyes of Anglophone modernist writers was neither the motor car nor

the moving picture, nor even the typewriter but the newspaper – a much older invention, of course, but one that had rapidly assumed overwhelming cultural importance in the first decade of the twentieth century, in Britain especially. This small but highly populated and urbanized island had achieved by this time almost universal levels of literacy and a highly developed railway system that permitted the delivery of the same morning newspaper to every town in England, Wales, and southern Scotland. Upon this basis were created the huge readerships of new popular papers like the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror*, and upon them the huge fortunes and political influence of the ‘press barons’ Northcliffe, Beaverbrook and Rothermere. Britain was and remains, as Q.D. Leavis asserted in 1932, “a nation of newspaper-readers”, by contrast with other European countries and with North America (Leavis 1979 182).

Modernism adopted the newspaper, and the broader world of commercial journalism, as its principal antagonist, its Other, not because it was remote and alien but of course because it was so uncomfortably close a neighbour, in two senses: first, it competed in the same medium but on overwhelmingly superior terms against poets, dramatists and novelists for the attention of readers; second, its economy underpinned that of literature itself, in that numerous writers were financially dependent upon work, ranging from book reviews to full-time editorial labours, on newspapers and magazines. Disturbingly, the newspaper world was both the competitor and the provider. T. S. Eliot’s little magazine *The Criterion*, for instance, in which he published ‘The Waste Land’, was the antithesis of the vulgarly sensational newspaper the *Daily Mail*, and yet it was actually financed by Lady Rothermere, the wife of that newspaper’s new millionaire proprietor. In these cultural conditions, modernist criticism sought desperately to reconstruct the boundary wall between true literature and mere journalism, before it was overwhelmed by the rising tide of journalese and its huge repertoire of clichés.

The opening of the warfare between modernism and the newspapers in London can be dated precisely to the year 1896, when two antithetical publications were launched: one was the first of the new cheap mass-circulation newspapers, the *Daily Mail*; the other was an early example of the expensive avant-garde ‘little magazines’, *The Savoy*. The *Daily Mail* survives to this day as a powerful paper; *The Savoy*, as little magazines generally do, collapsed after a few months. Here is the *Savoy*’s editor, the minor decadent poet Arthur Symons, writing in 1904 of the evils of journalism:

The newspaper is the plague, or black death, of the modern world. It is an open sewer, running down each side of the street, and displaying the foulness of every day, day by day, morning and evening (Symons 1904 3).

Symons's importance as a critic, acknowledged by Eliot and other later modernists, was that he transmitted the principles of French symbolism into England, and in particular recommended them to his friend Yeats. Symons in the 1890s took over the symbolists' view of the essential antagonism between poetry and rhetoric, and in his British context equated rhetoric more specifically with the public language of the newspapers. This identification he passed in turn to Yeats, who makes from it something far more substantial, as if reading back from the new horrors of the popular press an entire cultural history.

Yeats was not only an exemplary anti-rhetorical poet but also an active critical proponent of this symbolist principle, consciously recreating the very standards by which he was to be appreciated. Most memorably he declared that "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry" (Yeats 1980 170). Working from this antithesis, Yeats initiated the modernist tradition of simplified literary and cultural history - with important consequences in its later developments by Pound, Eliot and others. Not content just to avoid or to lament the rhetorical excesses of nineteenth-century poetry, he sought to account for their origins in some earlier cultural calamity. His essay of 1902 on the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser places that poet's career at the crucial point at which the old gaiety of Merry England was about to be obliterated by bourgeois puritanism and the prostitution of poets to the aims of the State and its official morality. Two years later in one of his own little magazines he contrasts the vitality of language and experience in the Middle Ages with the vacuous rhetorical commonplaces of the modern age:

We have no longer in any country a literature as great as the literature of the old world, and that is because the newspapers, all kinds of second-rate books, the preoccupation of men with all kinds of practical changes, have driven the living imagination out of the world... It is the change that followed the Renaissance, and was completed by newspaper government and the scientific movement, that has brought upon us all these phrases and generalisations, made by minds that would grasp what they have never seen (Jeffares 1980 136-7).

Thus from the new abstract rhetoric of the Renaissance to the daily newspaper of today there is some continuous cultural degradation that “would substitute for the ideas of the folk-life the rhetoric of the newspapers” (Yeats 1980 139). The canonical consequences of this position, which involve the relegation of such poets as Spenser, Milton and Tennyson who can be cast as puritan moralisers, were developed less by Yeats himself than by his disciple and sometime secretary Ezra Pound, and in a spectacularly aggressive style.

Pound’s most scandalous critical heresy was his implacable hostility to John Milton, in a campaign that was to unsettle for the next three decades the reputation of a poet usually placed second only to Shakespeare in the English pantheon. Pound, for whom the second-greatest English poet was Chaucer, wished to demote Milton to the lowest ranks of the minor seventeenth-century poets. “Milton is the worst sort of poison,” he wrote, and “a thorough-going decadent in the worst sense of the term” (Eliot 1954 216). This “most unpleasant of English poets” had blighted the course of English poetry with his stilted Latinisms and the hollow noise of his bombast; as for his ideas, they only showed “his asinine bigotry, his beastly hebraism, the coarseness of his mentality” (Eliot 1954 238). By contrast with Dante, Milton was evidently “a wind-bag” (Pound 1970 83). There was, fortunately, more to this than name-calling. The critical assassination of Milton was in one sense the belated revenge of the Symbolist school against its old enemy, English Puritanism, achieved by striking at its most sacred poet. Certainly larger cultural antagonisms were involved, and Milton was accused as merely the most prominent villain in an extended poetic delinquency, the general pattern of which follows Yeats’s sketch of the great Fall into moralising rhetoric. In Pound’s version, the Renaissance corrupted its linguistic energies through the over-cultivation of rhetoric, so that from the time of Shakespeare until the rediscovery of poetry as a musical art by Swinburne in the 1860s, English poetry was a degraded instrument in the hands of puritan doctrinaires and moralising preachers like Whitman, Tennyson, and Wordsworth. Few nineteenth-century writers escape this whipping: Browning and Swinburne are spared in England, Flaubert and Turgenev in Europe, but the century as whole is condemned for blurry sentimentalism, for emotional slither, for stupidity and softness.

Pound’s hostility to Victorian literature is not to be mistaken for a generalised assault on the past, of the kind announced by the Italian Futurists. On the contrary, Pound seeks to show that the post-Miltonic line of poets represented a departure from the true traditions of poetry to which he

urges a return -the classical and medieval tradition from Homer through Chaucer and Dante to Shakespeare. The central virtues of this older poetic tradition are those that have recently been revived by Pound and his circle under the slogan of Imagism: avoidance of rhetoric and ornament, concentration on the clear, precise image. That Pound opposed these literary virtues above all to the newspapers appears less in his writings on Milton or on poetry than in the terms of his praise for Joyce's *Ulysses*. In his 'Paris Letter' to the New York *Dial* of May 1922, Pound praised especially the 'Cyclops' episode of the novel for charting the distance between reality and rhetoric, and in these terms:

... the satire on the various dead manners of language culminates in the execution scene, blood and sugar stewed into clichés and rhetoric; just what the public deserves, and just what the public gets every morning with its porridge, in the *Daily Mail* and in sentimentorhetorical journalism... (Read 1968 198)

In the same article, Pound considers the multiple significances of the central figure of Leopold Bloom, who is at the same time "Shakespeare, Ulysses, The Wandering Jew, the Daily Mail reader, the man who believes what he sees in the papers" (Read 1968 194). Students of Joyce's *Ulysses* would of course not have any difficulty in elaborating this view of the novel's engagement with newspapers, which extends from Mr Deasy's letter, through Bloom's wiping himself with a page of a cheap magazine, through the 'Aeolus' episode in which the newspaper office becomes the great windbag of modern rhetoric, all the way to the linguistic exhaustion of the 'Ithaca' chapter.

For Pound, then, as for Eliot, the distinctive duty of the serious modern artist in prose or verse was to refresh the resources of the living language and thus to combat the deadening effects of journalistic discourse. This single principle, along with the indications given by these critics about the deadly consequences of Miltonic rhetoric and of the 'dissociation of sensibility', provided their disciples and followers in criticism with a programme of critical work that would test the strengths and weaknesses of the accepted literary canon, and from such a trial bring forth a new one.

Eliot's impact on the canon is sometimes regarded simply in terms of his promotion of John Donne, but in fact it is far more extensive than this. A Donne revival was already on its way, but Eliot both underpinned it with a historical scheme and a criterion of value, and generalised its critical

implications, in his observations on the 'dissociation of sensibility'. The qualities of Elizabethan and Jacobean verse in general could now be used to show up deficiencies in the post-Miltonic tradition in accordance with an attractively simple narrative of a Fall from integration. In this story, Milton could be identified as the poet who had eaten, in *Paradise Lost*, the apple of artificial rhetoric, while Shelley could be cast as his anaemic offspring. The Cambridge critic I.A. Richards, for example, suggested in *Practical Criticism* (1929 315-6), that admiration for Shelley or Milton was really a conventional respect for icons of poetic fame, and was not based on qualities of their verse. Professors began to notice in their students an abrupt turn against Shelley; and Edmund Wilson in *Axel's Castle* (1931) warned that a new orthodoxy was already established in the younger generation:

With the ascendancy of T. S. Eliot, the Elizabethan dramatists have come back into fashion, and the nineteenth-century poets gone out. Milton's poetic reputation has sunk, and Dryden's and Pope's have risen. It is as much as one's life is worth nowadays, among young people, to say an approving word for Shelley or a dubious one about Donne. (Wilson 1931 116-7)

In particular, the work of the Cambridge critic F. R. Leavis on the English verse tradition in his books *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) and *Revaluation* (1936) applied Eliot's and Pound's discriminations relentlessly, with the result that the Victorian poetic tradition was declared dead and buried, along with the poetic reputations of Milton and Shelley. John Donne was acclaimed as the great poet of the seventeenth century in Milton's place, and those later poets singled out for praise –Keats, Hopkins, Yeats, and Eliot himself– were regarded as valuable to the extent that they resembled Donne in the sensuous vigour of their language. And again, in Richards and Leavis, the health of the true poetic canon is insistently contrasted with the diseased state of modernity, most readily legible in the hysterics of the newspapers, the cinema and the radio.

So far I have been considering revisions of the English poetic canon in the light of modernist writers' diagnosis of the ills of modernity. But it should be added, if more briefly, that modernist criticism had more drastic effects upon the literary canon than just in its impact upon the reputations of Donne, Milton, or Shelley. Recent discussions of the literary canon's distortions by the priorities of modernism have tended to concentrate upon the marginalisation of women writers (other than Virginia Woolf) in our

accounts of modernism itself, or –in the context of the United States– upon the canonization of white writers at the expense of black; and some valuable corrections or restorations have been made in both of these cases. Yet modernist criticism's most extensive and damaging effect on the canon struck at a perhaps more basic generic level, wiping out whole categories of non-fictional prose as implicitly non-literary. For, having adopted the redemptive virtues of the poetic image as the central distinction between true literature and its opposite –journalism– the modernist critics wittingly or unwittingly thus removed the least poetic genres from consideration as literature at all. As these modernist principles were consolidated in the academic study of literature from the 1930s to the 1960s, literature came increasingly to be defined as 'poetic' in the Imagist sense. This allowed most drama, and certain kinds of prose fiction (Emily Brontë but not John Galsworthy, Herman Melville but not Theodore Dreiser) to be valued as fully literary, but it closed the door upon almost all examples of philosophical, scientific, historical, topographical, or even biographical prose. Literature, in the modernist dispensation, and especially in its academic embodiments, now consists only of poems, plays, prose fictions, and –interestingly the only exception among non-fictional genres– literary criticism of a certain kind.

It is now commonly assumed that the older any version of a literary canon is, the smaller and more restrictive it will be. This misconception can be refuted easily enough by looking at what I shall call the Edwardian canon: what was regarded as great literature immediately before Pound's and Eliot's principles were announced. The shape of the Edwardian canon is readily legible from the early volumes of the Everyman's Library –the major series of popular reprints of great literary works, launched in 1906, and from Arnold Bennett's handbook of 1909, *Literary Taste: How to Form It*, which advised self-educating readers how to assemble a library of truly great works. Both projects assume without question that Literature includes all manner of prose writings by scientists, theologians, travellers, economists, historians, philosophers, and biographers; and the standard academic histories of literature that appeared in this period also included chapters on these kinds of prose work. Everybody knew, until about the 1930s, that such works as Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and even Newton's *Principia Mathematica* were just as much part of English literature as the poems of Pope or Dryden. In this respect, the canon after modernism has shrunk remarkably.

A further, and much better known effect of modernist criticism on the canon was the severe demotion of a group of early twentieth-century writers

who were mischievously characterised by Virginia Woolf and other modernists as 'Edwardians'. As the critic Frank Swinnerton pointed out in *The Georgian Literary Scene* (1935), there was never really such a thing as an Edwardian writer: the period lasted only nine years, and one can find scarcely any author whose significant work is confined between those dates. The usual suspects – Shaw, Chesterton, Galsworthy, Bennett, Barrie, Wells – were all still producing new, often major work after 1910, indeed well into the Twenties. Woolf's reasons for calling them Edwardians were polemical – to suggest that they had no real claim upon the future. Several younger writers in the 1920s, including D. H. Lawrence and Robert Graves, joined the critical assault upon the so-called Edwardians, often charging them with various ideological crimes such as an outmoded belief in social progress, earning far too much money from their writings, and, worse still, contamination by the values of journalism. Indeed, all of the 'Edwardian' writers I have mentioned were or had once been professional journalists, and some – notably Wells and Shaw – were proud to regard themselves as journalists who also wrote plays and novels. Various attempts have been made to redeem the reputations of these authors, but it is unlikely that their work – certainly very uneven in quality – can be assessed sanely until we find some way to unravel that persistent modernist construction in which literature and journalism are taken to be stark opposites.

A final process of canonization should be considered here. Certain critical writings – or at least texts that we read as if they were critical in intention – of certain modernist writers have been frequently reprinted in anthologies, readers or appendices, and cited in textbooks while others are little read. The texts most often reproduced are those that seem to shed a fairly direct light on the methods or working principles of a given modernist author: Woolf on catching the impressions of a day, Lawrence on his new conception of characterization while writing *The Rainbow*, Eliot on impersonality and on the 'mythical method', Joyce (or Stephen Dedalus at least) on the impassivity of the artist, and perhaps a few slogans from Pound. But there is much more to modernist criticism than a series of clues to the working methods of these poets and novelists. In the first place, there are several perceptive modernist critics who are not among the leading poets and novelists, but nonetheless worth studying for their critical writings alone – John Middleton Murry, Edwin Muir, Robert Graves, Edgell Rickword, William Empson, to name a few. Even if we confine ourselves to the high modernist pantheon, we should find that the observations that modernist writers make about the works of others will often tell us more about them

than the direct justifications they make for their own works. And in their extensive critical writings on the earlier traditions they valued and those they repudiated, they show us more fully what it meant for them to be modern.

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# On Reading Considered as One of the Fine Arts: Collage and Modern Writing

Esteban Pujals Gesalí

In October 1961 the Museum of Modern Art opened an exhibition the title of which was 'The Art of Assemblage'. The show, curated by William Seitz, included 252 heterogeneous works, a few from as early as the fifteenth century and some from remote cultures. Most of the pieces, however, were by artists associated with Dada and produced in the years immediately before and after the First World War. There was also a smaller group of works that had been 'assembled' much more recently, such as Edward Kienholz' *John Doe*, of 1959 (two halves of an armless male mannequin in a child's pram), Robert Rauschenberg's *Canyon*, also of 1959 (a combination of oil on canvas with pasted printed matter, photographs, metal and a stuffed eagle), or Joseph Cornell's *Central Park Carrousel, In Memoriam*, of 1950 (a construction in wood, mirror, wire netting and paper). To accompany the works, Seitz produced an illustrated catalogue, in the Foreword to which he stated that the show intended to survey 'the metaphysics of assemblage rather than its history'. On the same page Seitz provided his definition of works that "incorporate reality... without imitating it: Save for a few calculated examples, Seitz wrote, the physical characteristics that these collages, objects and constructions have in common can be stated simply:

1. They are predominantly assembled rather than painted, drawn, modelled, or carved.

2. Entirely or in part, their constituent elements are preformed natural or manufactured materials, objects, or fragments not intended as art materials.” (Seitz 1961 6)

It seems that originally the show was to have been titled ‘The Art of Collage’, but this was eventually changed in order to avoid the primarily painterly term *collage*, so that the exhibition could also include three-dimensional works.

Considered from the perspective of the last 36 years, Seitz’ motives in ‘The Art of Assemblage’ are obvious. First, he wanted to associate assemblage with the ethos and with the aura of Dada in the years before and after the First World War; and secondly, he wanted to develop the notion of assemblage into a coherent theory that could serve as a rationale for the new developments embraced by the exhibition in works such as those of Joseph Cornell and Robert Rauschenberg. Both the exhibition and the catalogue underlined historical and conceptual continuities between Dada and late 1950s ‘collage’. But Seitz also organised a panel discussion which he moderated and to which he invited two critics, Roger Shattuck and Lawrence Alloway (who was teaching that year in Bennington, Vermont), as well as three artists: Robert Rauschenberg, Richard Huelsenbeck (who had emigrated to New York in 1936, changed his name to Charles Hulbeck, and established a successful practice as a psychiatrist), and Marcel Duchamp. It was on this occasion that Duchamp made his now classic statement ‘Apropos of Readymades’, which took almost four minutes to make –it was his longest public speech– and which ended with the following remark:

Since tubes of paint used by the artist are manufactured and readymade products, we must conclude that all paintings in the world are ‘Readymades Aided’ – and also works of assemblage. (Elderfield 1993 136)

It is this statement of Duchamp’s and the context of 1961 in which it was made that I want to use as my starting point. It seems to me that here we have an anticipation of most of what has happened in literature and in the arts in this second half of our century. Let me first of all direct your attention to the impeccable consistency of the statement in relation to the whole of Duchamp’s career as an artist –or as an anti-artist, if you prefer– from its beginnings in the 1910s, in that once again he insists on art being something that has to do with the vision of the viewer, rather than with the object. Secondly, and this is what my talk is mainly going to deal with, here Duchamp

is making a highly complex conceptual move in a game of chess that involves the whole history of 20th century art and writing. Let me explain this.

At exactly the same time as 'The Art of Assemblage' exhibition was being held at the MOMA, the Guggenheim was showing another exhibition of recent paintings by Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Adolph Gottlieb, Arshile Gorky and others. There was no catalogue for this exhibition. After two decades of New York School, Abstract Expressionism was in its maturity and the sponsors of the Guggenheim felt no need to explain the aesthetic and formal qualities of those works. This had been done already by Alfred Barr, Clement Greenberg, Michel Seuphor, Meyer Shapiro and other writers in the two decades and a half preceding the exhibition. Twenty five years earlier, in the introduction to the 1936 catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Alfred Barr had already constructed a genealogy of abstract modern styles based on the autonomy of the art object (Barr 1936), and in the preface to his *What is Modern Painting?* (Barr 1943) he had answered the question in the title by writing: "It is not easy to answer this question in writing, for writing is done in words, while paintings are made of shapes and colors". Clement Greenberg had similarly sought to define a role for autonomous and what he called 'pure' painting in both his 'Avant Garde and Kitsch' (Greenberg 1939) and in 'Towards a Newer Laokoön' (Greenberg 1940). It was in this last essay that Greenberg rendered the reductive equation whereby the formal value of the work resided in its medium; this combined with a genealogical construction similar to that of Alfred Barr's to turn modernism into a succession of increasingly self-referential terms. Later on, realizing that the dialogue between illusion and surface dominated the concerns of such French and Spanish moderns as Braque, Picasso or Gris, Greenberg's much later essay 'Modernist Painting' (Greenberg 1965), published four years after the Guggenheim abstract art and the MOMA 'assemblage' exhibitions, was to celebrate the eventual achievement of American, Dutch and German abstractionists whose compositions were more completely abstract.

Now, in putting together 'The Art of Assemblage', neither Peter Selz, Curator at the MOMA since 1958, nor William Seitz, Associate Curator for the exhibition, were intending an open attack on the Guggenheim show or on the artists whose works were on exhibition there or on the formalist discourses that justified their value. Seitz had actually written essays on the late works of Manet and had supported abstract artists like Mark Tobey. But new currents were emerging. In the late 1950s kinetic art, pop art, junk art and happenings were beginning to find, at least to some extent, sponsorship

and name. And, although several American pop artists would keep mentioning Willem De Kooning as an important influence, *their* aesthetics surely meant a break with Abstract Expressionism. If one thinks of Pop's return to Dada 'collage', which from Greenberg's perspective must have felt as a return to 'impure' representation, or if one considers Minimal sculpture and its Duchampian avoidance of both aesthetic considerations and personality, one can easily understand that in 1961 the realm of pure abstract forms constructed by Barr and Greenberg against the contaminations of kitsch was already seen with suspicion by a good number of artists, both in the U.S. and in Europe. The year before 'The Art of Assemblage' show, the Dutch artist Stanley Brouwn had made the announcement that all the shoe shops in Amsterdam constituted an exhibition of his works, and in 1961 Rauschenberg's *Erased Drawing by De Kooning*, and his portrait-telegram *This is a Portrait of Iris Clert if I say So* were six and five years old respectively.

Reading the transcript of the discussion at which Duchamp made his statement on ready-mades, one finds many symptoms of the change in direction that was then taking place in the arts, away from abstraction and the notion of autonomy in art and away from the chauvinistically American resonances of Abstract Expressionism. When the time came for members of the audience to ask questions, George Maciunas, the editor of *Fluxus* magazine, asked Roger Shattuck about some disparaging remark that he had made about Neo-Dada movements in Europe. It is interesting to note that neither Maciunas nor Fluxus were well known yet: the transcriber of the taped session recorded him as "George McQuiness, editor of *Flexus* magazine".

At various moments in the discussion Robert Rauschenberg insisted on the idea that meaning belongs to the people, to viewers, rather than to the artist or to the object. But nobody, either in the panel or in the audience, mentioned the Guggenheim exhibition and even less did anyone make a critical suggestion with respect to abstraction. The nearest that the discussion ever came to focussing on the abstractionist / non abstractionist alternatives was a moment when Lawrence Alloway made a distinction between art that depends on "purity of medium" and art that does not. At this point Rauschenberg asked him what he meant by "purity of medium" and Alloway insisted that there was a tradition of painting in which Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko belonged and in which Rauschenberg did not. Rauschenberg then said he didn't see the difference, Rothko and himself being in the same position, that of an artist using his materials.

Although at the panel the tension did not become audible, it must have been very visible for visitors to both exhibitions in 1961 that already then at least two camps existed, abstractionism on the one side, and on the other what was still a confusing mixture of Neo-Dada, proto-Pop, proto-Minimalism and performance art. And it is fascinating today to read between the lines of the transcription. 1961 was, for instance, the year when Guy Debord's third film, *Critique de la separation*, was edited, a film in which the question of politics in the cinema is presented as something that cannot be limited to 'content' but is always already also located in the very structure and operation of the representation, a perspective that leads him to link the critique of ideology and a type of modernist formal radicality explicitly based on the remotivation of ready-made materials.

The Internationale Situationniste had, of course, been founded in 1957 and at least until 1962, when there was a split and a rival Second Situationist International was set up by Jörgen Nash and joined by others from the Dutch, German and Scandinavian sections, it showed a keen interest in aesthetic questions, including the critique of abstract art and the development of *détournement* in painting. Asger Jorn, perhaps the best known of the artists linked to the I.S., had actually left it in 1961, but he continued to work on his 'modifications', his best-known piece, 'L'avant-garde se rend pas', having been first exhibited in 1962.

One sees today that by 1961 it was clear already for many artists that the way in which abstract art had been theorised by the formalist critics of the middle decades of the century had turned it against the preoccupations that had been most central to the avant-garde movements from which it had emerged. The principle of autonomy, which could be used to explain many aspects of the work of Kandinsky or Mondrian, made very little sense when applied to the cubist 'collages' of Picasso and Braque, and even less when used in relation to works reflecting the spirit of collective revolt visible in much cubo-futurist Russian art and particularly in the works of such Dada artists as Grosz, Heartfield, Hausmann or Höch. And it was this aspect of early 20th century art that interested the younger artists rather than the epic tale of how certain individual painters had liberated themselves from the tradition of representation through the creation of an autonomous artistic realm. This autonomous world of art was beginning to be seen as the autonomy of the cage, rather than an image of freedom. Barr, Greenberg and Shapiro had managed to depoliticise one of the most political moments in the history of Western art. After the aesthetic turmoil of the years around the First World War, which produced an array of brand new kinds of art,

hybrid forms, media, genres, they had succeeded in reconstructing the cultural priority of oil painting and then in carrying the separation of art from life to an extreme never reached before in Western art.

The younger painters on show at 'The Art of Assemblage' exhibition, and represented by Robert Rauschenberg in the panel discussion, could see the formalist historization of twentieth century art as a strategy to exclude the utopian aspiration to dissolve art into the relations between the members of the community. For many artists active in the 60s and later in the 70s, this would be seen as the most valuable inheritance of the avant-garde. By working on mixed media or on completely ephemeral materials and by reintroducing into art the problematics of meaning, these artists were trying to return to some point in the early 20s in order to reopen the aesthetic debate reintroducing aspects that had been left out of the scene and which they saw as essential to contemporary art.

Let me turn now briefly to Jacques Derrida's exploration of 'collage' in his grammatology. Of course, his reading of 'collage' takes place in the context of a deconstruction of philosophy as mimesis. Mimesis, or "mimetologism", as Derrida is fond of calling it, refers to the capture of representation by the metaphysics of "logocentrism", the era extending from Plato to NATO, or at least from Plato to Freud, in which writing is reduced to a secondary status as "vehicle", in which the signified is always prior to the material sign, the purely intelligible prior to the merely sensible. In spite of its associated complexities and controversies, Derrida's basic formulation of the nature of language is relatively simple, and it is a formulation which, placed in the context of the 'collage' paradigm, takes on its fullest significance. Grammatology is 'poststructuralist' in that it replaces the 'sign' with the more basic unit of the 'gram'.

In *Positions* (1972) Derrida writes: "It is a question of producing a new concept of writing. This concept can be called gram or différance... Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each 'element' –phoneme or grapheme– being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the text produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces. The gram, then, is the most general concept of semiology –which thus becomes grammatology." (Derrida 1981 26) In other words, 'collage' ('montage', 'assemblage') is the

manifestation at the level of discourse of the “gram” principle. As the editors of the Group *Mu* say in the special issue of the *Revue d'esthétique* that they edited in 1978 on ‘Collage’: “Its heterogeneity, even if it is reduced by every operation of composition, imposes itself on the reading as stimulation to produce a signification which could be neither univocal nor stable. Each cited element breaks the continuity or the linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to a double reading: that of the fragment perceived in a relation to its text of origin; that of the same fragment as incorporated into the new whole, a different totality. The trick of ‘collage’ consists also of never entirely suppressing the alterity of these elements reunited in a temporary composition. Thus the art of ‘collage’ proves to be one of the most effective strategies in the putting into question of all the illusions of representation” (Group Mu 1978 34-35). This undecidable reading effect, oscillating between presence and absence, is just what Derrida tries to achieve in his writing, from his remotivation of concepts to his publishing of two books under one cover in *Glas*.

Let me now turn to a point just before the beginning of my talk, back to the title that I have chosen for this talk that I am in the middle of. This title is almost unthinkable before Derrida –or before Duchamp, as I will go on to argue in a minute. It is a writing that is a reading that is a writing. Everyone who is at all familiar with nineteenth century English literature knows that ‘On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts’ is the title of a long essay piece by Thomas De Quincey, the two parts of which were published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1827 and 1839 respectively. My changing one word in that title adapts it to my purposes as the title of a talk on ‘collage’. ‘Collage’ is today perhaps the most adequate model available, the one that seems to exert less violence on language for the purposes of reading and writing, for speaking and understanding, for verbal and non-verbal modes of meaning. Now, precisely because the word that I have suppressed from De Quincey's title is the shocking one, *my* title retains this ‘trace’, the bloody flavour of murder that is everywhere in De Quincey's modest proposal even when applied to its new context, the title of my talk. De Quincey's piece aligns itself explicitly with Dean Swift's and goes on to touch on a wide variety of items, from the etymology of the word “assassin” and its connections with “hashish”, to an appreciation of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the “Augustan age of murder”, to a consideration of poison as an abominable innovation from Italy, and finally to a passionate narrative of the “immortal” Williams' London murders of 1812, together with two others no less memorable. *My* superficially bloodless title in fact

turns *reading* into a murderous activity, and this may remind some of you of Derrida's interpretation of 'collage' in *La dissémination* as an "operation" that goes the way of "the blade of a red knife", an operation that turns the collagist, whether artist, writer, reader, speaker, critic or philosopher, into a castrator of some sort.

But let me now return to 1961 and to the panel discussion that was taking place at the MOMA a while ago, and in particular to Duchamp's statement declaring all painting ever as 'collage'. As I see it, this statement ought to be valued as a prodigy of aesthetic insight, as a beautiful work of conceptual art and as an admirable moral action. Aesthetically, to say that oil paintings are 'collages' can only mean that we are invited to *turn* paintings into 'collages' by an act of vision on our part –or perhaps also by an act of our hands and with the help of a pair of scissors. Duchamp was saying this six years before any of Derrida's books were published. Not that chronological priority is that important. But then maybe it is: once again in 1961 an artist is succeeding in *understanding* without philosophy or the sciences providing the kind of analytical help that could have made understanding easier. Back in the 1910s artists and poets had been trying hard, with precarious means, without an adequate method or terminology, to arrive at a sounder understanding of meaning. They had to proceed not thanks to philosophy or linguistics, but rather in spite of them, linguistics being obsessed at the time with making claims to a scientificity which it was buying at the enormous expense of the exclusion of writing as well as restriction of the discipline to phonology. The frequent references of avant-garde artists and poets in the second decade of the century to bizarre notions like Ouspensky's "fourth dimension" and the like demonstrate this situation. And once more, just like Malevich, Khlebnikov, Larionov and Kruchenyk were in the years preceding the First World War, Duchamp is in 1961 an artist trying single-handedly to open up new conceptual ground, in his case to open up something that to me sounds extremely like deconstruction, deconstruction 'avant la lettre'. One could even argue that this proposal of Duchamp's, that the whole tradition of Western art is, or should be treated as, 'collage', had already been made back in 1913, at the time of his earliest ready-mades, the bicycle wheel and the bottle-rack.

But I would like to insist on the *beauty* of Duchamp's declaration of all painting as ready-made. At the panel everyone spoke a good deal more than Duchamp did. Apart from his three-and-a-half minute statement, his answers to questions were laconic, mostly monosyllabic. As usual with Duchamp's proposals and suggestions, verbal or visual, his statement was bound to

generate a tremendous transformation in the alert listener's consciousness regarding his/her views on meaning, and this he did, as usual, with a minimum of expressive investment. An elegant gesture consisting of just a few casual words said in his charmingly accented English, and suddenly all the rhetoric of liberation from tradition constructed around Abstract Expressionism and the idea of a 'pure' painting is made to sound absurd: there's no need for *that* kind of formal freedom because tradition itself is suddenly seen as 'ready-liberated' and whatever problem you had before in seeing things the way Duchamp sees them was *your* problem, not the world's, not art's, not tradition's, certainly not Duchamp's.

But, taken in its 1961 context, Duchamp's declaration of all art of the past as "Readymades Aided –and also works of assemblage" was, I think, an admirable piece of political action. His making use of his very special position in the history of Western art for the purposes of providing ideas and inspiration to a generation that was as dissatisfied as himself about the way in which history had been written down was, I think, a very deliberate and effective act, even if executed in the casual, jokelike way that was his signature always. I am not suggesting that May '68 in France and elsewhere would not have happened had Duchamp not made this statement, as no one will seriously argue that without the twelve issues of the *International Situationniste* the occupation movements in Paris would never have started. But I do think that Duchamp was perfectly conscious at the time of the 'Art of Assemblage' show that people's notions about meaning, about history and about the ways in which meaning and history could be seen as political processes that depended on one's actions, were on the point of being radically changed. And he took the opportunity of his presence on the panel to contribute to that change. His words "aided" an already forming tendency towards the reintroduction of politics into art and towards a better understanding of the ways in which meaning is constructed.

Contrary to Auden's line in his poem on the death of Yeats, poetry does make things happen; if nothing else, Duchamp's poetry contributed to make "happenings" happen in the 1960s and 1970s. This involved an increased understanding of the relation between life and art, which is, I think, a lot more than most 20th century artists can boast of having achieved.

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## **A Squint look at Modernism: the Tradition and the Aftermath**

Manuela Palacios González

Most current critical approaches highlight the need to contextualize literary studies, an aspect which was seriously neglected during the long-lasting dominion of immanent studies in literature until the 1960s. However, the analysis of the context in which literature is produced cannot be limited to a synchronic scrutiny of social, political, and economic conditions –although I am quick to acknowledge the vital importance of these issues. A contextual inquiry should also encompass the survey of the diachronic evolution of ideas and tendencies. As with many other critical tactics, one must beware of the pitfalls of a diachronic approach, namely, as exposed by New Historicism, our penchant for narrativization, for the bestowal of a teleological purpose on a historical or social process. And yet, the advantages of a diachronic method may outnumber the risks, proving to be especially productive for the analysis of Modernism, since an exclusively synchronic exploration of this artistic period may conjure up a mirage of novelties, originality, and climactic achievement followed by barrenness.

Close to the turn of the century and millennium, the Conference on 'Modernism and Modernity', held at the University of Santiago in 1997, undertook to reexamine the settled notions about modernism, an on-going debate of great topicality in the academic world. Current challenges to concepts such as 'originality', the celebration of intertextuality, the concern

with the construction of modernism as an artistic period of insurmountable accomplishments: these were all issues repeatedly raised at the conference, and they became particularly central to the panel discussions 'Tradition and Modernity' and 'Modernism and Turn of the Century'. The former panel focused on the seemingly paradoxical interaction of modernism with a past literary tradition, and the latter one considered the perpetuation, modification, and dismissal of various modernist tenets by later literary and critical practices vaguely labelled as postmodern. Both fields of inquiry suggested to me the visual metaphor of the 'squint look' as a productive strategy to destabilize deep-rooted notions regarding modernism.

Although the title of the first panel referred to tradition and modernity in the singular, Chris Baldick insisted on pluralizing these terms, not simply to recognize varieties among national and regional cultures -see for instance the very different conceptualizations of modernism as a kind of mannerism in Spanish literature versus the experimental avant-garde in British literature- but also to underline the temporality of these terms throughout history. In this light, we found it very useful to compare the various applications of the term modernism since the seventeenth century, and to examine the extent to which twentieth-century modernism is either a development or a rebuff of the sense of modernity brought about by the Enlightenment .

However, I wonder whether the use of the plural form of terms like tradition or modernity is any less essentializing than the singular, since there seems to persist the belief that all the categories under the same label share some common characteristic which transcends time and space. Actually, Terry Eagleton began his main lecture at this conference with the statement that all modernisms share their rejection of nineteenth-century realism. I would like to think that the analysis of family resemblances -as suggested by Wittgenstein- which account for transformations and variations among the items under the same label might be more fruitful and less essentializing. Nevertheless, I admit that an important feature of the use of categories in the plural form is to expose the existence of different political projects behind one nominal essence.

Both C. Baldick and Terry Eagleton added another term to the debate, 'modernization', which they considered a capitalist ruse. Modernization, they maintained, creates anxiety and unhappiness in people and produces narratives of crisis that only seem to be effectively counterbalanced by recourse to traditional beliefs such as family or religious values. Therefore, T. Eagleton stressed the necessity that modernization has

of tradition. I am ready to accept this view, as I observe a current backlash against the complete emancipation of women, which is being cemented on family values that require of women special sacrifices. However, I would like to consider another sense of the word 'modernization' which has been pointed out by Raymond Williams in his *Keywords*: "some local alteration or improvement of what is still, basically, an old institution or system". This sense of the term rules out, I admit, the possibility of a radical transformation of society, and yet, it conveys the hopeful expectation of an improvement.

Modernity may seem to be the natural antonym of tradition, but Manuel Barbeito deftly turned to T.S. Eliot's seminal essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in order to explore the modernist appropriation and transformation of the past literary tradition. The main point of this allusion, however, was not merely to argue how the past influenced the present, but how the past was radically transformed by the present. In an image which resembles the structuralist simile of the chess-game, Eliot defines the literary tradition as an ideal order of existing monuments which is modified by the introduction of new works. However, as Chris Baldick pointed out, and the process of publication of *The Waste Land* shows, this reorganization is not merely the responsibility of a great writer or the inherent values of a masterpiece, but the result of critical intervention and publishing strategies.

As M. Barbeito called our attention to the common etymology of the words 'tradition' and 'treason' (Latin, *Traditio*) the question was soon raised by the audience as to whether each reading of the past may not be an inevitable betrayal. The literary tradition is re-constructed according to our needs and values every time we approach it. Virginia Woolf, for instance, argued in *A Room of One's Own* that there is a blank page still to be filled in: the tradition of women writers headed by an imaginary Judith Shakespeare. Therefore, we must beware of investing the word 'treason' in this context with a sense of illegitimacy, as this would imply a belief in the existence of a 'proper' (and Derrida's reflection on the polysemy of the word *propre*—clean, adequate, one's own— comes in handy here) *Ur*-tradition.

In line with all this, M. Barbeito suggested that one possible signal of modernity, which he traced back to the seventeenth century, was Hamlet's doubt with regard to his ghostly father's demands. A later, and more blatant, betrayal of tradition is Milton's re-reading of the Bible in *Paradise Lost*. The central position of the word "disobedience" on the first line of the poem marks a watershed between the pre-modern veneration for tradition ("a blind or timid adherence" in Eliot's words, a "repetition") and the modern principle of doubt which was enthroned by the Enlightenment.

Terry Eagleton, who agreed with the primordial role of the concept of disobedience in *Paradise Lost*, preferred to trace this unruliness to the origins of humankind. Rather than finding it a mark of modernity, Eagleton considered disobedience as concomitant of tradition. By means of a deconstructionist procedure, he explained how traditions cannot get along without their heretics because traditions must produce their heretics: the snake was always already there in the garden. Why? Because the heretics help draw the boundaries of traditions and reinforce their identities. Tradition and deviation, the backward-looking and the forward-looking are, in this sense, in complicity with each other.

As for the way the present is altered by tradition, M. Barbeito proposed a subversive attitude towards the latter: to actively 'remember' (perhaps re-member?) the tradition rather than give way to the inertia of its "immemorial" (*OED*) usage, to denounce, along with Gulliver, the "Old Habits", but to derive knowledge from its long meditation on the human predicament. I would like to add that the 'difference' represented by tradition may provide us with alternatives to the less desirable aspects of the present. It is this difference which warrants the possibility of change.

Throughout history there have been several periods that experienced a very acute awareness of their modernity. For this reason, we may even speak of a certain tradition of the modern, an oxymoronic phrase that María Lozano connected with other master-narratives like originality, subjectivity, or the idea of the artist as master of his discourse and which were contradicted by the practices of continental modernism.

From the audience came the question of why it was precisely the beginning of the twentieth century that succeeded in keeping the label of modernism for its identification. Terry Eagleton emphasized the very special concern that this period had with time and history, its revision of the notion of temporality. I personally think that the temporal coincidence of this sense of modernity with the growing institutionalization of English studies at universities facilitated the entrance and permanence of this label in histories of literature. All previous claims for modernity in literary history were past, but the beginning of the twentieth century witnessed an intoxicating desire to "make it new" in creative writing, and academic studies soon joined to record this exhilarating atmosphere. Besides, as M. Lozano pointed out, English Departments were mesmerized by the prestige of the new writers' difficulty. The task to decipher modernist texts provided a justification for the existence of professors and critics.

We were also warned about the existence of suppressed traditions, such as, according to M. Lozano, the neglected role of the Mississippi or the Romantic and Symbolist American poetry in T.S. Eliot's work. These are cases of suppression that may have been encouraged by the writers themselves, as in Eliot's frequent and explicit anti-Romantic stance. Terry Eagleton's remark that traditions must produce their heretics in order to mark their boundaries, may apply to this particular example, and we may interpret Eliot's suppression (and of course T.E. Hulme's disparagement of the "dampness" of the Romantics) as a modernist imposition. The reason for this imposition, in M. Lozano's opinion, is partly Eliot and Pound's attraction toward the prestige of the European over the American literary tradition. This brings to my mind Ezra Pound's poem 'A Pact', where he proposes a truce with Walt Whitman and represents his former conflicts with the vernacular tradition in terms not dissimilar to the psychoanalytic ones employed by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*. "I come to you as a grown child/ Who has had a pig-headed father". However, and more importantly according to M. Lozano, the dismissal of the American literary tradition can be explained because, whereas the European modernist writer needs to fight against classical realism, the American modernist writer still needs to fight "the whale" of Romanticism and Symbolism.

The following panel 'Modernism and the Turn of the Century', which gathered Christopher Norris, Aránzazu Usandizaga, Bernd Dietz and myself, focused on the transformations of modernism by later developments both in critical theory and in various artistic manifestations.

If postmodernism is considered as a medley of narratives, I added yet another one to the burden by telling the story of the evolution of my work on Virginia Woolf and Post-Impressionist painting. The different steps in my research on this modernist writer have somehow run parallel to the various stages in the reception of Woolf's work. Aware as I am of the tendency of all narratives to construct some teleological progression, I must warn that no such progression is intended as from incorrect to correct, from naive to sophisticated, or even from an ineffective to an effective critical approach.

As a student, I was taught how to enjoy the texture of Woolf's discourse. A predominantly formalist approach showed me how experimentation with plot, time and characterization worked. Later, with the beginning of my dissertation on Woolf and the Post-Impressionist painters I also analysed formalist issues, such as the structural value of those masses on the right and left of the painting that Lily Briscoe is concerned with in *To the*

*Lighthouse*. What is mass? What is the difference between mass and volume? These were the types of questions that engaged my attention at the time.

Woolf's texts, however, also posed other problems that a formalist analysis did not account for in a satisfactory way. I could see, for instance, that Lily Briscoe's postponement of the completion of her painting was not merely a technical problem of balance between two masses, but was also inextricably linked to the ideological construction of gender roles and to the material circumstances in which women practice art. This was for me a time when I was committed to feminism, and another conference similar to this one, the Shakespeare week of 1987, with its discussion of Cultural Materialism also left a deep mark in my research.

Along with other productive critical strategies, Cultural Materialism encourages the analysis of contradictions in texts. These textual contradictions expose tensions and struggles in society which not even literature, with its poetic charm, can transcend. In my work on Woolf, I concentrated on aspects such as Woolf's ambivalence towards Post-Impressionism: her admiration for the silent art of painting, where narrative content can be restricted to a minimum, as well as her critique of its lack of an ethical commitment. The problem I faced then was that I ended up with a writer who was a sort of anomaly: a writer who maintained incompatible views in different texts. I felt uneasy with this undesired denigration of a writer I so much admired, but, above all, I disapproved of the position in which this approach placed me: finding fault with Woolf's inconsistencies but never engaging the examination of my own.

I am currently coping with this critical impasse. Analyses such as Toril Moi's (*Sexual/Textual Politics*, 1985) and Pamela Caughie's (*Virginia Woolf and Post-Modernism*, 1991) are illuminating in that they propose a functional approach to these contradictions, a critical tool that is historically contingent, provisional and relational. In this light, Woolf's apparently incompatible admiration for the sentimental Picturesque and for abstract Post-Impressionist still-lives can be seen as a successive change of focus to test different conceptions of art.

Pamela Caughie borrows Woolf's famous declaration and begins her book with the claim that: "In or about December 1985, Virginia Woolf criticism changed". She is referring to the impact of Toril Moi's work on current analyses of Woolf's writing. Caughie informs Moi's functional approach with some of the productive strategies of postmodernism, such as the ones just mentioned. Nevertheless, I believe that the previous stages in the reception of Woolf's work, formalism and radical feminism, were

necessary to get where we are now, and they continue to provide crucial questions with which to interrogate the text. There need be no limit to the number, or type, of questions one may ask of a text.

In the discussion of this presentation, M. Barbeito inquired whether the opposition formalist/post-formalist revolves around the binary opposition unity/diversity. In my opinion, there is indeed some aspiration to wholeness and balance of tensions in a great deal of formalist criticism, but the methodological reduction to a contrast of essences, as in the concepts 'unity' or 'diversity', may be self-defeating, and may mislead us into the same logic of sameness that we accuse formalism of. In the case of writers like Woolf, one often notices the struggle to achieve harmony and stability out of chaos and change, as if it were the writer's social function to provide this hope; and yet, such harmony is always ephemeral and soon gives way to the flux. So order is there and, at the same time, it is not. One may wonder to what extent order is there merely as an illusion, or on the contrary, whether works of art are privileged objects for its manifestation.

In his answer to M. Barbeito's question, Bernd Ditez suggested that current trash culture, the overabundance of artistic production and of stylistic diversity make the illusion of unity impossible. As a corrective to this situation, there will be, in his opinion, a build-up in the desire for centrality and for universal standards in the next decades. Along a very different line, A. Usandizaga's contribution to the dialectic of unity/diversity emphasized the avant-garde role of modernism in the attempt to do away with order, play with structure, and break it down so as to destabilize it. Finally, C. Norris remarked on how the interest in the polarity unity/diversity recurs periodically, and how contemporary fascination with chaos may well be a *fin de siècle* fantasy. Many current allusions to chaos theory, for instance, are based on a misunderstanding which is partly due to the appropriation of a theory of physics for the analysis of culture. Chaos theory studies the results of predictions issued from non-linear models and uses rigorous mathematical methods which leave little room for 'chaos' as understood by the layperson. Besides this clarification, C. Norris joined those who question the consideration of organic unity, as defended by New Criticism, as a value in itself, and highlighted the fruitful and stimulating nature that diversity may have in literature.

The title of this panel (in Spanish 'Modernismo y Fin de Siglo') is somewhat ambiguous as it may refer to the end of either the nineteenth or the twentieth centuries. 'End of the millennium' might have been a less misleading choice, as the purpose of the panel was to connect modernism

with current critical and artistic practices. Bernd Dietz confessed his preference for the type of speculative endeavour involved in the forecast of future cultural theories, rather than dealing with a closed, fictionalized notion of the *fin de siècle*. He chose two opposing poles of Canadian literary theory in this century, Northrop Frye and Marshall McLuhan, whom he presented as, respectively, representatives of the modern/postmodern opposition, and showed how their work has become intertwined with the problematic identity of Canada as a nation. B. Dietz also singled out a paradox as his starting point: McLuhan, the innovative, futuristic guru of the new media in the 1960s is now dated, whereas the reactionary, old-fashioned Frye is the man of the future.

Frye, a humble pupil from a local village in Québec, made his way into the University of Toronto thanks to a scholarship won at a national typing contest. A minister of the United Church of Canada, Frye never hid his interest in connecting literary criticism with theology. His book, *Anatomy of Criticism*, aimed at constructing a universal grammar for literature. McLuhan worked with Frye at the same Department of the University of Toronto. He was a politically reactionary Professor of English who had specialized in Old English. His interest in the mass media arose out of his concern with their pernicious effect on literature, but, B. Dietz maintained, he sold his soul to the devil and became fascinated by the evil he had undertaken to overturn.

So far, these are two very brief outlines of these two luminaries' careers. A rather compelling argument was woven by B. Dietz as he elaborated on the political concomitants of both academic perspectives. At a time when Canadian citizens were hungry for a national identity, Frye may have deprived his Canadian contemporaries of self-reliance when he stated that an expression like 'Canadian poetry' is actually a sort of oxymoron. Frye's conviction that the standards to create and evaluate good poetry are universal and that, by these standards, most Canadian poetry stops short of a canonical level must have disillusioned his fellow countrypeople. On the contrary, McLuhan managed to produce a picture of Modern Canada as the first nation of the twenty-first century, a time that will encourage nations without an identity. The global village will have no need of centres that establish standards of values, and the periphery will become the centre. B. Dietz maintained, however, that there is currently a reevaluation of the figure of Northrop Frye, and that he may well become a model for literary studies in the first part of the next millennium. Present dismay at the relativism of postmodern multiculturalism, the suspicion that texts of poor literary quality may be entering the canon exclusively on the basis of affirmative action, and

the pressure on universities and other centres of cultural authority to provide reliable values of scrutiny, evaluation, and intellectual discrimination: these are all factors that, according to B. Dietz, have set the stage for another swing of the pendulum towards the establishment of a universal aesthetics, such as the kind that Frye undertook to investigate.

This has certainly been one of the hottest debates in the academy for about the last twenty years. The debate is not over yet and, in my opinion, it should not be suppressed by the ideological impositions of any of the camps involved in it. The postmodern instability of the criterion of 'aesthetic quality' certainly makes many people uneasy. We must examine which are the particular social locations where this criterion originates, and which are the groups that may either benefit or suffer from its implementation. We must also analyse the ideological consequences of a cultural practice that focuses on the hierarchization of distinctions. A survey of the different canons of English literature through history suggests to me that value judgement is contingent and that there are not transhistorical, universal standards. The problem becomes further complicated when, from the general claim for universal values, we move on to specify exactly which are the devices, techniques or qualities that a good work of art must display. Consensus will be difficult to get at and several masterpieces will likely come to mind to contradict each of our conclusions.

If Northrop Frye and Marshall McLuhan might be respectively seen as paradigms of modernist and postmodernist attitudes in the 1960s, Aránzazu Usandizaga also identified a division, this time along gender lines, in the practice of the *Künstlerroman* during the modernist period. She quoted Pamela Caughie in the latter's distinction between the very different reactions of either male or female modernist writers to the problematization of the subject, and particularly of the hero or heroine: Caughie traces in texts by men some despair for what has been lost, but she finds, in writers like Virginia Woolf or Katherine Mansfield, an affirmation of something gained, a welcome challenge to adapt their aesthetic model so as to make it more flexible and responsive to change. It is for this reason that, according to A. Usandizaga, later women writers of this century have turned to the genre of the *Künstlerroman*, not so much due to a need for self-expression, but in order to approximate the Utopia of art as the best form of salvation for the heroine, who can no longer recognize her experience in the traditional literary destinies assigned to her.

The reservations I hold, however, with regard to some differences commonly made between male and female writing are based on the

biological determinism they seem to imply. Of course, many of the critics who attempt to pinpoint these gender differences will argue that it is not the writers' bodies that determine a specific way of writing, but the writers' experience of the way society invests their bodies with meaning. This experience, however, is necessarily linked to other factors such as class or race which, when examined, expose the exclusive attention to the difference between male and female writers as a rather problematic one.

A. Usandizaga finished her presentation in this panel about the passage from modernism to postmodernism by highlighting the way in which the modernist appropriation of the *Künstlerroman* on the part of women writers has constituted a frame to narrate a new myth which has become a highly topical subject in these postmodern times: that of verbal self-recovery.

The tensions between the cultural projects of modernism and postmodernism have given rise to a debate that Christopher Norris characterized as ferocious. The reason for this is the way questions of aesthetics are inextricably linked with issues of ethics, politics, human responsibility and epistemology. Terry Eagleton discusses various attitudes towards this problem in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. One may adopt a critical, dismissive, even hostile attitude towards aesthetics, and find it a non-existent subject, invented only by the bourgeoisie in order to promote certain interests. Another approach looks for transcendent, a-historical, absolute values, and sees aesthetics as a pure realm ideally removed from the sphere of contingent, political or cultural interests. Finally, Eagleton's own attitude, though recognizing the way aesthetics has been used to smuggle in particular bourgeois values, finds it an interesting contested area for political struggle.

Instead of essentializing the two projects of modernism and postmodernism, C. Norris chose to analyse the fissures and tensions within them. The work of Bruno Latour, the postmodern thinker and sociologist of science, exemplified for him the passage from a dismissal of the authority of scientific methods, to a recognition of the absurdity of taking cultural relativism too far, and of considering science as an exclusively contingent practice. This transformation in Latour's attitude is informed, according to C. Norris, with the spirit of modernity, which can be traced back to Kant's motto: dare to know. Although some postmodern thinkers have seen this motto as a contradiction, for it instructs to do something while inviting to question authority, C. Norris rejected this critique as facile and explained how Kant is not telling us what to think, is not specifying the content of what we ought to think, but is instead inviting us to question received truths and our own views.

On the other hand, Baudrillard is for C. Norris a thoroughly doctrinal postmodern thinker. His belief that everything is a play of illusions, that even terms like illusion, surface or appearance are not adequate, as there is no such opposition between surface and what is behind. There are no depths to be found, according to Baudrillard. We deceive ourselves if we imagine we can unmask appearances and discover, for instance, the real structure of economic domination. These are for him merely nostalgic values that are no longer credible. C. Norris acknowledged the sharpness of some of Baudrillard's insights, such as his diagnosis of Disneyland as a fallacious guarantee of the reality of America, Disneyland being a realm of fantasy but allowing the alibi that the rest of America has some hold on reality. However, and in spite of his brilliance as a social critic capable of identifying some ideological misrecognitions, C. Norris finds Baudrillard's postmodern attitude a dangerous passage from the scepticism that the Enlightenment left us as a legacy to the cynicism that announces the end of truth, history, reality.

When asked by A. Usandizaga what will come after postmodernism, C. Norris confessed that it is difficult to envisage a cultural project that may be more postmodern than postmodernism. The conference finished with his declaration that, in spite of the pressure to make it new, he can hardly imagine a more critical, self-aware, complex and reflective project than Deconstruction.

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