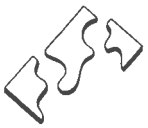

Postmodernism, Language, and Textuality Part I

Hugh J. Silverman
State University of New York at Stony Brook

Postmodernism has no special place of origin. The meaning and function of postmodernism is to operate at places of closure, at the limits of modernist productions and practices, at the margins of what proclaims itself to be new and a break with tradition, and at the multiple edges of these claims to self-consciousness and auto-reflection. Postmodernism is not as such a new style of creating artworks, of synthesizing novel self-expressions, and of justifying theoretically its aesthetic practices. Postmodernism does not open up a new field of artistic, philosophical, cultural, or even institutional activities. Its very significance is to marginalize, delimit, disseminate, and decenter the primary (and often secondary) works of modernist and premodernist cultural inscriptions.

Postmodernist thinking offers to re-read the very texts and traditions that have made premodernist and modernist writing possible—but above all it offers a reinscription of those very texts and traditions by examining the respects in which they set limits to their own enterprises, in which they incorporate other texts and traditions in a juxtapositional and intertextual relation to themselves. Postmodernist thinking involves rethinking—finding the places of difference within texts and institutions, examining the inscriptions of indecidability, noting the dispersal of signification, identity, and centered unity across a plurivalent texture of epistemological and metaphysical knowledge production.

Postmodernism brings the modernist hegemony to closure. It examines the ends, goals, and hopes of modernist activity, situating it in its context of premodernist frameworks. However, just as the post-impressionism of Van Gogh and Cézanne were not an *attack upon and rejection of* the impressionisms of Monet, Renoir, Manet, Degas, and Pissarro, so too postmodernism is not a simple refusal to accept modernist principles and perspectives. Rather postmodernism extends but also brings to a close the fundamental tenets and activities of a modernist outlook. This means that the lines of demarcation between modernism and postmodernism are not well defined. A region of indeterminateness prevails such that although the Joyce of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses* along with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, and Kafka's

The Trial are major documents of modernist literary production, Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, along with Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, Beckett's *Malone Dies* and the *Unnameable*, and Borges' *Fictions* take on features of a postmodern textual practice. Indeed to be able to identify particular literary works as postmodernist as opposed to modernist is itself the kind of enterprise invoked by the modernist critic seeking to distinguish modernism from romanticism (just as romantics were set off against—and set themselves off against—those of the classical style). But postmodernism in fiction, for instance, is not the successor to modernism—rather it is modernism taken to its extremes. Postmodernism signals the end of what has become commonplace and ordinary in the modernist outlook. Postmodernist literary practice operates at the edge of the modernist manner.

To be modern is to break with tradition, to interrupt the endless reiteration of classical themes, topics, and myths, to become self-consciously new, to attend to the *modes* of the times, to offer a critique of the conditions of one's own culture and society, to represent reality—not as it is—objectively and devoid of evaluation, but rather, as it is *experienced*—subjectively and with the transcendental or critical consciousness available especially to the artist. To be modern is to "break with the past" and to "search for new self-conscious expressive forms." Whether the "new self-expressive forms" are abstract like those of Kandinsky and Pollock or geometrical like those of Mondrian and Josef Albers, or alienated like those of Edvard Munch and Max Beckmann, or fanciful like those of Giacometti and Paul Klee, they all give shape to the concept of modern art. The modern artist claims to take a privileged view of the social and psychological concerns of the day. Modern man and modern woman are plagued with uncertainties, despair, bureaucratization, and mechanization. Their concern is how to cope with such solidifications and preoccupations of modern times—the Charlie Chaplin film is but a caricature of the modern condition. And the modern artist has an interior consciousness that knows how to express the realities of industrial society. Critics and professors of art or literature extol the virtues of the modern artist; they praise his or her abilities to perceive better than the rest of us; and they look to the artist for guidance as to how to articulate (if not diagnose or cure) the modern predicament. But the *postmodern* artist has no such privileged status. The postmodern artist is on the margins of things such that it is not the artist who counts but rather the paintings and inscriptions themselves. And these texts and performances achieve their significance and value in their intertextual relations with other texts and performances. The post modernist text *is* by its difference from other productions—including critical writings and alternate aesthetic or cultural genres.

The modern music of Schönberg, Bartok, Weber, and, in a different way, Stravinsky, offers a radical break with the classical styles of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. Where the romantic expressions of Berlioz and Mahler gave something other than the prior classical styles, they nevertheless could not be considered sufficiently radical, sufficiently modern, to be "a true break" with tradition. When Wagner introduced his music dramas, he brought together many different art forms. Although the medieval *Niebelungenlied* was the basis for his ring cycle, just as the Romantic poets latched onto Macpherson's (imaginary and mythical sixth century) Ossian for their inspiration, Wagner created what was hailed by Verlaine and others as *definitely* modern. Certainly he was not providing the sort of operatic work that Rossini, Mozart, Puccini, and even Verdi offered. Here was something solidly new, unquestionably modern, very much *à la mode*, praised not only by the *Revue Wagnerienne* but also by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1872). Nietzsche's disappointment—as elaborated later in the *The Case of Wagner* (1888)—was indicative of the self-delimitation of Wagnerian modernism. But Nietzsche—identified by Michel Foucault (1966) as a threshold figure, along with Mallarmé—was himself a spokesman for the postmodernism that had come too early, before its time, *avant la lettre*. Nietzsche's ultimate turn—away from Wagner, his view that Wagnerism was not, after all, the proper work of *his* "philosopher" Dionysus—was an early inscription of modernism's self-circumscription. But postmodernism has no place of origin—it can inscribe itself in different places, at various limit points—and Nietzsche's rereading of Wagner is only one such locus.

But what is *postmodernist thinking*? Philosophers are wont to cite Bacon and Galileo, Descartes and Malbranche, as the beginnings of modern thought. The idea that man can be an "interpreter of nature" (Bacon) or of the universe through an instrument like the telescope (Galileo), that one can reshape and control the world through science—inaugurates the "modern" world view. Descartes' further specification of the self or subject as able to distrust bodies and extended substances, as a thinking substance whose existence can be affirmed by a clear and distinct idea of its own activity, as offering a set of rules for directing the mind—these are all proclaimed to be distinctively "modern." Although not engaged *as such* in the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* (which Boileau and other seventeenth century critics ascribed to their new writers, Descartes nevertheless asserted his rejection of the scholastic style of philosophizing. Thus while literary debates of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—in France for instance—focused on the dispute between the ancients and the moderns, philosophers set the so-called modernist views of rationalism and empiricism into motion. The dichotomy between the philosophical claim that Descartes,

Hume, and Kant are modern philosophers while literary scholars proclaim Joyce, Woolf, Proust, and Kafka as modern is only one indiction of the effects of discipline segregation. But in that Molière, La Rochefoucauld, and Fontenelle are sometimes called "modern" suggests that even among literary disciplines the extent of cooperation in naming is not very significant. Similarly, modern *art* is clearly post-romantic or more definitively post post-impressionist, namely futurist, fauvist, abstract expressionist, cubist, surrealist, dadaist, and so forth.

While the arts do not correspond with respect to what counts as modern—and where philosophy interprets itself as modern since the late Renaissance, what is to be said of nineteenth century philosophy? Surely Hegel, Marx, Mill, and Comte are also modern—but they are modern with a twist, or several twists. Dialectic, the utilitarian principle, and positivism give a new look to the Kantian critical philosophy. So if rationalism, empiricism, critical philosophy, dialecticism, utilitarianism, Marxism, and Comtean positivism are all "modern" philosophies, then what sense does modernist *thinking* have? And in what respect can it be said that modernist thinking—when self-delimited—establishes the conditions for a post-modernist position?

If it can be said—as I shall here—that postmodernist thinking *enframes*, *circumscribes*, and *delimits* modernist thinking, then where are the places in which modernism in philosophy comes to an end? This closure occurs in many places and in many different ways. Postmodernism enframes modernism without identity or unity. It is fragmented, discontinuous, multiple, and dispersed. Where modernism asserts the centering, focusing, continuity—once the break with tradition has already occurred—postmodernism decenters, enframes, discontinues, and fragments the prevalence of modernist ideals. But this self-delimitation does not occur all at once. Indeed, the coordinate philosophical practices of the early twentieth century reaffirm, reconstruct, and then set the stage for their own self-circumscription. The determination of the ends of metaphysics and the paths of thinking is also the framework for the closure of modernism.

Concomitant with—and perhaps even antecedent to—the reign of twentieth century modernist writers like Joyce, Woolf, Proust, and Kafka, certain philosophies of consciousness achieve dominance in a variety of different contexts. In concert with William James' characterization of lived time as a "stream of consciousness," and Husserl's "phenomenology of internal time-consciousness," Freud developed a view of the psychic realm which is comprised of both consciousness and unconscious fields. Each of these philosophies of consciousness is also a theory of self-consciousness and self-reflection. The

Kierkegaardian call to individual subjectivity is defined by James, Bergson, Husserl, and Freud as a field available for scrutiny, investigation, and detailed inventory. One can examine one's own field of consciousness and describe, both temporally and spatially, the flow of conscious experience as distinct from the objective, empirical data of the outside, external world. But not that many philosophers of the early twentieth century were favorably disposed to the idea of a "ghost in the machine" (as Ryle, 1949, called it). Wittgenstein (in his earlier incarnation) wanted to remain silent about such matters. And Sartre (1936) discovered that the transcendental ego, which Husserl so steadfastly maintained (phenomenologically) at the heart of conscious life, could not be found—at least not *in* consciousness. For Sartre the ego was an object of consciousness, out there in the world, available for investigation just like any other thing. Consciousness, for Sartre (1943), was at best not anything at all, only pure freedom without any content. So along with the development of a modernist theory of self-consciousness, there are also the very seeds of its demise—in Ryle, in Sartre, and in Heidegger.

Heidegger does not provide the closure that the postmodernist will want to call for. Lacan and Derrida—to name some notable signatures—take the circumscription to its further stages of development. Heidegger's way is to call for the end of philosophy (1961, 1966). Once philosophy sets its own limits, rereads its traditions from the time of the Greeks, it can demarcate what it would be for philosophy to accomplish the tasks it sets for itself. If philosophy could achieve, through its acts of interpretation, an understanding of philosophical writers who sought to account for the essence of truth, the disclosure of truth, the uncovering of what has remained hidden over the centuries, then the path of thinking might become evident. Hegel had proclaimed that one could bring about the end of philosophy. Philosophy could bring its own activity to absolute knowledge—the full and complete synthesis would thereby be achieved. The *telos* or goal of philosophy would be the finalization of the movement toward the place where all knowledge is encompassed by its own activity. Heidegger sought to find the place at the end of philosophy where thinking might happen. But thinking can occur only where there is a place for the disclosure of truth. For Heidegger, truth can be disclosed only where difference is located. This difference is the ontico-ontological difference where (in his 1927 version) *Dasein* is interpretation and where (in the 1950s) language speaks.

Heidegger marks the shift from a theory of consciousness and self-consciousness to a theory of language. Sartre has no place for language until the late 1940s and 1950s. Merleau-Ponty had already spoken of the embodied and gestural expression of language in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), but in the late 1940s, when he began to read (and lecture on) Saussure, he incorporated the idea of

a spoken speech and a speaking speech as sign. With Merleau-Ponty, the language of the speaking subject is the elaboration of an embodied sign system. But Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of language is not yet a theory of textuality. When Roland Barthes (1953) provides a critique of Sartre's concept of literature (1947), he sets forth a theory of writing *at degree zero* which is no longer wrapped up in a complex discourse of subjectivity and authorship. Barthes proposes a theory of writing as revolutionary and yet non-historicist, a theory of writing which is informed by style and period but not tied down or limited to them. When Barthes later moves to a theory of the text (in the 1970s with *The Pleasure of the Text* for instance), he sets the stage for a postmodernist theory of textuality—differential, scriptural, and semiotic—which also marks the writings of Deleuze, Derrida, and Kristeva.

Notes

1. References will follow Part II of this article, to appear in Volume 4 Number 2.