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The "Logic" of Postmodernism: Theory, Criticism, Literature, Institution

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THE "LOGIC" OF POSTMODERNISM: THEORY, CRITICISM, LITERATURE, INSTITUTION

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("we keep coming
back and coming back . . ."
to the vision of dis-
placement at the site of
enactment, procurement,
debasement, trans-
substantiation, fulmination,
culmination . . .)

--Peter Seaton

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Despite the tendency of the semiotic process to be open-ended and relatively indeterminate, determination takes place all the time, has always taken place, and will always take place, over and above the efforts of individual thinkers.... The problem then becomes that of defining the conditions under which such a violent arrestation--in other words: institution--takes place.

--Samuel Weber

Today, how can we not speak of the University?

--Jacques Derrida

Given the incredible amount of critical work done on the subject, a study of "postmodernism" requires words of justification as much as it requires words of introduction. A good deal of literary critical ink has recently been spilled over each of the topics and writers I consider here: certainly Derrida, Foucault, Heidegger, and Pynchon are not new names to the discipline of literary criticism; and Sukenick, McElroy and "Language" poetry, while they may be new names to some, are likewise well commented upon. In fact, so much work has been done on these topics and authors that <u>simply</u> to add to the bibliography seems not only pointless, but also in some sense irresponsible--irresponsible insofar as it surreptitiously feeds a growing institutional framework without questioning the processes of (that) institution, as well as their consequences. Hence my

study takes a different tack. Throughout, I will try to emphasize the role(s) of the discipline of literary criticism--and, by extension, the roles of the university--in the production and control of meaning, while simultaneously trying to recognize and account for my own status as a literary critic, as a person who teaches and studies literature within an institution. This will necessarily entail, throughout, my engagement with what Jacques Derrida has called "a double gesture," a dual engagement which attempts to think the necessary, indispensable work of the university "even while going as far as possible, theoretically and practically, in the most directly underground thinking about the abyss beneath the university" ("Principle" 17). This double gesture will, hopefully, allow me to investigate important questions about postmodern literature and literary theory, but also to investigate the problems raised by the institutionalized nature of my own work.

While scholarly work of all types should attempt to take account of the functions of institutionalization, it seems especially important when discussing the literary manifestations of "postmodernism" and "theory"--the two generic categories that this work most easily fits into, and the two topics it treats most closely. First, and most obviously, there quite literally would be no categories "postmodernism" and "theory" if it were not for a

disciplinary apparatus that classifies phenomena in order to study them--a process, as Michel Foucault points out, which actually creates that which a discipline wishes to study by securing its proper object, its field of study.[1] It is important to note, though, a peculiar kind of doubling of this problem with respect to the institutionalization of postmodernism and theory. A seemingly obvious problem is created by the institutional character of postmodernism and theory: both postmodern literature and theory--if one could speak of their "generic" forms and put aside for the moment the questionable nature of that opposition--tend to emphasize the "open-ended and relatively indeterminate semiotic process" that Samuel Weber points out in one of the epigraphs to this chapter; but the process(es) of institution, on the other hand, tend to emphasize the "inevitable" closure of limits, the importance of determinate or determining institutional programs of decision-making or standard-setting. In other words, while the discursive claims and manifestations of postmodernism tend to emphasize the irreducibility of meaning and the inevitability of various kinds of indeterminacy, the processes of the institution and the functioning of the apparatuses of professionalism seem, for the most part, to

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[1]See The Archaeology of Knowledge, p. 31/44ff. Here and throughout this work, wherever a translation and an original are both cited, I cite the translation page number first.

remain undisturbed. One sees this especially (and ironically) in theoretical writing, where--to return to Weber's vocabulary--"individual thinkers" of indeterminacy often suffer "violent arrestation" at the hands of fellow theorists, both "competing" theorists and well-meaning followers. Competing theorists are likely to "violently arrest" a text in order to reduce it to a determinate, criticizable or surpassable position, while sympathetic followers are more likely to arrest a theorist's work in transforming it into an interpretative grid, an aid to producing determinate readings.

One might conclude from this paradox that the "practice" of criticism simply has not caught up with the "theory," and that what is necessary is some discussion concerning how to close the gap--to make theory more determinable in practice--or, in an anti-theory mode, a discussion of the inevitability of the gap between theory and practice.[2] I defer these important and necessary discussions for the time being, to point out instead that what tends to go unexamined in such discussions is the surreptitious forwarding of a certain institutional interest in determination itself, in arresting what purports to be an

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[2]One sees the former proposition played out in any number of theory-practice primers, from books as disparate as Eagleton's Literary Theory and Norris' Deconstruction: Theory and Practice. The latter "anti-theory" mode is found in the work of the "new pragmatists"--see Mitchell's Against Theory.

open-ended process in the service of "professional," institutional ends. As Paul Bové points out in Intellectuals in Power, even the most trenchant politically or theoretically oppositional criticism can serve to legitimate the hegemonic functions of the university through "the endless repositioning of intellectuals vis-à-vis other intellectuals in their battles for social rewards" (224). Determining the adequacy of competing critical positions tends to leave contemporary theorists in the uncomfortably Arnoldian position of moral judge or arbiter who can secure a position above the fray of mere opinion--a role, as Bové points out, which "is essentially a legitimation of status quo intellectual life" (223). Such determination and critical jousting can, in other words, serve to protect certain hegemonic power structures (both theoretical and institutional) while attempting simultaneously to criticize or undermine these structures.

In "The Profession of Theory,"[3] David Kaufmann summarizes the problems of institutionalization and theory when he writes that, despite the many important questions it poses,

> Recent theory...has precipitated the latest in a century-long history of pseudocrises that have

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[3]It is important to note that this essay was published in a very noticeable place within the profession: an issue of PMLA devoted to "The Politics of Critical Language" (May, 1990).

> functioned to protect the institutionalization of literature in the academy.... Theory--like its discontents--helps keep the world safe for lit. crit. [sic]" (522).

This, of course, creates a dicey problem for a study which would want to take account of the forces and problems of institutionalization vis-à-vis literary criticism; in the face of this insight--that simply criticizing a power structure may actually help it to perform its work--the question becomes, then, how to think against a structure while one is irreducibly <u>within</u> that structure--when there is no pure space "outside" from which one can criticize or judge? Or, to phrase the same problematic somewhat differently, how does one think "practice" when it can no longer simply be governed (or have its results guaranteed) by a determinate or determining "theory"? The question becomes, in Reiner Schürmann's words, what happens "once 'thinking' no longer means securing some rational foundation upon which one may establish the sum total of what is knowable and once 'acting' no longer means conforming one's daily enterprises, both public and private, to the foundation so secured" (1)? This, I will argue, is the question of the postmodern: insofar as almost any notion of the postmodern is characterized by the absence of a pure, grounding "rational foundation," the question of how to proceed without this grounding purity shows itself to be the

most crucial question for a time or place we would call postmodern. Also, it will be my contention throughout this work that the question of the postmodern is irreducibly both a systematic (philosophical or theoretical) and an institutional (pragmatic or worldly) question. I will take up the "systematic" aspects of this question beginning with chapter 2 and its examination of Derrida and literary criticism, and will focus primarily on the "institutional" questions in this chapter--though this distinction will, hopefully, become more and more dubious as I proceed. Chapter 3 will continue to examine literary criticism as an institutional system in relation to Foucault's texts. I will hold in reserve the question of theories of the postmodern until chapter 4, at which time I will also broach the question of postmodern literature. Chapters 5 and 6 will deal with the institutional and systematic problems raised by specific postmodern texts--Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow and "Language" poetry, respectively.

"In the Interest of Professionalism": Literary Criticism, Theory, and the Institutional Question of the Postmodern

We have seen, then, that there is an initial tension between the "interests" of institutionalization and those of postmodernism and theory--namely, institutionalization tends to undermine the openness that much postmodern theory calls for. As David Kaufmann continues in "The Profession of

Theory," the upshot of this is that "literary critics are confronted by a series of interesting but ultimately frustrating aporias" (528), paramount among them the frustrating realization--similar to Bové's above--that theory "has militated against the tendencies of [academic] specialization at the same time that it has acted as their agent" (528). Kaufmann goes on to sum up the dilemma that these aporias leave to the literary critic:

> To practice theory is to help the very divisions and forms of domination that theory seeks to overcome. By the same token, however, to give up critical, truly critical thought in the academy would be to strangle such thought in the only cradle it has left and to sacrifice what we still have of our best hopes. (528)

This is an eloquent phrasing of the disciplinary and institutional consequences surrounding what I have called the question of the postmodern: how does an oppositional critic proceed when no position "outside" can be secured, when theorizing in an attempt to undermine a system or institution runs the risk of actually "help[ing] the very divisions and forms of domination that theory seeks to overcome"? Certainly one cannot simply "give up critical, truly critical thought in the academy," but how do we make thought or action "truly critical" if the category which would ground such a criticism--truth--has withdrawn? Kaufmann--like so many others who formulate the question of

the postmodern--has no answers to these "ultimately frustrating aporias," precisely because they are, in his eyes, ultimately frustrating: that is, in the end, they are unsolvable dilemmas. His essay concludes:

> What remains, then, is hardly the stuff of heady perorations: the desire for an integrity that will sell itself neither cheaply nor easily and the hardened edge of an irony that, in the words of one of our less fashionable poets, "will not scare." (528)

What remains, in other words, is an impasse: the desire to recuperate a grounding integrity "must constantly fail" (528)--dashed by the hardened (though, he seems to suggest, ultimately frivolous) edge of a theoretical irony which posits the impossibility of such a ground.

Kaufmann's assessment of the paralyzed state in which the discipline of literary criticism finds itself is quite similar to Paul de Man's in "Shelley Disfigured," his essay on The Triumph of Life written for Deconstruction and Criticism. Toward the end of the essay, de Man takes stock of "our present critical and literary scene":

> It functions along monotonously predictable lines, by the historicization and the aesthetification of texts, as well as by their use, as in this essay, for the assertion of methodological claims made all the more pious by their denial of piety. Attempts to define, to understand, or to circumscribe romanticism in relation

> to ourselves and in relation to other literary movements are all part of this naive belief. The Triumph of Life warns us that nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence.... [The Triumph of Life] also warns us why and how these events then have to be reintegrated into a historical and aesthetic system of recuperation that repeats itself regardless of the exposure of its fallacy. (68-9, my emphasis)

De Man's focus here is "systematic" while Kaufmann's is primarily "institutional" (though already this distinction becomes problematic, since each is dependent on the other and both on a ground that seems to be eroding). But while de Man clearly has a different agenda than Kaufmann, they share a similar concern--the state of literary criticism in the absence of a transcendental ground--and a strikingly similar conclusion: in the absence of a "beyond" which could ground criticism, it is doomed to a "recuperation that repeats itself regardless of the exposure of its fallacy," destined to follow "monotonously predictable lines," endlessly concerning itself with Kaufmann's "interesting but ultimately frustrating aporias." In short, they both reiterate that the determinate and determining practice of

criticism can never "catch up with" the indeterminacy posited by literary theory--that the impasse cannot be resolved, and we are left with no choice but to go on as if the problems, fallacies, chiasmi, and aporias revealed by theory could be put aside. They both seem to grant the undisplacable imminence of an inevitable, nihilistic impasse for the discipline of literary criticism--an impasse that locates itself at the site of the question of the postmodern.[4]

This widely recognized and discussed impasse, though, certainly has not curtailed the production of literary criticism and theory--quite the contrary. In fact, an entire "theory industry" has grown up around literature departments in the past 20 years, and with this industry has come the increasingly specialist professionalization of

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[4]It should be noted that de Man tends to see this impasse itself as a new rigor that "refuses to be generalized into a system" (69), but my point here is that this undecidable de Manian impasse becomes generalizable when it grants the imminence of the present system. De Man here does not attempt to displace what he feels is a bogus aestheticist/historicist opposition, but focuses on the undecidability brought about by this opposition in Shelley's Triumph, and then argues that this "process differs entirely from recuperative and nihilistic allegories of historicism" (69). I'm not so sure: while I have no problem with arguing that undecidability is unescapable, it seems precisely a "nihilist allegory" to grant the simple inevitability of the system which engenders this undecidability--to argue that this process is destined always and everywhere to fall short (which is why for de Man it is "historically more reliable than the products of historical archeology" [69]). See Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of this topic vis-à-vis Derrida's (much different) notions of undecidability and history.

theory and interpretation. As Kaufmann points out, the impasse at or in which literary criticism finds itself has not had the cooling effect that one would expect on the profession(alization) of literature studies; rather, the impasse has fueled this profession(alization)--the most frustrating of Kaufmann's aporias--and given rise to a plethora of book series, journals, symposia, and dissertations (like this one) in which "specialists" attempt to diagnose criticism's illness.

The institutional metaphor of medicine here is, in some sense, unavoidable, as is the implicit disciplinary comparison.[5] While medical care and technology have certainly "improved" in the last 20 years (and continue to do so), the discipline has concomitantly gotten more specialized; and while medicine's improvements and discoveries have certainly had liberating effects (saving and improving the quality of patients' lives), they do continue to exercise a certain kind of (perhaps more insidious) control--a kind of "discursive" control begins to show itself as, for example, more and more tests as well as second and third opinions become "necessary."[6] While

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[5]See Weber's "The Vaulted Eye: Remarks on Knowledge and Professionalism," where he makes several striking comparisons between medicine and teaching--which have surpassed the law as the "exemplary professions" (45).

[6]This is, of course, not to mention the more obvious problem that medicine and the academy share: access (rather, the lack of access) for the underprivileged.

medical care generally improves as more specialized tests and more layers of interpretation are added to the process of diagnosis, these tests and layers of interpretation--both of which are applications of "progressive" methodologies discovered by the discipline--begin to exercise their own kind of control, and can lead to frustrating interpretative or diagnostic impasses. And while "progress" in the discipline of literary criticism certainly never saved or even necessarily improved the quality of anyone's life outside the discipline (as the progress made by the disciplines of social work, psychoanalysis, and even computer science could be said to have), I think the disciplinary comparison remains apt: literary criticism, like medicine, has seen an unprecedented rise in specialization in the last 20 years, and while this rise most certainly has opened up (one could say "improved") the theory and practice of both disciplines, it has also brought along with it a different kind of control--a "discursive" control that, because it is difficult to recognize, often goes unanalyzed. I also stress the (seemingly outlandish and digressive) comparison between the disciplines of literary criticism and medicine to emphasize that, for either discipline, <u>it is not simply or primarily a matter of going back to some pre-specialized "golden age"--even if such a regression were deemed possible or desirable</u>. It would obviously be ludicrous to say, for example, that human

sciences like medicine have not "progressed"--that a cancer patient is not better off today than he or she was 20, 30 or 50 years ago. Likewise, in discussing the professionalization of literary criticism, it is not a matter of attempting to recuperate a picture of the critic akin to Norman Rockwell's series of general-practitioner paintings--a folksy generalist whose individualism would stubbornly keep him out of an institutional setting; nor, however, is it a matter of simply apologizing for the disciplinary progress that professional specialization seems to allow. I must reiterate here the importance of the double gesture in this analysis: it would obviously be disingenuous of me <u>simply</u> to criticize or undermine a profession to which I "belong" and in which I work; but it is not, within this same reiteration, exclusively a matter of accepting the status quo vision of professional life. It is rather a matter of asking how and why it is that this process of institutionalization and professionalization can <u>seem</u> to be inevitable--unable to be disrupted. If Kaufmann is correct when he asserts that "Professors of literature can neither submit to professionalization nor resist it" (528), this seems to beg certain questions: questions about submission and resistance from within, about the seemingly totalizing conditions of this institutional specialization, about how and why institution leads to a paralyzing impasse for those who would want to study or disrupt it--questions

about, in other words, the institutionalization of theory and the institutionalization of the question of the postmodern.

Kaufmann's, though, is certainly not the only version of the disciplinary role of theory within the university. Jonathan Culler, in Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions, puts forth a much more positive picture of contemporary theory within the academy. He characterizes theory as

> anti-disciplinary, challenging not only the boundaries of disciplines, on whose legitimacy the university seems to depend, but also on these disciplines' claims to judge writing that touches their concerns. In practice, 'theory' contests the right of psychology departments to control Freud's texts, of philosophy departments to control Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger. (24-5)

For Culler, theory, rather than adding to a kind of discursive disciplinary control, precisely disperses such claims of control by questioning the "disciplines' claims to judge writing that touches their concerns." For Culler, theory does not secure and protect a disciplinary knowledge, but rather it is the "subversion of the articulation of knowledge" (25), a subversion which leads to "changes which repeatedly transgress university boundaries" (25) and open up the disciplines. While this is certainly a more positive

picture of the role of theory in the university, it does not seem to silence Kaufmann's objections. Indeed, it seems to begin forwarding precisely what Kaufmann sees as an over-enthusiasm concerning the "liberating" role of theoretical discourse, as well as surreptitiously broaching the "unwanted" professionalization of thinking that inevitably comes with the institution of theory.

In fact, Culler's discussion turns out to be a sort of hommage to the institution of theory--almost unbelievably so, especially given the way he traces the rise of literary professionalism. For example, in discussing the importance of the refereed journal in bringing about the institution of theory, he writes:

> One can argue that the system of publication exists not just to accredit professionals (a system of degrees would do that) but to distinguish those accredited from providers of services (such as nurses and school teachers), to accredit them as participants in an autonomous enterprise--a quest for knowledge--where in principle projects are not imposed by outside forces but flow from the critic's own curiosity or from the so-called 'needs' of the field itself. (29)

While Culler is here simply summarizing the rise of literary professionalism, this certainly sounds like the beginnings of a theoretical and ideological critique of the professionalizing role of journals: they serve to

"distinguish" literary professionals from mere "providers of services," and foster what could only be called a mystifying and theoretically indefensible portrait of the critic as a kind of individualist genius whose "projects are not imposed by outside forces" or institutions, but rather "flow from the critic's own curiosity" in the name of "an autonomous enterprise," a seemingly disinterested "quest for knowledge."[7]

Indeed, Culler's summary of the rise of professionalism continues in such a way that a sort of demystifying reading of literary criticism's professionalist fictions seems both necessary and imminent. For example, still summarizing, Culler quotes Christopher Jencks and David Riesman's The Academic Revolution: "Professionalism, [they write], is 'colleague-oriented rather than client-oriented'" (29). Culler does not comment on this quotation, but again criticism of it seems imminent, if for no other reason than such a claim--that literary criticism exists outside a commodity system--seems especially specious in the context of Culler's discussion of the professional centrality of journals, which rather obviously have to be "client-oriented" in order to compete for a shrinking theory dollar

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[7]For just such a ideological critique of the role of the critic, see Said's The World, the Text, and the Critic--especially the introduction, "Secular Criticism."

in an increasingly competitive market.[8] Likewise, when Culler notes that "In the academy, professionalism ties one's identity to an expertise and hence to a field in which one might be judged expert by one's peers" (29, my emphasis), it seems precisely a prolegomena to a sort of Foucaultian argument--perhaps like the one sketched out by Kaufmann above--concerning the processes by which the supposedly "liberating" discourses of theory lead to a proliferation of other (more insidious) means of control, the process by which "professionalism ties one's identity to an expertise."[9]

No such critique, however, is forthcoming from Culler. Rather, he celebrates professionalism precisely in the terms it seemed he was sure to undermine:

> The connection between criticism and the continuing professional evaluation on which promotions, grants, and prestige depend may thus generate a more specialized, yet more innovative criticism than would some other arrangement. The need to make an 'important

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[8]Cf. Weber's discussion of Burton Bledstein's work on "the culture of professionalism": the professional seeks to define his services as having "predominantly a use-value, not an exchange value. It is precisely in the effort to distinguish himself from the businessman, on the one hand, and from the worker, on the other, that the professional finds it necessary to cultivate the professional ethos and 'culture'..." (Institution 27).

[9]Cf. "The Repressive Hypothesis" in The Foucault Reader (301-29). Also, as I think will become clear, I am not attempting to make an argument for Kaufmann as a Foucaultian.

> new contribution' is built into the American academic system.... (29-30)

Here Culler puts forth, in his own name, the benign vision of the university that it had seemed he was setting up to be criticized: he characterizes the academy as a place of innovation, where an "important new contribution" is graciously rewarded by "promotions, grants, and prestige." Specialization, he argues, is necessary to produce "a more innovative criticism." While he glances over it as self-evident, the "innovative criticism" that he posits as literary studies' end (product) remains quite problematic--seems to be precisely a version of the autonomous "critic-as-genius" paradigm. Also, the imperatives of disciplinary self-protection (veiled in the terminology of progress) and the commodity fetish implied by emphasizing the "new and improved"--as well as the ways in which emphasizing critical "innovation" protects, promotes, and generates specialization--seem to be buried under a very rosy picture of personal freedom within the theoretical university. (In fact, one might note that Culler's vision of the theoretical humanities seems uncannily similar to the--supposedly outdated--vision of the academy in which the ends of a disinterested, appreciative Arnoldian criticism protect, promote, and generate the generalist--an irony to which I will return.)

Culler continues to explain the virtues of this

professionalism:

> Professionalism makes a critic's career depend upon the judgments of experts in his or her own field: deans, departments, publishers and foundations have, in the interest of professionalism, increasingly relied on peer reviews in decisions to hire and promote, to publish books and articles, and to award grants. While reducing capriciousness and favoritism in important decisions, this progress of professionalism shifts power from the vertical hierarchy of the institution that employs a critic to a horizontal system of evaluation. (29-30, my emphases)

It seems Culler here names not only a subversion of disciplinary knowledge strategies as the consequence of theory's professionalization, but also a shift of disciplinary power's axis from vertical to horizontal--though, of course, the shifting of power becomes a goal in itself when one argues, as Culler does, that power cannot be simply undermined or subverted, that there is no simple liberation from institutions or power.[10] But what seems anomalous here is precisely Culler's forwarding of a kind of liberation that comes "in the interest of professionalism": the "system of evaluation" which grows out of this shift helps in "reducing capriciousness and favoritism," a formulation which continues the liberationist metaphor that

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[10]See his discussion of Foucault in Framing (57-68).

he develops throughout his discussion of the "progress of professionalism." But in shifting axes, one does not necessarily--or even primarily--reduce capriciousness or favoritism or in any way escape these undesirable by-products of the workings of an institution. In fact, given the polarization of theoretical camps in recent years, one could argue that specialization has increased capriciousness and favoritism rather than vice versa.[11]

But, to get back to the "original" question, what is the status or role of theory in all this? As he continues, Culler concretely ties his professional progress metaphor back to the question of theory in an absolutely astonishing way:

> we must assert the value not just of specialization but of professionalization also, explaining how professionalization makes thought possible by developing sets of questions, imposing norms which then have to be questioned and thereby promoting debate on key problems. (54, my emphasis)

Professionalism here finds its dénoument in Culler's argument not simply as an improved system of evaluation nor even as a bolstering of critical ends, but literally as a

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[11]Given the plethora of theoretical stances, it seems unlikely that favoritism in publication is decreasing: would, for example, a deconstructive analysis be recommended for publication by a neo-Marxist; would a Habermasian recommend a Foucaultian analysis, or a new historicist recommend a new critical analysis?

transcendental--as that which "makes thought possible." This is, it seems to me, an absolutely chilling formulation, and not so simply because of the ominous consequences it seems to have for the hopes of "non-professionals" to think at all, but because thought or knowledge seems to be named here precisely and only in terms of its 19th-century disciplinary manifestation--as "developing sets of questions, imposing norms, and thereby promoting debate on key problems." Professionalism, as Culler defines it here, seems less what makes thinking possible than what makes the organization, control, and articulation of thinking possible--by deciding what sets of questions will be addressed, what norms imposed, and what problems deemed key. Here theory is made, quite literally (and paradoxically, given Culler's original formulation of the role of theory) into the discipline of professionalism--into a kind of meta-discipline which takes the other disciplines as its object, and organizes them under its classifications and rules.[12]

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[12]Compare the institutional resonances of Culler's theoretician with the MLA's self-produced picture of the critic in its Introduction to Scholarship: "criticism assimilates the best findings of the other, partial disciplines...and completes them by subsuming them in a final act of interpretation. Criticism gives meaning to literary studies; only when we, as critics, have performed our task have we fulfilled the purpose of understanding and placing the text.... [T]he view of critics as persons who complete the other disciplines also requires them to know the other disciplines. A superior position involves burdens as well as privileges. If literary studies stand atop a pyramid, perhaps that testifies not only to their elite situation but to the difficulty of the climb and the precariousness of keeping balance" (84-5).

For Culler, then, theory is a kind of new ground of the humanities, the privileged discipline because it affords to the professional the "critical or self-critical space within which discoveries and critiques take place" (54, my emphasis). The language of the so-called hard sciences fits well here with his call for innovation.[13] And it is perhaps here that an irony I noted earlier becomes most apparent: if the project of the humanities becomes a kind of scientistic innovation, then of course specialization is necessary; but this logic of the ends of the humanities is uncannily similar (in that it is dialectically opposed) to the conserving, Arnoldian paradigm which makes necessary the generalist. In fact, Culler sets up his argument in direct contradistinction to this generalist paradigm. He writes of the decision before us today:

> One can distinguish two general models at work.... The first makes the university the transmitter of a cultural heritage, gives it the ideological function of reproducing culture and the social order. The second model makes the university a site for the production of knowledge, and teaching is related to that function: in early years students are taught what they need to

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[13]See Weber, who quotes Marx on the capitalist/imperialist paradigm of the language of "progress": "'the conquest of each new country signifies a new frontier' ...[and] each new frontier signifies only a new country to be conquered" (Institution 148).

> know in order to progress to more advanced work; in later years, they follow or even assist their teachers' work at the frontiers of a discipline. (33, my emphases)

There seem to be several problems with Culler's formulation of the decision before us. First, we note that he has simply inverted the Arnoldian paradigm of the generalist: for the generalist, the tradition is the repository of real knowledge--epistémè--while theory is the realm of merely ideological doxa. But Culler, without examining the dubious terms of this opposition, simply rearranges the terms to favor the specialist--who is now involved in the "production of knowledge" while the generalist is assigned the "ideological function of reproducing culture and social order." Certainly the ideology/knowledge opposition is ripe for deconstruction, and Culler even goes on to give us the ammunition to do so: how, we might ask, does teaching students "what they need to know to progress to more advanced work" escape the "ideological function of reproducing culture and social order"? Likewise, if students' goals are to get to the point where they may "follow or even assist their teachers' work at the frontiers of a discipline," one might ask how professionalist teaching escapes a paternalistic, appreciative model or fosters innovation? In any case, it seems that the theoretical professionalism which Culler calls for serves--just as

strongly as the paradigm it seeks to displace by inverting--to conserve or protect the most traditional imperatives of the discipline.[14] And Culler admits that professionalism may have its problems, but he feels that they are outweighed by

> its compensating strengths--an encouragement of innovation, for example--and one must remind oneself of the alternatives which the opponents of professionalism promote: a vision of the humanities as repository of known truths and received values, which a dedicated non-professional corps of workers present to the young. (55)

So, in the end, Culler sees professionalism as the only defense against a backslide to the bad old days of higher education as ideological indoctrination, carried out by functionaries for the state's interests, "a dedicated non-professional corps of workers."

For Culler, then, professionalism is, in the end, inevitable--it is absolutely necessary to avoid what he sees as the disastrous outcome of its denial. And, it should be noted, he is by no means the only high-profile theorist who is also an apologist for professionalism: Stanley Fish, writing from a new-pragmatist perspective that is

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[14]Cf. Kaufmann's discussion of the Arnoldian strain of contemporary theory, 523ff.

particularly abhorrent to Culler,[15] comes to a similar conclusion about the necessity, value, and inevitablilty of professionalism.[16] He writes, about the hesitation that some of the contributors to The New Historicism collection express about the disciplinary consequences of their theoretical work:

> whatever the source of the malaise, I urge that it be abandoned and that New Historicists sit back and enjoy the fruits of their professional success, wishing neither for more nor less. In the words of the old Alka-Seltzer commercial, "try it, you'll like it." ("Commentary" 315)

Professionalism here is named as a possible cure for the "malaise"--the impasse--of a literary criticism robbed of its transcendental ground; even if professionalism is not exactly the cure, Fish suggests, at least it will allow the critic to forget or soothe the consequences of totalizing

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[15]Culler vehemently attacks the new pragmatism, "whose complacency seems altogether appropriate to the Age of Reagan" (55). Curiously, though, he seems finally to envision the future of literary studies as a kind of Rortian conversation: "the future is perhaps best imagined as an ongoing debate" (56).

[16]Fish's "thesis"--reiterated in a series of essays on professionalism--is roughly the following: "My contention is that anti-professionalism, insofar as it imagines a position of judgment wholly uncontaminated by professional concerns, is incoherent, since in order to be heard as relevant, a critique must already be implicated in the assumptions and goals that define the profession" ("A Reply" 125). This is precisely the dilemma to which the Derridean "double gesture" speaks and why this gesture is, to use a problematic but appropriate word, necessary.

over-indulgence.[17] And while Culler's professionalism cannot simply be conflated with the Fish's sloganeering, "don't-worry-be-happy" brand, they do both name professionalism as a valuable and necessary cure for the impasse of literary criticism--and it is also interesting to note that they do so from opposing sides of what would seem to be a ragingly discordant deconstruction/new historicism debate (a debate which I will discuss at some length in Chapter 3). What is particularly intriguing here, though, is that through Culler's and Fish's discussions of the necessity of professionalism it seems we are back--though we have taken an extremely circuitous route--to Kaufmann's assertion that the theory's professionalism can neither be affirmed nor denied in any consistent manner: its affirmation can be denied as an untheoretical acceptance, while even its denial--insofar as it comes irreducibly from within--can be shown to be a surreptitious affirmation. As a cure for criticism's malaise, then, professionalism seems also to be a poison: professionalism as pharmakon.

The Institutional Pharmakon

Pharmakon is one of Derrida's well-known "undecidables." In his analysis of the discourse on writing in Plato's Phaedrus, Derrida notes that Plato's text uses

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[17]Alka-Seltzer's other famous slogan, after all, was "I can't believe I ate the whole thing."

the same word--pharmakon--to characterize writing's seemingly dual and contradictory position vis-à-vis memory (see Dissemination 61-172). Socrates tells the story of two gods--Theuth, the inventor of writing, and Thamus, a ruler. Theuth comes to Thamus with his "elixir [pharmakon, remedy] of memory and wisdom" (274E); Thamus responds:

> you, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power opposite of that which they really possess. For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it.... You have invented an elixir [pharmakon, poison] not of memory but reminding. (275A)

The undecidable opposition inscribed in the very word pharmakon--poison or cure?--gives rise to a puzzling impasse in Plato's text: how can the necessary power of letters in memory and wisdom work as a cure if it is also a poison; how can writing be both an aid to memory and a subversion of memory? Indeed Plato himself here depends on this pharmakon, writing a didactic story that Socrates remembers he "heard of the ancients" (274C); the nagging question becomes: how can a pure knowledge be upheld or attained at all when following the necessarily discursive logic of knowledge leads inexorably to an impasse, to depending on that which should by rights be excluded, exiled to the realm of doxa?

The "systematic" situation of undecidability outlined

here (the "cure" of knowledge also brings, at the same time and through the same word, the "poison" of writing) quite closely resembles the "institutional" situation of the profession of theory: the cure of theory brings with it the poison of professionalism. In the language of deconstruction, perhaps one could say that the postmodern academy is in the position of Plato's pharmakon: undecidable, caught at or in what seems like an impasse. This impasse becomes all the more frustrating for the discipline of literary criticism because it seems to be a necessary, logical outcome of critical thinking itself: the thinking that is to uncover epistémè uncovers only impasse. And though this impasse can likewise be "explained" by critical thinking--it comes about precisely because in a postmodern epoch, the purity of knowledge has withdrawn, is not there, as Plato may have thought, to be uncovered--it seems to offer little solace, only adding to the slippage, leaving us inexorably, repeatedly within or at the impasse, blankly staring down Kaufmann's "ultimately frustrating aporias." The only tool we seem to have at our disposal to neutralize the impasse--critical thinking which could lead to critical action--is implicated as/in the "cause" of the impasse itself.

And this institutional impasse is, interestingly

enough, likewise inscribed in Plato's text.[18] Thamus continues on the poison of letters:

> You have invented an elixir [pharmakon] not of memory but reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and therefore will seem to know many things, when they are, for the most part, ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise. (275A-B)

The descent from knowledge to mere opinion that comes with writing likewise creates an institutional impasse--it makes Athens' students "ignorant and hard to get along with." In some sense, we postmoderns would want to cheer on this supposed amateurish "ignorance" in our students, thinking of it instead as a healthy and necessary skepticism concerning a received tradition. But there likewise seems a chiasmic reversal here in that this necessary skepticism must be learned, taught by a corps of professional teachers and scholars. We are back, again, at Kaufmann's impasse: theory--as truly critical thought--can neither be taught nor abandoned in the university; and it likewise seems that, as Stanley Fish writes, "Anti-professionalism is professionalism in its purest form" ("Anti-professionalism" 106).

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[18]Cf. Barbara Johnson's discussion of pedagogy and Phaedrus in A World of Difference (83-85).

So here we are left with a question; as Derrida asks, "If the same premises lead to evaluations that are apparently contradictory, what does that tell us about the system of reading and hierarchization at work?" ("Age" 21). It is at this point, then, that it becomes necessary to rethink the path that leads to this impasse, to conceive of some way to rethink the impasse, somehow to think opposites together--theory and academy, poison and cure, thinking and acting--without falling into the spuriousness of simply neutralizing the differences within some "beyond," but likewise without giving in to the status quo of impasse: "to avoid both neutralizing the binary oppositions...and simply residing within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it" (Positions 41); in other words, it is as this point that the double reading and writing of deconstruction becomes necessary. Necessary because deconstruction attends precisely to this impasse--but attends to it as other than simply impasse or stagnation. Necessary because there seems to be no simple ground beyond these oppositions, but a difference, a displacement, a double bind between them--an "outside" or double that disrupts their functioning rather than guaranteeing it. As Derrida writes: "a repetition without identity--one mark inside and one mark outside the deconstructed system, should give rise to a double reading and a double writing" (Dissemination 4). For Derrida, one

move of this double reading is a thematizing or "critical" one, a repetitive reading of sorts done necessarily from within the confines of the system or institution, but the second move of this reading or writing goes back over itself, questions its own motives, attempts to attend to what was excluded--systematically or institutionally--in the first move; a double reading or writing tends to a kind of outside, not a stable ground but rather an exteriority which "can no longer take the form of a sort of extra-text which could arrest the concatenation of writing" (Dissemination 5). This is what Derrida calls "out-work," the non-dialectical "work" of the outside, the "work" of the undecidable. I will, as I promise above, take up the "systematic" aspects of double reading/writing in the following chapters, but I would like here to attempt to take up the institutional "necessity" of a deconstruction.

The text that most trenchantly takes up this question of deconstruction and the academy is Weber's Institutions and Interpretation, a deconstructive analysis of the work of institution--the academy and the functioning of disciplines --and one that is notable in that it does not look primarily to Derrida's GREPH work for its institutional focus.[19]

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[19]See, for discussions of Derrida's GREPH [Groupe de Recherches sur l'Enseignement Philosophique] work, Ulmer's Applied Grammatology, Culler's On Deconstruction, and Fynsk's "A Decelebration of Philosophy." See also Derrida's "The Principle of Reason," and "Sendoffs," a report written by Derrida on the International College of Philosophy.

Though Weber is at times critical of Derrida's inattention to institutional matters, he performs a kind of double reading--based, it seems, very much on Derrida's "systematic" work--of the functioning of the academic disciplines. According to Weber, the basic problem surrounding professionalism, especially within the university, is not that the liberating intentions of the disciplines or of theory have been or are inexorably destined to be betrayed by the limiting of institution, but rather that the disciplines do not continue to ask themselves ground-questions, do not attend to what is excluded in or through their analyses; as Weber writes, the academy has built itself on

> instituted areas of training and research which, once established, could increasingly ignore the founding limits and limitations of the individual disciplines. (32, my emphasis).

Disciplines can posit innovative ends or lament unintended outcomes only if practitioners "ignore the founding limits and limitations" of the discipline--because those foundings are themselves impure, exclusionary, arbitrary and therefore cannot hope to lead to pure ends. According to Weber, any discipline, in order to perform its analyses, must cover over its founding problems, limits, and exclusions. Disciplines do so most often precisely by appealing to the "advance of knowledge" or the liberation which they

supposedly are to bring about: in short, disciplines--of whatever type--do not ask ground questions, they ask end questions. Ground questions lead to what disciplines read as an impasse because these "foundational" questions can upset the easy obtaining of an end: if a discipline seriously examines its ground, it will indeed "inexorably" lead to an impasse, precisely because the exclusions that work to constitute a discipline--its objects, its methodologies--are groundless.

Deconstruction, however, reads this impasse--this withdrawal of ground--as the closure of a way of thinking: after the closure or withdrawal of a transcendental mode of thinking, attempting to think with transcendental categories will, of course, lead to an impasse--the guarantee of transcendental thinking's success having withdrawn in a postmodern epoch.[20] But, at the same time, there is no pure place post-closure. Hence the necessity of the double logic: both inside and outside the categories of the closure, inside and outside the academic institutions that base themselves on these categories. We need, in other words, to "answer" the question of the postmodern, but, because of this double bind, the answer cannot be singular. As Derrida writes,

Two logics, then, with an incalculable effect, two

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[20]See my much more detailed discussion of this point in Chapter 4.

> repetitions which are no more opposed to each other than they repeat each other identically and which, if they do repeat each other, echo the duplicity that constitutes all repetition: it is only when one takes into 'account' this incalculable double-bind of repetition...that one has a chance of *reading* the unreadable text which follows immediately, and to read it *as unreadable*. (*Post Card* 352/373-4, translation modified)

With the closure of metaphysics, something comes to thought which cannot be read or understood in the terms of that thought--for example, the "perfectly logical" impasse of knowledge and its institutions, the fact that one set of data can lead to two logical conclusions which radically exclude each other. This "unreadable" text, however, does follow a "logic," though not a determinate (and therefore not a simply *in*determinate) one--rather, it "follows" the dual logic of the "incalculable double bind of repetition." And it is only when one takes this logic "into 'account'" (though, obviously, there is no simple accounting possible here)[21] that one has a chance of *reading* at all. It is only when one recognizes the "logic" of the impasse of unreadability that one has the chance of "accounting for"

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[21]Cf. Weber: "If 'account'...is inscribed within quotation marks, it is to indicate that the double bind cannot simply be taken into account" (97). Also, I have modified the quotation above by consulting Weber's translation.

the unreadable as something other than the dialectical, non-sensical opposite of the readable; likewise, it seems that it is only when one recognizes the determinate/determining logic that leads to the impasse of an institution or discipline--a way of thinking and acting that inexorably leads to nihilist reversals and hence to inaction--that one can attempt to account for this impasse as other than simple paralyzation or stasis, and other than simple obstacle to be overcome. It is this "logic"--which I will call the logic of the postmodern, inasmuch as it "answers" what I have called the "question of the postmodern"--that I will attempt to investigate and articulate throughout this dissertation.

My approach throughout this work might be called "deconstructive" (though a good bit of this dissertation questions deconstruction as an institutional category), but I emphasize from the start that it is not a matter of distilling a determinate/determining logic out of Derrida's texts and applying it to a horizon of other philosophical and literary texts. Rather, it is a matter of marking and negotiating paths through specific texts and institutions--in short, it is a matter of reading. I begin with the question of institutions because this question is inseparable from the more traditional systematic questions, and because the very question of the application of a methodology broaches inescapably institutional questions, question to which deconstruction can and does respond. As

Derrida writes in "Contest of Faculties":

> Precisely because it is never concerned only with signified content, deconstruction should not be separable from this politico-institutional problematic and should seek a new investigation of responsibility, an investigation which questions the codes inherited from ethics and politics. This means that, too political for some, it will seem paralyzing to those who only recognize politics by the most familiar road signs. Deconstruction is neither a methodological reform that should reassure the organization in place nor a flourish of irresponsible and irresponsible-making destruction, whose most certain effect would be to leave everything as it is and to consolidate the most immobile forces within the university. (in Culler On 56)

Deconstruction, however, has been and remains thematized precisely as "irresponsible and irresponsible-making destruction," and as a critical movement which "leave[s] everything as it is...within the university." In order to pose a question to this dominant reading of deconstruction, I would like to move from here to examine the institutional rise and fall of deconstruction in North American literature departments.

CHAPTER 2

THE DISCIPLINE OF DECONSTRUCTION

Deconstruction, it seems, is dead in literature departments today. Its death is usually attributed either to suicide--to its falling back into the dead-end formalism it was supposed to remedy--or to murder at the hands of the New Historicists, whose calls for re-historicizing and re-contextualizing the study of literature have successfully called into question the supposed self-cancelling textualism of the deconstructionists. Consider the following fairly representative assessments--the first of the "suicide" theory, the second of the "murder" theory:

> deconstructive criticism, which, however important, is but an offspring of New Criticism,...has done little more than apply what it takes to be a method for reading literary texts to the unproblematized horizon of its discipline.

> By neglecting the pragmatic and historical context of the utterance of what is dramatized in such a manner as to cancel it out, the criticism in question reveals its origins in Romantic (as well as, in a certain interpretation, Idealist) philosophy. It is a

> suprahistorical criticism that pretends to speak from a position free of ideology--that is, from an absolute point of view.

Critics of deconstruction will agree, I think, that these quotations well sum up the critiques which brought its short, happy life in American literature departments to an end.

The first quotation puts forth the critique usually associated with, for lack of a better word, "skeptical" detractors of deconstruction--those who hold that while deconstructive reading claims to be something radically new, in actuality it is simply another version of New Criticism's traditional methodology of close reading, cloaked in a theoretical vocabulary and reapplied to a series of texts in order to yield "new" readings.[1] These detractors point to the way in which deconstructive readers of literary texts hunt for self-cancelling binary oppositions in the same (essentially unproblematic) way the New Critics hunted for themes and ironies. In addition, according to this line of reasoning, the end result of both readings is the same: a New Critical reading totalizes the text by offering an all-

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[1]See, for example, Jane P. Tompkins' "The Reader in History": "What is most striking about reader-response criticism and its close relative, deconstructive criticism, is their failure to break out of the mold into which critical writing was cast by the formalist identification of criticism with explication. Interpretation reigns supreme both in teaching and publication just as it did when the New Criticism was in its heyday in the 1940s and 1950s" (224-5).

inclusive meaning or interpretation, while a deconstructive reading totalizes the text in exactly the opposite way--simply denying meaning or interpretation by showing how oppositions in the text cancel themselves out. For the skeptic, deconstruction committed suicide in literature departments after it realized it was unable to break away from the tradition it wished to supersede.

The second quotation reflects the critique of deconstructive criticism generally advanced by those concerned about its political dimension--or rather, its lack of political dimension. Deconstructive readings are faulted, in this line of reasoning, primarily for "neglecting the pragmatic and historical context" of literature and the production of literature, thereby performing a "suprahistorical criticism that pretends to speak from a position free of ideology." Additionally, and perhaps more damningly, those concerned with the political dimension of literature studies point to the danger of the political despair inevitably fostered by these readings' notions of simple textual self-cancellation, the danger of fostering passive acceptance as the political result of a reactionary and nihilistic textual undecidability.[2] For

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[2]See, for example, Eagleton's assessment in Literary Theory: deconstruction "frees you at a stroke from having to assume a position on important issue, since what you say of such things will be no more than a passing product of the signifier and so in no sense to be taken as 'true' or 'serious'.... Since it commits you to affirming nothing, it is as injurious as blank ammunition" (145).

the marxist, feminist, or (new) historical literary critic, deconstruction was murdered by a reorientation in literature departments toward the political and social dimensions of literary texts and of the discipline of literary criticism itself.

In any case, the quotations with which I began are certainly representative of compelling critiques of the practice of deconstructive criticism from two distinct points of view--what I have called the skeptical and the political--which are at odds with deconstruction. It is indeed odd, then, that both of these critiques are quoted from a recent book which is an apology for deconstruction, Rodolphe Gasché's The Tain of the Mirror (quotations from 255, 139). Gasché vehemently critiques a certain kind of deconstructive practice, but, unlike most of deconstruction's critics within literature departments, Gasché attacks and subverts this practice of deconstructive literary criticism in defense of deconstruction, in 'the name' of deconstruction, of "deconstruction, properly speaking" (135)--in defense of Derrida's thought against those who (ab)use it by turning it into an unproblematic, nihilistic method for reading literary texts.

There are, then, different readings of the role or value of deconstruction at work for Gasché and for the skeptical or political critics of deconstruction I characterized earlier; yet somehow both Gasché--a defender

of deconstruction--and the skeptical and political critics of deconstruction can come to the same general conclusions about the inadequacy of deconstructive literary criticism as it was and currently is practiced in America, especially by the "Yale school" and its followers. Gasché, rather than dismissing deconstruction out of hand, as the skeptics and political critics often do, argues that Derrida's thought has been grossly misrepresented by his American disciples, and that there has never been a properly deconstructive criticism in America; in fact, Gasché argues that there is nothing inherent in Derrida's work which makes it applicable in any simple way to literary criticism.[3] For Gasché, Derrida is, like many before him, a philosopher who has an interest in literature, but Gasché argues that this interest in no way makes his thought readily or easily available to be taken up for use in traditional literary criticism. He writes, against deconstructive criticism, that "to quarry from Derrida's writings is not automatically to become deconstructive" (2); in fact, Gasché states, "the importance of Derrida's thinking for the discipline of literary criticism is not immediately evident" (255).

Assuming that Gasché is correct--and I believe that, for the most part, he is--the question for those of us interested in deconstruction and literature then becomes:

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[3]Gasché made this point as early as 1979, in his "Deconstruction as Criticism."

what, if anything, can be made of--written of, thought of--the relation between a body of texts we call Derrida's philosophy and a body of texts we call literature? If we agree that, for the most part, what passed under the name "deconstruction" in literature departments in the 1970's and beyond had little to do with Derrida's thought, perhaps deconstruction needs to be reexamined. In short, it seems to me that now that the wave of deconstruction as a <u>method for interpreting texts</u> has crested and rolled back in literature departments, perhaps it can be reexamined as a philosophy, specifically a postmodern philosophy, a <u>postmodern thinking</u>, which is overtly interested in the literature and institutions of the postmodern world--or, more precisely, a philosophy which is interested in the process by which borders (the borders that separate literature and philosophy, texts and institutions, the modern and the postmodern) are assigned. I must stress that I am not interested here in aligning myself with those--skeptics or proponents--who see postmodern thought as valid solely in relation to postmodern texts; but, at the same time, I would like to question the value of critical projects which aim at simply re-reading the tradition from another (in this case, deconstructive) point of view. Or, perhaps phrased more precisely, I would like to question a certain reading of deconstruction which would allow it a properly critical project or a kind of world view. I would

like, at this point, to examine the institutional rise of American deconstruction and its reading of Derrida, and then point out where I think this dominant reading--the reading upon which the skeptical and political critiques of deconstruction are based--fails to account for the complexities of Derrida's work.

However, I run the risk throughout this argument of too-quickly totalizing the category "deconstructive literary criticism"; indeed, one of the key problems surrounding the reception of deconstruction in America is its thematization as a master term, something Derrida warns against:

> the word 'deconstruction' like all other words acquires its value only from its inscription in a chain of possible substitutions, in what is too blithely called a 'context.' For me, for what I have tried and still try to write, the word only has an interest within a certain context where it replaces and lets itself be determined by such other words as 'écriture,' 'trace,' 'supplement,' 'hymen,' 'pharmakon,' 'margin,' [etc.]...." (in Bernasconi and Wood 7)

I will try to honor the complexity within what may seem to be the monolithic category "deconstructive criticism"--a move which is, of course, necessary given the double bind I find myself in as someone who could quite easily be called a "deconstructive critic." There are, from the very "beginning," many deconstructions: the "rhetorical"

deconstruction of Paul de Man is different from the "pedagogical" deconstruction of Gregory Ulmer, which in turn is different from the "political" deconstruction of Michael Ryan, the "post-colonial" deconstruction of Gayatri Spivak, the "philosophical" deconstruction of Gasché, or the "feminist" deconstruction of Barbara Johnson, and these differences must be attended to. I should make it clear, then, that most of my comments concerning "deconstructive literary criticism in America" will be directed toward a rhetorical or tropological brand of Yale school deconstruction, perhaps most clearly represented by de Man and J. Hillis Miller. I turn my attention here because it is this rhetorical mode that has offered the greatest possibility to read deconstruction as a critical method--as a discursive tool for producing readings, and thereby for bolstering the work of a discipline.

The Commodification of Deconstruction in America

Deconstruction in America has a well-known genealogy; it was, so the story goes, imported from France and received in an enthusiastic way by many scholars in American literature departments, most following the lead of the Yale critics. Deconstruction brought "theory" to the foreground in the study of literature in America. Soon, theory classes in English graduate departments were a must, and a wave of deconstruction "handbooks" was produced to introduce

graduate students and interested faculty to the complexities of deconstruction in theory seminars. (Derrida's own writings were and still are, for the most part, scrupulously avoided in these classes because of their complexity and difficulty--again, or so the story goes.) Deconstruction was, to put it bluntly, commodified for an American market, simplified and watered down for use in how-to books which gave (and continue to give) an entire generation of literature students an overview of what was supposedly Derrida's work without a corresponding attention to Derrida's texts.[4] For example, the following quotations were taken from two of the leading handbooks used to represent deconstruction in theory seminars--the first from Jonathan Culler's On Deconstruction and the second from Christopher Norris' Deconstruction: Theory and Practice:[5]

> In undoing the oppositions on which it relies and between which it urges the reader to choose, the text places the [deconstructive] reader in an impossible situation that cannot end in triumph but only in an outcome already deemed inappropriate: an unwarranted

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[4]This commodification, we should note, moves hand-in-hand with the professionalizing of theory that I discuss in Chapter 1.

[5]The title of Norris' book, with its dependence on the metaphysical ur-distinction between theoria and praxis--the very distinction with which philosophy first configures itself--shows that Norris hasn't the faintest idea of the stakes of Derrida's project. "Differance," Derrida writes, is "a system that no longer tolerates the opposition of activity and passivity" (Margins 16).

choice or failure to choose. (81)[6]

> To deconstruct a text in Nietzschean-Derridean terms is to arrive at a limit point or deadlocked aporia of meaning which offers no hold for Marxist-historical understanding. The textual 'ideology' uncovered by Derrida's readings is a kind of aboriginal swerve into metaphor and figurative detour which language embraces. (80)

If we compare these handbook accounts of deconstruction with the characterizations of the skeptical and political critiques I began with, I think we can see that the critiques are right on the beam: in Culler's characterization, deconstruction is an essentially formalist reading method which emphasizes a pre-determined fall into meaninglessness resulting from the self-cancellation of oppositions in any text.[7] In Norris' view of

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[6]To be fair, this quotation from Culler comes in the context of his reading of de Man, but Culler effectively conflates his project with Derrida's, writing that deconstruction "emerges from the work of Derrida and de Man" (228).

[7]This reading is so institutionally canonized, in fact, that it has made it onto the GRE Literature in English Test. Sample questions 31-32 in the 1989-91 GRE Literature in English test booklet concern a passage comparing the new critic's "prior knowledge that all literature is paradoxical" to "the deconstructionists' foreknowledge that all texts are allegories of their own unreadability" (16). This is a point well taken, as I am arguing here. However, the GRE's question concerns the proper names of these movements. The answer: "(E) Cleanth Brooks and Jacques Derrida" (16).

deconstruction, we see the political implications of the "deadlocked aporia of meaning" which results from the deconstructive act--rather, we see precisely that there are no political implications, that the ideology uncovered by (and, presumably, championed in) Derrida's readings is indeed that we are trapped in a prison-house of language.

That, however, is simply not the case in Derrida's own writings. Time and time again Derrida warns of the danger--metaphysical and political--of simply neutralizing oppositions in the name of deconstruction. Derrida emphasizes that deconstruction involves a double reading, a neutralization and a reinscription. He writes,

> Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to intervene in the field of oppositions that it criticizes, which is also a field of non-discursive forces. (Margins 329)

For Derrida, contra many of his followers and critics, deconstruction is not a simple move toward neutralization. Derrida's thought does not move toward an end constituted by a "deadlocked aporia of meaning" which leads to "an impossible situation which cannot end in triumph"; rather,

this deadlock, this undecidability, this unreadability is only the first gesture in a double reading, the "overturning" gesture which shows the untenability of the "classical opposition," the fact that the privileged term in the opposition can only structure itself--in its presence--with reference to the non-privileged term--in its absence--leaving non-presence as a structuring principle of presence and calling into question the privilege of the master term over the subservient term. This is indeed first-level deconstruction, but it leaves the crucial operation of Derrida's thought unperformed: the displacement of the system and the reinscription of the opposition, the second move of a double reading in which "deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to intervene in the field of oppositions that it criticizes." For Derrida, deconstruction can intervene only by displacing the mode of thinking which leads precisely to these deadlocks, by calling for and attempting to make possible an other thinking. So, Derrida, in some sense, actually agrees with skeptical and political critics of deconstruction as literary criticism: deconstruction will not be able to intervene in the field of oppositions it criticizes until it goes beyond simple neutralization--that is, unless it makes this second move of double reading, a general displacement of that system whose logic leads it inexorably to these neutralizations, these pure negations.

Deconstructive literary criticism, as it is summed up by Culler and Norris and practiced in America, has yet to acknowledge the importance of this displacement in Derrida's thought. Derrida writes,

> deconstruction involves an indispensable phase of reversal [i.e. first level deconstruction]. To remain content with reversal is of course to operate within the imminence of the system to be destroyed. But to sit back...and take an attitude of neutralizing indifference with respect to the classical oppositions would be to give free rein to the existing forces that effectively and historically dominate the field. It would be, for not having seized the means to intervene, to confirm the established equilibrium. (Dissemination 6)

If deconstruction as literary criticism limits itself to neutralization, to first level deconstruction, Derrida here agrees that it is then politically impotent and even reactionary; simple "neutralizing indifference" gives "free rein to the existing forces that effectively and historically dominate the field" leaving the field of oppositions--a field which Derrida emphasizes is made up of both discursive and non-discursive forces--itself undisrupted. To fail to make the second move of the double reading would be simply "to confirm the established equilibrium." This, in Derrida's own words, is the

unfortunate status of deconstructive literary criticism in America.

The reason deconstructive criticism has yet to make the second move of the double gesture can, I think, be traced to the Yale school's influential (mis)reading of Derrida's notion of "undecidability," the notion that the majority of critiques of deconstruction attack most stringently: the skeptic sees the deconstructive critic's notion of undecidability as the simple opposite of decidability--making undecidability quite decidable; while the political critic sees undecidability as spelling out a dead end of futility for political action--as a notion which cannot help but bolster the social status quo. Deconstructive criticism, as Gasché has shown, often mistakes the inability to decide brought about by oppositions cancelling themselves out--what deconstructive critic par excellence Paul de Man calls "unreadability"--for Derrida's notion of undecidability; they are, however, not the same. According to de Man, "A text...can literally be called 'unreadable' in that it leads to a set of assertions that radically exclude each other" (Allegories 245). This, as we have seen in Chapter 1, would hold for Derrida also, but only as a first level deconstruction; textual assertions cancelling each other out are, for Derrida, a sign that a certain totalizing way of reading is experiencing its closure, a sign that this way of reading (thinking) must be radically displaced--its

grounds must be rethought carefully and the opposition must be reinscribed in a system which respects separation, which stands on a discontinuous, withdrawing ground.

For Derrida, the closure of this objectifying system--a system which always privileges identity over difference--entails a distinctly ethical imperative to rethink decision carefully and problematically.[8] For de Man, however, the upshot of this self-cancellation is that texts "compel us to choose while destroying the foundations of any choice" (Allegories 245, my emphasis). The undecidability fostered by unreadability, then, is the lesson, the end, the telos of deconstruction for de Man,[9] just as deconstruction names the negative movement which founds or constitutes the text.[10] And this genesis-to-revelation movement of de Manian deconstruction allows quite nicely a critical or institutional project for deconstruction; note, for example, de Man's comments about deconstructive reading, a reading

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[8]As Bernasconi has pointed out, there is no ethics without undecidability, i.e. if a totalizing system is your guide, decision is not a problem because the system has, by definition, all the answers. See his "Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics" (especially 135). See also Derrida very clearly making this point in his Afterword to the Limited Inc. texts (116).

[9]See above my discussion of de Man's "Shelley Disfigured" as a nihilistic allegory of recuperation.

[10]Cf. "Semiology and Rhetoric": "The deconstruction is not something that we have added to the text; it constituted the text in the first place" (138). For an excellent discussion of de Man and Derrida on this point, see Irene Harvey's "The Différance between Derrida and de Man."

that inexorably "ends up in indetermination": "We seem to find ourselves in a mood of negative assurance that is highly productive of critical discourse" ("Semiology" 137). Highly productive indeed; since deconstruction in a de Manian sense can be said both to constitute the text (as a system of rhetorical or thematic patterns) and likewise to predict the text's productive end (its assured indetermination), it becomes the ultimate critical discourse to which literature can be and should be submitted. De Man, in fact, makes a claim very much like this concerning the response of Proust's texts to the critical project of deconstructive reading:

> The whole of literature would respond in similar fashion, although the techniques and patterns would have to vary considerably, of course, from author to author. But there is absolutely no reason why analyses of the kind here suggested for Proust would not be applicable, with proper modifications of technique, to Milton or to Dante or to Hölderlin. <u>This in fact will be the task of literary criticism in the coming years</u>. ("Semiology" 138, my emphasis)

For de Man, then, deconstruction is the critical project <u>par excellence</u>, the determination (as indetermination) which no text can escape. Of course, to reiterate, this determining of the whole of literature as simply unreadable makes it possible to thematize deconstruction as a "new new

criticism,"[11] a criticism which reveals the meaning of literature as/in its unreadability. And this unreadability, in turn, allows the reader "to see that failure lies in the nature of things" (Blindness 18).

This is, however, not so for Derrida, who touches on the question of unreadability in his treatment of Blanchot's L'arrêt de mort:

> If reading means making accessible a meaning that can be transmitted as such, in its own unequivocal, translatable identity, then this title is unreadable. But this unreadability does not arrest reading, does not leave it paralyzed in the face of an opaque surface; rather, it starts reading and writing and translation moving again. The unreadable is not the opposite of the readable, but rather the ridge that also gives it momentum, movement, sets it in motion. ("Living On" 116, my emphasis)

For Derrida, the unreadable or the undecidable is not the revelation of a "failure [that] lies in the nature of things," as unreadability is for de Man; rather, for Derrida, the unreadable is the "place" where deconstruction

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[11] In fact, de Man has no trouble thematizing his project in this way: "I don't have a bad conscience when I'm being told that, to the extent that it is didactic, my work is academic or even, as it is used as a supreme insult, it is just more New Criticism. I can live with that very easily, because I think that only what is, in a sense, classically didactic, can be really and effectively subversive" ("Interview" 306).

becomes most enabling, most aware of the need to displace the system which leads to such an impasse. For Derrida, undecidability is a condition of possibility for reading; reading's impossibility--the impossibility of totalizing reading, of self-identical meaning--makes it possible for reading to be set in motion in other ways, makes it possible for readers to ask questions other than the metaphysical question, what is it, what is its truth?[12] Undecidability, for Derrida, is the undecidability of this question--what is it?--coupled with the imperative to ask different questions, to displace the force of this metaphysical question. De Man and many other deconstructionist literary critics do not, for the most part, see undecidability this way. For them, the impossibility of reading is the telos of deconstruction --it is what deconstructive readings seek to reveal.[13] It seems clear that this impossibility--if taken as a simple impossibility, as a "failure" or simple lack of possibility --can be seen as, in Derrida's words, the "unequivocal, translatable identity" of the text, of any text, for the

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[12]For an excellent discussion of Derrida's relation to the Aristotlean question "what is it?," see Gasché's Tain, especially pages 79 and 283.

[13]The notion that indecision is the telos of deconstruction is consistently attributed to Derrida as well as to deconstructive criticism. See Jonathan Arac: "De Man and Derrida scrupulously, brilliantly, pointed out others' errors and incidentally suggested whole new dimensions of the texts they read. There they stopped, Derrida with a question and beyond that an impasse, de Man with a paradox that rescued him from arrogance" (Critical 100).

deconstructive critic. A reading which concludes on the simple impossibility of reading is, in fact, a totalized reading; in other words, the deconstructive critic definitively--or, one could say, decisively--continues to answer the totalizing question "what is it?" when he or she contends that the truth of the text lies in its undecidability.

This move toward totalization in deconstructive literary criticism is not particularly surprising however, because literary criticism, as such, has always depended on a notion of decidability, of totalizing readability--even if the totality is thematized as absence, unreadability; the notion of decidability is necessary to isolate a text and then to produce a "reading" of it. Decidability, it seems, is a notion necessary for any literary criticism--even deconstructive literary criticism. For example, J. Hillis Miller writes in "The Critic as Host" (which was written for the famous "deconstructive manifesto" Deconstruction and Criticism):

> "deconstruction," which is analytic criticism as such, encounters always, if it is carried far enough, some mode of oscillation. In this oscillation two genuine insights into literature in general and into a given text in particular inhibit, subvert, and undercut one another. This inhibition makes it impossible for either insight to function as a firm resting place, the

> end point of analysis.... "undecidability" names the experience of a ceaseless dissatisfied movement in the relation of the critic to the text.
>
> The ultimate justification for this mode of criticism, as of any conceivable mode, is that it works. (252)

Here we see Miller giving an account of deconstruction similar to de Man's: deconstruction is a method which, if taken far enough, reveals the self-cancellation of binary oppositions in a text. What this movement finally affirms is the text's fall into a ceaseless undecidability predetermined by its--for the most part unconscious--self-subversion through its employment of figural language. This is, by now, familiar ground, but what is particularly interesting to me in Miller's notion here is his "justification" of deconstructive criticism; he writes that deconstructive criticism's justification, as the justification of <u>any conceivable mode</u> of criticism, is that it <u>works</u>. Miller here thematizes two contradictory modes or premises of deconstructive criticism: it must be "undecidable" as deconstruction; but, at the same time, it must "work" as literary criticism--it must decide for/in/about the text.

The paradigms of literary criticism do indeed "work"; they throw themselves into the dialectical process which is, which <u>defines</u>, work--work as movement toward decidability,

toward meaning, work that shows itself in literary criticism as the production of an interpretation of a text, a polished "reading" of a text, a decision about the meaning of a text.[14] As Miller writes in the same essay,

> "Deconstruction" is neither nihilism nor metaphysics but simply interpretation as such, the untangling of the inherence of metaphysics in nihilism and of nihilism in metaphysics by way of the close reading of texts. (230)

For Miller, deconstruction is "simply interpretation as such"; it is part and parcel of the "untangling" work of traditional criticism. In short, deconstructive criticism here is explicitly tied to decidability, the work of--what works in--traditional literary criticism. According to Miller, the recognition of an interpretative undecidability is, then, the "work" of deconstructive criticism, what it reveals as a transhistorical principle in its readings. This notion of undecidability as a principle--as the meaning of texts, of all texts--is, as I have argued above, essentially the same as traditional criticism's

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[14]Fish aptly summarizes this type of literary critical work when he writes, "theories always work and they will always produce exactly the results they predict.... Indeed, the trick would be to find a theory that didn't work" (Is There? 68). Deconstruction, I will argue, is precisely such a "theory."

transhistorical notions of meaning and/as decidability.[15]

Derridean deconstruction, though, always problematizes this decidability--though not in any simple, dialectical way; hence, a relation between Derridean deconstruction and literary criticism is not readily apparent--that is, a relation other than one in which literary criticism is a discipline to be deconstructed. Derrida writes:

> Deconstruction is not a critical operation. The critical is its object; the deconstruction always bears, at one mement [sic] or another, on the confidence invested in the critical or critico-theoretical process, that is to say, in the act of decision, in the ultimate possibility of the decidable. ("Ja, ou le faux bond," 103; trans. and cited in Culler, 247)[16]

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[15]According to Miller, for example, texts deconstruct themselves, uniformly and without reference to--or differentiation among--historical circumstances: "logocentric metaphysics deconstitutes itself, according to a regular law which can be demonstrated in the self-subversion of all the great texts of Western metaphysics from Plato onward" (228). Likewise for de Man, who actually mentions this point as the principal difference between Derrida and himself: "I would hold to that statement that 'the text deconstructs itself, is self-deconstructive' rather than being deconstructed by a philosophical intervention" ("Interview" 307). Cf. David Carroll's critique of this notion in Paraesthetics: "This indeterminacy or undecidability of art must, in each instance,...be argued anew and meticulously analyzed, rather than simply declared" (187, my emphasis).

[16]Culler, rather bafflingly, lets this quotation from Derrida stand virtually without comment--in a section entitled "Deconstructive Criticism." He does, though, gloss Derrida's quotation with the following from de Man: "'A

Derrida here argues that criticism--critique, the dialectical movement of affirmation, negation, and synthesis on the way to a totalized realization of truth--is the object of deconstruction, that-which-is-to-be-deconstructed. This notion of knowledge as critique can be read in the movement of the history of philosophy, with the great system-builders criticizing those before them and replacing the old systems with new and improved systems on the way to or in the name of synthesis, identity, and the realization of truth. But this movement of critique is also the movement of literary criticism, insofar as literary criticism is tied to a search for the meaning of texts, to the decidability of texts, to synthesis, to "transcendental reading, in that search for the signified" (Grammatology 160). As Derrida writes in "The Double Session," "The critical desire--which is also the philosophical desire--can only, as such, attempt to regain...lost mastery" (Dissemination 230).[17]

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deconstruction,' writes de Man, 'always has for its target to reveal the existence of hidden articulations and fragmentations within assumedly monadic totalities'" (Culler 247, my emphasis). When he uses de Man to gloss Derrida here, Culler sums up two of my arguments in a nutshell: 1) de Man "always" wishes to reveal a certain undecidability as the end of his project; and 2) the project of deconstructive criticism is consistently conflated with Derrida's--here in Culler's book, as it is in a great deal of secondary literature.

[17]Cf. earlier in "the Double Session" where Derrida argues that his "undecidables"--hymen, pharmakon, supplément, etc.--"mark the spots of what can never be mastered, sublated, or dialectized" (Dissemination 221).

Arguing for the transhistorical principle of the undecidability of texts is deconstructive criticism's move to regain this lost mastery over texts, to re-empower literary criticism. In fact, a re-empowering of literary criticism is overtly mentioned by Geoffrey Hartman as one of the "shared set of problems" facing those writing in Deconstruction and Criticism. He writes in his Preface:

> These problems center on two issues that affect literary criticism today. One is the situation of criticism itself, what kind of maturer function it may claim--a function beyond the obviously academic or pedagogical. While teaching, criticizing, and presenting the great texts of our culture are essential tasks, to insist on the importance of literature should not entail assigning to literary criticism only a service function. Criticism is part of the world of letters, and has its own mixed philosophical and literary, reflective and figural strength. (vii)

Hartman here seems to begin with an interesting notion of a possible "function beyond the obviously academic or pedagogical" (perhaps a function beyond the "professionalism" that I discuss above) for criticism, but ends up simply wanting to have criticism recognized for its "figural strength"--the strength it gains from its recognition of and use of a privileged figural language--within "the world of letters." Again, this seems to leave

the door open for deconstruction to be read as a traditional--even traditionalist[18]--thematized reading method, one which assigns and removes mastery from texts by the single criterion of their employment of figurative language. But it seems to me that if there is to be a relation between deconstruction and literary criticism, if deconstruction is to be "useful" at all to literary criticism, if there is a "lesson to be learned" from deconstruction, it is that literary criticism must face up to the questions posed by deconstruction: it must do something other than provide a method to produce thematized readings--to reassert mastery over texts--which, unfortunately, is what most of the deconstructionist critics in America have done with Derrida's texts.

Undecidability, Structure, Institution

"Yale" deconstructive criticism has, from its inception in America, certainly been characterized by its proponents as a sort of criticism which does something other than provide such thematized readings; as I argue above, it fails because it finds the same rock-bottom simple undecidability

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[18]For example, Hartman's notion that "teaching, criticizing, and presenting the great texts of our culture are essential tasks" is debatable on many fronts: who is the "we" implied by "our culture"; to whom are these tasks "essential"; what are (the stakes of assigning the status of) "great texts"? In the end, it seems that all of this quite clearly reinforces a notion of criticism as simply and "obviously academic and pedagogical."

in all texts as the nature of literature. For the deconstructionist critic, undecidability is a function of, is grounded in, the irreducibly rich signification of literary language; Hartman writes that all deconstructors are interested in "figurative language, its excesses over an assigned meaning" (vii). The undecidability of a text is the product of the figural, metaphoric language always at play within the text's attempted constitution of scientific, objectified truth. As Miller writes, "Deconstruction is an investigation of what is implied by this inherence in one another of figure, concept, and narrative" (223). In other words, because figurative language, which is irreducibly rich in significance or signification, is part of the constitution of--part of the ground for--the notions of concept and narrative, these notions cannot be made univocally significant: for Miller, the "concept" literature and the specific text's "narrative" remain undecidable because of the inherence of "figure"--figurative language--within their make-up. Thus, the ground of deconstructive literary criticism's notion of undecidability is specifically the undecidability of figurative language.[19]

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[19]Cf. Miller's "The Search for Grounds in Literary Study," in which he states that a double emphasis on the tropological and narrative (taken together, figural) nature of language in a story is both "the underlying logos or Grund and at the same time [that which] interrupts or deconstructs that story--this double emphasis tends to break down generic distinctions and to recognize, for example, the

This realization of the figural or metaphoric nature of all language is generally taken to be something that deconstructive criticism has lifted right out of Derrida, as an important component of his work. As Norris writes about Derrida's work, "deconstruction finds its rock-bottom sense [in] the irreducibility of metaphor, the différance at play within the very constitution of 'literal' meaning" (66). Here Norris characterizes a turn to the irreducible richness of metaphorical or figurative language (against the univocality of literal language, against philosophy) as the thrust of Derrida's work, especially in his famous text on metaphor, "White Mythology." This, again, is not the case in Derrida's work; he writes, against those who take "White Mythology" to be a text about the privilege of metaphor over metonomy,

> the whole of "White Mythology" constantly puts into question the current and currently philosophical interpretation of metaphor as a transfer from the sensible to the intelligible, as well as the privilege accorded this trope in the deconstruction of metaphysical rhetoric. ("Retrait" 13)

For Derrida, metaphor is not a trope which can have a privileged place in the disrupting or deconstruction of metaphysical rhetoric because it is part and parcel of this

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fundamental role of tropes in novels" (Rhetoric and Form 34).

rhetoric, a ground-concept of metaphysics. He writes in "White Mythology,"

> Above all, the movement of metaphorization (origin and then erasure of the metaphor, transition from the proper sensory meaning to the proper spiritual meaning by means of the detour of figures) is nothing other than the movement of idealization.... Each time a philosophy defines a metaphor it implies not only a philosophy but a conceptual network in which philosophy itself has been constituted. (Margins 226, 230)

For Derrida, a turn to metaphor, an affirmation of figural or metaphoric language, is a metaphysical move par excellence; the concept of metaphor--the sensible standing in for the intelligible by means of tropes--is the movement of metaphysics, of idealization, so it could hardly function as the ground for a concept of undecidability which could in some way disrupt this movement.

Undecidability, for Derrida, has nothing to do with the semantic, metaphorical richness of figural language; he writes, in his discussion of the undecidability of hymen in Mallarmé, "'Undecidability' is not caused here by some enigmatic equivocality, some inexhaustible ambivalence of a word in a 'natural' language" (Dissemination 220). It is not the richness of figural language which brings undecidability about for Derrida, but the structure of the field itself--a field which engenders undecidability as a

symptom of the closure of a certain totalizing way of thinking, of the need for the displacement of such a system. He writes,

> If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field...excludes totalization. (Writing and Difference 289, my emphasis)

For Derrida, it is the nature or structure of the field--of systematicity or metaphoricity in general[20]--rather than some sort of inherent ambiguity in a certain tropic use of figural language which is the ground of undecidability. According to Derrida, the nature of the field--a field which, he emphasizes, is made up of both discursive and non-discursive forces--inscribes difference within the heart of identity.

This can best be explained, I think, in terms of Derrida's interest in Saussurian linguistics, wherein the systematicity of language is accounted for solely in terms of "differences without positive terms" (Course 120); for Derrida, undecidability is a consequence of the functioning

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[20]Structure cannot be thought here as origin, ground, or limit; as Derrida writes, "Here structure means the irreducible complexity within which one can only shape or shift the play of presence or absence: that within which metaphysics can be produced but which metaphysics cannot think" (Grammatology 167, my emphasis). This discussion is very much indebted to Gasché's discussion of structure and systematicity in Tain (especially 143 ff.).

of the general system, a system which is grounded in difference rather than identity, a system which cannot purge the difference--the non-presence--which is part of its very structure. As Gasché writes,

> [For Derrida,] since concepts are produced within a discursive network of differences, they not only are what they are by virtue of other concepts, but they also, in a fundamental way, inscribe that Otherness within themselves. (Tain 128, my emphasis)

Undecidability is brought about because of this irreducible otherness which is inscribed in each concept--because of its necessary inclusion in a systematicity which forces the concept to constitute itself in/by relation to a chain of other terms. One term cannot function as a master term--rule the system from without--because it is configured in and it functions within a system always already in place. There is no pure, positive term constituted (from) without a system. The upshot of all this for deconstructive criticism's reading of undecidability, then, is that for Derrida this undecidability cannot be a "positive" consequence of the richness or ambiguity of figural language for the same reason that a signified cannot be a "positive" consequence of a signifier for Saussure: systematicity excludes the possibility[21] of a positive master term ruling

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[21]As a kind of ground, it also engenders this possibility, making Derrida's notion of ground quasi-transcendental, giving simultaneously conditions of

within a field. Hence, the inability to totalize--the undecidability--that Derrida speaks of is not the "positive" consequence of a certain sort of tropic language use; rather, it is conditioned by the nature of the system: it is due to the always already fact of systematicity at work in the very constitution of supposedly pure, "origin-al" concepts, concepts that wish to rule the chain, assure its decidability--concepts such as deconstructive criticism's transcategorial, transhistorical notion of simple undecidability. In short, a systematic rather than figural or rhetorical notion of "undecidability" separates Derrida from deconstructive criticism.

But perhaps I paint here an overly deconstructive picture of Saussure's systematic linguistics. An emphasis on systematicity is certainly no unproblematic buffer against decidability. Saussure, in fact, never quite goes as far as to allow the end-less chain of substitutions that would necessarily accompany a linguistics in which the signified was impure--tainted to the point of being "just" another signifier. As Derrida points out, Saussure has several mechanisms built into his linguistics which precisely allow decidability and maintain the sovereignty of the signified--most notable among them is the voice, Saussure's insistence on the properly spoken character of

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possibility and impossibility. Cf. Dissemination p. 166-68 and Tain pp. 316-18. See the more detailed discussion of ground in Chapter 4.

language.[22] As Samuel Weber notes, in order to protect meaning, "What Saussure does is simply to replace the notion of 'pure difference' with that of 'opposition' in order then to derive the structure of what he calls the 'totality of the sign.'" (Institution 146). On the level of system, then, Saussure protects meaning by introducing "opposition" (and hence dialectical sublation) into a system that would otherwise be characterized by "pure difference," a move which Derrida analyzes in terms of the opposition speech/writing.[23] But, as Weber points out, there is another way that Saussure arrests the chain of significations and assures meaning--through the very work of the discipline of linguistics:

> this 'totality' [of the sign] is, in turn, the product of what in a strange and revealing equivocation he calls the 'linguistic institution,' whose task is 'to maintain the parallelism between these two orders of difference,' that is, between signifier and signified. The equivocation of the term 'linguistic,' which can refer here to either language or to linguistics, is revealing inasmuch as it suggests that the

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[22]Saussure writes, "Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first" (23); of course, language for Saussure is not simply equal to speech, but speech is language's proper articulation (see Chapter 3, "The Object of Linguistics").

[23]See "Linguistics and Grammatology" (27-65) in Grammatology.

> establishment and maintenance of the object of a discipline--language as a system--is a task that only the discipline itself, qua institution--that is, linguistics--can perform. (Institution 146)

Weber here points out that Saussure guarantees meaning not only through the protection afforded the system of language by the signified, but through the protection afforded the entire enterprise of language study by the institutionalization of its discipline. Here "linguistic institution" is both the institution (establishment, organization) of meaning through the system of language and the protection of this entire apparatus of meaning through the institution (institutionalization) of the discourse known as linguistics.

Weber, as I noted above, is somewhat critical of deconstruction's lack of attention to such matters; he argues that Derrida's focus on "the conditions of possibility and impossibility of systematic thought...has tended to downplay the forces and factors that always operate to institute and to maintain certain sets of paradigms" (19). Weber, it seems, would criticize Derrida for deconstructing only the "systematic" aspect of Saussure's thought, and not its inevitable--and perhaps more sinister and pervasive--institutional manifestations.[24]

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[24]One could also note here that Saussure's linguistics is the paradigmatic "science" for structuralism, certainly the most powerful cross-disciplinary institutional movement

This is, as I suggest from the beginning of this study, a point well taken--one which I have already touched upon and which I will examine at some length in the following chapters. However, it is interesting to note here, as I have noted above, that Weber's argument against the single-mindedly systematic nature of deconstruction depends quite heavily on what could be called the systematic terms and strategies of deconstruction. Weber's argument concerning the functioning of institutions, for example, follows quite closely the argument I have been making for the prominence of the inscription of otherness in Derrida's "systematic" writings. In fact, Wlad Godzich paraphrases Weber's argument in strikingly similar terms; he writes, "In its day-to-day functioning, the institution manages to ignore this constitutive otherness within itself, and yet it cannot forget it since it stands as its foundational moment" (157). As I note in Chapter 1, Weber argues throughout his analyses that disciplines can only do their work it they forget that they are founded on exclusion--that a (groundless) exclusion defines the very field of a discipline, and if this exclusion were taken into account, it would inexorably disrupt the smooth functioning of the institutional apparatus. It should be noted, however, that this is precisely the logic that a "systematic" deconstruction follows--is precisely Derrida's analysis of the work of

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of this century.

metaphysics. Following Weber, I likewise have argued that the only way deconstruction can become criticism--can be institutionalized as/in a method--is through forgetting this "foundational moment" of alterity, though this foundational moment is, strictly speaking, neither a foundation nor a moment. It is through a discussion of this (non)founding "moment" of otherness that I hope to develop the question of the postmodern--how to think and act without a determinate/determining foundation--but I digress here to re-emphasize that, from the "start," this will have been an institutional as well as a systematic question. From here, I would like to move on to discuss Foucault and the problem of institutionalization--both his work on institutionalization (especially insofar as it can be brought to bear on deconstruction) and the institutionalization of his work (especially insofar as it mirrors and comments on the commodification of deconstruction).

CHAPTER 3

EXTERIORITY AND APPROPRIATION: FOUCAULT, DERRIDA, AND THE DISCIPLINE OF LITERARY CRITICISM

In the past decade, Michel Foucault's thought has been gaining increasing currency in literature departments in the United States. If one were to plot schematically the rise and fall of theories in literature departments, one could rather easily tie the rise of Foucault's genealogical discourse to the fall of another contemporary French discourse, Derrida's deconstruction; in fact, Foucault's thought first comes on the American literary critical scene thematized as a socially and institutionally engaged alternative to what many politically oriented critics saw as the paralyzing textualism of Derrida and his disciples at Yale. Raman Selden gives a representative account of the debate in A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory:

> There is another strand in post-structuralist thought which believes the world is more than a galaxy of texts, and that some theories of textuality ignore the fact that discourse is involved in power....[For Foucault] it is evident that real power is exercised through discourse, and that this power has real effects. (98)

Thus, Foucault is brought to bear on deconstruction in order to re-orient literary criticism to the real world, to the workings of "real power" in discourse and history. In fact, a whole school of criticism has sprouted up around Foucault's texts, "new historicism," which takes from a reading of Foucault its ground notion that "discourse is like everything else in our society: the object of a struggle for power" (Harari 43).

In this chapter, I would like to take issue with the terms of this debate--specifically with the notion that Foucault is somehow a champion of historical praxis over Derrida's purely textual theoria. But I would like to do so not in order presumptuously to expose misreadings of either Foucault or Derrida in the service of a better understanding of their relationship to literary criticism, but, rather, in order to say some things about the discipline of literary criticism itself. In other words, I am interested less in exposing supposed "misreadings" of either thinker's work within this second-hand debate than I am in examining the institutional and disciplinary imperatives which make these misreadings possible--in fact, I will argue that a certain economy of misreading is even necessary if literary criticism is to "use" either Foucault or Derrida at all.

And attempt to use them it does. The discipline of literary criticism is hungry for paradigms--hungry for new readings and new methods. The theory explosion of the

1970's brought with it an entire "theory industry" within and around literature departments; the backbone of this industry is the theoretical guidebook: there are evaluative studies like the aforementioned Reader's Guide, Terry Eagleton's Literary Theory: An Introduction, much of Jonathan Culler's early work, or Frank Lentricchia's After The New Criticism; and there are essay collections, like Donald Keesey's Contexts For Criticism, Josué Harari's Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Poststructuralist Criticism or H. Aram Veeser's The New Historicism. Books such as these are a major source of "theory" for many literary critics, and they present to the profession various methods or strategies for reading texts, for producing critical analyses.[1] As Harari writes in his hugely successful collection Textual Strategies, "method has become a strategy" (72), and for Harari, the future of literary criticism is to be a struggle among these critical strategies, these truth-strategies:

> I have presented the various critical struggles at play among contemporary theorists. It remains to inscribe these strategies in a more global framework, to put them in the ring of criticism as it were, and to determine how the rounds are to be scored. (69)

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[1]These types of books are, of course, especially prevalent--and, I hasten to add, important--for introductory courses in graduate curricula, where the traditional "Bibliography and Methods" course is quickly metamorphosing into a theory course.

Harari here invokes a perhaps all-too-familiar picture of the literature department--indeed of "pluralistic" society on the whole--as engaged in a violent struggle for the truth, for truth as strategic "victory," for truth as appropriation.[2] Such a conception, unfortunately, seems to replicate rather than displace the violent will-to-truth which is in question in many of the theoretical discussions he presents. Also, Harari's notion of truth as critical struggle rather problematically recuperates thinking such as Foucault's or Derrida's within an institution--it names and preserves the interior, protected space of the university as the nexus of discourse's truth, the "ring" where various truth strategies will be tested and a winner declared.

The notion of a "ring of criticism" is particularly apt here because the space of interiority suggested by the image of a ring is precisely what literary criticism has to secure for itself in order to isolate its object and to perform its work. If a truth about a text is to be revealed and preserved in criticism, then there must be a protected interior space where this truth can lie: the structure of

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[2]In fact, Harari gleefully celebrates criticism as violent appropriation: "all criticism <u>is</u> strategic. To the question: how should the critic approach knowledge? I know of only one answer: <u>strategically</u>. The power and productivity, the gains and losses, the advances and retrenchments of criticism are inscribed in this term: strategy, reminding us of its obsolete--obsolete?-- definition: 'A violent and bloody act.' In the game of knowledge, method has become a strategy: the 'violent and bloody' agent by which criticism <u>executes</u> the work and in so doing, paradoxically, canonizes it" (72, his emphasis).

the work, the biography of the author and its relation to his or her other works, the relation of the work to its historical circumstances, and so on. But any such notion of interiority--a place protected from the play of a larger network, a place where meaning can rest unmolested--is precisely one of the things in question in many of these "critical strategies," in thinking like Foucault's or Derrida's.[3] For example, in "What is an Author?," an essay anthologized (I am tempted to say canonized) in Harari's collection, Foucault calls for a writing about literature which is not based on the accepted interior unities of the author or the book; rather, he speaks of the possibility of a topology of discourse based on statements, positivities which "cannot be constructed solely from the grammatical features, formal structures, and objects of discourse" (157). Statements cannot be expected, contra Harari's hope, to stay in one place and fight it out in the ring of criticism because, as Gilles Deleuze notes, "each statement is itself a multiplicity, not a structure or a system" (6)--

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[3]Foucault and Derrida do, of course, perform "readings" of texts, philosophical and literary, but their readings are different from the majority of literary critical thematizations because of a certain exterior or reflexive moment in their readings: crudely put, there is the genealogical moment in Foucault, where the will to truth puts itself in question; and for Derrida, there is the second move of the double reading, which is a displacement and reinscription of the opposition uncovered in the first reading. Literary criticism attempts to reproduce these reflexive moments, but generally preserves an interiority of meaning through a valorization of the reflexivity itself as the meaning of all reading, all texts.

each statement is exterior, diffused, overflowing the totality of interiority.

It is precisely here, with the exteriority of the statement, that Foucault poses his most dangerous question to literary criticism; he writes in The Archaeology of Knowledge: "Language, in its appearance as a mode of being, is the statement [l'énoncé]: as such, it belongs to a description that is neither transcendental nor anthropological" (113/148).[4] He goes on to explain:

> ...the analysis of statements treats them in the systematic form of exteriority. Usually, the historical description of things said is shot through with [tout entière traversée par] the opposition of interior and exterior; and wholly directed by [tout entière commandée par] a move from the exterior--which may be no more than contingency or mere material necessity, a visible body or uncertain translation--towards the essential nucleus of interiority. (Archaeology 120-21/158-59)

This formulation of the "historical description of things said" also holds, I think, for the literary critical description of things said: literary criticism moves from the exterior (the other, the untranslatable, the unthematized) to the interior (the same, the translation, the theme). Foucault challenges the (possibility of such a)

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[4]I continue to cite translation page numbers first.

totalizing impulse in the human sciences, and outlines a thinking whose task is "to describe a group of statements not with reference to the interiority of an intention, a thought, or a subject, but in accordance with the dispersion of an exteriority" (Archaeology 125/164).

Notions such as dispersion and exteriority pose serious problems for literary criticism, whose traditional field enables it to explain what is inside a text by putting to work certain notions from outside a text, from a constructed place of critical privilege such as the author, reader, structure, or historical circumstances of the text. Paradoxically then, in the literary critical model, "outside" the text becomes another name not for an exteriority which would disperse the text's meanings, but rather for another--perhaps more pernicious--interiority which could protect and preserve the text's meanings; in other words, for criticism, the "outside" of the text is simply another name for an interior space--a space which can maintain its purity because it is beyond the play of the textual network. For example, in "What is an Author?" Foucault takes up the problem of the text's relation to the author--"the manner in which the text points to this 'figure' that, at least in appearance, is outside it and antecedes it" (141)--and argues that the author is one such privileged space of interiority that is outside the text:

> [The author] is a certain functional principle by

> which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. (159)

Foucault here points out that criticism employs the notion of the author to preserve a space of meaning, an interiority which can arrest the exterior hazards of signification. But it is problematic--if not impossible--to locate and maintain such spaces of interiority because, as Foucault notes,

> the margins of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references [un système de renvois] to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network. (Archaeology 23/34, translation slightly modified)

For Foucault, the book exists in an exterior network of statements where the interiority of totality is always dispersed; hence, there is no protected interior space within this network which could rule the entire network. Likewise, there is no place above or below the surface of discourse--no "outside," no pure interior space beyond the reach of the exterior network's effects--which could explain discourse, which could force discourse to render up a secret truth. This is what he calls the flattening of discourse:

all discourse is on a flat surface; therefore no instance of discourse can claim to rule from outside--above, below, or from a protected interior space upon--the surface, can explain or ground the entire chain nor preserve an instance of determinate meaning within the network. He writes, "There is no sub-text [Il n'y a pas de texte d'en dessous]. And therefore no plethora. The enunciative level is identical with its own surface" (Archaeology 119/157).

At this point, we may have to circle back to where we started this chapter, with literary criticism's recent romancing of Foucault at the expense of Derrida--to Raman Selden, who goes on to write in his Reader's Guide: "Like other post-structuralists, Foucault regards discourse as a central human activity, but not as a universal, 'general text,' a vast sea of signification" (98). This would seem to be the party line on the huge difference between Foucault's thought and Derrida's: Foucault's thought is interested in active power and history, Derrida's in passive thought and textuality.[5] But I would like to step back and

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[5]Foucault is, of course, more than partially responsible for this thematization of his thought vis-á-vis Derrida's, but I am not considering in this essay his rather vitriolic--and, it seems to me, unfair--response to Derrida in "My Body, This Paper, This Fire." This may seem like an outrageous avoidance on my part, but I justify it on two counts: 1) Foucault's text consists almost entirely of a point-by-point refutation of Derrida's reading of Descartes on the dreamer and the madman, something which does not directly concern me here (Foucault's infamous remarks concerning the metaphysical and pedagogical danger of "there is nothing outside the text" are dealt with below); 2) Foucault himself later criticizes Historie de la folie, as I

try to read Derrida and Foucault together. Strangely enough, I would like to read them together at the point where they seem farthest apart, at that "place" in Derrida's text that a whole host of his critics (including Foucault) have pointed to as the metaphysical Achilles' heel of deconstruction: Derrida's notion of "general text," which Selden glosses above as a totalizing "universal" that denies the world and history in favor of a "vast sea of signification."[6]

As I argue above, with his notion of general text Derrida is not attempting to cast the text and the world in what Foucault calls "the gray light of neutralization" ("Author?" 145), but rather to complicate notions of exterior and interior--not attempting "to extend the reassuring notion of the text to a whole extra-textual realm and to transform the world into a library by doing away with all boundaries, all framework, all sharp edges," but rather

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also outline below, for its naive notions of the metaphysical "experience" of madness--a criticism which, to a great extent, actually agrees with Derrida's: "everything [in Historie de la folie] transpires as if Foucault knew what 'madness' means. Everything transpires as if, in a continuous and underlying way, an assured and rigorous precomprehension of the concept of madness, or at least of its normal definition, were possible and acquired" ("Cogito" 41). For an excellent discussion of the conflict, see Geoff Bennington's "Cogito Incognito," a brief but insightful introduction to his translation of Foucault's essay.

[6]The secondary sources for such a reading of Derrida are too numerous to mention--it has become critical commonplace; so, instead, let me cite a book concerning Derrida and criticism that doesn't contain such a reading of general text: Gasché's The Tain of the Mirror.

"to work out the theoretical and practical system of these margins, these borders, once more, from the ground up" ("Living On" 84). Derrida's notion of text, then, seems to have at least this much in common with Foucault's notion of the exteriority of a network of statements: both notions posit a discursive field or network in which no term can rule from a privileged place of interiority;[7] and both share what Foucault calls a "limit-attitude" ("Enlightenment?" 45), an interest in re-working thought's borders in the wake of the Enlightenment.

But it is at this limit that the dominant literary critical-political reading of Foucault triumphs over Derrida; Foucault, given this reading, is interested in "reference and reality," with the "world of institutions and action" (Arac "To Regress" 250, 243),[8] while Derrida reinscribes everything within the rigid limit of the prison

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[7]In fact, one could gloss Derrida on the undecidability of text by quoting Foucault on the network of statements: "there is no statement in general, no free, independent statement; but a statement always belongs to a series or a whole, always plays a role among other statements, deriving support from them and distinguishing itself from them: it is always part of a network of statements" (Archaeology 99).

[8]Arac's "To Regress From the Rigor of Shelley," a review of Harari's Textual Strategies and Deconstruction and Criticism, champions the essays in the Harari collection which have an overt historical or political agenda, but does not question the institutional imperatives which might give rise to such collections; he seems, on the contrary, to toast these imperatives. He writes, building on an image from Shelley: "The 1970's have experienced critical fermentation, following the notable effervescence that began the decade" (242).

house of language. Again, I think this is an inadequate reading of both thinkers. Derrida sums up the relation between text and limit or context like this:

> I set down here as an axiom and as that which is to be proved that the reconstitution cannot be finished. This is my starting point: no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation. What I am referring to here is not richness of substance, semantic fertility, but rather structure: the structure of the remnant or of iteration ("Living On" 81);

while Foucault writes,

> A statement always has borders [marges] peopled by other statements. These borders are not what is usually meant by 'context'--real or verbal--that is, all the situational or linguistic elements, taken together, that motivate a formulation and determine its meaning. They are distinct from such a 'context' precisely in so far as they make it possible (Archaeology 97-8/128-29).

Here again it seems that we see Foucault and Derrida in general agreement against traditional and critical notions of context: one cannot appeal to (historical or extra-textual) context to rein in the significations of a statement or a text; a space of interior privilege cannot be maintained "outside the text." In fact, both Derrida and

Foucault seem to agree that context cannot rule text--a place of interiority cannot be maintained in an exterior field--precisely because context is not really "outside" the text at all. Quite the contrary: both text and context are engendered or made possible in the same field, under the same conditions--for Foucault this field is the "flat" network of statements, for Derrida it is the "structure of the remnant or of iteration."[9] Both notions serve to make it impossible for literary criticism to preserve a space of interiority by which it could construct a critical system--a saturated critical context above, below, or outside the text--to reveal and protect meaning.

This, it seems to me, is precisely why many literary critics simply have to read Derrida and Foucault as they do --Derrida as the last in a transcendentalist philosophical line and Foucault as the last in a materialist historicist line, as the founders of a "textual" deconstructive criticism and a "worldly" new historicism. Such readings are necessary if literary criticism is to continue as an autonomous discipline, because if literary criticism accepts a notion of exteriority, it not only has to face the problem of doing something other than revealing a meaning in the

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[9]Cf. Carolyn Porter's "After the New Historicism," in which she tries similarly to read Derrida and Foucault together: "to say that there nothing outside the text because there is no transcendental signified is precisely to cancel depth in order to foreground a signifying process which operates in and constitutes a horizonless plane" (266).

text, it has the much more pervasive problem of actually isolating its object, of separating inside- from outside-text, texte from hors-texte. Again we see the institutional imperative for literary critics to read Derrida's famous phrase "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" as "there is nothing outside of the text": if everything can be found within texts or textuality, and critics read texts for a living, then obviously the place or role of criticism is secured. However, if one translates this phrase as "there is no extra-text [literally, out-text]," it brings out a much different reading: a network of exteriority (here named "text") is given--has no determinable origin or telos--and no one term or discourse can claim privilege over another within this field; no space can be protected from the play of the network. Obviously, while the latter reading is positively disastrous for literary criticism's project, the former interpretation allows a continued central role for criticism: as I argue above, it allows critics to produce a deconstructive methodology and apply it to the whole of their field--revealing that, indeed, there is a nothing outside the determinate text precisely by applying a deconstructive methodology from this ultra-privileged site of the outside.

This easy methodologizing is one of Foucault's central critiques of Derrida's thought; Foucault argues that certain notions of the intransitivity of literature, extracted from

the work of Barthes and Blanchot, "are quickly taken up in the interior of an institution...: the institution of the university" (Foucault Live 114). But, as we have seen, it is only given a certain (rather suspect) reading of Derrida's thought that it can be taken up for such institutional imperatives--and, as is becoming clear in the movement or methodology called new historicism, Foucault's is no less prone to hypostasization. One might profitably object here that Foucault's work has no essential relation to new historicism--as we have seen Gasché argue concerning Derrida's relation to deconstructive criticism--but there is no denying the perceived influence of Foucault's work on new historicism, both in the texts of new historicists and critics of new historicism alike. Foucault's perceived link to new historicism is so strong, for example, that Frank Lentricchia's essay in The New Historicism, "Foucault's Legacy: A New Historicism?," does not quote one word of Foucault's text; granted, the original printing of Lentricchia's essay places it after his long and involved discussion of Foucault in Ariel and the Police, but when Lentricchia turns specifically to discuss new historicism, he mentions Stephen Greenblatt throughout in the same breath as Foucault, reinforcing the widespread belief that new historicism is simply a translation of Foucault--that because "Foucault's key obsessions and terms shape Greenblatt's argument" (242n), the relation between

Foucault's texts and new historicism is an unproblematic one.[10] This claim, in fact, could be said to comprise the "dominant" reading of new historicism--it supposedly takes directly from Foucault its ground notion, its "key obsession": a discontinuous power that moves through everything. For example, Carolyn Porter reads Greenblatt's assertion that "theatricality...is not set over against power but is one of its essential modes" as a translation of Foucault's claim that power "induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (262). In a crowning irony, one can now find Foucault being referred to as a practitioner of Berkeley new historicism,[11] just as Derrida was or is thought of as a Yale critic.

Insofar as Foucault (infamously) criticizes Derrida's thinking as "a historically well-determined little pedagogy" ("My Body" 27), all of this institutional attention creates

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[10]It should be noted that Greenblatt is scarcely responsible for such a reading; in fact, Greenblatt stubbornly refuses to offer a methodologization of Foucault --he cites Foucault quite sparsely, only twice in Shakespearean Negotiations--and refuses to offer a ready-made method for his own project, defining cultural poetics rather open-endedly as the "study of the collective making of distinct cultural practices and inquiry into the relations among these practices" (5). Likewise, Greenblatt stresses the institutional focus of cultural poetics, especially in essays like "Shakespeare and the Exorcists."

[11]See Richard Lehan's "The Theoretical Limits of New Historicism," where, citing Hayden White, he attacks "the logic of new historicism, at least as practiced by Foucault" (540). Lehan goes on to name Foucault's thinking the dominant component of "a theory that has now fashionably emerged as the representation school" (540).

something of a problem for him, though it seems fairly easy to locate the beginning of a Foucaultian response to his own methodization: power produces, an institutional discipline produces, and it consistently needs new processes by which to produce new objects of study or new thematizations; in short, a discipline like literary criticism needs determinate--and determining--methodologies. New historicism, then, takes Foucault's exterior notions of power and discontinuity in historical analysis and turns them into usable, interior, ontological notions: new historicism often analyzes texts by studying the slippery relations of power in texts and in history. This historicism is "new" in that it takes into account the discontinuity of history, but it can quickly become "old" again when it takes up a notion of discontinuity as a simple, declarable discontinuity: studies are produced which tell us that while we used to think history was continuous, it was in fact discontinuous. For example, in Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance (Volume 13 of Greenblatt's New Historicism series), Debora K. Shuger takes up "[t]he new historicist critique of traditional formulations of Renaissance thought" (1); she writes:

> Investigation of these habits of thought in the dominant culture of the English Renaissance yields surprising results. Despite their general agreement on doctrinal matters, the figures studied present an

> unexpected and sometimes drastic ideological pluralism. Instead of a monologic world view, one uncovers complex and divergent assumptions....The [Renaissance] impulse to define and distinguish...results from a prior sense of confusion and lack of demarcation. (9-10, my emphases)

For Shuger, new historicism uncovers the "complex and divergent assumptions" which underlie a supposedly or traditionally "monologic world view"; in fact, she seems to argue that behind any historical or intellectual order(ing) there is "a prior sense of confusion and lack of demarcation." She concludes her introduction with what seems to be an apt formulation of the new historicist critique: "Renaissance works noticeably lack a systematic coherence, their discontinuities instead exposing the struggle for meaning that fissures the last premodern generation" (16, my emphasis).

If this is the case, then the place or value of Foucault in new historicism is his discovery or exposure of the disorder which lies under or behind the supposed order of history--that behind what seems to be a historical continuity, one can always and everywhere find or uncover discontinuity. However, we have already seen Foucault problematizing this language of depth and his skepticism about "exposing" hidden origins (whether they be origins of order or disorder); likewise, such a reading of Foucault

precisely allows the easy methodological institutionalization which he criticizes Derrida for promoting--allows discontinuity to lie behind every continuity, and allows for the exposure of this discontinuity as/in the end of a discipline or method. Foucault responds to such a fetishizing of discontinuity:

> My problem was not at all to say, 'Voilà, long live discontinuity, we are in the discontinuous and a good thing too,' but to pose the question, 'How is it that at certain moments and in certain orders of knowledge, there are these sudden take-offs, these hastenings of evolution, these transformations which fail to correspond to the calm, continuist image that is normally accredited?' (Power/Knowledge 112)

For Foucault, it is not a matter of offering a choppy, discontinuist image of history to combat the "normally accredited" image of calm continuity, but rather a matter of attending to the disruptions themselves. Discontinuity, as a declarable historical or philosophical principle, can and does lead back to a totalizing image or picture of the historical "orders of knowledge"--is part and parcel of a very continuous institutional and methodological project. As Foucault writes about historical discourse at the end of the 18th century: "the regular historians were revealing continuities, while the historians of ideas were liberating discontinuities. But I believe that they are two

symmetrical and inverse effects of the same methodological renewal of history in general" (Live 47, my emphasis).

The methodological problematic Foucault outlines here, no doubt, doubles my own: I do not wish simply or primarily to offer a "symmetrical and inverse picture" of Foucault and Derrida--to say, 'Voilà, literary criticism misreads Foucault and Derrida, and here is the correct way to read them'--but to try to ask how or why it is, in some sense, inevitable that they will be misread by a discipline, and to ask if there is a mechanism in either thinker's text for explaining this appropriation--perhaps also complicating it --and to locate difference(s) through this operation. As I state above, I am less interested in "exposing" poor readings and misappropriations (though there is obviously a necessarily critical or polemical tone to parts of my text) than I am in tracing the institutional and systematic imperatives of these appropriations. The question at hand becomes, then, can Foucault and/or Derrida provide a rationale for their own appropriation by the discipline of literary criticism--can their thinking of the reflexive moment of exteriority explain its own, for lack of a better word, re-interiorization within an institution or a method, within "new historicism" or "deconstructive criticism"?[12]

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[12]It is interesting to note here Gayatri C. Spivak's provocative comments on her position in the new historicism/ deconstruction debate: she writes, citing Derrida, that "the conflict between New Historicism and deconstruction can now be narrowed down to a turf battle between Berkeley and

Perhaps tracing out possible answers to this question will help bring out important differences which, so far at least, I have been at great pains to collapse.

As I argue above, Foucault's explanation for his own appropriation would revolve around the problematics of power, and the way in which instances of power tend to move the exterior toward the interior--that even institutional studies which liberate in some way also create a new object or topic for discourse or study, a new subject(ification). Foucault puts it quite succinctly in "La folie, l'absence d'oeuvre," an appendix to the second edition of Historie de la folie:

> [Someday,] everything that we experience today in the form of a limit or as foreign or insupportable, will have taken on the serene characteristics of what is positive. And what for us today designates this Exterior risks one day designating us. (trans. and cited in Carroll 76)

Later in his career, Foucault criticizes Madness and Civilization for its naive notions of power (Power/Knowledge 118-19) and of "experience" (Archeology 16/27, where the translation incorrectly renders "expérience" as

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Irvine, Berkeley and Los Angeles.... At any rate, since I see the new historicism as a sort of media hype mounted against deconstruction, I find it hard to position myself in its regard" (280).

"experiment"),[13] but this "early" quotation seems to be consistent with "late" Foucaultian interest in "a form of power which makes individuals subjects...a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" ("Subject and Power" 212). Every liberation (of a cause, a discourse, a group, especially of an "individual" like the madman liberated from his madness) can and will transform into a type of subjugation--into a subject for definition--and subsequently into the conditions of emergence for later definitions, later designations.[14] The exterior does not remain exterior; it "risks one day designating us." Through this formulation, Foucault names the logic by which his thought is brought into an institution. He offers no "counter-formulation" precisely because he does not want to play into the hands of this logic by designating alternative conditions of possibility; his texts do not attempt to theorize or "ground" an outside precisely as a buffer against a totalizing logic which could then subsume or sublate it. He refuses to play the game on the terms of transcendental/dialectical philosophy, on Hegel's terms.

Indeed, Hegel is the thinker who poses the greatest

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[13]See David Carroll's excellent discussion of this problem in Paraesthetics (53-67); I must also credit him with drawing my attention the mistranslation (57n).

[14]Cf. Deleuze: "From Madness and Civilization on, Foucault analyzed the discourse of the 'philanthropist' who freed madmen from their chains, without concealing the more effective set of chains to which he destined them" (54).

question to thinking in our "postmodern" epoch (insofar as he is the thinker of the completion or totalization of the modern): how does one think against a Hegelian system which is fueled by negation, which diffuses contradiction or opposition by consuming it as merely a higher form of the system's own truth? As Derrida summarizes Hegelian sublation, "The Hegelian Aufhebung is produced entirely within discourse, from within the system or the work of signification. A determination is negated and conserved in another determination which reveals the truth of the former" (Writing 275). All critical discourse, then, risks playing directly into Hegel's hand, "risks agreeing to the reasonableness of reason, of philosophy, of Hegel, who is always right, as soon as one opens one's mouth in order to articulate meaning" (Writing 263). For Foucault, this question of Hegel is perhaps the most important question for postmodern thought:

> truly to escape Hegel involves an exact appreciation of the price we have to pay to detach ourselves from him. It assumes that we are aware of [suppose de savoir] the extent to which Hegel, insidiously perhaps, is close to us; it implies a knowledge, in that which permits us to think against Hegel, of that which remains Hegelian. We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his tricks directed against us, at the end of which he stands, motionless,

waiting for us. (Discourse 235/74-5)

Here Foucault takes up the question that Hegel poses to contemporary thought: how to think against a structure that anticipates or negates such thinking, that in fact thrives on determinate negations? And it is precisely because of his suspicion of Hegelian sublation that it is difficult to read Foucault as ideology critique--as, for example, Habermas would like to read him.[15] Ideology critique depends on a moment of liberation through reason, on the demystification of ideology in order to unmask knowledge. As Louis Althusser writes, ideology critique moves in the service of "scientific knowledge, against all the mystifications of ideological 'knowledge.' Against the merely moral denunciation of myths and lies, for their rational and rigorous criticism" (Lenin 11). But, for Foucault, "criticism"--as an attempt to stake out a more excellent reason or ground--guarantees that the winner has already been declared: Hegel in a unanimous decision; the dialectic continues undisrupted; reason is reassured. As Foucault writes, "'Dialectic' is a way of evading the always open and hazardous reality of conflict by reducing it to a Hegelian skeleton" (Power/Knowledge 114-5).

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[15]Habermas' first lecture on Foucault in Modernity is entitled "An Unmasking of the Human Sciences: Foucault," and while he clearly sympathizes with the "critical" side of Foucaultian analyses, he cannot agree with Foucault's genealogical analyses in that they deny the moment of "liberating" knowledge that ideology critique seeks.

The overarching criticism of Foucault's work in literary critical circles revolves around his refusal to acknowledge a moment of liberation through reason. For example, Edward Said, while sympathetic to components of Foucault's work, refuses to accept the notion that there is no space or end of liberation in criticism, or that a discipline like literary criticism necessarily creates a kind of subjugation as it studies phenomena; he writes,

> criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are noncoercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom. (World 29, my emphasis).[16]

While these certainly are reassuring sentiments, for Foucault reassurance is precisely the problem here: a "belief in non-coercive human community" (246) is a claim for the self-evidence of the critical project--is ultimately a justification that cannot be examined or questioned, just as the ideological justifications for the political powers Said would wish to demystify ultimately protect themselves from examination. Likewise, it seems that the most

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[16]Cf. Merod's The Social Responsibility of the Critic, where he writes, on the Chomsky/Foucault debate that Said (246) makes much of: "Chomsky stresses 'the normal creativity of everyday life' which prompts the emergence of language, culture, and both individual and societal practices that cannot be thought of as regulatory or repressive in any systematic way, but rather as life-giving and constructive, genuinely experimental" (168, my emphasis).

traditional critic could see his or her project in Said's formulation: "noncoercive knowledge" seems precisely a translation of "disinterested knowledge," and as such serves to protect the institutional interests of criticism all the more strongly.[17] For Foucault, there is no simple "liberation" through knowledge; as he writes, "knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting" ("Nietzsche" 88). The "knowledge" produced by the human sciences cannot move away from its origins as/in a kind of violence--and literary criticism (in both its institutional and systematic functions) is implicated in the movement of "liberation" through the subjugation of knowing: a discipline makes a new object to be studied out of the liberation itself, thereby reasserting reason's control. Liberation is confronted at its end by the smiling figure of Hegel, who has been there all along.

But this does not lead Foucault to a kind of stagnation or silence. The absence of a determinate methodology in his work and his denial of liberation within a discourse--so frustrating and ultimately paralyzing to some--have certainly not curtailed his production of important studies:

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[17]See Paul Bové's insightful discussion of Said and Foucault in chapter 5 of Intellectuals in Power, where he writes: "My objection...to Said's position is that it leaves this regime [the regime of truth] unchanged insofar as it validates the traditional role played by the leading intellectual who, above all, will not call into question his or her own interests in exploiting the ability to imagine and promote 'alternatives' continually in order to maintain or achieve authority and identity in society" (234).

studies of the madhouse, the prison, the clinic, sexuality. But, one might profitably ask, why does Foucault produce studies if they do not lead to the Enlightenment goals of heightened understanding or liberating knowledge? Why go on? As he takes a chair at the Collège de France, he discusses his "projects":

> the analyses I intend to undertake fall into two groups. On the one hand, the 'critical' group which sets the reversal-principle to work. I shall attempt to distinguish forms of exclusion, limitation and appropriation.... I shall try to show how they are formed, in answer to which needs, how they are modified and displaced, which constraints they have effectively exercised, to what extent they have been worked on. On the other hand, the 'genealogical' group, which brings the other three principles [chance, discontinuity, and materiality] into play: how series of discourse are formed, though, in spite of, or with the aid of these systems of constraint: what were the specific forms for each, and what were their conditions of appearance, growth, and variation. (Discourse 231-32/61-2)

Foucault's answer is necessarily double, thinking necessarily both inside and outside a system that is to be interrogated. For Foucault, like Derrida, analysis begins with an indispensable "critical" or polemical phase of reversal, a phase which attempts "to distinguish forms of

exclusion, limitation and appropriation." But, and this is the crucial point (as it is with Derrida), Foucault's analysis does not stop here with an overturning; if it does, it cannot truly escape Hegel--it is doomed to repeat the exclusions it uncovers. The overturning or uncovering itself must be subjected to an examination, but one which brings a sort of indeterminacy to bear on the overturning, on its emergence among various possibilities, chances, and discontinuities. Contra many of his critics, Foucault certainly does recognize a kind of "progress" in or through disciplines and the human sciences,[18] but it is necessarily a progress that leads to other--though, admittedly, often more humane or palatable--forms of exclusion and subjugation, not to a space of unproblematic, reassuring freedom. The progress of knowledge is itself a Hegelian ruse, and for Foucault, it is only if one takes into account a certain exteriority in the conditions of emergence for a discourse--thereby refusing an alternative, determinate ground or higher knowledge--that one has the chance of denying Hegel his otherwise predetermined victory by refusing to play the game of knowledge on his terms.

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[18]Cf. Rorty's critique in "Foucault/Dewey/Nietzsche," where he writes: "We liberals in the USA wish that Foucault could have managed, just once, what...he always resisted: 'some positive evaluation of the liberal state.'... You would never guess, from Foucault's account of the changes in European social institutions during the last three hundred years, that during that period suffering had decreased considerably, nor that people's chances of choosing their own styles of life increased considerably" (3).

This is perhaps where we see the major point of conflict between Foucault and Derrida: Derrida, rather than refusing to play on Hegel's terms, attempts to beat Hegel at his own game; he encounters transcendental/dialectical philosophy and tries to disrupt it by theorizing its conditions of possibility--which must, he argues, be partially non-transcendental, impure. This gives us a way of offering what might be Derrida's answer to the question of his appropriation by criticism: a transcendental or critical discourse will, to be sure, expel the otherness within it--the dialectic will totalize, will bring becoming into being--but for Derrida, an otherness still remains. He writes,

> There is no choosing here: each time a discourse contra the transcendental is held, a matrix--the (con)striction itself--constrains the discourse to place the nontranscendental, the outside of the transcendental field, the excluded, in a structuring position. The matrix in question constitutes the excluded as transcendental of the transcendental, as imitation transcendental, transcendental contra-band. The contra-band is not yet dialectical contradiction. To be sure, the contra-band necessarily becomes that, but its not-yet is not-yet the teleological anticipation, which results in it never becoming dialectical contradiction. The contra-band remains

> something other than what, necessarily, it is to become.
>
> Such would be the (nondialectical) law of the (dialectical) stricture, of the bond, of the ligature, of the garrote, of the desmos in general when it comes to clench tightly in order to make be. Lock of the dialectical. (Glas 244a)

Derrida offers a logic of his own appropriation which is at once very similar to Foucault's and at the same time radically different. Derrida's text can explain its interiorization in terms of the violence of dialectical thinking: the violence of the dialectical stricture "when it comes to clench tightly in order to make be"; the need within dialectical thinking (which is also critical thinking) for definition, synthesis; critical thinking's necessary interiorizing of an outside in order to cover up the structuring (literally transcendental) position of an outside within that thinking. Derrida attempts to disrupt this movement of making be by thinking the "transcendental of the transcendental," the structuring principle of the transcendental which the transcendental itself cannot think --that is, if it is to do the work of a traditional transcendental.

So perhaps we have come to the point where Derrida's thinking and Foucault's most radically part company: for Foucault, the "transcendentalist" emphasis of Derrida's work

is simply unacceptable, too prone to become a new orthodoxy. For all the similar effects and attributes of a Foucaultian network of statements and Derridean general text, perhaps the overriding difference is that "for statements it is not a condition of possibility but a law of coexistence" (Archaeology 116/153).[19] For Foucault, Derrida's involvement with a transcendental vocabulary allows the possibility that a transcendental space of interiority

> can be purified in the problematic of trace, which, prior to all speech, is the opening of inscription and the difference of deferred time [écart du temps différé]; it is always the historico-transcendental theme that is reinvested. (Archaeology 121/159, translation modified)

Such a potential for reification, according to Foucault, plays into the hands of institutional, status quo thinking. But it seems, in the wake of Hegel, that these are the risks of thinking itself--the risks of thinking or speaking at all.[20] Foucault's disruptive materialist discourse is no less difficult to take up for institutional uses than Derrida's disruptive transcendental discourse. And Derrida, for his part, is acutely aware of the institutionalization of undecidability or unreadability as a reading method in

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[19]See Dreyfus and Rabinow, who make much of this distinction (52-58).

[20]Cf. Derrida's "The Principle of Reason" (17ff.).

American literary criticism; Derrida writes his essay in Deconstruction and Criticism with this caveat concerning Maurice Blanchot's L'Arrêt de mort:

> The readability of unreadability is as improbable as an arrêt de mort. No law of (normal) reading can guarantee its legitimacy. By normal reading I mean every reading that insures knowledge transmittable in its own language, in a language, in a school or academy, knowledge constructed and insured in institutional constructions, in accordance with laws made so as to resist (precisely because they are weaker) the ambiguous threats with which the arrêt de mort troubles so many conceptual oppositions, boundaries, borders. The arrêt de mort brings about the arrêt of the law. ("Living On" 171)

This arrêt, this interruption, this gap, this falling out of (the dialectical movement of) work, lives on and remains un-institutionalizable, untranslatable, impossible to legitimize, precisely because it disrupts the laws by which it could be institutionalized, defined, or legitimated. Even after its seeming sublation, for Derrida the arrêt remains.

And perhaps it is here that Derrida and Foucault can be thought together again; they both attempt to bring about and attend to a certain absence of work, an arrêt, a break, a fissure, a discontinuity of/at/on/in the otherwise smooth,

confident flow of dialectical thinking. Whether this break is located at a transcendental or emergent level seems, to me anyway, not as important as the insistence on the break or hesitation itself, the moment of exteriority that poses a very difficult question for critical thinking--including literary critical thinking: can this hesitation, this otherness, be attended to "critically," that is thematically or in a revelatory discourse, one which attempts to uncover a determinate truth? Or does it require what Derrida calls a "thinking altogether differently" ("Sending" 326)? It very well may. Perhaps Foucault puts the question--the question to critical thinking that both he and Derrida, in different ways, pose--most succinctly:

> There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.... what is philosophy today--philosophical activity, I mean--if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known? (The Use of Pleasure 8-9)

But how, one might ask, does one think differently, especially if one cannot simply escape a certain thinking of the same? What exactly does "postmodern" mean in the

context of this questioning? How can it be thematized? What do the necessarily "double" analyses of the postmodern look like, and what do they accomplish? Likewise, after three chapters, we must at long last broach the question of the specificity of literature in or for this thinking differently.

After discussing for three chapters philosophies of borders and withdrawing grounds, perhaps we also need to ask why such questions become pressing at a particular historical space or time we call postmodern. Why, in other words, do these questions and problems arise "now"? Why would the questions posed to critical thinking by notions like general text or the statement come on the scene at all, much less at this postmodern "now"? Perhaps, as much postmodern discourse suggests, we are indeed at the end of something--the end of the subject, the end of art, the end of history--but what does or can "end" mean in this displaced postmodern context? In the following chapters, I will attempt to take up these topics--to perform, for lack of another word, "positive" analyses of postmodern thought and literature.

CHAPTER 4

THINKING\WRITING THE POSTMODERN

> Criticism, if it is called upon to enter into explication and exchange with literary writing, some day will not have to wait for this resistance first to be organized into a "philosophy" which would govern some methodology of aesthetics whose principles criticism would receive.... But this enterprise is hopeless if one muses on the fact that literary criticism has already been determined, knowingly or not, voluntarily or not, as the philosophy of literature.
>
> --Derrida

Theorizing the Postmodern, At the End of Metaphysics

Theorizing the postmodern has become a full-time profession for a cross-disciplinary army of thinkers. Generally speaking, defining the postmodern has become a vexing problem which has led to widely varying critical positions on the matter; however, the one thing that various postmodernisms and postmodernists seem to have in common is their assertion that a stable, knowable, transcendental notion of "truth" has become impossible to ground. From there, agreement ends, though at the risk of being reductive, I will venture to say that thematizations of the postmodern among literary critics tend to fall into two camps: those who define postmodernism as a <u>stylistic</u> or <u>systematic</u> phenomenon and those who define it as a <u>historical</u> phenomenon. Both kinds of definition have proven

problematic. For example, if postmodernism is a stylistic phenomenon (defined by a system of features such as playfulness, open-endedness, discontinuity, self-conscious reflection on the production of literature, excess, reader participation, etc.),[1] then why isn't, for example, Tristram Shandy postmodern? Tale of a Tub? Chaucer? Ovid? Why not Milton, for that matter?[2] Defining the postmodern as a stylistic phenomenon tends to rob it of any historical significance or specificity--in fact, at its strongest this notion tends to reduce the complex play of the history of literature to the transhistorical battle of postmodernism and its other by turning postmodernism into a kind of Geist which animates the whole of literary history.[3]

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[1]See, for example, Lodge, who discusses "the formal principles underlying postmodernist writing" (228ff.), among them contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, excess. See also Hassan's "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," where he offers a conveniently dialectical list of the features of modernism and postmodernism (91-92).

[2]For just such a treatment of Milton--and an impressive one at that--see Herman Rapaport's Milton and the Postmodern. While I find his reading of Milton compelling, I wonder whether it doesn't fall into the de Manian problematic I discuss in Chapter 2--where all literature becomes fodder for a method or discipline. For example, Rapaport writes that in composing the book he "was interested in attempting to use Milton as a test case for poststructuralist reading" (xiii).

[3]This is especially true in the work of Hassan; in "POSTmodernISM" he writes, "there is enhancement of life in certain anarchies of the spirit, in humor and play, in love released and freedom of the imagination to overreach itself, in a cosmic consciousness of variousness as unity. I recognize these as the values intended by Postmodern art, and see the latter as closer, not only in time, but even more in tenor, to the transformation of hope itself" (45).

Historical characterizations of postmodernism seem to offer an escape from the totalizing or generalizing problems inherent in a more descriptive or systematic theory, but even these characterizations often end up trapped in a kind of historical determinism which is a version of the transcendental truth postmodernism wants to question: if postmodernism is primarily a paralogistic reaction to a monologic modernism,[4] or is inexorably brought about by determining societal factors (such as the emergence of "late capitalism"),[5] then how can it escape having its truth given by a kind of lock-step, determining Hegelian historicism--where the truth of postmodernism is secured and guaranteed through the work of dialectical opposition and sublation? The vexing problem--made all the more difficult both by the complexity of the issue and the sheer volume of critical material on the subject--becomes, then, where to situate oneself in this discussion about the postmodern, at the impasse between system and history. Rather than argue for one side in this complex and far-ranging argument, I would like to step back and investigate the terms of the opposition itself. In general, my question here will be: what is the status or force of the opposition between history and system in a postmodern "context"? To anticipate

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[4]See Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition.

[5]See Jameson's "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism."

a bit, it will be my contention that an engagement between the postmodern and literary criticism must go "through" the discourse of philosophy--especially the "problem" of philosophy's closure or end--because, as Derrida notes in the epigraph to this chapter, "literary criticism has already been determined, knowingly or not, voluntarily or not, as the philosophy of literature" (Writing 28). Any criticism presupposes a theory, and literary theory is first and foremost a philosophy of literature. Because literary criticism and theory are bound to philosophy in this way, it seems necessary to examine or reevaluate criticism and theory in--to use an incredibly ironic term--the "light" of philosophy's closure. Such an examination is, it seems, doubly pressing in relation to the postmodern, insofar as the closure of philosophy and the concomitant withdrawal of a stable ground for critical thinking is precisely what gives rise to what I call the question of the postmodern. But rather than trying to construct a historical or systematic narrative leading up to postmodernism's withdrawal of truth, I will attempt briefly to outline the genealogy of this withdrawal--to trace a path back to this "event."

To find this "event" named, one need look no further than Nietzsche's texts--and perhaps most succinctly his (in)famous phrase "God is dead," by which a Madman pronounces the withdrawal of transcendental ground with a

kind of terrifying simplicity. One is tempted to say that this phrase, and the ethos that surrounds it, ushers in the era of "ends" that is so familiar to the postmodern: the end of metaphysics, the end of religion, the end of history. But, while this phrase certainly does not instigate these ends as a "cause"--the Madman's remark, remember, is already directed at "those who did not believe in God" (181)--one could argue that it certainly does name or mark the "logic" of these ends: metaphysics, religion, and history terminate with the death of God precisely because each of them--whether they are conceived of as disciplines, belief systems, or both--had lived on the promise of meaning in an end or telos; each organized itself around the guarantee of meaning beyond the physical realm which is inscribed in the very word meta-physics. So, if metaphysics is first philosophy--the discipline or belief system which can secure the ground for all others--it is clearly terminated if first principles are deemed to be "dead": arbitrary, fictional, "merely" invented, impossible to ground as transcendental. One can certainly recuperate these principles or mourn their loss--what else characterized the literary period known as "modernism," and continues to animate many critiques of the postmodern?[6]--but after the death of God, it can no longer

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[6]The dominant critique of postmodernism, in whatever form, is that it does not attend to such a metaphysical or historical "real." See, for example, Graff, who writes that the upshot of a Derrida's work--and postmodernism in general--is "the absence of any reality or meaning in life

be a matter of simply asserting the self-evidence of ground. The very fact that a stable ground must be recuperated or argued for at all attests to the impact of what Nietzsche's thought names: thinking can no longer be self-grounded in reason, subjectivity, method, history, God. As Reiner Schürmann writes, with the "death of God,"

> The schema of reference to an arche then reveals itself to be the product of a certain type of thinking, of an ensemble of philosophical rules that have their genesis, their period of glory, and that today perhaps are experiencing their decline. (4)

When reason has to defend itself or attempt to ground itself as reason--when the category can no longer be taken for granted or a ground for it secured--a certain kind of thinking begins to draw to a close: when speculation must ask about the value of speculation (as when Warhol's Brillo box poses the question, "Why is this not art?"),[7] a category--indeed, an entire system of thinking through which one constructs categories and defines the world--begins to experience its closure. But, as Schürmann reminds us, this closure is not simply a matter for thought--a systematic or idealist problem; it is both a systematic and historical closure:

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to which effort might be directed" (62).

[7]Cf. Charles Bernstein's discussion of Arthur Danto's reading of Warhol in "Critical Excess (Process)" (846-49).

> This hypothesis functions doubly (even though the opposition between system and history will eventually fall victim to that same hypothesis): it is a systematic closure, inasmuch as the norms for action 'proceed from' the corresponding first philosophies; and it is a historical closure, since deconstructionist discourse can arise only from the boundary of the era over which it is exercised. (4)

At the closure, then, thinking runs up against a systematic and historical limit within itself: when metaphysical thinking shows itself to be "historical"--when thinking as reference to stable ground can be thematized as a kind or type of thinking rather than as thinking itself--it also runs up against certain debilitating "systematic" consequences. In other words, the historical closure of metaphysics is itself systematic, and vice versa: the cause and effect categories by which one could name the prior or proper origin are rendered problematic by the closure itself--by the inability to secure a ground outside the closure by which it could be judged in a summary fashion, or upon which a narrative historical account of it could be rendered. The peculiar and pernicious problem in all this, though, is that the notion of ground and the concepts of philosophical thinking cannot simply be abandoned; as Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe writes, "We are still living on philosophical ground and cannot just go and live somewhere

else" (Heidegger 3).

Metaphysical thinking, then, finds itself at an impasse at the closure, the death of God, the loss of a stable ground--an impasse we began to examine above in terms of the nihilist reversals to which it inevitably leads: truth shows itself to be a lie, critical thinking can neither be affirmed nor denied, anti-professionalism shows itself to be professionalism, and so on. In the face of this impasse, the recuperation of a kind of metaphysical ground is certainly possible (at least discursively, rhetorically or pragmatically), but this shows itself not necessarily to be desirable because, from its "end," metaphysical thinking also shows itself to have been grounded in a kind of violent exclusion--a grounding exclusion which must efface its other to preserve its purity, eliminate difference to preserve the same. So, in the nihilist reversals that signal the closure of metaphysical thinking, we see a kind of cruel joke played out: nihilism, rather than helping to displace the privilege of the same, protects it all the more greedily--bringing, with its reversals, literally more of the same. From its "end," then, as Heidegger notes, the history of this thinking shows itself--in the triumph of will to power and the age of technology--precisely to be the history of this nihilism: nihilism as metaphysics' final and most glorious moment in the control and elimination of its other. And, in the most chilling of reversals, the legacy of this

thinking reveals itself (often brutally) in twentieth-century history. Lacoue-Labarthe summarizes the legacy left to our age, the age of technology:

> There is a kind of 'lethal' essence of technology, which means that its 'everything is possible' does in fact end up introducing, that is to say bringing about, if not the impossible, then at least the unthinkable (Extermination or genetic manipulation--and the latter is still on the agenda today). (Heidegger 69)

The "unthinkable" former, extermination, has indeed been brought about--in the holocaust; and Lacoue-Labarthe argues that the holocaust is "a phenomenon which follows essentially no logic (political, economic, social, military, etc.) other than a spiritual [metaphysical] one....In the Auschwitz apocalypse, it was nothing less than the West, in its essence, that revealed itself" (35).[8]

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[8]To many critics of the postmodern, this seems an outrageous claim. For example, Huyssen writes, "Auschwitz, after all, did not result from too much enlightened reason--even though it was organized as a perfectly rationalized death factory--but from a violent anti-enlightenment and anti-modernity effect, which exploited modernity ruthlessly for its own purposes" (203, last 2 emphases mine). For Huyssen (citing Habermas), the Enlightenment, as the strictly benign or progressive movement of reason, is "exploited" by the evil of Nazism in the holocaust; this, of course, allows reason to emerge safe, having banished terror once more by explaining it away. However, it seems astonishing that reason can emerge unscathed from the "perfectly rationalized death factory" that was Auschwitz. Huyssen is forced to refer to a pure, benign intention to salvage reason here, and in the process ironically offers what he accuses the postmoderns of supplying: "too limited an account of modernity" (203).

For Lacoue-Labarthe the holocaust is both a horrifyingly "logical" extension of metaphysical logic and an absolutely unique event (an event that shatters any possibility of "explanation," any attempt to account for it within a larger, ultimately reassuring narrative).[9] In fact, Lacoue-Labarthe argues that the holocaust cannot sufficiently be explained in terms of scapegoating or any other narrative which makes the Jews remotely "sacrificial" --as having died to bring about some greater revelation; even "holocaust" is the wrong word:

> [it] was a pure and simple <u>elimination</u>. Without trace or residue. And if it is true that the age is that of the accomplishment of nihilism, then it is at Auschwitz that that accomplishment took place in its purest formless form. God in fact died at Auschwitz. (37)

For Lacoue-Labarthe, the completion of metaphysics in the death of God can be "read" in the holocaust: a wholly bankrupt way of thinking and acting burns itself up in attempting to exterminate its other, but leaves no possibility for a Phoenix-type rising from among the ashes. The "formless form" of the holocaust is nonetheless quite

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[9]Insofar as the holocaust can be spoken of as a "unique event," this does not imply that it is somehow more horrific than the Stalinist purges or the Cambodian genocide--that the violence against the Jews was so much more violent that it remains unique. Rather, the status of genocide as an "event" precisely suggests that no comparision is possible, no simple accounting can be rendered which would allow us to say that one genocide was "worse" or "better" than another.

concrete; it is an irreducible event in that it cannot be reassuringly reduced to a logic which can be said to have brought it about. It remains simply too horrific to be adequately explained or--in a philosophical phrase with a chilling body-count resonance--"accounted for." This, of course, does not mean that there are no historical and systematic reasons or precedents for the holocaust--a long historical tradition of anti-Semitism and its theoretical defenses certainly cannot be simply ignored. However, the holocaust remains an event that a rationalist history cannot explain within its own logic--insofar as that logic is itself implicated in the event;[10] as Lacoue-Labarthe writes,

> And this event, we must admit, is historical in the strongest sense, i.e. in the sense that it does not simply arise from history, but itself makes history,

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[10]Lacoue-Labarthe gives 2 reasons for the essential irreducibility of the "event" of the holocaust's genocide:

1. Jews posed no threat to the Nazis, had no revolutionary social cohesion, "were not in 1933 agents of social dissension (except of course in phastasy)" (36);

2. also, the means used in the slaughter of the Jews were not of an essentially police or punitive nature; though police tactics were indispensable in rounding the Jews up, there were no confessions to be forced, etc: "None of the 'machines' invented to extract confessions or remorse or to mount the edifying spectacle of terror, was of any use. The Jews were treated in the same way as industrial waste of the proliferation of parasites is 'treated'.... As Kafka had long since understood, the 'final solution' consisted in taking literally the centuries-old metaphors of insult and contempt--vermin, filth--and providing oneself with the technological means for such an effective literalization" (37).

> cuts into history and opens up another history, or else unmakes all history. (5)

The holocaust, as an irreducible "event," precisely shatters any possibility of accounting for it in what is traditionally called historical terms--a notion of history, as the destinal story of a people, certainly cannot remain unimplicated in this event. Rather, this event "opens up another history, or else unmakes all history"; this event, in unmaking history and the systematic thinking upon which it depends, perhaps opens up the history of the other, the history of that which or those who would disrupt the purity of meaning upon which history depends. As Derrida writes,

> the very concept of history has lived only upon the possibility of meaning, upon the past, present, or promised presence of meaning and of truth. Outside this system, it is impossible to resort to the concept of history without reinscribing it elsewhere, according to some specific systematic strategy. (Dissemination 184).

Given the realization of the exclusionary violence of a will-to-wholeness, the postmodern project cannot be a properly "historical" nor "systematic" one. It perhaps becomes a matter, as Derrida suggests here, of constructing logic that "works" without working in the Hegelian sense of coming to an Aufhebung of wholeness--rather, a project of reinscribing "the possibility of meaning" as other than "the

past, present, or promised presence of meaning and of truth." This is, I have suggested, a necessary project at the closure of metaphysics, insofar as ignoring this closure leads inexorably to nihilistic impasses. Traditional thinking, then, must always fail to "work" because it cannot account for a "founding moment" otherness, and it is this "moment," as we saw in Chapter 1, which must be taken into account "according to some specific strategy." As Foucault phrases the problematic, "we must elaborate--outside philosophies of time and subject--a theory of discontinuous systematisation," (Discourse 231/60) outside transcategorial and transhistorical systems.

Derrida and the Postmodern

Despite the problems we have raised with the concept of history and the furor raised by many of Derrida's critics over his lack of attention to history,[11] it seems to me that he is careful to historicize his thought precisely to avoid its being taken as such a transcategorial and transhistorical system; he historicizes it as postmodern, situates it at the historico/systematic closure of metaphysics. He does this--often quite subtly--in virtually all of his texts; take, for example, this above-cited quotation from Writing and Difference, this time with a

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[11]For such a criticism of Derrida as ahistorical, see Said's readings in The World, the Text, and the Critic, especially Chapter 9.

different emphasis:

> If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field...excludes totalization. (Writing 289)

Note, here, the first part of the sentence, in which--without absurdly over-reading a simple adverbial clause--Derrida addresses some issues that he is often criticized for neglecting: first, totalization has had meaning, was possible to think given certain societal and historical circumstances which, at the closure of metaphysics, no longer exist; also, totalization may still have meaning (he writes "if totalization no longer has any meaning") but any meaning it has is radically altered by a contemporary--dare I say "postmodern"--notion of the conditions of possibility (and impossibility) for any kind of totalization.

Derrida sets out to historicize--and we have, hopefully, managed to complicate this word--his thought most overtly in "No Apocalypse, Not Now," his essay on nuclear society, on living after the holocaust, under the shadow of the bomb. He writes of the (im)possibility of nuclear holocaust:

> The hypothesis of this total destruction watches over deconstruction, it guides its footsteps; it becomes possible to recognize, in the light, so to speak, of

> that hypothesis, of that fantasy, or phantasm, the characteristic structures and historicity of the discourses, strategies, texts, or institutions to be deconstructed. That is why deconstruction, at least what is being advanced today in its name, belongs to the nuclear age. And to the age of literature. (27, my emphasis)

The possibility of apocalypse without revelation is what makes it possible for deconstruction to take notice of "the characteristic structures and historicity of the discourses, strategies, texts, or institutions to be deconstructed." How so? Derrida writes, "As you know, Apocalypse means Revelation, of Truth, Un-veiling" ("No Apocalypse" 24); but, of course, at the closure or end of metaphysics, there is no determinate "revelation" of truth, but only its withdrawal--not truth but impasse. Again, the "structure" of metaphysics shows itself to have a (debilitating) historicity. Likewise, the historical situation of nuclear society is infused by the structure of a nuclear logic of apocalypse with no revelation--the impossible possibility of a horrifying telos without an accompanying revelation of the meaning of history. Given these historical and systematic conditions, the stakes of a writing, the stakes of truth, the stakes of living at the closure, in a nuclear logic, are irreducibly different: these stakes are not reducible to a thinking of the same, to a thinking based on the assumption

of wholeness in a beginning or an end, to a thought based on revelation of truth or meaning, to a thinking which can confidently answer the metaphysical question "what is it?".

But what are we to make of Derrida's claim for this apocalyptic age as the age of literature? Surely there is an entire history of apocalyptic literature, and it is by no means a recent arrival. But the apocalyptic tradition is one that is firmly based on a coming revelation; the Books of Daniel and Revelation, for example, are firm calls for the end as a revelation and a remedy in times of crisis.[12] Literature, though, seems to be that body of texts which is in some way enabled by the relation between thought and this postmodern notion of apocalypse--as apocalypse without revelation, end without summary--and deconstruction belongs to this age, adopts its peculiar kind of postmodern apocalyptic tone, the tone which recognizes today, in Derrida's words,

> the apocalyptic structure of language, of writing, of the experience of presence, in other words of the text or of the mark in general: that is, of the divisible dispatch for which there is no self-presentation nor assured destination. ("Apocalyptic Tone" 28, Derrida's

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[12]Cf. Derrida's summary of the onto-theological notion of apocalypse: "Truth itself is the end, the destination, and that truth unveils itself is the advent of the end. Truth is the end and the instance of the last judgment. The structure of the truth here would be apocalyptic. And that is why there would not be any truth of the apocalypse that is not the truth of the truth" ("Apocalyptic Tone" 24).

emphasis)

Thinking has, up until the nuclear age of its closure, proceeded for the most part under the impression that it can reveal truth, it can totalize, it can assure its destination; even the skeptical tradition works under the auspices of revealing a truth--the truth that there is no truth or that truth is unknowable. The postmodern epoch, though, is conditioned by this apocalyptic--in this postmodern sense of the word--structure "of the text or of the mark in general," a structure which frustrates the arrival of truth, the structure of what Derrida calls elsewhere "general text."

This notion of the text or general text is the most criticized and misunderstood component of Derrida's thought; it is often read as Derrida's attempt to turn the world into a text, and in the process effectively to diffuse the real, historical problems of political and social existence by treating them as mere textual conundrums.[13] This is,

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[13]This is a very popular misconception, and one that came to a head in the pages of Critical Inquiry 13 (1) 1986, where Anne McClintlock and Rob Nixon took Derrida to task for stepping out of his hermetically sealed textual world to write about apartheid. He replies: "Text, as I use the word, is not the book. No more than writing or trace, it is not limited to the paper which you cover with your graphism. It is precisely for strategic reasons...that I found it necessary to recast the context of text by generalizing it without any limit....that is why there is nothing 'beyond the text.' That's why South Africa and apartheid are, like you and me, part of this general text, which is not to say that it can be read the way one reads a book. That is why the text is always a field of forces: heterogeneous, differential, open, and so on.... That's why I do not go

however, simply not the case; as I argue in Chapters 2 and 3, for Derrida, general text is not the text, the book, but rather a realm of mediation, something of a phenomenological life-world, the "given" network or chain that possibilizes discourse--in the broad sense of the word as a place where things are mediated--but at the same time makes it impossible for this discourse to arrive at any ontologically determinable destination, any telos. With his notion of general text, Derrida works out the consequences of "the apocalyptic structure of language," where nothing outside the differential network--general text--can guarantee meaning or arrest the chain of referrals; there is, in this sense, no extra-text, no term which could rule, organize, or regulate the system from without the system, precisely because the supposed master term must constitute itself within this network of referrals--by "referring endlessly to something other than itself."[14] There is no simple outside or beyond the closure.

It is crucial here to note, also, that general text is, despite the flood of claims to the contrary, a historical formulation. "There is no extra-text," the infamous phrase by which Derrida supposedly kills history, is itself an

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'beyond the text,' in this new sense of the word text, by fighting and calling for a fight against apartheid" (166-7).

[14]For the latest instance of Derrida discussing--or should I say defending?--general text, see the Afterword to Limited Inc. (136-7, 148).

irreducibly historical formulation, situated at the historical site of the closure. Derrida's, in other words, is a postmodern thought, conditioned by a postmodern world which lives after Auschwitz, after Hiroshima, always under the shadow of an apocalypse without revelation; in fact, for Derrida the postmodern world is conditioned not so much by living, but by

> LIVING ON, the very progression that belongs, without belonging, to the progression of life and death. Living on is not the opposite of living, just as it is not identical with living. The relationship is different, different from being identical, from the difference of distinctions--undecided (135).

Here we see most clearly the "worldly" aspect of Derrida's thought; it is concerned not simply with texts and their internal workings, but it grows out of a postmodern consciousness: a consciousness of being a survivor, a consciousness of living on rather than simply living or dying, of living on in the undecided--of not closing off possibility (difference) in favor of actuality (sameness), that determining closure being a necessary prerequisite to violence--beyond (which is to say between, as there is no simple beyond) the oppositions or hierarchies which have allowed and validated the horrors of the twentieth

century.[15]

Living on in the between, in the undecided, at the limits, disrupting the will to sameness or truth (as I state above, disrupting the metaphysical question "what is it?") is something which is "characteristic" of writing the postmodern; as Julia Kristeva writes,

> postmodernism is that literature which writes itself with the more or less conscious intention of expanding the signifiable and thus human realm. With this in mind, I should call this practice of writing an "experience of limits," to use Georges Bataille's formulation: limits of language as a communicative system, limits of the subjective and naturally the sexual identity, limits of sociality.... Never before in the history of humanity has this exploration of the limits of meaning taken place in such an unprotected manner, and by this I mean without religious, mystical, or any other justification. ("Postmodernism" 137, 141)

This questioning of the will-to-truth through an examination of the limits of truth is "characteristic" of postmodern writing and reading--where this interruptive questioning is

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[15]As Andrew McKenna writes, "The question of the postmodern in its most far-reaching implications, which are nonetheless the most concrete, is the question of survival, of living on after the dead. A postmodern consciousness is indissociable, for demonstrable, concrete reasons bearing on the recent past as they affect the possibility of a future, from the consciousness of being a survivor, of living on" (229).

done, as Kristeva notes, in an unprecedented, "unprotected manner," without a traditional ontological justification. Here, though, we should be careful of a kind of privileging historicism slipping in the back door. There are, of course, writers previous to the postmodern or nuclear age who deal with the "problem" of end without revelation (Cervantes, Mallarmé, Joyce, Sterne, Kafka, Woolf, Chaucer) as well as contemporary writers (even writers referred to as "postmodern")[16] who do not. But this postmodern questioning of limits--including a notion like general text, which Derrida explicitly ties to the question of limits--is, in a certain way, impossible to think outside a "postmodern" culture. This is, though, <u>not</u> to say that certain remark and supplementarity structures cannot be found at work in texts written previous to the nuclear age, but rather that it is precisely this nuclear logic which allows us to think these structures, to read their "work"--and its suppression

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[16]Take, for example, the group of American poets known as "the postmoderns"--a broad term used to refer to the Beats, San Francisco Renaissance, Projectivists, New York School, and Confessional poets--whose aesthetics are summed up by Charles Altieri: "postmodern poets have been seeking to uncover the ways man and nature are unified, so that value can be seen as the result of immanent processes in which man is as much object as he is agent of creativity" (608). The revelation of meaning is taken here "directly from experience, in fact from the fundamental experiences of human life like eating and making love, and does not require a mediating mythology" (635).

--in a tradition.[17]

This reevaluation of the stakes of the assignment of limits and quasi-ethical imperative to expand the realm of the signifiable--which grows, in Kristeva's reading, out of an experience of limits brought about by undecidability of the postmodern writing/reading of texts--is finally, I think, where deconstruction can be put into a relation with writing which we would call literary, that is if this distinction between thinking and writing even holds at this point in the discussion. The undecidability or unthematizability of texts--brought about by the structure of the postmodern field (the societal and textual conditions equally) in which they exist--represents, in a certain way, the limits from which discourse becomes possible in a post-modern context: and these limits have dire consequences for the totalizing impulse of the discourse of literary criticism, based as it is on the discourse of philosophy.

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[17]As Derrida writes concerning the seemingly ignored, disruptive work of writing in a tradition, "it is a peculiarity of our epoch that, at the moment when the phoneticization of writing--the historical origin and structural possibility of philosophy as of science, the condition of the epistémè--begins to lay hold on world culture, science, in its advancements, can no longer be satisfied with it. This inadequation had always already begun to make its presence felt. But today something lets it appear as such, allows it a kind of takeover without our being able to translate this novelty into clear cut notions of mutation, explication, accumulation, revolution, or tradition. These values belong no doubt to the system whose dislocation is presented today as such, they describe styles of an historical movement which was meaningful--like the concept of history itself--only within a logocentric epoch" (Grammatology 4, my emphasis).

As Gasché writes,

> If, in the last resort, the unthematizable because undecidable agencies of modern literary texts--agencies that are not of the order of image or concept, content or form, but that are textual structures--radically subvert the possibility of literary hermeneutics, it is because they represent the limits from which understanding and knowing become possible. (Tain 267)

It is in the exploration of these limits from which understanding and knowing become possible in a postmodern context that I see a possible relation between deconstruction and postmodern literary texts. By "postmodern literary texts" I mean a certain body of contemporary "literary" writings which explores the limits and possibilities of writing and thinking difference rather than sameness, writing which can account for the possibility of apocalypse without revelation--writing which frustrates the metaphysical question of truth, the question "what is it?". However, I must stress again that it is highly problematic to "define" this writing simply in terms of its features or historicity; the disruptions or transgressions of postmodern literary texts are necessarily written or performed--are part and parcel of the reading and writing process--or else they fall back into a such a descriptive category or theory. Such a writing then reinscribes within itself those marginalized differences, categories, excesses,

remains, groups, institutions and discourses which are excluded and then forgotten by a history of thought that raced toward totalized identity, revelation, wholeness, sameness, and meaning at the expense of all else. It is here, at or from the place called the closure of metaphysics, that relation between deconstruction and literature--as, crudely, a postmodern thinking and a postmodern writing--could begin to be thought, and it is around this set of concerns that I will examine postmodern thinking and literature in subsequent chapters. To begin to work toward some kind of specificity for these notions of postmodern thinking and writing, I would like to turn now to discuss the "problem" of representation in postmodern literature. This, it seems, is a crucial problem for postmodern writing, insofar as any disruptions it would perform or bring about must, in some way, go "through" representation--must be represented--even while representation experiences its closure.

Representation, End, Ground, Sending

He knew but must say. To say, he must start, but this could never be the start, for he could never see or have seen the start. He could go on, only, and in pieces, pieces that did for him, or that is, pieces that would do. But as he did, he felt divided and redoubled into several places of himself, inside and out. How did he focus? There wasn't one center.

--Plus

Everything comes to pass in retraits.

--The Post Card

So I want to write about representation and postmodern literature, but I have a difficulty from the very beginning of this inquiry: there is a certain way in which I can write about nothing but representation, because a metaphysical structure governed by a privilege of representation is what makes it possible for me to say anything at all. Foucault thematizes this difficulty:

> the human sciences, when dealing with what is representation (in either conscious or unconscious form), find themselves treating as their object what is in fact their condition of possibility. They are always animated, therefore, by a sort of transcendental mobility.... They proceed from that which is given to representation to that which renders representation possible, but which is still representation. (Order 364, my emphasis)

There is, then, no way I can place my two concerns in a simple relation and discuss one vis-à-vis the other--something like "The Problem of Representation in Postmodern

Literature"--because there is no "place" outside representation from which to speak about it or about whatever "postmodern literature" might be; to do so would be to treat as the object of my discourse that which, in fact, constitutes the very conditions of possibility for discourse in general: a representative metaphysical structure--characteristic of the epoch of modern subjectivity--that partially dictates what can be said and the ways in which it can be said. The only way to speak about this system, then, is from within; the only way to deconstruct the system is by thinking the system's ground--its conditions of possibility --carefully and problematically. This is not a prime directive, but rather a recognition of what Derrida calls "a necessary dependency of all destructive discourses: they must inhabit the structures they demolish" (Writing 194).

Discussions of representation, then, are rendered highly problematic by their "necessary dependence" on the structure of representation itself. Much discussion of postmodern thought and literature centers around what theorists perceive to be postmodernism's critique and/or outright rejection of representation; many such readings presuppose, in fact, that postmodern texts are in a simple oppositional relation with representation--postmodernism against representation.[18] It seems to me that the question

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[18]See, for example, Richard Rorty's Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature: "Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey are in agreement that the notion of knowledge as accurate

is much more complicated than that. As Derrida writes in his essay "Sending: On Representation,"

> Today there is a great deal of thought against representation. In a more or less articulated or rigorous way, this judgment is easily arrived at: representation is bad. And this without being able to assign, in the final analysis, the place and necessity of that evaluation....And yet, whatever the strength and the obscurity of this dominant current, the authority of representation constrains us, imposing itself on our thought through a whole dense, enigmatic, and heavily stratified history. It programs us and precedes us and warns us too severely for us to make a mere object of it, a representation, an object of representation confronting us, before us like a theme. It is even difficult to pose a systematic and historical question on the topic (a question

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representation, made possible by special mental processes, and intelligible through a general theory of representation, needs to be abandoned" (6); cf. Huyssen's After the Great Divide, where he characterizes postmodernism as a brand of decadent modernism "confident in its rejection of representation and reality" (209). For an excellent discussion of representation and postmodernism, see Arac's introduction to Postmodernism and Politics, in which he addresses the reception of Derrida's work in the United States, especially the mistaken notion that his work is essentially epistemological and that it is characterized by a "rejection of representation" (xxiv). I must also credit Arac for drawing my attention to the opening quotation from Foucault.

> of the type: "What is the system and history of representation?") now that our concepts of system and history are essentially marked by the structure and the closure of representation. (304)

In this section, I would like to discuss representation in a postmodern context, to work out "the place and necessity" of representation "now that our concepts of system and history are essentially marked by the structure and the closure of representation"--to paraphrase, I would like to discuss what it might mean to come to the limits of the structure of representation (the limits of modern subjectivity) and begin to recognize aporias, gaps, fissures at its limits, but still to inhabit a discourse possibilized by the traces of this structure. I will draw here on Heidegger's reading of the rise of representational thinking in modern philosophy and Derrida's reading of this concept's "fall" in postmodern thought. This fall brings about the closure of representation and in some sense makes possible an investigation of modern philosophy's ground, as it affects both philosophy and literature after subjectivity. In broaching the question of the literary, I will pay particular attention to Joseph McElroy's Plus and Ronald Sukenick's The Endless Short Story.

Already, though, I encounter any number of problems, not the least of which is keeping my own analysis from simply replicating the dialectical movement of critique,

which is the mainspring of representation. Likewise, here we need to confront the disciplinary slippage created by employing the sense of the words "modern" and "postmodern" across two different disciplines where they carry different significations: modern philosophy designates the philosophies of the subject, or a period in the history of Western philosophy running from Descartes to Hegel; whereas modernism in literature studies designates a movement among artists at the beginning of this century. However, I want to suggest here, as I argue above, that postmodernism in literature and the arts must confront postmodernism in philosophy, that the postmodern in any discipline or form must confront the "problem" of thinking after representation. However, that having been said, more problems are created than solved: the disciplinary periodizing (modern/postmodern) and genre distinctions (literature/philosophy) that my argument seems to take for granted are rendered problematic by the closure of representation. Hence, my argument has both to trace the closure of representation and to recognize that the argument itself is subject to this very closure and the slippage it engenders. Thinking\Writing the postmodern must account, in some way, for its own status as an other discourse--a discourse both inside and outside the problematics of representation. As Derrida writes,

> This other discourse doubtless takes into account the

> conditions of...classical and binary logic, but it no longer depends entirely upon it. If the proponents of binary opposition think that the "ideal purity" to which they are obliged to appeal reveals itself to be "illusory,"...then they are obliged to account for this fact. They must transform concepts, construct a different "logic," a different "general theory," perhaps even a discourse that, more powerful than its logic, will be able to account for it and reinscribe its possibility. (Limited Inc. 117).

It is this different logic, a logic of the postmodern that can reinscribe the very function of logic, which thinking\writing the postmodern calls for--a logic that can think representation, end, and ground along a different way, a way which Heidegger and Derrida call, among other names, sending.

In his essay "The Age of the World Picture,"[19] Heidegger ties the rise of representational thinking to the rise of modern philosophy and its notion of the subject or Cartesian cogito. For Heidegger, thinking in this subjectivist mode literally becomes re-presenting in that

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[19]The German, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes" from Holzwege, has been translated as "The Age of the World View." The title seems better translated as "The Age [or Epoch] of the World Picture" for at least two reasons: 1) Bild is clearly "picture," not "view"; and 2) "world view" confuses this analysis of the rise of the subject with Heidegger's much earlier analysis of Jaspers' Weltanschauung philosophy in §2 of the Introduction to Basic Problems of Phenomenology. Throughout, I will render "Bild" as "picture."

everything which presents itself must be referred or re-presented to the normativity of the human subject; he writes,

> To re-present here [in the modern period] means to bring what is present before one [Vorhandene] as something confronting oneself, the person representing it, and to force it back into this relation to oneself as the normative area. (350/84)

This notion of re-presenting is impossible without modern philosophy's notion of the subject--the subject as that which must filter all things confronting it through its subjectivity, in turn forming the basis or ground for "this relation to oneself as the normative area."[20] For Heidegger, this privilege of the subject leads to a humanistic notion of the world as totalizing subjectivist world picture with man as the absolute mean or measure for all things; he writes that in the epoch of re-presentational thinking, "man fights for the position in which he can be that existent which sets the standard for all existence and forms the directive for it" (353/87).

But what happens to this ground of subjectivist re-

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[20]Cf. Derrida's reading of Heidegger's notion here: "It is only the rendering available of the human subject that makes representation happen, and this rendering available is exactly that which constitutes the subject as subject. The subject is what can or believes it can offer itself representations, disposing them and disposing of them" ("Sending" 309, my emphasis).

presentation when man, as that which would serve as the mean for all other things and the ground for all determinations, shows itself to be a problematic category--to paraphrase Foucault, an invention of modern times which is fast approaching its end?[21] When man approaches its end, these modern times--or, better, the time of philosophical modernism--and their dominant modes of thinking also approach their end. And this means, in a certain way, the end of the absolute privilege of re-presentation as well as the end of metaphysics, because, as Heidegger notes in "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," "Metaphysics thinks beings as being in the manner of representational thinking" (374/62). But here the analysis moves all too quickly, without asking what it might mean to come to the end of philosophy, the end of metaphysics, the end of representation. In Heidegger, this notion of end cannot be read in the traditional, metaphysical manner--as a simple limit. He writes, "We understand the end of something all too easily in the negative sense as a mere stopping, as the

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[21]Of course, representation itself plays a large role in this "death of man"; as Foucault notes, because "man" cannot be both that which gives representations and that which is represented, it must withdraw as a category. Cf. Derrida's "Sending": "The subject is no longer defined only in its essence as the place and the placing of its representations; it is also, as a subject and in its structure as subjectum, itself apprehended as a representative. Man, determined first and above all as subject, as being-subject, finds himself interpreted throughout according to the structure of representation" (314).

lack of continuation, perhaps even as decline and impotence" ("End" 374/62). For Heidegger, we cannot--without overtly and simplistically playing metaphysics' game--understand the end of re-presentative thinking (the end of philosophy) as a simple limit which stifles progress; such a thinking of end remains metaphysical, remains a representation. But, and perhaps more importantly, neither can we thematize this end as the precondition to a simple breakthrough where the ground of metaphysical thinking is no longer problematic. The question(s) of ground(s) is and will be crucial for postmodern thinking--thinking after modern subjectivity; rather than seeing the end of philosophy as the place where the question of grounds can be abandoned and the tradition simply left behind or overcome--thinking end as a simple limit or boundary--Heidegger sees the end of metaphysics as that place where these questions become most crucial, most problematic, and perhaps most enabling. He writes, "The end of philosophy is the place, that place in which the whole of philosophy's history is gathered in its most extreme possibility" ("End" 375/63). This characterization of end as <u>radical possibility rather than simple limit</u> calls for a rethinking of the tradition and the question of grounds.

There is, then, the task of <u>rethinking</u> modern philosophy's conception of representation as ground rather than simply thematizing representation as "bad" and/or thinking that we can simply move beyond it; we must try to

think its possibility as a condition of possibility. The modernist philosophical schema of representation cannot simply be criticized and replaced with another, equally problematic interpretative metatheory--to do so is to fall back into the metaphysical trap of representational, subjectivist, dialectical thinking; but neither can the problem of representation simply be left behind. As Derrida writes,

> We might say in another langauge that a criticism or a deconstruction of representation would remain feeble, vain, and irrelevant if it were to lead to some rehabilitation of immediacy, of original simplicity, of presence without repetition or delegation, if it were to induce a criticism of calculable objectivity, of criticism, of science, of technique, or of political representation. The worst regressions can put themselves in service of this antirepresentational prejudice. ("Sending" 311)

For Derrida, it is fruitless to "criticize" representation in any traditional way, because such a notion of "criticism" presupposes a displacement of representation and its replacement by another system on the way to a more objective or scientific understanding of truth.[22] A criticism based

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[22]This is not, as many critics would have it, to say that deconstruction is an inherently status-quo thinking which merely stands impotent before oppositions or simply

on an "antirepresentational prejudice" remains naive--and, essentially, representational--if it attempts to recuperate another simply non-representational ground for interpretation, if it simply pushes representation to the margins and moves another notion to the center. Such a criticism ends up simply recuperating a representational, metaphysical world view or hermeneutic in the name of an antirepresentational thinking.

How, then, are we able to think this ground of representation, if we cannot overcome it or leave it behind in any simple way, but neither can we think in opposition to it in any simple way? Perhaps what we must do in a post-modern epoch is to think ground differently, to think the conditions of possibility for thinking in a different way, to ask questions other than "how do we criticize this position or overcome this opposition"? As Derrida writes, all this "is difficult to conceive, as it is difficult to conceive anything at all beyond representation, but [it] commits us perhaps to thinking altogether differently" ("Sending" 326). Nevertheless, the question remains, insistent: how can we conceive of a relation to this philosophical ground, these conditions of possibility, which might possibilize a "thinking altogether differently"?

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neutralizes them. As I argue throughout, criticism--as the overturning or neutralizing of oppositions--is a crucial part of deconstruction, but it does not constitute the "end" of a deconstructive analysis.

In "Sending: On Representation," Derrida develops Heidegger's notion of the "sending" of being as a possible postmodern relation to philosophy's status as ground for thinking, as conditions of possibility. Heidegger refines his notion of sending in the late lecture series "On Time and Being"; he writes,

> In the beginning of Western thinking, Being is thought, but not as the "It gives" [Es gibt] as such. The latter withdraws in favor of the gift which It gives. That gift is thought and conceptualized from then on exclusively as Being with regard to beings. A giving which gives only its gift, but in the giving holds itself back and withdraws, such a giving we call a sending [das Schicken]. According to the meaning of giving which is to be thought in this way Being--that which It gives--is what is sent. Each of its transformations remains destined [geschickt] in this manner....to giving as sending there belongs keeping back--such that the denial of the present and the withholding of the present play within the giving of what has been and what will be. (8,22/ 8,23 my emphasis)

For Heidegger, this peculiar sort of ground-as-sending both gives or sends itself (offers conditions of possibility) and holds itself back (withdraws); it is not a traditional,

metaphysical notion of ground in that it does not offer the gift of presence in its sending--its withdrawal of presence as it simultaneously offers the conditions of possibility for presence makes simple notions of presence impossible to ground: hence, "to giving as sending there belongs keeping back--such that the denial of the present and the withholding of the present play within the giving of what has been and what will be." This notion of simultaneous withdrawing and offering from a shifting ground--which he names Ereignis--allows Heidegger to thematize the epochs of Being in an other-than-positivistic way; he writes,

> To hold back is, in Greek, epoche. Hence we speak of epochs of the destiny of Being [Epochen des Seinsgeschickes]. Epoch does not here mean a span of time in occurrence, but rather the fundamental characteristic of sending, the actual holding back of itself in favor of the discernability of the gift. (9/9)

For Derrida, Heidegger's notion of sending is a place to begin to think a postmodern (post-subjectivist) ground, a quasi-transcendental ground which is no longer a traditional, simply transcendental or immanent ground, but which continues to function as that which gives a peculiar kind of universality through offering conditions of possibility. Gasché explains this notion:

> The quasitranscendentals upon which philosophy's

> universality is grounded are no longer simply transcendentals, for they represent neither a priori structures of the subjective cognition of objects nor the structures of understanding of Being by the Dasein. The quasitranscendentals are, on the contrary, conditions of possibility and impossibility concerning the very conceptual difference between subject and object and even between Dasein and Being. (Tain 317)[23]

For Derrida, there is a certain sort of quasitranscendentality in Heidegger's notion of sending--especially in ground's giving and simultaneously taking away conditions of possibility ("conditions of possibility and impossibility"), but Derrida maintains that Heidegger's notion remains haunted by the specter of teleological thinking in that sending is "destined" [geschickt] from ground to thinking in various epochs of Being.[24] Also, it seems suspect to Derrida that there could be a pure gift of time or Being, a giving prior to a system(aticity) that always already makes pure giving--giving without some kind of reciprocation, giving (from) without a system, "the

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[23]Cf. Limited Inc. pp. 127ff.

[24]Cf. "On Time and Being": "What is historical in the history of Being is determined by what is sent forth in destining, not by an indeterminately thought up occurrence [Das Geschichtliche der Geschichte des Seins bestimmt sich aus Geschickhaften eines Schickens, nicht aus einem unbestimmt gemeinten Geschehen]" (8-9/ 8-9, my emphasis).

actual holding back of itself in favor of the discernability of the gift"--impossible.[25]

Given Derrida's reading, Heidegger's epochs of Being--the epoch of representation, for example--are destined or given from the ground of Being to arrive at certain points in the history of Being. To bolster this reading, Derrida turns to "The Age of the World Picture" and Heidegger's discussion of the vast difference between the Greeks' notion of truth as unconcealment or aletheia and the modern conception of truth as re-presentation. Heidegger concludes that "in Greece the world cannot become a picture"; but he hastens to add:

> On the other hand, the fact that for Plato the existent is determined as eidos (appearance, view) is the presupposition, coming far in advance [weit voraus geschickte] and for a long time acting secretly and indirectly, for the eventual transformation of the world to a picture. (351/84)

Derrida quickly picks up on this notion of Heidegger's, arguing that such Heideggerian sendings and transformations are "fated, predestined, geschickte, that is to say, literally sent, dispensed, assigned by a fate as a summary of history" ("Sending" 311). For Derrida, such a notion of sending presupposes that ground was, is, or could be present to itself, able to give the gift of presence but unwilling

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[25]Cf. Glas, 242-244a.

to do so--instead, working "secretly and indirectly" to shape the history of Being. But, Derrida asks, what if this ground is always already divided, never present to itself, discontinuous, unable to gather itself and unable to send to a specific destination, unable to secure the history of Being:

> Wherever this being-together or with itself of the envoi of being divides itself, defies the legein, frustrates the destination of the envoi, is not the whole schema of Heidegger's reading challenged in principle, deconstructed from a historical point of view? If there has been representation, it is perhaps just because the envoi of being was originally menaced in its being-together, in its Geschick, by divisibility or dissension (what I would call dissemination). (323)

This quasitranscendental ground that Derrida posits--this ground which itself is subject to dissemination and trace--calls for a different kind of thinking of ground: a ground "older" than any philosophical distinction, but one which in no way offers a pure origin or beginning point to validate the traditional work of these distinctions; a ground which could not assure the arrival of a sending, which could not determine "positive," inexorable circumstances and thereby function metaphysically. Rather, in Derrida's notion of sending as envoi,

> The envoi is as it were pre-ontological, because it does not gather itself together or because it gathers itself only in dividing itself, in differentiating itself, because it is not original or originally a sending-from (the envoi of something-that-is or of a present which would precede it, still less of a subject, or of an object by and for a subject), because it is not single and does not begin with itself although nothing precedes it; and it issues forth only in already sending back; it issues forth only on the basis of the other, the other in itself without itself. Everything begins by referring back, that is to say, does not begin...from the very start, every renvois, there is not a single renvois but from then on, always, a multiplicity of renvois, so many different traces referring back to other traces and to traces of others. (324)

Such a notion of ground as discontinuous and never present to itself--as ground which issues forth only by issuing back to "itself" which is already plural--necessitates that the envoi be at the same time "a multiplicity of renvois," an unsheltered origin which cannot master that which it engenders; this ground--which respects the unthematizability of the Other and moves through the entre of difference rather than the binary oppositions of sameness--may be a way

to conceive of the thinking differently about representation that the postmodern calls for.

But perhaps Derrida has all-too-hastily denied Heidegger's Ereignis such a status as withdrawing, postmodern ground. Derrida often calls attention to Heidegger's continued claim that the essence of important terms in his thinking (technology, representation, Ereignis) does not belong to those terms: so the essence of technology is nothing technological,[26] the essence of representation is not a representation ("Sending" 314), and Ereignis (which makes the history of Being as sending possible) is itself unhistorical. About this move in the Heideggerian text, Derrida writes, "It is in any case by a gesture of this type that Heidegger interrupts or disqualifies, in different domains, specular reiteration or infinite regress [renvoi à l'infini]" ("Sending" 314). Derrida argues that when Heidegger removes the "essence" of his terms from the field(s) they engender, he shelters this grounding function--precisely protecting ground from the play of the network, protecting ground from the potential slippage of dissemination and thereby guaranteeing the arrival of Being's sending. For Derrida, Heidegger's withdrawal of ground serves primarily to protect ground's purity more rigorously.

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[26]On this point, see a brief question-and-answer exchange between Derrida and Geoff Bennington in "On Reading Heidegger" 175-76.

Derrida's reading, though, can be complicated considerably by closely examining Heidegger's notion of the "grounding" function of Ereignis. In "On Time and Being," for example, Heidegger insists that Ereignis, not Being, is the matter for thinking--that "Being, which lies in sending, is no longer what is to be thought explicitly"; he continues:

> Thinking then stands in and before that which has sent the various forms of epochal Being. This, however, what sends as Ereignis, is itself unhistorical [ungeschichtlich], or more precisely without destiny [geschicklos].... With the entry into Ereignis, its own way of concealment proper to it also arrives. Ereignis [appropriation] is itself Enteignis [expropriation]. (42/44)

Here we see Heidegger performing the very move which Derrida thematizes as a protective one: Heidegger seemingly removes Ereignis from the history of Being which it renders possible, thereby mystifying Ereignis by attempting to seal it hermetically, beyond the reach of contamination. But what are we to make of Heidegger's claim that the thinking of Ereignis "stands in and before [in und vor] that which has sent the various forms of epochal Being"? It would seem that Ereignis is already divided as a ground, standing not simply before what it engenders (as an a priori ground would), but both in and before--an already double(d) mark at

the origin. Also, here Heidegger refines the "unhistorical" essence of Ereignis not as a transhistorical grounding function that fatalistically determines the field it makes possible, but as the ground of a history that is itself without destiny--a Geschick that is, in and by its "essence," geschicklos. Top this off with Heidegger's insistence that the "concealment proper" to Ereignis is itself Enteignis--expropriation, dispersion, one could name it "dissemination"--and we would seem to be a long way from the sheltered ground and the assured sending and arrival of Being that Derrida reads in Heidegger's texts. And, one could further ask, even if Derrida's deconstruction of Heidegger's grounding function is on the mark, what is to be said about différance--which, it has been argued, is clearly heterogeneous ("literally neither a word nor a concept" ["Différance" 3]) to the field which it makes possible, and therefore precisely the sort of ground-beyond-question that Derrida accuses Heidegger of producing.[27] Derrida responds that différance is not an essence or origin--that undecidability does not exist in general as a sort of negative ground.[28] He argues that deconstruction is a

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[27]See, for example, John Boly's "Deconstruction as a General System": "Différance is a mystified concept, an absolute, all-inclusive origin that is strategically, conveniently put beyond analytical reach" (201).

[28]See "Différance," esp. pp. 26-27.

situation, not an essence.[29] The same argument, however, can be (and has been)[30] made in favor of Heidegger. And so on...in a sort of renvoi à l'infini.

I let citations stand in place of arguments here not because, as Habermas' infamous phrase would have it, postmodernists "[do] not belong to those philosophers who like to argue" (193),[31] but because an extended discussion of the "Who's-more-metaphysical?" type would ultimately prove unsatisfying and would remain (rather overtly) within the bounds of representation as critique. Rather, I step back and hesitate, pointing out that the critico-interpretative vertigo I outline above is part and parcel of the problematic I am discussing under the rubric thinking\writing the postmodern: there is no guaranteeing the arrival of a message--the economies of (mis)reading between and among Heidegger, Derrida, and their readers can be accounted for by the very "theory" under consideration here. This accounting for non-plenitude, non-arrival, and

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[29]See Limited Inc., pp. 115ff.

[30]See Reiner Schürmann's Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy: "In reading Heidegger from beginning to end...the practical implications of his thinking leap into view: the play of a flux of practice, without stabilization and presumably carried to the point of an incessant fluctuation in institutions, is an end in itself. The turn beyond metaphysics thus reveals the essence of praxis: exchange deprived of a principle" (18).

[31]This charge is specifically leveled against Derrida; see his response to Habermas in a long footnote to Limited Inc., pp. 156-58.

errancy in an other-than-negative way is part of the "project" of thinking\writing the postmodern: these texts are--if my "argument is correct"--in-scribed within the network(s) they de-scribe, and are subject to its play. Or, as Derrida writes about Heidegger's attempt to tell the story of Being,

> As soon as there are renvois, and that is always already, something like representation no longer waits and we must arrange to tell this story differently, from renvois of renvois to renvois of renvois, in a destiny which is never certain of gathering itself up, of identifying itself, or of determining itself. (325)

Perhaps this postmodern call "to tell this story differently"--to tell a story which does not move toward a transcendental signified--allows us to bring the question of literature onto the scene, as a challenge to the philosophical, representational mode of story telling.

Joseph McElroy's Plus takes up this challenge by trying to think these problematic postmodern relations--by trying to think the status of the representing subject after the "death" of the subject and of representation. Plus is a different kind of science fiction story about a disembodied human brain called Imp (Interplanetary Monitoring Platform) Plus which is put into orbit of Earth and monitored by

Ground.[32] Imp Plus sends and receives messages from Ground, but it always receives more than these messages. The text begins:

> He found it all around. It opened and was close. He felt it was himself, but felt it was more. It nipped open from outside in and from inside out. Imp Plus found it all around. He was Imp Plus and this was not the start. (1)

This "more"--the "plus" that simultaneously "was himself" and "was more"--is a recurring concern of McElroy's text. This initial "Plus" or "more" (at the beginning of the book which is "not the start"), this excess--of message, of self, of experience--cannot be thematized into a totalized metaphysical picture. The messages from Ground come on a closed Concentration Loop, but even this direct sending does not guarantee their intelligibility; the more, the dissemination always already at work even at the "source," makes the meaning of the sendings from Ground difficult to control: "through the message impulses [from Ground] Imp Plus knew a thing more than what they told" (5); "Ground said the word" (7), but "Imp Plus knew more" (8). As the text continues, this excess of message and of self, this ground withdrawing from both Imp Plus and from Ground, makes not only the meaning, but the very destination of the

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[32]The "story" is very much more complicated than I make it out here. For an excellent distillation of the plot of Plus, see David Porush's The Soft Machine (172-75).

sendings from Ground to Imp Plus impossible to control: "And Imp Plus did not know if the transmission was to Ground or him. He seemed to be transmitting within himself....There was more all around, and the more all around was joining itself to Imp Plus" (36). This Plus, this more, this excess of signification, is one of the things that Derrida points to as a possibilization for deconstruction, for a postmodern exploration of the question of ground; he writes,

> If I had to risk a single definition of deconstruction, one as brief, elliptical, and economical as a password, I would say simply and without overstatement: plus d'une langue--both more than a language and no more of a language. (Memoires 15)

The excess that Imp Plus experiences in the messages from Ground, "more than a language," is what makes the sendings from Ground possible (allows them to be thematized in language, to be offered as representations), but simultaneously makes it impossible for them to come to the specific destination and interpretative closure that the representing, philosophical subject wishes to achieve--"no more of a langauge," no more of a single, univocal, self-present message to be transmitted between stable interpreting subjects, and no more of a guide from the Ground of language as representation: "Ground did not feel

familiar now" (25).

But this problematizing of the question of ground does not lead to a simple abandonment of the question of ground--for Imp, Ground cannot simply be turned off or abandoned when it shows itself as problematic: "One thing he could do he found by having done it. This was to hear Ground's transmissions as silence. Yet when and how weren't sure" (73). Imp Plus contemplates turning off the sendings from Ground, but finds this impossible because the very activity of thinking--in this case, the category of negation--is shot through with and implicated by the metaphysical ground of representation. How or when can the conditions of possibility for discourse and thinking be abandoned or turned off, especially if it is these conditions which are being interrogated? The only way Imp can conceive of a different mode of thinking is through the system of a present mode of thinking, so he must interrogate the ground that modernist thinking stands on if he is to think differently:

> So all he knew was that what life he was possessed of inclined him to give Ground answers. In return for answers that in turn might make him know the more that he had come to be. (170)

In order to theorize his postmodern existence--one characterized by a recognition of the inevitable excess which makes totalizing systems untenable--Imp engages the

ground of the modernist systems which his postmodern knowledge exceeds; this ground must be interrogated if he is to "know the more that he had come to be" on the way to postmodern thinking--a thinking that is inevitably, Imp realizes, in two places at once, both inside and outside representation as the language of the subject: "Imp Plus thought his being outside and inside had hit him with an impedance of double vision" (50). This double vision, needless to say, impedes my own sight of Plus; I am, in reading the text, inside a problematic of representation as critique while simultaneously attempting to open up this reading or critique to an outside, an excess, to the plus which makes reading Plus (im)possible.

It is this "double vision" that a postmodern thinking and writing attempts to attend to--a double vision caused by "being inside and outside" the structures of a thinking that is to be displaced. But if the postmodern must both displace and account for the displacement of the modern, then stubborn question of how such displacement is possible needs to be asked: how is it possible both to make use of and also to displace--to be inside and outside--the thinking of a tradition? Derrida likens this situation--the postmodern situation--to writing, receiving, thinking a post card:

> its lack or excess of address prepares it to fall into all hands: a post card, an open letter in

> which the secret appears, but indecipherably....
> What does a post card want to say to you? On what conditions is it possible? (Post Card 17 November 1979)

Derrida here poses the questions of end, sending, ground, and representation using the metaphor of a post card: a representation (a "world picture," one might say) sent along its way with the distinct possibility of never reaching a specific destination, open to many readings along the way. However, given its limited discursive space and the fact that--unlike a letter--its representations are open and inscribed directly on its surface, a post card is also prone to many misreadings along the way, and this is what a thinking\writing the postmodern attempts to account for: not only the possibility of plenitude, understanding, reading, but the simultaneous possibility--engendered by the same ground, by the same conditions of possibility--of non-plenitude, misunderstanding, misreading. And it is perhaps this ability to understand the problematics of the (non)arrival of the post card which is the condition of possibility for postmodern writing and thinking; maybe it requires, as Derrida writes,

> Knowing how to play well with the poste restante. Knowing how not to be there and how to be strong for not being there right away. Knowing how not to deliver on command, how to wait and to make

> wait...to the point of dying without mastering anything of the final destination. The post is always en reste, and always restante. It always awaits the addressee [destinataire] who might always, by chance, not arrive. (Post Card 191/206)

Perhaps postmodern knowledge is "itself" this writing of the approach, the never-not-yet of the (im)possible (non)arrival of truth; a conception of end in this thinking differently about metaphysics and about literature--end as other than simple limit--allows us to thematize this approach without arrival of meaning, this envoi, as other than a lamentable situation. As Derrida writes, "this divisibility of the envoi has nothing negative about it, it is not a lack, it is altogether different from subject, from signifier" ("Sending" 324). We can thematize this envoi as a lamentable situation only from the premises of untenable metaphysical system, a system which is experiencing its closure. And Derrida's Post Card not only thematizes but also enacts or performs this (im)possible (non)arrival of truth after the closure of representation: the text is written in short, cryptic, sometimes discontinuous sections which strain and finally crack traditional distinctions between letters and post cards, between philosophy and literature, between the discourse of truth and the discourse of fables.

But despite Derrida's insistence that a writing of the post card shakes representation, it is important even--perhaps especially--here to hesitate, to point out that the metaphor of thinking\writing the post card--if taken solely stylistically, as the "form" of the postmodern--risks the arrival of a new representation, a new world picture centered around the cryptic ambiguity and catchy slogans of a post card. One need only think of the myriad discourses (advertising and architecture, for example) which locate their notion of the "postmodern" in the short, ambiguous juxtaposition of unrelated images to see that this has already happened--and, one is quick to add, to reiterate the inadequacy of reading the postmodern as a sheerly stylistic phenomenon (what Lacoue-Labarthe has called the "rag-bag" school of postmodernism).[33] Such misreadings and misappropriations are, of course, inevitable in any period, but postmodernists, in attempting to account for these misreadings, can also become aware of the cultural logic of (mis)appropriation which fuels them--to paraphrase an unlikely source, to understand how bad things happen to good ideas--and thereby remain aware of the risks of thinking\writing the postmodern. As Derrida writes,

> ..."thought" risks in its turn (but I believe this risk is unavoidable--it is the risk of the future itself)

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[33]Lacoue-Labarthe's remark is cited in Gasché's "Postmodernism and Rationality" (534).

> being reappropriated by socio-political forces that could find it in their interest in certain situations. Such a 'thought' indeed cannot be produced outside of certain historical, techno-economic, politico-institutional and linguistic conditions. A strategic analysis that is to be as vigilant as possible must thus with its eyes wide open attempt to ward off such reappropriations. ("Principle" 17)

This problem of reappropriation--often criticized as something postmodernists celebrate--brings us back to the necessity of the double move: the necessity of both philosophical thematization (a thinking) as well as a kind literary reflexivity (a writing) which can disrupt the reappropriation of dialectical sublation; a double move which can attempt to disrupt the reappropriation of the postmodern as a commodity, as a programmatic institutional scheme--in short, as a representation.[34]

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[34]This is not to say that deconstruction or Heidegger's thinking are not commodifiable; aside from the more obvious academic commodifications, one need only note Bob Mackie's Spring 1990 advertising campaign with Bloomingdale's ["A new cool of thought. A new philosophy of style. Deconstruct. Lighten up. It's a little more free."] and the recent "Applied Heidegger" movement [cf. Gottleib's "Heidegger for Fun and Profit"] to see that there is indeed a rampant appropriation mind-set at work in what is perhaps too blithely called late capitalist society (a mind-set which, it should be noted, depends upon representation--upon the consumability of representations); however, it seems hasty to indict Derrida and Heidegger as cheerleaders for these misappropriations, or to accuse them of being romantically unaware of the dangers of reappropriation. See, in addition to numerous Derrida essays (esp. "Living On," Memoires, and "Principle"), Heidegger's remarks about the university,

And with this double move we return to the question of literature--to the question of the specificity, the place of literature--in a postmodern situation. Perhaps literature, what we call the literary, has always, from before the beginning, been that which poses the greatest danger to representation: perhaps it can be called the "post" which has always haunted the "modern",[35] the (im)possibility of representation which has haunted representation. Perhaps now--from the place we call the closure of representation--we are able to read this threat that literature poses. Literature has existed throughout the modern, subjectivist period (one could argue throughout its entire history) only in, by, and for philosophy--only within the problematics of a revelation of its truth. Literature exists in the subjectivist period primarily insofar as it represents experience--the edifying truth embedded in the fiction of the fable. But what happens after Nietzsche, when the discourse of truth shows itself to be a fable? Literature comes to be that which can, in some sense, mark the break, the interruption, the insufficiency of truth as representation, and the necessity to tell the story differently. Hence a certain privilege of literature, of writing, in coming to grips with a postmodern logic; but, as

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capitalism, and the "gigantic" in "The Age of the World Picture."

[35]I steal this phrase from a conversation with John Protevi.

Lacoue-Labarthe warns,

> If writing has this privilege...it is not because we are finally delivered from the world, from presence (and from representation)--as one now hastens to add rather quickly--by simply inverting (or even not inverting at all) metaphysical oppositions. Rather it is because writing is, above all, this reflection of experience where reflection (and hence experience) constantly undoes itself. ("Fable" 55-6)

Postmodern writing (postmodern literature, postmodern text) then becomes the place (the site, the space) where the logic of the renvois (the logic of a writing which cannot control its own destination, the logic of what we would call the postmodern) moves and shows itself--as thinking\writing, that "reflection of experience where reflection (and hence experience) constantly undoes itself." It is not, as Lacoue-Labarthe maintains, a matter of inverting strategies --of scrapping the subjectivist category of representation and being free of it--but rather a matter of constantly undoing, of rethinking representation, end, and ground in writing--of thinking\writing the post card.

So the literary seems a privileged place to ask the question of thinking\writing the postmodern--provided, that is, literature can twist free[36] from before the law of

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[36]I lift this phrase from John Sallis, who allows it to resonate as "the slightest twist, setting one from that moment adrift from the logic of opposition, adrift in a

philosophy, from before the law of representation which would give literature its form, its signifying transparency, its end. Literature can, perhaps, attempt to twist free from representation in being end-less, rejecting the transcendental signified--remaining a story without ends. A text like Ronald Sukenick's The Endless Short Story. In the penultimate section of ESS, "The End of the Endless Short Story, Continued," Sukenick asks the question of writing the postmodern, of writing the end-less, of writing a tenuously addressed post card from the closure of representation: "the end of one time is always the beginning of another kind of time," he writes, "And who knows what the mailman may bring?" (130). Sukenick plays on notions of time and end in his text; his is a continuing rather than a simple end--an "End, continued," an end which, like the postcard, may or may not arrive. In fact, the text's final endless story is titled "Post Card," and is characterized as

> a post card from THE ENDLESS SHORT STORY. THE ENDLESS SHORT STORY has a secret ambition it wants to write the Great Amer ican Postcard. These are some of the requirements for The Great American Postcard it has to have a Great Character. It has to have an All Encompassing Plot. It has to be Signific ant and easy to read. It should be Serious but not so seri ous as to make us feel bad. (130)[37]

The traditional criteria for the form of a representative

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certain oblique opposition to logic" (160).

[37]This quotation, as well as the ones which follow, contain Sukenick's original line breaks and spelling.

narrative are satirized here by Sukenick as the "requirements for the Great American Postcard": totalized, logical plot; a serious, significant--but not too depressing--theme; and simple, consumable readability. Sukenick's text possesses precious few of these "requirements": it is discontinuous, playful, and unreadable--that is, if reading means the consumption of "an All Encompassing Plot." The fractured "form" of Sukenick's text also doubles or performs the fracturing "content": the fracturing of the text makes the call for the Great American Postcard "to be Signific/ ant and easy to read" a difficult one to fulfill. In fact, because the Great American Postcard is itself a sending from the already disseminated ground of Sukenick's text--"a post card from THE ENDLESS SHORT STORY," a postcard within a postcard--the distinctions of form and content (origin and end, context and text, philosophy and literature) are themselves subject to a fracturing. The "end"--the revelation of meaning, the transcendental signified that representation has always dreamed of--is literally de-formed here by Sukenick: the form of language as representation is literally broken or cracked on the page in Sukenick's attempt to write/think in an other way.

But Sukenick is not simply gushing abstract thoughts onto the page in random order--a romantic, subjectivist project to be sure; rather, his text both enacts and

thematizes (in a simultaneous double movement) the destructuring of the language and tradition of representation--the conditions of possibility given to postmodern literature. Sukenick writes of the tradition as

> alphabet soup dissolving in the thick warm broth of humanism fish food again. For as Captain Postcard knows the target is always poetry. And the bullet is poetry. And the gun is poetry. Every poem destroys the language a little. Blows a hunk off the stale intractable block of it. Blows it to bit s so the fish can eat again and multiply in their many surpr ising species shapes and hues only to fall prey to bigger f ish or to fish that are smaller but more numerous and one ho pes more lively like dull unwieldy epistolary novels that break down into constituent postcards while tragic Captain Postcar d sails off his moment past to meet his fate in the bland de pths of cliche. What you hear is the sound of fish nibbling alphabets. It's three generations later and all of this has happened already. (131)

For Sukenick, the literature of the past gives conditions of possibility to a postmodern literature, which must work within the framework of the past insofar as it must use the same language and acknowledge its tradition as representation, but Sukenick is here literally rethinking the tradition of representation "three generations later." In Sukenick's text, this tradition is to undergo not only a critique but a destructuring: "the target/ is always poetry. And the bullet is poetry. And the gun is/ poetry"; and each postmodern text "destroys the language a little. Blows a/ hunk off the stale intractable block of it. Blows it to bit/ s." Postmodern text destroys the language of the past to allow others to feed on its innovations and further open up the system to the possibility of thinking differently. The language of representation is the only

language we have, so the forms we take from the past--the "dull unwieldy epistolary novels" of the Eighteenth century --must "break down into constituent postcards": the monolith of writing as representation must be broken down "so the fish can eat again and multiply," so artists can produce new forms. Indeed, the question of form here is crucial for Sukenick--his text both uses and disrupts forms of language as representation, but it does so without offering a ready-made form with which to replace representation. In this way, his text is both inside and outside representation: it gives way to an endless rewriting\rethinking of form--an approach of form--and broaches the possibility of thinking differently, thinking end-lessly, thinking as writing, thinking\writing the postmodern.

This different thinking--an <u>other</u> thinking rather than <u>another</u> thinking--likewise calls for a different practice of literary "criticism." Sukenick concludes his text with two literary critics fishing for the meaning of the Great American Postcard--for the end of <u>The Endless Short Story</u>:

> Two fishermen with elaborate gear stand o ver a pool and talk about it. They haul out fish one after another club them pull out their guts. When they're done the y string them up on their car and take a snapshot. And ther e it is. The Great American Postcard. They stutter off in the clumsy model T of analysis bringing home food for though t. Dear ESS. Went fishing today but all I caught was a pos tcard and it wasn't Serious. Didn't have no plot. No charac (132)

Here Sukenick suggests a certain practice of literary

criticism: haul out the fish--the new texts fed on the bits of langauge blown off by the gun of postmodern writing--and "club them pull out their guts" for a meaning, a representation, a world picture, a snapshot. Such a practice allows the critics to "stutter off in the/ clumsy model T of analysis bringing home food for though/ t," to bring the food for thought to the classroom as a dead fish brought home in a model T of paradigmatic analysis. But what they will have caught is the "Great American Postcard" --a sending which, in the end, cannot be "hooked." Or can it? A question remains: what have I caught here? Indeed, am I myself caught in the wide-angle lens which takes the fishermen/critics' snapshot, next to any number of dead fish: Sukenick, McElroy, Derrida, Heidegger? Have they become mounted and stuffed above these pages; has representation been waiting here, quietly at the end of this discussion, to reimpose its order? Perhaps, as there is no absolute escape from representation, no clean place or language--no untouched fishin' hole. But there remains also at this end an other notion of end, a hesitation rather than a resolution, a challenge to the fishing licence issued by representation, a sending that remains unapprehended: "Went fishing today but all I caught was a pos/ tcard and it wasn't Serious. Didn't have no plot. No charac." End of story; end of a certain kind of stories--or, perhaps more precisely, end of a certain kind of writing; end of a

certain kind of thinking. End of a certain notion of end(s).

CHAPTER 5

GRAVITY'S RAINBOW AND THINKING THE POSTMODERN OTHER

Alas, who is there
we can make use of? Not angels, not men;
and already the knowing brutes are aware
that we don't feel very secure at home
within our interpreted world.
--Rilke

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are.
--Foucault

There's no real decision here, neither lines of power nor cooperation. Decisions are never really made--at best they manage to emerge, from a chaos of peeves, whims, hallucinations and all-around assholery. This is less a fighting team than nest full of snits, blues, crochets, and grudges, not a rare or fabled bird in the lot. Its survival seems, after all, only a mutter of blind fortune groping through the heavy marbling skies one Titanic-Night at a time. Which is why Slothrop now observes his coalition with hopes for success and hopes for disaster about equally high (and no, that doesn't cancel out to apathy--it makes a loud dissonance that dovetails inside you sharp as knives).
--Gravity's Rainbow (676)

At this point in this work, an urgent question reemerges: how does one proceed after the end of a notion of ends? How does or can one read the postmodern? How does one read--let alone write about or "criticize"--a text that is perhaps the postmodern text par excellence, Gravity's Rainbow (hereafter GR), an encyclopedic, end-less text whose difficulty and resistance to interpretation are legendary, even within the criticism which would want to interpret it?

How does a critic or discipline respond to a text that resists the paradigms of criticism, that always seems to elude being mastered, that puts aside the possibility of a determinate decision concerning its meaning? As I have suggested above, one way to deal with such an impasse is "simply" to re-thematize the work of criticism, to allegorize reading or critical work as the revelation of its own impossibility--the route taken by a certain kind of rhetorical deconstructive criticism. Strangely enough, this route is largely untravelled in Pynchon criticism, though almost all readings of GR contain a caveat about the difficulty, impossibility, or undesirability of totalizing the text.[1] In fact, for the majority of Pynchon scholars, the way into a reading of GR is precisely through this difficulty, through the text's status somewhere between meaning and non-meaning: GR is consistently thematized in terms of its richness (its vast size, complex use of sources, and highly complex narrative constructions and obfuscations), a richness which in turn offers criticism multiple--perhaps infinite--interpretations.[2]

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[1]See, as a general caveat, Bernard Duyfhuizen's "Taking Stock," a review essay of 26 years of Pynchon criticism; he writes that "all future critics of Pynchon must remember the lessons of the past: his complex texts resist reduction, and patterns of meaning rarely extend beyond momentary, and sometimes illusory, conditions of being" (88).

[2]There is, in fact, an entire genre of Pynchon criticism which takes this "encyclopedic" route; see, in addition to Mendelson's seminal "Gravity's Encyclopedia," Tölöyan's "War as Background in GR," Weisenburger's A GR

Paradoxically, however, such a critical maneuver can end up treating discontinuity or unthematizability as a continuous theme--which, once uncovered, reveals that GR is not really unthematizable at all. GR's rich ambiguity becomes, rather, its over-arching theme, and the novel becomes an allegory for the ambiguity of the world and of art--for their plurality. In the secondary literature, GR is consistently read as a text which affirms a sort of Romantic, humanist freedom among myriad possibilities for being--the richness of the text figures the freedom of the reader within the plurality of the world. This is, in fact, virtually uniformly the case in GR criticism. I cite, almost randomly: Seed writes that GR's myriad patterns "raise multiple possibilities of arriving at knowledge. At the same time, since there is a continuity between characters' efforts to know and the readers', Pynchon raises different possible ways of interpreting his own novel" (209). Earl writes that we as readers "are all shocked...into a higher consciousness that can finally lead us to a transcendental freedom" (249). Schaub argues that Pynchon's "writing succeeds in binding people together...[his] fiction reminds us of what a true society would mean" (151-52). Hite writes that "GR is another mammoth project of loving the people, loving even their

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Companion and "The End of History?," Cowart's Pynchon: The Art of Allusion, and Moore's The Style of Connectedness.

preterition in its scatological profusion, avoiding a univocal standard of judgment, avoiding hierarchy.... It is instead a novel that affirms the nonsystematic, nontotalizing connections of a community based on making meanings" (156). Moore argues that "the reader of GR must learn to see the quasi-magical, part-hallucinatory web of interconnections, variously familiar, obscure, farfetched and hitherto unthought-of among all these images, signs and omens" (28). Wolfley writes that for Pynchon "[n]othing really matters but individual freedom" (121). Ames argues that the Counterforce releases linguistic "possibilities that give hope and life to those outside" (206). Even Hume's study of myth in GR has a pluralist/humanist bent: "To our monomyth-shaped minds, openness, kindness, acceptance of preterition, and responsiveness to the Other Side seem terribly evanescent and fragile, but Pynchon organizes them into a structured model, so we can consider his proposition for its validity as a whole" (139-40). And so on.[3]

My question concerning GR and the critical project surrounding it, however, will be a different one: what happens when criticism encounters a text which, far from offering the critic many possible interpretations, radically

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[3]McHoul and Wills' Writing Pynchon is, in fact, the only major book that doesn't put forth such a humanist reading, and in fact has much to say about this reading's inadequacy to the complexities of GR (1-13).

resists any thematized reading whatsoever? If, as I have argued in the preceding chapter, the postmodern signals the end of a certain notion of ends, then an end-oriented discipline (if that is not a redundant formulation) which encounters an end-less writing must, in some way, domesticate that writing, put it to work in the service of a determinate end. Phrased in another--perhaps more combative--way, my question will be what happens if one takes quite seriously criticism's ubiquitous claims about the non-totalizing (or non-totalizable) nature of GR? If one is to take these claims seriously, it seems to follow that GR is characterized not by a plurality of possible interpretative meanings, but rather by a strange inability to interpret its meaning(s) at all.

This, of course, will need to be worked out, but I must stress that I do not mean to suggest GR is, à la de Man, simply unreadable or without meaning. To clarify what might seem like an obvious and inescapable inconsistency (the problem of my own reading of what I have called an unreadable text), I hasten to clarify two necessary points about my conception of reading or thematizing the postmodern: 1) of course GR is able to be read and thematized--what else characterizes the readings cited above and makes possible my own reading of it?; and, 2) this thematization is a necessary and unavoidable step within a double gesture. The pull toward determinate meaning comes

with any use of language; however, I want to suggest here that there is something other than thematization which is not simply the opposite of thematization. I want to suggest that GR poses a ground-question to criticism's pull toward determinate meaning through its disruptions of any simply thematized reading, through its disruptions of any attempt to assign it a comforting, consumable readability. In short, I will argue that GR produces neither the plurality of interpretations that most Pynchon critics argue for, nor the reassuring unreadability that de Man practices, but rather a fracturing unreadability coupled with the imperative to read differently; in other words, GR produces an unreadability that is not simply the opposite of readability, but one which calls into question the field of opposition wherein the unreadable is simply opposed to the readable. GR's unreadability, as the epigraph to this chapter reads, "doesn't cancel out to apathy--it makes a loud dissonance that dovetails inside you sharp as knives."

Pynchon and Pluralism;
or, Pluralism is a Humanism

It is well-documented that Pynchon's texts overtly discuss the status of thinking the "between"--the middle ground between the exclusionary poles of binary thinking. Many critical discussions of Pynchon use the texts' overt thematizations of the question of the between--in the final pages of The Crying of Lot 49 and in the Pointsman/Mexico

debate in GR--to ground a pluralist reading.[4] Hite sums up this pluralist reading in "Included Middles," the first chapter of Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon,

> There is an infinite "middle" region between the hyperbolic extremes of an absolute, externally imposed ...order and total chaos.... Pynchon's novels themselves are "middles," and they demonstrate how much significance can be included within a plurality of limited, contingent, overlapping systems that coexist and form relations with one another without achieving abstract intellectual closure. (16, 21)

For Hite (as for the litany of critics cited above), Pynchon deals thematically with excluded middles in order to include them; he thematizes the "bad shit" (Crying 137) of excluded middles in the service of a pluralistic community of interpretations. If this is the case, though, Pynchon's text finds itself placed in a rather sticky situation, valorizing or offering a vision of what is presumably the "good shit" of inclusive pluralism in dialectical contradiction to the "bad shit" of excluded middles. Including the middle by hypostatizing it as an inhabitable place populated by competing relational systems precisely allows this "middle" to be located and sublated by a dialectic, allows dialectical thinking to achieve "abstract closure." And GR seems to take this into account:

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[4]See pages 136-37 in Lot 49 and 48-55 in GR.

pluralist criticism's notion of the between as a place to write your own solutions, as a place to be "included," is precisely the reading of the between given by Pointsman, one of the arch-villains of GR, as he lusts after the minds of Kevin Spectro's tabula rasa shellshock victims, who are "egoless for one pulse of the Between . . . tablet erased, new writing about to begin" (50).[5] The logic of pluralism remains a logic of metaphysics, of humanism. This pluralist "humanism," though, is something of a misnomer, insofar as pluralism is characterized not so much by a concern for the otherness of others, but by an obsession with manipulation and ends--with determinate meaning and rhetoric, persuasion, use. And Pointsman realizes the potential political economy of those in the between; he longs "to use their innocence, to write on them new words of himself, his own brown Realpolitik dreams" (50).

Up to this point, I have (at least surreptitiously) been advancing the argument that literary criticism is a kind of "human science": I have argued that literary criticism is, in many ways, a quasi-scientific discourse interested in producing ever-more methodologies in the hopes of better controlling and understanding its object, literature--just as Pointsman dreams of producing ever-more methodologies in the hopes of better controlling his human

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[5]Throughout, ellipses are Pynchon's, except where enclosed in brackets.

subjects. This argument can most specifically be developed here, I think, by looking at the question of "pluralism" in and around the text of GR, a text that rather overtly concerns itself with sciences and their workings,[6] and likewise a text given a thoroughly pluralist reading by literary criticism. But we need to hesitate here and ask if it is really fair to say that a pluralist brand of literary criticism is just another sort of human science, a determining discourse that constrains its object in the midst of studying it. Isn't pluralism, as its proponents would argue, precisely an incredulous response to the iron-fisted, totalizing metanarratives of the sciences--a call to recognize and foreground the constructed nature of any interpretative claim, and hence a call to acknowledge the potential plurality of such claims?[7] Pluralism in this sense would seem precisely to invalidate the monologizing claims of the sciences--human or otherwise--and hence could be seen to be the "postmodern" discourse par excellence; as Brian McHale argues in his "Telling Postmodernist Stories":

> To escape the general postmodernist incredulity toward metanarratives it is only necessary that we regard our own metanarrative incredulously, in a certain sense, proferring it tentatively or provisionally, as no more

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[6]See Alan Friedman's "Science and Technology."

[7]See, for example, Fish's "What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?"

> (but no less) than a strategically useful and satisfying fiction.... I am recommending, in other words, that we need not abandon metanarratives--which may, after all, do useful work for us--so long as we 'turn them down' from metanarratives to 'little narratives.' (551)

This is, I think, a concise formulation of the pluralist logic which underlies much GR criticism: the myriad sections and various world views represented in GR are consistently read as what McHale calls "little narratives," multiple world views that can be and need to be adapted to fit various circumstances. As I argue above, this logic of pluralism could be said to inform the dominant reading of GR as a text that offers multiple readings, and in so doing, figures the freedom of the reader to engender his or her own provisional, un-transcendental narratives which can avoid the totalizing violence and hegemony of binary, scientist metanarratives.

But, again, it seems that the text of GR would problematize such a humanist/pluralist reading, precisely by implicating it in the movement of a kind of violent, hegemonic scientism. For example, Pointsman sums up the world view of the master, Pavlov, in the following way:

> 'Pavlov believed that the ideal, the end we all struggle toward in science, is the true mechanistic explanation. He was realistic enough not to expect it

> in this lifetime. Or in several lifetimes more. But his hope was for a long chain of better and better approximations.' (89)[8]

Pavlov's scientific method, it seems, follows precisely the logic of a humanist pluralism, where the totalizing ends of inquiry--the "true mechanistic explanation" that Pavlov pragmatically knows cannot be reached--are protected by what McHale calls "a strategically useful and satisfying fiction." In other words, precisely what remains unquestioned by this pluralism are the ends of inquiry, the unquestioned "useful work" that a discipline or method allows one to perform.

However, the ends of methodological or scientific inquiry often show themselves to be problematic rather than merely "useful and satisfying," and the technological world in which these ends remain unquestioned is one of the principle concerns of GR, where a kind of pragmatico-pluralist humanism shows itself as the technological world view par excellence--a world where everything becomes available for use, to be taken up by a method and converted unproblematically to an end. As Ihab Hassan writes, quoting

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[8]Compare this quotation with the MLA's Introduction to Scholarship on the present and future of literary criticism: "Perhaps someday criticism will have become a science, equipped with scrupulous (if not infallible) rules of procedure. Perhaps someday critics will agree on most (if not all) of their principles. Everyone impatient with the current illogic and anarchy of much of the field would welcome that day" (92).

William James, the world of end-oriented thinking is the world of pluralist/pragmatist thinking, which "looks away from '<u>first things, principles, categories, supposed necessities</u>,' and looks toward '<u>last things, fruits, consequences, facts</u>,' and like a corridor in the great mansion of philosophy, it opens on many rooms" ("Making Sense" 453). In Hassan's words, pluralist thinking helps one breathe the fresh air of "many rooms" within "the great mansion of philosophy"--it opens thinking to the fresh air of many potential usages and many points of view, and allows this fresh air to invigorate the closed, stale air of the house of being; pragmatist thinking escapes totalization through its emphasis on multiple, provisional ends rather than on the inevitably metaphysical and unitary notion of grounds. However, this naming of ends as simply provisional or pragmatic in pluralist discourse hardly seems to shake or open up metaphysical thinking, as Hassan--and many other pluralists--seems to think it inexorably does.[9] The shift of emphasis from grounds to ends is <u>precisely</u> the movement of a technological, representational metaphysics--a metaphysics we see at work throughout <u>GR</u>, in the myriad forces that dog Slothrop, in the techno-representational world "where only destinations are important, [where]

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[9]See, for example, Hassan's reading of Rorty: "Pragmatism brackets Truth (capitalized), circumvents Metaphysics and Epistemology; it finds no universal 'ground' for discourse" ("Making Sense" 453).

attention is to long-term statistics, not to individuals: and where the House always does, of course, keep turning a profit" (209).

It is this profit, this end product, this work, that a technological world view protects most greedily--and it is also this end product that a pluralist humanism cannot live without. The economy of such a world view dictates that ends must be determinable, that there be no reserve or excess, that inquiry proceed, as Laslo Jamf's work does, "logically, dialectically" (250). In fact, it is the dialectical thinking which pluralism protects--through a common obsession with ends and complete expenditure--that carries most clearly this technological world view.[10] For example, note the way in which dialectics and the expenditure (and/or profit) of ends are related in the following passage, where Richard Rorty muses on what happens when the "the pragmatist pulls out his bag of tried-and-true dialectical gambits":

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[10]The rise of technology is, perhaps, the concern of contemporary thought, for thinkers as disparate as Heidegger, Adorno, Foucault and Bataille; Rebecca Comay nicely sums up the notion of technologization: "the progress of enlightenment brings new and seemingly irreversible forms of domination: the reification of experience and the introduction of the abstract measure of utility; the reduction of qualitative difference to the quantifiable identities of the market; the increasing centrality of productive labor as the determinant of thought and action; the expulsion of the mundane sacred and its replacement by an otherworldly deity; and, last but not least, the (Newtonian) determination of time as an inert continuum of exchangeable now-points" (69).

> He proceeds to argue that there is no pragmatic difference...between 'it works because it's true' and 'it's true because it works'.... [The pragmatist] does not want to discuss the necessary and sufficient conditions for a sentence being true, but precisely whether the practice which hopes to find a philosophical way of isolating the essence of truth has, in fact, paid off. (Consequences xxix).

For Rorty, it is precisely the pragmatist's "dialectical gambit" which has "paid off": in the metaphysican's game, Rorty offers the pawn of grounds in order to gain the favored strategic position of ends. For Rorty, "truth" is a game for patsies insofar as it ignores the real business of thought: the pay-off of work, of use, of return--the dialectical pay-off that is the cornerstone of a well-functioning pragmatico-technological world view.

Strangely enough, this pragmatico-technological world view in GR is most often analyzed by critics not in terms of its offering multiple pragmatic freedoms for individual decision, but in terms of the marriage of multi-national corporations and government bureaucracies, wherein IG Farben's death-dealing arrangements with the Nazis come to prefigure the post-war order of multi-national capitalism.[11] (We should note here that this seems rather

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[11]See, for example, Mazurek, who argues that GR "describes the emergence of the permanent war economies of the United States and the USSR from the ashes of World War

baffling, precisely because of the dependence of these readings on the premises of a humanist, pragmatic pluralism --a pluralism which would want to read individual freedom rather than institutional repression in its world view.) A Farben executive explains their corporate version of folk history and the future of multi-national capitalism to Nazi financiers:

> 'The persistence, then, of structures favoring death. Death converted into more death. Perfecting its reign, just and the buried coal grows denser, and overlaid with more strata--epoch on top of epoch, city on top of ruined city. This is the sign of Death the impersonator.
>
> 'These signs are real. They are also symptoms of a process. The process follows the same form, the same structure. To apprehend it you will follow the signs. All talk of cause and effect is secular history, and secular history is a diversionary tactic. Useful to you, gentlemen, but no longer to us here. If you want to know the truth--I know I presume--you must look into the technology of these matters.' (167)

Throughout GR, this emphasis on technologies of death--especially the V-2 Rocket, and the nuclear rocket which it (pre)figures--is perhaps the ultimate marriage of

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II, a world in which Lt. Slothrop, the middle-class everyman, is literally manipulated from cradle to grave by the multinational I.G. Farben" (156).

dialectical thinking and killing, of end-oriented research and capitalism, of technology and "structures favoring death." Note the importance of research to Farben's corporate world view, and their interest in dialectical thinking--in the "process" or "the technology" by which they hope to gain and maintain control. And it is this emphasis in GR that poses a very difficult question to claims for humanist freedom made by the pluralists: how can this emphasis on ends and use not be a concomitant emphasis manipulation and violence? Again, I cite Rorty:

> from a full-fledged pragmatist point of view, there is no interesting difference between tables and texts, between protons and poems. To a pragmatist, these are all just permanent possibilities for use, and thus for redescription, reinterpretation, manipulation. (153)

Because it effaces differences among objects--or, better, because it treats everything as a potential object--this "full-fledged pragmatist point of view" shows itself to be in league with a manipulative, technological world view; such a pluralist pragmatism, it seems, promotes the dialectical, end-oriented thinking which, in large part, allows and promotes the discovery of World War II's "structures favoring death."

However, this relationship between dialectical thinking and death moves not only at the empirical level of invention, but indeed at the structural level that our

Farben executive points us to. Death can be seen as that which fuels dialectical thinking, that which allows the very movement of progress and history--as the Farben executive puts it, "epoch on top of epoch, city on top of ruined city." In fact, as Hegel argues, dialectical thinking cannot perform any useful work until it confronts and masters death--the dialectic moves forward only when it appropriates the negative moment of death, what Hegel calls "the tremendous power of the negative; it is the energy of thought, of the pure 'I.'" (19). Hegel continues:

> Death, if this is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength.... But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself.... Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. (19)

Hegel here makes it clear that dialectical thinking needs the negativity of death--the negativity of "non-actuality," of the unrealized or unrealizable;[12] in fact, the negative

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[12]The following discussion of death and negativity owes a tremendous debt to Paul Davies' reading of Blanchot and Hegel.

moment of the dialectic is the only "productive" moment of thought--the necessary "dismemberment" of totality or surety wherein truth "finds itself."[13] If thought were to "shrink from death," it would never experience this dismemberment, and hence never experience the higher unity that the dialectic allows--the "magical power which converts it [death, the negative] into being." In short, dialectical thought--which uncovers the technologies necessary to build death-favoring apparatuses--is itself a "structure favoring death," death in the form of the productive negativity necessary to dialectical sublation. The dialectic confronts death--the absolutely other, that which dismembers life--and masters it, thereby allowing thought to master anything else in its path. And it is this structure (or, as Derrida writes, this stricture) of dialectical thinking that needs to be accounted for in pragmatic-pluralist criticism, which rather naively argues that a unitary metaphysics cannot deal with any kind of uncertainty, dismemberment or plurality--that uncertainty or freedom can simply be opposed to or

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[13]In fact, death is fundamental to Hegelian "Man," as Bataille points out: "If the animal which constitutes man's natural being did not die, and--what is more--if death did not dwell within him as the source of his anguish...there would be no man or liberty, no history of individual. In other words, if he revels in what nonetheless frightens him, if he is the being, identical with himself, who risks (identical) being itself, then man is truly a Man: he separates himself from the animal" ("Hegel" 12).

"defeat" a totalitarian certainty.[14] For Hegel, giving up such certainty is precisely the productive moment of thought: "Thoughts become fluid...when the pure certainty of the self abstracts from itself--not by leaving itself out, or setting itself aside, but by giving up the fixity of its self-positing" (20, my emphasis). In GR, then, it seems one is compelled to analyze not only the death-dealing products of a certain technological world-view, but the structure of the world view itself--the structure of the structures favoring death, their insidious movement(s)--and to ask if these movements and structures can be disrupted in any way.

While the intervention of a thematizing or interpretive moment is necessary and inescapable in this inquiry, there must be an other moment in the postmodern economy of meaning if a pluralist economy of ends is to be disrupted. As Derrida writes,

> The other relationship to competitive plurality would not be strictly and rightly through and through interpretive, even if it includes an interpretive moment. Without excluding the first interpretation, above all without opposing it, [this other relationship] would deal with the multiplicity which

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[14]See, for example, Slade's "Escaping Rationalization" and Leverenz's "On Trying to Read GR," both of which center on the reason/unreason opposition--with unreason as the eventual winner--as the key to reading GR.

> cannot be reduced to the order [of competitive plurality], be it a war order or not. It would deal with this multiplicity as a law of the field, a clause of nonclosure which would not only never allow itself to be ordered and inscribed, situated in the general Kampfplatz, but would also make possible and inevitable synecdochic and metonymic competitions: not as their normal condition of possibility, their ratio essendi or ratio cognoscendi, but as a means of disseminal alterity or alteration, which would make impossible the pure identity, the pure identification of what it simultaneously makes possible. ("Some Statements" 72)

A "reading" of GR must be accompanied by an other reading, a second or double reading which "would deal with... multiplicity as a law of the field," as a structural necessity rather than a pragmatic consequence, as a ground which must be attended to rather than an end which must be fought for. For all its discussion of multiplicity, a pluralist economy remains an economy of opposition because it does not consider the structure of the field or network in which truth arises--its conception of multiplicity consists rather of (re)evaluating competing claims among opposing truths. A double reading necessarily begins in such an economy of interpretation, opposition, thematization, but it moves from there to examine the ground of that economy itself, but not as a foundation which could

assure the ends of inquiry--"not as their normal condition of possibility, ...but as a means of disseminal alterity or alteration, which would make impossible the pure identity, the pure identification of what it simultaneously makes possible." The structure of the field--what I have been calling the "postmodern" field--both makes thematization possible and makes it impossible for that thematization to cover or master the entire field, both makes relation possible and interrupts determinate relation through a disseminal otherness or alteration within the constituting space of that relation. The discipline of literary criticism, as I have likewise argued, on the whole concerns itself solely with this first reading or economy. However, it is toward this other field or economy in GR which we now turn--though, of course, we never merely escape an economy of reading or interpretation; it is, rather, a matter of doubling this economy and disrupting it: altering the space of this economy, opening it to its other.

The Structure of the "structures favoring death": Death and Dialectics

One of the most compelling "plot lines" in GR revolves around the Herero, the African tribe subjugated by the colonial Germans and subsequently turned into death-worshippers, into a people favoring death. It should be noted, however, that when the Germans went to Africa to

build colonies and subjugate the Herero, the logic behind this movement was precisely a dialectical one--where the other is appropriated as a version of the same, to be studied, analyzed, used.[15] As GR puts it, "Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death" (722). This link between "Analysis and Death" explains Tchitcherine's (and, one imagines, his Schwartzkammando brother Enzian's) interest in dialectics:

> Not till recently did he come to look for comfort in the dialectical ballet of force, counterforce, collision, new order--not till the War came and Death appeared across the ring [....] only then did he turn to a Theory of History--of all pathetic cold comforts--to try to make sense of it. (704)

When death appears and comes to thought--as the absolutely other, as that which cannot be experienced, thematized, understood--thought must in turn find a way to master that death, to find some way to make it productive, or at least to obviate its potentially interruptive or dissembling effects. Thought will "try to make sense of" death through the "comfort" afforded by "the dialectical ballet of force,

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[15]Cf. Hegel, where otherness is thought as "a difference which is no difference, or only a difference of what is self-same, and its essence is unity" (99). See also Pynchon's 1969 letter to Thomas Hirsh, printed as an appendix to Seed: "I don't like to use the word but I think what went on back in Südwest is archtypical of every clash between west and non-west, clashes that are still going on right now in South East Asia" (242).

counterforce, collision, new order." But, insofar as death cannot be negated, used, understood, or even really chosen, it has the potential to cripple dialectical thought. For example, in a famous scene in GR, Tchitcherine and Wimpe discuss mystification and Marxist dialectics; Wimpe argues, in an eminently quotable passage: "'Marxist dialectics? That's not an opiate, eh? [....] Die to help History grow to its predestined shape'" (701). Dialectics, here the Marxian variety (which, of course, carries a well-known debt to the Hegelian),[16] makes of death a productive moment within the narrative of history--substitutes the narrative of History for the narrative of God, and does so with the fuel supplied by the negative moment of the dialectic.

But here a question remains: is death really so easily sublated, so easily mastered by a dialectic? Is death a simple, sublatable negativity? As Tchitcherine stumbles through the drug-induced argument with Wimpe, he becomes increasingly less sure; he goes on concerning death: "'You don't know. Not till you're there, Wimpe. You can't say.' 'That doesn't sound very dialectical,' [Wimpe replies]. 'I don't know what it is'" (701). Indeed, death is not very

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[16]See Marx's Introduction to the second edition of Capital: "The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it [dialectic] is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell" (25).

dialectical: as Tchitcherine points out, one never "knows" about death until one "is there"; however, when one "is there," one is no longer in a position to "know" anything at all--one is dead, drawn out of the network of possible relations which constitutes the world of knowledge. In fact, death--insofar as it does not respond to a rational analysis, will not answer the question "what is it?"--stands in a cripplingly neutral non-relation to thought: the inability to thematize death comes not from its potential richness or the plurality of relations that a being can have toward or with it, but rather from the fact that death shows itself in no determinate relation whatsoever to a being.

As Hegel points out, there must be a double meaning to the negative if there is to be sublation and mastery: the negative [death] must first dissemble or rend totality, and then enter into a determinate relation with this fragmentation, in the process saving it from the status of a mere fragment. In other words, for the negative to be productive (indeed, for there to be production at all), the dialectic must grasp terms within a relation; it is the relation which assures the subject that it can appropriate anything. As Hegel writes of this dual meaning, "Consciousness distinguishes something from itself to which, precisely, it relates" (in Hyppolite 23-4). But, again, as Wimpe and Tchitcherine's conversation points out, the subject cannot have a determinate relation with death--

insofar as death "is" the disruption or stoppage of life, the absence of all relationality. This is precisely why death has to be mastered by dialectical thought; it must be brought into a (productive) relation with life if there is to be any "progress," and this is precisely the brilliance of the dialectic: it acknowledges the potentially dissembling effect of something other than thought (other than life and reason) but goes on to master that other (that fracturing irrationality) in an ever-stronger and more rational unity. This other-than-thought is trapped in a productive relation with thought--becomes other-to-thought, thought's opposite, dialectically contained within thought as thought's other--and can thereby be taken up in a philosophical relation and used towards the ends of thought. Institutions like the White Visitation, then, strive to produce "rationalized forms of death--death in the service of the one species cursed with the knowledge that it will die" (230); in short, they produce technologies which reassure comfort in the face of death--if in no other way than through the knowledge that humans can (re)produce death, control its randomness, make death's negativity productive, put it at the service of a cause or a useful end, in a determinate relation with life.

But perhaps there remains an other death, a death radically other to death as productive negativity--a death which stands in no determinate (and therefore no enabling)

relation to technological thought. As Rilke, certainly an important presence in GR,[17] writes, perhaps the problem becomes finding that which "permit[s] the reading of the word death without negation; like the moon, life surely has a side turned away from us which is not its opposite" (Letters 316, second emphasis mine). Heidegger glosses Rilke's strange formulation:

> Within the widest orbit of the sphere of beings there are regions and places which, being averted from us, seem to be something negative, but are nothing of the kind if we think of all things as being within the widest orbit of beings.... The self-assertion of technological objectification is the constant negation of death. By this negation, death becomes something negative. ("What?" 125)

Perhaps Heidegger's gloss here is stranger than Rilke's formulation, but both ask a similar question: is there something which stands outside of the seemingly totalizing relation(s) of use, something which cannot simply be taken up by technological, dialectical thinking--something which is not simply "opposite"? Technological thinking translates all things into a determinate, negative relation and thereby

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[17]For a concise discussion of the secondary material on GR and Rilke, see Hohmann's "Pynchon and Rilke: A Survey of Criticism" in his Thomas Pynchon's GR (271-82). Stark, for example, writes that "[i]nformation about Rilke is indispensable for a full understanding" of GR (in Hohmann 271).

masters them dialectically--brings them into a relation where their truth can be known. In GR, for example, the Herero myth of death and the hidden side of the moon is tainted by precisely this technological relation:

> It began in mythical times, when the sly hare who nests in the Moon brought death among men, instead of the moon's true message. The true message has never come. Perhaps the rocket is made to take us there someday, and then the Moon will tell us its truth at last. (322)

Because the Herero have been "Europeanized in language and thought" (318), they are no longer able to think that perhaps the "moon's true message," as Rilke suggests, is that not everything exists to be appropriated by a technological world view, that (like death and the other side of the moon) not everything exists in some determinate relation to technological thought. Likewise, the Herero stood in no determinate relation to Europe until its technological order of analysis and death was reined upon them--an order that tricked them into believing there was a determinate "truth" to the moon and to death, and enslaved them to the project of the rocket in the service of this deadly truth.

All of this is not, of course, to argue that death is a wonderful thing--a positive rather than a negative; rather, it is to argue that death resists characterization, resists being opposed in any positive/negative way, resists being

placed in any determinate relation at all. The fact that one hears (and Blicero and the Schwartzkammando read) a death-worshipping affirmation of dying in Rilke precisely makes this point: we have not learned to hear death (nor anything else, for that matter) as other than simply negative or positive--we have not learned to think things, in short, as <u>other</u>, as standing in no determinate relation at all to humanity's technological world view. As Rilke writes, we have yet to think the "open":

> You must understand the concept of the "open"...in such a way that the animal's degree of consciousness sets it into the world without the animal's placing the world over against itself at every moment (as we do); the animal is <u>in</u> the world; we stand <u>before it</u> by virtue of that peculiar turn and intensification which our consciousness has taken.... By the open, therefore, I do not mean sky, air, and space; <u>they</u> too are "object".... (in Heidegger, "What?" 108).

This "open" that Rilke speaks of stands in no relation to the circumspective consciousness of appropriating, technological subjectivity--it cannot be object for a subject, and hence cannot be thematized in terms of the relationality that pluralism posits as an alternative to a binary world view. Rather, Rilke's "open" is the very opening of relationality itself--with which there can be no determinate relation. Everything in the technological world

has become "object" to or for totalizing "subject," and must be drawn out from that relation, allowed to resonate in what Rilke calls the "open." This would seem to require, then, some notion of de-subjectification, impersonality: the determinate self--which experiences the world in relational terms, in terms of use, of short term goals--must be scattered, must be drawn out of the determinate relations of dialectical thinking.

And this is precisely Slothrop's fate in GR. Slothrop's self--a self tracked, charted, and probed endlessly throughout GR--is consistently compared to an albatross in section 4, until it finally becomes "scattered": "he has become one plucked albatross. Plucked, hell--stripped. Scattered all over the Zone. It's doubtful if he can ever be 'found' again, in the conventional sense of 'positively identified and detained'" (712). Slothrop's scattering is often treated in Pynchon criticism as a negative or lamentable situation. Edward Mendelson, for example, argues that Mexico ends up as the novel's hero,[18] while Slothrop, in his scattering, suffers a terrible fate; while Mexico survives to form the Counterforce, "Slothrop will lose all real and potential relation to any world, whether of language or of act" (191). Perhaps, though, there is an other way to read Slothrop's

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[18]For Mendelson, Mexico represents the "affirmative and true aspects" of GR, the "book's moments of hope and love" (186).

scattering in GR--a way to read his scattering as other than involving a lack of wholeness or possibility. Perhaps, GR suggests, the self is an albatross, one of "their" agents: "The man has a branch office in each of our brains, his corporate emblem is a white albatross, each local rep has a cover known as the Ego" (712-13); and Slothrop, even (perhaps especially) in drawing out of "their" world of determinate relations, remains involved in a power struggle, a power struggle not thematizable as a simple opposition--a "Counterforce"--but rather a struggle against a more insidious kind of power. Perhaps Slothrop carries on the kind of struggle Foucault talks about in his late work, a struggle which sets out

> to attack not so much "such or such" an institution of power, or group, or elite, or class, but rather a technique, a form of power. This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.

("Subject" 212)

Slothrop's determinate relation to forces throughout this book--his individuality, his proper name--is precisely what allows him to be "'positively identified and detained,'" allows him to be marked by "a form of power which makes individuals subjects." His proper name, however, shifts throughout the book only to disburse in his scattering, in what could perhaps be called his final heroic action--if it were properly either "heroic," an "action," or even his final action in the logic of GR.[19]

Language here becomes difficult, because it too depends on the categories (cause and effect, subjective intention and objective act) that Slothrop's scattering disrupts. It is not that Slothrop exactly causes this disruption through

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[19]It seems to be taken for granted in much GR criticism that Slothrop's "scattering" is tantamount to a disappearance into another realm--into a kind of transfiguration or rewriting of the Orpheus myth. The usually supremely authoritative Weisenburger, for example, writes that those in the counterforce "organize around [Slothrop's] memory" (Companion 263), which suggests Slothrop "dies" in some sort of traditional way at this point in the novel. This, however, doesn't pan out in the (admittedly odd and unreliable) logic of GR itself, though. On page 381, which Weisenburger dates mid-July, 1945 (at the Berlin White House), Slothrop overhears a conversation among some reporters concerning the 1946 Miss Rhinegold beauty pageant, though we're told it "will be months before he runs into a beer advertisement featuring the six beauties" (381). When he does run into the advertisement (and finds himself rooting for a Dutch woman who reminds him of Katje), it will be after his early September "scattering"; likewise, we are told that Slothrop may have played harmonica on an album by "the Fool," put out sometime after the Stones were famous (742). Slothrop does not, it seems then, "simply" disappear as a mythic hero or Jesus figure; he hasn't transcended, but rather refuses to be tracked, identified.

an intentional subjective action; as Slothrop himself says, questioned about his ontological status by the deceased Tantivy in a dream, "'I didn't do anything. There was a change'" (552).[20] Rather, perhaps we should say Slothrop brings about or calls for(th) a certain disruption: Slothrop's scattering disrupts a kind of subjectivity which is part and parcel of the contemporary war state, of the modern world of the subject and the state which depends on identity, property, statistics, the individual. Slothrop's scattered state disrupts the world view of the Nazis, who he notices are consistently "purifying and perfecting their Fascist ideal of Action, Action, Action, once his own shining reason for being. No more. No more" (266). Perhaps in posing a question to the "Fascist ideal of Action, Action, Action," Slothrop wages his own war, but a war not waged in the name of "liberation" or action. Perhaps Slothrop's agenda is not "liberation" or his "self" at all; perhaps, as Foucault writes,

> the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We

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[20]Also, as the text informs us, this way toward scattering has been a long time coming and has not exactly been Slothrop's choice: "Slothrop, as noted, at least as early as the Anubis era, has begun to thin, to scatter" (509).

> have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries. ("Subject" 216)

So Slothrop, when he scatters/is scattered, may indeed "lose all real and potential relation to <u>any</u> world," but he also opens up a gap--a resistance--in a world which thinks only in terms of "real" and "potential." Slothrop opens a space within the terms of dialectics, where an actual world is consistently opposed to a coming world, where the only relation among things is one of opposition, negation, sublation--in short, where the only relation is a relation of control.

As I argue in Chapter 3, to grant a dialectical world view is to lose to the status quo in a fixed game, the game of the negative. To disrupt this world, it must not only be negated, opposed, but also contested, its grounds shaken. An "absolute" gap of otherness must be opened up within the totality of the same. As Emmanuel Levinas writes,

> What is absolutely other does not only resist possession, but contests it....If the same would establish its identity by simple <u>opposition to the other</u>, it would already be part of a totality encompassing the same and the other. (<u>Totality</u> 38)

So Slothrop's scattering, while it can be thematized as either active or passive (positive or negative), is properly neither, precisely because his scattering brings the rupture

of the proper, the dependability of the sameness of the same. In short, Slothrop's scattering--in drawing him out of the determinate relations of the technological world--opens upon an otherness that is not simply the opposite of sameness, an otherness that breaches totality rather than allowing itself to be contained within totality: in short, an otherness that is--to strain language--other to the relations of opposition. Slothrop's death as scattering approaches, in this way, Rilke's "open" or his "other" death--an end that is not properly an end at all, a continuing end that carries no relation to a totality, but rather disrupts it.[21]

And this disruption--this drawing language itself out of work, out of a determinate relation with traditional system(atic)s of meaning--is perhaps the postmodern "work" of GR, though it is a work which performs more than the thematizable work of the negative, and hence creates a disruption of work. The systematics of work and ends have obtained throughout the history of Western thinking, a history that Levinas thematizes in terms of war: "The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy" (Totality 21). This, of course, raises the question--a question I have emphasized throughout this dissertation--of

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[21]See Blanchot's reading of Rilke and death in The Space of Literature.

the end of totality, the question of post-war, the question of postmodern. What is the post-war relation to a war economy--to the language and concepts of the war, of totality? In GR, this question first comes up as Slothrop escapes the V-2, in liberated France on his furlough at the Casino Hermann Goering:

> The manager of the Casino Hermann Goering, one César Flebótomo, brought in a whole chorus-line soon as the liberators arrived, though he hasn't found time to change the place's occupation name. Nobody seems to mind it up there, a pleasant mosaic of tiny and perfect seashells, thousands of them set in plaster, purple, pink, and brown, replacing a huge section of roof (the old tiles still lie in a heap beside the Casino), put up two years ago as recreational therapy by a Messerschmitt squadron on furlough, in German typeface expansive enough to be seen from the air, which is what they had in mind. The sun now is still too low to touch the words into any more than some bare separation from their ground, so that they hang suppressed, no relation any more to the men, the pain in their hands, the blisters that grew black under the sun with infection and blood. (184-85)

Here we see worked out quite intricately the post-war relation to the "occupation name": the words "Casino Hermann Goering," once so pregnant with meaning for "a

Messerschmitt squadron on furlough," now exist in no more "than some bare separation from their ground, so that they hang suppressed, no relation any more to the men," no determinate relation anymore to the war economy of totality in which they formerly functioned. Of course, this is not to say that the pre-war name bears no connection at all to the war name--not to say that a post-ontological language has no connection to ontology--rather it is to say that the post-war names do not exist in a properly philosophical relation, a relation which grasps into a totality.[22] Rather, these words are now "separat[ed] from their ground," uprooted from their fixed place within totality--after the war, after ontology--bearing no relation anymore to the painful work of the war: unable to explain the terror and horror of that economy, but not simply outside of it either --therefore able to open up a dissembling space within it.

Post-war, Postmodern

The incommensurability of pre-war and post-war vocabularies (following Levinas, ontological and post-ontological language) is a recurring concern of GR, and is not simply, I would argue, a "thematic" or "critical" concern, insofar as such a problem concerns the very

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[22]Again, Hegel: "Each extreme is a middle term for the other extreme, a middle term by means of which it enters into a relation with itself and gathers itself up....[each term] is for-itself only through this mediation [relation]" (in Hyppolite 165n).

(im)possibility of something like a theme or critique in a postmodern context. In fact, this incommensurability is first treated in the novel's famous opening lines, the always already underway (non)place where Gravity's Rainbow begins: "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now. It is too late" (3). Note the way the non-relationality of the rocket--"there is nothing to compare it to now"--is phrased in temporal terms; the rocket's non-relational "now" is, in Marc Redfield's words, "disturbingly sandwiched between competing temporal markers ('It has happened before' and 'It is too late')" (160). The rocket certainly refers to past occurrences, but these do not seem to be up to the task of describing it "now," of capturing this event in a properly philosophical relation: something like it may have happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now, no context which can give it(s) meaning. Hence, this "nothing to compare it to now" is both a reversal--a negation, an opposition--and a displacement: the present itself--the "now" in which there could be a philosophical relation--is exploded, and along with it goes the continuity between (and the ground for) the past and future. Under the postmodern logic of the rocket, the present, like Slothrop, becomes a perpetual crossroads that stands in no determinate relation to the known past or foreseeable future--it stands in relation only to the non-relation of an indeterminate future

characterized by the unthematizable approach of death. Each segment of the novel is, in turn, akin to this "beginning" undecidable screaming; past events or future promises cannot explain the events at hand: "now," post-war, post-modern, there is nothing to compare events with in order to reveal their hidden truth in the same way that one section of the novel cannot be appealed to in order to explain or ground all the others. GR is an exterior, flat network of statements, with all its sections on the same level, so to speak--with no secret message hidden below their surface. It has the structure of apocalypse without revelation--things happen but episodes are not thematizable in any determinate way.

This non-relationality in or of the text can be discussed in other ways, and is "at work" in any number of GR's other "controlling metaphors." In fact, the very title of the book poses a question to the sublation of dialectical relations. When two nouns are placed together, one would expect an attempt at sublation; with Gravity's Rainbow, then, one would expect an attempt to think Newton's explanation of the rainbow together with the imaginative resonances of the rainbow for the poet, to bring the two to some synthesis.[23] However, as the possessive of the title suggests, the rainbow--even in its long symbolic history in

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[23]For just such a discussion, see Abrams, "Newton's Rainbow and the Poet's" (303-12).

poetic or imaginative writing--always already belongs to a kind of scientific discourse, insofar as even poetics is a sub-genre of the discourse of truth, of philosophy. So the question posed even in the title of GR is not how to think the technological (gravity) in relation to the poetic (rainbow), but how to think the poetic in such a way as it is not simply a subset of a determining technologized philosophical discourse: however, this project becomes not the romantic project (an attempt to recuperate the primacy of the imaginative rainbow over the technological determinacy of gravity), but rather the postmodern project of drawing the rainbow out of relation to the determining, technological world of gravity--of attending to its opacity rather than attempting to render it transparent.

And this project likewise has resonances for the institutional apparatuses of literary criticism--a discourse which attempts to gain a kind of scientistic or technological mastery over its object, even if this mastery is presented as a pluralism. Underscoring the link between pluralism and technological thinking, Weisenburger makes much of GR's two mentions of Gödel's theorem in his Companion; he reads Gödel as yet another marker of pluralist hope:

> In GR, Gödel's incompleteness theorem is a hopeful sign.... [T]he incompleteness theorem establishes that formal closure, completeness, and internal consistency

> may all be pipe dreams. As such, it makes a telling background to Pynchon's representations of closed versus open fields, of being "shut in by words" as opposed to breaking free by means of them. (145)

This is, by now, familiar ground: Gödel's theorem is marshalled here by Weisenburger to bolster the humanist freedom that GR mirrors and calls for--Gödel shows us how indeterminacy shatters determinacy and leads to freedom. There is, however, an other reading of Gödel. As Derrida writes,

> An undecidable proposition, as Gödel demonstrated in 1931, is a proposition which, given a system of axioms governing a multiplicity, is neither an analytical nor deductive consequence of those axioms, nor in contradiction with them, neither true nor false with respect to these axioms. (Dissemination 219)

Again, the difference here is that for Weisenburger, Gödel's undecidability unleashes many possible relations by debunking the priority of the unitary; for Derrida, however, Gödel's undecidability points to a radically plural non-relation--an undecidability that stands in no dialectical opposition to decidability. Even though it makes that decidability possible, this undecidability stands in no properly philosophical relation whatsoever--is "neither true nor false" with respect to the axiomatics of scientistic decision.

And GR "performs" this absence of philosophical relation--what in Chapter 2 I call an apocalypse without revelation--as well as being overtly "about" it:

> Screaming holds across the sky. When it comes, will it come in darkness, or will it bring its own light? Will the light come before or after?
>
> But it is already light. (4, Pynchon's emphasis)

With the Rocket should come some kind of revelation, a new determining order in its wake, as there should be a new determining order in the wake of the war, under the shadow of the nuclear Rocket. The text asks the common questions for us: is there something "new," a new light or an intensified darkness, that comes with the Rocket, and will this new order, this new light, come before the Rocket or in its wake? But these questions become complicated by the fact that "it is already light," that this process of change is always already underway, and it has been from what would metaphysically be called a beginning--a place prior to or outside the textual network which, if it could be found or posited, could give the text, the chain of referrals, a determinate meaning. But in GR, there is no beginning and there are no determinate ends--this is the logic that the Rocket allows us to see: that a positive origin or reference is always already withdrawing; the effects of a network are always already in play; the other is always already at work within the same. In this sense, GR is like

the diaspora of the novel's opening page: "No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into" (3, Pynchon's emphasis). It is not an attempt to isolate and study a kind of consciousness or reveal what is "behind" the postmodern world--this, we should remember, is Pointsman's and Laslo Jamf's work. Instead, it is a postmodern thinking, which Foucault characterizes as a thought that

> bursts open the other, and the outside. In this sense, the diagnosis does not establish the fact of our identity by the play of distinctions. It establishes that we are difference, that our reason is the difference of discourses, our history the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks. That difference, far from being the forgotten and recovered origin, is the dispersion that we are and make. (Archaeology 131/172-73)

So the Rocket, perhaps, does bring a new light with it--a kind of revelation: it is the light of that which has been neglected throughout the history of light, but at the same time has made that history possible: non-dialectical difference, otherness, "the dispersion that we are and make."

CHAPTER 6

POLITICS, POETICS, AND INSTITUTIONS: "LANGUAGE" POETRY AND LITERARY CRITICISM

A society which was really like a good poem, embodying the aesthetic virtues of beauty, order, economy and subordination of detail to the whole, would be a nightmare of horror for...such a society could only come into being through selective breeding, extermination of the physically and mentally unfit, absolute obedience to its Director, and a large slave class kept out of sight in cellars.

Vice versa, a poem which was really like a political democracy--examples, unfortunately, exist--would be formless, windy, banal and utterly boring.

--W.H. Auden

Academic colonization is contemporary poetry's fundamental social problem because it incorporates the politics of culture into a process that can only be determined institutionally.... Although historically self-defined within an 'anti-academic' tradition, its long-term engagement with social, aesthetic, and linguistic theory provides language poetry with both a vocabulary and potential mechanisms for posing the institutional question that, for example, the anti-theoretical college workshop tradition lacks.

--Ron Silliman

Up to this (late) point, I have for the most part deferred overtly posing the question of the political implications of the postmodern--though, of course, the topic has come up in several different guises throughout this study. In the literary critical field at large, the political questions raised by postmodern thought and

literature are certainly well commented upon.[1] Unfortunately, however, the arguments concerning the politics of postmodernism are often all-too-easily reduced to a kind of crude parody which betrays much of the complexity of the questions. Note, for example, the way Jerome McGann formulates the question concerning the "heated controversy which has developed around the idea of the postmodern--is it or is it not a reactionary social phenomenon?" ("Contemporary Poetry" 627). McGann's phrasing of the question concerning the politics of the postmodern is quite problematic, and for reasons other than its reductive either/or binary form: McGann's question presupposes, as so much of the secondary literature on the politics of postmodernism does, that the "idea of the postmodern" is somehow a unitary thing, and that this idea has some sort of monolithic consequences--reactionary or progressive--for a "society." The apotheosis of this kind of reasoning can be found in Jameson's "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate," where he presents a table of six theorists of postmodernism with a "+" or a "-"

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[1]The amount of work done on this question is, in fact, staggering. Jameson's work is, perhaps, "seminal." See, in a similarly Marxist/Frankfurt School vein, the critiques of Huyssen and Habermas--both of which react to the type of "poststructuralist" treatment found in Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition. For feminist discussions of the politics of postmodernism, see the essays collected in Nicholson. See also the essay collections edited by Ross and Arac. This, of course, only scratches the surface of a topic that is buried under scholarship.

(or both, as in the case of Lyotard) next to their names, "the plus and minus signs designating the politically progressive or reactionary functions of the positions in questions [sic]" (111). I think we must remain wary of this "either-or" approach to the complex question of postmodernism's political implications for several reasons: first, because it reduces a highly complex and contested field to a simple binary skeleton. Also, such a phrasing of the question is troubling because it takes for granted an unproblematic movement between aesthetic phenomena and political actions--or, conversely, perhaps the problem lies in the fact that this formulation so cleanly separates text and context, postmodern art and postmodern culture.

In this literary critical parlance, "postmodern culture" most often means "fragmented culture"--as I argue in Chapter 4, the one thing that various postmodernisms and postmodernists have in common is their assertion that a stable transcendental has withdrawn; and the controversies surrounding the politics of postmodernism tend to focus on whether this fragmentation or loss of center can be seen as a positive or negative thing--whether it is socially progressive or reactionary. Again, as McGann writes,

> In postmodern work we become aware of the many crises of stability and centeredness which an imperial culture like our own--attempting to hold control over so many, and so widely dispersed, human materials--inevitably

> has to deal with. The response to such a situation may be either a contestatory or an accommodational one--it may move to oppose and change such circumstances, or it may take them as given, and reflect (reflect upon) their operations. (628, my emphasis)

Again, we see a familiar but problematic either/or spelled out here. For McGann, who engages contemporary American poetics here, any (poetic) response to the conditions of a seemingly monolithic postmodern existence can be categorized as "either a contestatory or an accommodational one"; a poet produces either a work which opposes the "capitalist empire" (624), or one which merely takes it "as given" and reflects upon bourgeois experience, thereby reifying and validating it.

The problem that remains here is one which we have touched upon continually throughout this study: how does one secure a position outside the "given" structures of a language or society in a postmodern situation--a situation which is in large part defined by the absence of an outside, the absence of an uncontaminated theory which could ground a truly revolutionary practice? Likewise, couldn't it be argued that reflecting on the operations of culture--on, for example, the operations of advertising or the State Department or the university--is far from a merely "accommodating" societal response, but rather a reflection that can carry with it a necessary questioning? Lastly, it

seems that McGann conflates rhetorical or formal experimentation--the devices by which contemporary poetry makes us aware of postmodern "crises of stability and centeredness"--with politics, making a mistake that Auden warns us against in one of the epigraphs to this chapter. While Auden's (elitist) poetics and politics are not exactly to be lauded, he does warn us of the dangers of simply equating poetic structure and political structure--of assuming a simple relation (or of assuming any relation at all, for that matter) between the structure of "society" and the structure of a "good poem."[2]

It is against the backdrop of questions like these--questions about the politics of postmodern poetic form and content, about the possibility of political and syntactic disruption from irreducibly within a dominant discourse--

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[2]I have no wish to endorse Auden's conception of poetry or of politics here--his idea that all poetry involves the "aesthetic virtues of beauty, order, economy and subordination of detail to the whole" is certainly among the first casualties of both "New American" and "Language" poetics; also, his contempt for a radically democratic rhetorical poetics seems quite obviously tied to his elitist politics. However, I think it is important to keep in mind (as Auden reminds us) that anything written is necessarily structured; and, indeed, much of the literature that poses essential questions to Auden's conception of poetry is itself intricately structured--even if it is structured in such a way as to de-structure "beauty, order, and economy." The question is, in other words, always one of structure(s) --in poetry as in politics; it is not simply a matter of structure-order-totalitarianism vs. anarchy-freedom-peace.

that the current debate over "language" poetry[3] is being played out. Enough general accounts of the language poetry "movement" exist to justify making my introduction to it here brief.[4] Language poets take their name from the poetics journal L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein from 1978-81. The term language poetry has come to name a loosely affiliated group of North American poets who are engaged in a radically heterogenous questioning of contemporary poetic syntax, theory, and politics--though the radicality of their critique makes their grouping under such a homogenous label quite difficult from the outset. In fact, the name "language" poetry seems to suggest an emphasis on language, hardly something new in the history of poetics, and an emphasis which does not--on

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[3]I insist on the quotation marks around "language" here at the beginning, and will hereafter drop them. But dropping them does not involve lifting the designation "'language' poetry" to the level of the proper--a certain non-propriety of usage being the primary reason for putting words in quotation marks. Instead I wish to uphold a different economy of quotation marks here vis-à-vis my usage of the term "language" to describe language poetry. Derrida describes this kind of economy quite nicely: "It is this proper sense of propriety which, this time, is put in quotation marks and not the opposite, which has always been the case" ("Some Statements and Truisms" 77).

[4]For a general introduction to and evaluation of language poetry, see especially Silliman's Introduction to In the American Tree; see also Bartlett, McGann, Hartley's Introduction, and Perloff's review essay "The Word as Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the 80's."

the face of it--seem conducive to a "political" poetry.[5] However, as Lee Bartlett points out, the common thread among these heterogeneous poets is their interest in poststructuralist theoretical discourse about language (750); they share an interest in language as that which, in some senses, shapes experience and constructs the world, and an interest in the materiality and play of the signifier rather than in the meaning of the signified--in paratactic orders of poetic surface rather than in strictly hypotactic orders of subordination and depth. In this view, they draw connections between themselves and the radical modernist poetics of Stein, Williams, Zukofsky, Mallarmé, and even the Eliot of The Waste Land.[6]

Language poetry began as an "outsider" movement in

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[5]Indeed, as Michael Greer points out, an emphasis on "language" is perhaps not what these disparate poets have in common at all: "The name 'language poetry' is a misnomer insofar as it suggests an organic or essentialist view of language.... [I]t seems that one should argue instead that 'writing' rather than 'language' is the central term in this field of work--not poetry, politics, or theory as distinct fields of discourse, but writing as a space in which all of what were once distinct genres, forms, modes of address, may now intersect, undermine, reinforce, echo, contradict, restate, or transform one another" (351).

[6]Cf. Silliman's "Negative Solidarity": "Like other avant garde movements, 'language poetry' began by identifying its own distinctness, criticizing the naive assumptions of a speech-centered poetics. But, unlike many of its modernist ancestors, 'language poetry' also drew positive connections between itself and the work of preceding generations, most explicitly to the New American Poets of the 1950s and '60s: the projectivist or Black Mountain writers, the New York School, the San Francisco Renaissance, and even the Beats" (171).

American poetics, and it remains consistently a discourse marginal to the dominant "academic" or "workshop" poetics which informs the teaching of poetry in most MFA programs and the publishing of the prestigious poetry magazines; language poetry remains at the margins of what Charles Bernstein has called "official verse culture" (Content's Dream 246).[7] However, language poetry--as with almost any avant garde--is now moving from the margins toward the center, as it gains more attention from academic critics and as more of its "practitioners" take jobs within the university.[8] And this attention has, not surprisingly, only gained them more scorn in the eyes of fellow poets and in the pages of The American Poetry Review; language poet Ron Silliman summarizes the "conflict" over language poetry within the poetry community:

> The specific charges are the following: "language poetry" is alleged to be driven by theory; it is anti-speech and thereby anti-individual (sometimes this is

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[7]See, for example, the letter exchange between Bernstein and Marvin Bell in the September/October 1990 American Poetry Review, or David Shapiro's review in the January/February 1991 APR, in which he argues that one could plausibly map the current poetic spectrum as a political one, with "'Language' poetries as an infantile left" (37).

[8]Bernstein, for example, has recently taken a funded Chair in the Humanities--formerly held by Robert Creeley--at SUNY-Buffalo, and Barrett Watten is now on the editorial board of Representations. Other poets associated with language writing have had more long-standing associations with the academy: Bruce Andrews, for example, has long taught political science at Fordham.

> extended to anti-democratic and elitist); it participates in self-conscious collective behavior; it valorizes the ugly and the unintelligible; its leftist politics are strident and didactic. Taken together, the implicit claim is that "language poetry" is closet academic verse, seeking explicators rather than readers. ("Negative" 172)

One is immediately struck by the fact that the "charges" levelled against language poetry are strikingly similar to those levelled against theoretical discourse in general: language poetry is accused--as is, say, deconstruction--of being at the same time impenetrable or elitist in its difficulty and ultimately frivolous or meaningless; language poetry is accused of slashing and burning a speech-based poetic tradition in favor of an "unintelligible," "strident and didactic" writing process; and it is accused, like the theoretical discourse it often incorporates, of being a "collective behavior" produced solely for other insiders. As critic Eliot Weinberger writes, for many language writing is far too "jargon-entangled" (181), characterized by "specialized language, self-referentiality, and disdain for the uninitiated" (182); however, for Weinberger, all of this sound and fury signifies nothing in the end: "the 'language' poets have exploded the myth of the whole, and what seems to be left is what television calls 'bites'.... A 'language' poem in perhaps its most typical form begins,

ends, and goes nowhere" (184).

It will, of course, be difficult to assess these charges without examining an "actual language poem"--though, of course I run the converse risk here of having any poems I cite stand in as generalizing and narrow "examples" of an extremely diverse and contested field of writing. This, however, is a necessary risk; if I were to leave any analysis of specific language poems aside, this text would run the more dangerous risk of allowing the heterogeneity and specificity that language writing stresses to be obscured in generalizations. So, we must keep this in mind, even as I generalize about language poetry from the scanty and in some ways arbitrary evidence of Barrett Watten's long poem Progress, which begins:

Relax,
stand at attention, and.
Purple snake stands out on
Porcelain tiles. The idea
Is the thing. Skewed by design . . . .

One way contradictory use is to
Specify empty.
Basis, its
Cover operates under insist on,
Delineate. Stalin as a linguist . . . .

I trust replication.
Gives,
Surface. Lights string
The court reporter, distances.
That only depth is perfect . . . .

Comes to the history of words.
The thought to eradicate
In him. The poetry,
by
Making him think certain ways . . . . (1, ellipses Watten's)

The first thing we note about Progress is that it begins with a logical contradiction: the contradictory imperatives "Relax, / Stand at attention, and."[9] We note also that this opening sentence ends with "and."--another seeming paradox, insofar as the connector "and" should signal and/or promise syntactic continuation and continuity. However, an answer to the syntactically logical question "'and' what?" is immediately disrupted by the period. The sameness or continuity of meaning which should be guaranteed by the syntactic bridge of the "and" is interrupted from the very beginning of the poem: the bridge which should guarantee the very intelligibility of the line "It is one and the same." (21) is destroyed from the outset. The opening sentence ends in mid-thought, without coming to a proper sublation or synthesis of meaning, without fulfilling the dialectical promise of the connector. The continuous movement of meaning is interrupted prior to the initial sublation necessary for progress (or for the poem Progress) properly to begin.

Progress continues (or does it begin again?): "Purple snake stands out on / Porcelain tiles. The idea / Is the thing. Skewed by design . . . ." These lines seemingly

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[9]For reasons which I hope will become obvious, I cite Watten's text complete with intra-line periods, ellipses, and other punctuation. This may require some patience on the part of the reader: some of his periods will end some of my sentences, though any punctuation I add to a quotation will be cited within brackets.

engage the poetics of William Carlos Williams: "Purple snake stands out on / Porcelain tiles." seems a gentle parody of Williams' "The Red Wheel Barrow," though the question posed to Williams' poetics becomes more pressing in the sentence "The idea / Is the thing.": the emphasis here is shifted from Williams' "no ideas but in things" to an even more radical emphasis on the materiality of the poetic idea: "The idea / Is the thing." emphasizes the absence of an interior space within or behind things which could carry or protect their essence, and which poetry could make it its job to reveal. Rather, Watten's revision of Williams' dictum--and the following stanzas quoted here--emphasizes repetition and surface as a kind of radically non-revelatory "essence": "I trust replication. / Gives, / Surface." Williams' "no ideas but in things" presupposes a depth--presupposes, as does "the court reporter," "That only depth is perfect . . . ." Watten suggests here that thinking in terms of depth may actually "eradicate" poetry, eradicate a type of poetic thinking that moves along the surface play of writing.[10] "[T]he history of words" thought as depth, "distances[,]" or meaning eradicates poetry "by / Making him think certain ways . . . ." and not others; but perhaps the

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[10]See also Watten's Total Syntax, where he compares Williams' and Silliman's "insistence on the unheroic particulars [...] where the 'nonaesthetic' observed detail is the key to social insight": "in Williams [...] the inconsequential is dramatized in a single moment of truth that is also ironic, while in Silliman its use is in a much more radical, ongoing process of evaluation" (109).

idea here is written as surface (and the fragmentation thereof): "I write, as in a mirror, / This present." (4).

It should be noted, though, that in Progress this "I" which "writes" and "trust[s] replication" also places its "trust" in a lot more than replication: we find "I trust wheat . . . ." (2); "I trust the materials." (2); "I trust the thing itself . . . ." (3). It seems here that trusting replication is trusting not "in" the idea in things, but rather trusting the necessary movement of or between things, the necessity of error, of change--in short, the impossibility of static meaning: "Stasis is a pinball." (10). The "I" that "trusts" and "writes," then, is likewise drawn into this drama of non-teleological movement: "I am otherwise." (69) because "I" am always part of this "replication[,]" of this linguistic network which "Gives, / Surface." The poem, then, becomes a matter of thinking and writing this surface--"Thinking on the planes / Of a building, / but in verse." (6)--rather than thinking toward a dialectic sublation which could reveal the stable essence of the thing.

For Progress, it is not simply a matter of employing words whose "contradictory use is to / Specify empty" the category meaning. Nor does Progress give in to the urge simply to "delineate[.]" Rather, poetry like Progress attempts to think an other notion of progress--an economy which is not simply found or represented, but haltingly,

disruptively written from the ground up. Progress names its disruption as an "Aggressive neutrality." (6), a kind of writing which Bernstein characterizes as

> noninstrumental (a writing that does not carry a meaning along with it as information to take away, which would make the writing there primarily to serve up this information, a shell in itself) where language is not in gear, is idling.... Writing as stupor, writing as out-to-lunch. Writing as vacation. Writing degree zero. Idleness as antistatic (functionless, it becomes estranged). Writing as idled thinking (not just the means to a displaced end...). (Content's 83-4)

The intransitivity of writing named here seems to describe well Watten's Progress--and is, perhaps, characteristic of language poetry on the whole, much of which could be called "idled thinking (not just the means to a displaced end)." While there certainly is a displacement that language writing creates, the writing and thinking of language poetry is "not just the means to a displaced end," but rather brings forth this displacement coupled with a necessary displacement of end-oriented thinking itself--of disrupting a larger end-oriented economy of meaning.

But, even within this double economy of disruption, it is not a matter of being once and for all free of teleological meaning's economy; as Bernstein writes in the poem/talk/essay Artifice of Absorption,

> ...the designation of the visual, acoustic, & syntactic elements of a poem as "meaningless", especially insofar as this is conceptualized as positive or liberating--& this is a common habit of much current critical discussion of syntactically nonstandard poetry--is symptomatic of a desire to evade responsibility for meaning's total, & totalizing, reach; as if meaning was a husk that could be shucked off or a burden that could be bucked. Meaning is not a use value as opposed to some other kind of value, but more like valuation itself; & even to refuse value is a value & a sort of exchange. Meaning is no where bound to the orbit of purpose, intention, or utility. (8)

For Bernstein, there certainly is a "positive or liberating" moment in language writing's "syntactically / nonstandard poetry," but this liberation of alternative syntactical meanings is not "just" the "displaced end" that language writing moves toward. Rather, there is a second and simultaneous consideration for this writing, a consideration which makes it impossible to "evade responsibility for meaning's total, & / totalizing, reach"; poetry, in other words, cannot be simply liberated from an economy of meaning, "as if meaning was a husk / that could be shucked off or a burden that could be / bucked." Meaning is not just one poetic value among others, but "more like valuation

/ itself"; hence, language writing, if it wishes to pose a question to this economy, cannot simply throw off meaning, but rather must disseminate meaning--doubly disrupting it to the point where meaning becomes "no where bound / to the orbit of purpose, intention, or utility." As Bernstein writes, his notion of language poetry is "a poetry that does not assume a measure but finds it" (75), a writing that does not move toward the wholeness of a meaning, but strives to find a measure for itself, a way to account for the surface play of the poem itself, rather than solely to refer to or clarify some end or meaning "outside" of this play.

The politics of such a poetic project, however, seem unclear at best. In fact, for many commentators language poetry comes dangerously close to reproducing an "art-for-art's-sake" aesthetic, and, despite the overt political claims of the poets themselves,[11] a question is often posed to language poetry concerning the potential for a political praxis drawn from a poetics of "idleness," discontinuity or dis-functionality. For example, Marjorie Perloff, following Jackson MacLow, writes that "If language were really stripped of its referential properties...'language poetry' would be no more than a mandarin game, designed to entertain

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[11]Silliman, for example, writes quite clearly and unambiguously: "Let us undermine the bourgeoisie" ("If by 'Writing'" 168). His essay is included in the second section of The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book, in which more than 25 writers associated with language writing take up the question of Writing and Politics (119-192).

an elitist coterie" ("Word as Such" 233).[12] This equation of language poetry with an art-for-art's-sake aesthetic, however, seems to miss the essential questions posed by language writing. It seems odd, for example, that Perloff would align language poetry with something like MacLeish's famous art-for-art's-sake dictum "A poem should not mean / But be." A conception of poetry like MacLeish's--where the poem is mystifyingly wrenched out of the material networks of language and into the purity of the realm of being--is precisely the prime target of language poetics. In fact, an art-for-art's-sake aesthetic always has as its end some notion of aesthetic distance, where the artistic object is elevated above any networks of signification, placed at an unreachable distance, and then contemplated in its being. But this aesthetic distance is precisely what is collapsed in postmodern work like language poetry--the language poem exists in a network where language and syntax cannot be separated from meaning and being. The language poem cannot be purified and held at a distance precisely because no notion of disinterested aesthetic distance can continue to hold in language poetics; as I argue throughout this work,

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[12]Perloff, however, goes on to argue that this impotent elitism is not necessarily the case in language poetry because much of its syntactically non-standard work can empower or free the reader to see myriad connections between things. In the end, though, Perloff remains a bit skeptical: "the question remains whether the calling into question of 'normal' language rules...is a meaningful critique of capitalism" (233).

in a postmodern context no pure space outside the drama of signification can be secured.

This is, however, not simply to call for or validate what is called an "engaged art." As Levinas writes in a 1948 essay on Sartre's engaged art, an art-for-art's-sake aesthetic certainly "is false inasmuch as it situates art above reality and recognizes no master for it" ("Reality" 131). However, Levinas asks,

> Is to disengage oneself from the world always to go beyond, toward the region of Platonic ideas and toward the eternal which towers above the world? Cannot one speak of a disengagement on the hither side--of an interruption of time by a movement going on on the hither side of time, in its 'interstices.' ("Reality" 131)

Perhaps, as Levinas suggests here in the context of a similar argument, the interruptions of language poetry cannot be collapsed quite so easily into Perloff's hermetic "mandarin game." As Levinas suggests, there can be a disruption of meaning--a disengagement--which does not simply or necessarily elevate the work of art to the untouchable realm of being; rather, there is a disruptive engagement brought about by attending to the discontinuous space between things--by attending to the "interstices" of presence or experience rather than to the seemingly smooth continuities. Perhaps language poetry is attempting to

bring about this disengagement on what Levinas calls the "hither side of time," an interruption on this side of transcendence--a disengagement that does not try to take the work of art beyond the world into a realm of purity, but rather a disengagement which attempts to create a disruption in the smooth functioning of this world's systems of meaning and being. This disruptive disengagement, then, would be one which denies itself what Levinas calls the "pretentious and facile nobility" ("Reality" 131) that characterizes the aesthetic distance engendered by an art-for-art's-sake theory.

However, the politics of language poetry's poetics of disengagement, disruption, or discontinuity remains a sharply contested question. Perhaps the most famous academic critique of language poetry along these lines is contained in Jameson's "Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." For Jameson, language poetry is architectonic of the surface-obsessed, fragmentary, "schizophrenic" aesthetic of postmodernism--is representative of an aesthetic/cultural logic that, in its destruction of the autonomy of the subject and the continuity of history, cannot help but ruin any possibility for personal conviction or political change.[13] Jameson, in

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[13]As Jameson writes, a postmodern critique may liberate one from the bounds of subjectivity, but it also entails a "liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a present self to do the feeling" (64). Likewise, this type of critique animates many feminist and

fact, critiques a notion of postmodernism very much like the one I have been developing here; my recurring concern with the "flattening of discourse"--the absence of an outside or hors-texte, the (dis)locating of the subject within in a network of exteriority--is precisely what Jameson attacks as "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense--perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms" (60). For Jameson, Warhol's work and language poetry are prime examples of this schizophrenic depthlessness and its emphasis on the surface or signifier. While discussing Warhol's "Diamond Dust Shoes," however, Jameson inadvertently makes a case for a kind of "depth" to Warhol's work--and to postmodern "fragmentation" on the whole. He writes

> [in "Diamond Dust Shoes"] it is as though the external and coloured surface of things--debased and contaminated in advance by their assimilation to glossy advertising images--has been stripped away to reveal the deathly black-and-white substratum of the photographic negative which subtends them. (60)

It seems that Jameson here (dis)misses the fact that Warhol's emphasis on something like a "photographic

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post-colonial critiques of postmodernism, which are less interested in "feeling" than in the oppositional power which seems to require a subject position. See Christine Di Stephano's essay in Nicholson and Trinh T. Minh-ha's Woman, Native, Other.

negative"--that which allows pictorial representation to take place but is not itself representative--is precisely a kind of "depth" exploration, insofar as it is an exploration of the conditions of possibility for representation. But, as Jameson notes, for Warhol this negative subtends the image--that is, "underlie[s] as to enclose or surround" it (American Heritage Dictionary). So the subtending negative has no essential or philosophical depth-relation to the photograph; it is not simply before or below the photographic image, but rather is both before the image and contained within it, is a kind of always-already-divided ground.[14]

This emphasis on a peculiar kind of ground in Warhol's work helps bring us back to Derrida's thinking, which Gasché has written about in similar terms--in terms of the subtending, non-reflective back or "tain" of a mirror which makes reflection possible without itself being reflective. Gasché writes,

> Derrida's philosophy, rather than being a philosophy of reflection, is engaged in the systematic exploration of that dull surface without which no reflection would be possible and no specular or speculative activity would be possible, but which at the same time has no place and no part in reflection's scintillating play. (6)

Gasché here sums up in a nutshell many of the arguments I

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[14]See my discussion in Chapter 4 above.

have been making concerning postmodernism and (the end of) philosophy: the emphasis on the play of surfaces or networks in the work of Derrida, Foucault, Pynchon, or the language poets is not simply a hedonistic, irresponsible reaction to an ethos of impossibility; rather, this confrontation with surface or depthlessness is, as I have maintained throughout, necessary insofar as it is part and parcel of the systematic and historical specificity of the postmodern situation. There simply is no outside to appeal to, no space which can be protected from the play of an exterior network; hence, thinking must proceed differently, in and through the thought of difference without reduction to sameness.

Of course, the recognition of the conditions of postmodernity does not stifle but rather amplifies the question of the politics of this kind of postmodern work--and specifically the politics of language poetry. In "Postmodernism," Jameson critiques language poet Bob Perelman's poem "China," which begins:

> China
> We live on the third world from the sun. Number three.
> Nobody tells us what to do.
> The people who taught us to count were being very kind.
> It's always time to leave.
> If it rains, you either have your umbrella or you don't.

The wind blows your hat off.

The sun rises also . . . .(in Jameson 73)

"China," we should note in passing, only gets increasingly discontinuous from here, and Jameson hails this emphasis on discontinuous, paratactic series as the "fundamental aesthetic" of "so-called Language Poetry" (73). For Jameson, this paratactic emphasis on the play of signifiers in the poem means that it "turns out to have little enough to do with that referent called China" (75); he goes on to argue that the poem's refusal to engage the real historical situation of third-world China--"the third world from the sun"--robs it of any proper political significance that it might have had, leaving it instead merely as an example of late capital's "schizophrenic fragmentation" (73).[15] In Jameson's reading of "China," then, "the signifying chain... is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers"

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[15]Cf. Bernstein, who poses a question to Jameson concerning his totalization of the conditions of postmodernism and the artistic responses to it: "the 'same' artistic technique has a radically different meaning depending on when and where it is used....For example, juxtaposition of logically unconnected sentences or sentence fragments can be used to theatricalize the limitations of conventional narrative development, to suggest the impossibility of communication, to represent speech, or as part of a prosodic mosaic constituting a newly emerging (or then again, traditional but neglected) meaning formation. These uses need have nothing in common....Nor is the little-known painter who uses a Neo-Hellenic motif in his or her work necessarily doing something comparable to the architect who incorporates Greek columns into a multimillion dollar downtown office tower. But it is just this type of mishmashing that is the negative horizon of those discussions of postmodernism that attempt to describe it in unitary socioeconomic terms" ("Centering" 47).

(72); the signified is "reduced" to the level of the signifier, and we are left with the materiality of language without any hierarchical order(ing)--we are left with a world bereft, therefore, of history or praxis. In short, for Jameson language poetry's paratactic aesthetic of fragmentation cannot help but be politically reactionary insofar as it simply mimics and thereby upholds the fragmentation and apathetic end-lessness promoted by the bourgeois ideology of late capitalism.[16]

However George Hartley, in Textual Politics and the Language Poets, takes issue with Jameson's characterization of the politics of language poetry. Hartley argues that when Jameson reads Perelman's poem merely as a schizophrenic "breakdown of the signifying chain" (Jameson 72) and a reification of the logic of late capital, he misses the fact that "China" produces precisely the kind of powerful critique of bourgeois ideology that Jameson sees lacking in much postmodern art; for Hartley, Perelman's "China" is an example of language poetry's "deconstruction of the 'referential fetish'--and with it the bourgeois claims to 'natural' language" (99); language poetry performs this

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[16]Cf. Adorno's Aesthetic Theory, where he offers an interesting retort to this line of reasoning: "Those who allege that art has no longer any right to exist because it upholds the status quo do no more than promote one of the stale clichés of bourgeois ideology. The latter has always been prone to frown and demand to know 'where all this is going to end'. Art, in effect, must escape from this sort of teleology.... The idea of destination or final end is a covert form of social control" (357).

"deconstruction" through a "laying bare of the framing process" (99), through the exposure of the arbitrariness and multiplicity of any poetic order(ing). This being the case, Hartley writes,

> Ironically, Perelman and other so-called language poets can be seen to meet Jameson's call for a new political art whose 'aesthetic of cognitive mapping' in this confusing postmodern space of late capitalism may achieve 'a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing [the world space of multi-national capital], in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spacial as well as social confusion.' (52, quoting Jameson 92)

In Hartley's reading, Jameson misses the point of language poetry's "fragmentation"; Hartley argues that language poetry does precisely the needed work of ideology critique so that, in Jameson's own words, "we may again begin to grasp our positioning as...subjects," begin once again to act and struggle against the forces of late capital.[17] In fact, Hartley argues that language poetry performs this

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[17]Cf. Hartley: "It is to the ruling class's benefit that we do not recognize the socially-constructed nature of language, for if we did we might recognize that the hegemonic views of reality--such as that commodities are 'natural'--are to a certain extent arbitrary, and, therefore, open to questioning" (35).

progressive ideology critique in and through the very concepts that Jameson points to as the reactionary element in language poetry: its fragmentation of poetic form and its emphasis on the materiality of the signifier. Hartley writes,

> In their questioning of the function of reference, the self-sufficiency of the subject, and the adherence to standard syntax of the closed text, some so-called language poets have developed a poetry which functions not as ornamentation or as self expression, but as a baring of the frames of bourgeois ideology itself. (41, my emphasis)

So, in the end, for Hartley language poetry functions as a discourse which, far from simply reifying bourgeois (poetic) ideology, actually bares the ideological frame of bourgeois workshop poetics and its conception of poetry as a product or message simply to be consumed--"as ornamentation or as self expression." And in laying bare this framing process, language poetry allows the reader to see and participate in the myriad possibilities for meaning which are covered over by a unitary poetic and sociological ideology of consumption.

So, in the end, Jameson and Hartley have less a disagreement on the proper ends of a politically engaged postmodern art than they do a disagreement over whether language poetry fits the bill. For both Jameson and

Hartley, it is imperative that there be produced a postmodern art of critique, an art, in Jameson's words, "which explicitly foreground[s] the commodity fetishism of a transition to late capitalism" (60). The thematization of language poetry's project as this kind of ideology critique has, in fact, become the dominant reading of language poetry in academic literary criticism today: for McGann, language poetry's project is to reverse or oppose that "deformed and repressive form of reference called referentiality wherein language is alienated from its use-functions" (640); likewise for Marjorie Perloff, who argues that language-oriented writing helps us to see that "our words can no longer be our own but that it is in our power to represent them in new, imaginative ways" ("Can(n)ons" 654).

But, as compelling as it may be, this critical apology for language poetry remains itself problematic, insofar as these literary critical readings of language poetry seem rather unproblematically to recuperate a proper "job" or brand of commodified "work" for language poetics: namely, the work of ideology critique. This work of ideology critique, it should be noted, is in large part a job given to language poetry by criticism.[18] However, several

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[18]It should be further noted, however, that many language poets in the late 70's and early 80's were quite comfortable with a poetry of ideology critique which attempted to restore to the reader and society a linguistic use-value rather than a deformed exchange-value. This, however, has since come under scrutiny. Steve McCaffery writes, for example, "In hindsight, I can admit to certain

pressing questions remain for the standard literary critical reading of language poetry: how, for example, is the politically engaged critic or poet to account for the end product or work performed by ideology critique itself--how, in other words, can a poetics of ideology critique pose a radical question to the drama of commodification if it too produces a circumscribed use- or exchange-meaning, if it reveals a consumable end? In yet other words, one could ask whether reading language poetry as ideology critique doesn't precisely allow or force language poetry to become simply another "bourgeois" poetry of reference in which the reader comes to a consumable poetic realization or epiphany--an epiphany concerning the poetic "framing process itself, and by extension the process of ideological framing which is no longer taken for granted" (Hartley xiii). If language poetry moves in the service of the pre-determined end of ideology critique, as so many critics assert, doesn't it then participate in a rationalist project which leaves it squarely within an enlightenment bourgeois ideology of truth as unconcealment? How can the project of "laying bare" the truth behind the ideology escape the very ideological fetish which it seems that language poetry would displace: a

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naiveties in that approach. This writing was all produced before any of us had discovered Baudrillard's seminal work The Mirror of Production.... In light of the Baudrillardian 'proof' that use value is but a concealed species of exchange value, I would say now that the gestural 'offer' to a reader of an invitation to 'semantically produce' hints at an ideological contamination" (in Bartlett, 747n).

referential fetish which ignores the surface in favor of the revelation, which ignores the parataxis of material signifiers in favor of the hypotactic truth of the signified which lies behind them. Indeed, language poetry's "political" import seems to lie precisely in its refusal of a such a commodifiable "project"; as language poet P. Inman writes "Writing is inescapably political. It doesn't illustrate the bleakness of late capitalism. It can't get outside itself. It is, rather, amidst itself, made out of the social world around it" (224).

This gap between the surface of language writing and its reception or thematization by certain literary critics seems yet another indication of the drive toward determination in the discipline of literary criticism, which must cut this estranging discourse down to fit a recognizable literary category; when language poetry becomes thematized as an engaged avant garde, its politics and its styles become recognizable. Critics who laud or disparage language poetry's politics for the most part eschew the fact that, in Michael Greer's words, language poetry's "'political' claims rest not so much on the expression of a 'position' or an agenda as they do on an effort to change the way we attend to texts, 'poetic' and otherwise" (335). Language poetry, in other words, has no traditionally recognizable political "agenda" over and above its engagement with thinking, with texts. (This, however, is no

small field--as language poets on the whole recognize no essential barrier between the text and the world; as Inman writes, the poem is "made out of the societal world around it.") In fact, as Greer argues, literary criticism's disciplinary drive to circumscribe language poetry and to assign it a task ultimately diffuses the disruptiveness of the writing, diffuses the potential radicality of its rethinking the terms of the poetic and the political; he writes, "the rethinking of subjectivity and authorship [in language poetry] is ultimately overshadowed by a competing impulse [in literary criticism] to <u>situate</u> 'language poetry,' to name and define its 'place' in contemporary poetry" (336). He goes on concerning McGann, Bartlett, and Perloff:

> all these critics share an impulse to characterize language poetry as the repressed 'other' of a dominant 'workshop' poetic, theoretically sophisticated where it is naive, philosophically skeptical where it is idealistic, and politically oppositional where it is accommodating.... Language poetry is, in effect, marginalized as part of an avant-garde 'alternative' which functions merely as an 'ongoing corrective' to an equally reified 'dominant' poetic. It loses any political or aesthetic significance it may have had in its own right as this binary historical map is drawn, and it becomes merely a way of provoking or irritating

some fictional 'mainstream.' (337, 340).

Greer argues that McGann, Bartlett, and Perloff de-radicalize the disruptions created by language poetry when they name it as simply the opposite of the mainstream workshop poetics--as "an avant-garde 'alternative' which functions merely as an 'ongoing corrective' to an equally reified 'dominant' poetic." By locating language poetry as the center's opposite and opponent, a determining "binary map" is drawn and the fragmented text of language poetry suddenly becomes easily readable--the location of the work and the intention behind it having been ascertained.

Literary critics likewise domesticate language poetry, I would argue, when they make claims for language poetry's status as ideology critique; when language poetry is thematized as performing ideology critique, this determination ends up collapsing it into a familiar role--an engaged avant-garde literature--which allows its potential disruptions to become revelatory in a traditional or recognizable way. It seems that this is especially true for Jameson's and Hartley's reading of an engaged postmodernism: when Hartley argues that language poetry can actually assist in Jameson's project of cognitive mapping, he goes a long way toward domesticating language poetry as precisely the kind of anti-postmodern postmodernism that Jameson calls for throughout his essay--an art which involves "reconquest of

sense of place" (89).[19] In short, readings which prescribe such literary critical work for language poetry seem not to account for the disciplinary politics of positing recognizable labels such as "engaged avant-garde" or "ideology critique" for language poetry. Literary criticism reduces the complexity of reading language poetry into an accessible and commodifiable code or intention just as workshop poetry reduces the complexity of poetic experience to the consumability of an epiphany. As Bernstein writes about the recognizable codes and epiphanies of workshop poetics,

> Experience dutifully translated into these 'most accessible' codes loses its aura and is reduced to the digestible contents which these rules alone can generate. There is nothing difficult in the products of such activity because there is no distance to be travelled, no gap to be aware of and to bridge from reader to text: What purports to be an experience is transformed into the blank stare of the commodity--

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[19]Again, see Adorno's Aesthetic Theory, where, contra Jameson, he calls for an authentic artistic "mode of experience that is able to overcome the tendency to resort to false immediacy. Immediacy is gone forever" (311). More recently, however, Jameson's work has been becoming a bit more sympathetic to "fragmentary" postmodernism; in the recent "Postmodern Architecture," for example, he speaks approvingly of the necessity for "a new kind of sentence, a new kind of syntax, radically new words, beyond our own grammar" and likewise seems more sympathetic to a radical materiality, lauding architect Frank Gehry's "attempt to think a material thought" (147).

> there only to mirror our projections with an unseemly rapidity possible only because no experience of *other* is in it. (*Content's Dream* 59)

In its identification of language poetry as ideology critique, the question of literary criticism's determining disciplinary role again goes unasked. When language poetry's intention is thematized as the *dialectical other* of academic workshop poetry's bourgeois poetics, the unthematizable experience of "*other*" in reading it is hypostatized, is negated and sublated: the dissembling experience of "*other*" in language writing is smoothed out of the work as it is given a determining intention and a job to do, as its heterogeneous surface "is transformed into the blank stare of the commodity."

However, it is important to note that when language poetry is thematized as the dialectical other of academic workshop poetry, something of a semantic confusion is involved: "academic poetry" is itself vehemently opposed to the academy; it sees itself as the protector of the values of the individual against the increasing institutionalization of modern life. It values the "naturalist" qualities that are summed up in a speech-based, subjectivist poetics: the priority of the human voice, the priority of non-linguistic experience over abstract thought, the priority of individual freedom over institutional

constraints.[20] This being the case, however, this tradition is left in something of a compromising position--trapped within a university structure it would want to question, while quite literally compromised by its position within that structure. The obverse of "insider" dilemma, of course, is to remain "outside" the academic poetic establishment, but this likewise seems compromising, insofar as it effectively cedes authority to the status quo. The canons of poetry and the manner in which poetry is taught, read, and disseminated to the general public would remain untouched in following this "outsider" strategy; political purity would be purchased at the cost of impotence.

Weinberger, for example, defends his poetics against language poets and literary critics--both of whom, remember, he chastises for being too theoretical;[21] he writes, "Unlike critics and 'language' poets, I have no agenda and am opposed to all canon-formation" (184). Unlike critics and language poets, Weinberger here seems quite naive in his belief in a disinterested place of objectivity, an outside where he can be unproblematically opposed to and untouched by the politics of an "agenda" or a "canon." Indeed, it is

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[20]For a good--if polemical--summary and critique of workshop poetics from outside the language movement, see Dooley's "The Contemporary Workshop Aesthetic."

[21]This is, I hasten to add, <u>not</u> to suggest that Weinberger is a friend of an apolitical, workshop aesthetic; however, he does see poetry as a defender of the ideals of individualism.

precisely through their common engagement with theoretical discourse that "critics and 'language poets'" would both become suspicious of the agenda embedded in Weinberger's claim, "I have no agenda." Likewise, as Silliman notes in one of the epigraphs to this chapter, it is precisely "its long-term engagement with social, aesthetic, and linguistic theory [that] provides language poetry with both a vocabulary and potential mechanisms for posing the institutional question that, for example, the anti-theoretical college workshop tradition lacks."

That "institutional question," as I have emphasized throughout this study, is necessarily a double one: if a pure "outside" space must be found in order to pose a relevant question, it will not soon be formulated because this kind of outsider distance has disappeared in a postmodern epoch; the "purity" of the outside shows itself as an illusion. It seems, then, that the great institutional lesson learned by marginal groups over the past 25 years has been the necessity of mediating institutions--that, despite the potential problem of co-optation, the presence of traditionally oppressed or excluded groups within society's institutions is absolutely necessary, as is a simultaneous and ongoing engagement with problem of institutionality. There must be, as I argue concerning Derrida's and Foucault's thinking, a double move: first, there is the necessary and indispensable critical

move which intervenes and overturns a historical repression or exclusion--which promotes access by the excluded to traditionally insular societal and political institutions; but there must likewise be a second move--an ongoing reevaluation of the field itself--if this critical move is to avoid re-visiting the very exclusion it seeks to redress.

As Silliman argues in "Canons and Institutions," each important social movement of the twentieth century gravitates towards institutions to sustain its victories, or it dies--the pro-choice movement, for example, would likely die if there were no women serving as legislators and lobbyists; feminism would exist in name only if there were not concomitant institutional gains by women in politics and public life. As Silliman writes, "The history of movements like these is virtually unanimous on the point that all tend to gravitate over time toward mediating institutions, regardless of what their original stance toward them may have been, or else they suffer defeats and dissolve outright" (162). Generally speaking, institutions are at the forefront of visiting repression on marginal groups, which, of course, makes these groups wary of becoming institutionally involved. However, the reification of this inside/outside distinction depends on a kind of atheoretical one-way logic, wherein institutions are simply and repressively "bad" and outsider status is liberating and "good." As Silliman writes, this one-way logic of

institutional avoidance can no longer hold:

> I have suggested throughout this talk that a feature of mediating institutions is in the fact that they are inescapable. All forms of organization that attempt to bypass, deny or avoid them are, I believe, social forms of psychological denial built out of an inner need to reject internal conflict and complexity. (162)

For Silliman, the question of marginal groups and institutions cannot be sufficiently posed within an "attempt to bypass, deny, or avoid" institutions, but rather must be posed within a network of "internal conflict and complexity," within a theoretical framework that refuses to think institutions such as the academy in simple good/bad terms. As he writes, "Rather than being reducible to any reified identity, for example that of 'the enemy,' the academy is a ground, a field for contestation" (165).

This, it seems to me, summarizes the institutional resonances of many of the theoretical arguments I have been tracing throughout this work: the theoretical position that there is no pure uncontaminated space, liberation, or outside--in short, that there is no extra-text--has gone a long way toward theorizing the institutionalization of interpretation, theory, poetry, and intellectual inquiry in this postmodern era. If they have anything in common, the theoretical and literary works I discuss here engage and engender a withdrawing, postmodern conception of ground.

The unavoidable impurity of intention and meaning allows one to account for misreading or multiple readings as something other than error or plurality, as something engendered by the linguistic ground of thinking itself. As heterogeneous as this work is, all of it in some way or another posits or attempts to think an other-than-negative way to account for error, to account for our necessary status inside a domineering discourse as other than simple contamination or co-optation--in short, to account for life in a postmodern epoch.

Insofar as it confronts head on the impossibility of traditional or metaphysical notions of the theory/praxis distinction, this absence of an outside, rather than paralyzing praxis, makes praxis possible in a different way --as Bernstein writes, it allows one to "resume [activity] in a different way, from a different direction" ("Optimism" 833). How does, for example, a revolutionary explain that in seizing power, his or her movement often replicates the atrocities that made the old order untenable? For that matter, how does an intellectual movement--say, deconstruction--account for the reinscription of orthodoxy performed in its name? Generally speaking, this accounting is done in one of two ways: some conciliation to "pragmatic" concerns, a chilling subgenre of the Nuremberg defense--and a line of reasoning that one sees quite a bit in literary criticism these days; or, conversely, a

protestation that the truth of the movement had been hijacked, slandered, misread, manipulated--when, in fact, there is nothing we could any longer recognize as purity in the first place.

All of this is not to say that Democrats and Republicans, Derrida and de Man, the Klan and the NAACP are collapsed into a mishmash of the same; rather, as Bernstein suggests above, seeing that nothing is pure, there is no outside allows you to start again, in a different direction, with your eyes wide open to differences, able to account for difference in its own right, as other than a negative--other than as a falling away from the possibility of sameness. The only way postmodern "essence" can actually be hijacked or slandered is through attempts to reconstitute a philosophically proper essence, an essence which engenders positive, inexorable circumstances and leaves the question of truth and the field where truth comes about undisrupted. The "essence" of the postmodern is in its impropriety--in its withdrawal of the proper, and its acknowledgement of the ground of thinking and acting in the other of the proper. As Derrida writes, "the proper of a culture is to not be identical to itself--to have to say "me" or "us" in the difference with itself" ("L'autre cap" 11).[22] In the end, as language poet Peter Seaton writes,

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[22]I must thank Michael Naas for his translation of this passage. Also, the final quotation from Peter Seaton is found in Bernstein, Artifice (44).

("we keep coming
back and coming back . . ."
to the vision of dis-
placement at the site of
enactment, procurement,
debasement, trans-
substantiation, fulmination,
culmination . . .)

CONCLUSION:
ENDS

[T]wo propositions seem to me to have continued validity: that the strictly technical work of art has failed, and that the opposing route of arresting technique arbitrarily leads to indifferent results. While technique is the epitome of the language of art, it also liquidates that language. This is art's inescapable dilemma.

--Adorno

These few general remarks to begin with. What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? Generally speaking. There must be other shifts.

--Samuel Beckett

Even while remembering all we have said about ends, here at the end of this work perhaps a question remains: are we, despite everything, left here at the end with a version of what we began to study? Are we, after the end of an end-oriented economy, left simply with another--more pernicious--impasse? In the epigraph above, Adorno outlines this sort of impasse, the impasse of a language whose end-oriented economy of meaning as "technique" "has failed," but a language which likewise needs this economy in order that it not lead merely to "indifferent results." For Adorno, these "indifferent results" are brought about whenever one tries to pose a question to an end-oriented economy of techinque by which a work of art tries to communicate a determinate message; "indifferent results" are, then, the

inexorable upshot of taking "the opposing route of arresting technique arbitrarily," of attempting to question the functioning of meaning. According to Adorno, because of the postmodern disruption or alteration of an end-oriented economy of meaning, the language of art--indeed, discourse in general--cannot hope to lead to anything other than these indifferent results. Because art is left with nothing other than this failed language, it too must fail; as he writes, "while technique is the epitome of the language of art, it also liquidates that language." For Adorno, this double bind is "art's inescapable dilemma."

This dilemma could, of course, also be posed within the question of the theoretical or societal ends of discourse in general--that is, if Adorno does not pose it in these terms already. Insofar as determinable ends in a postmodern economy seem both necessary and impossible, the dilemma of ends <u>is</u> the dilemma of the language of art; in fact, these dilemmas are tied together by the question of language, by the inescapability of language, the necessary mediating role that language plays in society's discourses--a role which, in a frustrating turn, makes determinate ends both possible and <u>im</u>possible. Language holds out the promise of an end, while simultaneously sweeping the ends of determinate meaning away, and this would seem to leave us squarely within another impasse, as deep if not deeper than the institutional impasse with which we started.

However, throughout this work I have tried to articulate an other economy of meaning, one which does not depend on traditional notions of opposition, possibility, ends or language--and hence an economy of meaning which is not simply stifled by the closure or radical alteration of these philosophical problematics. Note that I do not write, as Adorno does, about the "failure" of philosophy, language, or thinking; as I argue concerning de Man, to talk in terms of failure is to grant the validity of a philosophical economy of ends. To talk of failure (or, for that matter, to talk of pluralism) is to remain always within reach of the end, always having to account for the non-existence of an end as the lack of an end (or the multiplicity of many ends)--in short, always having to account for difference in terms of the ultimate possibility of sameness. It has been my contention here that there is a thinking which, while not wholly or simply outside or beyond the problematics of this discourse, remains other to the discourse of opposition, lack, or plurality--other to Adorno's choice between a feeble discontinuity and an iron-fisted control.

Adorno's impasse is located at the impossible choice between two untenable opposites: the uncertain "route of arresting technique arbitrarily" and the stifling or oppressive "strictly technical work of art." Perhaps Beckett's epigraph, though, offers us an other way to think this opposition. It begins by likewise taking up Adorno's

problematic--speaking of two impossible ways to proceed: merely discontinuously ("by aporia pure and simple") or simply within the language of dialectical philosophy (by "affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later"). However, perhaps I have, throughout my text, been trying to approach a reading of the final words of Beckett's epigraph here, specifically the sentence that comes <u>after</u> the impossible (non)choice or opposition we seem to be left with--<u>after</u> the recognition of an impossible postmodern decision between a seemingly non-sensical progression and a wholly untenable and manipulative fall back into tradition. In the end, I have perhaps argued nothing other than this: at the time or space we call the postmodern, "There must be other shifts."

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