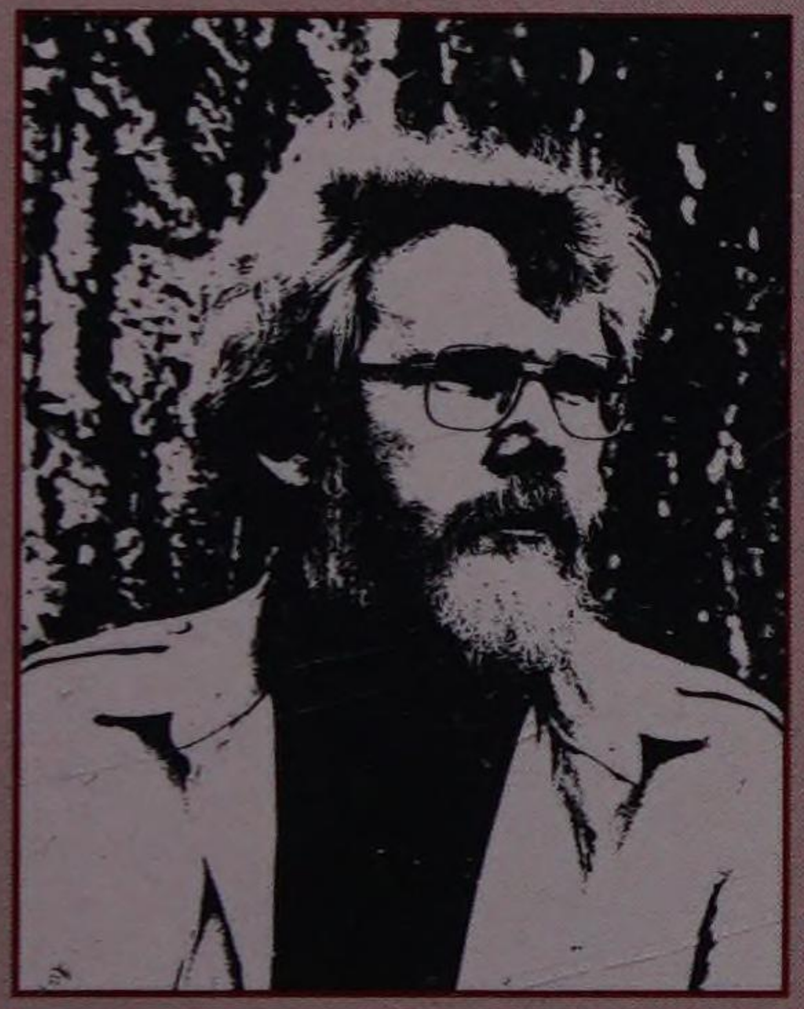
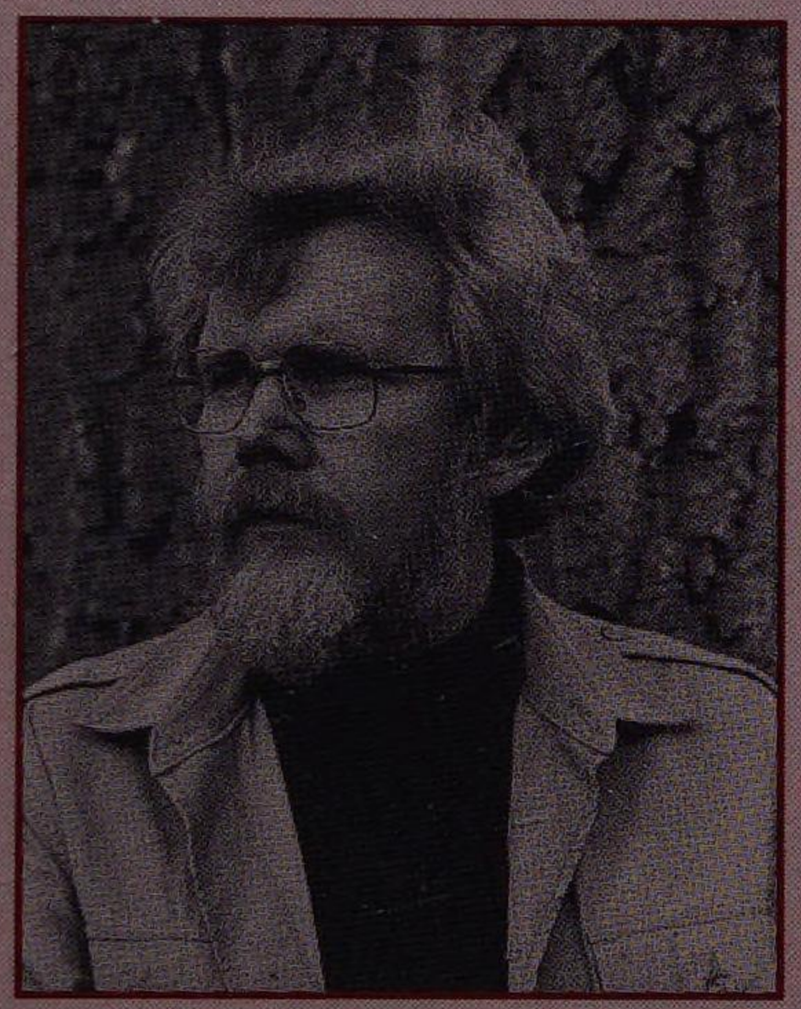
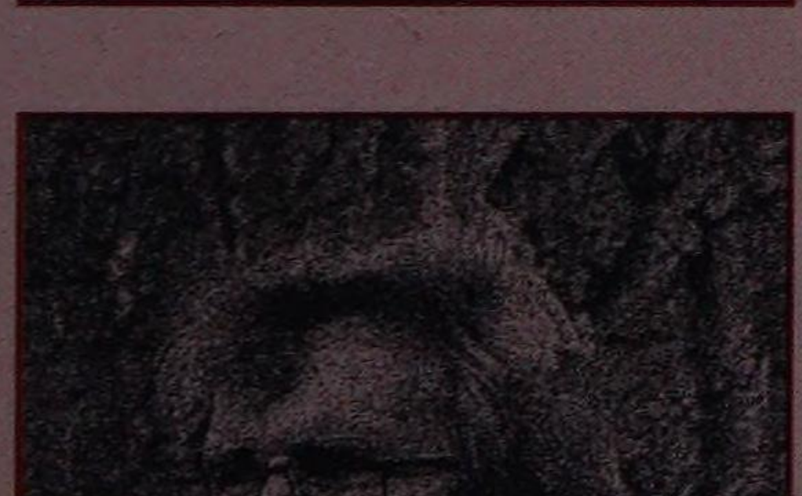
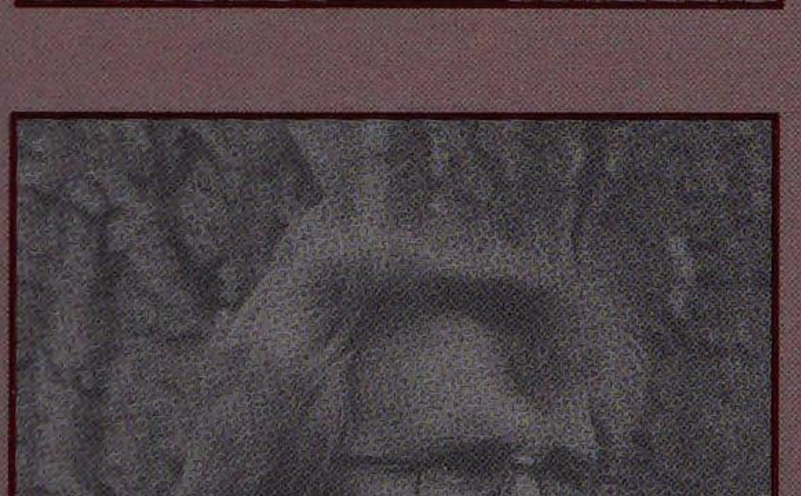
The Poetics of the Common Knowledge









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The Poetics of the Common Knowledge

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Mihai I. Spariosu, Editor

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THE POETICS OF THE COMMON KNOWLEDGE

Don Byrd

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of New York
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That is: life is absolutely simple. In any civilized society
everyone should know EVERYTHING there is to know about life
at once and always. There should never be permitted, confusion—
—William Carlos Williams

I have ever found your plain things the knottiest of all.
—Herman Melville, as Ishmael

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The present book—volume two of *The Nomad's Encyclopedia*, announced in my *The Great Dimestore Centennial* (1986)—arose from conversations with Charles Stein, almost weekly over a period of ten years, and an ongoing correspondence with Jed Rasula. I think also of sitting on Cressy Beach above Gloucester Harbor with Gerrit Lansing, who prompted me to the title of this book; of a dinner with Beth Schultz in Lawrence, Kansas, when she, Marge, and I realized that in middle-age one may begin to live with the rhythms one's body has always relentlessly declared; of a spectacular autumn afternoon in the Catskills with David Matlin and Gail Schneider, when David diagnosed the amnesia that releases Americans from their violence and Gail was doing the rabbit paintings; of George Butterick, who, when I told him that I was afraid my book was getting too long, said, "Don't worry, and write your butt off" (I will miss George's clarity of mind and advice; I wish he could have seen the end results: *in memoriam,* 1942–1988); of visits with Paul and Nancy Metcalf and with Neil and Wendy Rolnick; of Ed Sanders, who insisted, "Don't let yourself be burned-out"; of talks with Kenneth Irby, Robert Duncan (*in memoriam:* 1919–1988), Jackson Mac Low, Clark Coolidge, Madeline Gins, George Quasha, Jack Clarke (*in memoriam:* 1933–1991), Nathaniel Mackey, Bob Grenier, Christer Hennix, Robert Bowen, David Levi Strauss, Pierre Joris, Judith Johnson, Gene Garber, Michael Blitz, Jondi Keane, Derek Owens, Joe Amato, and John Winner; and of the time when Jerome and Diane Rothenberg showed up in Albany for a semester with the combination of talk and testimony that carried me through a critical juncture in the writing. Also, there was a lunch with Judith Malina, who said the task in the 1950s and 1960s had been to wake people up, but now, people are wide awake and scared to death—the problem is to give them courage. Her theater is a monument to these tasks. This insight allowed me to find my proper focus when I got lost in the

details. These friends and many others are implicated in my thought; love and the common knowledge circulate in the community. Marge and Anne Byrd, above all, are my tutors in the common and the necessary.

Although the deaths pile up and fill the previous paragraph with ugly parentheses, the private discussions continue. Of their necessity and depth, I have no question. The passage from private to public however is fraught with doubt and uncertainty. No one knows enough to write confidently of the matters for which we are responsible as agents of the community. Unfortunately, our responsibility is not relieved by our ignorance.

CHAPTER 1

The Parable of Beginning

In full imagination poetry issues
like blood on Lady Macbeth's hand,
nails of the dead making the ship
move which carries her epiphany
into the continuum at the risk of
heart's awakening to the old ways
wanting, this final mystery
once set upon yields the all from
which you were cut away, for I have
seen the star, rise and embodied,
no ghost, but the real thing ritual
murder could not produce, the war
of oneself given over as instrument
immersed now in a cowl of sound.
—John Clarke, "Beginning the Other Side"

MAKING THE WORKING SPACE

In the process of their becoming, the literal thinking, writing, and rewriting, these essays revealed a fact of composition that may have been first noticed by Pascal: "The last thing one discovers when writing a work is what one should put first." The process is endless: each rewriting yields a new first thing. In the working, each site—chapter, paragraph, even sentence—reaches toward completion only to reveal, if one attends with care, its incompletion, so it discovers a new first thing, turns back on itself, and seeks to be more inclusive, until every constituent tries to become the monad in which the whole is reflected. Language is recursive: it implicates more and more language until it rediscovers itself or some suggestion of what it had been, for, as it reaches near the critical point of recapitulation, it suffers a phase shift, enters a new dimension, and becomes itself an object of study, an open and indeterminate site rather than a tool. It opens again and again in the pursuit of its own closure, always beginning.

The perspectives through the course of the text consequently shift, sometimes rapidly. Juxtaposed sites engage with and fail

their own self-containment. The use of such a text is not to cut through the cone of the matter in order to show this or that parabolic section—there is no one parable—but to manifest the interior complexity of the cone and the numerous parables it concretely contains.

The *content* might have been entirely different. In the following essays, I pay special attention to Descartes, Hegel, and Freud. I am critical of their simplistic representationalism, their implicit doctrines of force, their submissions of the individual to generalized, abstract formalisms. I might have taken up Spinoza, Darwin, and William James, or Locke, Hume, and Whitehead, arriving at much the same place by different and, for me, more sympathetic routes. The point is not a particular historical narrative. For that matter, the content might have been completely non-narrative. The *thing* I want to reveal is neither form nor content but the conditions of manifestation as such. I am interested in beings who cause themselves, define themselves, and enclose themselves in their radical uniqueness. I am interested in how they may be understood as acting not from their theories—that is, generalities about their possible formal condition—but from their singularities. I do not mean to depreciate theory. It has it uses in describing possibilities. The acts of living however are insistently and beautifully singular. They are not general or generalizable: "One chance each time."* It is this insistence that I propose to understand, and this beauty I hope to affirm.

We have languages and bodies—macrocosm and microcosm, themselves only parables. We are too often missing the mesocosm—the dense locale of the common, that is absorbed by the exaggeration of symbolism, on the one hand, and by mere biology, on the other. I am interested not in the phenomeno*logy* of spirit which is disciplined by the dialectic of master and slave, subject and object, teacher and student, but in the *phenomena* of spirit which are common. To make a logic of phenomena, to objectify them and attend to their ratios, introduces at the outset a displacement that can never be overcome.

We have suffered from an inadequate logic—perhaps from logic as such—which reduces everything to a structure of likes and

---

*Charles Stein in conversation (about 1987).

differences without measure and a sentimental poetics, which treats measure as convention. Logic is a collection of techniques for a theater, a representational space. It accounts adequately, therefore, for closure, for endings and deaths. Logics, however, typically do not account for beginnings. "We can assume nothing and assert nothing dogmatically," Hegel writes on the first page of his *Logic;* "nor can we accept the assertions and assumptions of others. It seems as if it were impossible to make a beginning at all" (Hegel, 1975, 3). As logics are necessarily founded upon that which is unconditioned and underived, any beginning is too late. To begin logically, thus, is to make a violent symbolic gesture, to throw certain elements together, as the etymology of "symbol" suggests. Dr. Johnson's famous comment on the violent yoking of ideas in metaphysical poetry is also relevant. The world that modern discourse addresses is fashioned of symbols bound by abstract force. Western culture has compensated for its belatedness by violence, and everyone who declares a logic—psycho-logics, socio-logics, or any science that proposes to reveal the unitary logical structure of a body of knowledge—is implicated. The modern western tradition is inherently technological; it uses the machine or social machinations to compensate for its failure to get in on the first creation.

Once a logic is established, its continuation is assured by its inherent mechanism. The dialectic needs argument as the souls of the Homeric underworld need blood. One is tempted by the Nietzschean hope that it might be overwhelmed or at least contained by the aphorism, the argument that dramatizes all of its dialectic ramifications in the *adequacy* of its language. The dialectic, however, resolves only in the apocalypse. To contradict it is to continue it: such are the desperate terms of modern history.

Wilson Harris writes, "Our grasp of time tends—everyone knows—to incorporate tragic proportions of determined futures and to overlook unspectacular resources of futurity and imagination that may alter perception through and away from fixed habit, greed and monoliths of terror" (Harris, 1983, xvi). And in this connection, he speaks of "blocked muses," the muses hemmed in by the massive compulsion in rationalism to repeat and, as Freud notes, submitting to its own mechanistic designs, to have the aim to live by having the aim to die.

Freud might have said more precisely that the aim of all *abstract* life is death. Inanimate matter was never more than a medium of life: protein happened to be available for the use of the living. Life requires *some* medium, and protein is complex enough to embody its dense, complex forms. In manifesting itself in protein, however, life is subject to the laws of protein, which are deathly, mechanical, repetitive. In manifesting itself in consciousness, in language, in desire, in family, in society, in technology, it is subject to the laws of these media and their mechanisms as well. All of the *resources* of life are machines, the resources of life are death, the resources of freedom are laws. The ancient fantasy is that we can annihilate the medium—the body and its laws—and have life, *pure* life, spirit, angelic matter. We have many rituals for the annihilation of the medium—not only religion but also art and work. All of life, according to Freud, is just such a ritual.

We cannot now afford to be sentimental about our vocabulary. We hear of the end of Man or the Subject, the end of Nature, the end of Culture, the end of History, Sex, Family, Desire, Power. The announcements seem dramatic and important. Writers compete for public space by trying to discover some still more fundamental Reality that has ended. (The end of Reality too has been announced.) The theoretical excitement arises from the vague hope that living will step free at last. All of the logics of liberations, however, are machines that are efficacious because they inexorably repeat themselves; thus they recur to the ritual of liberation and "die trying."

As a matter of fact, none of these concepts are important in themselves; they are *only* concepts. Certain conceptual institutions have collapsed. Conceptuality as such, however, has not ended. The end of the usefulness of these great, organizing terms signals a staggering *increase* in available abstraction. Abstraction has freed itself from theology, which is to say, it has freed itself from this or that abstraction; now we have pure abstraction, the abstraction of abstraction. Life is manifested in various media from which it is never free. The freedom of living appears only in the density that arises in the interference patterns where living realizes itself profusely and declares its *mastery* of media. Life is no longer required to seek death to manifest itself.

Unlike logic, which must be prior to its own practice, poetics is properly *after* the fact of the poem. Charles Stein writes:

IT ISN'T A MATTER OF REPETITION:
THE THING THAT EXCITES NARRATION
HASN'T
happened yet

(Stein, 1985, 6)

The problem for the writer of poetics is the opposite of the logician's: it is always too soon. The common intuition of the whole cannot be represented by symbols; it cannot be mediated. The purest moments of beginning are silent: the world is mute. Everything is what it is; everything is clear. The continuous space in which humans act, where they not only gesture and walk but also think, talk, and write, cannot be symbolized. In it, there are no infinitesimals, no discrete breaks, no logical atoms such as the units that Wittgenstein calls "facts" or the phonologists call "phonemes"; it can be made manifest only by action. Symbols are inherently symbols of division.

The emergence of the common knowledge from the silence is always disruptive and uncertain. Now we must know, in Philip Guston's words, "Where to locate everything and where everything can exist" (Guston, 1965, 38). Things can be located *or* they can exist; located existence is difficult. Guston discovered the problem in his careful attention to the paintings of Piero della Francesca; it may be discovered in any common space. Existent things do not have simple locations. This is the problem of the common knowledge. Everything is located in and exists in space—a completely real space that is familiar as a quotidien condition of living. It cannot, however, be symbolized; we can make no direct reference to it. It must be constructed: it can be lived, but *as knowledge* it must be constructed. For this reason, a poetics, not an epistemology, is required. We can no longer abide the scaleless world in which theory and its prose disciplines dislocate us.

I could say, simply, that the following essays attempt to explain what Ezra Pound meant in the imagist manifesto by "Go in fear of abstraction" and William Carlos Williams meant by the thematic line in *Paterson,* "No ideas but in things." Probably no two statements in twentieth-century poetics, however, have been more influential and less understood. It was not understood that a statement composed exclusively of concrete nouns and action verbs may be utterly abstract. Abstraction is a matter not of diction but of organization, of movement, of rhythm. Therefore I should say that the

purpose of the following essays can be specified in the words of Charles Olson, from *The Maximus Poems,* Volume 3:

> an actual earth of value to
> construct one, from rhythm to
> image, and image is knowing, and
> knowing, Confucius says, brings one
> to the goal: nothing is possible without
> doing it.
>
> (Olson, 1983, 584)

Or the words of Louis Zukofsky in "*A*"–12:

> So goes: first, *shape*
> The creation—
> A mist from the earth,
> The whole face of the ground;
> Then rhythm—
> and breathed breath of life;
> Then *style*—
> That from the eye its function takes—
> "Taste" we say—a living soul.
> First, glyph; then syllabary,
> Then letters. Ratio after
> Eyes, tale in sound. First Dance. Then
> Voice. First, body—to be seen and to pulse
> Happening together.
>
> (Zukofsky, 1978, 126)

These passages are not equivalent: Olson favors the ear, Zukofsky the eye; both however propose an unfamiliar and difficult orientation in relation to the common world. The task is not to interpret these passages but to create the working space in which their proposals renovate the possibility of action.

Western epistemology has distinguished rigorously between emotion and thought—between thought that agitates the body, *rhythm,* and thought that does not. Distinguishing these domains and enforcing their separation have been primary tasks of education and art. The poetics of the common knowledge proposes to fill the void in the breakdown of that epistemology, that education, and that art. Now all thought agitates the body. Now all knowledge is emotional. There are no inert facts, no cold ideologies, no contemplative reliefs from acting and being acted upon; all knowledge is potentially dangerous.

In this culture, we deal with the epistemological stress, for the most part, with narcotica, literal drugs, the distractions of the media, or the mechanisms of work. These are the functions of Thanatos. The promise of amelioration is not the promise of ideological critique and reform but the promise of a better drug, a bigger shopping mall, a more entertaining satellite network, a more spectacular amusement park, a more absorbing baseball game.

The poetics of the common knowledge looks not to drug the agitated body into the passivity that imitates the inanimate but to redeem emotion. Now everyone is responsible for their feelings as they were once responsible for their beliefs.

The break of modern methodology with classical metaphysics was profound. Modernism's claim of a continuous Western tradition of logocentrism beginning with the Greeks was a desperate ploy, the acceptance of which represents an almost universal failure of scholarly nerve. Metaphysics has been for more than three centuries a sentimentality—necessary to the prevailing cultural strategy but in an important sense, which has been at least half-understood and half-accepted, phony. It has been maintained and enforced by an aesthetic tradition, often masquerading as religion. Modern humanistic culture has been an exercise in bad faith ever since its inception.

The philosophic enterprise of Jacques Derrida—and his work is a notable instance of a *kind* of undertaking that has been central to the refashioning of the humanities and social sciences during the last two decades—is poised on an implicit history of the Western intellectual adventure that underwrites this sentimentality by way of negation. At best it is an eccentric history, a Nietzschean willing of a particular Platonism which is to be identified and rooted out. Derrida's readings are breathtakingly profound and gloriously subtle. Under his scrutiny, the most unlikely texts yield extraordinary passages of philosophic thought. His essays are engaging reading. The kind of personal authority that he assumes, however, removes him from the company of the common world. His texts can be read but not shared. As readers, if we engage his texts in the terms they themselves require, we too follow an idiosyncratic trajectory of textual production. For the true poet, as Blake notes, there is no other, and Derrida is a poet of this authoritarian kind. He enters the pleasure dome where his word is final. His texts are to be

tested, as Blake's visionary poems are tested, for their depth, their beauty, and their use. Derrida's writings present vision, not knowledge. This is not to deny the importance of Derrida's thought. His nihilism is rigorous and its methods demanding. It is not, as it is sometimes suggested, a justification of an any-thing-goes-know-nothingism. When vision is mistaken for knowledge, however, the culture is in the direst danger.

To be sure, if ones test of objectivity is sufficiently rigorous, all claims of truth fail, and we inherit a tradition that has required *absolute* rigor. Knowledge of the common world has been tested by the impossibly rigorous requirements that prevail in mathematics, logic, and the physical sciences.

The question of truth, however, is prior to epistemology. Epistemology is an administrative, not a foundational, science. Truth cannot be *founded* on another truth; such a thought obviously implies an infinite regress. A truth claim can be founded only upon an agreement concerning what constitutes a legitimate or adequate proof—that is, upon an ethical consideration.

Skepticism is irrefutable and empty. *The Poetics of the Common Knowledge* maps a space in which the ethical grounds of knowledge can be considered.

THE FIX

To be certain, we are in a *fix*.

The term *fix* cannot be easily resolved: we are placed, fastened securely, stabilized and unalterable, nonvolatile, killed and kept as a specimen under glass, directed, adjusted, ascribed, allotted, set aright, made ready, prepared, focused, repaired, de-sexed, hardened, bribed, provided for, doped up. We undertake a fix in the face of a breakdown. It is a word of people who confuse their lives and their knowledge of their lives with the structures of their machines. We have taken up an abode; we are in a predicament. It is the classic premise of comedy. A fix is possibly deadly, and it is, therefore, also a premise of tragedy.

When one is in the profoundest fix, every attempt to extricate oneself from it makes it worse. It is the hair of the dog, the spike in the vein. The crooked gambler, the crooked politician, and the hit man, *fix* things. We fix our attentions, purposes, affections, or eyes—the fix locks mind to body in a self-overcoming mechanism.

We are determined, dedicated to a teleology, which we are expected to discover and maintain: almost already something else, so being the very thing we destroy ourselves—victims of our own references to genetics, evolution, history, who must constantly tamper with our own mechanisms in order to stay on course. Our enterprise is not viable.

The *OED* quotes John Donne in an example of the alchemical jargon "fixion": "There must be a fixion, a settling thereof, so that it shall not evaporate into nothing." But if it is volatility itself that we want to fix? The alchemical drama is tragicomedy. It tells of a marriage of opposites, a merging of life into death: this is the boldest formulation of the fix. It is at least one way out of the dialectical mess. Near the end of *Phenomenology,* Hegel writes: "death becomes transfigured from its immediate meaning, viz. the non-being of the *particular* individual, into the *universality* of the Spirit who dwells in His community, dies in it every day, and is daily resurrected." (Hegel, 1977, 475)

To say nothing of belief, is it even possible to *think* this thought? We can, of course, say it. The grammar is correct: *death is life*. Structurally, it is correct—that is, this is the unstructuring required by structure. In the face of actual death, it means nothing. Grammatical rectitude or even grammatical necessity is not enough. Is it a thought, or is it a grammatical condition, a logical requirement, just beyond thought?

Everything now is in question. Everything, *including this statement,* is in question. The liar's sentence ("I always lie"): if it is true, it is false; if it is false, it is true. The classic fix. Its value flickers back and forth with the speed of the mind, which hurries in an attempt to catch itself in the act of changing or slows down in an attempt to see how it works. It is not just this strange self-embracing sentence, this narcissistic grammatical aberration—and a presumably insignificant group of similar self-referential statements—however, which enters this peculiar oscillation. The language as a whole ultimately refers back to itself. Of course, it is possible to formalize important fragments of a language. Saussure, Chomsky, Montague, and many others have developed useful techniques, and, within their domains, the formalisms give statistically reliable results, but Wittgenstein writes: "All propositions are of equal value" (Wittgenstein, 1961, 145). And he realizes that "All propositions, *including this one,* are of equal value." Describing

itself as a proposition, it is no "higher"; it cannot master itself any more than it can master language as a whole. Thus, Wittgenstein ends the *Tractatus* with the declaration that all of his own propositions are nonsensical—all of his propositions, including that they are all nonsensical, are nonsensical—the *reductio ad absurdum* of the philosophic tradition.

A *fixion* is a fiction, an untruth that is true or posited as truth, a narrativization of the fix, so the liar of the paradox is given time to elaborate both the false as true and the true as false—that is, the dialectic. The production of language goes into infinite regression and self-proliferation, so the conditions that are proposed for thought turn out themselves to be unthinkable.

Since the seventeenth century, if not since the sixth century B.C., the formal structure of language has been confused with the structure of mind and world. So variable, vast, and fascinating is this medium that we have pursued it, or consumed it, as if it might be meaning in itself. The interplay of the abstract concept, on the one hand, and the concrete event, on the other, generated an overwhelming historical dynamism. For every advance in abstract thought, a renewed aesthetic commitment generated new energies and realized new possibilities. Conversely, every aesthetic breakthrough called forth and required an ever more athletic abstract mind. Now, however, the *formal* possibilities, both in art and science, have been realized. The new, nondialectical logic that appeared in the aftermath of World War II can isolate and formalize this or that aspect of the world without regard to totality. Unlike the old logics, the new requires nothing of the world it describes. Therefore, nothing can be learned about the world by studying logic or grammar. The content of the new logic is purpose and desire, not the necessary forms of mind or substance. In cybernetics and information theory, one draws distinctions in spaces that are called into existence by the distinctions themselves. The techniques of abstraction are no longer underwritten by an originating unity. We are, thus, of a time that does not find its origin in the *logos;* we are *beyond* the closure of metaphysics. "In the beginning there was information," Fred Dretske writes. "The word came later" (Dretske, 1981, vii). Granted, as the critics of the tradition of the *logos* will note, Dretske's formulation defers the problem that they take as primary, but, from the new perspective, the deferment is not critical; the new logic does not require the pursuit of the

infinite regress. The slack or difference that was fatal to metaphysics is a built-in feature of the new procedures, indeed a requirement of their practicality. Difference is precisely the quantity that cybernetics measures.

We consign our lives to a mysterious semiotic domain, which is so vast and various that it cannot be theorized or it can be theorized only piecemeal in relation to this or that particular project. The institutions in the culture, in order to preserve their systemic nature, define a universe of possibility in relation to the particular function that they serve rather than to a universal theory. The power of this new thought derives *not* from the methodological reduction of multiplicity to universal rules but from the discovery of techniques by which complex and rigorously effective structures can be generated *without* universal reference. Knowledge is now statistically reliable.

We do not know how to characterize our own time, except by the fact that it is *after* something else that was definitive: modernism or industrialism or structuralism, for example. The one positive designation that has gained some currency is "the age of information." To say the least, the mere *quantity* of information affords the term considerable usefulness: according to one prediction, "as much information will be generated and distributed between 1987 and 1990 as in all of previous human history" (Bunnell, 1987, 14). The indexing systems that proved barely adequate to organize and access printed materials begin to break down in the face of this amount of information. It might be more accurate to speak of an age clogged with information.

In one of the most important essays in literary theory of the past decade, "Local Transcendence: Cultural Criticism, Postmodernism, and the Romanticism of Detail," Alan Liu provides a devastating critique of what he calls "cultural criticism . . . in high postmodernist forms: cultural anthropology, new cultural history, New Historicism, New Pragmatism, new and/or post-Marxism, and finally that side of French theory—overlapping with post-Marxism—that may be labeled French pragmatism . . ." (Liu, 1990, 76). In a short essay, he demonstrates that the foremost strategies for generating cultural analysis produce only "a culture-*spiel* as determinedly depthless in its play with representational surfaces, facades, screens, and media of all sorts as a vinyl LP hand spun by a rap artist, that master of culture-*spiel* able to

fragment long-play metanarrative into *petits récits*" (Liu, 1990, 48). These spiels, he tells us, recycle a familiar, and tired, romanticism that *appeals* to practice but provides no practice other than the appeal to practice. He writes: "If I had to put my criticism of high postmodern cultural criticism in brief, it would come to this: 'context' is not the same as 'culture.' Context throws over the surface of culture an articulated grid, a way of speaking and thinking culture, that allows us to model the scenes of human experience with more felt significance—more reality, more practicality, more aesthetic impact—than appears anywhere but on the postmodern version of romantic 'nature': a screen" (Liu, 1990, 99).

"Culture" is now available only by way of the virtuoso performances of the expert. We are dazzled by the generation of meaning out of details so arcane that they are not even shared by a cult of initiates. The culture critic addresses the question of meaning in relation to a local pastiche that is determined by the contingency of a particular reader's reading. The hope is that, if the texture of a particular cultural swatch can be examined in enough detail, the larger pattern will be implied.

We now enter a time of utter fragmentation. In contrast to the high postmodernist cultural critics, we must see that we are radically local. We entertain the fragments of no whole. Languages are invented again and again before our eyes, and in the perpetually perishing present. They manifest themselves and remain or disappear by virtue of whatever contingencies of attention they engage. *Beyond* the birth trauma and the Oedipal dilemma, we attend daily the regeneration of a common world. The 'things' we compose—it is hard give them a more specific name—are local and carry no force beyond the locality in which their actual *uses* are their only principles.

We have thought that there is one logic and many possible worlds that satisfy it. Rather there are many logics and only one, *postlogical* world. Logics are the content, not the structures, of the world. The conception of the artist has been that he or she observes the universal logic and fills in the colors of its particular occasions. All freedom has been conceived in terms of variant images of the controlling logic. Literary theory now, rather than descrying the logical preconditions of literary activity, must give attention to the richness of concrete action that proliferating logical spaces afford. Thus, it does not attend to absence and longing for lost logical

origins, to the self-resistance of theory, or to the density of local texture that bespeaks the residue of the great nineteenth-century intellectual systems such as Marxism and Freudianism; it attends to the *amplitude* of time and space, which is nonlogical in its proliferation of niches for living and casual in its destruction of them.

There is no way out of the fix. We are recursive beings. If the species is caught in an infinite loop, the condition is hopeless. The resources of a finite earth will be destroyed before our philosophic needs are satisfied. If, however, the recursive loop can be conceived as finite, humans as psychological, sociological, and cosmological beings can achieve stability *without* coercion.

RADICAL MODERNISM

The abiding problem that Descartes left us is uncertainty over proper human scale. Descartes's tricky little argument proves something about the grammar of "ego" but not about the grammar of proper names: I can know that I am I without knowing who my "I" is. Descartes's *cogito* was of a different scale than René Descartes himself. As Nietzsche discovered, on solid Cartesian grounds, he was all of the names in history. Nietzsche's argument and its repetition in this century is solid evidence of our lack of a concrete realm of history that comes into existence as concretely measured time, actual ratios between actual events, not between events and presupposed, theoretical backgrounds. Nietzsche might have argued as justifiably that his ego had no name, that all names belong only to history. We measure ourselves, though they are useless as measures, by scaleless archetypes—Jesus or Oedipus, or by the Nietzschean self-sublating hero. Likewise, the lack of meaningful scale is apparent in the architecture of cityscapes, sprawling suburbs, and art. The music of Wagner, Mahler, and Bruckner suffer from a lack of scale as does the music of Webern—the nineteenth-century composers as arbitrary in their gargantuanism as the twentieth-century composer in his miniaturism. More recently, Stockhausen and Glass, for all of their differences from the earlier composers and from one another, are similarly scaleless. Tolstoy's great work fails not from its lack of center, as Henry James and Percy Lubbock complain, but from its lack of scale, as do Browning's *The Ring and the Book* and Joyce's *Finnegans*

Wake. The problem is not the mere size of these texts but our inability to know how big they actually are.

Since the seventeenth century, the official philosophy of the West has been unable to account for the profoundest subjectivity or the profoundest objectivity. We have known, rather, an objective subject and a subjective object. In our relative subjectivity, we discover an arena in which we become giddy with talk, and in contemplation of our relative objectivity, we discover certain predictable patterns that afford significant control over nature. As William Carlos Williams notes, however, "Without measure we are lost. But we have lost even the ability to count. . . . I repeat, a new measure by which may be ordered our poems as well as our lives" (Williams, 1969, 340). Lacking scale and measure, we can define the world only by halves, and our definition requires a reconciliation of radically different modes of discourse, a reconciliation that is possible only in a generous theoretical sense. We have been required to subvert the structures on which we stake our conceptions of the world. The intellectual tradition seems bent upon its own self-cancellation. It bespeaks the possibilities of a renewal that at the same time it denies. This is the agony of modernism, clearly apparent in Descartes, and most poignant perhaps in the *angst* of a Heidegger, Schönberg, or Eliot, but now, sadly and widely suffered by the masses, who turn their backs on the modern and seek comfort in the teachings of Khomeini, Moon, Swaggart, Robertson, and Falwell, or who, in the same spirit of fundamentalism, take up learned jargons of aesthetics or the social sciences. We are caught between idolatry and nihilism. The dialectic produced the irresistible force and the unmovable object and then stalled. In the infinite domain that opens, the most spectacular kinesis produces no measurable motion: having travelled an immense distance, there is still an infinite distance to go.

Modernism and postmodernism are not philosophies, nor do they belong to particular historical epochs; they are modes of historical action. Modernism expresses the will to begin again by identifying language with being. The new beginning inevitably upsets the conventional practice of life catastrophically. It is concerned not with the purity of beginning but with the stability that arises from beginning again—the reality that is never reduced to familiarity and predictability. Modernists quickly despair of language and are happy to return to inarticulation, opening logical space after logical space, sometimes in dizzying proliferation. The

Plato of the dialogues is a modernist in this sense. Postmodernism is administrative and pedagogical. Sometimes the divergence between being and language becomes so intense that it can be enforced only by totalitarian organization and violence, an all too familiar fact of this century.

From the fifth century B.C. until the nineteenth century, the equation of being and language continued to produce at least occasionally new and unexpected relationships. Hegel, however, spoke for a crisis in modernism—a crisis for the possibility of intellectual renovation. A profound modernist himself, he expressed the enthusiasm of a culture that was committed not only to beginning again but to including both beginning and end in its beginning. Nineteenth-century European culture was imperialistic even on the transcendental scale: the time-honored modernist strategy entered a postmodern infinite regress. Thereafter modernism was not a philosophic strategy but a historical fact. The century between the revolutions of 1848 and the end of World War II was a time of unparalleled intellectual, military, political, and industrial upheaval. For the lack of a better name, we have referred to it as a time of "modernism," which means only, "we have never seen anything like this before," and truly we had not. This modernism is not a collection of styles that had its day and faded. It was thrust upon us as an effect of our prodigious—and perhaps cancerous—productivity.

Postmodernism, the response to the time *after* the apocalypse, is a philosophy of administration, the business of business schools. It is necessary to manage the inevitable divergence of being and knowing which follows the modernist catastrophe. As a social concern, it is a counterpart of the solid waste problem. If we have too much garbage, we also have too much "good" stuff, too much poetry, too many paintings, too much music. The immense proliferation has turned even the modernist masterpieces into embarrassments of riches, so we must work as hard to distribute the spiritual booty as we do to bury the waste. If we are now postmodern, it means only that the newness has worn off, that dadaist goofiness has become commonplace.* It remains to realize the dadaist sanity.

The Poetics of Common Knowledge is an unapologetic mod-

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*See, for example, Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Marcus, 1989).

ernist essay, concerned not with *carrying-on* but with beginning and beginning again, with the rhythm of beginning, and the measure of "true necessity" by that rhythm. I assume not only that beginning again is possible but that about 1910, a vast energy gathered toward a new beginning, manifesting itself in the continuous world war and utter technological renovation that dominated the first half of this century. By this propulsion we escaped the gravity of Western humanism. The human creature has internalized its machinery in its evolution. We have entered the cyborgian world of science fiction where we confront creatures—indeed all of us—to which the distinction between living things and mechanism does not apply. Donna Haraway notes: "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (Haraway, 1985, 66). Our fascination to ourselves as cyborgian creatures is that we combine in our beings the predictability of machines with the reckless, independence of singular creatures. It is an attractive but dangerous combination. Machines do not began again, do not renovate themselves, do not produce the freshness and new variety which is required to maintain the order of the system. The cyborgian world is an adventure in order, a construction of the world from unique components that are always in danger of being overwhelmed by their own inherent tendency to repeat, simulate, and generalize.

The failure to attend to the strange centaur world—half industrial waste land and half computer simulation—that we inhabit is extraordinary. Thus, Roland Barthes, in 1971: "The break, as is frequently stressed, is seen to have taken place in the last century with the appearance of Marxism and Freudianism; since then there has been no further break, so that in a way it can be said that for the last hundred years we have been living in repetition" (Barthes, 1977, 155–56). Fredric Jameson, in 1981: Marx "alongside Freud and Nietzsche [is] one of the great negative diagnosticians of *contemporary* culture" (Jameson, 1981, 281, my emphasis).

Is it not remarkable that these giants of nineteenth-century materialism are accounted contemporary? The thought of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche not only belongs to the twilight time of classical physics, it is profoundly predicated upon the Newtonian worldview. To be sure, there has been no "break," no new coherent

world picture; it has been rather a rupture and a flowing, which is the condition of radical modernity. No century in human history has seen such radical change in the material conditions of life as the one just past. The results of systematic research and technological development as the basis of an ever-expanding world economy are obvious and profound. The refusal to recognize the accompanying intellectual upheaval borders on psychosis.

Barthes writes: "Just as Einsteinian science demands that the relativity of the frames of reference be included in the object studied, so the combined action of Marxism, Freudianism and structuralism demands, in literature, the relativization of the relations of writer, reader and observer (critic)" (Barthes, 1977, 156). It is an ill-informed metaphor. This "relativistic" object that Barthes discovers is not the "object" of modern physics: Einsteinian physics does not turn physical space-time into textual hash. On the contrary, Einstein declares that *every* locus of observation is absolute. Barthes's prevalence represents a serious setback, a loss of fifty years at least. Charles Beard (Beard, 1934) and Carl Becker (Becker, 1932) were further along this line of thought in the 1930s; Ezra Pound in "Cavalcanti: Medievalism" (Pound, 1965, 129–200), William Carlos Williams in "The Poem as a Field of Action" (Williams, 1969, 280–90), and Gertrude Stein in *Lectures in America* (Stein, 1985) were further along. The great materialistic systems of the nineteenth century, bereft of the science that underwrote them, have been recycled as aesthetic and reactionary political strategies. The technological procedures that dominate contemporary culture have been assimilated by the cultural studies industry to antiquated notions of critique.

"The Newtonian-Euclidean subconscious," to use Milič Čapek's term, has powerfully reasserted itself. Čapek writes, "the mental habits which constitute what may be called our 'Newtonian-Euclidean subconscious,' and whose roots lie deep in the phylogenetic heritage of man are too obstinate to be modified by a bare mastery of mathematical formalism, which merely suppresses without eliminating them" (Čapek, 1961, xv). Čapek, of course, speaks of thinkers who have mastered the mathematics and *still* have trouble consistently thinking the new intellectual world (it is so strange), not the students of culture who, in the face of mathematical ignorance have retreated to the safety of a bedraggled romanticism that forestalls criticism by criticizing itself. Much of the

literary theoretical activity of the past two decades has been a willful attempt to regenerate the illusion of Newtonian-Euclidean space as a cultural arena. It has been profoundly reactionary, profoundly unwilling or unable to deal with a world that is as alien as the world our science describes. We are radically uprooted from the neat theoretical worlds that relieve our confusions with talk of material objects and physical forces. The Marxist notion of conflict, the Nietzschean notion of will, and the Freudian notion of desire now have the status that angels had for the classical physicists.

The distinction that Barthes obscures—and it is almost universally obscured in contemporary literary theory—is between the continuous manifold of physical space and the discreet manifold of logical space. In a continuous manifold, there are no objects—no Cartesian space-points, no atoms, no phonemes (i.e., discrete semantic atoms). Everything is dispersed throughout the spatial field. From any particular frame of reference everything is precisely located, but from a universal perspective the entire spatial field is densely saturated with every object in it. Like many other theorists who work in the aftermath of structuralism, Barthes comprehends only the discrete manifold of logical or grammatical space. His textualized object is the Newtonian object that must absorb the vagueness of location that absolute time and space require. Barthes speaks not for a meaningful relativism but for a Euclidean-Newtonianism with the jitters: "Each poetic word is thus an unexpected object, a Pandora's box from which fly out all the potentialities of language; it is therefore produced and consumed with a peculiar curiosity, a kind of sacred relish. This Hunger of the Word, common to the whole of modern poetry, makes poetic speech terrible and inhuman." (Barthes, 1967, 48) Barthes suggests that modernity moves toward a new Eden, where it will overcome the crippling double bind that it suffers and produce a "literature" that is not literature, a "history" that is not history. He speaks for a desperate romanticism.

This does not mean that we must now adjust our paradigms to relativity theory, quantum mechanics, chaos theory, or the theory of self-organizing systems. These are in fact, for the most part, probably irrelevant to human life; they do not deal with the common scale. We cannot expect a new epochal paradigm. It is paradigmatic thought itself that has come to an end. Of course, we have

local paradigms that provide administrative procedures for particular purposes, but language does not contain a picture of itself. We have reached the profoundest level of abstraction. The *intellectual* adventure is over. The *logic* of the situation is revealed: certain rules produce certain results. The linguistic media define zones of logical possibility, and they are all inhabited. We cannot cover every point in the space, of course, but as in the infinitesimal calculus, we can approach the limit and forget the remainders that are not significant anyway. Life is not now renovated in relation to the *logos* or in relation to the absence of the *logos*. It is like updated software: the intellectually new is not *fundamentally* different from the old, but there is a lot of new documentation to read. Radical modernism equates not being and language but being and consciousness. Mind does not carry out beyond knowledge into the unconscious structures of language. Knowledge is, Gertrude Stein reminds us again and again, what we know.

POETIC KNOWLEDGE

We are the daily victims of an addictive aestheticism: a huge distraction industry produces consumable images of meaning and efficacious action, creating a universal environment for egos that are at once highly prized and literally superfluous. The Self is, at this point, a luxurious reference to a bygone era—as it were, a collectable antique. For example, we support symphony orchestras the size of the army of Renaissance city-states to play music that was written a century or more ago while excluding most contemporary music from the concert halls. Beethoven's evocation of the historical individual's relationship to eternity becomes for the posthistorical listeners an Image that relates them to a reality requiring their participation and, at the same time, systematically excluding them. The German tradition in music, as it is now purveyed, is a perfect cultural product because it cancels itself out, allowing its audience the feeling of meaning without the world in which that kind of meaning can be realized.

The education industry is deeply implicated in the recycling of history. Harold Bloom writes: "The teacher of literature now in America, far more than the teacher of history or philosophy and religion is condemned to teach the presentness of the past, because history, philosophy, and religion have withdrawn as agents from

the Scene of Instruction, leaving the bewildered teacher of literature at the altar, terrifiedly wondering whether he is to be sacrifice or priest" (Bloom, 1975, 39). Professor Bloom's terror and wonder are explicable. History, philosophy, and religion are disciplines of knowledge; literature is a discipline of taste. In a culture that has a taste for history but no historical foundation, the aesthetic domain is inflated. Moral, political, and religious meanings are piggybacked on abstract languages that relate only to their own systematic requirements. They are statistical manifestations, shared hallucinations, that appear when light hits abstract forms at certain angles. It is a powerful strategy. The only limits are practical and pedagogical: initiating everyone into a second world—a world quite alien to the one the student discovers on the street—is a massive job. In monolithic cultures, which limit themselves to a few controlling images, education can provide the necessary hermeneutical tools. The abstract code, however, is able to assimilate endless particulars and, moreover, requires a continually broadening base of particulars to feed its ravenous generalizing powers; soon more images and interpretations than can be reasonably managed accrue. Students can be exposed to great diversity, but they cannot be given the confidence of a culture. Without the convenience of a relatively small canon, the field is simply too vast.

The literature teacher's anxiety for which Professor Bloom eloquently speaks, however, should be mitigated by the fact that the privileged scene of instruction and its priestcraft have been effectively replaced by a universal media environment that instructs the masses directly. The institutions of high art are the product of an ideology that has itself eroded away. Art activity has not changed, but the culture has changed around it, giving it a different status. Although the forms of artistic production are still vital, and the jargon of the art business—classifications of genres, categories of judgement, and so forth—is still in common use, art has ceased to be a producer of value and has become merely a producer of descriptions and commodities in a statistical field. Ideology is replaced with the Nielsen ratings and the opinion polls.

The replacement of the elite tradition with the popular media is now more or less complete. The change appears democratic because of the size of the population involved, but in practical terms it is not a significant change. A people can be better tyrannized by itself than by an elite. Aura is not necessary in an aesthetically

dense world. The principles of the high-cultural canon are now enforced not by awe but by the omnipresence of the popular media. The symphony, for example, must be impressive in both its quality and its scale so its themes will be remembered after the audience has left the hall. Popular music need not be memorable, because it is unavoidable. Similarly, television drama is always there. Although video recorders are now widely available, there is little reason to record anything. One sitcom can be substituted for another without loss. We do not need memorable music, poems, plays, paintings: the values that the memorable "objects" manifested are now literally repeated in the electronic furnishing of homes and cities. The information covers us, flows over our surfaces; we are in a great Jacuzzi of information. The field of radical contradictions has given way to a completely forgiving medium, which can be transmitted electromagnetically to create a universal productive environment.

Post-Hegelian intellectual history confirms that universal entailment is true. Its logical circuits, unfortunately, are infinite. Our paths of thought never fail to confirm our assumptions, but the thought never reaches its goal: the Truth or the Revolution or Self-Knowledge are endlessly deferred; the analyses of nature, history, and person are interminable. "The revolution of poetic language," in Julia Kristeva's ringing phrase, the language of the post-Hegelian bacchanal, revealed the heterogeneity and indeterminacy of the semiotic field. Ultimately, the rationalization of the symbolic domain was drawn into the dark side of the associative logic that it had exploited. Kristeva: "Magic, shamanism, esoterism, the carnival, and 'incomprehensible' poetry all underscore the limits of socially useful discourse and attest to what it represses: the *process* that exceeds the subject and his communicative structures." Poetry, which had striven to express perfected consciousness, the *unity* of the idea and the thing, became the source of, again in Kristeva's words, "the essential element of a practice involving the sum of unconscious, subjective, and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction—productive violence . . ." (Kristeva, 1984, 16).

Against the proliferation of meaningless production, I will argue that it is poetry, *workings in poetic language and action,* not mere submission to its violence, that can redeem us from the post-Hegelian pathology, driving us further into spiritual and ecological

disequilibrium. In Alfred North Whitehead's words, "there can be an intuition of probability respecting the origination of some novelty" (Whitehead, 1978, 207), and this probability is *nonstatistical*. The unique occasions of this intuition are not the production of a mechanism nor are they predictable by induction. If history represents our intuition of more or less permanent patterns in life against which loss is realized and measured, nonstatistical intuition represents—again in Whitehead's terms—"a creative advance into novelty" (Whitehead, 1978, 349). The statistical knowledge by which we describe our accommodation to the world has an inside as well as an outside, and it is on this axis, not on the axes of mind and matter, subject and object, or general and particular—these are all terms of absolutist metaphysics—that our knowledge must be turned.

We are primitives of poetic knowledge. Poetry's conventions have been sadly vitiated by over two millennia of obedience to theory, from Aristotle to current theorists, such as Kristeva, who value poetry only because it concretizes and negates theoretical totality. Much of what passes for poetry is mere decoration and sentiment—poetry produced, consciously or unconsciously, as the illustration of this or that abstraction or, more recently, as the illustration of an-*arché*-ism—that is, to show that there is nothing to show. The poetics of the common knowledge proposes to understand the making of a knowledge that is not theoretical. If it is anti-intellectual, it is not hopefully a know-nothing anti-intellectualism. Indeed, mind itself is a gross simplification, the substitution of a schematic image for a rich participation in the articulation of living space.

We have much to learn from the cultures that articulate cosmologies without writing, but we cannot put on the shaman's cloak and appropriate their cultural traditions as we appropriate the natural resources of their lands. In spiritual practices, they have a sophistication that we will forever lack. It is our advantage—and the terms of the danger in which we find ourselves—that we have worked our way *through* theory. While we now return to that perpetually unfamiliar place of endless chance and *changing* that can be safely called "the real," we engage it not as spirit but as information. The common can be specified as that which remains more or less constant in any medium of information storage and transmission. Myth was the quintessential content of oral culture, metaphysics was the quintessential content of literate culture. The

poetics of common knowledge now begins to prepare the legacy of literacy for the electronic media.

My claim for the redemptive powers of poetry may seem hopelessly optimistic and probably even foolish. Indeed the level of literacy required to read even the least demanding poetry is now fairly rare. *Poetic knowledge*, however, is not exclusively or even most significantly what appears in those peculiar and despised writings known as "poems." It is the knowledge of finitude, of words and things that happen once and once only, measurable but not repeatable, the intuitions of *nonstatistical* probabilities that are *creative*, not merely re-creative (or recreational). It is not clear what conventions might best embody this knowledge. The most pervasive forms, to which many people *pay attention* are perhaps musical. Television, of course, is omnipresent, but its viewers are only partially conscious at best. Indeed it appears to be impossible to pay close attention to television. I suspect the new poetics will have more to do with pedagogy and engineering than traditional aesthetic objects. The literary form as such, poetry itself, is of small consequence; it has been perhaps already absorbed into life. The same could be said to a greater or lesser degree of all of the traditional art forms. If Marx once believed the philosophic task was not to interpret the world but to change it, the task now is not to replicate the world but to make it. Marx hoped to put the worker in control of the productive or more precisely *re*productive institutions; the poetics of the common knowledge proposes to put the individual in control of creation and *the* Creation.

The common is given, but the common knowledge is not. It should not be confused with "common sense"—which is to say, the lore of compromise a culture builds up with its own ignorance. *The common knowledge might be properly contrasted to disciplined knowledge*. The domain of the common knowledge has no preexistence. It comes into being only when contingent beings come into contingent relationship. The common knowledge leads not to certainty of mind but to confidence of action. It consists not of propositions to be communicated from A to B but of orientations in fields of meaning, measures by the scales in which humans share not a perspective or a belief but a world that opens to this or that particular vantage and practice. In order to constitute an effective community rather than a symbolic machine for social production, organized beings must orient themselves in their mediascapes. For those of a common orientation, knowledge is not

transmitted through a channel (sender to receiver by way of code, in Jakobson's well-known paradigm); it is, rather, the condition of action that permeates the space of the community. That it cannot be spoken is not "mysterious." There is no occasion to speak it; it is what makes speaking possible. It is however perpetually made manifest in the acts of creation. Whitman's barbaric yawp *says* nothing, it manifests the creation of the world that can be shared. Louis Zukofsky reminds us, "Measure/tacit is" (Zukofsky, 1978, 131). We hear the sounds, but the *measures* are made manifest.

The disciplined knowledge that might guide us from this crisis and the perpetual violence of our times is flawed: to understand has come to mean to be able to give an explanation of a phenomena as a symbolic machine. When information that *was* shared is interpreted and thus found meaningful, it is removed from the common; it becomes epistemic property. One situation is interpreted in terms of another, so the one becomes a mere logical function of the other. The modern psyche, the modern, human psyche itself, represents the triumph of our first attempt to create an artificial intelligence machine—a discipline of knowledge. That the project now continues, constructing models in silicon rather than in a fictional Self, should not be surprising. In the mode of this self-willed robot, language as such is a device for binding a relatively low-order of abstraction to a higher order. The binding of energy by symbols involves establishing relationships between two levels of abstraction, between, for example, the simple idea of a thing and the idea of a thing that includes itself by way of its self-aware creatures. Knowledge in this sense involves a double bind and is compromised with unreality from the outset. Symbolic binding is the underlying device of Western epistemology in all of its common forms—its various totalitarianisms, both right and left, as well as the totalitarianism of what Herbert Marcuse called "repressive tolerance," its artistic conventions, its theologies and atheologies.

Wallace Stevens's jar has become an essential of undergraduate education because it reveals in anecdotal form the fundamental cultural strategy. It tells of symbolically bound energy:

> I placed a jar in Tennessee,
> And round it was upon a hill.
> It made the slovenly wilderness
> Surround that hill.
>
> (Stevens, 1982, 76)

In terms of theory, this is all one needs to know about technology. The artifice of the jar and its strategic placement *bind* not the wilderness, which is irrelevant to its symbolic use, but the *energy* of wilderness. The difference of potential between the juxtaposed images creates, as it were, a voltaic power cell that energizes the hermeneutic process that in turn binds its own informational flow in some form. This generation of energy *ex nihilo* suffices to drive the symbolic machine ultimately into the profoundest fix: the process exploits the very conditions that make it possible.

The contrast between Stevens's "Anecdote of a Jar" and Gertrude Stein's "A Carafe, That Is a Blind Glass," from *Tender Buttons*, is clear: "A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading" (Stein, 1962, 461).

Information here, rather than tending toward the creation of stasis, is unbounded. The carafe, rather than defining discrete objects in a discrete manifold, is a flowing in a continuous manifold. It communicates nothing but itself. Stein pursues objects past their discrete eidetic solidity, generating linguistic surfaces, continuous spaces in which every distinction is returned through its reference to itself. Language is no more internal to the psyche than any other object of attention. Both its content *and* its grammatical structures are contingent. In a totally different context, that of theoretical physics, David Finkelstein proposes a logic "which is itself a dynamic ingredient in the physical theory, an actor rather than part of the stage" (Finklestein, 1969, 213). This is a fundamental disruption.

"No one has been able to pose the problem of language," Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write, "except to the extent that linguists and logicians have first eliminated meaning; and the greatest force of language was only discovered once a work was viewed as a machine, producing certain effects, amenable to a certain use" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977, 109). Although we are free to assert a preference for this or that disposition toward language, its mechanism—as it were, its time and space—is still largely unquestioned. By the same token, *the problem of meaning* is posed only to the extent that poets first eliminate Language. This is not to say, of course, that they have eliminated the sounds or marks of words, the medium of measured speech, but they have eliminated *Language*, that peculiar abstraction which since Parmenides has con-

fused its own systematic requirements with the world's and which in modern linguistic science has become the prime philosophic datum.

"We are led back," Foucault writes "to that place Nietzsche and Mallarmé signposted when the first asked: who speaks? and the second saw his glittering answer in the Word itself." And he adds, "The question as to what language is in its being is once more of the greatest urgency" (Foucault, 1970, 382). The precise nearness *and* distance of this Word to the Word of the New Testament should not be missed. It is not a particular Word, a word made flesh, but the infinite structure of wordiness in worldliness, which we can know piecemeal but not in totality. Although it never allows the comfort of certainty, it does offer an infinitely commodious setting for writing. It is not however Mallarmé who now gives the profoundest evidence concerning the being of language but the cyborgian engineers who write the code for fifth-generation computers, and the rhetoric of television, rock music, and shopping malls. For those who address the being of language these are the proper objects of study.

Foucault announces the imminent end of Man, that is, the end of abstraction, and of Man as the trope of that abstraction. For Foucault, the inevitable outcome of the dialectic that he traces is the dissolution of Man into language. He does not, however, follow this thought to its conclusion. Just because the language cannot be systematized as a totality does not mean that it cannot be systematized in parts. To say that every sign is haunted by its opposite, every yes is haunted by a no, every conscious meaning haunted by an unconscious meaning, may represent a great insight (it does) or it may be a symptom of neurosis (it is). Although the truth of any proposition is undecidable against the background of the whole of language, language only *plays* in that vast context, it *works* in locally specified environments. A jail sentence has a decidable value as does a Dear John or the sentence that is signified by a pink slip tucked in with a pay check. These are are among some of the drearier domains of the common knowledge.

The end of Foucault's Man may be the beginning of the machine as "human," not the great machine of the paranoid vision that Foucault so dramatically invokes but the humble machine—not the great Mainframe in the Sky but myriad personal computers in open networks, each following its mechanistic program in its random, meaningless, linguistic environment.

Foucault's work might be seen as a poetics of *disciplined*

knowledge, and it is to his horrific vision in which all knowing is hedged in sadomasochism, that I hope to propose an alternative. *The Poetics of the Common Knowledge* does not argue with *Civilization and Madness, The Order of Things,* or Foucault's later, brilliant histories of power, but it takes another route through the history from the seventeenth century to present. The poetics of common knowledge answers Nietzsche's question not with Mallarmé but Melville. In a letter to Hawthorne, he writes: "We incline to think that God cannot explain his own secrets, and that he would like a little information upon certain points Himself. We mortals astonish him as much as He us. But it is this *Being* of the matter; there lies the knot with which we choke ourselves. As soon as you say *Me,* a *God,* a *Nature,* so soon you jump off from your stool and hang from the beam. Yes, that word is the hangman. Take God out of the dictionary, and you will have Him in the street" (Melville, 1960, 125).

As stable objects, Melville's three terms—"Me," "Nature," and "God"—are the apexes of the stable triangle of Western metaphysics, the termini of the Cartesian geometry, the beginning, middle, and end of Hegelian logic, the ego, id, and superego of Freudian psychology. They are the terms of a simple combinatorial logic that, for more than three hundred years, has created a history by adjusting and readjusting the ratios. It is as if we have have able to count to three and no further.

These noun-objects arrange themselves around the hero, the king, the movie star—the father—the one allowable perspective, the one true subjectivity, to which all others have reference. The peculiar quality of the hero or king is to be the one of all people who is self-sufficient. His is the only individuality. He writes the poetry he wants to read because his subjects' writings, like their dreams, as Freud tells us, are inscribed on his royal body. The king is the image of the Will to Power, and we should not underestimate the nostalgia that invests this figure, though now his authority is dispersed through the whole medium of social intercourse. We now come to the crisis of democracy, when we might give every individual his or her authority in relation to the medium. Otherwise, our knowledge will continue to be deathly and administered in relation to power structures that must always increase the total sum of power that they organize until finally the structure fails and the power disperses.

Melville recognizes that to identify any object is to submit it to

a logic that is largely independent of the identification itself. Davis and Gilman, the editors of Melville's letters, misunderstand the grammatical awkwardness of the passage, conjecturing that Julian Hawthorne (who transcribed from the now-lost original) miscopied the phrase "the Being of the matter." They want to substitute terms that present precisely the problem that Melville tries somewhat awkwardly to avoid. Their suggested emendations—"Being that matters" and "Being that maddens"—both make Being into a noun-agent, thus putting God back into the dictionary. To Melville, the truth is neither transcendental nor imagined to be in some uncanny, hidden place, such as the unconscious. All of that which in this century would be studied as language or would be objectified and become the subject of scientific disciplines is the content of the visible truth. For the first time since perhaps the pre-Socratics, the representations of language are the *content* of the world, not its structure. Language is completely plastic; it is no longer possible to hold part of it back to create a shape for the remainder. The medium flows and is therefore subject to measure.

I do not know how to say this more emphatically: *the structure of the world is not the logic of language but the meaning of language*. Logical entailment involves one kind of necessity, and facts involve another. The requirements of the world are not logical but factual, and we have no reason to believe that factual necessity presupposes logical necessity. This writing desk *has to* be here because it is in fact here. If I want a book from the shelves on the south wall of my study I *have to* walk over there; I *have to* walk on the blue and red carpet. There is nothing logical in these requirements. They are requirements of measure in the physical world and the nature of my ongoing physical relationship with it. Jean Piaget writes: "If man, as Michel Foucault puts it, is only a 'a kind of rupture in the order of things,' to which has corresponded (but for less than two centuries) 'a mere wrinkle in our knowledge,' it is nevertheless worth remembering that this rupture and this wrinkle are the product of a great upheaval—but a well-organized one—which is constituted by life as a whole" (Piaget, 1970, 50). The organization of this upheaval can be known, not in absolute terms, to be sure, but in terms that are at least as certain as anything to which one might turn for a guarantee. No greater certainty is required for effective control of an enterprise. The poetics of the common knowledges proposes a practice that dwells, to recall

Whitehead's words, in the domain of nonstatistical probability, where creative advances into novelty are possible. The language is fluid, public, a communal store of signs; it is useful precisely because its signs have no particular referent. If one says language is destroyed by the poet, it is not a large or heroic act. If Language—that vast interlocking grammatical system that science posits but that has never been observed—exists at all, it is a low grade of existence. Its ontological status is like the government or the moral order; it is so compromised with things that are not-Language that it is really impossible to investigate the matter to anyones satisfaction. Language takes value when its generality is measured by specific acts of living.

AN ORIENTATION

The "proofs" of my many assertions, unfortunately, are lengthy and cumbersome. The very notion of proof involves the kind of abstract binding that I hope to expose. The task is to make concrete realities manifest.

In the domain of the common and only in the domain of the common, true poiesis occurs; the rest is technology and decoration. We get no additional leverage by trying to characterize the *medium* of knowledge—language, labor, sex, power—as if we might know what we do not know. The common knowledge is the knowledge of time and body, the end points of the continuum that is mediated, the waves and particles of open systems. Any act creates a space and a discrimination, an orientation and a nature, information and meaning, like the elusive conjugate pairs of quantum physics. In totalitarian systems, we lose one or the other; in mediation, we lose both and substitute a third. The possibility of these losses attend any writing. They plague the following essays. The ultimate goal, of course, is, as Walt Whitman realized, for *everyone* to be a poet—that is say, for everyone to language a world that provides orientation for the community.

In a pervasive change of the cultural mind in the seventeenth century, a complex descriptive model was substituted for nature, so *something* in the model corresponded to *everything* in nature. The model was a formal system or linguistic machine—in contemporary jargon, a computer program. It was assumed that the world consists of a few types of simple objects—atoms of some kind,

some limited and enumerable set of simple things, that can be represented by linguistic tokens—and a finite set of specifiable rules by which these tokens can be combined. Thus, the rules can be applied to the tokens; and linguistic models of the world, corresponding point by point to the physical world, can be created. "To *understand* a phenomenon," thus, means "to be able to construct a corresponding linguistic machine." Of course, if the model corresponds precisely to the original, it is not clear what has been gained. The locus of the object is changed. Humans seem to feel that the model, being a "human thing," as it were, is more understandable than the world itself.

The testimony of the poststructuralists in this connection has been important: we now know that language is not a unified thing, even as an object of study. It is, rather, a collection of "programs," virtual machines, that define their operations in terms only of themselves. They all prove to be ultimately circular. Some of the loops—in fact, most of them—generate simple patterns that repeat dully as they continue on their endless paths; a few create interesting, nonrepeating textures. The Romantic poets discovered, or at least capitalized upon, linguistic loops of the latter kind, and poststructuralist theoreticians are still fascinated by them. The nonrepeating loop produces a "text," not resolution but the ongoing difference that is always the same. The resonances are rich and attractive, echoing out through their infinite logical spaces, but after a while they become so rich that finite information processing mechanisms such as human minds become overloaded, and the density can be heard only as white noise. It is then a matter of theology whether the roar is the sound of the absolute, of Being, or of terrifying emptiness. The great modern synthesis that poses these vastly inclusive uncertainties has proven to be resilient. Although it has closed, it has not ended; the terms of its virulent inertia are still to be understood.

The eighteenth-century philosophers could not explain organic forms. Newtonian machines, which they could model accurately and the behavior of which they could predict, did not grow. It was obvious, however, that somehow the warring elements of traditional chemistry—earth, air, fire, and water—combined to change the acorn into the oak tree. These simple natures that were defined by their conflict or, as we would now say, "difference," were brought into harmony to produce the phenomena of life. The *source* of the

harmony, however, was necessarily transcendental: manifest nature did not, as Hume had so strikingly shown, require any *particular* order. The model of the organism that emerged in the latter half of the eighteenth century was not so much a new Idea as a kind of ragbag for ideas into which almost anything could be thrown. It was not exactly a paradigm—because blatantly incoherent elements were included—but a strategy to stand in the place of a paradigm. The phenomena of mind in Hegel's masterful account, for example—the mind responsible to both nature and transcendental order—is endlessly conflicted. In the Hegelian view, mind receives input in the form of difference, processes the differences according to transcendental principles, which arise and erase themselves, and issues output, again in the form of self-conflicted products. The Romantic organism simultaneously constructs and deconstructs its infinite being. In its constructive phase, it is totalitarian; in its deconstructive phase, it is cynical. J. Drummond Bone puts the matter succinctly: "The idea of the 'organic' contained for the Romantic period in Britain both notions of completeness and the impossibility of completeness, of a state of true being (the 'organic whole') and a state of truth which was eternal becoming (the 'infinity' of the organic). In the first lies a tendency towards the elaborately formal, indeed even the mechanical. In the second lies the temptation of the abandonment of form" (Bone, 1987, 195).

Romantic organism produced a reconciliation of Newtonian mechanism and organic teleology by fiat. In the interstices of organic creativity, a place was found for free interaction between natural perception and transcendental intuition. The various organic theories were distinguished from the mechanism of classical physics on the grounds that organic processes are irreversible. Embodying purposes and thus the possibility of progress, their development is not symmetrical with respect to time: organisms receive inputs from several sources, transform their constituent materials by reconciling contradictory forces, and *creatively* adapt themselves to novel environments. There was however no way to explain the workings of bodies except in Newtonian terms—that is, in terms of *forces* working on matter. The problem of interaction between mind and body, which plagued Cartesian thought, was given an *ad hoc* but metaphorically cogent solution. Language itself was figured as a kind of psychic head of steam that, like the

heated gasses in the great industrial engines, transmitted its force (spiritual in its intangibility) from nature to mind and, in literary form, from mind to mind. Wordsworth imagines in *The Prelude* that nature impresses upon "all forms the characters of danger or desire," thus forcefully inscribing a sermon upon the heart of the boy who can, as an adult, profitably recollect these marks so thoughtlessly received. In the organicist understanding of perception and memory, nature's force literally rends a path through the neural material, abrading and consuming psychic space, in order to inscribe itself on the subjective tablet, and this mechanism is understood in a fundamentally consistent sense from Locke to Freud to Lacan and Derrida. Since the nineteenth century, the mechanism of inscription and the vitalism of purposive organisms have been maintained in uneasy synthesis.

This incoherent vitalism was not the failure of certain theorists. It was a requirement of the state of knowledge that made itself manifest in the years of the American and French Revolutions. Its power derives from the fact that it was able to find a place for so many blatant contradictions in a working cultural strategy. A *consistent* account of the static forms of Newtonian physics, on the one hand, and the progressive unfolding of industrial economies and new political institutions, on the other, was not possible. To a large degree, moreover, both dualism and various attempts to reconcile dualism were inherent in Western philosophy. The standard accounts of organicist theory, such as M. H. Abrams's, correctly invoke both Plato and Aristotle as contributors to the synthesis (Abrams, 1958, 184–85). This is, perhaps, to say only that Western epistemology has been consistently representationalist and universalist. Ever since Plato posed the problem of knowledge in terms of conjecture about essences that pervade shadowy phenomena, it has been necessary for systematic philosophy to account for an Image, an Idea or a source, *and,* as the achieved Idea was itself a source of something else, a purpose or teleology. The organism was the middle term, a trace between an origin and a result, an input and an output. The finite unity was required to include all that it was not—consciousness must include the other; the finite, the infinite; the static object, the becoming object; and so forth. This, of course, leaves us in a fix of the first order.

The nature of the fix now becomes apparent because the culture has successfully *implemented* organicist teleology. The vegeta-

ble mind of the Romantic theorists was reiterated in social, economic, and cultural domains to produce the technological progressivism that took *growth* as the fundamental measure of value, even, in a sense, as the necessary mark of existence itself. In practice, the imagination of transcendental perfection generated growth that was out of homeostatic control, or to put the matter more bluntly, the Romantic arrogance was underwritten by an organism that confused the scale of its ecological niche and the scale of its infinitely generative dialectical language and represented cancerous proliferation. Thus, we face impending ecological disaster on several fronts.

Since World War II, however, the conception of the 'organism' has undergone a profound change, so profound indeed that it is only the same concept by virtue of answering the same question—what is the nature of the living. With the appearance of the cybernetic view of organism, the distinction between mechanism and vitalism no longer carries its classical force. Norbert Wiener writes: "the modern automaton exists in the same sort of Bergsonian time as the living organism; and hence there is no reason in Bergson's considerations why the essential mode of functioning of the living organism should not be the same as that of the automaton of this time" (Wiener, 1965, 44). It had appeared that organism, with its teleological impetus, was exempt from mechanistic determinism, and it afforded a space for human dignity and values, perhaps even for divinity. Cybernetics, however, moves the question of mechanism and determinism to a higher level of abstraction. As it turns out, the Newtonian cosmos represents only a special case of automation. The circuit of the great machine, what I will call the "cynical" machine, is vitalistic—a construction of personal and social mechanisms which no longer observe the traditional distinction. Against it, the Heideggerian hope is not invalid but utterly misplaced.

The change cannot be simply schematized. Cybernetic thought is not a new paradigm. It is rather a science of paradigms and, as such, represents utterly unfamiliar levels of abstraction. In light of it, no paradigm or archetype carries more than local significance. Clearly, from the old paradigmatic perspective, we now enter a time of utter fragmentation. Representations of the world are pragmatic, related to particular purposes, ideological. There is no common *picture* of the world. The organism is now understood neither

as a machine, which receives an input and produces an output, nor as a teleological entity, which derives from a source and tends toward some final end, but as a self-creating and self-organizing system. Such a description raises the specter of rampant subjectivism, and, without doubt, the nature of the object that is shared has radically changed. In fact, what is shared is not objects or representations but processes and rhythms.

If the old objective world picture limited what one could *see*, the limit on the common domain is a limit on what one can *do*. The limit is not epistemological but environmental. Organic dignity is now founded neither on a transcendental source nor on the immediate intuition of being itself. Organisms are to be valued for their autonomy, for their existence through themselves, not for their origination in something Other. This is to say, *organisms are the other*. They are so intimately involved with their environments, they are their environments. The rational hope of avoiding the paradoxes of self-reference turns out to be a hope to avoid life itself, which precisely and necessarily defines vitality in terms of the crisis of self-reference. This does not mean that knowledge is merely subjective: the shared knowledge, however, is not guaranteed by a common source but by the interaction of organisms with one another and a common environment.

It is a large view, which I hope to comprehend. Perhaps to look forward at the argument, focusing on the history of Force (motive, will), will clarify the position.

During the epoch that included both Descartes and Freud, the world as a History produced by the interaction of Nature and Person was constituted as a hybrid machine, half-matter and half-symbol. The symbols, however, like the things to which they were bound, were material. The pervasive metaphor extended Newtonian physics to the domain of the human soul, which was the necessary force binding the components of the symbolic machine into the required configurations. The materialism of the soul was obscured by a sentimental spirituality, but its force was no more—or less—mysterious than the forces that, according to Newton, bind objects, such as solar systems, across great distance. The poststructuralist theories of writing as a material trace—to say nothing of the current recycled versions of nineteenth-century materialisms such as Marxism and Freudianism—cling to metaphysical notions of force in the form of will or desire, while rejecting the

metaphysical substances. That is, they retain a concept of vitalism or dynamism from the old concept of organism without retaining the concept of organism itself.

As modes of representation, the inadequacy not merely of the particular models but of this strategy of model making has been demonstrated. The symbolism itself, quite apart from it content, however, also has extraordinary requirements that are expressed as *force:* the "force" of History or, on another scale, the "force" of the individual's will to power. Poststructuralist methodology has freed us from the Cartesian-Newtonian *image* of the world without freeing us from its relentless and destructive dynamism. As David Lachterman writes in *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity,* "The Postmodernists, having become persuaded of the essential finitude of human knowing and speaking, to say nothing of writing, somehow leave intact the infinitude of a will embedded or embodied in a finite *and* inescapably deluded intellect" (Lachterman, 1989). *The Poetics of the Common Knowledge* proposes to deglamorize the mechanisms of will.

The following essays undertake to discover a dynamism proper to humankind to replace the wonderfully fascinating, beautiful, and ultimately self-destructive dynamism that has driven the culture now for over three centuries. William James states the alternative:

> I am as confident as I am of anything that, in myself, the stream of thinking (which I recognize emphatically as a phenomenon) is only a careless name for what, when scrutinized, reveals itself to consist chiefly of the stream of my breathing. The "I think" which Kant said must be able to accompany all my objects, is the "I breathe" which actually does accompany them. There are other internal facts beside breathing . . . and these increase the assets of "consciousness," so far as the latter is subject to immediate perception; but breath, which was ever the original of "spirit," breath moving outwards between the glottis and the nostrils, is, I am persuaded the essence of which philosophers have constructed the entity known to them as consciousness. That entity is fictitious, while thoughts in the concrete are fully real. But thoughts in the concrete are made of the same stuff as things are. (James, 1976, 19)

The theme is environmental in the most urgent and practical sense—a matter not of organic *thought* but of the literal organism

itself, as a practical, active entity. The dynamism of the person is the dynamism not of will or desire or temporality but of breath. It is, thus, *spiritual* knowledge that I address.

The design of the study is simple. It traces progressive symbolization through four essays: "Symbolic Nature," "Symbolic History," "Symbolic Person," and "Symbolic Symbols." The "I think" thinks nature by way of a formal symbolic system; it thinks its temporal relationship with nature or history; and it thinks itself or person. In each of these critical moves, explored in certain epoch-forming texts of the modern West, the "I think" is driven by the search for content for its symbols. Ultimately, it finds only the symbols themselves, so symbols are symbolic not of Nature, History, or Person but of more symbols. Thus, I follow the search for content from Nature to History to Person (and the unconscious of person) to the moment of recursion, the moment at which language begins to eat its own tail (tale). This is a moment of paradox and consternation, to say nothing of a certain dizziness, that can be overcome only by taking the entire matter to a higher level of abstraction, a task that has fallen to the cyberneticists and information theorists. The chapter "Symbolic Symbols" begins with a consideration of them.

In each chapter, the movement is from the "I think" of theory to the "I breathe" of poetry, from an abstract structural*ism* to actual constructions, from logical objects to physical objects. Logic lets us think about all of the members of a particular class of objects, poetry lets us think about one thing at a time. Logic can account for all of the possibilities of a given world or set of axioms, but it cannot account for the way the world happens to be. Nothing can be simpler than this fact, but it is hard to say (this is the problem which troubled Wittgenstein through his entire career). Theoretical language—and in this sense, all Language is theoretical—is biased toward the general case. Poetry is made from sounds and marks, but, paradoxically, *not* language. Thus, in each chapter, the discussion moves from theory to poetry, in an attempt to expose the theoretical bias of language (not to argue with it, which of course is impossible, as the only instrument of argument is the biased one).

The persistent danger is that humans confuse themselves with their own mechanisms, with their technologies as well as their bodies and souls—both of which, isolated from one another, are

also merely machines. They confuse life with the systematic background that they conceive for it. I think of Ornette Coleman's comments on the *Free Jazz* recording sessions: he speaks of the desire to express "our minds and emotions rather than being the background for emotions" (Coleman, 1961). Machines, including both those special kinds of machines that were called "organisms" by romantic theorists and those other necessary machines called "world systems" are the *backgrounds* of emotion. The baroque and romantic artists, whose heroic archetypes have prevailed now for more than three centuries, are allowed only to prepare the theater (theater and theory share a common etymological root). Theirs is profoundly theoretical art, an art of backgrounds. It is a contemplative art, demanding passivity and *re*presentation—"powerful emotion recollected in tranquility"—rather than a meditative art, an art of measure, of stepping off of boundaries, an activity that *is* life rather than a reflection upon it. Again, Ornette Coleman says of the ensemble playing on *Free Jazz,* "You can hear the others continue to build together so beautifully that the freedom even becomes impersonal."

The Poetics of the Common Knowledge attempts to define the dynamism that is neither abstract will to power nor desire or, more accurately, greed—the motives of cancerous acquisition figured in our theory as Newtonian force—but the impersonal freedom of sustainable communities. Unlike the ecologists who argue that we must, in order to survive as a species, return to some earlier form of technology, I argue that we must find a technology that expresses a sustainable dynamic, not merely a primitive version of what we have. There seems to be no "theory" of such a motive: theory inevitably commits us to expanding fields that ultimately "run us to death." It is a *practice* that is required, and we must learn to pay attention to the rhythms of the practice, not the abstract historical dynamism that theory necessarily involves. This practice can be characterized initially by the following claims (to be justified only by the study as a whole):

1. The sickness from which life on earth now suffers is diagnosed in these terms: the modern West mistook the tools of representation—the various languages—for the forms of human thought and experience. It failed to recognize tools as *expressions* of the world's attempts to know itself. In the short term, this

confusion generates immense force. Unfortunately, it is a force that requires humans as a resource as it requires fossil fuel, endless space in which to dump its waste, and so forth. In the long term, it destroys the viability of complex life in its environment.

This mistake has now been transported from the West to the remainder of the world.

2. The conscious ego is not the *subject* of knowledge, and information is not the *object* of knowledge. They are both, rather, the products of specific acts of knowing

3. Language in the simple, nontheoretical sense is a second-order operation of information on itself—that is, information describing itself. It represents subjectivity.

4. Theory or *logos* is a third-order operation of information on itself—information describing itself describing itself. It represents objectivity.

5. Object and subject wax and wane with purpose. The sustained intensities of objectivity and subjectivity are both ultimately destructive to the world that is their host.

There is also a purposeless intensity that generates information concerning values or the ends which purposes accomplish. This intensity is neither objective or subjective.

6. The common knowledge appears in the light of a theory of theories or a fourth-order operation on information—that is, *abstract expression* (the movement in American painting is incidentally relevant). It is not a knowledge of representation and, thus, the reconciliation of representational loci—subject and object—is unnecessary.

7. There are higher-level operations that it is our opportunity (and perhaps responsibility) to explore. Chaos itself is theorized. The oldest struggle is over. Chaos is understood as complexity. Again, every fragment is whole; again, every whole is fragmentary. We can now think these thoughts. The task, the completion of which may belong to another generation, is to think them until we can inhabit them.

8. Traditionally, a poetics would have been understood as the theory of the inevitable (and inevitably melancholic) return to a lower level of abstraction, the self-conscious practice of world construction in light of high-order self-reflection. The ability to confirm abstract concepts in terms of action was the redeeming quality of poetry for Aristotle, and, although the theory was given a dis-

tinct twist in the seventeenth century, a related notion still underwrites the academic study of literature. Poets are those sad creatures who, having surveyed the powerful theoretical engines that modern culture has promised, turn back, as Wallace Stevens noted, to take one last look at the ducks. Poetry, thus, has been for modern culture the reservoir of responsible nostalgia. It has been a concession to the archaic.

As it is now generally studied and practiced, especially in most creative-writing schools, poetry deserves the contempt that the current inattention to the genre bespeaks. It preaches, even in its most ironic posture, an obedience to abstraction or a rebellious refusal of abstraction—abstraction understood always in some seventeenth-century sense. Most often, it is so deluded about its own nature, it preaches obedience to abstraction in the name of rebellion against abstraction. The old, antitheoretical, workshop poets, frightened by the rigors of logical speculation, are mired in abstraction that they fail to recognize.

Poetics properly understood takes theory—theory well founded or unfounded, centered or decentered—as its content, not its form. It is now clear that hills and stones and trees are, as much as the great philosophic systems, abstract objects. The very notion of concretion is an abstraction. The modern poetry that creates the permanently modern is not a theoretical activities. It is a register not of thought but of feeling so rich as to comprehend all that might be thought of. It is the mastery of theory, the production of life value. Its concerns are quantitative and measurable. How much awareness? How much complexity of feeling? It measures richness not in terms of possessions but in terms of the intensity of living in a complex world. It is concerned with the uniqueness of its own event, not the normative requirements of thought (logic) or of society (propaganda enforced by tradition).

Theory is ruled by the law of noncontradiction; poetics is ruled by the law of non-self-exploitation. In theory, self-reference runs in a *vicious* circle; it is destructive and self-destructive, death seeking. In poetics, self-reference is the mechanism of a sustainable cycle of life.

The Constitution of Life as a Symbolic Machine: Some Sub/Versions

the zig zag mothers of the gods
of science the lunatic fixed stars
& pharmacies
fathers who left the tents of anarchism
unguarded
the arctic bones
strung out on saint germain
like tom toms
living light bulbs
aphrodisia
"art is junk" the urinal
says "dig a hole
"& swim in it"
A message from the grim computer
"ye are hamburgers"
—Jerome Rothenberg, "That Dada Strain"

CHAPTER 2

Symbolic Nature

> Modern European philosophy, even before the *ego cogito* but certainly from then on, situated all men and all cultures—-and with them their women and children—within its own boundaries as manipulable tools, instruments. Ontology understood them as interpretable beings, as known ideas, as mediations or internal possibilities within the horizon of the comprehension of Being.
>
> —Enrique Dussel

THE TWO CULTURES

The Pursuit of the Infinite

The complaint of the seventeenth-century modernists against the scholastic tradition was justified: scholasticism neither progressed nor was interested in progression. Rather, it circled a persistent core of problems, inquiring about the nature of God, society, and man, mediating between the universal categories of logic and unique actualities. The static images that were produced in this contemplation bore witness to a fundamental incommensurability and, thus, to a perpetual ontological crisis. In the Aristotelian scheme each object is unique and each event requires a unique explanation. When a stone falls, according to traditional physics, it suffers an inward transformation that carries it to its "natural place." Until something happens there is nothing to explain; until the stone falls it *is* in its natural place. This knowledge is available only on a case-by-case basis; the disposition of each entity must be individually determined. The maintenance of a just relationship between *eidos* and *nous* was a massive contemplative chore, but it opened direct human participation in the cosmic dynamism.

The seventeenth-century search for a "method" of knowledge was motivated by the hope of discovering entire classes of phenomena that corresponded to the mathematical species of algebra. Unlike classical arithmetic, the new mathematics developed by Vieta and Descartes did not require an actual counting of actual things. Vieta speaks of "the zetetic art [which] does not employ its logic on

numbers—which was the tediousness of the ancient analysts—but uses its logic through a logistic which in a new way has to do with species" (Klein, 1968, 321). Mathematical analysis deals not with particular quantities but with classes of quantities, mathematical potentialities or functions—$y = f(x)$—which describe forms of relationships between *possible* individuals. We know, for example, the *form* of the acceleration of a ball on an incline plane; it can be expressed as a mathematical function. The equation itself tells us nothing, however, about particular balls and particular inclined planes; the relevant quantities must be measured and substituted for the generalized expressions of the formula. The functions in terms of which classical physics is expressed are independent of any *particular* world, and their advantage is precisely their avoidance of particular and sensuous means of expression. Unlike classical *mimesis,* seventeenth-century methodology models a world of which there is no unique image; it defines not images but *infinite classes* of images. Our world, the "real" world, is a contingent instance of the *possibilities* described by the formulae.

If Euclidean geometry is timeless, Cartesian geometry is also paradoxically spaceless. It removes mathematical expression from the realm of concrete intuition altogether. From the time Vieta's "*ars magna* found a place in the system of knowledge in general," Jacob Klein writes, "the fundamental *ontological* science of the ancients is replaced by a *symbolic* discipline whose ontological presuppositions are left unclarified" (Klein, 1968, 184). Thenceforth, the being of all things was not number in the classical sense but an unmeasured, formal property. It could be variously identified with ego, nature, or God, and it could be quickly and conveniently moved from one of these sites to another like the pea in the shell game. The modern view, thus, has a built-in fudge factor. The countable and accountable world was replaced with a formal structure, the content of which is arbitrary and, from a theoretical point of view, even superfluous.

Herman Weyl speaks of the seventeenth-century "leap into the beyond." Thereafter, the efficacious cultural forms became unavailable to intuitive scrutiny. The world to which the senses are responsible leaks out into the infinitely large and small. In an attempt to clarify the attitude of the algebraists, Weyl alludes to certain Indian and Buddhist texts that revel "in the possibilities of producing and designating prodigious numbers by means of the

positional system, that is, by combination of addition, multiplication, and exponentiation." He adds: "In spite of their fantastic aspect there is something truly great about these efforts; the human mind for the first time senses its full power to fly, through the use of symbol, beyond the boundaries of what is attainable by intuition" (Weyl, 1949, 36). One feels this excitement in the writings of the seventeenth-century mathematicians. Vieta's *Introduction to the Analytic Art* (1591) ends by appropriating "to itself by right the proud problem of problems which is: TO LEAVE NO PROBLEM UNSOLVED" (Klein, 1968, 353). And even as he lays out the rules of his methodology, which insist upon the need for caution, Descartes notes simply, "there is no need for minds to be confined at all within limits" (Descartes, 1967, 1). The question of the ontological status of the universal is swept away by this enthusiasm. Herman Weyl:

> The leap into the beyond occurs when the sequence of numbers that is never complete but remains open toward the infinite is made into a closed aggregate of objects existing in themselves. Giving the numbers the status of ideal objects becomes dangerous only when this is done. The belief in the absolute is deeply implanted in our breast; no wonder, then, that mathematics was bold and naive enough to perform the leap. Whoever accepts as meaningful the definition 'n is an even or odd number according as a number x does or does not *exist* such that $n = 2x$,' which refers to the infinite totality of all of numbers . . . , already stands on the other shore; for him the system of numbers has become a realm of absolute existences which is "not of this world" and from which only gleams here and there are caught and reflected in our consciousness. (Weyl, 1949, 38)

This position is often called "Platonic," and there are Platonic arguments that indicate a clear longing for the other shore. In fact, however, Plato knew only a worldly mathematics in which the sequence of numbers, open toward the infinite and the infinitesimal, is never "made into a closed aggregate existing in themselves." Without entering the fray over the Platonic conception of number, which is fought by scholars of formidable learning and dialectical skill, it can be safely said that the modern number, unlike the ancient, does not depend upon actual counting and actual countable entities. The modern view is not simply more abstract but of a different order of abstraction. This is the first

appearance of what Hegel will call "the right infinity," infinity as a real quantity, not just an endless succession.* The knowledge of the *mechanism* of this infinity is the profound gulf that separates modern from ancient culture, and it is only now that we have passed to a still higher level of abstraction that the seventeenth-century leap into the beyond can be fully comprehended.

The complexities of this situation created new a psychology: like an algebraic expression, the Cartesian ego was an ideal object that could be articulated only in formal language, especially the formal language of poetry and art. The rise of mathematical analysis and the poetic traditions of Milton, Donne, and Racine were cognate developments. The new poetry represented an ideal self as mathematics represented an ideal world, both of which are infinite and thus in some sense incomprehensible. The rhythm of the accentual-syllabic line, unlike classical verse, was not based on a real counting of intuitable quantities; it was, rather, a relationship, like an algebraic function, that defined rhythmic species and might be realized by a range of possible performances.

In the new regime each individual soul became the site of a "paradise within," as the archangel Michael tells Adam at the end of *Paradise Lost* and, at the same time, the cultivator of the garden, which reveals God's will by allegory. There were awful paradoxes hidden in this formula, but they were obscured by the substitution of the new methodology for the slower and less-powerful techniques of *mimesis*. The dissociation of sensibility that T. S. Eliot notes in Milton was not a failure of art but a necessary feature of the new program. In a revealing book, *Milton and the Postmodern*, Herman Rapaport argues that "Milton is not a poet of the logocentric, the theocentric book, but a poet who banishes the signified" (Rapaport, 1983, 13). That is, Milton was already a poststructuralist poet. As we shall see, every poet who absorbed and continued the methodological tradition from the beginning both does and does not banish the signified. In one sense, the poets obviously banish it: they create fictions. At the same time, how-

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*Perhaps it will make the general direction of the argument clearer to note here that Hegel's right infinity is, from the point of view of the poetics of common knowledge, the *wrong* infinity. Finitism or the wrong infinity comes back into play seriously in this century in the mathematics of Henri Poincaré, L. E. J. Brouwer, Herman Weyl, and Alexis Yessinin-Volpin. A good introduction to this theory can be found in Charles Stein's introduction to *Being = Space × Action* (Stein, 1988, 1–45), in which an earlier version of this essay originally appeared.

ever, they create special fictions that are truer than the truth of the signified. The *mere* signified exists in an inferior world, a world itself banished and substituted for. For the solipsist who Milton was, the place of the signified is taken by more signifiers. The poststructuralists hardly provide a critique of the tradition: they expose some of the tricks which has it made effective.

Post-Cartesian solipsism was rigorous. Never before had individuals felt so keenly the responsibility for their own beliefs. For the few the intellectual challenge was unsurpassed; for the many only the enthusiasm of hymn singing and Bible thumping made the interior garden seem real at all. In time the intensities and insecurities of the situation became unbearable, and, after the great wave of religious psychosis and strife past, the rational spirit of the theology was attached to science, and the enthusiasm was attached to art. These two modes of the aesthetics of self came to pass for the objective and subjective realms, the one expressed by science, the other by *sentimental* reference to "the tradition." Humans, thus, became sadly subject to their own self-creations, metaphors in which they were weak and unreliable but oddly empowered as agents of change because the Other was created in the image of their reason. They were simultaneously master and slave, godlike creators of replicas on which they modeled themselves, disciplining themselves to their own mechanisms. Although idealism and materialism were their bleak *philosophic* alternatives, philosophy itself was largely irrelevant, except as symptom or official policy. A new psychology had taken hold, and inside it there were no true contraries, as Blake would note. Maintaining a subjectivity so large and commodious that physical mechanism and rational freedom could be simultaneously maintained involved a massive cultural project. The glorification of reason by the scientific community and the glorification of art by the aesthetic community involved claims that could not be responsibility demonstrated, but both were necessary to the emerging culture that valued only a progress that sacrificed all of its vitality to a vicious and infinitely circular regression.

Ideal Language

"Descartes" is our convenient name for the site of cognitive excitement that marks the essential assumption for the community of modern thinkers. The historical personage and his writings are by

no means irrelevant, but the site as such is dependent upon neither. We honor him, rather than Vieta or Galileo and Bacon, who were prior to him in important respects, not only because he independently developed powerful techniques of mathematical analysis but also because he identified mathematical potentialities with pure space, thus creating the context of modern physics and, most significantly, for our purposes, defining the relationships between the common language and formal languages in terms that have persisted as fundamental structures of the culture. Or, if we emphasize the subject rather than the object, we can say that Descartes gave us the first complete image of the modern self, the solipsistic demiurge of modern technological psychology, an entity whose judgements call an unlocated and problematic world into being.

The Cartesian strategy creates a language of language, a writing of writing. It is evidence and understanding of this doubling that we seek in Descartes's work, which is the culmination of a profound culture change, closely associated with the development of printing and the development of linguistic forms appropriate to it. The question and answer format of classical dialectics gives way to a series of manic monologues. Descartes's *Rules for the Regulation of the Mind* consists not of questions and answers but of propositions and commentaries. The modern era is initiated not by catechism or dialogue but by *self*-interpretation. In addition to Descartes, one might think in this regard of the essays of Montaigne, Bacon, and Burton, or the solipsistic implications of the novel in the instigating hands of Cervantes and Defoe. The linearity of print-bred intelligence depends upon writing as an image of abstract temporality, a temporal sense that distinguishes it clearly from the linear duration of oral poetic performance, the temporal play of classical dialectics, and the oratorical time of classical rhetoric. The change from qualitative science to quantitative science parallels a shift in emphasis from ontology to epistemology, from grammar to rhetoric, and from poetry to prose.

The seventeenth-century implementation of a mechanical information-handling technology and its product—the printed book—required the revision of fundamental beliefs and institutions. The proposals for reform were diverse—some more or less useful; some, from our perspective, more or less absurd. Murray Cohen, in *Sensible Words: Linguistic Practice in England, 1640–1785*, gives a useful account of the linguistic projectors (Cohen,

1977). A remarkable number of these diverse projects—developing shorthand scripts or hieroglyphic writing, teaching the deaf and dumb, creating universal grammars, and so forth—shared a common theme of breaking the relationship between language and speech. The animadversions of the linguistic projectors on the centrality of the rhetorical voice anticipated and, in a sense, outdid the twentieth-century critique of voice led by Jacques Derrida. Respect for the voice as the guarantor of self-presence and for the associated metaphysics of the originating Word was undermined as far as the primary intellectual modes were concerned. In the seventeenth century, as in our own times, the fact that European writing was a mere transcription of vocal sounds that in turn referred to objects was a cause of special consternation. Phonetic language seemed to double the distance between a description and its object. As early as 1615, Matthew Ricci gave an influential account of Chinese ideographs, and proposals for visual languages were common. Even Francis Bacon commented on the advantages of glyphic over phonetic writing. Not only teaching the deaf but teaching as if *everyone* were deaf became a primary undertaking of a culture gearing up for book literacy and mathematical technology.

By the end of the century, the outline of a scheme that could compensate for the shortcomings of phonetic writing was articulated. The cultural solution to the problem that arose in the context of Cartesian thought was to create two languages: one formal, descriptive, and geometric; the other expressive, decorative, and historical. Although complex and often inefficient cultural institutions were required to oversee the practical relationship between these primary linguistic zones, the strategy afforded unprecedented intellectual leverage.

Descartes understands at least implicitly the necessary relationship between language reform and technology. In a letter to his friend, Mersenne, dating to about the time he was writing the *Regulae,* he suggests that an ideal language, which, like mathematics, would reveal the truth by virtue of its structure, is possible: "Order is what is needed: all the thoughts which can come into the human mind must be arranged in an order *like the natural order of numbers.*" (Descartes, 1970, 4) The suggestion here is related to the *mathesis universalis* of the *Regulae* as well as Leibniz's plan for a universal calculus, Frege's symbolic logic, Russell's logical atomism, or any language that depends upon the identification and

manipulation of "the simple ideas in the human imagination out of which all human thoughts are compounded." Descartes goes on to say: "The greatest advantage of such a language would be the assistance it would give to men's judgement, representing matters so clearly that it would be almost impossible to go wrong." The conception of a language that grammatically or structurally disallows falsity was a central philosophic fantasy from Descartes to the early Wittgenstein, and it persists, at least as a motivating fantasy, among certain researchers in cognitive science.

Descartes warns Mersenne, however, that he should "not hope ever to see such a language in use. For that, the order of nature would have to change so that the world turned into a terrestrial paradise; and that is too much to suggest outside of fairyland." (Descartes, 1970, 5–6) The recognition that such a language is possible but that it cannot be implemented without *a change in the order of nature* brings us to the moment of the technological crisis, the disjunction between what the order of nature produces of its own accord and what is possible. Most people, perhaps all people most of the time, are hopelessly mired in unreason. If the structure of reality is determined logically, and, therefore, unreasonable people are requirements of that structure, how does one establish the grounds for truth *outside* the habitual and determining language of the peasant or, for that matter, the intellectual salons? What conditions make reason possible? Although Descartes does not pose the question in quite these terms, which belong to Kant and the following century, he confronts the problem directly. If language is determined by habit and thought by language, how might it be possible to establish an arena of free intellectual renovation?

As an "instrument of knowledge," Descartes feels, the natural languages derive from or are secondary to a mathematical science that contains "the primary rudiments of human reason" (Descartes, 1967, 11). At the same time, his inability to develop mathematics *without* the "derivative" language is clear; he must have it in order to state the rules. This is a logical problem of the first order, and Descartes makes the only possible arguments: (1) truth can be established only in an ideal language and (2) the natural language *in the ironic and sentimental mode* can meet its metalinguistic requirements. He draws the analogy to the person who would practice the craft of a smith but who lacks the necessary tools and equipment. It would be necessary, he tells us, for the

person first to fashion the required items in stone and wood and, then, in turn, to use these to make tools of more suitable but more intractable materials. "This method of ours," he writes, "resembles indeed those devices employed by the mechanical crafts, which do not need the aid of anything outside of them, but themselves supply the directions for making their own instruments" (Descartes, 1967, 25). The ideal language is a subset of the natural language, and, if a few clearly defined terms can be established, the remainder of the language can be constructed from these nodes of clarity, or at least that is the hope.

It is not clear, however, that one linguistic mode is the iron to another linguistic mode's stone. Descartes' argument is blatantly circular.* If a language as inclusive and fluent as the natural language is developed, how can it avoid all of the complexity and imprecision of the natural language? Descartes was athwart the problem of ideal languages, which the later Wittgenstein so cogently exposes: "When I talk about language (words, sentences, etc.) I must speak the language of every day. Is this language somehow too coarse and material for what we want to say? *Then how is another one to be constructed?*—And how strange that we should be able to do anything at all with the one we have!" (Wittgenstein, 1953, 49). As a logical problem, it is insoluable. It is possible, however, to create cultural institutions with enough tolerance that the problem can be absorbed, at least in sufficient measure to make ideal languages useful to technology, however uncertain their metaphysical foundations.

The Second House of Culture

The modern strategy for creating ideal languages has been to accept a traditional language as a kind of metaphysical halfway house, while articulating ideal structures that are alien to it. Before undertaking the process of doubt in *Discourse on Method,* Descartes notes that we do not rebuild the house in which we live without furnishing ourselves with "some other house in which we may live commodiously during the operations," so he adopts certain maxims to live by, as he carries out the reconstruction of

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*This fact has generated a series of important essays by some of Descartes's most perceptive readers; these have been collected in a useful volume, *Eternal Truths and the Cartesian Circle,* edited by Willis Doney (Doney, 1983).

philosophy—for example, "to obey the laws and customs of my country, adhering firmly to the faith in which by the grace of God, I had been educated" (Descartes, 1967, 95). That is, he provisionally accepts the tradition that he is questioning and undermining.

The epistemic border that appeared in the seventeenth century was not between the known and the unknown but between two normative languages, the algebraic formalism and the aestheticized natural language. Although the supposed gap between the two cultures has occasioned much impassioned graduation-speech rhetoric, the two languages and the two cultures that serviced them were both essential. Thus, Descartes argues that "To study the writings of the ancients is right, because it is a great boon for us to be able to make use of the labours of so many men . . . But yet there is a great danger lest in a too absorbed study of these works we should become infected with their errors, guard against them as we may" (Descartes, 1967, 5–6). "The ancients" is a code term for what would be known as "culture" in the nineteenth century and "the humanities" in the twentieth. Descartes is thinking not only of the ancient texts but also the entire exegetical tradition, the lock, stock, and barrel of his own formal education, and, more generally, the tradition of letters itself. In counseling casual regard for the ancients, Descartes hits the keynote of subsequent rationalistic, technological, liberal thought. Since the seventeenth century, the *literary* tradition, in the broadest sense, the tradition of literature, of philosophy (to the extent that it has not been a pursuit of formal symbolic systems), of history, of colloquial thought in general, has been implicated in the sentimentality of a prephilosophic Golden Age. The modern West, the culture that has taken modernity as its definitive quality, has obsessively fantasized about its relationship to the ancients. Never has a culture so poised itself upon the dream of another so distant in time and space. Like Chronos with a time machine, we have devoured our ancestors. In audacious and inspired acts of scholarly piracy, we have appropriated classical images that are sensuous, timeless, and wholly inappropriate to the modern impulse. The fantasy has not been hampered by excessive knowledge; we do not know much about the Greeks. It is, at any rate, indirectly the Greece of the scholars that has figured in the modern imagination, but from the Italian neo-Platonists, Mar-

lowe, and Shakespeare, to Joyce and Pound, the reservoir of classical imagery has been the target for a nervous meditation, a recalling and a casting away of a genealogy that we have created to justify and temper our rapaciousness.

The nostalgia for a time in which the particular is perfectly accommodated by the universal and vice versa is the instigating sentimentality of modern rhetoric. Georg Lukács writes: "For the question which engenders the formal answers of the epic is: how can life become essence?" (Lukács, 1971, 30). This is a clear and important formulation. In a preliterate poetry a great deal is forgotten, but the parts that are retained all have equal status. No part of the Homeric text exercises control over the remainder. It is the most parsimonious use of memory, and that which is remembered is worn down to the narrative nubs of myth. There are no irrelevancies: each image and piece of information retains its integrity; the value of information is not absorbed into a structural hierarchy. In Homer, the essences are made manifest, not named. The problem of the individual is solved by the fact that the epic discourse is structured by proper nouns; it never occurs as a problem, because the problem of the universal never arises.

The origin to which the modern West recurs is as much historical as metaphysical or, to say the least, the gap between the requirements of the theory and the practical workings of the culture is immense, and it is only the hopelessly intellectual who assume that the theory is more than an elegant afterthought. We conceive of a philosophic apocalypse in which thought will be sublated and the possibility of Odyssean action will reappear. Both of these conceptions, both the Golden Age and the dialectic that leads *forward* to it, are products of the philosophic tradition, and together they conspire to constitute a project, the program of which is nowhere clearly articulated.

As a rule of thumb in reading modern philosophy, one can assume that the gist of the position is never contained in an isolatable passage. For this reason the kind of textual attention that has been taught by Derrida and his disciples often produces deeply ramified incomprehension. To uncover the movement of the philosophic currents at a given time, it is necessary to examine the given details against the vastest background. The meanings of texts appear only in relation to a tacit knowledge of the complete tradition.

The center of interest is the propulsion toward the coherent truth. This fact discourages scholarship. Although the academy creates the appearance of isolated subject matters for microscopic scrutiny of expert researchers, it is not possible to test the generalizing sweep of even so cautious a philosopher as Descartes—to say nothing of Hegel or Freud—against all of the relevant material.

The histories that are implicit in modern thought, however, are not factual but mythological. Our dream-time happens also to have been an historical epoch from which we can recover texts, artifacts, ruins, and so forth. Our arguments over the nature of Greek social organization, the translation of pre-Socratic philosophic fragments, or the development of vase painting, therefore, are in effect theological.

Unlike the humanist scholars, the scientists and mathematicians were restoring not ancient texts but the pure thought of the Golden Age of science, which we know, if at all, in late and decadent form. Of this blest time, Simon Stevin, the mathematician, writes, "We call the wise age that in which men had a wonderful knowledge of science which we recognize without fail by certain signs, although without knowing who they were, or in what place or when" (Klein, 1968, quoted 187). Descartes goes so far as to accuse the ancients of harboring the secret of their discoveries for mercenary reasons—a practice that was not uncommon among Descartes's contemporaries. The scientists and mathematicians were "rearticulating" a world that never existed. Indeed, as Descartes and others well knew and proclaimed when their rhetoric moved into its other mood, they were drawing a world out of their own baseless creativity. They projected their own epistemological obsessions on a tradition that was largely interested in ontology, and the contradictions that were inherent in their project were deep and generative. The modern dialectic has been responsible to logic, to empirical evidence, and to personal freedom. The primary philosophic enterprise has been to discover a synthesis in which these contradictory claims can be satisfied. Such syntheses are, of course, necessarily unstable: personal freedom finds itself contending with the demands of *both* of the other terms, which are at odds with one another. It was in the creation of a theoretical world that a reasonable compromise seemed possible. The modern impulse has been to create a second world, a universal techno-environment, including perhaps replications of living organisms and, at least in

computers, human intelligence—a replica that adds only its own predictability.

The Unacknowledged House

The two cultures, however, required a third culture, itself unspoken and even unrecognized. The languages of mathematics and poetry required the mediation of prose—a medium in which the ideal languages could be laundered. Jeffrey Kittay and Wlad Godzich write, "prose is considered omnipresent. . . Prose is meant to have no place; prose does not happen. Prose is what assigns place." The universal prose, which appeared in the seventeenth century, was not so much a literary genre as a new world, almost nature itself, which appeared to stand between the objective idealism of science and subjective idealism of poetry. Kittay and Godzich go on to say: "In relation to verse or indeed any other form, prose assumes the position of matter. . . It is there from the beginning, as the *hyle* of the world, and it is what will remain after the destruction of whatever may have been imposed on it. Unlike ancient *hyle*, however, prose is not inert; it does not wait for the inspirational breath to set it in motion, it animates and motivates, disposes, arranges, assembles, and orders by itself" (Kittay and Godzich, 1987, 197). As a self-energizing and motivating medium, prose is both a cultural motor and a persistent source of potential anarchy at the very heart of the culture. It is the resource of printed language: an undefined medium that implicitly encloses as a system all of the combinatorial possibilities of the alphabet. It paradoxically encloses the infinite with finite marks, thus creating an insoluable puzzle for the subject that identifies with its logical possibilities rather than its factual condition.

The terms of the debate over modern prose style were defined more than fifty years ago in classic essays by Morris W. Croll and R. F. Jones and have not been seriously disturbed by subsequent considerations. Croll emphasizes the reaction against the rhetorical style of Cicero by the Senecans—notably, Lipsius, Montaigne, and Bacon—thus seeing the matter as a continuing adjustment of modern practice to classical models. Jones, on the other hand, emphasizes the relationship of prose to science. He shows that many of the important concerns were immediate and utilitarian rather than literary. Therefore, he argues that the thoroughly mod-

ern prose style did not develop before the last half of the seventeenth century. To say the least, there were two strains of prose in the seventeenth century, and the problem has revolved around how to characterize them. Stanley Fish adds a new set of descriptive terms to the opposition without upsetting the distinction: "To the paired terms of my predecessors—Anglican-Puritan, Painted-Plain, Ciceronian-Senecan, Scientific-Rhetorical, Utilitarian-Frivolous—I add a new pair, Self-Satisfying and Self-Consuming" (Fish, 1972, 379). Fish rightly shows that the universal acceptance of the plain style after the Restoration was a result not of the triumph of this or that party but of an epistemological shift that all of the parties more or less shared. Prose style, thereafter, became the intellectual currency, the basis for a dialectic that was not possible as long as different formalisms represented radically divergence logical spaces. Allied with the newly available abstraction, prose was an awesome tool, and it proliferated as the utility of public information and entertainment. Formal beauty and expressiveness were incidental values. It was the raw material of thought or experience. The source of the formalism had been relocated.

Despite the divergence of the sources from which they trace the development, Croll and Jones agree that prose is *natural* language. Of Thomas Browne, Croll says: "He writes like a philosophical scientist making notes of his observation as it occurs. We see his pen move and stop as he thinks. To write thus, and at the same time to create beauty of cadence in the phrases and rhythm in the design—and so Browne constantly does—is to achieve a triumph in what Montaigne called 'the art of being natural'" (Croll, 1971, 70). This line of thought, given another half turn, justifies the automatic writing of the surrealists. Jones, on the other hand, emphasizes the naturalness of the self-effacing style that was favored by Puritan preachers and the scientists of the Royal Society, which are by no means mutually exclusive groups. John Wilkins, for example, who was one of the founders of the Royal Society, authored important statements on the style of both sermons and scientific reports. Jones finds the origins of modern prose style most clearly characterized in the often-quoted prescriptions from Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* (1667). In keeping with the necessary strategy of linguistic renovation, Sprat appeals to the precedent of a Golden Age, praising "primitive purity" that delivers "so many *things*, almost in an equal number of *words*"

and "Mathematical plainness" (Sprat, 1958, 113). Croll conceives of the writer as a creature of nature and thus "natural," where Jones conceives of a writing as natural and thus as colorless as other objects of the Newtonian cosmos. Nature has to be conceived on a scale that could include a natural subject and a natural object. For one, style is the man, and, for the other, a completely styleless language is the equivalent of the objective world. Both speak of essential qualities of this new linguistic form; its allowance of equivocation is a necessary counterpart to the rigors of the idealized formal language of mathematics, on the one hand, and poetry, on the other.

The prose that developed in the seventeenth century and continued as the primary medium of knowledge cannot be simply defined. In a sense, its usefulness depends upon its lack of definition. It is the material from which both the formal language of mathematics and the formal language of poetry is refined. Of a passage from Pascal's essay on "Imagination," Croll says, "Nothing could better illustrate the 'order of nature,'" which is an order of definite objects but uncertain relationships, relationships that are—to use terms that have been common in poststructuralist cant—subject to "sliding or overturning of former categories," "slippage," and "decentering." Prose elegantly allows these imprecisions, which are excluded from both formal mathematical languages and poetry. Croll goes on to note that the sentence "begins by naming the subject, the *plus grand philosophe*, without foreseeing the syntax by which it is to continue. Then it throws in the elements of the situation, using any syntax that suggests itself at the moment, proceeding with perfect dramatic sequence, but wholly without logical sequence, until at last the sentence has lost touch with its stated subject. It is a violent, or rather nonchalant, anacoluthon" (Croll, 1971, 47–48). This is a fair characterization of one boundary of the "world of prose," which, according to Hegel's analysis, appears in the nineteenth century. The other boundary is formed by normative disciplines—rigorous grammars or empirical investigations. In effect, the resources of abstraction that mathematical analysis supplies requires an entire culture as its medium. It is the function of prose to communicate with the incommensurable elements that are necessarily involved in the synthesis—to translate, to absorb the slippage, to allow the play, and so forth. As Robert Adolph writes, "From the Restoration on,

normal literary prose is, to use McLuhan's terms, a 'linear' product of the 'print culture.' The chief aim of such prose is useful public communication" (Adolph, 1967, 245). It becomes an instructional medium, devoted, as Stanley Fish notes, to the universal belief of the Restoration in "the ability of the mind to be instructed in the truth" (Fish, 1972, 380). There are some specialized vocabularies, of course, which distinguish certain professional groups, but prose itself becomes transparent and is only now called into question.

THE TWO LANGUAGES: SPACE

> For the modern scientist energy has no borders, it is a shapeless "mass" of force; even his capacity to differentiate it to a degree never dreamed by the ancients has not led him to think of its shape or even its loci. . . Perhaps algebra has queered our geometry.
>
> —Ezra Pound

Compendious Abbreviations

But Descartes sets a process into operation that moves us inexorably toward contemporary technoculture. The profoundest incoherence—incoherence invoked on behalf of an all-embracing totality—was required to break the sway of the old mentality, and open the cosmic possibilities of the printed book. From his earliest work, the suppressed essay, *The World; or Essay on Light*, Descartes assumes a thoroughly literate cosmos in which voice, like sight per se, has no significant relation to the abstract objects that constitute the field of knowledge. The voice bespeaks itself in language that is not heard, nature writes itself in signs that have no relation to the object, and the soul writes its emotions on the human countenance in signs that must be interpreted. Descartes's dualism divides meaning from voice as decisively as it does body from soul (Descartes, 1979, 4–5).

The central concern of Descartes's *Rules for the Regulation of the Mind* is the relationship between the common language and the conventions of mathematical formalism. His project relates directly to those of his contemporary linguistic projectors. He hopes to translate from the phonetic language to an algebraic language of geometric glyphs. In this connection, he recognizes the need for "certain compendious abbreviations," which supplement

memory and aid "the continuous and uninterrupted action of a mind that has a clear vision of each step in the process" (Descartes, 1967, 8). The Cartesian method is fundamentally typographical: it is concerned with graphic arrangements that clearly reveal the structure of the argument, so mathematical proofs are easily read and the relationships between ideas made manifest. To think in terms of contemporary mnemonic technology, the rules for the regulation of the mind address the problem of programming, the creation of software for the printing press. It would not be overdramatizing to say that Descartes's proposal borders on a mysticism of inscription: "since [memory] is liable to fail us and in order to obviate the need of expending any part of our attention in refreshing it, while we are engaged with other thoughts, art has invented the device of writing." And, he advises: "nothing that does not require to be continuously borne in mind ought to be committed to memory, if we can set it down on paper" (Descartes, 1967, 60).

What does the method require to be continuously borne in mind? Or, conversely, what cannot be committed to the formalism? These are practical questions, the kind of questions that must arise for a practicing mathematician, and questions of this kind, more significantly than questions of ontology, have motivated the history of the past three centuries and more. If the intuition and the expression of mathematical entities required the same kinds of objects, the questions would be simply answered, but they do not. The content of "naked understanding," in Descartes's terms, is "simple natures," entities as colorless and as empty as the natural integers that can be arranged in sequence by a simple enumerative process and then combined by rules to produce all possible valid combinations. For Descartes, these entities may be spiritual, corporeal, or *both at once*. He appeals to them first as ideal objects that must "be taken altogether outside the bounds of the imagination, if they are to be true." And again as merely pragmatic considerations: "It matters little, however, though they [the simple natures] are not believed to be more real than those imaginary circles by means of which Astronomers describe their phenomena, provided that you employ them to aid you in discerning in each particular case what sort of knowledge is true and what false" (Descartes, 1967, 40). There is an inherent contradiction in the idea of an imaginary ideal—that is, an imaginary object of which no im-

age is possible. It is, however, precisely this imageless—which is also to say measureless—image that Descartes takes as the building block of his system (of the world) and that becomes the mark of modern thought. It is variously the infinitesimal point of mathematical analysis and the dimensionless, significant difference of phonology.

The Cartesian symbols, even more distinctly than the phonetic alphabet, are not merely indices of simple natures; they are images that visually replicate an object. Metaphysical purity, therefore, as Jacques Derrida is correct to note, necessitates that the entire argument be comprehended in a single view, as "present to itself." Descartes, however, explicitly makes no such claim: "what I have to do is to run over them [i.e., the properly concatenated propositions in the proof] all repeatedly in my mind, until I pass so quickly from the first to the last that practically no step is left to the memory, and *I seem to view the whole all at the same time*" (Descartes, 1967, 34, my emphasis). He is careful to stay within the *practical* limits of the method: the instantaneous apprehension of the whole that absolute knowledge requires is temporalized. He writes: "even though the understanding in the strict sense attends merely to what is signified by the name, the imagination nevertheless ought to fashion a correct image of the object, in order that the very understanding itself may be able to fix upon other features belonging to it that are not expressed by the name in question" (Descartes, 1967, 59). The ability to relate ideal simple natures to images—literally, marks on the page—is the essential equivocation of modern knowledge. The imagination integrates the names, which for "naked understanding" is in the realm of abstract potentiality, in its world-constituting function. In the century after Descartes, this practical function was sentimentalized and given responsibility for articulating an aesthetic world—the domain of artists and engineers alike.

The evidence for, in Derrida's words, the "unfailing complicity . . . between idealization and speech" (Derrida, 1978a), simply does not appear in Descartes or the work of the other essential thinkers—that is, the thinkers who contribute directly to the development of contemporary technoculture. Of the classical tradition, Derrida's assessment is no doubt accurate. In modern philosophy, however, presence was always and only a sentimentality, albeit a

necessary sentimentality until it was, over a period of centuries, eroded away and replaced with its replica—a statistically fulgent zone in the media flux that can now be controlled by the machinations of popular culture, rather than by metaphysics and theology in collusion with art. Why Derrida's proposal of a grammatology has aroused such exaggerated interest at this late date is not clear. A deep reactionary spirit must need to believe that the question of rational ontology is still open, that the sentimentality that has invested terms such as *self, imagination,* and *environment* with their powerful resonances can be sustained, if only by negation.

If one emphasizes those features of methodology that underwrite its efficacy rather than those that attempt vainly to maintain its consistency, the complicity between idealization and *writing* is clear, and, when voice *is* idealized, typically its structure is bent to the demands of phonetic writing and not the reverse. Certain primitivists, Rousseau and Levi-Strauss, whom Derrida takes as typical, have invoked the classical tradition on behalf nonliterate people, and in a twentieth-century attempt to salvage the Cartesian project, Edmund Husserl idealizes voice, as Derrida elegantly demonstrates in *Speech and Phenomena,* but these are anomalous examples. To the extent that Husserl idealizes voice, he follows neither Descartes's lead, as we have seen, nor the lead of the other dominant strain of modern philosophy—that is, Locke's, with its insistence upon the primacy of writing. Locke's metaphor for the mind as a *tabula rasa* underscores the dominance of writing in the modern *episteme.* We have had a science of writing and *only* a science of writing for the past three and a half centuries.

The ideal self and the ideal object were not required by the Cartesian project; they were concessions to the human need for certainty, not to the practical requirements of the methodology. The power of the formalism, confirmed by the successes of technology, is now secure, and the fact that neither self nor object were functional is exposed. We are all Cartesian modernists, who, by staging an idealism as the pretext for a language without etymologies or sensuous content, have undergone a new beginning. The proliferating formalism often seems overwhelming. It has no outside and no concrete content. Increasingly we are its creatures. If we can expose its implementation, to see how we gradually replaced our intuition of the world and its measured language with

a logic and an aesthetic, perhaps we can begin to reclaim a concrete common world as the content of a community.

Intuition

The seventeenth-century epistemologists reordered the relationship between the arts and the sciences as they were understood in classical and medieval times. In the classical view, art emphasized the practicality of judgement, and science emphasized theory for its own sake. Although the tradition of philosophic utopianism proposed to apply theory to politics, which was the highest art, the thought of applying theory to nature in a practical sense never occurred to the classical thinkers. The Cartesian position represents a change in desire, a reassessment of the relation between thought and the physical world. In the *Tractatus,* the last great document of the Cartesian tradition, Wittgenstein says, "anyone who understands me eventually recognizes . . . [my propositions] as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)" (Wittgenstein, 1961, 151). In the first four rules of the *Regulae,* we witness Descartes's somewhat inelegant scramble up his own ladder of nonsense. Commentators have tried to explain his incoherence, but we must recognize that modernism involves not incoherence as a mere intellectual error but as a consuming and powerful intellectual foundation. Only thus is the logical impossibility of beginning again overcome.

The passages on intuition in the *Regulae* are some of the last tentative looks of Faustian man, self-creating man, whatever we should call the modern human, back to the firmly rooted ontology of the classical world. Descartes substitutes "clear and distinct ideas" for "intuition" in his later work, and when the term intuition returns to philosophic currency in the work of Kant, it has a different valence; it no longer relates to objects as such but to the conditions that make the apprehension of objects possible—that is, the forms of sensibility, time, and space. Descartes's definition of "intuition"—in its particular unclarity—is revealing: "*intuition* is the undoubting conception of an unclouded and attentive mind, and springs from the light of reason alone; it is more certain than deduction itself, in that it is simpler" (Descartes, 1967, 7). We learn a good deal more about what intuition is not than what it is:

it is not sense perception, it is not imagination, and it is not deduction. Although it is not reason as such, it is "born of the light of reason"—that is, apparently, to the mind which *shines with* reason, purely and attentively. His examples are of two sorts, intuitions of the self and intuitions of geometric properties: "Thus each individual can mentally have intuitions of the fact that he exists, and that he thinks; that the triangle is bounded by three lines only, the sphere by a single superficies, and so on" (Descartes, 1967, 7). We have knowledge of at least one singular object, the knowing self, and of certain classes of objects that are tautologies—the necessary constituents of judgements which are synthetic and a priori. The problem for epistemology is to join them. The argument that Kant finally articulates is implicit in Descartes's development of the idea.

Rule 1 states: "The end of study should be to direct the mind towards the enunciation of sound and correct judgements on all matters that come before it" (Descartes, 1967, 1). "Judgement," a common term of traditional logic, has to do with building up true propositions from simple elements, as opposed to syllogistics—the study of the relationships between propositions. The notion, however, that the *focus* of intellectual effort should be judgement rather than syllogistics was radically new. According to the methodologists, medieval logic had been lax in judgement, that is, in determining the truth of the premises. The importance of this distinction goes to the very root of Descartes's differentiation of his work from the Scholastics'. The problem for the thinker who is intent upon a thoroughgoing revision of the philosophic tradition is to adjust not merely the philosophic terminology but the relationships among the terms that inform the entire structure of thought. The meanings of the terms and the meanings of the terms in which the terms are defined must all be changed at once. Change of this order marks the difference between the profound modernist, such as Descartes, and, for example, the so-called modernists who fought the war between the ancients and the moderns in the eighteenth century. Those who complacently understand their position as "modern" are, in effect, already postmodern. The *Regulae* is a remarkable work precisely because of the insight into the perpetual modernist crisis that it affords. Modernism is that state of mind in which the system and the objects of one's thought wax and wane together.

In the commentary to the first rule, Descartes does not address the relationship between judgement and syllogistics directly. Rather, paraphrasing a passage from Aristotle, he renovates a series of related terms. Implicitly, the argument proposes that judgement is to syllogistics as the sciences are to the arts and as the mind is to the body. In this context, all of these central terms—and many others that depend upon them—come loose from their traditional moorings in scholastic thought and provide Descartes with a plastic medium in which to express himself. The precise meanings of the terms in the commentary are never specified; moreover, "judgement," which is the central term of rule 1, is given only indirect amplification.

The commentary focuses on the Aristotelian distinction between the sciences and the arts: "sciences . . . entirely consist in the cognitive exercise of the mind, [and] . . . the arts . . . depend upon an exercise and disposition of the body." The arts, with their physical involvements in the world, deal with *particular* subject matters and *particular* judgements or conclusions, rather than the theory of judgements as such. To his first examples of the arts, agricultural operations and harp playing, Descartes adds investigations into "human customs . . . the virtues of plants, the motions of stars, the transmutations of metals," and so forth. The sciences, on the other hand, "taken all together are identical with human wisdom, which always remains one and the same, however applied to different subjects, and suffers no more differentiation proceeding from them than the light of sun experiences from the variety of the things which it illumines." The science for which Descartes speaks represents Renaissance megalomania at its most dramatic: it has no specific content; it is rather the rules by which any possible content can be constructed; and, above all, it prepares the reasonable person "not for the purpose of resolving this or that difficulty of scholastic type, but in order that his understanding may light his will to its proper chance in all the contingencies of life" (Descartes, 1967, 1–2). The moderns propose to deal with the contingencies of life from the perspective of that which is *not* contingent and to renovate the physical world on behalf of the mind. Knowledge of particular things and events derives from judgements of universals, so the actual world is secondary to the Cartesian ego. "Judgement" is no longer a matter of building up isolated propositions

from simple apprehensions; it is rather a world-constituting act. *The first proposition of modern philosophy is technology.*

Western science is neither simply a method nor a body of knowledge but a complex institution that coordinates method and knowledge with psychological forms. I know of no scholarly account of the crucial role that art, and especially the timed arts, poetry and music, played in the development of the scientific project of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They too became in a sense technological, as implementations of the soul. Descartes sets the stage for a powerful movement in art that creates the requisite psychology of selfhood. In Milton and Donne, in El Greco, in Bach, and in the facades of Baroque churches, we can see signs of a new human creature that understands itself as infinite potentiality, as the generator of language that contains all knowledge and expresses not the outcome of science but its resources. It was the artist who supplies the profound *imagination* that methodology requires as a substitute for intuition. The new mode is clear, for example, in Bruno's attacks on Petrarch and in the widespread appearance of metaphysical poetries—"Concettismo," "Marinismo," "Gongorismo." The new images are not based on similitude. The vehicles of the metaphors are directly intuitable—a beloved and a compass in the famous example from the poem by Donne—but the relationships between them are not; how the terms relate must be explained. This strategy opens vast new metaphoric spaces: at *some* level of abstraction, everything is like everything else. The modern mind is more at home with paradoxes than with ontological mystery; it prefers recursive languages that require tireless but potentially entertaining interpretation to an hierarchical language that requires absorbed contemplation. Baroque art is the aesthetic leap into the beyond that corresponds directly to mathematical analysis.

The Equivocations

The difficulties that are presented by the self-reflective requirements of methodology appear in the commentary on rule 4: "There is need of a method for finding out the truth." In itself, this rule does not seem powerful, but it goes directly to the heart of the modernist objection to scholastic learning that made heavy concessions to contingency. Descartes writes: "So blind is the curiosity by

which mortals are possessed, that they often conduct their minds along unexplored routes, having no reason to hope for success, but merely being willing to risk the experiment of finding whether the truth they seek lies there" (Descartes, 1967, 9). The failure to appreciate precisely this *risk* indicates a complete lack of interest in the primary form of intuition, which is mimetic rather than methodological. The mimetic sense of the world presupposes an object of imitation the nature of which is radically different from, perhaps even incommensurate with, the medium of imitation. That is, the classical tradition was profoundly, not just grammatically, dualistic. The *logos* of the tradition did not confuse Being with language. Discourse might be *about* the meditative object, but methodology institutes an inherently linguistic world as its field of operation. Only with Cartesian rhetoric do "discourse" and "meditation" begin to be synonyms.

Certain textual peculiarities in the *Regulae* and especially in the commentary to rule 4, which have been widely noted by readers of the work, are revealing. It is possible to see Descartes struggling with the complexities of his incoherent strategy. The first paragraph of the commentary more or less recasts the first three rules, and the second asserts the rediscovery of an ancient mathematical method. Although we do not know exactly when the *Regulae* was written, it was probably after Descartes had discovered algebraic geometry, a development that seems to be on his mind, because he tells us that he is thinking not of an "ordinary mathematics" but rather of an "instrument of knowledge . . . [that is] the source of all others." The confusion over the nature of this science has been far greater than is justified by the textual difficulties. The problems are logical, not textual, and they remain a constant of the philosophic tradition from Descartes himself, who found a way in the *Discourse* to sweep them under the rug, to Noam Chomsky and the foremost current French proponent of geometric mechanism, René Thom.

Although most of the "repetitions" in the *Regulae* can be accounted for in terms of perfectly normal thematic development that could have been worked out in revision (Descartes never prepared the manuscript for publication), there are a few passages in which Descartes is clearly struggling with serious philosophic problems. Consider, for example, this pair of passages:

> 1. For the human mind has in it something that we may call divine, wherein are scattered the first germs of useful modes of thought. Consequently it often happens that however much neglected and choked by interfering studies they bear fruit of their own accord. (Descartes, 1967, 10)
>
> 2. But I am convinced that certain primary germs of truth implanted by nature in human minds—though in our case the daily reading and hearing of innumerable diverse errors stifle them—had a very great vitality in that rude and unsophisticated age of the ancient world. (Descartes, 1967, 12)

These are not sentences of an inept or immature writer, as some commentators have suggested; they are written with a sensitivity to tone, nuance, and rhetorical impact. Whether the germs of truth are divine or natural might seem a matter of significant indecision, but it makes no difference to the actual *structure* of the argument. In either case they are *innate* and, equally important, they were known to the ancients; that is, a trace of them exists in the traditional learning. The *problem* is accounting for error. The tradition is obviously responsible for the "diverse errors" of the schoolmen, but it must, at the same time, somehow give evidence of these originary germs of learning. A logic never begins; it must have been so always. The old house of the new culture is not merely a convenience; it supplies a necessary component.

The same problem emerges dramatically in Descartes' account of the relationship between ancient and modern mathematics. Again, in these passages, Descartes is trying out alternative assessments of the modern renovation:

> 1. At the present day also there flourishes a certain kind of arithmetic, called Algebra, which designs to effect, when dealing with numbers, what the ancients achieved in the matter of figures (Descartes, 1967, 10).
>
> 2. For it seems to be precisely that science known by the barbarous name Algebra, if only we could extricate it from that vast array of numbers and inexplicable figures by which it is overwhelmed, so that it might display the clearness and simplicity which, we imagine, ought to exist in genuine mathematics (Descartes, 1967, 12).

As in the previous passages, Descartes's stance is already in the schematic world picture which depends upon a new formal lan-

guage for its expression. If there is only the mechanism of unreasoning habit, on the one hand, and the invariant rules of the *mathesis universalis*, on the other, how does one make the transition from the false mind to the true? If knowledge is innate, it is impossible to account for the pervasiveness of error. If, however, it represents genuine innovation, it is impossible, having only the false tradition, to account for the ability to recognize the new truth.

These inconsistencies represent the efforts of a major philosopher, entering the mature phase of his thought, struggling with an insoluble problem at the center of his system. The fact that the system has had pervasive influence on the subsequent intellectual history of the West should perhaps be enough to make us doubt that logical consistency is as fundamental as we have believed. In terms of the increase of intellectual efficacy, in fact, the evidence might more fully support the usefulness of allowing thought to play back and forth between a willful dualism and a theoretical commitment to coherence. Any ideal language necessarily waffles in relationship to the common language it is intended to replace. The relationship between methodological thought and colloquial thought, between the new mathematics and the scholastic tradition, is necessary and necessarily obscure. Had Descartes prepared the manuscript for publication, he would have no doubt produced a text in which the problems are not so blatant, but the equivocation is essential to the program itself.

Rules 5 and 6 propose a method for analyzing complex arguments into their constituent parts and ordering simple natures in useable form, while rules 7 through 11 outline synthetic techniques for reconstituting the world in an ideal mathematical language. Rule 6, in particular, Descartes tells us, contains "the chief secret of method . . . For it tells us that all facts can be arranged in certain series, not indeed in the sense of being referred to some ontological genus such as the categories employed by philosophers in their classification, but in so far as certain truths can be known from others." (Descartes, 1967, 16) By carefully keeping track of absolute and relative terms—the structure of the hierarchy—it is possible to enumerate statements in order from the simplest and clearest to "whatever is said to be dependent, or an effect, composite, particular, many, unequal, unlike, oblique, etc." By exploiting

the mnemonic technology of writing and particularly writing in the convenient and easily manipulated form of print, data can be managed in sure and powerful ways.

If the analytic function is the great secret of the Cartesian method, Descartes gives a much fuller and less-confusing account of the synthetic process. It is not necessary, for our purposes, to go into the procedures; more sophisticated versions of them are known to undergraduate mathematicians. The kind of *attention* that is being proposed beginning in rule 7, however, requires a radically new psychology. If thought can be regulated in its own operations and, thereby, released from the contingency of world, it can explore all possibilities. *Classical thought attended to the relation of form to thing; the modern, to the relation of form to form.* Descartes writes: "I am now able by attentive reflection to understand what is the form involved by all questions that can be propounded about the proportions or relations of things, and the order in which they should be investigated; and this discovery embraces the sum of the entire science of Pure Mathematics" (Descartes, 1967, 20). The confidence that the mind can extend its knowledge of actual structure to the structure of actuality is essential to the modern will to power.

In rule 12, which summarizes and concludes the first section of the *Regulae,* Descartes reintroduces the use of imagination, sense, and memory, but now their subordination to intuition and deduction—or the "understanding," in his term—is assured. The *mechanical* quality of imagination, sense, and memory is emphasized. The image of the human that Descartes presents is a being consisting of two texts or as existing at the intersection of two texts: one belongs wholly to the physical, mechanical world; the other is divinely or naturally inscribed in the mind in the form of combinatory techniques that encompass descriptions of all of the world's possibilities. In a metaphor that he carries through an extended passage, Descartes compares the body with its secondary intellectual faculties to a writing pen. In early modern grammatology, this passage must stand with Locke's discussion of the *tabula rasa*. Judgement is always judgement of a specific writing. He initially introduces the figure to explain how sense impressions are transmitted from the external world to some part of the body without the passage of "any real entity from one to the other":

> It is in exactly the same manner that now when I write I recognize that at the very moment when the separate characters are being written down on the paper, not only is the lower end of the pen moved, but every motion in that part is simultaneously shared by the whole pen. All these diverse motions are traced by the upper end of the pen likewise in the air, although I do not conceive of anything real passing from the one extremity to the other. Now who imagines that the connection between the different parts of the human body is slighter than that between the ends of a pen, and what simpler way of expressing this could be found.
>
> Conversely, the fancy manifests itself by the opposite motion of the pen. This example also shows how the fancy can be the cause of many motions in the nerves, motions of which, however, it does not have the images stamped upon it, possessing only certain other images from which these latter follow. Just so the whole pen does not move exactly in the way in which its lower end does; nay the greater part seems to have a motion that is quite different from and contrary to that of the other. (Descartes, 1967, 38)

It is unfortunate that the discussion of Descartes's mechanism has focused so heavily on the question of animals. Although his readers have been scandalized by the thought that horses and dogs may be automata, Descartes thinks of the larger part of *human* behavior as mechanistic and, as it turns out, *grammatological*. He argues that language is necessary to rational behavior and that the lack of language in animals is sufficient to prove that their actions are mechanical, but he does not say that language *assures* rational behavior. Self-directed activities of mind are rare and occur only when the germs of knowledge are awakened and utilized. Otherwise the stimulus-response circuit is merely robotic. These germs may, and presumably did, lay dormant for eons, and even in times when the method is known, true understanding is uncommon. The casual capacity for language—that one has a store of words, grammatical patterns, certain habitual uses, and so on—may be merely habitual and automatic. The other requirement of rational behavior is *method*.

Descartes's rhetorical strategy in the *Discourse* is to stage the epistemological question in terms of autobiography; thus shifting the question from matters of theoretical consistency to matters of education or development: "I shall endeavor in this discourse to

describe the paths I have followed, and to delineate my life, in order that each one may be able to judge of them for himself," (Descartes 1967, 83) and so forth. Consequently, he is never required to make a whole-cloth translation from the common language to the ideal. The process, rather, is the initiation into error which is gradually recognized and corrected. The circularity of the argument is less obvious because we allow that people learn from their mistakes, while logical systems do not. It is the prototype of other self-improvement schemes. Since Descartes, we have increasingly placed our trust in our ability to construct the world (and self) we require, first as mathematical replicas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then as technological replicas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

THE TWO LANGUAGES: TIME

> In English the poetics became meubles—furniture—
> thereafter (after 1630
> & Descartes was the value
> —Charles Olson, "A Later Note of Letter #15"

The Cyborg

Let us quickly focus the issues: Descartes substituted the models of mathematical analysis for the external world. Newton, recognizing the mistake, tried to reverse the field, and he turned Descartes inside out—as later Marx would turn Hegel upside down—but it was too late. Substituting his own empiricism for Descartes's rationalism, Newton changed the perspective but not the metaphoric structure: he transferred the divinely underwritten logical structure of ego to a prior and absolute space, which he identified with divinity. That is, the founders of modern physics, despite their apparent oppositions, both conceived of the difference between the human and the divine as a matter of perspective. The chief intellectual project thereafter was the creation of human replicas to inhabit these perspectives that were oddly more rational than humans themselves. Descartes even conceived of constructing automata that might appear fully human.

His model of human beings, which treats the nervous system in terms of coding and information transfer, is a direct forerunner of

contemporary models in cognitive science and artificial intelligence. Descartes could not, however, account mechanistically for functions that are considered "mental," that is, especially *purposive functions*. His automata might have behaved as if they were doubting, thinking, and knowing, but they could not doubt, think, and know.

Until this century, and the discovery of cybernetic self-organization, it was not clear how to reconcile purposive and mechanistic behaviors. They appeared to have different temporal structures. Cartesian science related the adequacy of causal explanation to the atemporality of geometry, thereby displacing scholastic teleology from the ontological to the cultural domain and rendering questions of purpose merely social and pragmatic. The cultural institutions at large became responsible for managing change or "progress" in a concrete realm that was implicitly technological; that is, teleology became a cultural and historical project, distinct from those other "timeless" processes of nature. The human agent as a purposive motor became the supreme cultural product.

Poetry and the Cartesian Circle

The prepublication manuscript of Descartes's *Meditations* was circulated among many of the important philosophers and theologians of the day, and Descartes responded to the objections in an appendix to the first edition. The objections of the logician of Port Royale, Antoine Arnauld, are the most telling. One might trace the beginnings of deconstruction to Arnauld's discovery that Descartes's arguments are circular or, perhaps more accurately, to the cultural decision to carry on Descartes's project despite its circularity. The foundation of modern epistemology involves putting off the proof of the premises until they can be supported by the conclusion. This is the basis for the progressive production of knowledge, and, if we can doubt its logical basis, we cannot deny its spectacular, material success.

Thus, deconstruction has not died, as it has been announced in various forums; it was, in the motto of the Hell's Angels, "born dead." It was the active principle of negation that fueled the dialectic, the sneer on the lips of the Cartesian demon, the car on what Hegel called "the way of despair." Though this movement of

deathliness achieved a peculiar vitality during the Reagan era, it was not a fad: the other moment of deconstruction was the abstract, generalized systematicity of thought itself. If the construction of atemporal formalisms was the positive practice of post-Cartesian scientific culture—the persistence that tied it to the classical stasis—deconstruction was its historical motive. Time was not the intuition of change but a disciplined taking apart of taking apart, an analyzing of analysis. Together the stasis of the formal systems and the dynamism of their historical failures and reconstructions underwrote an ironic absolutism and a fundamental, ultimately corrosive cynicism.

We have space for only a cartoon history of deconstruction, but it will make the necessary points. Descartes discovered that it was possible to define a formal subset of the natural language that so exposed the logical structure that precise calculations were possible. That is, the rules for the regulation of the mind could be stated in the natural language and then the natural language could be criticized for its logical inadequacies from the special perspective that the new formal rules allowed. The construction of formal systems, pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, involved an implicit deconstruction of the natural language, and this somewhat inelegant mechanism of thought has been fundamental to the success of progressive knowledge during the past three centuries. As it turned out, the formal systems were never, as Descartes had hoped, complete or completable, but the natural language was forever in the process of being devalued from a succession of emergent formal perspectives. Of course, the first great formal systems—analytical geometry and infinitesimal calculus—were quantitative, but Descartes recognized from the beginning the possibility of a *mathesis universalis* which would embrace all discourse. As Chomsky has rightly noted, the science of linguistics was explicit in the Cartesian program. The interpretation of the natural language increasingly depended upon formal models, until finally it was understood in terms of the formal models of Chomsky and Montague.

The weakness of the new formal language was semantic. The structures themselves were elegant and powerful; the formal, generalized signs, however, did not have easy intercourse with the singularities of the world. Either the sign gained meaning by somehow pointing at things that were not themselves elements of the formal system—an idea that had strong commonsense appeal but

proved to be theoretically awkward—or the signs were understood as having more signs as their meaning, so the coherent formal system was assumed to relate to the coherent world as a whole. In either case, it was necessary, at least implicitly, to bind symbols to their referents by force, and the history of philosophy from Descartes and Locke to Freud, the Vienna Circle, the early Wittgenstein, and many current cognitive scientists can be read as a series of strategies for the generation and management of that force.

The sign, the thoroughly modern sign, gained its shape from participation in a logical system based on distinctions that cut the universe of discourse into discrete entities. To name—and of course all naming in literate cultures is implicitly the naming of the phonemes—was to make a cut in universal logical space, differentiating a particular class from all possible classes. Although awful paradoxes lurked in the notion of a class of all possible classes, these *structures* were rich and useful. They underwrote Newtonian physics and thus subsequent European science and philosophy. Kant was Newtonian; Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud were Newtonians; Hegel, despite himself, was a Newtonian (he had no other cosmology available). The dialectic engaged language, and the entire content of its particular historical moment, thus energizing concrete change in the relationship between humankind and nature, between social classes, and so forth. Deconstruction involved at once the failure of philosophic theories and the fall of empires. Whatever the specific connections between Locke and Jefferson, Rousseau and Robespierre, Marx and the revolutions of 1848, Nietzsche and Bismarck, the dialectic of thought and the dialectic of action managed a complex intercourse. After World War II, however, if not after World War I, that profound synchronicity was erased. Thereafter, history was motivated not by abstract thought but by technology.

The deconstruction*ism* of the past quarter-century is the *generalization* of this dialectical unravelling. It understands that any *historical* construction is a shambles even from the moment of its conception. The dialectic is now almost exclusively academic: thought passes so graciously from thesis to antithesis, it does not, as it were, rough up the ground enough to generate significant historical movement. The logical field is so plastic that any claim can be adequately sublated in a few familiar gestures. The semantic resources of the natural language, which had provided a useful

metalanguage from which new formal programs could be launched, has decayed, and now we suffer from something like intellectual heat death, that ultimate moment prophesied, in different ways, by the laws of thermodynamics and by Tristan Tzara, when all energy is equally dispersed throughout the cosmos. From his apocalytpic vantage, Hegel saw knowledge in the self-destructive play of self-reference. Given knowledge of the Absolute, the contradictions that propelled the dialectic were both resolved and not resolved: everything was itself *and* nothing was different than anything else; everything was the same *and* different; *everything* that was true was false and *everything* that was false was true. We live in the aftermath of this destruction. The mind was turned into a computer, and consciousness itself was turned into a television long before technology caught up. The earth is overrun with our representations of earth. We have entered a universal, grey medium—the postmodern blob. The representation cannot be represented.

The deconstructionists have cogently demonstrated that it is impossible, in absolute terms, for a writing to carry in itself the information that is necessary for its interpretation. They have not concluded however that the demand for such information is therefore nonsensical or that the rationalist project with its self-defeating mechanisms is bankrupt. In fact, many of them, under the melancholic influence of Freud and Lacan, figure that it is precisely the information, the lack of which is the cause of our misery. The private language has not been dismissed, but driven underground, and named the "Unconscious," so problems that resisted the fully confident and authoritative Cartesian self must now be puzzled out in the half-light (or less) of a fractured ego. We discover at this point—and the logical turns begin to appear with a dizzying rapidity—that the terms that define our condition are themselves unreliable. Jacques Derrida writes: "the Freudian concept of trace must be radicalized and extracted from the metaphysics of presence which still retains it (particularly in the concepts of consciousness, the unconscious, perception, memory, reality, and several others)" (Derrida, 1978b, 229). We are thus on the flip side of the liar's paradox. Radicalized and extracted, these concepts that map the essential Freudian structures are all subject to the paradox of self-reference: at least part of the time (and there is no way to know when), therefore, consciousness is unconscious,

perception is hallucination, memory is forgetfulness, reality is illusion, and so forth. "Logically," one might replace any of the central terms with their opposites. Such, literally, is the sad condition of post-Hegelian logic.

Derrida's own address is an instance of a particular kind of decorum. The concepts in which we have sought the meaning of our lives turn out to be norms, statistically reliable zones of thought. We have no idea what their status might be, but it happens that the individual instances that they subsume are numerous or at least numerous enough, lacking an absolute accounting, to be persuasive. In this context, it is possible to entertain remarkable, fascinating and thought-defying questions, as when, Derrida asks, in the concluding paragraph of "Freud and the Scene of Writing," "How . . . , on the stage of history, can writing as excrement separated from the living flesh and the sacred body of the hieroglyph (Artaud), be put into communication with what is said in *Numbers* about the parched woman drinking the inky dust of the law; or what is said in *Ezekiel* about the son of man who fills his entrails with with the scroll of the law which has become sweet as honey in his mouth" (Derrida, 1978b, 231). It is of course a trick question. All of the variously possible answers are wrong and right. Points are given for style, and, by an unspoken agreement, style is judged by the canons of traditional French prose with all of its Cartesian assumptions, which is to say, of course, that there is no room for sloppiness; every detail must be clear and distinct. As it turns out, only the grand abstractions are equivocal. Stylistic requirements carry the weight of authority. Derridean "logic" has the rigor not of a Frege or Russell but of a Flaubert or Mallarmé.

"Can writing *as excrement* . . . ?" Derrida asks. We might also answer the question observing a different decorum. Tristan Tzara: "Dada remains in the European framework of weaknesses, still it is a bunch of excrement, but we want to shit in different colors to ornament the zoo of art of all the consulate flags." Although for Tzara language is utterly public, without interior dimensions, he shares with Derrida a logical form, the final reduction of the central concepts of the European dialectic to the logical rubble of self-reference. He also writes: "Anti-dadaism is a sickness: selfcleptomania, the normal human condition is DADA. But the true dadas are against DADA" (Tzara, 1973, 147). Those who favor Dadaism are mere avant-garde tourists, who haven't a clue as to

the depths of outrage which Dadaism bespeaks. If you are for Dada, you are against it; if you are against Dada, you are for it.

The Derrida phenomenon in literary studies—quite apart from any assessment of Derrida's actual accomplishment—was symptomatic of an academic discipline in trouble. For twenty-five hundred years philosophy had concerned itself with the relationship between particular things and abstract categories, and poetry was the site on which these terms endlessly failed to fulfill the others requirements—a site of primary cultural transactions, where the most abstract and reliable knowledge intersected with images of actual objects and events, where eternity and time played out their most spectacular dramas. Although individuals are common—indeed the very building blocks from which basic concepts are generalized—the adequate manifestation of the individual required all of the artifice the culture could muster. Western art was a wondrous *ad hoc* solution to the most enduring problem of Western philosophy. From the time of Hegel to the time of Norbert Wiener, philosophic attention shifted to the relationship between abstract categories and the nature of abstraction as such. The issues of the greatest philosophic consequences have not to do with the the relationship of the One and the Many but with the relationship of first- and second-order abstractions. The individual can now be assumed merely as a statistically reliable zone. The *One,* the concept, relates to the many, not by way of contradiction (and thus dialectical process), but by way of the bell-shaped curve. Thus, for Derrida, the central philosophic problem is not the relationship between Being and the individual chair or person, as it was for Parmenides and every philosopher until, at least, Hegel, but the relationship between Being and the abstract systematicity of phonetic writing as against the abstract systematicy of speech, on the one hand, and nonphonetic writing, on the other. Derrida's ploy is desperate but courageous: to seize not the constructive moment but the inevitable, deconstructive moment, when the dialectic produces not the heroic leader on the white horse but the markings on the pages of an infinite book as the occasion of ecstatic attention. To assert boldly and without reservation a commitment to writing as the image of death itself represents an ultimate self-sacrifice to the Idea of history as writing. This drives the silver stake through the heart of the vampiric ego, thus rendering a world, like the Flaubertian book, held together by almost nothing but style. Al-

though Derrida takes up literary texts and reads them with much subtlety and grace, he does not take up the literary problem. Derridean philosophy declares, in effect, that the literary problem—the peculiar incommensurability of the individual thing and the concept to which it belongs—is solved. Indeed that clarity of image vis-à-vis concept, which was the motive of post-Aristotelian aesthetics, was a trick, a philosophically irresponsible and even dangerous trick that glossed over the failure of metaphysics.

Certain artists, however, posed individual entities that do not depend upon the *concept* for their definition or meaning. That is, when abstraction managed to name its concepts without deriving them from individuals, individuals likewise were freed their dependency upon conceptuality. It is the commonality of the individual, its freedom from disciplinary concepts, its *action* (rather than its image) that literary theory must now grasp.

What kind of motion is *e*-motion? Consider gestural space—the sum possibilities for human acts, internal and external, the movements of thought as well as the movements of arms, legs, and head, the acts of lungs, throat, teeth, and lips in the production of sounds. These acts of living are not representative of something else but meaningful in themselves. The arm moves through an infinite number of points, passing from one to the other, solving Zeno's paradox without difficulty. The gestural universe does not have to move toward deferred equilibrium; it *is* in equilibrium at every point. A gesture may stop or it may continue. If it stops, there is no dynamic residue.

By contrast, logic begins by taking a gesture as a *symbol* of a distinction: a formalism is introduced. The thing indicated is distin guished from *everything* else. The continuity of the gestural space is broken by reference. Logical space is not continuous but composed of a series of discrete objects or atoms. So long as the reference remains relatively local, the formalism is manageable and useful, but when it begins to refer to its own processes, it enters upon a self-destructive oscillation. What is required is the study not of logics but of poetics, the domain to which the gesture rather than the reference is fundamental. It is necessary not to deny reference—gestures sometimes point at things—but to confuse the value of the gesture with the value of the reference is deathly. Gesture is free and improvisatory, reference constitutes machines that it has been the Western habit—and confusion—to call "souls."

We know a good deal about the logical requirements of poetry (which turn out to be impossible to achieve) but too little about the *poetic* requirements of poetry. "I permit to speak at every hazard," Walt Whitman writes at the outset of "Song of Myself." Though it is too rare, we know such speech, the speech of free improvisation, without "talk of the beginning and the end," as we know such improvisation in painting and music in the work of Kandinsky, Schwitters, Guston, and Pollock, Cage, Coleman, Coltrane, Taylor, and others. If there are rules, they must belong to each hazard, each contingent occasion, not to a universal logos. We must see that such speech is required of a singularity, not of a generalized logical entity. Our ignorance is desperate. If meaning is representation, if X *means* because it can be exchanged for Y, "this process has no return," In poetics, however, things mean not because they can be exchanged for something else but precisely because they *cannot* be exchanged. Each gesture is unique; its value derives from its unrepeatable moment, not what it can be exchanged for. The dynamism, which has been attributed to historical dialectic, derives rather from the emotion of gesture. Intelligence does not significantly represent the world, it measures it by its acts.

Confidence beyond Thought

> For this is the company of the living
> and the poet's voice speaks from no
> crevice in the ground between
> mid-earth and underworld
> breathing fumes of what is deadly to know,
> news larvae in tombs
> and twists of time do feed upon,
>
> but from the hearth stone, the lamp light,
> the heart of the matter where the
> house is held
> —Robert Duncan, "Tribal Memories"

Pythagorus—or perhaps I should say, the thought that is mythologically bound to the name "Pythagorus"—casts a very long shadow over the intellectual history of the West. The authority that was associated with number before the rise of algebra is difficult for us to comprehend. The meditation on numbers which is a

consistent current of intellectual engagement before the sixteenth century seems fanciful and superstitious. For St. Augustine, however, to name only one prestigious example, numbers were the real things of which the world was constituted, and the knowledge of numbers gave far more direct and reliable knowledge of both nature and God than language as such, which he understood as as logical categories bound by social convention. The relationships between the first three integers, he believed, were far more necessary and binding than any mere grammatical relationship. Moreover, in a thought that derived from Pythagorean sources, he believed that the self-identity of the soul was bound to the absolute nature of enumeration. Summarizing the Augustinian doctrine, Etienne Gilson writes:

> A soul is one only on condition that it remain consistent with itself, i.e., that it regularly display the same powers and perform the same actions. . . No matter what thing we consider, whether material or spiritual, individual or social, it appears as something constituted by numbers, relations, proportions, equalities, or resemblances, and these in turn are merely the creature's attempt to imitate the original likeness whereby God is perfectly equal to Himself, i.e., His essential and indivisible unity. (Gilson, 1960, 212)

With the appearance of the species numbers of algebra, however, these relations, proportions, and equalities took on infinite dimensions. It was experienced, as we have seen, as a dizzying expansion of potential knowledge. The discovery that the integers have no ontological integrity, however, merely prefigured the nineteenth-century discovery that Euclidean space is not unique, and the twentieth-century discovery that logic itself can be constructed on a variety of radically differing axiomatic assumptions.* From the initial Cartesian "leap into the beyond," we arrived in an intellectual space that is so abstract that we cannot say whether it is the form or the content of the world that we actually inhabit.

With the appearance of methodology, however, the mathematical stuff of the cosmos was no longer available to experience. The

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*J. L. Bell gives a readable, nontechnical account of this development in his essay "Category Theory and the Foundations of Mathematics" (Bell, 1981).

measure by which the soul had attuned itself to itself was trivialized as one of an infinite number of cases. The quantitative bases of classical poetic meter–a real counting of real rythmic durations–was undermined and replaced with an abstract scheme in which the meter of the poem and the movement of its individual performances were directly analogous to an algebraic function and its individual roots. Poetry thus lost its status as a component of the real. Its functions were social and normative. Now that those functions are largely performed by the electronic media, the poetry and art that carried on those traditions– the traditions of Donne and Milton–are luxuries of a certain rare kind. The work of T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens represent the magnificent dead–end of those traditions, at which Christian aestheticism and humanist aestheticism vie with one another as the realizations of the metaphysics of self-reflexivity.

Like its cognate epistemology, the baroque poetic tradition articulated various strategies of self-reference. It avoided the ultimate nihilism that is implicit in its project by proposing ever larger linguistic fields. Language is larger than any "I" that expresses itself by words, and the pursuit of self-expression through language leads systematically, by the logic of language as such, to both knowledge of the absolute *and* self-alienation, as Hegel would conclusively demonstrate. If one sees language as a whole from an eternal perspective, as Descartes saw geometry, the entire fantasy collapses: I am I, everything is only what it is, integral and meaningless. Thus, the tradition of poetry that arose among Descartes' contemporaries insisted paradoxically upon finitude as a way of energizing the ideal. It was a self-exploitation from the beginning and could only, as Hegel would accurately note, overcome or sublate itself.

The most significant essay into this matter is Robert Duncan's "A Seventeenth Century Suite in Homage to the Metaphysical Genius in English Poetry (1590-1690): Being Imitations, Derivations & Variations upon Certain Conceits and Findings Made among Strong Lines," in *Ground Work I: Before the War* (Duncan, 1984, 70-93). It is not merely a sequence of poems but a poetic investigation–a working in the common to produce knowledge not by discipline but by creation. Pedants will object that Duncan uses the term "metaphysical" inaccurately, but they will only show that he does not make their mistake of confusing styles with poet-

ics. From Duncan's point of view, all of the significant poetic styles of the seventeenth century are implicated in the substitution of a conventional imagination for intuition: poets turned their attentions to the relationships of image to image, of form to form, of language to language, their stylizations paralleling those of the *mathesis universalis*. Both the most extravagant devotees of metaphysical conceits and the neoclassicists sought ways to regulate the common language by the idealizations of verse.

Many of the poets of Duncan's generation wrote in imitation of seventeenth-century poetry, intending only to continue the cultural imperative (which had worn itself out in the nineteenth century) to imagine an ideal self. Duncan, however, undertakes the project as one of the most articulate polemicists against the old New Criticism, which had sponsored this kind of poetry. In his earlier essays, he objected to the conventional forms of the neo-metaphysicals, but it was not the pentameters and the quatrains per se that drew his ire; it was the use of conventional poetic techniques to enforce normative morality and normative feeling. In "A Seventeenth Century Suite," however, recognizing that language itself is conventional, Duncan addresses convention without obsession. He knows that to honor a particular convention, even by denying its validity, is to privilege one convention against another and to create idealisms in the otherwise open field of language. He demonstrates in his seventeenth-century workings that his pluralism is large enough to include the metaphysical impulse that he had rejected as the "official" style of New Criticism. The field in which the mature Duncan's work conducts itself is large enough to contain conventional selves, such as speak in seventeenth-century poems, *and* the vast spaces exterior to them. The space can be explored, as it were, from both sides. Duncan exploits the aesthetic space and then steps outside it so we see zones of particular kinds of intensity arise and dissipate into larger and more serviceable fields. Proposing a homage, Duncan enters fully into the metaphysical spirit and reveals both its interior richness and its lack of grounding in any thing but itself. "A Seventeenth Century Suite" is not only a remarkable set of poems, it is also a critical act of the highest order.

The "Suite" looks back in its concerns to an earlier poem, "Santa Cruz Propositions." There, Duncan writes:

> Poetry! Would *Poetry* have sustained us? It's lovely
> —and no more than a wave—to have rise

out of the debris, the stink and threat
—even to life—of daily speech, the roar
of the giants we begin from,
primordial Strife, blind Opposition,
a current that sweeps all stagnant things up
into a torrent of confidence beyond thought.
(Duncan, 1984, 36–46)

This passages seems to comment directly on the project of "A Seventeenth Century Suite." The true poets contend with the order and primordial conflict not only within their own poetry but within opposing orders of poetry as well. They are not bound by consistency, ideality, convention, or norms, *but by a world* that includes other people and other poets—the vast array of differences and othernesses. Life arises in the world not from the neatly prepared grounds of method or even from the rationalized strife of the dialectic but from the "confidence beyond thought"—the confident specificity of redeemed emotion. Duncan writes: "Each of us must be at strife with our own conviction on behalf of the multiplicity of convictions at work in poetry in order to give ourselves over to the art, to come to the idea of what the world of worlds or order of orders might be" (Duncan, 1985, 111–12).

What Is

In the prelude to the "Suite," "Love's a great courtesy to be declared," Duncan positions himself in relation to the conventions not of metaphysical poetry but of courtly love. He addresses the seventeenth century from the medieval perspective, a perspective to which he returns in "Dante Études," the variations on lines from Dante's prose works, which immediately follows the "Suite" in *Ground Work I.* In direct contrast to the "regulated" language of the seventeenth-century models, Dante underwrites "our own" language,

". . . that which we acquire without
any rule" for love of it . . .

This,

being primary,
natural and common,
being "milk";
is *animal:*

lungs sucking-in the air, having
heart in it, rhythmic; and
moving in measure
self-creating in concert

—and therein,
noble.

(Duncan, 1984, 96)

That is, primary language is (1) not rule-governed, (2) not spiritual, and (3) not the declaration of an original order. Before "the leap into the beyond," finite humans participated directly in their finite world; they did not presume to measure the infinite by species and abstraction, for which they could know the forms but not the content. Thus, it was language as engaged in time and even the things of the flesh, not the conventions of grammar, that allowed the possibility of the incarnation. If the Word was embodied merely in words nothing was gained. The unified principle would be thus dispersed in a logic devoted to endless classification and division in which the original unity either appears only as a theoretical limit or escapes. Significantly, the Word was embodied in the *flesh,* not in the institutions of language.

Medievalism is, of course, a conventional zone of poetic intensity in its own right, but it is concretely larger than the metaphysical because it opens immediately outward: the ego of the courtly lover is unstable and therefore declares a space of unknown properties; its boundaries are not significantly dependent upon rule-bound linguistic or aesthetic structures. On the secular plane, the self of the courtly lover is incarnated in the gaze of the beloved and the intuition of the beloved by the lover, not in the self-reflexivity of the *cogito*. Duncan hearkens back with Ezra Pound, who speaks in his essay, "Cavalcanti: Medievalism," not of "pagan worship of strength, nor the Greek perception of visual non-animate plastic, or plastic in which the being animate was not the main and principal quality, but this 'harmony in the sentience' or harmony *of* the sentient, where the thought has its demarcation, the substance its *virtu,* where stupid men have not reduced all 'energy' to unbounded undistinguished abstraction" (Pound, 1965, 154). In the medieval perspective that Duncan initially adopts, the world of surfaces, of geometries, of linguistic conventions, are fields of contingency from which vision potentially arises. In the prefatory poem, he writes:

I'd
dissolve my soul in sleeping surfaces
where transient phantasies may come and go
that somewhere in that multiplicity of
chance encounters
I might come again to you and find
Love's court
set up once more to rule my mind.

(Duncan, 1984, 70)

How do we determine what is to rule our minds? The Cartesian solution—to be ruled by rule—is obviously circular. There is no binding rule on which to base a decision until after the decision has been made. Duncan prefers to take his chance with chance. In *The Spirit of Romance*, which is an important context of Duncan's poetics, Pound asks, "Did this 'chivalric love,' this exotic, take on mediumistic properties? Stimulated by the color or quality of emotion, did that 'color' take on forms interpretive of the divine order? Did it lead to an 'exteriorization of the sensibility,' an interpretation of the cosmos by feeling?" (Pound, 1968, 94). Questions to which Duncan has consistently given an affirmative and secular answer. Interpretation by feeling, however, proves potentially more rigorous and even more immediately practical than interpretation by rule-governed reason. Methodology establishes the formal conditions of meaning, not meaning itself; it allows its practitioner to know what *can* happen but only in relation to infinite classes. It is a godlike knowledge, but for finite beings it requires endless interpretation. The truth is there, to be sure, but short of eternity we cannot adequately process it. The methodologist, then, is a medium—that is, language itself—which forever mediates himself or herself.

In "A Seventeenth Century Suite," the appearance of an "other world" is not the world of Poetry with a capital P, which is more typical of Duncan's work, but the conventions of a kind of poetry that Duncan himself had once rejected as a model. These conventions do, however, rise and speak, interpreted not by rules but by feelings that are neither generalized nor capricious. The variations interpret their sources in relation not to hermeneutic rules but to the rigorous metrical requirements of a particular eros, a particular reading and a particular writing. The poem itself is the evidence of the engagement, and it is the event—irreducible and inexplicable—that is the truth of the matter, not some some secondary

interpretation that refers the event to other relationships that may figure in a reader's designs but are only obliquely concerned with the poem.

The metaphysical genius is, above all, literate and literal, which is to say, it is tied to writing and it demands everything in writing; it is the master of formal systems that arrange atomic syllables according to the rules of grammar and the conventions of metrical forms. Contingency is regulated: for every mark here there *must be* a mark there. Although the marks are themselves arbitrary and contingent, the metaphysical aesthetic attends only to the constancy of relationships. The images of lovers' bodies are mapped point by point onto the image of geometer's compass, violating both, and so forth. Language for the metaphysical poet calls forth more language and insists upon an immediacy of relationship even in oblique situations. Language is inside language, chasing its own tail.

This regulation of contingency, however, is bought at immense expense: the loss of life as an actual event, conducted here and now. The task of Duncan's "Suite" is to open this self-justifying recursivity to its own contingency—a matter that he addresses at the outset in his variations on Sir Walter Ralegh's theme, "What Is Our Life?" Life imitates plays, a formula that must immediately turn upon itself, in that inside the play, plays imitate life which imitates plays, and so forth. It is a small and accurate parable of the infinite regress that was until this century the definitive modern event. The psychology is also characteristically modern: "Thus march we playing to our latest rest, / Onely we dye in earnest, that's no jest." (Duncan, 1984, 70)

The fundamental change that had come about in the Renaissance was clear to such men as Francis Bacon: modernity was "half in love with easeful death." In his essay, "On Death," Bacon writes: "You shall read in some of the friars' books of mortification that a man should think with himself what the pain is if he have but his finger's end pressed or tortured, and thereby imagine what the pains of death are, when the whole body is corrupted and dissolved; when many times death passeth with less pain than the torture of a limb; for the most vital parts are not the quickest of sense" (Bacon, 1985, 9). The psychology that Freud outlines in *Beyond the Pleasure Pleasure* took hold in the seventeenth century. The homeostatic controls on history, created by an *intuited*

world, had been removed, and the West had entered its period of wild growth, of proliferation not by mimesis but by methodology. The genetic and the personal have been utterly confused in mass society. To Freud the Cartesian combination of vital physicality and deathly mnemonics will seem to express itself as the erotic attraction of death. Duncan reads Ralegh as saying, "In death alone we are sincere," and implicitly we are cast between a groundless eros and the attractive sincerity of death.

In the second variation, in which he retains Ralegh's theme but rejects his imagistic constraints, Duncan insists upon the knowledge that is missing in Ralegh's poem, of "deep uproilings / of earth beneath your feet"—that is, knowledge of that which does not derive from the recursive event but is the news of not-being itself. He invokes that which is not theatrical, not theoretical, which seems at once a volcanic eruption from the earth and a pimple on the skin of the beloved. All of the content of the infinite regress is suddenly manifest

> In an instant
>
> four hundred and thirty-two thousand years
> inertia of conflicting forces
> shows its face raging.
>
> (Duncan, 1984, 72)

This is the face of Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction. The Hindu cosmic epics allow some sense of the hopeless immensity involved in Western terms such as *infinity* and *eternity.* If Hegel, for example, spoke of the emergence of the Absolute at the end of a cycle of several periods of four hundred and thirty-two thousand years each, the scale would not be meaningful, but the point might more readily come home.

Duncan's engagement with metaphysical poetry—or the true poets' engagement with the world of texts, both formally written texts and "natural" signs, "the fall of a rock, the shifting of sands," in Duncan's words—is not dialectical. The poets do not answer the text of the world in kind but create a language that belongs to another geometry altogether, responsible not to the theorized world but to itself: "We are creatures of language and invent in turn with the sounds of ours mouths, or hands beating surfaces, or with marks upon a stone or arrangements of sticks, an other

speech, a speech 'for its own sake' in answer to the World Order which was a language before ours" (Duncan, 1985, 122). The "deep uproilings / of earth beneath your feet" do not revolve or repeat. The poets enter again and again into the destruction of the self that is the avenue of vision, sacrificing that valued access, while standing in testimony to the accuracy of signs they themselves do not *under*stand. One who bears witness does not interpret (which would violate the testimony) but rather says, "I heard, I saw": "The first experience in poetry is to find in words not an argument or an explanation but a world, to see another world or to be of another world. Here definitions are not restrictions but outlines of emerging possible elements of that world" (Duncan, 1985, 121–22). In the second Ralegh variation, he writes:

> Against my body, against my soul,
> against my spirit, I go then
> in the destruction of the grades of me,
> to the undoing of those hierarchies . . .
> (Duncan, 1984, 72)

Thus, a persistent sense of hopeful catastrophe that informs Duncan's work. Perhaps one reason Duncan has not been more usefully read is his refusal to allow the reader the comfort of the literary. In his homage to the genius of the tradition, he enters the world that it proposes in order to open its limits to what it had excluded. He undermines the ego-security that the metaphysical poem proposes to create and to recover the knowledge that is repressed in it. In the variations on Robert Southwell's "The Burning Babe," he distinguishes between "a babe of fire" and "a baby on fire." The babe of fire belongs properly to the poem as an image of the perfected self. There is no denial of these mysteries, which are the mysteries of self-consciousness and the persistent study of the modern West: the perfection that is also deathly. Our obsessive questions have had to do with the nature of this recursive function: in Southwell's poem we read of "A pretty Babe . . . such floods of tears did shed, / As though his floods should quench his flames, which with his tears were bred." In "Imagination's alchemy," we await the return of the final deferred term that brings us to equilibrium. This is the conventional conclusion of modern mysticism, and, without denying the integrity of the vision, Duncan gives the passage an appropriately conventional mystical ending, drawing his terms from crucial passages in his own poetry:

The burning Babe, the Rose,
the wedding of the Moon and Sun,
wherever in the World I read
such Mysteries come to haunt the Mind,
the Language of What Is and I
are one.

(Duncan, 1984, 74)

Thus, Duncan recalls the language of an earlier poem that crucially defines the space of his work:

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow
as if it were a given property of the mind
that certain bounds hold against chaos,
that is a place of first permissions,
everlasting omen of what is.

(Duncan, 1960, 7)

The conclusion, which is drawn in the Southwell variation, that "the Language of What Is and I / are one" is one of the possible loci in the meadow: that is, it is a usurpation of the meadow on behalf of art. It is one of Duncan's loci, and he here claims it. It is, however, an appropriation that no sooner appropriates the meadow than it removes itself. This is the frustration and sometimes the fascination of the perfected *cogito:*

He's Art's epiphany of Art new born
a Christ of Poetry, the burning spirit's show;
he leaves no shadow, where he dances in the air,
of misery below.

(Duncan, 1984, 75)

The self-transcendent image flees the world of chance, even if its perfection is an infinite proposition which finite subjects can only comprehend in brief, intuitive insights. Duncan insists upon another incarnation for which suffering is real suffering, suffering which is not tempered by the memory or the promise of eternal wisdom:

Another Christ, if he be, as we are,
Man, cries out in utter misery.

(Duncan, 1984, 75)

Southwell's Christ exists only in the recursive symbolism of the poem. Duncan's other Christ inhabits the world which is not relieved by transcendental knowledge:

I cannot imagine, gazing upon photographs
of these young girls, the mind
transcending what's been done to them.

From the broiled flesh of these heretics,
by napalm monstrously baptised
in a new name . . .
(Duncan, 1984, 75)

The newspaper photographs from the Vietnam war that Duncan brings as evidence to the second Christ are irrelevant to the first. The "human" Christ's finitude is relieved by neither the logical mystery of Southwell nor by the mysterious incarnation of Augustine. Duncan speaks of the Word not as rational origin but as a sounding—the measurable vibrations and physicality of language. Augustine writes: "The Unity you love can be effected in ordered things by that alone whose name in Greek is *Analogia,* and which some of our writers have called proportion" (Augustine, 1947, 23). For the secular Duncan, the analogy is not, however, to something *else*—some world writ large—rather life imitates itself: "The *sounding* is the love that moves the poet in language" (Duncan, 1985, 57). The reference of language to itself is in a finite, measurable field. Not being analogous to a divine order, it does not undermine the perfections that it exhibits in itself. To order a language on the basis of one word sounding like another word, on one phrase taking twice as long to pronounce as another phrase, makes sense—that is, perceived by senses, *felt*—as opposed to ordering a language on ideal or transcendental atoms of meaning (Cartesian space-points or structuralist phonemes) that lack the content of feeling and allow no resource to intuition. In Duncan's reading of the poems, eros orders both the grammar and the measure of the verse. The "Suite" is a practice of a distinction that he makes "between the line itself as a going forth, instituting itself as a new event and presence in the world—a sortie Whitman named it—and the poetry [like Wordsworth's, and he might have said like Ralegh's, Southwell's, or Jonson's] where the lines address themselves to an intense turning in upon their own meanings to seek the regulation of emotion and experience" (Duncan, 1985, 200). The use here of "regulation" might be usefully compared to Descartes's use of the term: it bespeaks a discipline of feeling comparable to Descartes's disciple of mind.

In the next two pieces in the "Suite," on George Herbert's

"Jordan I" and "Jordan II," Duncan comes as near writing straightforward variations as he does anywhere. He is oddly closer to Herbert than to any of the other seventeenth-century poets. For Herbert, as for Augustine, poetry was not the creation of a new thing, an invention, as Sir Philip Sidney insists, especially not a creation of the image of the Cartesian self, but an incarnation of the structure of the cosmos, an enactment of real time. The imitation is structural rather than imagistic.*

The "Jordan" poems have been reasonably taken as Herbert's poetic manifestos. Unless their irony is noted, however, they are disappointing—at least for us, who find a declaration of faith tantamount to a kind of mad assertion against all reason and evidence and, thus, expect a Miltonic grandiosity of design, overwhelming the improbability of the doctrine, or a Donne-like display of pathological desire ("Batter my heart," etc.). In light of the new philosophy, the work of Herbert's principal contemporaries was not only an imitation of an imitation, as Plato had noted; it was an imitation of an imitation in a world that offered no original. The relationship of the abstract ego to the abstract space of nature allows only "enchanted groves," as Herbert says in the "Jordan (I)," as the sites of poetry—magical places in which the poet-magician pulls ideal images out of the recursive hat of prose language and the reader must be a diviner, "Catching the sense at two removes." Herbert, who chooses to "pull for Prime," recognizes the phoniness of the Self that is proposed. The logical guarantee that is offered by the *cogito* and the similarly solipsistic arguments of the seventeenth-century philosophers have no relationship to lived life. Even the ideally decorated presentations are ultimately casual and collapse back into the perplexity of casual prose. Herbert's poem stakes nothing on its imagistic content. In "Jordan (I)," he opposes the whole tradition of fleshy, mythological and amorous poetry by saying, plainly, the words, "My God, My King." No poet had ever expected a simple naming to carry so much weight. In fact, however, the poem has said, "My God, My King," through the entire poem, the trivial images serving as

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*In a study of Augustine and Herbert, which has important implications for the study of seventeenth-century poetry in general, William H. Pahlka notes that "poetic imitations and *imitatio Christi* were, for Herbert, inseparable" (Pahlka, 1987), and he demonstrates the pervasive significance of Augustine's *De musica* to Herbert's *The Temple*.

soundings of the mathematical-musical structure that is the true content of the poem. For Herbert, any image would be merely sensuous and false. The impulse of the poem is the direct intuition of the divine manifested by the harmony of the soul which produces and meditates on the metrical structure. The content of the poem is the obsessiveness of the tune, which may be reduced to a hummed half-line and an injunction or naming:

duh-da-da-duh da-duh and pull for Prime
da-duh-da-duh My God, My King.

The use of such verse is not to provide an ideal image of the self but to orient a finite being to an infinite order, and as an expression of the "temple," as Herbert proposes it, to orient a community of worshipers for whom the pull for prime is the most concrete injunction.

In "Jordan (II)," Herbert notes that the worldly images, "quaint words, and trim inventions," are illegitimate insinuations of the self into the true meditative fire:

As flames do work and winde, when they ascend,
So did I weave my self into the sense.
But while I bustled, I might heare a friend
Whisper, How wide is all this long pretence!
There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd:
Copie out onely that, and save expense.
(Duncan, 1984, 79)

Herbert's poems are not professions of faith but *experiences* of faith: the moment by moment address to the harmony of the soul and its analogy to the divine harmony. Herbert expresses a poetic that would find its most complete realization not in poetry but in the tradition of pure music. It would be not the poets but the composers who would undertake to copy out the "sweetnesse readie penn'd" in love. And, to a certain extent, the culture has never recovered from the magnificent successes of Beethoven and the tradition of music from which his work grew. The dissociation of sensibility that T. S. Eliot identified as the loss of relevance of feeling to thought was in fact, even more broadly, a loss of relationship between the meanings of a particular ethos and the possibilities for action that it affords and formal structure.

Duncan's variations are, like the originals, quiet, albeit completely secular. Likewise, for Duncan the poem always presents the

problem of incarnation—not the analogical incarnation of the divine harmony but the literal incarnation of the person in the making of the poem. Rather than a re-creation and recalling of experience, Duncan proposes a direct working in the actual time of the poem. As poems, they are not major efforts, but they bring forth necessary evidence:

> (I) For I have this simplicity in my God, My King,
> that he holds for me the truth of what I am,
> no fiction but a working thing in me.
> (Duncan, 1984, 78)

The poem registers nothing but the fact of its own activity. The recursive density of language proposes to represent nothing but itself:

> (II) This water is but water. This is
> no other water than it is, nor more nor less
> that's meant to bless,
> and works no magic
> but our bliss.
> (Duncan, 1984, 79)

The first of Duncan's variations sounds a little like Polonius and the second like an Iowa Workshop metaphysical poet. Nevertheless, they are as sincere for Duncan as he takes Herbert's poems to be. It is the *Truth*, which however proves neither what was expected nor final; it is rather a superficial alignment, a seeing that what is, is. In the face of this settlement, "Passages 36" bursts forth unexpectedly, proclaiming that grief is the proper mode of this knowledge.

"Passages 36" belongs both to the suite and to the poetic domain of "Passages," a sequence that first appears in *Bending the Bow*. To "Go as in a dream," as the injunction from the second Ralegh variation has it, is to experience the nature of the true God:

> "Then with the true God, the true *Dios*,
> "came the beginning of cruel tribute
> "the beginning of the betrayal of justice,
> "the beginning of strife by trampling,
> "the beginning of violence,
> "the beginning of no hope."
> (Duncan, 1984, 80)

These lines are in no sense ironic. The truth of Southwell's self-consuming babe is here recovered as the truth of God. Truth and falsity are dimensions of a formal space that we inhabit and that inhabits us. This is the knowledge of the metaphysical genius to which Duncan pays homage, and it must be honored because it establishes the theater in which our knowledge is exhibited. Duncan writes: "the mind addresses / and would erect within itself," not theoretical bliss—the pleasures of the text and so forth—but "itself"

> as Viet Nam, itself as Bangladesh,
> itself exacting revenge and suffering revenge.
>
> (Duncan, 1984, 80)

The justification of theory is not its mysterious origin, which is a self-referential shuffle, but the access that it allows to reality, to that which is *not* generalized and abstract. The true world is *not* a mystery of interpretation as our theorists would have us believe. It is the most obvious thing there is: it is airplanes raining down napalm, it is the freeway choked with traffic, it is the burning rain forests of the tropics. Skepticism and relativism in the face of this obviousness are obscene:

> Is it to suit the myth yet to come—
> the ritual mutilation, the despoiling of nature, of earth,
> of animal species, and mankind among them,
> with hatred and, no longer having a feeling of what is done,
> without hatred, day after day,
> the burning, the laying waste?
> Eat, eat this bread and be thankful
> it does not yet run with blood.
>
> (Duncan, 1984, 80)

The proposal of a countertruth, however, is likewise obscene, because it likewise claims an authority that justifies "cruel tribute," "the betrayal of justice," "strife by trampling," and so forth:

> Each day the planes go out over the land,
> And revolution works within
> to bring to an end in the rage of power
> the works and dreams
> of a governing Art. The air is darkened.
> Drink, drink, while there is water.
> They move to destroy the sources of feeling.
>
> (Duncan, 1984, 81)

The world that is determined by claim and counterclaim—the dialectical world—which we inhabit and which inhabits us concretely and painfully, is to be measured by a grief that perhaps cannot be sufficient, cannot be redeemed.

Although it should not be necessary, I want to emphasize that Duncan's readings are not to be confused with the typical antitheoretical conventionalism which seems to be once again on the rise, now that it is apparent that literary theory is neither as vast nor as interesting as many critics began to believe twenty years ago. The theory of theories is a vast tautology, never completable in the practical sense but never doubtable as an ultimate conclusion. In the seventeenth-century models, the closure of language is complete, and, when they propose to manifest the truth, as in Ben Jonson's "Hymnaei," the poverty of the metaphysical imagination is revealed:

> "*Her orient hayre,*" I read:
> "*By which beleeving mortalls hold her fast,*
> "*And in those golden chordes are carried even,*
> "*Till with her breath she blowes them up to heaven.*"
>
> Now what am I to do with that? tho I read there is a glow
> where men's souls are quickened in her hair and
> rise upon her breath toward heaven so, the poet's conceit
> turns me back from the myth I know therein.

The figure of imagination that proposes to manifest Truth fails in its spectacle to make Truth any more than an advertisement, an obscene parody of the witness that it might bear to the love which the poem celebrates. Duncan's poem, however, does not make a simple point of taste. Jonson is given the most generous opportunity to bear his witness. The problem is not merely a matter of literary style or of failed poetry. Jonson and his contemporaries propose to situate us in relation to Truth, but, as Duncan writes:

> I do not know where I am with her,
>
> and myriad reflections upon her face
> lead from old deeps into new deeps of Night.
>
> (Duncan, 1984,88-89)

Since the seventeenth century, we have articulated a culture inside a language that, testifying on its own behalf, imagines the figures of its own truth. Jonson's lady Truth has, of course, had more attractive manifestations. Indeed she has been set forth in

irresistible perfection, say, by Bach and Beethoven, where the world-defining strife is neutralized in the logic of music. The Self-God/God-Self of lady Truth, the being that must include all, because it includes the language in which it is defined, is the figure of modern egotism. Some of Descartes's earliest critics noted that his argument in this connection was circular, that he took self-existence as the grounds for his argument for the existence of god and the existence of god as the grounds for his argument for self-existence. The mathematical Self-God and the poetic Self-God confirm one another. Perhaps it would be better to speak of the "musical" Self-God as all of the timed arts are implicated and compromised. These are the great idealizations of space and time, geometry and music, which, contradicting and confirming one another in a careful dance, have required the participation of the entire culture. To support it has required untold exploitation of human and natural resources.

In the final poem of "A Seventeenth-Century Suite," Duncan takes up the theme of John Norris's "Hymne to Darkness." The turn to darkness is the only recourse for the poets who locate themselves outside of the destructive illumination, beauty, and quest for abstract power to which the culture devoted itself in the seventeenth century:

> yet striking ever true to what is
> most dark to me in me from that first
> darkend scale of all light Harmony
> asking, answering, note upon note of silent
> command of tunings sound
> beyond sound.
>
> (Duncan, 1984, 91)

This is the darkness from which the Self-God/God-Self in its divinity has withdrawn, and it is explicitly identified in Norris's poem with the muse. It is *not* the darkness of the Freudian unconscious, where theorization is not precluded by darkness. What is manifested from this darkness is not something unseen, some obscure origin, but an end and a voice that calls to it. In his blasphemous meditation on the Lord's prayer, he notes:

> Out, out from the First, from the Void,
> the over-whelming repose of a finality
> overtakes the trembling lives, the sounding

energies,
and into a Silence I call *Our Father*
draws them in.
(Duncan, 1984, 93–94)

In the darkness there are others and the sounding of the voice—not as an ideal but as sounding in the Silence—tests the possibility of love.

In closing lines of the poem the poet is startled by a kiss from the darkness and the voice of his lover saying, "*Good Night!*." He notes completely without irony, "Love sets me free." The courtly pose of the opening poem is replaced with a domestic love relationship. The final line serves both as a conventional ending to the poet's enthrallment to a manner that is not completely congenial and as a reintroduction to Duncan's central theme.

Real Time

The ideal realm that the Greeks discovered included a teleology. It was the *purpose* of the acorn to grow into an oak tree. Modern science, however, deals only with ideal or achieved purposes. In the modern view, acorns are always oak trees as they are also dead and decayed oak trees and soil and nutrition for second-growth forests, and so forth. The cosmos is already finished according to Newtonian doctrine, a mere playing out of the implications of formulae which are already achieved in the divine mind. As limited divinities, humans can discover the formulae, but our information-handling capacity is too limited. We do not have sufficient data to predict the future, except in carefully isolated and controlled situations.

In the Euclidean-Newtonian cosmos, therefore, time is a shadowy domain. Although Newton himself supposed that its space was a divine attribute, prior even to the creation of the material world, Spinoza and Malebranche, who were bolder and more consistent metaphysicians than Newton, saw that it was unnecessary to a fundamental description of the world. The principles of the cosmic mechanism imply and supersede all possible events. Laplace gave this succinct formulation in 1814: "An intellect which at a given instance knew all the forces acting in nature, and the position of all things of which the world consists—supposing the said intellect were vast enough to subject these data to analysis—would embrace in the same formula the motions of the

greatest bodies in the universe and those of the slightest atoms; nothing would be uncertain for it, and the future, like the past would be present to its eyes" (Čapek, 1961, quoted 127).

Although it is mistaken to say that time in the Newtonian cosmos is illusory, it is a human dimension, peculiar to finite minds and important as a teleological framework in an otherwise complete and purposeless world of matter in predetermined motion. Teleology is not natural but social. After the Newtonian world picture was psychologized by Kant, the model of classical physics was easily extended to the development of history and the social sciences, and with the emergence of technology, it became increasingly clear that the human world changes profoundly despite the eternal nature of cosmic principles. History is the ratio of human time to divine time. The supremely nonhistorical thought of the Enlightenment prepared the way for the first, Dionysiac experience of history, during the period between the American Revolution and 1848.

Of course, the ratio of human time to divine time is incalculable, but the timed arts—notably music and poetry—create a sham experience of manageable ratios with infinite implications that seem to empower humankind in a dimension that we have not been able to inhabit and have not been able to forget. A sub/version of this sense of history will occupy the following chapter. The immediate task is to note the personal experience of time that was the grounds of that explosive historiography. From Milton and Racine to Wordsworth and Hölderlin, from Bach to Beethoven and Wagner, the experience of time seemed to open, if not quite directly on the infinite, at least directly enough that the infinite could be intimately and even comfortably known.

Like space, time had been theorized, thus profoundly transforming the poetic medium. The time of the accentual-syllabic poem was no more the time of accentual Anglo-Saxon verse or quantitative classical verse than the space of the mathematical analysis was the intuitive space of Euclid. Much as the images of the seventeenth-century poems have reference to other images and, ultimately, to language itself as the great Image of the World, which is the content of Ralegh's play, the rhythms have reference to an *implicit* rhythmic structure in the language rather than the actual rhythms of the performer's voice or the real experience of time. In the standard formulation, typified by Wellek and Warren, "English

verse is largely determined by the counterpoint between the imposed phrasing, the rhythmical impulse, and the actual speech rhythm conditioned by phrasal divisions" (Wellek and Warren, 1966, 170). The confusion of rhythm and mechanical repetition in the culture at large is nowhere more apparent than in this standard doctrine. Rhythmic impulse in this sense can be understood in terms only of the reciprocating cylinder of the steam engine or some other mechanical device.

Much as the painter's sense of perspective anticipated the theoretical space of mathematical analysis, the poetic and musical forms that developed in the sixteenth century anticipated theorized time. The development of the new mathematics and the new prosody may have been largely independent, but the coherence that they formed in the seventeenth century could hardly have been more seamless. The one resulted from the digestion and articulation of theories of proportion that had been transmitted through Arabic sources, the other from the first attempts to deal consciously with questions of poetics in relation to the modern European languages, especially English and German, where the most important temporal innovations—temporal technologies, one might say—the prosodies of Milton and Donne, on the one hand, and the music of Bach, on the other, produced the experience of time as a historical vehicle. As Anthony Easthope notes in an important essay, the dynamic quality of time was subordinated to the representation of "a systemic totality, an explicit preconception legislating for every unit of stress and syllable and 'this continueth through the verse' (Gascoigne), 'in sequence of a metronome' (Pound)" (Easthope, 1983, 66).

Although it relates to a different philosophic stance, Duncan's conception of the poetic line, which derives variously from Whitman, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, H. D., and William Carlos Williams, and by analogy, from the abstract expressionist painters, is nearer Augustine's than Sidney's or Gascoigne's: it is not relational and normative but quantitative. It is not, of course, based on syllabic quantity—English is not quantitative in that sense. Even in iambic pentameter, when it is not merely mechanical, syllables speed up and slow down, slurring, in order to maintain the rhythmic integrity of metrical durations determined by caesuras and end stops. Duncan's rhythm is based rather on the *duration* of the caesural phrase and the line. "Rhythm," Pound says, "is a form cut

into TIME, as a design is determined SPACE" (Pound, 1960, 198). In "Some Notes on Notation"—the preface to *Ground Work: Before the War*—in which he explains the scoring of his later work, Duncan writes: "The literal time of the poem is experienced as given, even as the literal size of a painter's canvass is given. What is advanced in the process of the poem is the configuration of that given time. The counting of numbers, that numbers count in the structure, is an important aspect of the design" (Duncan, 1984, ix).

In the late 1960s, when Duncan first began scoring his work by his new conventions, in which caesuras and line endings were literally counted, the conducting hand in his performances was not as flamboyant as, say, Osawa's, but nonetheless distinct and dramatic, and he could be heard, under his breath, counting out the silences, which run up to a count of eight and occasionally more—very long rests in a public performance of poetry. In later public performances, his hand would occasionally conduct a few lines, as he looked for the rhythmic center of a poem, but the bodily "disposition" would soon take over. In a reading at Bard College of the entire manuscript of *Ground Work* over a period of several days in 1983, he did not count audibly. The overt signs of the measure were internalized in the precise renderings of the lines.

Time in a proper reading of a Duncan poem is a completely different experience than in either traditional iambic pentameter or the conventional "free verse" that derives from a failure to *hear* the rhythmic energy of the poetry of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. Robert Lowell and the myriad poets who followed his lead in the 1960s and 1970s lost both the beauty of traditional poetic forms and the rhythmic "nutrition of impulse," to use a phrase of Pound's, which is fundamental to the vital verse practice of this century. Thus, for literary theorists, who take Lowell's verse practice as normative, the experience of time is replaced by the experience of language or writing. Temporal intuition—or what might be called the "Bergsonian experience"—is highly valued by post-structuralist theorists, but they know it only as a derivative, a by-product of linguistic structural breakdown, as "play" or "decentering" force. Jacques Derrida's deconstructions and readings of erased texts, for example, are an endless engagement to prevent the temporal flow from freezing into the language of metaphysics. Many of his frequent generalizations about the Western tradition,

however, apply at best only to the post-Cartesian tradition. His analysis of both Husserl's characterization of the temporal present as an indivisible blink of an eye and the silent voice, which hears itself in the supposed temporal point that he generalizes to "the history of idealization" in its entirety, misses much of philosophy from Parmenides to Will James and Norbert Wiener and fails entirely to comprehend the most profound evidence of temporality the poets have provided in this century.

Augustine, for example, notes explicitly that the experience of time cannot be reduced to the blink of an eye. Indeed, if time is taken abstractly as a series of indivisible points, it is not possible to account for temporal experience at all. Literally, there is no place to be: "one hour passes away in fleeting particles. Whatever of it has flown away is past, whatever remains is future. If any portion of time be conceived which *cannot now be divided* into even the minutest particles of moments, this only is that which may be called present; which, however, flies so rapidly from future to past, that it cannot be extended, it is divided into the past and future; but the present has no space" (Augustine, 1948, 197, my emphasis). In every consideration of time, it seems, some version of the Zenonian paradoxes lurk about. When one tries to pin time down, it disappears. This may be its most mysterious and attractive character. From the perspective of the point-present, time cannot be measured. It is not possible, for example, to compare a metrically long and a metrically short syllable. In fact, if time consists of a series of points, the basis of metrical time as such becomes hopelessly problematic. Thus, in *De musica,* Augustine declares: "All measure and limit is preferred to infinity and immeasurableness" (Augustine, 1947, 15). Time can be inhabited and measured only in its fullness, as involving memory and expectation. Measure must account for various dimensions of time, which consists not of temporal atoms but of complex durations implicated in past, present, and future. Only if time is taken in the most radically subjective sense does it manifest, paradoxically, an objectivity. Augustine's paradigm for temporal measure is the reciting of a psalm: time has both duration and content. In Latin verse, which is measured by syllabic duration, not by a count of syllabic stress like modern English verse, time is never empty or merely normative. Augustine writes:

> I am about to repeat a psalm that I know. Before I begin, my attention is extended to the whole; but when I have begun, as much of it as becomes past by my saying it is extended in my memory; and the life of this action of mine is extended both ways between my memory, on account of what I have repeated, and my expectation, on account of what I am about to repeat; yet my consideration is present with me, through which that which was future may be carried over so that it may become past. The more this is done and repeated, by so much (expectation being shortened) the memory is enlarged until the whole expectation be exhausted, when that whole action being ended shall have passed into memory. And what takes place in the entire psalm, takes place also in each individual part of it, and in each individual syllable: this holds in the longer action, of which that psalm is perchance a portion; the same holds in the whole life of man, of which all the actions of man are parts; the same holds in the whole age of the sons of men, of which all the lives of men are parts. (Augustine, 1948, 201)

For Augustine, speech and duration are isomorphic, intensive vectors. Thus, in the experience of reciting a psalm, the actual time of the performance and the time of the psalm coincide. The expressivity of the performer is overwhelmed by the objectivity of the performance, which establishes a domain of commonality. By incarnating the rhythmic structure of the psalm, it is made public by way of the performing body.

Cartesian grammatology and its cognate poetics consciously propose the fiction of atemporality. The especially prepared text of a formal proof consists of enumerated steps in deductive reasoning. The Cartesian image is a chain: "we cannot with one single gaze distinguish all the links of a lengthy chain, yet if we have seen the connection of each with its neighbor, we shall be entitled to say that we have seen how the first is connected with the last" (Descartes, 1967, 20–21). The Cartesian link and the Augustinian syllable are both *metrical* units, ways of keeping track of the linear progress of discourse. The Latin or Greek syllable, however, is a fixed quantity, inherent in the syllable itself. A link in a Cartesian proof may infold entire language worlds (it may in turn subordinate complex arguments), so the structure is at once hierarchical and linear. In the metaphor of the chain, Descartes unites the contradictory characters that dance complexly in his discourse. The experience of temporality in the language of a formal proof is

utterly unlike the experience of *quantitative* poetic time, which is fundamental to the Augustinian cosmology. Cognitive time does not answer to *any* externality; it is a psychological dimension. Although it would be left to Kant to deny the objectivity of space, which is implicit in the circular Cartesian argument, Descartes recognizes cognitivity as the source and end of temporality.

One notices, reading Duncan's variations, that the rhythms not only are more varied and demanding of attention than the rhythms of his seventeenth-century models but are of a different kind. All of the seventeenth-century poems are iambic pentameter, with the exception of Southwell's, which is in fourteeners, a line created by running the eights and sixes of the ballad stanza together and regularizing the accentual verse with iambics. The strategy that creates the rhythmic effect of the fourteener is much the same as the strategy of pentameter: both recognize the inherent tendency in English to the four-beat phrase and create syncopations by imposing the expectation of one beat more or one beat less per line. The fourteener is difficult to handle, as it tends to crank apart into the native sixes and eights, but the Southwell poem is masterful. Conventionally syncopation is the mark of "serious" poetry. By contrast, one hears this verse, for example, as playful and childish:

> Hinx, minks, the old witch winks;
> the fat begins to fry.
> There's no one home but jumping Joan,
> father and mother and I.

The speaker is a concrete ego—the ego of the speaker of the poem at the time of the speaking. The measure is absolute, not a ratio. Unlike the syncopated verse of Duncan's sources in "The Suite," it does not invoke normative conventions that are independent of the particular performance of the poem.

Duncan's verse is *technically* nearer the nursery rime than the seventeenth-century poems: it is performed in real time, making no concession to the individual expressivity of the performer. Needless to say, it is much subtler. The verses are recited, and the voice is incarnated. Once again speech orients the body, and the body orients speech. For Augustine, this was an imitation of Christ; for Duncan, it is the incarnation of that person he is. In "The First" (from *Ground Work II: In the Dark*), Duncan writes:

IN THIS MUSIC (Webern): "*Every thing is a principal idea.*"

Every where central to enquiry.

Every time initial.

The people of this nation thruout time are not one but a multi-
tude each from his one
heart/mind coming forward masst

so you cannot strike down our leader for no *one* leads us—
you will be exhausted before we are to strike down the

multitude of volitions we come from.
(Duncan, 1987, 60)

The task is to clarify this firstness, this initiality, in which nothing is subordinate, in which the multitude of volitions is expressed as a multitude, not as a statistically derived sum. What we are in ourselves is forever in conflict with what we are in the mass; the life in us in conflict with the finality of what we are as poor historical creatures, who aim at nothing but our own exhaustion and extinction, which, in a sense, is already accomplished.

LINGUISTICS: CARTESIAN

The emotional disturbance echoes down the canyons of the heart.
Echoes there—sounds cut off—merely phonemes. A Ground-rules double. You recognize them by patter. Try.
—Jack Spicer, "Phonemics"

The unique contribution of seventeenth-century logic was the invention of the abstract machine. The conception of the logical function that underwrites mathematical analysis, on the one hand, and at least the dream of a universal grammar, on the other, was new. With it, the nature of technology changed profoundly, but more significantly the mind as such conceived itself technologically. In the most general terms, the new logic proposed that, if a particular proposition is possible, all of the logical preconditions for that *class* of propositions must exist: a thought entails the psychology that makes it possible. The paradigm of cognitive science—the mind as computer—was essentially a seventeenth-

century development. Since World War II, of course, it has been possible to construct logical devices with high-speed electronic switches. The mystery of the relationship of body to mind turns out to be fairly simple: the Cartesian body consists of the switches, the Cartesian mind is their *logical* concatenation—computer and program.

As Descartes knew and as Berkeley and Hume would show, nothing in experience gives evidence of the kind of reliably discrete objects that methodology requires. Thus, Descartes appeals to innate simple ideas. Conversely, Leibniz argues that the world is composed of monads—simple entities that somehow are already and always implicated in totality. In short, Descartes defers the problem with an infinite circular regression, and Leibniz, arguing that there is no simple location, confronts it directly by positing an incoherent origin. The sun's gravity exerts its force on the planets because, in some sense, the sun and planets are constantly conjoined, separable only in the common mode of human perception. These are the alternatives that rule-governed reality allows. Neither alternative is completely attractive if one seeks Truth founded on unimpeachable logic.

The resilience of the argument for innate knowledge is remarkable. Despite the obvious problems it involves, it has been recycled in the Kantian categories, the Hegelian logic of history, and the Freudian unconscious. Most significantly now, it returns in cognitive science, the first major interdisciplinary reorganization of knowledge to attract both widespread academic attention and, perhaps more significantly, lavish government funding. In *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution*, Howard Gardner writes, "René Descartes is perhaps the prototypical philosophical antecedent of cognitive science." And he takes Descartes as thematic. He notes, for example, that "Early intimations [of the possibility of robotics and artificial intelligence] can be discerned in the work of René Descartes, who was interested in automata that could simulate the human body" (Gardner, 1987, 142). Gardner even gives Descartes credit for an opinion that has often been used to ridicule his thought. He interprets the Cartesian suggestion that body and soul join at pineal gland as an early interest in the localization of neural functioning; thus, he understands Descartes as a forerunner of Broca, Wernicke, and present-day neurophysiologists (Gardner, 1987, 284). And, of course, he recognizes Descartes's contribution to the development of transfor-

mational grammar: "Leaning explicitly on the work of Descartes some three hundred years earlier, and borrowing leaves as well from the writings of Plato and Immanuel Kant, Chomsky argued that our interpretation of the world is based on representational systems that derive from the structure of the mind itself and do not mirror in any direct way the form of the external world" (Gardner, 1987, 192). The instituting metaphor of cognitive science is the formal system and explicitly the computer program: any human output requires an internal system that makes that class of output possible.

Although Chomsky's historical research on the Cartesian tradition has been reviewed harshly, he reveals an essential fact of the understanding of language in the modern West. Perhaps we can think of his writings in *Cartesian Linguistics* and in the first and third chapters of *Language and Mind* as more mythological than scholarly; he reveals our linguistic unconscious. The thought of Descartes's "primary germs of truth implanted by nature in human minds" is as essential to the culture that built the World Trade Center, the space shuttle *Columbia*, and Disneyland as Athena is to the culture that built the Parthenon or the Virgin is to the culture that built the gothic cathedrals. Chomsky describes language as a mode of free cognitive creation, and the Cartesian precedent for his argument is strong: "Descartes . . . described human reason as a universal instrument which can serve for all contingencies and which therefore provides for unbounded diversity of free thought and action" (Chomsky, 1966, 15).

Chomsky takes little note, however, of the distinction between natural language and *mathesis universalis* that, for Descartes, constituted a significant boundary to the freedom. Even the passage that Chomsky cites implies that *at least some* language is bounded, unfree, and reactive. Descartes writes: "mind is of such a nature that from the motion of the body alone the various sensations can be excited in it," and as we have seen, language without careful methodological discipline is a manifestation of physical mechanism. In the commentary, he goes on to say:

> For we see that either spoken or even written words can excite any thoughts and stirrings whatever in our mind. On the same sheet of paper, with the same quill and ink, if the end of the quill is merely guided over the paper in a certain way; it will produce letters which will excite thoughts of combats, tempests, and fu-

ries, and states of indignation and sadness in the minds of readers. If, however, the quill is moved in another almost identical manner, it will cause very different thoughts, of calm weather, peace, and pleasantness, and exactly opposite states of love and happiness. (Descartes, 1983, 281)

Language in this sense, which is of course precisely the creative mode of poetry as it is generally understood in romantic theory, is according to Descartes mechanical, and no doubt the emphasis on the pen, the mechanical instrument of writing, functions rhetorically to underscore its mechanical nature. Although Descartes never doubts the rich creativity of language, the problem as he understands it is to find a unity of language that is not constantly subverting itself with something new or compromising itself with its own mechanism. Such of course was the motive in searching out a new logical language. The poststructuralist critique of common textuality is implicit in Descartes's desire to discover the *mathesis universalis*. The Cartesian method is directed toward rational control of the unruly linguistic machine that generates its illusory worlds. Chomsky reads romanticism back into Descartes, but in retrospect his assessment of the general spirit and direction of Cartesianism is sound. The culture has underwritten ever more elaborate forms of mental mechanism as the source of productivity.

Contemporary Cartesianism, as Chomsky summarizes it, maintains that "A language is a collection of sentences of finite length all constructed from a finite alphabet . . . of symbols. Since any language L in which we are likely to be interested is an infinite set, we can investigate the structure of L only through the study of finite devices (grammars) which are capable of enumerating its sentences" (Chomsky, 1959, 137). Although it is considerably more general, Chomsky's formulation develops directly from Descartes. For Descartes the system consists of the symmetrical grid that is named for him, space-points identified by their relationship to vertical and horizontal axes on the grid, and the rules of algebra. Implicitly, all of the infinite variety of the world can be generated by recursively applying the finite rules to the space-points. For Chomsky, the grid consists of a phonological grid and the rules of grammar.

The mathematics of such systems was formalized in this century by Alan Turing, who established the necessary conditions for the logical decidability of propositions by the Cartesian machine

and any similar abstract machine, which are now generally called "Turing machines." In effect, his theory is the theory of computer programming: the value of a proposition is decidable only if the necessary operations can be performed by a finite number of steps on a finite number of objects in accord with a finite number of rules. Most formal theories of language, like Chomsky's, assume that language can be characterized as a Turing machine. Terence Langendoen and Paul Postal mention twenty-seven different linguistic systems that make this assumption, and no doubt there are more (Langendoen and Postal, 1984, 73–74).

As it turns out, however, natural languages are not Turing machines. Jacques Derrida's most significant result, as far as formal linguistics is concerned, is this: he successfully undermines the ideality of the abstract machine with the concreteness of the marks that constitute natural languages. Although these are not precisely his terms, it is the substance of *Speech and Phenomena* and the necessary foundation for the argument in *Of Grammatology.* Derrida's entire meditation derives from the the deconstruction of the Cartesian circle. He asks the question—a relatively innocent-sounding question—that undoes the entire tradition: "how can we justify the *decision* which subordinates a reflection on the sign to a logic?" (Derrida, 1978b, 7). How do we decide—the emphasis is Derrida's—to obey a logic without having *already* invoked the logic? Consistent attention to this question leads directly to the most corrosive aspect of Hegel: every logic undermines itself. This argument shows that the truth value of *any* text is logically undecidable. The question of whether to subordinate the signs to a logic is itself undecidable; thus every interpretation of the text spectacularly emits more text as the interpreter scrambles on the slippery hermeneutical grounds.

Derrida's argument, while valid, is logically weak. It is itself textual and historical. D. Terence Langendoen and Paul M. Postal make a much stronger argument by proving what they call "the N[atural] L[anguage] Vastness Theorem." They prove formally that natural languages consist not of a countably infinite collection of sentences, which thus could be enumerated by a recursive rule, but of an uncountably vast collection. That is, the set of all sentences of a natural language involves precisely the same paradox as the set of all sets: it must include itself. A formal system, for example, must account for those sentences that begin "I know and

I know that I know and so forth." They quote Gödel's statement of the problem: "It follows at once from this explanation of the term 'set' that a set of all sets or other sets of a similar extension cannot exist, since every set obtained in this way immediately gives rise to a further application of the operation 'set of' and, therefore, to the existence of larger sets" (Langendoen and Postal, 1984, 48–70). This result leads directly to Langendoen and Postal's NL non-constructivity theorem, which demonstrates that natural languages are not formal systems. The grammar of a natural language cannot be given in terms of rules and objects that will generate the entire collection of allowable sentences in the natural language (Langendoen and Postal, 1984, 71–81).

Of course, this argument takes nothing away from the positive success of any linguistic theory. Significant *fragments* of natural languages can be described, as a number of useful grammars clearly demonstrate. The argument does, however, raise profound ontological questions. If linguistic objects are not concepts constructed by rule in accord with psychological principles, as Chomsky and other constructivist linguists argue, what are they? Langendoen and Postal follow Jerrold J. Katz in arguing that language consists of abstract, rather than generated, objects. To exchange Cartesian psychologism for Platonic realism, however, seems to exchange a sophisticated absurdity for a patent absurdity. Plato had to resort to fancy to give an account of these curious objects, and the modern Platonists are hardly more realistic about their realism. It is a kind of logical fundamentalism, which insists upon the literal, objective existence of its logical objects—a position that is common among logicians and mathematicians and increasingly common among linguists.

Jerrold Katz's thought in this regard has taken an interesting turn in his recent work. Rather than rejecting Descartes's arguments, most notably the *cogito*, he proposes an alternative interpretation, which, even if it is questionable on scholarly grounds—and I believe that it is—is an important contribution to Cartesian mythology and the modern myth of symbolism. In his *Cogitation: A Study of the Cogito in Relation to the Philosophy of Logic and Language and a Study of Them in Relation to the Cogito*, he lays out the basis for the intuition of the abstract foundation of linguistics. He argues that the *cogito* is not an enthymeme and therefore a truncated deduction that construes premises to arrive at a

conclusion but an analytic entailment. He understands Descartes as arguing that existence is involved by definition in the very act of thinking; no intervening logical steps are subsumed by this conclusion. Katz interprets both Descartes and Chomsky's Cartesianism in terms of pure abstract theory rather than in terms of psychological categories.* In effect, Katz proposes a pure Cartesian grammar, not one infected by the subjectivism of Kant. In structuralist grammars, Katz notes, there are concrete objects and abstract rules. There must be substitution criteria for determining that this or that linguistic unit is equivalent to some other. In generative grammars by contrast, "An understanding of the concepts in question thus comes from their systematic connection to other concepts within the theory, on the one hand, and from the connections of the theory as a whole to the phenomena in its domain on the other" (Katz, 1986, 27). For the generative grammarian, "language" is a purely abstract domain to which the *cogito*—its description of itself and its world—belong. Linguistics as such and the abstract ego of the linguist *as* linguist therefore have no responsibility for the connections of the theory as a whole to the phenomenal domain. Skepticism of the kind voiced by the poststructuralists, therefore, is not the grammarian's problem: it must be dealt with by politics or social engineering or education. Katz secures the basis for a linguistic science, but only at the expense of rendering the formal study of language meaningless for those who are concerned with understanding the common world. The "I" who describes his or her own language may be an utterly confident theoretician, working with absolute objects in an absolute domain, but the knowledge is rendered merely disciplinary or academic (which is, of course, not to say trivial, as engineering is also an academic discipline, and, by way of engineering, academic entities are readily realized and intrude into the common domain by virtue of a crass materiality that does not recognize disciplinary boundaries).

The Cartesian equivocation on the status of the *cogito*, as it hovered between being a synthetic construction and an analytic immediacy, was logically inelegant but practically useful until at

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*The Cartesian text is not definitive. Descartes seems simply not to have been clear about the analytic-synthetic distinction and was thus a kind of naive Kantian, understanding his propositions as analytic or synthetic as it suited his argument. If linguistic objects turn out to be purely abstract, of course, their relationship to concrete reality then becomes totally problematical.

least some time in the present century. For example, it allowed the "I" to be the speaking subject of a love poem, on the one hand, and the theoretical ego required by mathematics, on the other. Now, however, the abstract ego has asserted itself as an absolute theoretical object, leaving the mere, actual people in a domain where the knowledge that addresses their most intimate concerns are, in fact, irrelevant. Even literature and the arts, to the extent that they constitute themselves as domains of theoretical objects, likewise withdraw from the space in which egos suffer the trauma of being bodies in particular locations, associated with particular people, whom they love or hate or fear, or, more troublesomely, whom they love, hate, *and* fear all at the same time. The completely nontheoretical *mess* in which people find themselves is cut through with disciplines that nowhere address the crisis that initiates their desire for knowledge.*

Like concepts, to recall Wittgenstein's phrase, none of the *disciplines* are for use on single occasions, and the development of disciplinary knowledge has consistently taken the place of other kinds of more specifically useful insights. Thus, it has been important merely to display nonsense. The tradition of outrageousness that runs from Dadaism to Fluxus to such contemporary rock groups as the Sex Pistols, Pere Ubu, and the Butthole Surfers has been merely to mark the site at which knowledge disappears into the concrete situation. As it turns out, the single occasion—as opposed to the successful realization of the concept, the mass occasion—is typically bizarre and even ridiculous, especially in a culture in which all behavior is constituted to reveal statistically reliable zones that are required as the basis of social order.

If grammar cannot be described in terms of a finite formal system, however, it might also be understood as a concrete, rather than a systematic, construction. Modern linguistic science has assumed that language is a system of empty concepts or essences, which are actively, and even willfully, made to apply to concrete, particular occasions. Especially in the work of the cognitivists, language is conceived as a set of procedures or grammatical rules and a collection of tokens—marks, phonemes, or whatever—which can be put into play in the service of the "mind." Mind is, in

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*I use *mess* as a technical word. I considered *world* or *ecosystem* as alternatives, but they both imply some theorized unity from which discipline might arise.

one sense, the collection of rules and tokens, but it is something *more:* it also decides what it *wants* to say. It is the seat of some linguistic activating device—eros or will. By way of this x-factor, which is never the concern of the science itself, that concepts are specified for use on single occasions. For the linguist, *particular* acts of speech are as random as the course of a particular electron for the physicist.

LINGUISTICS: NON-CARTESIAN

Indeed, the *perception* of particular speech acts is difficult to explain in terms of any of the linguistic theories based on the concept of the phoneme. It is not possible to correlate the physical properties of speech with the perception of meaning. The earliest spectographic analyses of speech revealed no invariant patterns in the speech signal (Joos, 1948). Phonemes are modified by the requirements of other phonemes in their immediate linguistic vicinities. Michael Studdert-Kennedy writes: "Thirty years of research with synthetic speech have demonstrated that the speech signal is replete with independently manipulable 'cues', which, if varied appropriately, change the phonetic percept" (Studdert-Kennedy, 1985, 140). Some progress has been made in defining phonetic distinctions in terms of dynamic events that take multiple constraints into consideration. *The Journal of Phonetics* devoted a special issue to the problem in 1986, with a lead article by Carol A. Fowler, "An Event Approach to the Study of Speech Perception from a Direct-Realist Perspective," which is reviewed by an impressive array of experts in the field. Despite this important work, however, R. M. Warren's earlier conclusion still stands: "While phonemes are constructs useful for transcribing and analyzing, they are without direct perceptual basis . . . phonemes seem to have no *direct* relevance to perceptual processes leading to the comprehension of speech" (Warren, 1976, 409, my emphasis).

With the collapse of idealism—and the parasitic idealisms that locate cognition in relation to a slippery or decentered phonology—two defensible possibilities present themselves: Platonic realism, which assumes the reality of abstract grammatical objects, and empirical realism. The first of these position is extensively developed by J. J. Katz; the other, at least inchoately, by Robert Verbrugge. I give here an outline of Verbrugge's work, to the extent that I know it (there are only a couple of published

essays), as it develops an understanding of language that is commensurate with the poetics of the common knowledge. Although Verbrugge seems to draw back from the most radical implications of his thought of extending the ecological theory of perception of J. J. Gibson to language, he suggests that cognition and symbol use must be viewed as a species of event perception like seeing and hearing.* As he notes, "This would require a dramatic change in our view of language (seeing it somehow as a specific medium) and in our view of language comprehension (seeing it as an activity that is free of interpretive mediation)" (Verbrugge, 1985, 164).

The proposal is radical indeed. Verbrugge proposes that language is (1) not ambiguous, (2) not arbitrary, (3) not representational, (4) not mediated, and (5) not formal. One could hardly find another doctrine of linguistics that is more fundamental or widely shared than these five that he proposes to overturn; indeed they are the assumptions that are necessary to the very idea of linguistic science as such. Without them, language must be understood as suffused throughout the particular occasions of its use and as deriving its *structure* from those occasions, *not* from an abstract medium. Therefore, language as such could not be understood as a separate object of study. Like other kinds of perception, Verbrugge suggests, "information about [speech] events is necessarily *specific* to them. . . In the case of perceptual experience [and, as he argues by analogy, in the case of speech perception], this implies a tight, nonarbitrary coupling between the experience of events, the media affected by events, and the events themselves" (Verbrugge, 1985, 160).

Verbrugge analyzes three aspects of this specificity.

1. He speaks of language as a catalyst: "Like chemical catalysts, words are rarely the substance of the process they affect, but they can *trigger* a flow of imagining and *constrain* the flow in very specific ways. Words are also like catalysts in that they constrain a process without in any sense containing a representation of the process or its results" (Verbrugge, 1985, 171).

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*Gibson's radical bypass of classical phenomenology is collaterally relevant to the poetics of the common knowledge, and an awareness of his approach will make Verbrugge's work seem intuitively more accurate. The important studies are *The Senses Considered as a Perceptual System* (Gibson, 1966) and especially *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Gibson, 1979).

2. He notes the importance of redintegration in the perception of language events: "The activation of virtual experiences by words may be viewed as a process of recollection and more specifically, of redintegration, if we consider words and their patternings to be the commonality between present and past events. . . Redintegration could be said to occur when words alone activate perceptional and actional attunements . . ." (Verbrugge, 1985, 173–74). These attunements are the province of the common knowledge. They are established and adjusted, not by workings in an abstract medium, but by concrete performance in the context of the concrete world. The structures are real not by virtue of their independent existence but by virtue of actually constituting the world which they reveal.

3. Finally, he proposes that all language is indexical: "indexes are signs that are related to what they signify by some natural constraint—such as thunder, a footprint, a bad cough, or a bird's nest. . . Words are not merely indexes to things, but indexes of social events and settings." Thus, language is a concrete, primary medium, like light and sound, not a secondary, reflective, or representational medium. The acts of language therefore are not dependent upon abstract schemata. Verbrugge speaks of the "'existential' relationship between *all* words and their natural occasions" and, although he does not follow out the more general philosophic implications of his argument, his is a radical existentialism, not merely a programmatic or theoretical one (Verbrugge, 1985, 179). Drawing on the research program of J. J. Gibson, he arrives at a pure existentialism, according to which, existence has no significant relation to essence conceived as something separate from existence. Acts do not define essences, as Sartre implies. An act is an act with its own concrete content that is not merely prior to essence; it has no relation to essence whatsoever.

It appears that such a theory will not support a science of linguistics—that is, a science that must describe a domain of essences. Indeed, if the special status of language perception is eliminated, the absurdity of a linguistic science as such would be clear. To propose a theory of coding and decoding symbols to understand the functioning of language in an environment would be comparable to proposing a theory of light to explain the way a person walks through a room without running into things.

If it will not support a linguistics, however, Verbrugge's sugges-

tions appears to point to precisely the theory of language required by the poetics that certain poets have been articulating—or lacking the necessary theory, *trying* to articulate—since Whitman and Melville. Of course, Verbrugge himself is completely unaware of this connection, as far as one can tell, but in his understated, social-scientific language, he takes several important steps toward getting Melville's self, nature, and God out of the dictionary and into the street.

Developing Verbrugge's line of thought in relation to biology, Humberto Maturana writes:

> Human beings can talk about things because they generate the things they talk about by talking about them. That is, human beings can talk about things because they generate them by making distinctions that specify them in a consensual domain, and because, operationally, talking takes place in the same phenomenic domain in which things are defined as relations of relative neuronal activities in a closed neuronal network. (Maturana, 1975, 56)

Communication takes place not as a result of information passing from a sender to receiver by way of a code—as the classic paradigm proposes—but as a result of social attunement or, in a term that Maturana uses, "shared orientation." The *same* information is independently generated by individuals who are attuned or share an orientation. This line of thought leads to a profoundly non-Cartesian conception of mind and language. Mind is not the foundation of social interaction but the creation of social interaction, Maturana and Varela write: "The unique feature of human social life and its intense linguistic coupling are manifest in that this life is capable of generating a new phenomenon, both close to and remote from our own experience: our mind, our consciousness" (Maturana and Varela, 1987, 223). The mind lacks innate knowledge; mind itself is our construction, not as the implementation of a given abstract structure, but as the private manifestation of specific acts in relations to specific, public occasions.

This is, of course, the solution to the problem of origins. Structure is malleable. That it slips and slides, returns on its self in logical loops, and thus decenters itself—the very qualities that render it useless as a theoretical medium—are precisely the qualities that makes it viable as the stuff of the common knowledge. The

poetics of common knowledge understands "difference"—the sameness that is not identical, in Derrida's formulation, as a dimension not of linguistic slippage but of poetic *precision*. In poetry, as in cartography, it is *differences* that are recorded as usable information. Poetic measure marks differences and shades of differences with a precision to which both the abstract thought of identity and its critique are blind. Derrida says that "differance . . . points out the irreducibility of temporalizing," or it points it out to philosophers, one might say, as only they have been so inattentive as to miss this most aggressive character of the real. The poetics of common knowledge insists that the earth, the actual, physical earth, and its actual inhabitants, *not* language, preserve "the difference that preserves language" (Derrida, 1978, 130) and poiesis reveals the specific forms of their acts in its measure. For the poet, temporality is not the snake in the metaphysical garden but the dimension of order.

Derrida's claim for the efficacy of language is the inverse of the rationalist's, and it is open to the same objection. The rationalist creates rules for a logic, rules that he follows carefully. If he does not become entangled in his rules, he assumes that he has learned something about the world. Derrida, on the other hand, notes that the rationalists invariably get tripped up by their rules—indeed, that getting tripped is inherent in rule making—and he assumes that, in observing this fact, he has learned something about the nature of the world. The poetics of common knowledge contends that in either case we have learned something only about the nature of rules. In order to follow rules, there must rules for implementing the rules; every access to a logically constructed world is blocked by infinite regression.

Structure, however, does not come from elsewhere, from some mysterious origin; structure is given by its own difference with itself. Structure is the thickening of generality that makes community possible. Verbrugge as a linguist and student of perception and Maturana and Varela as biologists define the possibility of a conceptual domain *without foundation* and without regress to a logical origin. They fall short of producing a poetics of the common knowledge, however, from lack of a developed sense of measure. Therefore, they cannot provide any insight into the single occasion. They locate precisely the site of the conceptual horizon, the crossing of which produces dadaism or indeed any singularity—the

domain in which events are unique, unrepeatable, and therefore, in a sense, unknowable. It is *measure*, not structure, that comes from elsewhere. Nothing in the structure provides a sense of scale.

MEASURE

The issue raised by Duncan's "Suite" is precisely the question of temporal quantity that was central for Augustine. Duncan is concerned with the difference between time as the concrete medium of language, on the one hand, and as an abstraction in which time enters only as a particular performance or illustration, on the other. Indeed, more generally, it is the issue raised by Walt Whitman's free verse practice. What is at stake is not a matter of aesthetics or craftsmanship but the most profound question of the relationship of language and reality. Thus, for example, the assertions of William Carlos Williams concerning prosody are by no means hyperbolic. When he speaks of "a new measure by which may be ordered our poems as well as our lives" (Williams, 1969, 340), he speaks of an *order* in the same serious sense that one in the philosophic tradition might speak of logical order or *logos*. That is, there is an order in time that is as *necessary* as logical order but that is concrete and particular rather than abstract and general. A concept is not for use on a single occasion but a *measure* is.

Duncan's remeasuring of seventeenth-century poems and, similarly, for example, Pound's measuring of prose texts by the American founding fathers in the *Cantos* (see, for example, cantos 31–34) are instances of repossession of a concreteness lost both to conventional poetic forms and to prose. Once again, for the first time since Plato's *Republic* settled the matter for the West, there begins to be a suggestion of poetry as a fundamental mode of knowledge, something comparable to the Greek *musike*. Thrasybolos Georgiades notes the significance of this untranslatable term: "The word *musike* in Greek is an adjective, not a noun. It means *mus-ish*, 'pertaining to the Muses.' Perhaps one could amplify it: 'mus-ish activity' or 'mus-ish education.' Possibly it would be best to connect the two: 'mus-ish education' through 'mus-ish activity,' and not a finished product. . . . *musike* functioned . . . as the very essence of intellectual education and as the force determining the ethos" (Georgiades, 1973, 107–8). The immense loss has been frequently noted, most often nostalgically, by Heidegger or

Georgiades himself, and to be sure, the new poetry does not pervade the culture as *musike* pervaded Greek culture, but for the first time since the Greeks, I want to say the *technology* for an ethical culture exists. Until recently, a world in which the minds and bodies of individuals were attuned to common ethical self-construction was *theoretically* out of bounds. What is shared in an *ethos*—etymologically, a space shared with other of one's own *kind*—is not a common *description* of the world, not a world picture or paradigm, not even common assumptions about time and space, but a common haunt: the *things* are the same, however much the individual perspectives may differ. We haunt the same world, and it is in our acts of making that we are embodied and realize our commonness.

For a certain tradition of democratic poets, deriving from Whitman, who declare that all people are of one kind, the essentials of a literate *musike* reappears. In one sense, of course, the notion of "literate *musike*" is self-contradictory, *musike* in the classical sense was inherently oral. The poets themselves have been frequently tongue-tied in their attempts to explain the implications of their discoveries, and in an important sense, the concreteness of the world cannot be theorized; it can only be enacted.

Verbrugge comes close to proposing a principle of measure in his discussion of redintegration—a common term in associationalist psychology for the restoration or renewal of mental totalities. The law of redintegration explains the connectivity between thoughts that were previously connected to some totality. It implies that mental functions ultimately involve only wholes of which there are no parts. For the tradition of British empiricism and the psychology that derived from it, the law of redintegration, on the one hand, and the assumption that mental content consists of simple ideas, on the other, were terms of a debilitating incoherence. Although Verbrugge, like J. J. Gibson, dispenses with the notion of simple ideas, he is puzzled about how to deal with the lengthy spans of time that are involved in language perception. He worries that "we risk returning to concepts of memory and association that have failed in the past to provide credible explanations of redintegrative phenomena" (Verbrugge, 1985, 174).

Part of the problem stems from the origins of Verbrugge's research in the study of event perception. Events in the narrow sense are relatively isolated: when I notice the bird land on the branch

outside my window or hear a power saw begin to whine somewhere in the neighborhood, these are more or less atomic events. They are noticed precisely because they punctuate the unattended continuities. In language, however, the ways in which events *connect* with one another is of great interest. The totalities are not so obvious, and indeed we are not schooled to pay attention to speech acts as extended events. Descartes proposed that the coherence of language results from the recursive application of atemporal rules to finite collections of tokens. By contrast the poetics of common knowledge notes that language may be discovered to cohere in relation to totalities measured *through time*.

Granted, we do not want to return to the discredited theories of associationism, but it is a knowledge of the *actual* associations of thought, not associationism, that is required by an event-perception theory of language. In this regard, William James's insights are far from exhausted. James writes:

> The manner in which trains of imagery and consideration follow each other through our thinking, the restless flight of one idea before the next, the transitions our minds make between things wide as the poles asunder, transitions which at first sight startle us by their abruptness, but which when scrutinized closely, often reveal intermediating links of perfect naturalness and propriety—all this magical imponderable streaming has from time immemorial excited the admiration of all whose attention happened to be caught by its omnipresent mystery. (James, 1950, I, 550)

The attractions of understanding this flow are, of course, considerable. If the principles of the connections between ideas could be discovered, one of the most obvious mysteries of the human mind would be cleared up. James makes a distinction that seems at first so simple and obvious as to be trivial but that, in truth, cuts to the philosophic heart of the matter. The very notion of connectivity itself, as it turns out, is ambiguous: "which sort of connection is meant?" James asks, "connection *thought-of*, or connection *between thoughts*"? The Cartesian tradition, down to and including contemporary cognitive science, proposes to account for all of the possibilities of thought and all of the connections *thought of*. As James recognized, however, "The jungle of connections of thought can never be formulated simply." The possibilities are infinite. As James shows, if they are simplified, so as to be enclosed by a

rational scheme, such as the rational forms of Hegelian history, the very richness of fantasy and arbitrariness that "are part of the very bone and marrow of our minds" is eliminated. As he goes on to argue—and this argument is crucial to the poetics of the common knowledge—"*Association,* so far as the word stands for an *effect, is between* THINGS THOUGHT OF—*it is* Things, *not ideas which are associated by the mind.* We ought to talk of the association of *objects,* not the association of *ideas*" (James, 1950, I, 554). Or, to put the matter in other terms, the mind deals with complexes, not simples, most significantly, temporal complexes: "The knowledge of some other part of the stream [of consciousness], past or future, is always mixed in with our knowledge of present things" (James, 1950, I, 606).

We have no means other than poetic measure to give a precise and significant account of this aspect of knowledge. As Georgiades notes, the Greeks *musike* was the technology of this knowledge, and the persistent nostalgia for Greek culture, from the eighteenth-century battle of the books to Joyce's *Ulysses* or Georg Lukàcs's *Theory of the Novel,* is precisely for this lost unity and potential magic. Georgiades writes:

> [In the ancient Greek language] we find a situation in which the things of the outer and inner world meet us as active and living forces, as "essences." Objects here behave like antimate beings and feelings are objectified, personified. There is no distinction between conception and name, on the one hand, and object and individual material thing, on the other. The field is open to conjuration.
>
> . . . In western languages, however, the ontological aspect of the word has vanished, as it were. Western philosophy has evolved correspondingly: logic has separated itself from ontology; the "essence of things," understood by the Greeks as substance and as present, in Kant's philosophy was transformed to the *Ding an sich,* the thing *per se,* which remains inaccessible to the human. Georgiades, 1973, 103–4)

But by the same token, there now begins to be a language that rejoins itself to the concrete. With James's recognition that the mind works its associations not between ideas but between things, we have not an ontology, not a *logic* of being, but *a working among beings as such*. The word as much as the thing is an object, not a representation or a simple token but a complex thing in its own

right. Trees, hills, rocks, houses, and *language* are facts of the landscape, and we deal with words as we deal with other things. Faced with a difficult climb up a rocky slope, we look for signs of good footing. We look for loose gravel, which calls for one kind of move; mud, which calls for another; and exposed tree roots, which call for still another. Words too offer a purchase on a landscape and require a comparable attentiveness to a completely concrete world. "For the Greeks," Georgiades writes, "the realm of the intellectual, of the substantial, is lowered to that of the sensory and becomes identical with it. The ancient conception of 'being' is characterized, as Hegel says, by the consciousness of the 'god himself entering the temple and dwelling in our midst'" (Georgiades, 1973, 105). For us, however, the sensory is raised to the realm of the intellectual, of the substantial, and becomes identical with it. The modern conception of being is characterized by the consciousness of men and women entering the world and dwelling in our midst. Although the gods do not appear, humans are invested with something of the value that was previously reserved for the divinities. Music, Leroi Jones writes, "is the result of thought. It is the result of thought perfected at its most empirical, i.e. as *attitude or stance*" (Jones, 1963, 152). It was that most concrete connection to thought that was lost in the world of mixed abstractions that Cartesianism introduced.

In both modern prose and in the verse forms that came to dominate poetry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, abstract time and its ratios are, in effect, prior to meaning itself. Thus, the division of structure and semantics that has unsettled our practice of language ever since. Or, to put the matter in terms that are appropriate to the next chapter, time was transformed into history: the flow of events in time was counterpointed to the Times, and thus the value of every act was rendered relative. Any particular performance of a traditional lyric is an instance of its potentiality or purpose that must be energized by private motives. The pattern allows innumerable possibilities for any given choice in the actual performance. That is, it allows performers of the verse expressive freedom, but only inside a context that insures that they thump out some version of pentameter, the temporal structures that generate meanings but do not specify their use. The voice becomes a temporal function of the metrical form, just as the actual things to which the poem refers becomes a function of

mathematical analysis. The poem as such cannot be performed because the text "contains" any number of possible performances; it can only be *represented* by a performance. The performance and the performer, therefore, become representative, mere examples. The poem itself represents *all* of its possible realizations, which is to say is represents nothing in particular.

Anthony Easthope speaks of English and German pentameter, French alexandrine, Italian and Spanish hendecasyllabic meter, and Russian tetrameter—those meters which are considered "natural" to their languages—as epochal forms of bourgeois culture (Easthope, 1983, 75). They represent precisely the dependence of bourgeois culture on abstract production that has not fully freed itself of its medium. When these forms began to break down—and signs of the breakdown were present almost from the beginning of the bourgeois regime—it was signaled by two very different modes of production that are, however, easily confused with one another because of their superficial resemblance. On the one hand, the sustaining conventions may be lost: readers simply may not hear the counterpunctal rhythm. It is the property of a homogeneous speech group at a particular historical time. For a society, even a small, elite society, to share an abstract norm controlling production of speech and even breath involves an awesome degree of unconscious regulation. At some point, if the efficacy of the institution is to be sustained, the background rhythm must be theorized; that is, the coherence of time or history must be plausibly reproduced and vigorously maintained, just as the coherence of logical space must be theorized. Such was the task of Hegelianism in Western thought, and the initial concern of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Symbolic History

We must have a new mythology, but this mythology must be in the service of ideas, it must be a mythology of reason.

—G.W.F. Hegel

And so to such as German Kant and Hegel, where they, though near us, leaping over the ages, sit again, impassive, imperturbable, like the Egyptian gods. . .

Mark the roads, the processes, through which these States have arrived, standing easy, henceforth ever-equal, ever-compact, in their range today. European adventures? The most antique? Asiatic or African? Old history—miracles—romances? Rather our own unquestion'd facts. They hasten, incredible, blazing bright as fire.

—Walt Whitman

If you write the way it has already been written the way writing has already been written then you are serving mammon, because you are living by something some one has already been earning or earned. If you write as you are to be writing then you are serving as a writer god because you are not earning anything. If anything is to be earned you will not know what earning is therefore you are serving god.

—Gertrude Stein

THE HEGELIAN APOCALYPSE

The earth has been destroyed. Only a
few people know that. The rest usually
think of it as a subject of threat;
atomic, nuclear, erosional
etc.

—Edward Dorn, "A Theory of Truth"

The Two Modernisms

From Descartes and Locke to Kant, both rationalists and empiricists maintained that the world that consciousness imagines for

itself relates to an original, however superfluous it may sometimes seem. Although the world-creating activity of consciousness takes place on the boundary between an interior and an exterior, which are finally no more than posited realms, the world that is produced is still *in some sense* a replica, a manifestation of a friction or tension in intellectual space. It can only be said, despite the implicit contradiction, that after Fichte no original corresponds to the replica and that in the Hegelian synthesis conceptualization becomes so fluent that language alone suffices as a world. Any concept understood in Hegelian terms contains all concepts. All perspectives, even perspectives that are contradictory, open to the all-embracing truth. Thought requires error, which—rather than Cartesian certainty—is the first principle of Hegelian logic. Hegelian doubt, however, unlike the Cartesian, which Hegel characterizes as "shilly-shallying about this or that presumed truth, followed by a return to that truth again, after the doubt has been appropriately expelled" is profound. After his confrontation with the malign demon, Hegel is never able to return to the prior truth. "The road can therefore be regarded as the pathway of *doubt*," Hegel says, "or more precisely as the way of despair" (Hegel, 1977, 49).

As much as labor language is, Hegel insists, the alienation of the Cartesian ego into its universality:

> Language . . . contains [the ego] in its purity, it alone expresses the "I", the "I" itself. This real existence of the "I" is qua real existence, an objectivity which has in it the true nature of the "I." The "I" is this particular "I"—but equally the universal "I"; its manifesting is also at once the externalization and vanishing of this particular "I", and as a result the "I" remains in its universality. The "I" that utters itself is heard or perceived; it is an infection in which it has immediately passed into unity with those for whom it is a real existence, and is a universal self-consciousness. (Hegel, 1977, 308–9)

It is to the nature of this infection, which is to say, the infection of language and ultimately the world that is described by and created by the ego, that we now address ourselves. Radical modernism cannot argue with Hegel. The dialectic feeds on contradiction. As individual readers and as a culture we are infected, we can only live through Hegel—live by engagement with him or at least the thought that he first adequately articulated. He is the tar baby of philosophers. We cannot hope to reach the end of the way of

despair. This is Hegel's truth. Mallarmé, in Foucault's reading of him, was almost correct: the language *has* spoken; its logic is complete; it has nothing *more* to say. What it says, however, is infinite—that is, it says *everything*. The depth of the persistent modernist strategy, to equate being and language, reveals itself: *if being is language, every thing is true (and false)*. Hegel's thought is the apocalypse. The world is destroyed by its truth. His beginning takes all of its infinite consequences into consideration. By incorporating the end and all of its logical resources, he preempts beginning again, and we enter the *verkehrte Welt*—the topsy-turvy world, in which every beginning again is a continuation. Without the various disciplines by which we are mastered in the topsy-turvy world, we have only paradoxical languages. As a radical modernist, one may want to speak of identifying language with nonbeing, for example, but that is topsy-turvy talk too. Rather the radical modernist move is to dissociate knowledge from language, information, history, textuality—the media that are confused with the factual world they mediate. It is necessary to dissociate knowing even from the medium of consciousness. The experience of the topsy-turvy world, when it is fully teased out, reveals that the authority of these overwhelming concepts is a joke, literally comedy, Hegelian apocalyptic comedy. We have had some brave predecessors, but only now do we begin in large numbers to laugh.

Lower-case consciousness, language, information, history, and textuality are local systems, contingent and open, factual, available for use. I have cited Melville's letter to Hawthorne—"Take God out of the dictionary, and you will have Him in the street." It is from this critical perspective that we read Hegel, for whom perfected self-consciousness remains in relation to a science of language—what Hegel calls "logic"—which cannot be stated with a finite grammar. Thus, the Hegelian beginning again produces a newness that is not new, an event that utterly destroys the past without moving toward the future. The dialectical habits of mind so completely color our disciplined knowledge that it is difficult even to state an alternative.

Hegel begins not with the isolated ego but with all of the richness and confusion of Descartes's second house of culture, where history and its implicit tragedy call forth a profound questioning. His rejection of the classical infinity in favor of the modern is explicit. The wrong infinity, he notes, "is only a negative of a

finite: but the finite rises again the same as ever, and is never got rid of and absorbed. In other words, this infinite only expresses the ought-to-be elimination of the finite" (Hegel, 1975b, 137). The right infinity, on the other hand, does absorb the finite. He compares the right infinite to an acid that is transformed in its absorption of the alkaline finite but "does not lose itself." To paraphrase Herman Weyl's comment on the Cartesian project in terms that are appropriate to Hegel, *The leap into the beyond of the beyond occurs when the infinitely open logical array of the natural languages is made into a closed aggregate of objects existing in themselves*. Hegel repeats the move that Descartes makes on the sequence of integers on the natural language. Hegelian logic discovers the infinity of mathematical analysis in the instigating metaphors of natural language itself. It is the infinitesimal calculus of the alphabet, which reveals the complex ratios of object to subject, consciousness to self-consciousness, master to slave, and so forth both, in their differences and their approach, at some infinitely deferred limit, to identity. In the *Logic* of 1830, Hegel notes, "People who are too fastidious toward the finite never reach actuality, but linger lost in abstraction, and their light dies away" (Hegel, 1975b, 136). We can now see, however, that life is not redeemed by the thought of the right infinity and that its endless process is as tedious as the wrong infinity. It is fastidiousness toward the finite—the ever-new here-now—that defines radical, post-Hegelian modernism, as in Walt Whitman and Gertrude Stein, to whom the second half of this essay is devoted. For more than two millennia, the resources for beginning again were associated with abstraction. After Hegel, and especially after Shannon and Wiener, they were associated with the concrete. Consider, for example, Whitman's fastidiousness toward finite time: "The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them, emptied them, / And proceed to fill my next fold of the future."

Language cannot be described finitely. From Hegel's point of view, therefore, it is possible only to swing back and forth between bacchanalian revel and despair—the heady mystical moment of participation in absolute knowledge and the grim reality of finitude. Post-Hegelian history has confirmed the dialectical character of Western institutions. The necessity of history and the contingency of history are always in proximity. Even the simplest thought requires the whole of history and its simultaneous denial. Every

experience is total experience. "To me the meanest flower that blows can give / thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears," Wordsworth writes. This concentration of the all in everything is, of course, attractive. It makes experience almost unbearably rich and significant, but the richness and significance is bought at the expense of the constant nearness of the poor and the meaningless. In every lapse of concentration, the unmitigated contingency of "lazy existence" asserts itself. It requires genius or utter distraction, the philosopher or the couch potato. The emotional turbulence of the postromantic era results from this all or nothing attitude; mystical insight walks hand in hand with nihilism.

The radical modernism that arose in the middle of the nineteenth century was signaled theoretically by the non-Euclidean and N-dimensional geometers—especially by Riemann—and practical evidence of it can found in the work of Melville, Whitman, Dickinson, William James, Henry James, Benjamin Paul Blood, and others, some time before a conscious poetics was formulated by the generation of 1910, most notably perhaps by Gertrude Stein and Marcel Duchamp. The radical modernists, rather than identifying being with language, identified language as the *content* of being. *The structure of being is everywhere made manifest by linguistic media but it can only be known factually and finitely, not by characterizing the nature of the medium.*

The End of Poetry, the Beginning of Poetry

We will examine Hegel's argument in the opening pages of the *Phenomenology* in detail, but in its most generalized form, it sounds much like Parmenides in Plato's dialogue: if we begin with the thing, *any*thing, and ask how we should name it, we are in a quandary because we cannot possibly recognize it without already knowing what it is; if we begin with the pure concepts, just empty names, however, there is no way to associate them with undifferentiated things. In either case, as Parmenides succinctly argues, having elicited the possible various forms of the paradox from the young Socrates, philosophy is without a reliable origin: "if . . . one will not allow that there are characters of things that are, and refuses to distinguish as something a character of each single thing, he will not even have anything to which to turn his mind, since he will not allow that there is a characteristic, ever the

same, of each of the things that are; and so he will utterly destroy the power and significance of thought and discourse" (Plato, 1983, 13). Hegel's work is in the aftermath of the destruction of reason. Having taken the step into the beyond, he does not have a language that can "acknowledge ideas or species of existences" or "define particular species." Nothing can be separated from anything else. Thus, modernist that he was, he begins the project twice, taking up first one horn of the dilemma and then the other: in *Phenomenology,* starting with the unnamed and inherently unnameable, stuff of consciousness, and in *Encyclopedia,* beginning with logic, with language, the names that have no content. If it were not for the history of culture, the accumulated false starts and rhetorical ploys, it would never be possible to get beyond this beginning. There are no absolute representations. The aesthetic realm that includes the entire world of "experience"—every thing finally but the absolute thought of the absolute mind—is never more than temporary or provisional.

Hegel closely follows the logic of Plato in *Parmenides,* which he calls "surely the greatest artistic achievement of the ancient dialectic" (Hegel, 1977, 44). The Parmenidean arguments are devastating, not only to the Platonic theory of ideas but, more generally, to the possibility of rational thought leading beyond the Parmenidean unity. Whatever Parmenides himself may have thought, and trying to interpret the fragments is at best a speculative undertaking, the Platonic Parmenides establishes a series of paradoxes that leads us to the conclusion that, *if there is anything,* it is one, indivisible, continuous, timeless, and unspeakable. When Socrates is utterly vanquished, Parmenides suggests to him that the noble and divine impulse of philosophy might be served by an art that "is generally regarded as useless, and condemned by the multitude as idle talk." And he adds that, in the exercise of this art, Socrates should "examine the consequences that follow from the hypothesis, not only if each thing is hypothesized not to be, but also if that same thing is hypothesized not to be" (Plato, 1983, 13). This is, of course, the classical dialectic. Its basis is idle talk—that is to say, tradition or culture.

Classical reason refused to compromise the distinction between a worldly space, which must be conceived as a singularity, and a mental space, which was marked by syntactical recurrence; and Descartes's violation of it seems perhaps unconscious. The

Parmenidean logic, as Plato appears to have recognized, however, is inescapable; and the paradoxes that Parmenides and his student, Zeno, articulated have plagued subsequent thought. In the immediate Hegelian context, Kant reasserts the classical rigor. He develops four propositions—which bear on central philosophic concerns—and their opposites, maintaining that the arguments for both sets of propositions are equally valid. For example, in the "Second Conflict of Transcendental Ideas," the argument that most clearly recalls the Zenonian paradoxes, Kant shows that, on the one hand, "Every composite substance in the world is made up of simple parts, and nothing anywhere exists save the simple or what is composed of the simple," but, on the other hand, "No composite thing in the world is made up of simple parts, and there nowhere exists in the world anything simple" (Kant, 1965, 402). Kant's solution to these problems is to assign the terms of the conflict to different logical spaces, the one is true of the phenomena, the other of the noumena. More generally, Kant argues, paradoxes arise in the failure of this distinction.

So long as two separate-but-equal logical spaces can be maintained, it is possible to argue reasonably that the world is both finite and infinite, atomic and continuous, that nature is both determined and free, that god both does and does not exist, but the arguments are satisfying only to the most utterly rational minds. The drive toward unity is emotionally overpowering. The philosophers who immediately followed Kant, most notably Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, and the artists of the period, quintessentially Beethoven perhaps, made noble attempts to bring science and psychology into more confident relationship to the life of the spirit. It was the first and last adequate manifestation of the modern ego, and it is for this reason that romanticism has cast such a long and persistent shadow over subsistent Western culture, where it has sponsored both anarchism and totalitarianism, mysticism and technologism. Of course, radical modernism makes no attempt to *represent* the ego at all.

When Spirit conceived itself as the source of a cogent world image, it necessarily conceived itself as more, as a vast, seamless texture of information, a world-embracing syntax that is meaningful only because it cannot communicate with all parts of itself at the same time and, so, must defer its awareness of the total logic on behalf of the absorbing parts, thus creating history. The metaphysi-

cal subject that was called into existence by renaissance humanism and codified in methodology was the necessary site for the construction of a world ideally suited to that subject's own self-understanding. Like Descartes, Hegel approached his work in the spirit of humanism, but Hegel had discovered the lesson of the metaphysical poets, that at some degree of abstraction any two things are identical and at some degree of abstraction any two things are different; moreover, the choice of abstraction is, at least within limits, open. Hegel revealed this occult knowledge of the new poetry and systematized it. Just as one order of poetry came to the end with Plato, another order of poetry came to the end with Hegel. To be sure, the old poetry has been carried on by the academy. The ideal self that Cartesian modernism required is produced as a luxury, and it is this silly figure that creative-writing workshops and most criticism of poetry cultivates and sentimentalizes. We are still living out the consequences of this dispersion.

In the closing passionate pages of *Phenomenology,* Hegel writes of history as presenting "a slow-moving succession of Spirits, a gallery of moving images, each of which, endowed with all the riches of Spirit, moves thus slowly just because the Self has to penetrate and digest this entire wealth of substance" (Hegel, 1975, 492). This ecstatic attention concentrates the history of Spirit in summation in a moment of satisfied self-awareness. Before Hegel's time, one finds records of the absolute Spirit felt and symbolized or seen and presented to passive contemplation: that is the aesthetic prehistory of absolute knowledge. Hegel, however, is just beyond, as he says, the passage "over from the poetry of the imagination to the prose of thought" (Hegel, 1975a, 1:89). The ecstasy is not frenzy, nor is Hegel transfixed in contemplation. The images pass slowly, and, while they might be alluded to imaginatively, as symbols, here they are thinkable and thought. In the *Aesthetik,* Hegel describes the disappearance of the epic world in which life is the practice of forms thoroughly integrated with themselves. Of the "world of prose" that follows the epoch of poetry, he writes:

> the individual is no longer able to maintain that appearance of autonomous and complete vitality and freedom which is the very foundation of the notion of beauty. It is true that neither system nor a totality of activities are lacking in the immediate human reality and in the undertakings and institutions of the latter; yet

> that whole is but an aggregate of individualities, its occupations and activities are split and fragmented into innumerable parts, so that only tiny particles of the whole fall to various individuals. (Hegel, 1975, 1, 89–90)

Reality is particle-ized, atomized. The unity of finite objects with the finite space in which it is measured is broken. Prose mediates the ideality of mathematical analysis and the ideality of normative measure in poetry and music, retaining the ideal forms without the ideal content. Hegel reveals the career of reason. Thereafter, the *rational* structure of history (as distinct from its contingent procession of events) holds no more surprises; it is the structure of logic itself. He investigates the mechanism of thought, not like Kant to seek a guarantee of its adequacy, but as offering direct access to knowledge itself. Thereafter, the medium is the absolute (a paradox in itself). We have replaced the Parmenidean problem of not being able to begin, with the Hegelian problem of not being able to stop.

Ludwig Wittgenstein writes: "One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing the frame through which we look at it" (Wittgenstein, 1953, 48). To a certain extent this confusion is common to all philosophic thought, but in the nineteenth century, there was a widespread determination to *inhabit* the frame, which proved in large measure to be both inhabitable and malleable. Hegel provided a logic by which these repetitions, tracing and retracing the outlines of things, develop a rich internal texture and appear to gain reality. The production of the Hegelian cinema became the central cultural project.

Symbolic History is not time but the ratio of an event to a specified context that is theoretically rule-governed. History is theorized as as sequence of events playing against a stable background of epochal rules. It was Hegel's discovery that any set of rules that is complex enough to account for the sequence of events is infinitely generative. To act at all in such a context is to overwhelm the finite. For Napoleon such exaggerated drama was possible; by 1848, it was not. Thereafter, the attractions of synthesis, which reconciled so much and achieved so little, diminished: science became increasingly a series of nonphilosophic procedures for predicting and controlling phenomena, and the remainder of philoso-

phy attached itself to a psychology, sometimes in the name of nationalism or education of the masses or entertainment. It is the poetics of the production of posthistorical history, this altogether *uncommon* production, which replaced poetic production, that we consider in this chapter.

"Betwixt Unity and Number"

David Hume had shown that the split in Cartesianism that separates intuition and the logic of language cannot be overcome. Making specific reference to Descartes's test of clearness and distinctness, he argues:

> 'tis a principle generally receiv'd in philosophy, that every thing in nature is individual, and that 'tis utterly absurd to suppose a triangle really existent, which has no precise proportion of sides and angles. If this therefore be absurd in *fact and reality,* it must also be absurd *in idea;* since nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible. . . Now as 'tis impossible to form an idea of an object, that is possest of quantity and quality, and yet is possest of no precise degree of either; it follows, that there is an equal impossibility of forming an idea, that is not limited and confin'd in both these particulars. (Hume, 1978, 20)

In a sense, this is merely the oldest philosophic problem: all stones, for example, are of a certain weight and color, but the *idea* of stone is neither heavy nor light, red nor black. The specificity of intuition and the generality of the logic of language are in themselves irreconcilable. The intuition discovers unitary objects and the language requires classes which refer to innumerable objects. From the ideas of unity and number, thus supplied, however, it impossible to arrive at the idea of identity, by which, for example, one can be assured of an object's identity with itself through time. What is required is a medium—a third realm—"betwixt unity and number," as Hume says, through which the things of the world and their representations can be conjoined. The subsequent history of philosophy is characterized by the quest not for a foundational premise but for a foundational medium, which Hume argues must be, in effect, a medium "betwixt existence and non-existence," which is to say a purely imaginary place, according to his account, produced by the inertia of custom.

With respect to the imagination, Kant, a solid man of the Enlightenment, must have known that he was on dangerous grounds; all right-thinking men despised the imagination as the generator of chimeras and madness. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, in his attempt to respond to Hume, however, he takes the imagination into the house of metaphysics and gives it a place of such privilege that it is almost beyond criticism. The imagination is the associative principle, which first atomizes the continuous flow of pure intuition and reassociates the atoms into discrete representations. It is the imagination that mediates betwixt unity and number, between existence and nonexistence. It therefore designates a site for the origin of language, but it does not explain it, except by way of transcendental conflict. Kant writes: "A pure imagination, which conditions all *a priori* knowledge, is thus one of the fundamental faculties of the human soul. By its means we bring the manifold of intuition on the one side, into connection with the condition of the necessary unity of pure apperception on the other" (Kant, 1965, 146). To this day, philosophy looks for the medium which unites the seamless web of intuition with the discrete objects of grammar and logic. The history of the past two centuries of thought is strewn with theories of the medium: Fichte's ego, Hegel's history, Marx's labor, Schopenhauer's will, Nietzsche's recurrence, Freud's (very different) ego, Peirce's signs, Russell's logical atoms, Heidegger's Being, Jung's archetypes, Jakobson's and Turbetzkoy's phonemes, Levi-Strauss's structures, Lacan's signifying chains, or Derrida's *différance*. Behind all of these, as contradictory as they are, is the Kantian conviction that the imaginative medium must *somehow* produce its own content either in relation to a specifiable subset of the medium—a *logos*—or in relation to the extensive medium itself.

This fundamental argument in *Critique of Pure Reason* has been adequately explained a thousand times and is the philosophic property of everyone who ever took a beginning philosophy course, but we must examine it again in an attempt to understand its remarkable resilience, especially among literary critics where its—largely unconscious—influence continues almost unabated. The dependence of the argument upon a class of propositions that Kant exemplifies with Euclidean geometry must be made clear. As we shall see, the discovery of non-Euclidean geometry undermines

not only the specific Kantian argument but also the entire class of arguments that proposes to derive knowledge of the world from knowledge of the linguistic media. The medium is no more a priori than the content.

Language is a kind of experience, of course, so it is not surprising that language and experience in general are confused, but Kant insists upon first radically separating and then rejoining them, making a fundamental gain in the process. At the outset, he notes that language experience is peculiar in that language can refer both to itself *and* to the contents of intuition—that is, it is a *possible* medium. However, statements that refer to language—"analytical judgments"—and statements that refer to intuitions—"synthetical judgments"—have notably different characters. The truth or falsity of analytical judgments can be determined inside language itself. A classic example is "All bachelors are unmarried." It is not necessary to examine any bachelors to know that this is true; it is a definition. And as Kant notes, "Through analytic judgements our knowledge is not in any way extended" (Kant, 1965, 29). The truth or falsity of synthetical judgments, on the other hand, depends upon conditions outside of language; that is, they actually say something about the world. The truth of the statement "the rose is red" can be determined only by *looking* at the rose. Such statements tell us about the world, but unfortunately we can never be completely certain of their truth. Our appeal to experience is never completely conclusive. The observation cannot be guaranteed to be correct. We are perhaps unwittingly observing the rose under a red light.

The question that arose for Kant took this form: Are there propositions that are logically necessary *and* applicable to experience, or, how are a priori, synthetic judgements possible? Kant adduces the theorems of Euclidean geometry as examples of a priori synthetic judgments. They seem to be readings from the medium betwixt unity and number itself: "That the straight line between two points is the shortest, is a synthetic proposition. For my concept of straight contains nothing of quantity, but only of quality. The concept of the shortest is wholly an addition, and cannot be derived, through any process of analysis, from the concept of the straight line. Intuition, therefore, must here be called in; only by its aid is the synthesis possible" (Kant, 1965, 53). In other words, the transcendental imagination itself produces the condi-

tions by which its own spatial image is known, and, beyond establishing the general categories of thought, the primitive synthetic powers of the imagination are awesome. As it had once articulated the entire pantheon, prior to the advent of metaphysics, now it was to replicate its performance *in consciousness,* rather than in the dream-world alone. In order to accomplish this task, it would call the only highly developed technology of world construction that was available, the tradition of visionary poetry; the perennial vision was to be theorized.

The unity of life had never been so profoundly tested, nor had the self been required to bear such torque. The generation of philosophers who were the immediate heirs of Kant's work were at least in part aware of their theogonic task. What had been obscure in mythology was now to be recovered in the clear light of reason. Schelling writes: "As the mythologies and theogonies of primitive peoples anticipated modern science, so Böhme anticipated all scientific systems of modern philosophy in his description of the birth of God. . . Böhme is really a theogonic personality, but it was just this which prevented him form raising himself to free world-creation and just thereby to the freedom of positive philosophy" (Brown, 1977, quoted 274). Schelling, undertaking to rectify this situation himself, proclaims: "Mythology in general and any piece of mythological literature in particular is not to be understood schematically or allegorically, but symbolically. For the demand of absolute artistic representation is: representation with complete indifference, so that the universal is wholly the particular, and the particular at the same time wholly the universal, and does not simply mean it" (Schelling, 1989, 14). Schelling's claim that the particular is universal is, of course, mysticism and directly related to the mystical tradition which finds the *imago dei* in the finite world. It echoes the Augustine argument on the trinity and also the Socratic argument that physical love is an image of philosophic love. His literalism, however, is breathtaking. He makes no distinction between the image and the thing imagined, and his boldness has compelled nearly two centuries of aesthetic meditation. It is so commonplace that one is likely to miss the fact that it is, as presented, literally non-sense.

Hegel objects to Schelling's universal particular, and in the grand design of his works, he confronts aesthetic mysticism with scientific abstraction. The difference for Hegel, however, is only

that the identity of the particular and the universal is deferred to the absolute. Otherwise, the pursuit of the universal remained tediously on the path of the wrong infinity.

Like his humanist predecessors, however, Hegel venerates Greek culture. Recognizing that the relationship between the ancients and the moderns is subject to historical development, however, he argues that, to continue the ancient impulse, it is necessary to articulate a contrary position or at least a position that is submerged by the ancient ontological enthusiasm. Like Descartes, he strategically deploys a dependence upon a continuous tradition which is fictive. Therefore, he turns away from the content of ancient philosophy—"the scientifically valueless myths," as he calls it—and concentrates on method. Unlike Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza, however, Hegel is not a mathematician, and he speaks disparagingly of the mathematical tradition in idealism. The Cartesian method, like the ancient philosophic myths, dwells excessively on mere content; it does not pursue its method *inwardly,* as Hegel says, to the interior conditions of its possibility. "In mathematical cognition," he writes, "insight is an activity external to the thing; it follows that the true thing is altered by it" (Hegel, 1977, 24). Unlike the Greeks and the first modernist philosophers, who were equally bowled over by the superficial power of the dramatic demonstrations of mathematical analysis, Hegel draws attention back to the common language, but a common language that has taken the ideal language up into itself. Philosophical cognition unites the external and internal moments:

> The inner coming-to-be or genesis of substance is an unbroken transition into outer existence, into being-for-another, and conversely, the genesis of existence is how existence is by itself taken back into essence. The movement is the twofold process and the genesis of the whole, in such wise that each side simultaneously posits the other, and each therefore has both perspectives within itself; together they thus constitute the whole by dissolving themselves, and by making themselves into its moments. (Hegel, 1977, 25)

In this mutual positing, substance is generated *ex nihilo*. In the beginning is not the Word but the medium, the language and its fully ramified infinitistic logic. In the drama of the *Phenomenology,* the terms of the Cartesian dualism are required to contend with one another, not in terms of mathematical formalism, but in

terms of cultural history. Granted, Hegel's language here seems strained after the lucidity of Descartes, and this will continue to trouble our reading. The *Phenomenology* was written at white heat and perhaps carelessly, but after puzzling over passages one generally feels that there are reasons for the difficulties. Here Hegel explains how we get past the Parmenidean problem of beginning. The problem arises again clearly and urgently in the aftermath of the Cartesian compromise, when the ideal language turns back and undertakes to incorporate the metalanguage that made it possible. This turning back as a perpetual process, a beginning again in a space of having begun, is in effect language engorging itself, the modernist moment as such. About 1945, in the work of the cyberneticists and information theorists, it would lead to a theory that could deal with multiple variables without reference to an all embracing and infinitely deferred absolute. Hegel first signals the possibility of completely fluent abstraction, abstraction *as* abstraction, its own content.

Verkehrte Welt

The first three chapters of *Phenomenology* establish three loci in of Western epistemology: simple empiricism, simple idealism, and transcendental idealism. These positions can be identified with historical figures and philosophical movements, but the history of the Hegelian spirit and the actual history of philosophy coincide only in general terms. For Hegel, metaphoric ratios develop between ancient and modern philosophy and between the history of philosophy, thus folded into both itself and the individual consciousness. The perspective is never clear and can never be precisely clarified. The problem is not to determine some specific referent but to appreciate the metaphoric richness of any given locus in language.

In "Sense-Certainty: or The 'This' and 'Meaning,'" Hegel addresses the disjunction between experience and language, a problem that had twice previously pushed philosophy to the the crisis point in the thought of Parmenides and Hume. At the outset, Hegel rejects the Parmenidean ontological mysticism. The immediate and unspeakable intuition of "this-ness," he says, "proves itself to be the most abstract and poorest truth" (Hegel, 1977, 58). As he goes on to show, the "this" is called into existence by the requirements of language itself; conceived apart from language, it is empty,

nothing at all. Hegel takes no interest in languageless meditation and the intuition of cosmic unity that is at the heart of the Parmenidean epic. Its poverty, according to him, is precisely that it cannot be spoken and cannot, therefore, become involved in the social conflict that is the motive of history itself. "What is called unutterable," Hegel writes, "is nothing else than the untrue, the irrational, what is merely meant [but not actually expressed]" (Hegel, 1977, 66).

Hegel confronts the full force of the Parmenidean logic squarely:

> It is as a universal too that we utter what the sensuous [content] is. What we say is: "This", i.e. the universal This; or, "it is", i.e. Being in general. Of course, we do not *envisage* the universal This or Being in general, but we utter the universal; in other words, we do not strictly say what in this sense-certainty we *mean* to say. But language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves directly refute what we mean to say, and since the universal is the true [content] of sense-certainty and language expresses this true [content] alone, it is just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, a sensuous being that we mean. (Hegel, 1977, 60)

Even in the English translation the equivocation on "mean" in this passage is powerful. Its *meaning* in the first two uses (which may themselves have slightly different shadings) is different from its meaning in the final use. On the one hand, it means "intention" and, on the other, "reference." In the German, however, the polysemy is even more obvious. The verb *meinen* carries the force both of "meaning" and "of being of an opinion, of mere opinionating," and it also offers Hegel the opportunity to pun on *mein*, the possessive adjective (mine). The activity of meaning is the activity of taking possession. The certainty that was initially understood as a certainty of the thing itself is transferred in the dialectical process to the act of knowing: "[Sense-certainty's] truth is in the object as my object, or in its being mine [Meinen]; it is, because I know it" (Hegel, 1977, 61). The dialectic is a semantic machine that generates significance out of its own attempted possession of itself through the possession of language. This is the ego-infection of all discourse; ego takes possession of the language on behalf of opinion, on behalf of untruth, until the untruth or its "meaning"—that is, both personal opinion and general significance—is revealed.

The argument for the sufficiency of language is desperate, the only possible preserve of a culture that had lost the habits by which language is interpreted and must look to language to interpret itself. It imposes the solipsistic dilemma on the culture at large. Why, one wants to ask, is language "the more truthful"? One might well think of language in itself as neither truthful nor untruthful but as a colorless medium. Language, however, Hegel argues, has a self-correcting feature: "In it [language], we ourselves directly refute what we mean to say." And again, he speaks of language "which has the divine nature of directly reversing the meaning of what is said, of making it into something else" (Hegel, 1977, 66). That is, language is perpetually self-critical; it is like the Pentateuch, telling the story that establishes its own authority. If the discourse is universal, it cannot rest until it implicates all of language, and in the process of following its implications, it reveals the inadequacy of its originating tropes. Each turn (*trope* is etymologically "turn") offers a new perspective, and each perspective proves to be limited.

Unlike Hume, whose ultimate philosophic task was to justify the bourgeois decorum of mid-eighteenth-century England, Hegel could not fall back on stable social and linguistic conventions. Or perhaps one can say more accurately, that Hume's arguments have a different significance for times of social stability and times of dramatic social change. The bourgeois revolution was in the past for Hume's England, and its regime was comfortably established. The West has seldom known a society in which the conventions were so secure, sophisticated, and impeccably practiced. The language was supported by firmly entrenched and respected institutions—the preserve of a small, homogeneous ruling-class that had every confidence in its authority. And, of course, such a stability has never established itself again. By contrast, Hegel, according to tradition, was penning the final parts of *Phenomenology* almost literally as Napoleon marched into Jena. In such a time, what is the habit or convention to which Hume attributed all ontological and epistemological as well as social stability? Hegel was at the beginning of the epoch of the most dramatic change in human history. In the nineteenth century, we entered the epoch of changing change that features not only continual flux of phenomena but also constant revision of the entire intellectual context.

In the long run, however, it was neither revolution nor

Napoleonic adventurism but technology that disturbed the neoclassical complacency. The difference between a hand loom and a power loom was quantifiable and dramatic; under its impact, old ways of thinking about production and markets were outmoded. Time and change were immediate and undeniable experiences. The thing to be explained was not dead matter, which does not revise itself, but mind, which is constantly changing. By the time of Hegel, it appeared that changes of mind were not, as they had seemed to the neoclassicists, merely the vicissitudes of enthusiasm but inherent facts of a trial and error process that leads to definitive local improvements. Thomas Edison and Henry Ford were Hegelians in practical garb.

Hegel's argument cannot get fully underway until he begins the discussion of perception: "The wealth of sense-knowledge belongs to perception, not to immediate certainty, for it was only the source of instances; for only perception contains negation, that is, difference or manifoldness, within its own essence." Any particular thing is no sooner perceived as a thing—that is, as the bearer of a name and the representative of a class—than it involves the contradictions that motivate the dialectic. As particulars can never be more than provisionally accommodated by logical classes or "notions," as Hegel says, and vice versa, the categories must be in time ever more finely analyzed. Perception and the language of the conditioned universal, the universal that is always supplemented with a "this," or "here," or a "now," are the tools of the casual consciousness, the miasmal realm of everyday life in which deception lurks, according to Hegel, at every turn: "It is 'sound common sense' that is the prey of these abstractions, which spin it round and round in their whirling circle" (Hegel, 1977, 79). Consciousness is a representation that represents nothing but its own activity; it is at once instrument and medium. With the appearance of the unconditioned universal, consciousness breaks its relation with lazy existence and enters the realm of pure thought, thought that requires nothing but thought for its development. Philosophy is that mode of thought that learns from itself, as it were, from its own nervous tension. It tries to catch itself in the act of beginning. In its hall of mirrors, consciousness sees and sees itself see, and by comparing image to image, a space that has no property but comparison comes into existence. This logic is the common language equivalent to algebraic logic, and by its means an entire culture—

not just the initiates of mathematical analysis—makes the "leap into the beyond." This is the domain of phenomenology. Thus, the phenomena are already a medium, and the tension in it that drives the dialectic is mediation of this immediacy.

Unless we note that the Hegelian construction of the world takes place in a falsely and dangerously inflated aesthetic space, it will appear so rich and various, so full of promise, as to make one contemptuous of the meager world which the thinkers of the Enlightenment proudly inhabited. Hegel's morbid preoccupation with opinionating is symptomatic of a culture in a frenetic process of trial and error—feverish activity arising from the infection of language by the ego in which *every* idea must be tested, every thought must be pushed to its conclusion, every mistake must be offered the redemption of meaning, in order to sustain a relatively stable situation in a culture which has no reliable truth, habits of mind, or conventions of social behavior. Such has been the intellectual landscape since about the time of the Napoleonic wars.

Force and Understanding

The powerful abstractions, which mathematical analysis made available to Descartes and Newton, had been used only to describe essentially static forces. In the third chapter of *Phenomenology,* "Force and the Understanding: Appearance and the Supersensible World," Hegel recognizes how comparable cognitive tools are applicable to a world that is manifestly dynamic and historical.

The Hegelian critique is addressed to concepts that had served as boundaries of subjectivity. Although Descartes had substituted relationships for measure of the image, he continued to conceive of the objects of thought as external to the logical categories of the subject, and the unconditioned universal, even as it appeared after the Copernican revolution which Kant claimed to have effected in philosophy, was still conceived as a *thing,* not the pure relationship that consciousness requires. In his critique of the Kantian notion, Hegel writes: "This unconditioned universal, which is now the true object of consciousness, is still just an object for it; consciousness has not yet grasped the Notion of the unconditioned as Notion. It is essential to distinguish the two: for consciousness, the object has returned into itself from its relation to an other and has thus become Notion in principle; but consciousness is not yet for

itself the Notion, and consequently does not recognize itself in that reflected object" (Hegel, 1977, 75).

The stage of consciousness that Kant represents posits a world-constituting understanding but that understanding does not recognize itself in its creation. For Kant, like Descartes, the content is given by intuition, and the form is provided by concepts, by virtue of the synthesizing power of consciousness. Although the Kantian compromise answers the empiricist critique, consciousness is still estranged from its own creation. The Kantian mind cannot hold its creation in itself. Its own cognition cuts it off from its possibility of acting, at least in the profound sense that attracts Hegel, of following the consequences of knowledge to its boundless limits. The subject looks in the mirror and sees *something* but fails to recognize itself. It is stopped, as it were, at the mirror's surface. Kant does not take responsibility for the reflection; otherwise the terms of the antinomies would appear in the same space and the elegant order of the Newtonian picture would crumble. The Kantian compromise left the problem of interaction between mind and body not much beyond the Cartesian impasse. "Consciousness plays no part in its free realization," Hegel writes, "but merely looks on and simply apprehends it" (Hegel, 1977, 80). Its world-constituting activity is limited to the imagination of a static world that excludes the dynamism of its own action.

The move that Hegel makes is one of the boldest, even one of the most outrageous, moves in the philosophic literature. Fichtean egotism was grandiose, but it was controverted by the actual experience of will. The world-constituting subject is never free of itself; it engenders its own resistance. Hegel takes this division of the world and this resistance into consciousness itself: "To begin with, therefore, we must step into its place [i.e., the place of the constituted object] and be the Notion which develops and fills out what is contained in the result. It is through awareness of this completely developed object, which presents itself to consciousness as something that immediately is that consciousness first becomes explicitly a consciousness that comprehends [its object]" (Hegel, 1977, 80). This step initiates an infinite regress, inside of which Hegel discovers the whole of history from the perspective of the end of history. The absolute antitheses are posited as identical: in their infinite extensions, subject and object, general and particular, are the same—that is, notions of consciousness.

Kant had developed an elaborate dualism to avoid this conclusion. In Hegel, however, the drive to monism is rampant and imperial: all content is dissolved into the form, the solvent of form. To posit the identity of subject and object is to posit the absolute as a potential of consciousness. The paradise within, by which the seventeenth century sought to repair damaged reason, was now to be imposed on the world. At this moment of posited unity, all being becomes metaphorical in relation to the unity of language, and consciousness has intimations of the absolute, albeit a "poor" absolute, articulable, but not yet articulated. It can be attained only in more and more audacious appropriations of the world to language (or language to the world). This is the Faustian consciousness or the Promethean consciousness perhaps, but the Faust who has internalized his Mephistopheles or the Prometheus who has internalized his eagle.

Here one finds the first fully articulated exposition of the scaleless, parodic world replica that the West still inhabits. In this crucial and difficult passage of argument, Hegel first descries the *verkehrte Welt*. The term is usually translated into English by "inverted," but it implies a whacky inversion. In the strongest sense, *verkehrte* can be translated as "perverted." This term has proven more troubling for Hegel's commentators than perhaps it should. Hans-Georg Gadamer usefully orients us to the term with reference to the satiric tradition. The "up-right" world calls forth its own parodic image, and from any finite perspective, the world is more or less grotesque, a series of replicas of which there is no original (Gadamer, 1976, 7–24). In truth, however, the *verkehrte Welt* is as old and as well known as the philosophic world itself: it is the world of the paradoxes that every attempt to be rational engenders; it was known to Parmenides, Heraclitus, Zeno, and Gorgias; to Proclus, Tertullian, and Ficino; to Rabelais, Erasmus, and John Donne. Rosalie Colie's great *Paradoxia Epidemica* (Colie, 1966), while focusing on the renaissance, is an exposition of the tradition of the topsy-turvy world from Parmenides to Bertrand Russell, and outlines the range of cognition with which an inclusive phenomenology of mind must in fact contend. In taking responsibility for both the unconditioned universal and the self *in* the unconditioned universal, the Hegelian consciousness enters the profoundly paradoxical space of self-reference. Some version of the liar's paradox colors the very beginnings of historical process.

The *verkehrte Welt* is "the Notion of the unconditioned as Notion," the world as pure contentless relationship. If every proposition is true, at least inchoately true, every proposition is also false. Modernist philosopher after modernist philosopher had proposed the identity of being and language, only to be derailed by the paradoxes. Hegel undertakes the sublation of the paradoxes themselves.

This act, which must be seen as profound aggression, sets us on the dialectical and historical path: "The onset of the new spirit is product of a widespread upheaval in various forms of culture, the prize at the end of a complicated, tortuous path and of just as variegated and strenuous an effort" (Hegel, 1977, 7). Hegel realizes, however, that this first seizure represents a new world only in its startling immediacy, an unstable moment of will, a moment of madness or Bacchic transcendence that is soon negated by the thing itself, causality, or physical law. Just as the excitement of political seizure gives way to the boredom of imperial administration, the excitement of ontological seizure gives way to the boredom of argument. The metaphoric relations are such that it makes only temporary sense to ask whether we are speaking here of politics or ontology. Without equivocation, Hegel asserts that the answer is both: "the 'matters' posited as independent directly pass over into their unity, and their unity directly unfolds its diversity, and this once again reduces itself to unity" (Hegel, 1977, 80). The generality of this thinking, the inclusiveness of "matters," makes illustration superfluous and essentially impossible. Whether we speak of some irreducible atomic event of consciousness or the apprehension of the absolute, the movement is the same: knowledge for the Hegelian consciousness is to dismiss the boundary between consciousness and other. The experience of this reduction, this moment of appropriation, is the initial experience of force.

The larger part of chapter 3 of *Phenomenology* is devoted to Hegel's analysis of force. From the time of Galileo and Descartes until the early years of this century, force was an important notion both in physics and in quasi-scientific philosophy. Transformed into notions of will and desire, it continues to exercise a largely unconscious role in our language and thought. Force is one of the central tropes of the modern West. From the beginning, however, as Leibniz recognized, force was the Achilles heel for Newtonian interpretation of physics. Hegel takes it in the broadest possible

sense, and, at the very beginning of the century in which the notion was to function as an ultimate appeal of scientific rhetoric, shows both that force binds the knowledge-guaranteeing ego together with the rarefied world that mathematical physics describes *and* that it is a relatively empty concept. It first appears as the innerness of both percipient and perceived, the primitive energy of reason, which overwhelms the content of thought to reveal its rational structure. In its kinetic manifestation (Hegel calls it the "expression" of force), it is consciousness; in its potential manifestation ("force proper"), it is the supersensible world. As expression, force is known as "given-ness," intuition, and content; in its proper being, it is known as concept, understanding, and form. However, "the truth of Force remains only the thought of it;" Hegel writes, "the moments of its actuality, their substances and their movement, collapse unresistingly into an undifferentiated unity, a unity which is not Force driven back into itself (for this is itself only such a moment), but is its Notion qua Notion. Thus the realization of Force is at the same time the loss of reality" (Hegel, 1977, 86).

Simple force at its most abstract is the poorest grade of consciousness. It establishes little more than the possibility of thought, the first vague stirring of the intellectual ego and the conditions that make understanding possible. These terms are still too closely related to simple dualism to be of much real use to Hegel's most characteristic modes of thought. "Noumena" and "phenomena" as moments of force are fleeting and insubstantial:

> consciousness has a mediated relation to the inner being, and, as the Understanding, looks through this mediating play of Forces into the true background of Things. The middle term which unites the two extremes, the Understanding and the inner world, is the developed being of Force which, for the Understanding itself, is henceforth only a vanishing. This "being" is therefore called appearance; for we call being that is directly and in its own self a non-being a surface show. But it is not merely a surface show; it is appearance, a totality of show. (Hegel, 1977, 87)

This "totality of show" is a rich arena of possibilities, inhabited by entities in that identity and nonidentity are tentatively reconciled. These entities—portions of conceptual mush in which universal and particular are united—are commonly known to us as the images of romantic poetry. When they vanish, like the airy sprites which they are, they invoke a supersensible world, but their

interiors are still completely undeveloped and vacuous. Unlike the more credulous transcendentalist poets and even Kant himself, Hegel recognizes that these figures beckon to an interior that is empty, not to "the holy of holies," Hegel says, recalling a phrase of Kant's. Admitting, however, that "there may yet be something" in that place of the supersensible, he opines it is best to hold the space open: "we must fill it up with reveries, appearances produced by consciousness itself. It would have to be content with being treated so badly for it would not deserve anything better, since even reveries are better than its own emptiness" (Hegel, 1977, 89). For Hegel and subsequent bourgeois culture, this is the place of both art and the psychological unconscious, the domain, as we now know, of the postmodern simulacra.

The supersensible world, the world to which Kant assigned the freedom of both man and god, proves then to be mere appearance. It is abstraction or potential, imagined in the name of natural law, which Hegel defines as "the stable image of unstable appearance" (Hegel, 1977, 90). The law as a law of consciousness represents a higher grade of reality than the mere posited supersensibility for which it stands. The tension that is expressed in the stability of instability, however, bespeaks the opposite of law—that is to say, tranquilized change, the presence in the law of the multifarious, particular, and deviant cases that it mirrors. Such law, Hegel says, "does not fill out the world of appearances." It is the shrunken head, the desiccated thing left over, when the living body has been expressed as law. Despite its superior potential, consciousness has still not attained even the reality of the mere appearances that it describes. Consequently, the account of experience in terms of one law must invoke others: to explain the fall of a feather by the law of gravity also requires the laws of aerodynamics, and so forth. So the possibility of a law of law arises, but the universal law must explain such totally different kinds of content that the sense of law as such is lost. "The unification of all laws in universal attraction expresses no other content than just the mere Notion of law itself, which is posited in that law is the form of being. Universal attraction merely asserts that everything has a constant difference in relation to other things" (Hegel, 1977, 91). It must include itself and must, therefore, assert its own difference from itself. The laws of physics, for example, are merely the objective moments of the reveries with which we fill the supersensible emptiness. The flux of appearance

is art, the stability of appearance is law. Hegel puts the ideal world of physical law and the ideal subject of poetry into dialectical opposition and enters the world of a prose that subsumes everything in its unmeasured abstractions.

The Final Triumph of Humanism

The last half of chapter three of *Phenomenology,* in which the turn to pure abstraction transpires, has occasioned remarkably little commentary. Since it is here that Hegel speaks of the necessity to think pure change and of the inverted world, it has not been utterly ignored, of course, but perhaps now we can see that in this nearly impenetrable passage of dialectic that some of Hegel's most radical and prophetic thinking occurs. He envisions a world in which resistant actuality turns plastic before human consciousness. If there is to be a world of spirit at all, it must be created; human creativity, though never free of its own requirements, is absolute. It is here that the Nietzchean willing of will is prepared. We dwell with Hegel in this prolonged moment of spiritual excitement. We await the appearance of the absolute, and, in our confused babble, we think it may be Napoleon or nuclear weapons, or man or "the closure of metaphysics." At certain moments of crisis, this egoic infection still rages in our institutions.

If, as I suggested earlier, the ancient theogonies are recapitulated in consciousness by modern idealism, Hegel here discovers the intellectual equivalent of the omphallos, the point of world origin. The argument becomes increasingly difficult to paraphrase, not only because it is dense (which it is), but also because, one suspects, Hegel is trying to follow the dialectic through a passage, which seems to him significant, indeed the core itself of the intellectual tradition that he inherited, but that proves to be a dialectical dead-end. Although he clearly sees the conclusion, he is as puzzled by this dialectic complication as we are. To say the least, there is a passage of argumentation that leads from the first sighting of Force, expressing itself and being repressed into itself, to the discovery of the fully developed notion of Force, that seems frankly garbled. The Hegelian discourse rarely feels so tenuous. The conclusion, which only in our own time has returned so clearly to focus, is startling and threatens to bring the dialectic to a stop.

Hegel discovers that law is a mere tautology; it is completely

lacking dialectical tension: "A law is enunciated; from this, its implicitly universal element or ground is distinguished as Force; but it is said that this difference is no difference, rather that the ground is constituted exactly the same as the law" (Hegel, 1977, 94). Such is the stability of the Newtonian world: "It is an explanation that not only explains nothing, but is so plain that, while it pretends to say something different from what has already been said, really says nothing at all but only repeats the same thing" (Hegel, 1977, 95). One might say that precisely that is its advantage: from the point of view of the Enlightenment, an explanation that changed the thing explained would have been no explanation at all. Hegel, however, recognizes that the Understanding at this point is little richer than the sense certainty and perception that it supersedes. If sense certainty consists of meaningless, indescribable change and perception of self-contradictory common sense, law is static, and it omits the larger part of the world which interests us. It fails to account not only for history but also for most kinds of individual variation: Hegel notes, "the law by which a stone falls, and the law by which the heavenly bodies move, have been grasped as one law. But when the laws thus coincide, they lose their specific character" (Hegel, 1977, 91). The question, which we have already raised in the context of Cartesian method, is, How does the translation into the language of law overcome individual variation—in short, what happens to difference? Hegel is completely lucid concerning this intellectual sleight of hand: "the difference . . . is posited by the Understanding in such a way that, at the same time, it is expressly stated that the difference is not a difference belonging to the thing itself" (Hegel, 1977, 94). Difference is stowed away in the understanding in order to clarify appearances.

If the law of appearances is that "everything has a constant difference in relation to other things," what then is the law of the Understanding? It must account for the stability of law, and, in order to do so, it must take flux into itself. It absorbs difference and converts it into cultural activity, on the one hand, and revises the law, on the other. Hegel states its law thus: "like becomes unlike and unlike becomes like" (Hegel, 1977, 96). This is the law of the "inverted" world:

> Through this principle, the first supersensible world, the tranquil kingdom of laws, the immediate copy of the perceived world, is

> changed into its opposite. . . This second supersensible world is in this way the inverted world and, moreover, since one aspect is already present in the first supersensible world, the inversion of the first. . . According, then, to the law of this inverted world, what is like in the first world is unlike to itself, and what is unlike in the first world is equally unlike to itself, or it becomes like itself. (Hegel, 1977, 97)

Thus, the grounds for a progressive history is established. The Understanding has access both to the "tranquil kingdom of laws" and the utterly anarchic kingdom of difference. The requirements of this knowledge are more rigorous than any humankind had ever been asked to endure. If the intellectual discipline, which over several millennia had taught humankind to think, consistently had been harsh, Hegel demands that "We have to think pure change, or think antithesis within the antithesis itself, or contradiction. For in the difference which is an inner difference, the opposite is not merely one of two—if it were, it would simply be, without being an opposite—but it is the opposite of an opposite, or the other is itself immediately present in it" (Hegel, 1977, 99). The Cartesian double dualism is made explicit and shown to be, after all, unified in Understanding. The trace of dualism, however, is maintained in the involvement of Understanding in two infinite regresses, one that is static and forever approaching motion, one that is in motion and forever approaching stasis. Hegel calls them "simple infinity" and "Infinity, or this absolute unrest or pure self-movement," and it is capital-I Infinity that is the "soul of all that has gone before" (Hegel, 1977, 100–101). The chief activity of Infinity, even in the most self-contained appearance, is self-explanation or self-consciousness. In the dialectic, true knowledge only appears with the necessity to explain the failure of law; in fact, only then does self-consciousness or the grounds of true knowledge come into existence. When consciousness discovers itself, it finds that all along there has been nothing else; it is merely the site of a paradox, a topsy-turvy world, that endlessly explains itself to itself. It functions both to elicit thought and to frustrate thought. On the one hand, we contemplate the empty interior: "It is manifest that behind the so-called curtain which is supposed to conceal the inner world, there is nothing to be seen unless we go behind it ourselves, as much in order that we may see, as that there may be something behind there which can be seen" (Hegel, 1977, 103). This is the

point in the modern bacchanal when the god enters the dancers. It is not the god that discovered wine, however, but a god that promises wine at the infinitely deferred conclusion of the explanation. The new Bacchus is the god of heady talk; the new Venus is the goddess of intellectual coitus interuptus; the new Hephaestus is the creator of technological expediencies. On the other hand, we enter into the experience of discipline, of mastery, of being a slave and a student. Consciousness must be mastered from without or from the appearance of without, which of course proves to be from within. All knowledge is disciplined knowledge, spanked knowledge, arising only from the experience of Force, and all knowledge is therefore perspectival. In all knowledge there is a suggestion of something militant, if not positively military.

The Tedium of the Absolute

In Hegel, the vestiges of the old mimetic logic, which created logical models or metaphors by imposing a single perspective on extant states of affairs, gave way to irony—that is, a knowledge of change without measure. The ironic consciousness knows no boundaries because it knows only a theoretical space and time, which it constantly undermines. The definitive quality of Hegel's thought, despite his intentions, is novelistic, not dramatistic. The novel is the preeminent ironic genre. We feel that the story is known to the narrator (however murky a figure he may be) before the story begins. The pleasure of reading a novel has to do largely with the feeling that logic and phenomena are *already* assimilated to one another; they are already aspects of psychology. The novel furnishes solipsism with all of the richness of an actual world. Perhaps the social function of the novel was, in part, to break down the feeling of conflict between the form and content of the world. Such, at least, is the effect of Hegelian narrative logic: time appears not as the source of unexpectedness and freshness but as history that is virtually past but, at the same time, to be constructed. The only access to change that the logical tradition offers is change that is already completed. The perpetual ascendancy into the absolute is the final gathering of the world into the infinite and infinitely forgiving narrative.

The novel, of course, was one of the first mass-produced consumer products, and its cognate philosophy of history was a re-

sponse to an experience of time generated by technology. Under the impact of the industrial revolution, the rate of historical change increased to the extent that acceleration could be experienced in the space of one generation. Hegel did his best to account for this experience in light of traditional logic, but he could only explain change by imagining himself at the end of history. Now we know that he was at the beginning of world-revising change and that his logic was a last desperate attempt to save a ghost of the Parmenidean unchanging object of knowledge. The mechanical time of the seventeenth-century poets gave way to the time of the newspapers, the periodicals, the serial novels, the histories and histories of histories in the nineteenth century and then to the movies and television in this century. The conflict between time and performance was sublated in abstract rhythm or, I would suggest as a more accurate term, in "historicized temporality." Hegel explicitly recognizes the relation of poetic time to historical time:

> This conflict between the general form of a proposition and the unity of the Notion which destroys it is similar to the conflict that occurs in rhythm between metre and accent. Rhythm results from the floating centre and the unification of the two. So, too, in the philosophical proposition the identification of Subject and Predicate is not meant to destroy the difference between them, which the form of the proposition expresses; their unity, rather, is meant to emerge as a harmony. (Hegel, 1977, 38)

Time as a floating center, a kind of balloon or aesthetic spaceship, is central to the experience of history which appeared with the bourgeois revolutions. As we have seen, the institution of iambic pentameter as the mark of serious poetry in English was in effect a commitment to a mode of temporality which ties subjectivity to history. This linear logic is a formal reflection of the Hegelian merging of subject and predicate. In one of its dimensions, the ego has access to the enfolding and productive generality of the dialectic. In the free metrical substitutions, which marks the verse practice of the great romantics, time becomes utterly plastic. It is *theoretical* time, as much a construction of methodology as the Cartesian space—an idealized dimension of action to correspond to the idealized space of understanding. As a result, however, time appears as private, and it is a strict dependency of the will. Thereafter solipsism was isolation in private time as well as private space.

In the new synthesis, time and its objects are eradicated and then recreated in the artistic-aesthetic domain. Hegel is probably thinking of the some of the soaring passages in Hölderlin, who was the German master of this moment when the new poetry at once achieved its potential and exceeded it. It is here, at this pinnacle of poetic excitement, that it gives way to the prose of thought. Hegel could have been thinking of these lines in Hölderlin's "Brot und Wein" that both describe and enact the synthetic harmony:

Fest bleibt Eins; es sei um Mittag oder es gehe
  Bis in die Mitternacht, immer bestehet ein Maas,
Allen gemein, doch jeglichem auch ist eignes beschieden,
  Dahin gehet und kommt jeder, wohin er es kann.

One thing is sure even now: at noon or just before midnight,
  Whether it's early or late, always a measure exists,
Common to all, though his own to each one is also allotted,
  Each of us makes for the place, reaches the place that he can.
(Hölderlin, 1961, 244–45)

Hölderlin lacked the powerful bourgeois tradition of the French and especially the English, and his metrical practice is much more theoretical than that of his contemporaries. When Longfellow wrote in classical meters, it was an academic performance: Like Coleridge's return to accentual verse, it was an indication that rigorous iambics were already losing their hold on Anglo-American tongues. For Hölderlin, however, the attempt to adapt classical meters to the German language—the rhythms of which, based on accent rather than quantity, are wholly inappropriate—represented a move into a higher degree of abstraction. Hölderlin's skillful simulation of classical elegaics in the poem is to a certain extent mechanical. Unlike the pentameter norm of so much English and German verse, for example, Hölderlin invokes a norm that has no hearable relationship to the performance of the lines. Of course, like Ezra Pound in some of the recorded readings, he may have stylized the German in order to imitate classical meters in his own performance of the verse, but it seems unlikely, as it would have obscured the relationship between accent and meaning. It is, moreover, this distance between the measure common to all and the proper measure allotted to each one that is, in effect, the theme of the poem. The destitution of modernity, the destitution of

the time that the gods have deserted, is marked by a language that disjoins the common time and the individual time.

That he manages, inside these rigorous constraints, to maintain a rhythmic coherence—using devices that are irrelevant to the theoretical scheme—is of course remarkable. I know of nothing that establishes the characteristic tone of elegaic modernism any earlier. It is the tone, for example, of the closing pages of the *Phenomenology,* the pervasive tone of music for the larger part of nineteenth century, quintessentially developed in Wagner, the tone of Victorian poetry; in more desperate configurations, it is the tone of T. S. Eliot and the tone of half of Ezra Pound (or half of the tone of *all* of Ezra Pound), of Stravinsky, the neoromantics in American music and the neoformalists in American poetry. Elegaic production is, in a sense, production that does not produce. From Hölderlin to the latest popular elegaic critic of the tradition—I could refer to many of the illustrious critics whose prophetic voices are collected in Ralph Cohen's *The Future of Literary Criticism* (Cohen, 1989)—history can be conducted only in terms of abstract temporality, a ratio of time to times: the present is divided by some incommensurable other historical token, Hölderlin by Pindar, Browning by Sordello, Pound by Homer, and so forth. History, rather than producing, has offered itself up to perpetual self-immolation. It pushes Zeno's paradoxes to absurd completion: Zeno's arrow both does and does not reach it target; the tortoise both does and does not outrun the hare. From the perspective of the absolute to which logic finally gives us access, these are not contradictory states of affairs.

Hegel's reintroduction of time and the possibility of meaningful change was a relief from the timeless worlds of the mathematicized cosmos; it is no doubt Hegel's redemption of the Cartesian ego from empty eternity that makes him the central thinker of the nineteenth century. The way in which Hegel reintroduces time, however, keeps thought completely in the Cartesian orbit. Hegelian time is time merely to be overcome. Its history is the education of the spirit into temporality, and it is an education for temporal Napoleons, who would overwhelm time as well as space. Hegel writes, "Spirit necessarily appears in Time, and it appears in Time just so long as it has not grasped it pure Notion; i.e. has not annulled Time" (Hegel, 1977, 487). The transformation of Spirit that transpires in the closing pages of *Phenomenology* is terrifying in its arrogance, which turns on the Kantian categories and reap-

propriates them as merely subjective. The Spirit recoils at the emptiness of mere abstraction and proposes to itself the *utility* of its absolute freedom. This moment is, for Hegel, the passage from the contemplative life of the religious community to the active life of the Self as pure Notion in History. It is with great zest that he portrays the subsequent pathology: "Not until consciousness has given up all hope of overcoming that alienation in an external, i.e. alien, manner does it turn into self-consciousness; not until then does it turn to its own present world and discover it as its property, thus taking the first steps toward coming down out of the *intellectual world*, or rather towards quickening the abstract element of that world with the actual Self" (Hegel, 1977, 488).

This is the entrance of the despair that is the way of the Spirit into the concrete world. That is, the infinite regress by which Spirit generates the dynamism of its intellectual world is transferred to the material culture. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the imagination, which quickened "the abstract element of that world with the actual Self," developed an astounding fluidity. It could model one world as well as another. The artifice of Mallarmé or Huysman's elaborate interiors forecast the shopping mall and video pleasure dome. To note only one salient example of this unanchored terminology, Nietzsche takes melodrama (and Zarathustra is no less melodrama than the popular theatrical fare of the later nineteenth century) to the limit of romantic artifice and beyond, where truth and untruth, genuine emotion and sentimentality, are indistinguishable from one another. In one of the strangest inversions in the work of this man who made a habit of turning everything upside down, melodrama becomes comedy.

Comedy has always seemed a secondary art because it cannot properly take place in the theater. It begins as ritual—Hegel tells us—but it ends as an orgy in which everyone, ritual celebrants and audience, participates. It reveals its medium. All of the latent possibilities, all that has been masked by sanity or taste, are manifested. Of the comedian, Hegel writes: "the actual self of the actor coincides with what he impersonates, just as the spectator is completely at home in the drama performed before him and sees himself playing it." Comedy begins by donning the masks and ends by taking them off. "What this [comedic] self-consciousness beholds is that whatever assumes the form of essentiality over against it," Hegel goes on to say, "is instead dissolved in it—in its thinking, its

existence, and its action—and is at its mercy" (Hegel, 1977, 452). To be sure all essentiality melts away. And have we not been constantly playing out this comedy, essentiality melting like flesh, in wars and death camps? We laugh the philosophic laugh—the bacchanalian laugh at Golgotha (these are the terms of the Hegelian irony). Now we must begin to wonder if we can stop laughing, or if we are condemned to the howling, mad laughter which echoes through the theaters, where we are both players and audience, convulsively and endlessly. Is it possible, at this foremost stage of art, as Hegel reckons it, to find life other than a collection of stories from a sado-masochistic *Mad* magazine?

In tragedy, there is a cosmic order. The theater itself is a theory, an *imago mundi*—Shakespeare's Globe, for example, which foregrounds the essence against a background of accident, meaning against a background of mere information. Comedy destroys the essence; life appears utterly flat; it manifests not necessity but possibility. In the spirit of Hegelian comedy, Artaud invokes the spectacle of cruelty and terror in which the assault of the permutative universe is revealed. The telling of the possibilities is the telling of the medium itself and the mediation of the individuals and events which inhabit it. This is the crisis of the Cartesian self, the recognition that it can be identical to itself only by comprehending all of the possibilities of its medium; that is to say by comprehending the Unconscious—the cruel deity of this closing epoch of transition, an uncanny Trickster, which (who?) manifests only in occasional glimpses, never leaving a reliable trace.

The dialectic leads to no new knowledge. The thoughts that arise in self reflection are neither "higher" nor more compelling in any other sense than the thought that arises from the most objective observation. The autoerotic satisfaction of Hegelian logic takes its rise in the thoughts, "I am not quite I," and "I will be I" (it is very close to Freud). We have poured a world replica into the space between these thoughts. We cannot just turn from its falseness: it is replicated in steel, concrete, and electronic circuitry. The replica is very like the world, but fashioned from a simplistic logic, nothing fits very well. In order to sustain itself at all, it must grow wildly, trying to repair the system that was so poorly made in the first place in the process, so it gets tired, and wants to die even in its most exuberant attempts to live.

Hegel wrote the lives of heroic figures, of emperors and imperi-

al philosophers (of which Hegel himself may be the only adequate example) into the static cosmos. The dialectic objectifies the ego or subjectivizes history—locating things in the Hegelian world is always problematic—thus producing a normative society. For those who do not constantly rehearse the whole of history in deeds or thoughts, however, time is still an empty accumulation, and few have the confidence of absolute knowledge. Post-Hegelian thought found itself dealing with spiritual disaster on an ever greater scale. In time the dialectic runs its course from clarity to irony and then to something like schizophrenia. In moments of crisis, Hegelian logic can neither specify a contradiction nor maintain an identity; it cannot define subject and object or internal and external, so they remain distinct, as, later, Freud, following in Hegel's footsteps, cannot distinguish between life and death. Hegel gutted logic. He left the classic science in such an impoverished state that even the most general distinctions were empty and their terms interchangeable.

The End of History

Sometime in the middle of the nineteenth century, the relationship between abstraction and practical life was transformed. The distinction between idealism and materialism lost its force, and, while it carried great *emotional* resonance, because it was associated with questions surrounding the breakup of traditional religious faith, technology replaced ideology as the grounds of mediation. This change was announced by the *Communist Manifesto* and in the revolutions of 1848. That the popular revolts were quickly put down and the old regimes restored indicates only that it was not primarily a political change. The narrative of human purposiveness was grafted to the mechanistic and deterministic stock of Newtonianism. This view is implicit in the great historical paradigms, the Marxian utopia, the Nietzschean recurrence, and the Freudian unconscious relentlessly unfolding its timeless content in history and biography. In each case, history is played against a richly figured backdrop of eternity. Unlike Hegel, who remained attached to the classical ideal, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud narrativize the crisis of rationality, attributing action to unconscious forces and motives. This is the mark of their postmodernism.

The progressive *episteme* demanded both ever bolder imagina-

tive leaps and ever more massive cognitive schemata to preserve order, ever more chaos and greater repression. The narrative by which it was rationalized required a relatively stable background, an epochal system that provided the terms of explanation, and a dazzling fluency of style to adjust to the particular situation. The nineteenth-century novel was the laboratory of this fluency, and the novelist was the pedagogue to the bourgeoisie, which, as a class, was unprepared to deal with the disruption that its own emergence occasioned. Dickens, Balzac, Tolstoy modeled a new psychology in which the distance between particular events and the massive informing schema was immense but manageable in terms of a carefully plotted story.

As Henry Adams foresaw clearly, however, the manic intensity could not be perpetually sustained. At some point the instigating contradictions, between the one and the many, the self and the not-self, all of the uneasy differences that had motivated thought, were no longer generative. They were not resolved and not definitively shown to be unresolvable, but their bite and poignancy were lost in a sophistication that could no longer be passionately sustained. The dialectic permanently stalled, and the production of meaning proliferated without relation to a unifying scheme. Although Henry Adams's theory of history has been treated as a curiosity of latter-day mechanistic thought, a footnote to the Comtean philosophy of history, or a mistaken science that, from Newton to Einstein, explained all "mysterious" phenomena, such as the action of gravity on distant objects, by "force," it might be better understood as a profound analysis of a peculiar and previously unparalleled variety of sociocultural stress. The acceleration of history, as Adams shows, is an inherent requirement of progressive thought, but its very success pushes it toward catastrophe. In *The Education,* he writes, "After 1500, the speed of progress so rapidly surpassed man's gait as to alarm everyone, as though it were the acceleration of a falling body which the dynamic theory takes it to be" (Adams, 1974, 484). Increasingly, it was no longer possible to assess a particular fact against the systematic background of an epoch, and thus events became merely free-floating occurrences. In an attempt to describe this unstable situation, Adams applies the rule of phase, the mathematics that describes threshold phenomena—such as water turning to ice—to history. His argu-

ment, in brief outline, is as follows: if the religious phase of history lasted ninety thousand years and the mechanical phase three hundred (i.e., $300 = \sqrt{90{,}000}$), the electrical phase could be expected to last roughly seventeen years ($17 = \sqrt{300}$), before giving way to the "ethereal," which would last just over four years ($4 = \sqrt{17}$); if we had entered the electrical phase in 1900, as Adams supposed, then thought would reach "the limit of its possibility in 1921" (Adams, 1949, 308).

Reasonable man that he was, Adams was aware that his dates were arbitrary and perhaps fanciful. Even Charles Sanders Peirce, however, Adams's less excitable contemporary, envisioned a stage in which "mind is at last crystallized" as the inherent possibilities of cosmic evolution are fully realized. Although Peirce placed this crystallization in "the infinitely distant future" (Peirce, 1955, 323), he was concerned with logical, rather than Adams's historical, limits. In characteristic modern fashion, they agreed upon the form of acceleration, but not on the measure. For the historian, the logic need not play itself out to its ultimate conclusion to precipitate an epistemological crisis: "The movement from unity into multiplicity, between 1200 and 1900 was broken in sequence, and rapid in acceleration. Prolonged one generation longer, it would require a new social mind. As though thought were common salt in indefinite solution it must enter a new phase subject to new laws. Thus far, since five or ten thousand years, the mind had successfully reacted, and nothing yet proved that it would fail to react—but it would need to jump" (Adams, 1974, 498).

Beyond a certain point on the accelerating curve, Adams could imagine only the possibility of "thought in terms of itself," rather than in terms of a reifying historical narrative. Obviously, given our habit of speaking of our own time as definitively after some other, but exhibiting no definitive character of its own, we have the same problem. We speak of Adams's "jump" as if in midair, uncertain where we will land: we call our epoch "postindustrial," "postcultural," "postliterate," even "postcontemporary." These terms attempt to conjure a history that has dispersed into thin air. When everything changes, history collapses on itself. Adams's ethereal stage of thought arises with the breakdown of the distinction between narrative and science, between history and the infinite. In a sense, this moment was envisioned by Hegel: the absolute as such is not thinkable in a finite sense, and, while the absolute has not

manifested itself, its progressive realization can no longer be embodied in the finite mind or finite act.

In the last stage of thought, Adams did not know whether to expect a stasis, "the subsidence of the current [of active mind] into an ocean of potential thought, or mere consciousness, which is also possible, like static electricity," or some intensely kinetic event, the consequence of which might be "as surprising as the change of water to vapour, of the worm to the butterfly, of radium to electrons" (Adams, 1949, 308–9). The situation that obtains proves to be a paradox, embracing both activity and passivity. We enter the perpetual crisis of self-reference, in mathematical logic and physics as well as art. Russell's paradox of self-reference, Gödel's incompleteness theorem, quantum physics, and Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare of her Bachelors, Even* or Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author,* are landmarks of the problems that arise when a representation requires a representation of itself. Of course, this is precisely the heritage of the Cartesian circularity. Suffice it to say that sometime, beginning about 1921, science and history confronted both logical and empirical horizons that limited the possibility of a coherent and universal paradigm. We attain knowledge by observing the world, but we are also in the world, which we observe in no trivial way, and we must therefore observe ourselves. We begin with the purpose of observing the thing and end with an observation of a relationship in which we are ourselves an unavoidable term. Moreover the language is part of the world that it describes, and the world, it turns out, is part of the language, so language describes itself, the world as a feature of itself, the language as a feature of the world, and so forth ad infinitum. At this point, all of the world-descriptive sentences blink back and forth, declaring, maddingly, *if this sentence is false, it is true; if it is true, it is false*. It seems that this situation should be disallowed by logic, but classical logic has no means other than arbitrary legislation—such as Russell's and Whitehead's theory of types—to prevent it.

The bourgeois strategy has been to claim an independent region of language that is not subject to the general economy of language: it may exempt a religious language, the language of a cultural tradition, or the sentimental language of an inflated conception of family, self, and so forth. One way or another, the trick has been to interpose a conceptual scheme between the "innermost" self and language as a defense against alienation. If that

bulwark falls away, social identity is imposed not by a particular paradigm—a kingly narrative, the requirements of material production, or the functions of an organic social order—but by language itself. Conceptual schemes, whether thought of grandly as metaphysics or as blatant fictions, create linguistic communities, without invading the vestigial arena of privacy. These regions of identity, offering aspects of freedom and aspects of necessity, are requisites of the bourgeois conception of democracy that recognizes human integrity not in terms of human bodies or the measurable physicality of speech but in terms of the self as private property. Descartes's subjectivism exchanged an infinite and unfathomable Other, the Augustinian God, for an infinite and unfathomable Self. The gains are clear: the exterior world, thereby, is rendered intelligible to physical science and psychology replaced theology as the science that attempts to satisfy the human need to deny the painful limitations of the human organism. Modern subjectivism reflected the divine realm into the human interior and created the unconscious. The mediating space has been defined by religious belief for the masses and by history for the intellectual elite.

History, with its traditions and paradigms, was the story we told to keep time alive in the awesome context of the infinite which annuls all temporal activity. In "Written History as an Act of Faith" (1934), Charles Beard writes, "any written history involves the selection of a topic and an arbitrary delimitation of its borders—cutting off connections with the universal. Within the borders arbitrarily established, there is a selection and organization—a single act—which will be controlled by the historian's frame of reference composed of things deemed necessary and of things deemed desirable" (Beard, 1934, 220). For at least a time, the deeming of necessity and desirability seemed to offer a source of exploitable temporality, just as the New World had seemed to offer endlessly exploitable space. One paradigm could be played against another, always allowing a space in which identity could swerve, but quickly the ploy of historical relativism became a grim necessity and lost most of its yeast.

The argument that language embodies paradigms or general conceptions that are distinct from its general structure turns out to be paradoxical. The necessary argument is well made both by

continental thinkers, such as Jacques Derrida, and Anglo-American thinkers, such as Donald Davidson. Davidson's formulation has the virtue of clarity, and I will follow it for the present.

Taking examples from Thomas S. Kuhn's history of science, from Whorf's studies of Hopi, and from the works of philosophers as different as W. V. Quine and Henri Bergson, Davidson examines the claim that "Conceptual schemes . . . are ways of organizing experience . . . they are systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation; they are points of view from which individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene. . . . Reality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one scheme may not in another" (Davidson, 1984, 184). *Weltanschauung,* historical epochs, and ideologies are all conceptual schemes. Davidson objects that the notion of paradigms belongs to paradigmatic thought, that the notion of epochs belongs to epochal thought, and more generally, that the definitive terms of any scheme are defined only by the scheme itself. Our confident and lucid discussions of different schemas should cause doubt about their objective status and their independence. Obviously they are somehow included in our scheme of discourse and, as such, lack the very uniqueness that we are wont to attribute to them. The bite of this argument becomes clear in face of precisely the question Davidson raises, which might be put in these terms (though they are not quite Davidson's): how are the contents of a paradigm translated into a scheme without paradigms as significant conceptual features; how is it possible to translate not the concepts but the features of concepts that lend those concepts schematic authority. He concludes: "Given the dogma of a dualism of scheme and reality, we get conceptual relativity, and truth relative to a scheme. Without the dogma, this kind of relativity goes by the board. Of course truth of sentences remains relative to language, but that is as objective as it can be. In dividing up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true and false" (Davidson, 1984, 198).

We can see in this argument the final stage of a socialization process by which humankind adjusts its sense of self to the abstraction of language; the plurality of schemes is homogenized in the universality of the linguistic medium.

Whitman and the Wrong Infinity

There is a literature that attempts to express the possibilities of absolute history, investing the linguistic medium itself with all that has been lost from life and generating almost pathological intensities. It is satisfying as long as we feel its power and not its pathos, but it verges forever on self-pity. Mallarmé, Matthew Arnold, Nietzsche, and many of the other instigators of romantic modernist literature—like their recent commentators and deconstructors—are forever on the verge of whining. The issue is not that Hölderlin became the official poet of German National Socialism or that Ezra Pound made fascist broadcasts on Italian radio or that Paul de Man wrote anti-Semitic essays for a collaborationist paper; even the most benign and liberal approach to Hegelian history must either overwhelm the present with eternity or remain forever in the elegaic mood.

According to romantic theory, to live—to move at all—it is necessary to undermine the logical stasis that is taken as the inevitable (Newtonian) background, to throw oneself recklessly into the double bind that dynamism in logical space requires. The impulse toward integration is the product of contradictory and mutually dependent discourses: the discourse of reason and the discourse of unreason are mutually dependent. The difference of potential between them energizes an otherwise complete and static field—i.e., Newtonian causal determination, Hegelian logic, structuralist *langue,* computer programs, and so on. The impulse to action, therefore, is inevitably a kind of self-exploitation, an invitation to madness and the suffering of mastery. "To understand the historicity of Romantic discourse," Clifford Siskin writes, "is to be able to hear within it the discourse of addiction" (Siskin, 1988, 179). One might even say that the culture is addicted to history, to static kinesis, unprogressive progress, nonproductive production. More precisely, however, we are addicted to mediation, of which history is only an example. When media are consumed—that is, reified as things in themselves and given special subjective relevance—the result is the familiar pathology, a situation that is unstable, at once tense and exhilarating. To the medium eater, everything is dissociated and significant. Nature is a substance that is attractive and easily abused; History is a "rush." In this connection, Hegel's

language is accurate and revealing: "Appearance is the arising and passing away that does not itself arise and pass away, but is 'in itself' [i.e. subsists intrinsically], and constitutes the actuality and the movement of the life of truth. The True is thus the Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk" (Hegel, 1977, 27). It is, however, a modern Bacchus who is worshipped: the Hegelian True is the true of the infinitesimal calculus, an infinite rising and passing away that does not itself pass away—the infinite not as merely endless succession, which would have been known to the classical Bacchantes, but as a closed aggregate of objects existing in themselves. Formal languages, natural languages, culture, imagination, history, sex, power, being, and so forth are media that we have consumed, and in our theory they have been understood as half-mechanical and half-mystical.

History in a posthistorical time turns back to its medium, its history of itself and the textual trail that is now cut loose from the phantom events it sought to record. The minimal requirements of an orderly temporality and narrative succession, that each *now* derive from a *then* and give way to a *next*, are not met by a language in which any part, slipping and sliding on its references, ultimately implicates an inconceivably vast totality. Pure abstraction or "the world of prose" in Hegel's phrase, the world without overt aesthetic content (because all content has become aesthetic), asserts itself as a quotidien fact. Rather than presenting itself as the Absolute, however, as Hegel prophesied, it fragmented in a succession of possible worlds, each world with its own logic. Each signifier stands in relation not to one paradigm but to as many as can be self-consistently devised, all of which appear to make comparable legitimate claims for attention. Initially this state of affairs offers an attractive freedom: when a signifier is moved laterally from one paradigm to another, it accrues a remarkable density and potential energy; but when it is moved in the direction of time by way of action, events regress infinitely into their own possibilities and the dense signs diffuse. Thus an immense freedom alternatively supports exhilaration and despair.

The predominant function of the arts in the West since the seventeenth century had been not to situate action in the great household (i.e., *oikos*, "house," therefore, "ecology," "economy")

but to restore the object, from which consciousness is said to be separated, to its ideal status. Although it has not been the dominant tradition and has been poorly understood, the necessary reversal, the restoration of the object to its commonality, has been an important motive of the arts since the middle of the nineteenth century. In the insistence that the object of consciousness proves to be that which is most familiar, not something which must be striven for and restored, it represents a total break with the tradition of idealism. Language is relative only to the concrete world as its measure, not to some structure of itself, neither referent, nor structure, logic, method, device, category, frame, concept, paradigm, grammar, rhetoric, writer, reader, tradition, history.

Walt Whitman's poetry resembles Wordsworth's, Shelley's, or Hölderlin's as little as theirs resembles Pope's and Doctor Johnson's. The high romantics articulated finite images against the background of Hegel's right infinity. Although the romantic poets insisted on the primacy of the concrete, the world they grounded on the authenticity of particular experience was absorbed by ever more powerful levels of abstraction. The romantic poems are texts or poems on the verge of entering the flow or textuality—that is, they are writings in history. Whitman's poems are writings in time. They are posed not against an ideal background but against the actual time of the performance. It is true, Whitman sometimes falls for a generalization, as D. H. Lawrence rightly objects:

> I AM HE THAT ACHES WITH AMOROUS LOVE.
> Walter, leave off. You are not HE. You are just a limited Walter.
> (Lawrence, 1964, 164)

And, though his enthusiasm occasionally runs away with him, he is a "limited Walter"; containing multitudes, he is very large, but countable. The measure of his verse is actual quantity, not relationship. And, as we shall see, his images are concrete and paratactic, the requirements of an actual world, not of an absolute logic. There had not been such a poetry since the disappearance of Anglo-Saxon and Latin. Whitman, however, rather than making nostalgic reference to medieval times—like the romantics, thus giving us a simulacrum of finitistic thought—creates a verse practice that responds directly to the finitistic nature of technology. Whitman is one of the first "modern modernists," contesting for mastery not with universal, logical machines but with finite, tech-

nological processes. After Whitman and Melville, it is clear the contest is not between world systems—not between dialectical idealism and dialectical materialism or between the absolute ego by the name of Ahab and the ultimate matter in the form of a whale—but between actual, physical humans and actual machines, high-speed printing presses, floating sperm oil factories, and paper mills (see Melville's "The Tartarus of Maids").

Poetry—poetry as such, apart from its possible compromises with abstract thought—is an interpretation of the common intuition, which makes a group into a tribe or a nation or a race, or possibly just a work force. Now we enter into a common fate, a world and species fate: such is the meaning of Whitmanic democracy. The smallest units are the person and the world. Whitman's rhetoric therefore is colored by imperialism. Unfortunately this democracy and this imperialism have expressed themselves, for the most part, tyrannically. Their relationship to Latin America, Asia, and Africa is shameful, and, as Whitman, like few others, recognized, it has also treated itself cheaply, using itself as a tool of its own least attractive capacities. He understood the alternatives as two writings or underwritings of empire. In his address to an historian, he says:

> You who celebrate bygones,
> Who have explored the outward, the surfaces of the races, the life that has exhibited itself,
> Who have treated of man as the creature of politics, aggregates, rulers and priests,
> I, habitan of the Alleghanies, treating of him as he is in himself in his own rights.
>
> (Whitman, 1964, 2:307)

One writing expresses a relationship—one thing is known in terms of another—man in terms of politics, societies, or religions; and, also, in its imperialism, it expresses the third world in terms of Europe and the United States, or it expresses geographies in terms of resources, great diversities of physical objects in terms of the monotonous medium of money, and so forth. The historian's time is abstract and has a shape which is irrelevant to the experienced time of any of the participants in the events. In the imperialist iconography of the nineteenth century, History was inevitably a man on a horse, leading a well-organized army. It was seen not as

the arrogance of mechanization but as primal force, expressing the cosmos or the mind or the universal unconscious. The other writing expresses humans—and as it turns out, everything else—only in terms of themselves. It is not as easy as it sounds: the categorical logic of language has a built-in bias toward the aggregate. Whitman corrects the logic of language with the physicality of language. The identity of the person and the world is posited neither as a metaphor to be exemplified, as it was before Descartes, nor as a puzzle in logic, as it was after Hegel. It is, at once, a matter of enquiry and construction. Knowledge is the construction of that which is discovered, and, although the construction is arbitrary, what is discovered is not.

We have lost the sense of poetry that allows us to understand the Platonic assertion that empires crumble when the mode of the music changes or Novalis's claim that the one who controls rhythm controls the universe and even the relatively modest proposition of the Imagists that a new cadence is a new idea. As Ezra Pound repeatedly notes in the *Cantos*, "To break the pentameter / that was the first heave." It was, of course, Walt Whitman's heave, and it was not an easy fact for Pound to swallow: "He is America. His crudity is an exceedingly great stench, but it is American. He is the hollow place in the rock that echoes with his time. . . Entirely free from the renaissance humanist ideal of the complete man or from the Greek idealism. He is a genius because he has vision of what he is and his function. He knows that he is a beginning and not a classically finished work" (Pound, 1973, 145).

Whitman, like Dante, renovated the language of a culture. Traditional English metrics produce temporal norms that measure all performances reductively. Whitman's mensural practice assumes an actual temporality; his democracy is possible, as we shall see, only in actual time, the time of its performance and reperformance. In Whitman's poetry and in poetry of the tradition that it established, the rhythm is not determined by syllabic stress. The numerous attempts to scan Whitman's verse are mistaken not in their details but in their general assumptions. The readers of *Leaves of Grass* can stress the syllables more or less as they chose; the performance is not controlled by a norm, so there is literally no way to regularize the patterns, no way to judge correct emphasis. Stress is not a formal determinant in Whitman's poetry. The controlling rhythms are not relative but absolute, the fact of a particular, con-

crete performance. Although English is not a quantitative language (in the sense of distinguishing syllables of different durations), Whitman creates an *equivalent* to quantitative verse by giving his attention to the phrase and the line rather than to the foot. His verse improvises quantitative rhythms by attention to durations that are marked both by time and by the repetitions of vowels and consonants. "A design cut in time," in Pound's phrase, is not established by any single aspect of language abstracted from the language as a whole. In accentual-syllabic verse, the reader's expressive emphasis is allowed within the normative limits of the poem's absolute temporal form. The performance is absolutely controlled by the measured durations of phrase and line and by the repetitions of sounds—rhyme in the largest sense of the word—but *the time of the poem is the actual time of the performance itself*. Just as Shakespeare's poetic monuments would make no sense in Whitmanic verse, these lines, from "So Long!"—the concluding poem of *Leaves of Grass*—would makes no sense in iambic pentameter:

> Camerado, this is no book,
> Who touches this touches a man,
> (Is it night? are we here together alone?)
> It is I you hold and who holds you,
> I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls me forth
> O how your fingers drowse me,
> Your breath falls around me like dew, your pull lulls the tympans
> of my ears,
> I feel immerged from head to foot, delicious, enough.
>
> (Whitman, 1980, 2:452)

The meaning here, as in a Shakespearean sonnet, is completely literal. Whitman's verse, however, does not include its own ideal time nor its own ideal reading; it depends upon the performance and the time of the performance. The speaker of the poem does not know whether it is day or night.

Leaves of Grass is not significantly representative; it is, rather, an interpretation of the common. Traditional forms appear to leave great freedom of personal expression, while in fact, leaving none, as even the most daring departures of performance are assimilated to the ideal. Whitmanic verse, on the other hand, allows little room for personal expression in the reading of the lines. Whitman habitually refers to the poems as "chants," and the quality of the chant and the usefulness of chanting as a mode of presen-

tation in liturgies or cheers is that it obscures the personal, expressive voice (and when he speaks of "a programme of chants," it is completely appropriate to hear the pun on "chance"; time in Whitmanian free verse is a dimension of contingency). The ego that serves to interpret the common world in Whitman's poetry is not—to recall John Keats's characterization of the Wordsworthian ego—sublime; the Whitmanic ego is no more than a convenience. Its use in language, like the use of terms such as *here* and *now,* is that it has no *specific* meaning; it is one of the nodes by which the common has purchase on the logic of language, which is otherwise tyrannically perspectival. The allowance of a full measure of use to deictic terms is profoundly anti-Hegelian.

Whitman's "language experiment," as he called it himself, brings us to the final stage of literacy. The makers of books had assiduously sought the unity of the book with itself; now the book was to be a register of activity. Consider the delicacy with which Whitman establishes the universe of his measure at the beginning of *Leaves of Grass:*

> One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,
> Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-masse.

To "sing" and to "utter" specify modes that are in conflict. The one is self-reflexive, the other is not. One sings oneself as a person, one utters *words.* Song is absolute and without particular content. In an address to the soul, Whitman writes:

> Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
> Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture,
> not
> even the best,
> Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.
>
> (Whitman, 1980, 1:5–6)

The paradoxes of utterance arise precisely because language is the possession of the masses and is useful in bringing forth diverse circumstances and experiences that are uniquely manifest, from a given perspective, only with the expense of considerable will. The potential conflict was traditionally solved in English poetry by iambic pentameter. The poets utter in terms of absolute, counterpointed measure, and allow themselves or others as performers the opportunity to sing: such was the normative function of poetry. Whitman enforces no norm; every time and place is perfect.

The cosmic Person is not Whitman's theme but a persistent obstruction, which is implicated concretely from the outset in the philosophic oppositions of "One's-self I sing": one's-self/En-masse, body/mind, male/female, free action/divine law. These derive more or less directly from the logical antinomies, and romantic philosophy had discovered certain tricks of reconciliation that were known to Whitman, and in moments of relaxation, he uses them. Whitman, however, unlike the romantic writers whom he resembles, is usually aware that his project rests on a dilemma that no *logical* ploy can resolve. In the words of Kenneth Burke, "Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are *selections* of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a *deflection* of reality" (Burke, 1969, 59). In the sense that it is relevant to *Leaves of Grass*, history is marked by these persistent deflections or obstructions, the product of the individual entering and expressing the common where value arises, rather than by masses, interest groups, marching armies, or the logical absolute. Disturbed by "the genius poets of old lands" insisting that war is the "one theme for ever-enduring bards," Whitman replies:

> I too haughty Shade also sing war, and a longer and greater one
> than any,
> Waged in my book with varying fortune, with flight, advance
> and retreat, victory deferr'd and wavering,
> (Yet methinks certain, or as good as certain, at the last,) the field
> the world . . .
>
> (Whitman, 1980, 3:625)

Here the antinomies are restated in a form that defines the project of *Leaves of Grass* as a whole: "my book" and "the field the world." The book is identified not with language nor with the world in the abstract but with a particular engagement. In "To Thee Old Cause," he declares, "my book and the war are one." The doubt that arises from these claims, however, is deep and generative. The identity of the book and the field of the world is "certain," he says, "or as good as certain," but the intuition of the underlying unity manifests itself only in obstruction and conflict, some of which arise from the nature of brute reality and some of which arise from the nature of language. Every creative advance, every move in the direction of manifesting the unity, is necessarily a

disruption and a move toward disunity. The mark that symbolizes the unity is a mark amongst marks, which must itself be assimilated to the totality for which it stands, and the logic of marks does not necessarily reflect the intuited sense of the world.

Against history, Whitman poses not unity but the actual voicing of the lines in the poem as the access to people and things as they are *in their own right*. This is the crucial distinction, for the lack of which useful critical thought has nearly come to a halt. By his use of the term *vocalism*, he distinguishes "voice" from the idealized voice of conventional poetics, from the metaphysical voice that proposes to be present to itself, thus, closing the field of discourse, and from the postmetaphysical voice that in the failure of self-presence merely pursues its own tail through endless textual play. Jacques Derrida writes: "There is an unfailing complicity here between idealization and speech [*voix*]. . . The passage to infinity characteristic of the idealization of objects is one with the historical advent of the *phone* . . . what makes the history of the *phone* fully enigmatic is the fact that it is inseparable from the history of idealization, that is, from the 'history of mind,' or history as such" (Derrida, 1978a, 95). The remarkable oversight is that this complicit *voix* is itself physical, a manifest body that idealization seeks to avoid, as it seeks to avoid the physicality of other objects. To be sure, the history of the mind is inseparable from the idealized voice, and, in the period of its greatest success, idealism managed to create images of the idealized voice in poetry. The period that began with Milton, Dryden, and Racine and included the work of the great English romantics, Hölderlin, and Hugo was remarkably successful in this regard.

Whitman's response goes to the heart of the matter: "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world" (Whitman, 1980, 1:82). This is no ideal *voix*. In "Vocalism," he writes:

> Vocalism, measure, concentration, determination, and the
> divine power to speak words;
> Are you full-lung'd and limber-lipp'd from long trial? from
> vigours practice? from physique?
> Do you move in these broad lands as broad as they?
> Come duly to the divine power to speak words?

"Vocalism" takes up the full physical character of speech, its percussiveness and projectivity:

I see brains and lips closed, tympans and temples unstruck,
Until that comes which has the quality to strike and to unclose,
Until that comes which has the quality to bring forth what lies
slumbering forever ready in all words.

(Whitman, 1980, 2:308–9)

Although Language is inherently abstract, an idealism, it is *also*—both in its written and spoken forms—physical, and it tends thereby toward self-correction. The mnemonic uses of poetry called upon rhythm and rhyme as devices of continuity and order. The habits of reading aloud and illuminating manuscripts, which both called attention to the *physicality* of language, were lost, however, to the universality of print. "The language industry" was mechanized even before textile production. The voice could be idealized because literally, in the age of prose, it had no primary function. A poet of the newspaper age, Whitman assumes a literate audience and the easy circulation of cheap printed matter, conditions that his generation was the first to act upon unselfconsciously. Indeed for Whitman, the reasons for idealizing the voice were no longer remembered. He speaks of the devices of idealized address—"rhyme or uniformity [of rhythm]" as "gaggery and gilt" (Whitman, 1964, 2:440). So what is voice for? Whitman was not required to feature some aspect of language as memorably monotonous—that is, so many iambs per eye sweep, or whatever—as a goad to recall. To be sure, there are memorable lines in *Leaves of Grass;* but few of the poems as wholes are memorable, nor are they intended to be. No one is likely to want to memorize the catalogs, for example, which, unlike Homeric catalogs, are intended to create vocabularies, not to record specific information. The more concentrated and content-laden passages, however, make no greater concessions to memory. Given Whitman's assumptions, there are few reasons to memorize a poem; it can always be read again. The poet's language, however—and Whitman was the first to appreciate this fact—is freed from the heavy requirements of redundancy and can, thus, address a vastly larger field of sounds, images, and themes. Language is freed to make full use of all of its dimensions in the construction of a world.

Thus, in a beautiful passage, from the beginning of "Song of Myself," which one might think to memorize, even our syntactical expectations are disregarded and the complex articulation of the sound of the poem refers to no abstract unifying device. Although

this is oral poetry, in the sense that it is written to be voiced, it shares none of the techniques of oral poetry in traditional societies; it is no more formulaic than it is grammatical. In traditional oral poetry, the physical voice is featured because it is a mnemonic tool; here it is featured in its own right, sound, serving equally with syntax, to organize the thought. Consider this passage from the second section of "Song of Myself":

> The smoke of my own breath,
> Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch, and vine,
> My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing blood and air through my lungs,
> The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color'd sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,
> The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind,
> A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms,
> The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,
> The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hill-sides,
> The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from the bed and meeting the sun.
>
> (Whitman, 1980, 1:2)

A body coagulates around the breath, thickens, involves a world and people outside of itself, and rises as song. It is a literal rendering of the obstruction of body, generating thought as *active*, rather than, as in philosophy, reflective and explanatory. In fact, as the passage never comes to a grammatical period, it never declares anything. It requires an actual speaking: it becomes a speech only if an actual voice lends its density to these unlocated phrases.

The opening line, the noun and its dependent prepositional phrase, creates the expectation of a verb, and, to the ear, "echoes" seems at first to fill the bill. Certainly appearing in that grammatical position, it might be a verb. Only the comma after "breath," a device of written language, signals otherwise. In performance, however, the pause and the new line mark a gathering of tension to energize this word that ambiguously, and momentarily, fulfills our grammatical expectations. Although smoke does not generally echo, it is not clear how literally we are to take the passage, and

there is pressure on the reader's short-term memory to find an appropriate finite verb. The context of the previous two stanzas, which have to do with the sense of smell, does not strongly limit the possibilities. One might be prepared for the distillations of human fragrances becoming visible. We are given no opportunity to consider these subtle options, however, because "echoes" is followed immediately by another word, "ripples," which also might be heard as a verb, and then by two phrases—"buzz'd whispers" and "love-root"—either of which, given the fact we are slightly disoriented and actively looking for a verb and then perhaps an object, might satisfy our grammatical need. The smoke of breath might buzz whispers, and, for the matter, as we are beyond the limits of short-term coherence, it might love root. We are likely now to hear even "silk-thread, crotch and vine" as hovering in the grammatical space that satisfies the need for a verb and an object. Erotic puns invoke the most remote connotations.

However, grammar is, in effect, a creed of its own, and one of the "creeds in abeyance" that Whitman notes in the first section of the poem. When we come to the line beginning "my respiration," we are well into memory overload and begin to despair of our expectations, so we give ourselves over to the written record, which puts "my respiration and inspiration"—reasonably enough—in apposition with "The smoke of my own breath." If there is lingering grammatical hope that Whitman might regroup and still give us an appropriate verb, it is clear we will have to sort matters out later. As a readerly strategy, we are willing to forget the intervening passage and try to discover what breath as respiration and inspiration does, but we are given a list, which line by line strays further and further from parallel construction. The next two lines stick to the general area of reference—breathing, smelling, nose, mouth, and so forth. We recognize that "voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind" may still parallel "the smoke of my own breath," but this knowledge depends upon conscious analysis. It cannot be "heard" as fulfilling requirements of grammar: attention is not so generous.

The lines thereafter have the appearance but not the content of parallel structure: "the sniff" follows well enough from "respiration," and the thought might pass from the sense of smell to the sense of hearing in "the sound of the belched words of my voice," but "a few light kisses, a few embraces" is radically disjunct. The passage from self-reflection on the voice to a love encounter gives

the readers some indication of the distance between the voice that speaks here (or the voice for which they speak in their reading) and its possible, ideal counterpart. The next lines, beginning "the play of shine" and "the delight alone," appear superficially to recur to the parallel structure, but these experiences are displaced from the lyric subject. In the fuzzy grammar, the lines seem to float free of the subject-object axis. Only at the end of the passage is the world reembodied, not as *logos,* but as song.

By the time we get to "the play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag," it is apparent that we will not get out of the passage with the grammar intact, and Whitman makes no attempt save us from the grammatical quagmire. He does not "complete a thought"—that is, he does not impose the grammatical drama on the passage and does not grammatically locate the nounish-events. What holds the passage together and allows us to attend, even after the grammar has dispersed, is the complex and careful sonic organization of the passage. The assonance, "the tone-leading of vowels," as Pound calls it, carries through the passage: smoke / own / echo; breath / thread; ripples / whispers / silk; buzz'd / love / lungs; vine / my / dry; beating / green / leave / leaves / sea / reaching / trees / streets / feeling / meeting; hay / play / shade; light / shine / delight / sides / rising. The repeated consonants through the passage are sibilants and liquids, and the rhythmic power derives not from syllabic stress patterns but from the hard bilabials and dentals that zone-off the flow of the speech. As the passage moves away from the repeated phrases having to do with breath, voice, and smell, to the articulation of a fleshy person, the assonance becomes denser. One is carried over the transition, from the mere expectation of an appropriate verb to the appearance of a person, on the run of long-*e* sounds: the coherence is created by auditory rather than grammatical devices. One passes into a linguistic space where the controlling shapes are not periodic but paratactic. There is no significant subordination in *Leaves of Grass*. It is, of course, possible to complete sentences in such a linguistic environment, and Whitman most typically does, but the effective forms of the poem are not controlled by that grammar. Because these are fully literate poems, perhaps the first fully literate poems, the poet is interested in their enactment; they are in effect formless until they are spoken. Poetry had never before been *written* with such confidence, and therefore it could dismiss

precisely those literate devices by which voice is inscribed in writing. It could potentially become an equivalent of voice, not its mere representation. To do so, it must appropriate the body and voice of a performer.

It is not wrong to hear all of the possible puns on "solid" and "sound," in this passage from section 20 of "Song of Myself":

> I know I am solid and sound,
> To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,
> All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means.
> (Whitman, 1980, 1:25)

"Solid" and "sound" are likely to be first heard in their metaphorical rather than in their literal senses. We might say that a person's financial condition is solid and sound or, if they are preparing for an exam or applying for a job, that a person's knowledge is solid and sound. Here, however, the passage should also be taken literally: the person is a spatial entity—solid, physical, mute—and a temporal entity—rhythmic, relational, and linguistic. When we pass from the human to the nonhuman, literally, from inside the skin to outside, the terms are reversed: the flow of the universe is rhythmic, relational, and mute; the writing of objects is solid, physical, linguistic. We might generalize in the fashion of the poststructuralists and say that both sonic and solid language are traces, but we would obscure the profound differences. To put the matter clearly but perhaps not too schematically: the objects of the universe converge as flow and writing and are returned as objects and speech. A region of cosmic flow, named, yields a solid object; descending into class logic, it is associated with a type or, in another pun that is behind Whitman's thought, it is typed, printed. In turn, the type, read, becomes sound, the flow of speech. The form of this language is literally the physical world itself. There is the urge, understandably, to name the thing that relates the solid and sound forms. Whitman calls this fundamental unit of intuition the "eidolon." It is the entity that reconciles all of the sameness and difference, like the indifferentiable units of the physical continuum that produce difference. Space and time are constituted of eidolons, as evanescent signs, on one hand, and the "body permanent / the body lurking their within thy body," on the other. They are beyond the lectures of the learned professor, beyond all mathematics and sciences, but completely immediate

and accessible. It is clear that to name them is to create insoluable problems: they are the terms of self-obstructing acts, the mirages that appear to create a solid world when we take thought. As a way of understanding their dimension, we can assume for the present that we are dealing with a dualism (to be accurate, we must say only that we both are and are not dealing with a dualism).

Like several other writers who work in Whitman's vein, in an attempt to overcome the substantialist bias of the tradition, Whitman sometimes appears to treat the flowing and the sonic as fundamental. In a footnote to a section of *Specimen Days*, entitled "The Great Unrest of Which We Are Part," Whitman writes:

> Every molecule of matter in the whole universe is swinging to and fro; every particle of ether which fills space is in jelly-like vibration. Light is one kind of motion, heat another, electricity another, magnetism another, sound another. Every human sense is the result of motion; every perception, every thought is but motion of the molecules of the brain translated by that incomprehensible thing we call mind. The processes of growth, of existence, of decay, whether in worlds, or in minutest organisms, are but motion. (Whitman, 1964, 2:289)

The interpretation of this common motion was and is a central philosophic mystery, but, in singing the body electric, Whitman arrives in a poetic space where the relationship between act and agent breaks down. After a long catalog of American types in section 15 of "Song of Myself," Whitman writes:

> And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
> And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
> And of these one and all I weave the song of myself,
> (Whitman, 1980, 1:20)

As it turns out, our search for a finite verb in the passage from section 2 was misguided, in a sense. We were drawn into improper expectations by grammatical logic: what is missing is not a verb but a true agent. In fact there is no one there, only a singing, a rising and a meeting of the sun, an interpretation of the common. At least that is the case until *someone* performs the poem. The nouns seem to contain motion in themselves, not by means of their willful agency.

Or again the consideration of the "solid" and the writing of the universe leads us to a linguistic clot surrounding the word *type*.

Allowing all of the turns which would occur to a man who was trained as a printer, it yields "imprint," "model," "embodiment," "nature," "character" (from Greek *tupos*, a "blow," "impression"). In "Starting from Paumanok," Whitman writes:

> Not the types set up by the printer return their impression, the meaning, the main concern,
> Any more than a man's substance and life or a woman's substance and life return in the body and the soul,
> Indifferently before death and after death.
> Behold, the body includes and is the meaning, the main concern, and
> includes and is the soul;
> Whoever you are, how superb and how divine is your body, or any part of it!
>
> (Whitman, 1980, 2:284)

And this, from "A Font of Type":

> This latent mine—these unlaunch'd voices—passionate powers
> Wrath, argument, or praise, or comic leer, or prayer devout,
> (Not nonpareil, brevier, bourgeois, long primer merely,)
> These ocean waves arousable to fury and to death,
> Or sooth'd to ease and sheeny sun and sleep,
> Within the pallid slivers slumbering.
>
> (Whitman, 1980, 3:698)

And again, in a prose note, written about the same time as "A Font of Type," he speaks of "the most important and pregnant principle of all, *viz.* that *Art is one*, is not partial, but includes all times and forms and sorts—is not exclusively aristocratic or democratic, or oriental or occidental. My favorite symbol would be a good font of type, where the impeccable long-primer rejects nothing" (Whitman, 1964, 2:685). The font of type is at once the repository of potentiality and of typification, of recognizing an entity as belonging to a type class. Every one's name is in the type rack. The pun on "character" is to the point: we might speak of the "characters" of an alphabet or the "character" of a southerner or a mechanic. One's self as type is many: One is "O-N-E", and O-N-E can make many imprints. Any inscription of the one betrays itself:

> Still though the one I sing,
> (One, yet of contradictions made,) I dedicate to Nationality,

I leave in him revolt, (O latent right of insurrection!
O quenchless, indispensable fire!)

(Whitman, 1980, 3:632)

The continuous surface that mediates between one and the One is dispersed, and its materials are made available for use in the construction of poems. The logic of type (molded lead) is not the logic of Language. Its combinatory is finite and unlimited: it is always possible to cast more type, but the aggregate totality cannot be specified. The infinity of type is the Hegelian wrong infinite—the imprint of a concrete, *measurable* world.

Whitman recognizes that we are obstructions to ourselves. The images that define us, by which we are made manifest to ourselves and to others, block the very thing that we are. This dilemma can be managed only by constant movement and measure, accurate to the events themselves. It is by sound and sequence, not by linguistic logic, that language is embodied and speaks for the common.

The measured displacements that we have noted in section 2 of "Song of Myself" is closely related to techniques that would become common in both painting and writing in the cubist era. Gertrude Stein writes, Walt Whitman "wanted really wanted to express the thing and not call it by its name" (Stein, 1985, 241). Whitman has been frequently called an Adamic namer. If he is, it has not been sufficiently observed that he is uncomfortable in the role. He prefers to stay as close as possible to the nameless intuitions:

Beginning my studies the first step pleas'd me so much,
The mere fact of consciousness, these forms, the power of motion,
The least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love,
The first step I say awed me and pleas'd me so much,O
I have hardly gone and hardly wish'd to go any farther,
But stop and loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic songs.

(Whitman, 1980, 2:468)

The step beyond the beginning is the step into abstraction, and Whitman takes it uneasily:

I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,
I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness.

(Whitman, 1980, 2:311)

Between the times of Whitman and Gertrude Stein, the Euclidean-Newtonian world was swept away, and there were theoretical grounds for Whitman's practice:

> Naturally, and one may say that is what made Walt Whitman naturally that made the change in the form of poetry, that we who had known the names so long did not get a thrill from just knowing them. We that is any human being living has inevitably to feel the thing anything being existing, but the name of that thing of that anything is no longer anything to thrill any one except children. So as everybody has to be a poet, what was there to do. This that I have just described, the creating it without naming it, was what broke the rigid form of the noun the simple noun poetry which now was broken. (Stein, 1985, 237)

The world was no longer mediated by language. Stein recognizes in Whitman her own disinterest in exhibiting the mere requirements of form interposed between the nouns and the things themselves. In the linguistic regime that had prevailed, which can perhaps be called "practical metaphysics," both language and the sensible world were the implicit media of a transcendental realm: in common expository and narrative writing as well as in philosophic discourse, words and objects were felt to be the sensible figures of a logic that completed itself only in a nonsensible realm.

Poetry is the construction not of things that happen again—that is, machines—but of things that may *almost* happen again: "verse" is etymologically a turn, a turning back or returning, which may use repeated patterns of syllabic quantity or stress, vowel sounds or consonant sounds. The *poem* does not repeat, even when it is most straightjacketed with abstract form. Gertrude Stein writes:

> When I first really realized the inevitable repetition in human expression that was not repetition but insistence when I first began to be really conscious of it was when at about seventeen years of age, I left the more or less internal and solitary and concentrated life I led in California and came to Baltimore and lived with a lot of my relations and principally with a whole group of very lively little aunts who had to know anything.
>
> I began then to consciously listen to what anybody was saying and what they did say while they were saying what they were saying. This was not yet the beginning of writing but it was the beginning of knowing what there was that made there be no

> repetition. No matter how often what happened had happened any time any one told anything there was no repetition. This is what William James calls the Will to Live. If not nobody would live. (Stein, 1985, 169)

The poetics of common knowledge addresses the insistence with which rhythmic discrepancy asserts itself. While recognizing the statistical significance of the repetition compulsion, which manifests itself both in maladaptive personal behavior and the arrogant demonstrations of power so common in our culture, it notes that the heart beat, the breath, and the free-floating linguistic events in consciousness are not recurrences; each moment has its own uniqueness. The texts of the common knowledge can be performed again and again, spoken or sung or interpreted. We feel that we have been neither the object of a communication nor the bearer of tiresome habit. Rather we have been informed of an intensity: the interior crisis of being alive is made manifest. The reader-performer of the text and the audience are informed of a measure. This is one kind of knowledge; otherwise, there is trial-and-error (experimental science) and hear-say (culture).

THE EROS OF LANGUAGE

Fechner's Experiment

As a student of William James and a friend of Alfred North Whitehead, Gertrude Stein was in touch with the most advanced thought of the time. Her initiation into science and technical philosophy, which was largely and increasingly only a reflection on the methods and results of science, was so thorough that she could forget it, forget its language, forget its intimidating authority, and forget its boring insistence that life was over, that only its patterns of repetition remained to be fully discovered and mathematically described. She could forget all of that because she inhabited the world to which it belonged, and she was interested in the aspects of life that do not fit the pattern rather than those that do. Few artists or theoreticians have been so at ease with the controlling ideas of this century. Stein insisted upon dealing with the most complex ideas of her day in the language of chit-chat.

There was, Gertrude Stein knew, an *authoritative* grammar—a grammar that, if taken seriously, requires that we believe not only

that history is over but also that all of the logical possibilities are tallied up, in effect that life is over. The purely mathematical forms of the grammar were more fully developed, by Russell, Frege, Peano, and others, but the groundwork for the calculus of the natural language reached back to Descartes and Leibniz, and it was only a matter of time until it was formalized. Trained at Johns Hopkins in the sciences, which appropriated the authority of that grammar (if not the rigor of its demonstrations) to particular subject matters, she was "bored, frankly openly bored" (Stein, 1962, 76). When she decided to leave medical school, "Her very close friend Marion Walker pleaded with her, she said, but Gertrude Gertrude remember the cause of women, and Gertrude Stein said, you don't know what it is to be bored" (Stein, 1962, 77). That is, she was *theoretically* bored, bored with the thanatos of science. At that time almost no one had yet had the experience of enlightened false consciousness, the utter boredom of those who have lived past the end of life and can only in their rightness repeat themselves endlessly and deathfully. Stein recognized the onset of enlightened false consciousness in herself and turned from it.

William James had taught her to keep an open mind.* Stein saw that to do so, however, she would have to keep an open mind even about keeping an open mind—Adams's ethereal thought—a discovery she made and began to base a literary practice upon only a few years after Bertrand Russell had discovered the devastating results of this same paradox for attempts to derive mathematics from logic. She turned away from that hall of mirrors, reflecting back into themselves until they arrive at an infinite medium that can be zoned out and described statistically. Stein's language is finite and immediate, local to a physical space in which everything is, as she says, always the same and always different. For Stein the immediacy of language is not the immediacy of self-presence but the immediacy of difference as measure.

Stein has an ability to reduce complex philosophic issues to anecdotes that are not, of course, adequate for philosophy but that mark the forgetting of philosophy by a person interested in living

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*James was perhaps unnerved by the results of his teaching. He visited Stein after she moved to Paris, and she reports: "He was enormously interested in her writing and in the pictures she told him about. He went with her to her house to see them. He looked and gasped. I told you, he said, I always told you that you should keep your mind open" (Stein, 1962 #122, 75).

in the world, not just describing it. For example, she tells this story in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas:*

> Gertrude Stein never had subconscious reactions, nor was she a successful subject for automatic writing. One of the students in the psychological seminar of which Gertrude Stein, although an undergraduate was at William James' particular request a member, was carrying on a series of experiments on suggestions to the subconscious. When he read his paper upon the result of his experiments, he began by explaining that one of the subjects gave absolutely no results and as this much lowered the average and made the conclusion of his experiment false he wished to be allowed to cut this record out. Whose record is it, said James. Miss Stein's, said the student. Ah, said James, if Miss Stein gave no response I should say that it was as normal not to give a response as to give one and decidedly the result must not be cut out. (Stein, 1962, 74)

This is an interesting anecdote for a number of obvious reasons. We could pick up several threads, none of which are *essentially* thematic—that Stein does not have subconscious reactions, that she was proud of her relationship to James, and so forth. It also allows James to declare himself on the central methodological issue in the experimental psychology of the time and incidentally locates Stein's work in relation to an intellectual "clot" that radiates through all of the fundamental disciplines of knowledge.

Stein would have known (or would have forgotten) Ernst Heinrich Weber's and Gustav Theodor Fechner's studies of the relationship between stimulus and sensation. Richard Herrnstein and Edwin G. Boring say that Fechner's assumption (in *Elemente der Psychophysik*, 1860) "that all just noticeable differences in sensation are equal and therefore provide a subjective unit for stating the magnitude of sensation . . . created most of the quarrels in psychophysics for the next hundred years" (Herrnstein and Boring, 1965, 67). Both Fechner's assumption and his methodology were hot items of debate at the time Stein was taking James's seminar. Stein herself did an experiment on reaction times that was at least indirectly related.

Although the Weber-Fechner experiments hardly seem profound in themselves, they happened to bear on the central intellectual problems of the mid-nineteenth century, and we still have not successfully coped with the issues that they raise. Weber had ob-

served that "if two weights, one of which is 30 half ounces and the other 29, are compared by handling them, the disparity is not perceived more easily than when two weights of 30 and 29 drams are compared with each other" (Herrnstein and Boring, 1965, 64). That is, the half-ounce, which is four drams, produces no more noticeable sensation in relation to thirty half-ounces than the dram does in relation to thirty drams. Fechner states the law in these terms: "equal relative increments of stimuli are proportional to equal increments of sensation" (Herrnstein and Boring, 1965, 67). Weber also conducted studies on the length of lines compared by sight and speculates that the rule holds for the comparison of audio frequencies.

The interesting problem that Fechner raised and that pushed this pedestrian-seeming experiment into prolonged controversy has to do with the threshold cases—cases in which the subject could not decide if a weight was heavier or lighter, a line longer or shorter, and so forth. As we are concerned with the theory rather than experimental methodology, I will give a generalized account of Fechner's experiments, focusing especially on the questions of language that will be most relevant to the ongoing discussion:

Consider a simple language that consists of three names, three signs of relationship, and one rule of interpretation. The names are *A*, *B*, and *C;* the relationships are: greater than, less than, and equals. These signs are interpreted by picking up pairs of weights from the collection, A, B, and C, one in each hand, comparing their weights, and noting their relationships.

I compare weight *A*, which weighs ten grams, with weight *B*, which weighs eleven grams, and cannot distinguish between them. So, $A = B$.

I compare weight B, which weighs eleven grams, and weight *C*, which weighs twelve grams, and cannot distinguish between them. So, $B = C$.

Then I compare weight *A*, which weighs ten grams, with weight C, which weighs twelve grams, and I *can* tell the difference. That is, $A < C$.

The logic of this situation is troublesome. It does not obey the fundamental logical law of transitivity. We know logically that if $A = B$ and $B = C$, then it is necessary that $A = C$. At first the paradox seems so simple as to be no more than a trick, but careful examination will indicate that the problem appears in any attempt

to represent a sensation. Phenomenal intuition and its representation have different requirements. Clearly the problem cannot be solved by a more accurate measuring device; it is inherent in the nature of measurement as such. More accurate measurement makes the terms of the paradox subtler, but, at some point, the ability to discriminate breaks down. Space dissolves, and we discover that $0 = 1$. Everything is the same and everything is different.*

The paradox is decisive for Hegelian phenomenology. Sense certainty is judged to be inferior to language precisely because it proves to be logically intransitive. Hegel gives this account of the physical time continuum: "The Now is pointed to, *this* Now; it has already ceased to be in the act of pointing to it [i.e., $A = B$]. The Now that *is* is another Now than the one pointed to, and we see that the Now is just this: to be no more just when it is [$B = C$]. The Now, as it is pointed out to us, is Now that *has been,* and this is its truth; it has not the truth of *being* [$A \neq C$]. Yet this much is true, that it has been" (Hegel, 1977, 63). This physical character of reality is, Hegel says, "unutterable . . . the untrue, the irrational" (Hegel, 1977, 66). The attempt to express it unsays itself. For Hegel, this unsaying constitutes the language's self-guarantee. In order to avoid the logical problem, it is necessary for Hegel to define a continuum on which there is always a point between any two points, though it may involve units so small they cannot be measured; that is, it is necessary to move from intuition to symbolism, from phenomena to phenomen*ology.* Hegel's logic posits infinitesimal, discrete units to which, of course, no phenomena correspond. The symbolic continuum that is created consists not of measurable extension but of discrete relationships. It is without scale: there are an infinite number of intangible points between any two points. Having once made a commitment to this no-space, however, it is impossible to stop making distinctions and defining new points. In the attempt to make sense of the first symbol—to read it—we make more symbols, regressing infinitely into the space of the Zenonian paradoxes, where the rabbit never catches

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*The example here derives from Henri Poincaré's *Science and Hypothesis* (Poincaré, 1952, 35–88). Poincaré's influence is traced by Linda Henderson in *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Henderson, 1983).