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Determining the Postmodernist Text

Gregory T. Polletta

What if we were to start by saying that postmodernism is a critical fiction, a critic's fiction, rather than a determinate artistic program or movement? What if we say that postmodernism is the creation and production of the art institution or polity rather than a live and real force in the making of art – specifically, in the making of novels, poems, or other literary texts? "Postmodernism," Malcolm Bradbury observes, "has in some ways become a critic's term without ever quite being an artistic movement."[1] The argument then would go that postmodernism is less an exigency for artistic experimentation, less the latest program or position for "making it new" by writers, and thereby a term for describing and defining what is happening now in the arts, and started happening somewhere about the late 50s, in the wake of modernism, than a term for taking critical or theoretical positions in the institution of literary studies.

All the more reason, should that be the case, for engaging the question, and indeed my own discussion here will focus on the uses to which postmodernism is being put in the making of literary history and critical discourse within or in opposition to the institution of literary studies. However "fashionable" may be the "theme of postmodernism,"[2] whatever the modishness that may attach to the name of the game, the subject bulks too large and figures too seriously in the activity of criticism right now to write it off indifferently; it has generated too voluminous a discursive practice or "discursivity" – to cite the notion of Roland Barthes that has been so influential in "theorizing postmodernism."[3] And it

[1] "Modernisms/Postmodernisms," in *Innovation/Renovation*, ed. Ihab Hassan and Sally Hassan (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), p. 326.

[2] Fredric Jameson, "Foreword" to Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. vii.

[3] Quoted by Hal Foster, "Re: Post," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking*

should become clear as we go along that this is not some trivial or faddish pursuit for proper nomenclature but an attempt at a critique of discourse formation.[4] What may be at stake, besides propriety, is property, authority, ownership, and all those other words, root or branch, which signify, by tradition, possession. *Placing* the postmodernist text may be less a question of disinterested classification than of determining where, if not to whom, it belongs. Determining postmodernism turns on, to borrow the locutions of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the *keepings* as well as the *markings* of a literary text.

One approach – arguably the most productive or powerful approach – in determining the postmodernist text is by way of "deconstruction," that is, by applying the body of deconstruction critical theory associated with the work of Jacques Derrida, or that larger and looser congeries of critical theory and practice we have taken to naming "poststructuralism."[5] Indeed, we are told by a growing number of critics that the exemplary postmodernist text is Derrida's *Glas*, which Geoffrey Hartman has called "a new nonnarrative art form."[6] Whatever the merit of

Representation, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Boston: David R. Godine, 1984), p. 200. Foster's piece is included in the section of this anthology entitled "Theorizing Postmodernism."

[4] Cf. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Photography After Art Photography," in *Art After Modernism*, ed. Wallis, pp. 81–82: "What is at stake in art photography or postmodernism concerns their respective agendas and how as art practices they are positioned – or how they position themselves – in relation to their institutional spaces. I refer not only to the space of exhibition, but to all the discursive formations – canons, art and photography histories, criticism, the marketplace – that together constitute the social and material space of art."

[5] Derrida is quizzical about the overwhelming attention that has been given to "deconstruction" and the neglect of the other terms of his philosophical investigations. See *The Ear of the Other: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, ed. Christie V. McDonald, tr. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), pp. 85–86, where he explains "why the word 'deconstruction' has always bothered me" – "this word which I had written only once or twice" and "all of a sudden jumped out of the text and was seized by others who have since determined its fate." Derrida, it should also be noted, holds no particular brief for "modernity," let alone postmodernism: "As for me, I'm no fan of modernity. I have no single belief in the irreducible specificity of 'modernity'," ibid, p. 84. Nevertheless, as so many of the essays in *Art After Modernism* display, deconstruction has become a staple of postmodernist discourse, along with what are putatively the terminologies and methods of poststructuralism.

[6] *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. xix.

this claim, there is no denying that Derrida's book exhibits one of the markings so frequently advanced as distinctive to the postmodernist text, and that is the way the postmodernist writer crosses freely between the borders of narrative and non-narrative, fiction and non-fiction, fictive invention and critical commentary, literary and non-literary verbal compositions – the way postmodernist writing effaces the so-called traditional boundaries, demarcations, and separations of genre, stylistic decorum, register, mode, and so on through virtually the whole anatomy of received literary structures.

Glas aside, poststructuralism has been exceedingly influential in determining what a text is or should be. In fact, to speak now, as I am doing, about the postmodernist text rather than the postmodernist poem or novel is to be drawn into the poststructuralist universe of discourse, and in speaking of a text on the occasion of this conference on "The Structure of Texts," we can hardly fail to take notice of that immensely complex and consequential turning in the recent history of critical theory whereby a concern with the "structurations" *(signifiance)*, "structurings," and "signifying practices" of a text has supplanted investigations of determinate structures and sign-systems based on the Saussurian model of linguistics (with its binary relation of signifier to signified): in short the swerve from *structuralism* to *poststructuralism*. Barthes, having so forcefully promoted structuralism early in his career, remains as one of the most authoritative and influential spokesmen for the present poststructuralist disposition towards the "theory of the text," and in his 1973 essay with that title he speaks of "the crisis of the sign" which precipitated the turn, the "overturning of former categories."[7] But it was Derri-

[7] Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text," tr. Ian McLeod, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 33–35. On Derrida's critique of the Saussurian foundations of structuralism, see Young's "Introduction," pp. 15–19. For Barthes' own account of the change in his persuasion, see the passage from a 1971 interview quoted by Young, p. 8. The "overturning of former categories" refers to Barthes' famous and immensely influential 1971 essay, "From Work to Text" (tr. Stephen Heath, repr. in *Art After Modernism*, p. 170), which itself inscribes the passage in his career from one, a preoccupation with the structures of the work, to the other, a preoccupation with the structurations of the text. Edward W. Said remarked some time ago that "the structuralist activity" Barthes was promoting early on "cannot show us why structure structures; structure is always revealed in the condition of having structures, but never, as Jean Starobinski has observed, structuring, or in the condition of *being structured*, or failing to structure," "*Abecedarium Culturae:* Structuralism, Absence, Writing," in *Modern French Criticism: From Proust and Valéry to Structuralism*, ed. John K. Simon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

da who provoked "the crisis of the sign"; it was Derrida who exposed the contradictions in the conceptions of sign and structure – the "logocentrism" or suppositions of metaphysical presence – upon which structuralism was founded. And while both Barthes and Derrida conceive of a text as *writing*, rather than as any determinate structure or composition of significations, while both poststructuralism and deconstruction foster an aesthetics of textual indeterminacy, they differ profoundly in their philosophical assumptions, methods, and purposes. How they differ is too complicated a question to entertain here,[8] but, returning to our subject, what seems to have happened is that the two are customarily spoken of together, without much discrimination, so that not only is the postmodernist text a text which may be described and determined by poststructuralism and/or deconstruction – but the terms have become all but interchangeable, in the sense that what the theory holds a text to be is what the postmodernist text is in every particular: that one is virtually a simulacrum of the other. Hence the claim would be that poststructuralism and deconstruction theory underwrites, authorizes, or even engenders the postmodernist text – rather than the other way around.

Moreover, as Fredric Jameson asserts, in an article I shall discuss at length presently, "theoretical discourse" itself "is also to be numbered among the manifestations of postmodernism."[9]

Elizabeth W. Bruss goes further by declaring that "literary theory" itself has become "our representative literary genre." She is doubtless right in claiming that theory has become engrossingly "literary" in its writing, but she adds a final, an insupportable, turn of the screw by arguing that the writing *of* theory by her exemplary authors of "beautiful theories" – William H. Gass, Susan Sontag, Harold Bloom, and Barthes – is more innovative and experimental and imaginative than so-called "creative" postmodernist writing.[10] This turnabout in the relationship of theoretical discourse to literary texts *per se*, as we used to say, is one of

1972), pp. 378–79. For an example of what Barthes produced when he took up the "structurings" of a text, see his 1973 "Textual Analysis of Poe's 'Valdemar'," in *Untying the Text*, pp. 135–60.

[8] See Young, "Introduction," *Untying the Text*, p. 19 for a sketch of these differences.

[9] "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), p. 112. This anthology was first published as *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983).

[10] *Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). pp. 79; 481 et passim.

the most perplexing and mystifying novelties in recent criticism. Although the motives may have been justifiable initially – to devalorize, deconstruct, or demystify the attachments to "literature" of such notions as originality, authenticity, and authorship; or, as Barthes urged, to establish the permeability of textual practice[11] – the outcome has been an indefensible valorization of the writing of theory. It is one thing for Barthes to proclaim, "Let the commentary be itself a text," or for Hartman to call into question the traditional divisions, in the institutional practice of literary studies, between primary and secondary texts, between creative and critical texts, and quite another to be asked to accept the primacy and superiority of what was formerly held to be a secondary activity or form of writing.[12] Besides, if we are going to speak of deconstructing "literature," we should be clear that Derrida has repeatedly stressed that there are no logocentric literary texts, only logocentric interpretations or appropriations of the writing.[13] More importantly, for our purposes, it should be recognized that literature came before theory in posing these problems: it is the writers of literary texts who have been grappling all along with the question of what is or is not literary in literature.

In the event, we may remark how changed the present situation is from the task Ihab Hassan set himself in championing postmodernism. Hassan was a pioneer in the territory, but what is worth noting is that he urged the need to reform and revise the then contemporary critical theory because it could not account for what was happening in the arts. The reigning "modernism" in the institution of literary studies had to be dethroned by what was happening in the postmodernist practice of the arts.[14]

One of the obvious consequences of a position such as Hassan's is whether we shouldn't treat postmodernism as a historical episode, and proceed according to tried and true methods of identifying and placing the postmodernist text in a historical period. Christine Brooke-Rose, for

[11] "Theory of the Text," in *Untying the Text*, p. 41: "We cannot by right restrict the concept of 'text' to what is written [to literature] ... All signifying practices can engender text: the practice of painting pictures, musical practice, filmic practice, etc."

[12] Barthes, "Theory of the Text," p. 44. Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Understanding Criticism," *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

[13] See Young, "Introduction," *Untying the Text*, p. 19.

[14] *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), pp. 24–25.

instance, brusquely dismisses both terms, modernism and postmodernism, as "purely historical, period words." She contends that the inventory of properties proposed by Hassan as representative of postmodernism can be found over the whole map and history of past literature and "what would seem to be new is their combination" – that is, only the ensemble of properties, and their rearrangement in new configurations, is what identifies a text as postmodernist.[15]

But determining the postmodernist text is not a simple matter of repeating the old moves of periodization in making literary history, for the term may be less a periodizing enterprise than a critique of period-making and the functions that activity performs in the institution of literary studies. Nor is determining the postmodernist text a simple matter of establishing distinctive stylistic markings or identifying structural properties. For as one critic has observed: "However restricted its field of inquiry may be, every discourse of postmodernism ... aspires to the status of a general theory of contemporary culture."[16] This may sound grandiose and it may so total the field of inquiry as to obliterate meaningful differentiations, such as the differences between a theoretical text and an art-or-literary text, but the position is worth citing as testimony that postmodernism, both as discourse and as artistic production, inescapably compels us to include the terms of a cultural analysis as well as anything reductively stylistic or formalistic or "literary."

To look at this another way, the attempt to determine the postmodernist text in stylistic terms, strictly stylistic terms, is dubious in that it so easily invites or becomes a stratagem for discrediting the writer and the writing. Postmodernism, it won't take much exposure to see, is not one style but many styles, pluralism is the order of the day, and eclecticism, we are told repeatedly, is what postmodernism is all about, its single clearly identifiable feature. But before we make the next familiar move in fabricating literary history and affirm that hence we should speak of postmodernisms, as we should speak of modernisms, the discriminations of these blanket terms, we ought to ponder whether the effect of the proceeding, if not its purpose, isn't to defuse and disperse that collaboration of energies by which writers take fire from one another and begin tearing periods apart. A common way of disarming the new is by identifying a certain repertory of formal properties in order to assert: And what's so new or modern about that? It has been

[15] Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 344; 350.

[16] Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Foster, p. 61.

done before, everything been done before, though not in the same combination. The rejoinder, of course, is to say that the norm is what counts, the stylistic norm of a historical period, rather than the singular appearances. Both the attack and the defense, however, are likely to miss or mask the point the painter Barnett Newman made when he tartly remarked:

> This shrewd popularization of the big lie, that modern art isn't modern, succeeded in establishing the respectability modern art now enjoys with museum directors and professional art lovers, but wrought havoc with the creative forces struggling for a footing wherever this false thesis took hold.[17]

Which I take to mean that denying the *modernity* of what gets called modernism and postmodernism is a way of housing their productions, their texts, safely – a means by which control is exercised over the holdings, the keepings. The very profession of the art institution is to devise categories and classifications and cataloguings by which the holdings are placed and kept out of harm's way, guarded for free access, to be sure, but made secure – and in the more suspect senses of these words, so that, for instance, the devising of period concepts by which a field of activity is organized for systematic study may also be an agency by which the objects of study are neutralized and subjugated, a means by which the text is, so to speak, de-textualized. Whereas the writing, or the painting, of the modern text, by resisting any containment in a book or a museum or any canonical ordering, undoes or disowns whatever we say determines and fixes its identity or use or power. The writing that makes the text, the text that is the writing, unsettles any terminal or determinate status we try to impose upon it. The authority of the writing disturbs whatever authoritative use we want to make of the text – dispossesses our efforts to hold it fast and house it in some final resting place.

What is curious about so many discourses of postmodernism, however, is precisely the way in which they try to find a place for themselves by ascribing a terminal or determinate status to modernism. It is obvious right from the name itself that "postmodernism" turns about and returns us to the term it envelops or encloses: the "modernism" which lies behind and came beforehand. Like so many post-prefixing terms in literary or art history, post-modernism returns us to a precedent and compels us to determine what the modernism is with which the relationship is posed and/or opposed. And, of course, there is an equivocation. The word poses a discontinuity which implicates a continuity, or a

[17] Quoted in Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Abrams, 1977), p. 27.

disaffiliation which avows an affiliation it professes to disavow, a rupture or a break that is not clean and definite – even though a number of critics, Hassan most exuberantly, will play on dis-un-de forms of undoing or unmaking, as when he asserts that "postmodernism is an aesthetics of playful discontinuity." Setting aside the rhetoric of these formulations, the problem is whether in all such discourses the postmodernist text isn't being determined, by its partisans and adversaries alike, by imposing a determinate and terminal status, a fixed state, on its precedent in order to be allowed an indeterminate freedom of expression. The question is whether the term "postmodernism" finds its place in critical discourse only by stabilizing "modernism" and making it marmoreal – in particular, as has become the fashion among certain promoters of postmodernism by conjuring up a ghostly entity called "the modernist paradigm."[18] And to move to the other side, the question is whether postmodernism is to be demeaned or discredited by making touchstones and monuments of the great achievement of modernism.

As an illustration of how the activity of determining the postmodernist text proceeds by opposing periods or paradigms, I should like to examine three discourses of postmodernism, the foremost of which is an essay of 1982 by Jean-François Lyotard entitled "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" This was in part a rejoinder to a piece by Jürgen Habermas entitled "Modernity versus Postmodernity," originally a lecture delivered in 1980, and reprinted recently with the title, "Modernity – An Incomplete Project." The third is an essay of 1982 by Fredric Jameson entitled "Postmodernism and Consumer Society."[19]

Let me begin with a passage from Jameson's piece. He names a number of recent artists and performers, as "varieties" of postmodernism, and then he says:

[18] The following quotation from Fredric Jameson's *Fables of Aggression* (1971) by Foster, "Re: Post," p. 194, is representative: "The contemporary post-structuralist aesthetic ... signals the dissolution of the modernist paradigm – with its valorization of myth and symbol, temporality, organic form and the concrete universal, the identity of the subject and the continuity of linguistic expression – and foretells the emergence of some new, properly postmodernist or schizophrenic conception of the cultural artifact – now strategically reformulated as 'text' or '*écriture*,' and stressing discontinuity, allegory, the mechanical, the gap between signifier and signified, the lapse in meaning, the syncope in the experience of the subject."

[19] Lyotard's essay, tr. Régies Durand, is in *Innovation/Renovation*, ed. Hassan, pp. 3–29; Habermas's, tr. Seyla Ben-Habib, in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Foster, pp. 3–15; Jameson's op.cit., pp. 111–125. The quotations from Jameson's essay that follow refer, in order, to pp. 111–112; 113; 114; 118; 125; 114.

> Most of the postmodernisms mentioned above emerge as specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism, against this or that dominant high modernism which conquered the university, the museum, the art gallery network, and the foundations. Those formerly subversive and embattled styles – Abstract Expressionism; the great modernist poetry of Pound, Eliot or Wallace Stevens; the International Style (Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies); Stravinsky; Joyce, Proust and Mann – felt to be scandalous or shocking by our grandparents are, for the generation which arrives at the gate in the 1960s, felt to be the establishment and the enemy – dead, stifling, canonical, the reified monuments one has to destroy to do anything new. This means that there will be as many different forms of postmodernism as there were high modernisms in place, since the former are at least initially specific and local reactions *against* those models. That obviously does not make the job of describing postmodernism as a coherent thing any easier, since the unity of this new impulse – if it has one – is given not in itself but in the very modernism it seeks to displace.

This is fairly typical of how critical discourse has been going about its work of determining the postmodernist text, and fairly typical, too, of how literary history is being made, by using one period to place the other. Jameson is ambivalent about some of the forms that have succeeded and displaced modernism, for, in his view, postmodernism in the arts is an expression of a consumer society. Postmodernism, he declares, is "a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order – what is often euphemistically called modernization, postindustrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism." And all of this is evidenced in his discussion of the formal features of the postmodernist text he identifies as *pastiche* and *schizophrenia*. There is not much I have to say about these formulations other than that *pastiche* is clearly a formal term (which Jameson gives some clever turns by distinguishing from *parody*) whereas *schizophrenia*, which looks quite misplaced, is made to serve as a formal term by signifying a collapsed sense of temporality, "the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents," and thereby, according to Jameson, a postmodernist rather than a modernist form of temporal structuring.

But it might be worth pausing to examine the argument about a "new component" he adduces to explain why "classical modernism is a thing of the past and why postmodernism should have taken its place." "This new component," Jameson asserts, "is what is generally called the 'death of the subject' or, to say it in more conventional terms, the end of

individualism as such." Now, there is no topic that is more imposing in contemporary critical theory than the "death of the subject," no subject that is of more consuming or productive interest, none that has more mazes of ramification, none that has liberated more energies of discourse, and, as Jameson acknowledges, the question of the subject is a preoccupation, a favored quarry, of poststructuralism. It is perfectly in keeping that a recent piece by Hélène Cixous on Joyce's story "The Sisters" should begin with a section entitled "Discrediting the Subject," and appear in a collection of essays called *Post-Structuralist Joyce.*[20] If a story which was first published in 1904 can be said to discredit the subject (in the sense of dislodging the privilege and value that have been invested in a central real consciousness or presence), that obviously calls into question the terms by which Jameson classifies a writer like Joyce as a modernist rather than a postmodernist. Again, it should be emphasized that for a poststructuralist of Derrida's persuasion a text is not constitutively modernist or postmodernist; the text does not need to be deconstructed; only the interpretations which have been imposed on the text need deconstructing: the determinations of what it is taken or meant to signify, not its signifying powers. But if we must speak historically, then the dwindling fortunes of the subject have been a preoccupation of much of the fiction and poetry of nineteenth and twentieth-century literature; it has been a major theme of long standing rather than of recent origin. If we think in terms such as the "disintegration of the subject," and take that to mean less a traumatic breaking apart of the speaking or narrating or authoring subject, a decentering of the self, than a recentering of these dramas in language, in writing, in speaking and telling and making fictions, we can discern this as traversing the whole span and terrain of whatever it is we call "modern literature." The various devices that have been proposed for determining modern fiction – devices and terms such as parody, reflexivity, digression, fragment, miscellany, *écriture,* textuality, palimpsest, aleatory or allotropic compositions and decompositions and recompositions – all of these and more may be construed as constructions for displacing and replacing *unity,* both structural and phenomenological, as the central organizing principle for making literary texts. Historically speaking, the "crisis" of the integrating subject and the move towards a dis-integration of the subject is patent in the combined efforts of Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Ford Madox Ford at making fiction new and writing "the new novel" – but theirs is

[20] "Joyce: the (r)use of writing," tr. Judith Still, in *Post-Structuralist Joyce,* ed. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 15 ff.

only one example of many that might be cited in any historical account of the fortunes of the subject.

The point would be that there are more than differences in degree in the way we word the case. There is all the difference in the world between the death of the subject and the discrediting or decentering or disintegration of the subject. But however we put the question, it should be made clear that postmodernism is distinctly not a doing away with all forms of structure. The norms of structure may be called into question, or wrought to a crisis, but neither postmodernist or modernist writing tries to do without any semblance or trace of structure – however much the structuration may aspire to the condition of silence, absence, the unsaid, the unsayable, or any of the other "negations" that are often proposed as consequent upon the disappearance of the subject. Decompositions and de-structurings, it should go without much saying, are hardly non-compositions or non-structurings, except as purely grammatical expedients or inventions. And such terms are less an aporia, a doubtful assertion, a shady proposition, of postmodernist writing than an aporia of those who would speak for the text in the name of postmodernism. Postmodernist writing is a discrediting of the subject, and of the modes of structuring a text that depend on a belief in the centrality and unifying powers of a subject, doubtless wrought to extremes compared with what might be located in modernist or any earlier writing, but this is not, in any simple sense, the death of the subject.

It is, however, the *historical* crisis of these developments that so dismays and disturbs Habermas. In his essay on "Modernity versus Postmodernity" he calls into question, into very sharp questioning, the historical consequences of postmodernism – the implications of the properties and purposes of the postmodernist "text", its improprieties, its offenses, travesties, and transgressions, its de-structurings, its *destructive* consequences. He starts his argument with what he acknowledges to be a great over-simplification: that in the history of modern art we can detect a trend, a steady march, towards ever greater autonomy in the definition and practice of art, and he then cites a succession of experiments that he says have been nonsense or nugatory or dead ends. The artists have not produced an emancipatory effect but "a desublimated meaning or a destructured form."[21] Modernity is "an incomplete project" because the failure of artistic experiments in time has exposed the parlous consequences of a shattering of a vital relationship among the three structures, the three discourses or discursive practices, he calls

[21] Habermas, p. 11; the next quotation refers to p. 13.

cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive rationality, i. e., discourses of science, theories of morality and jurisprudence, and discourses and practices of art. The project of modernity has failed, Habermas claims, it has not been fulfilled, it has taken a series of wrong turnings, postmodernism has become an anti-modernity, and thereby a manifestation of lost causes, so to speak. Habermas makes a plea, a noble plea, to reunite that which has been split apart or torn asunder – by returning to the energies of art, culture, and society inaugurated by modernity, by resuming and reinvigorating the project of modernity: "The project aims at a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages, but would be impoverished through mere traditionalism."

Which is the point where Lyotard intervenes with his query, "My question is to determine what sort of unity Habermas has in mind,"[22] and without going into the full particulars of his response, or counter-critique, what I should like to consider is the defence Lyotard mounts in behalf of postmodernism, the postmodern condition, the postmodernist painting or writing, and the implications of his dispute with, his polemic against Habermas for anything we might say in determining the postmodernist text and how we come to terms with such a text.

Lyotard follows, like Jameson and Habermas, the common practice of opposing modernism and postmodernism. He, too, seems to make hard and fast distinctions between the two by asserting that postmodernism rejoices and revels in change, turbulence, and experiment with no regrets for a past project or agenda, whereas the modern is marked by melancholy, nostalgia, and a yearning for unified structures or structurations.[23] Lyotard, however, gives modernity its due by reminding us of what it means to be modern: "Modernity," he says, "in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the 'lack of reality' of reality, together with the invention of other realities."[24] I say *remind* because this is the view of modernity – not of "modernism" – that Paul de Man so compellingly put forward in his

[22] "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" p. 331.

[23] See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Talks," tr. Christopher Fynsk, *Diacritics,* 14:3 (Fall 1984), "Special Issue on the Work of Jean-François Lyotard," pp. 24–25. For an exposition of Lyotard's notions of the "libidinal economy" of postmodernism, along with a useful "partial bibliography" of Lyotard's writings, see Maureen Turim, "Desire in Art and Politics: The Theories of Jean-François Lyotard," *Camera Obscura,* 12 (Summer 1984), pp. 91–109.

[24] "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" p. 336.

essays into the subject,[25] and de Man's views in turn were a reminder, less of the history of the term, and least of all of the diversity of programs that have paraded under its auspices, but of the historical affirmations and re-affirmations of the concept of modernity, which is a dividing moment, idea, intention, or act: that moment when the writer or painter forgets or disowns the past. Modernity is a letting go of the past, leaving the past behind, and what that signifies in the making of art: tradition, the great tradition of that which comes beforehand, the old, the past masters, the masterpieces, the whole institution or polity of masteries and masterpieces. Modernity, in whatever age it appears, is, so to speak, "starting from scratch." This is the idiom Barnett Newman liked to use in avowing his own constant determined struggle to make his paintings modern, and it is a good, an apt, idiom because it comprehends, by the figure and the resonances of the figure, how a painter or writer inscribes himself in the history of art: that is to say, re-inscribes, rewrites, himself, from the beginning, with every beginning. For it is that – a beginning, and not merely, in Barthes' famous conceit, a *déjà-lu*. Newman made his own disavowal of tradition, which, if you like, only repeats what has been said many times over. "We do not need the obsolete props of an outmoded and antiquated legend," he asserted grandly, "We are freeing ourselves of the impediment of memory, association, nostalgia, myth that have been the devices of Western European painting."[26] However "traditional" this may sound in the so-called "tradition of the new," starting from scratch is not starting from nothing or even starting from zero but starting anew. It is an inaugural moment rather than a determinate historical episode or determination. "Modernity," in de Man's presentation of the term, is conceptual and categorical rather than descriptive and programmatic. The various programs of "modernism" may be at odds with and even the counterfeits of modernity. Modernity, then, is very much an unfinished project, in every sense of the word, an indeterminate series of beginnings.

Modernity, modern writing or painting, the modern – all of these can be made without much finessing of Lyotard's terms to be a worthy project, and salvaged from both its detractors and admirers. But postmodernity is what Lyotard wants to advance towards, postmodernity is what he is determined to deliver and inscribe in discourse rather than

[25] Particularly "Literary History and Literary Modernity" and "Lyric and Modernity," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 142–165 and 166–186.

[26] Quoted in Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, p. 26.

merely describe and publicize. His arguments on its behalf turn on a criterion and concept of "unpresentability": in the words of the title of one of his essays, postmodernity is "presenting the unpresentable."[27] These arguments are too complex for any summary exposition and analysis, but the distinctiveness of his position, and the possibilities it opens for determining the postmodernist text, for the discourse of postmodernism, may be gathered in a passage which follows his treatment of Proust as exemplary of the modern and Joyce as exemplary of the postmodern:

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. A postmodernist artist or writer ... the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules or categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done.*[28]

Just how searching and novel this position is for theorizing postmodernism may be gauged by contrasting what David Lodge says in speaking of the attempts by postmodernist writers to abolish the "familiar" modes of ordering and structuring fiction:

> If postmodernism really succeeded in expelling the idea of order ... from modern writing, then it would truly abolish itself, by destroying the norms against which we perceive its deviations. A foreground without a background inevitably becomes the background of something else. Postmodernism cannot rely upon the historical memory of modernist and antimodernist writing for its background, because it is essentially a rule-breaking kind of art and unless people are still trying to keep the rules, there is no interest in breaking them and no interest in seeing them broken.[29]

[27] "Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime," tr. Lisa Liebmann, *Artforum,* 20:8 (April 1982), pp. 64–69. For a succinct commentary on the sources of Lyotard's notions of the sublime, see John Rajchman, "Foucault, or the Ends of Modernism," *October* 24 (1983), pp. 44 ff. Barnett Newman was preoccupied with the sublime, and he too was one of Lyotard's "sources." Although it is customary to place Newman as an Abstract Expressionist painter, a modernist, Lyotard has treated him, on several occasions, as an exemplary postmodernist artist.

[28] "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" pp. 340–41.

[29] *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: E. Arnold, 1977), p. 245.

Lodge, with all his sympathies for the "enormous risks" taken by postmodernist writing, ends by expressing a familiar complaint about the posturings and pretense of the parodistic or parasitic strain in much of what is happening now in the arts. He voices a common worry about the excesses and abuses of postmodernist experimentation.

Lyotard, however, pulls us up sharply by warning of what has become all too common a feature of discourses about postmodernism. "From every direction," he declares, "we are being urged to put an end to experimentation, in the arts and elsewhere."[30] From every direction, left right and center, we are being urged to terminate experimentation. To shape up, to come to order, to stop playing around and be serious, to restore humane values, to retrieve vital heritages or a unity of communal experience, to recover what we have lost, to reconstruct what has been deconstructed, to be constructive, to abide by the rules. "In the diverse invitations to suspend artistic experimentation," Lyotard says, "there is an identical call for order, a desire for unity ... for security, or popularity [i.e., reaching, speaking intelligibly to, communicating with the public] ... Artists and writers must be brought back into the bosom of the community, or at least, if the latter is considered to be ill, they must be assigned the task of healing it." Not that Lyotard is urging the recuperation of the old, the discredited notions of the freedom, autonomy, social indifference, or privileged status of the artist. Precisely the contrary. "If they too do not wish to become supporters of ... what exists," he declares, "the painter and artist must refuse to lend themselves to such therapeutic uses. They must question the rules of painting or of narrative as they have learned and received them from their predecessors. Soon the rules must appear to them as a means to deceive, to seduce, and to reassure, which makes it impossible for them to be 'true'," which is to say that they must leave the old rules behind. The experimentation of postmodernism for Lyotard is an activity of new determinations of what writing and painting can or should be in what *will have been done.*

This may sound like a reprise of the rhetoric of all the old manifestoes of the avant-garde – a replay of the same old exhortations to experiment and make it new, the same unremitting pursuit of experimentation and innovation as if they were empty ends in themselves – at a time when the aporias of the avant-garde, the very concept and status of the avant-garde, are undergoing severe critical scrutiny and delegitimation.[31] Re-

[30] "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" p. 329; the next two quotations refer to pp. 331, 333.

[31] See Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition," in *Art After Modernism,* ed. Wallis, pp. 13–29. Cf. Peter Bürger,

valorizing these imperatives, moreover, may play into the hands of those who have been arguing that exhaustion is built into the premises of modern art; that there is a necessary depletion in its capacity to shock or scandalize by breaking the rules unceasingly and transgressing, forever transgressing, received decorums and limits; that postmodernism is, in the words of one highly-publicized formulation, "the literature of exhaustion" which leaves only parody or pastiche as new forms of creative experimentation.

But there are crucial differences in Lyotard's position. He is advancing a new argument. And one way of catching how and why it is so might be to pose against Ezra Pound's imperative, "Make It New," a statement by William Carlos Williams, who was, of course, no less intent on experimentation and innovation than his friend Pound. "Art" Williams declared, "can be made of anything."[32] A poem, a novel or whatever other structuration of writing, a text can be made of anything. The novelty, the art, will be discovered in what will have been done, in making something from anything, rather than in the act of will and defiance and reaction against what is traditional, conventional, or whatever it is that has been done before. Making it new is discovering what is new in the making of anything, no holds barred, no rules binding, no rules standing in the way. Not that "anything goes", as so many objections to experimentation now are phrased, but rather that "anything can be made into a text." And by Lyotard's terms it is this that would be the enabling conviction or condition for the postmodernist text.

To question the rules, then, the correct rules, the good rules, is for Lyotard what moves and determines the writing of the postmodernist text. To question the correct rules, including the innovating rules of a "modernist" text, is to commit an impropriety that calls into question what is good and proper and even new or experimental. It is, indeed, to question property, as I suggested earlier: the keepings and holdings of writing and painting. The postmodernist text is a dispossessing and dislodging of properties. A dispossession, for one thing, of the *placings* of the art institution or polity, as well as of the formal or structural properties, the rules by which a text is judged worthy of being called artistic and included in the holdings. The dispossession, for another, of the individual authority of the author, either to certify originality or to reserve all rights of interpretation and use. The dispossession, in Lyotard's

Theory of the Avant-Garde, tr. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[32] From a letter of 1932 to Kay Boyle, *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams,* ed. John C. Thirlwall (New York: New Directions, 1984), p. 130.

words, the "constant dispossession of the craft of painting" and writing "or even of being an artist." The dispossession of these and so many more of the properties we attribute to the production of art in order that we may treasure the texts and hold them for our pleasure, curiosity, solace, utility, or whatever. Potmodernism is breaking the rules, consensus-breaking rather than consensus-making, calling into crisis canons of artistic judgment, received orderings or placings of masterpieces, but – and here is the new turn Lyotard gives to these already familiar propositions – the motives are less to shock, scandalize, or shatter than to remake the rules by finding new rules of artistic structuration in what will have been done. Lyotard's position, in fact, implicitly challenges the whole dramaturgy of breaking rules, rupturing continuities, transgressing limits that are the scenarios of so much contemporary critical discourse – and which curiously perpetuates the figure of art, if not the artist, as lawless, revolutionary, criminal: a heroically satanic activity.[33] For Lyotard, pushing the rules to the limit and breaking them is not what matters: it is leaving the rules behind. The postmodernist text is discovering, making, inventing the rules by which it is to be determined. In that sense, then, the postmodernist text is an *undetermining,* which designates (however awkward the locution), not its indeterminate construction or meaning, not even its indeterminable status, but its determination, its resolve, to invent new or unimaginable or inconceivable rules of structuration in writing, in the writing, or in what will have been written.

But since many of the same things might be said of the *modernist* text, as distinct from the programmatic texts of "modernism," and since, indeed, they might equally be said of the unmodified *text,* according to the poststructuralists in general and Derrida in particular, we should take a closer look at the historical reasons why we need the term, the *postmodernist text:* a closer look at how history figures or should figure in determining the postmodernist text. For if we say that the conviction "art can be made of anything" is an inaugural moment in postmodern-

[33] Harold Bloom may be the most spectacular "dramatist," as Bruss exhibits in *Beautiful Theories,* pp. 306–7, 312–18, passim, but other dramatizations are acted out all over the stage of recent criticism, e. g. when Barthes presents the text as "that which goes to the limits of the rules of enunciation (rationality, readability, etc.)," as an "experience of limits," "From Work to Text," in *Art After Modernism,* p. 171; or when Foucault presents modern art as "an art of transgression," *Untying the Text,* p. 11, and Rajchman, "Foucault, or the Ends of Modernism," p. 43. Indeed, such dramatizations may be said to constitute the "scene" of contemporary critical discourse.

ism, there is plainly no denying that it appears at a *historical* moment, in a historical *situation*, and that this enabling condition, as I called it, produces structurations of writing that are sensibly different, historically speaking, from those that obtained beforehand. "Art can be made of anything" alters the disposition, a historic disposition, towards rule-breaking and rule-making, but its only real value is in the *event* of what will have been done, as in the writing of *Paterson*.[34] And while this does not mean that the event is historically determined, in any simple sense, or that any adequate measure of what is produced can be taken by falling back of the procedures for marking and placing that have been traditional in literary studies, some measure must be taken of the historical situation in which both the production and reception of what will have been done *take place*.

One way of doing this is to propose that we need the term the "postmodernist text" in order to mark the latest turn or the most advanced degree of the historical development by which we ask, not "what is beautiful?" but, "what can be said to be art (and literature)?"[35] and that postmodernism is the juncture at which "art can be made of anything." This line of argument might be open to the objections that have been registered about periodizing literary history. A stronger objection might be that it is too *literary* a history: that it fails to take due account of the actual historical situation of such formations, by being too formalistic or stylistic in its priorities, and that it neglects the material realities of the historical conditions in which such turns take place.

Such in fact is the position of one body of postmodernist criticism – arguably the most forceful or pertinent body of postmodernist discourse – which addresses the social, political, cultural, or ideological purposes that are served by what is being done now in the arts. For critics of this persuasion, what matters are the ends of beginning with the conviction that "art can be made of anything." And the objects of their investigations of what will have been done are not the makings of beautiful, intricate, audacious, or whatever structurations of writing and painting, but a *critique* of the historical situation within which these structurations take place – a critique of discourse formation. The purposes served by such a critique are held to be oppositional: to represent the deconstructive or demythologizing strategies and devices by which the production

[34] For a treatment of *Paterson* as a postmodernist poem, see Joseph N. Riddel, *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counter-Poetics of William Carlos Williams* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974).

[35] Lyotard, quoting Thierry de Duve, in "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" pp. 333–34.

of art, the art that is being produced now, postmodernist art, *indicts* the institution or polity or art – indicts in a direct, active, and consequential fashion rather than in any sense merely figuratively. Barthes presented the text as a weave or a network – a tissue very like a textile[36] – but the "oppositional" postmodernist critics concern themselves with the materially *social* network in which the postmodernist text is produced, disseminated, and received. To return to my earlier discussion of "discrediting the subject" for an illustration of what is distinctive about this body of recent criticism, it is concerned with the differences in the purposes to which the historical development of discrediting the subject are being put both in postmodernist art and postmodernist critical discourse – of *what is being made of* the issue : the various and energetic ways by which discrediting the subject are being employed as a cultural critique; in particular, by putting into question the attendant beliefs in individual creations or creativity, original art and artists, masters and masterpieces, to the point where, in Michel Foucault's provocative formulation, "we are at present witnessing the disappearance of the figure of the 'great writer'."[37]

Powerful as this approach to determining the postmodernist text may be, however appealing the seriousness of its cultural concerns, it is shadowed by a formidable array of problems, and even outright contradictions, one of which is that the terms of Barthes' or Derrida's conceptions of the text cannot be used to legitimate what may be quite contrary purposes. The oppositional and ideological ends proposed by this critic-

[36] "From Work to Text," in *Art After Modernism,* p. 171, and "Theory of the Text," in *Untying the Text,* p. 39. Cf. Derrida's reweaving of the figure in "Semiology and Grammatology," *Positions,* tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 27.

[37] "Truth and Power," tr. Colin Gordon, in *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 127. The context of the statement is Foucault's critique of "the whole relentless theorizing of writing which we saw in the 1960s," that includes, not only, e. g., Barthes and Derrida, but Foucault himself, as Rajchman shows in his essay on "Foucault, or the Ends of Modernism." For an example of "oppositional" postmodernist critical discourse, note the following statement by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Photography After Art Photography," in *Art After Modernism,* p. 80: "Seriality and repetition, appropriation, intertextuality, simulation or pastiche: these are the primary devices employed by postmodernist artists ... The appearance of such practices in the 1970s seemed to portend the possibility of a socially grounded, critical, and potentially radical art practice that focussed on issues of representation as such. Collectively, use of such devices to prompt dialectical and critical modes of perception and analysis may be termed deconstructive."

ism, however desirable in themselves, are not easily accommodated to the *theories* of deconstruction and/or poststructuralism. They can hardly be used to determine the postmodernist text. The tactics of deconstruction, the vocabulary of its concepts or principles, cannot be employed, as they are so lavishly and freely in this body of postmodernist criticism, without facing up to Derrida's obdurate insistence that "the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far" – "all the limits, everything that was to be set up in opposition to writing (speech, life, the world, the real, history, and what not, every field of reference – to body or mind, conscious or unconscious, politics, economics, and so forth)."[38] The text, the postmodernist text, simply cannot be invested with a social or historical presence, or appropriated to an ideological field of reference, on or by Derrida's terms. Something more is needed than the putative "deconstruction" of the critiques of the historical place of the postmodernist text.

Lyotard's position may not be a way out of such an impasse, but it assumes a different vantage and a less skeptical outlook. For if we say that "rethinking representation" is the urgent imperative in "theorizing postmodernism," and if we say that Derrida has produced the most imposing philosophical critique of representation, we might then say that it is Lyotard, precisely because of his concern with "presenting the unpresentable," whose work is instructive in understanding how what is being written or painted now takes place. This is not to suggest that Lyotard is better at unraveling the knot of problems about representation than is Derrida, or more cogent as a theorist, but rather to say that he gives a more material sense of the production of a text, he is closer to the actuality of the writing or the painting of a text, he is more attentive to how writing and painting are being performed at the moment, he is more directly and actively and concretely concerned with how the postmodernist text comes to be produced: how it takes place. Lyotard has an acute awareness of the historical situation of the postmodernist text, but while he is like Derrida in resisting any determinations or delimitations of the text, his position is that none of the powers assigned to the text so far – social, political, cultural, historical, or whatever – are commensurate with, measure up to, the force, energy, and value of what will have been done in the performance of writing or painting.

Let us say, then, following Lyotard's lead, that we need the name the *postmodernist text* if for no other reason than as a certain figure of the text, of writing, a certain historical figure. The figure of a text which

[38] Quoted from Derrida's contribution to *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Harold Bloom et al. (1979), in Young, *Untying the Text*, p. 19.

leaves behind anything we determine to be the markings of even the most "modernist" of texts. A text which leaves behind the indeterminacy or radical uncertainty which contemporary critical theory has made so capital in reading, interpretation, textual analysis. The figure of a text which undoes and remakes the rules of representation, however modern or modernist we have concluded these rules to be, which undoes and remakes the modes of experimentation about which we have reached a consensus. A text wherein tradition, the past, the great tradition no longer play the role of that which the writer rebels against, and labors under in an anxiety of influence, or that which we, as readers, contend against or nostalgically yearn to restore. Let us say that the postmodernist text is the figure of a text which invites us to forget the past, to leave the past behind, not to be unmindful or unruled, but to engage new rules of making and writing and reading.

And if this looks like a phantom, a figure without a text, something which can be imagined but not named, or the figure of desire rather than the real thing, consider the case of Joyce, whose career may be taken as exemplary. *Ulysses* is a modern novel, a modern text, by any definition of the term, even by the parody or pale fire of "the modern" which has passed into the literary histories of the assorted programs of "modernism." *Finnegans Wake* is, by any definition of the term except "strictly" historical or chronological, a postmodernist text. But what is it that we want to assert by such denominations? That *Finnegans Wake* makes it new in ways that are more audacious than anything *Ulysses* attempts? Perhaps that is so, but it would be funny to invoke a "rupture" or that armory of rhetoric by which a modernist "paradigm" is supplanted by another paradigm. The two texts are written by the same hand, under the same "signature" (to use the locution by which Derrida and other contemporary critics efface the writer's presence) – by the same hand, too, that wrote "The Sisters." Do we want to divide Joyce's work by saying that *Finnegans Wake* is a postmodernist text because it is a critique or representation, a radical calling into question of received ways of writing fiction? *Ulysses* had already done this, not only in the pastiches of "The Oxen of the Sun," but across the whole body of the novel. *Ulysses* puts into question just about all the old rules by which we used to establish what makes writing a novel. And it wouldn't take much to show that Joyce wasn't really original in so doing, and therefore we shouldn't stand in awe of the figure of the "great writer" – even though the text itself of *Ulysses,* by the indeterminacy of Joyce's voices, deconstructs any such misapprehensions. All of which, to be sure, Joyce carries to extremes, as we might say, in *Finnegans Wake.*

But it isn't the search for novelty, or breaking received rules for making it new, and the stylistic markings that attach to these endeavors that count nearly so much as the leap of the writing into unimagined possibilities. *Finnegans Wake* leaves novelty behind, including the novelties of *Ulysses,* leaves, indeed, novel-making behind in order to discover new imaginations of possibility, new *rules* for constructing fiction. To engage this text is to partake of all that has been advanced in the present theory of the text – indeterminate *signifiance,* hybrid structurings, polyphony, polycentricity, transpersonal polycentricity, textual production in readership, overdetermined structurations and signifying practices – and more. More, because to read this text for its writing, as it is written, is to discover what we never imagined fiction could be or do until Joyce did it – to revel in an infinity of unseen or unheard-of structurations and signifying practices. The unseen and the unheard-of are exactly what Joyce presents: a presenting the unpresentable. It is not the novelties of the structurations of *Finnegans Wake,* or the breaks with precedent structures, that so engage and captivate us as the re-constructing and re-conceiving of what language can do in what will have been done, what rules might be discovered in writing for the language of literature. And Joyce, it should be said against those who would argue for the non-literary tendencies of postmodernist texts, Joyce is nothing but literary, however we must stretch our suppositions of what it means to be "literary." We are not drawn to Joyce's texts only, or even primarily, for their transgression of the limits of fiction. We are not drawn to Joyce's texts only, or even primarily, for all the reasons and motives and markings that have been advanced for modernism, though they are there, or for all the markings and motives of postmodernism, though they are there in every particular. We are drawn by their liberating sense of what writing can be and do in and by the writing. And to value Joyce's writing in *Finnegans Wake* in no way obliges us to reject *Ulysses:* one text does not usurp or supplant the other. It is simply to read with an enlarged and exhilarating sense of how Joyce continuously sought and constructed new determinations of what writing is or might be. Of how "art can be made of anything." And of the many things that are left behind in the access of wonder or pleasure or understanding at reading Joyce's work, one is the notion that it is his work. We do not worry about determining *his* text. The last thing we ought to worry about in reading *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake,* in fact, is *determining* the text.