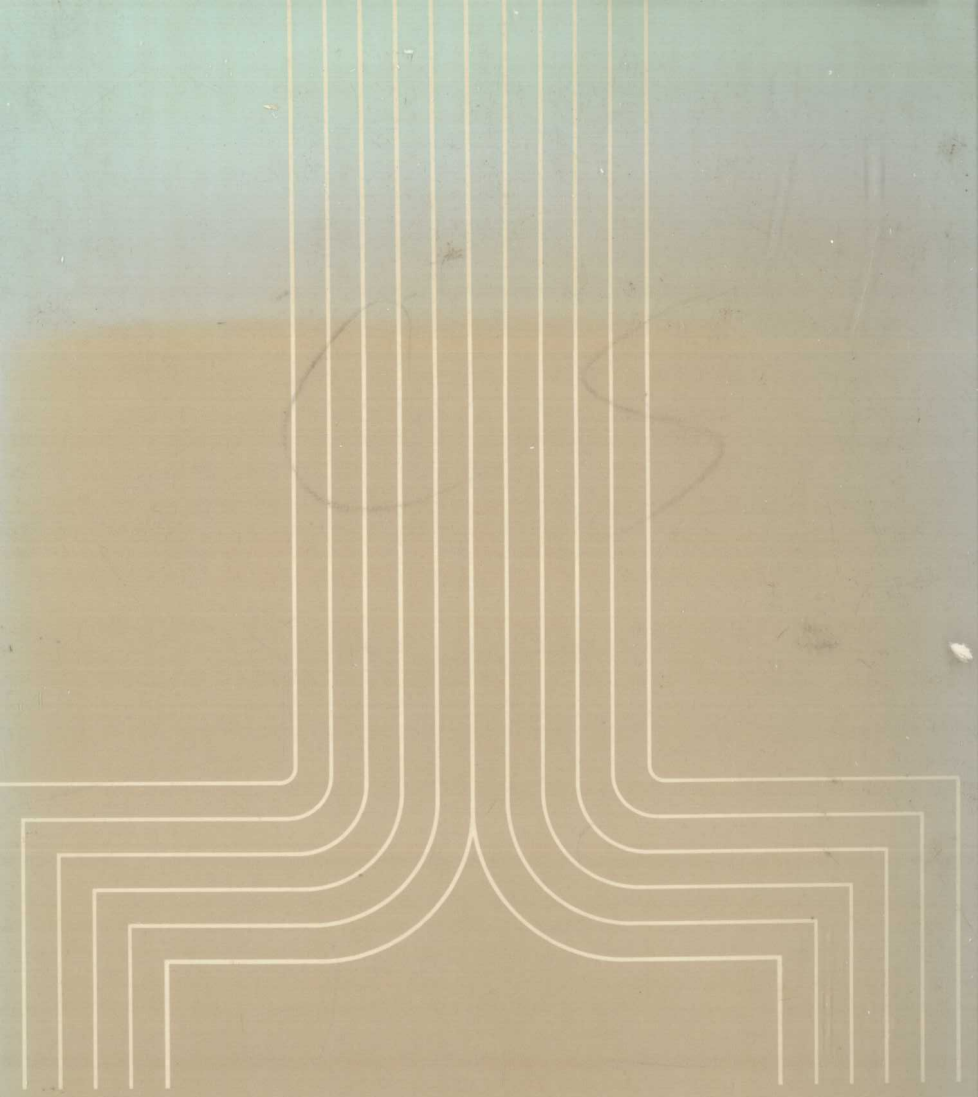

CHRISTOPHER BUTLER

AFTER THE WAKE

AN ESSAY ON THE CONTEMPORARY AVANT-GARDE

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An essay on the contemporary avant-garde

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INTRODUCTION

The essay which follows is concerned with some of the avant-garde literature, painting, and music produced since the publication of *Finnegans Wake*. Writing about contemporary art is pleasurable, but also risky; one deals with a world without any conventionally agreed order. It is not given to us as the product of some academic consensus, an ordered series of Eliotic monuments sanctified by time and tended by critics. No such landscape is well established in anyone's mind yet, and even if we think we know (as we usually do) who the major figures might be, we are less sure of what to do about them. What follows is truly an essay, on an artistic scene whose structure at times seems to owe far more to the 'happening' than to any easily discernible historical or logical order.

For most of us, even those whose good intentions are backed up by an awareness of the art of the modernist period, find the contemporary situation very confusing. The basic reason for this may well be that avant-garde art does not yet communicate very directly (or even pleasurably) with the public at large. This seems to offer a golden opportunity to the critic, who can indulge his liberal and pacific instincts by interposing himself between the embattled artist and his bewildered audience, and beginning to explain. But this is, I think, much too optimistic a view. The gap originally opened by the modernists between advanced art and the audience of reasonable men and women of goodwill is far too wide for there to be any easy critical solutions or easy critical guides to the contemporary situation.

My plan has been to argue that in the 1950s radically new conventions for the language of art were developed by writers, musicians, and painters who wished to break away from modernism. I then go on to give an exposition, following so far as is possible the artists' own statements of intention, of some major works of this 'postmodern' period, in which I discern a contrast between those which are dominated by a theory of their own rule-dominated means of creation, and those whose method is antithetical to this, being irrationalist, indeterminate, or aleatory. I then use this corpus of examples (and others) to consider more generally

the nature of the avant-garde and the cultural context which makes it possible, and to analyse critically in conclusion the nature of the 'aesthetic experience' which it offers.

My main aim is to show that there are common, though not necessarily explicit, aesthetic principles underlying much recent art. It is at this level that the close analogies between the arts can be appreciated and an implied *Zeitgeist* discerned. These 'agreements in principle', as fragile as any in the political sphere, help us to build up a picture, admittedly a provisional one, of the way in which contemporary art functions within our culture. This is not to suggest that I attempt any great philosophical rigour in what follows, nor, if my mere introduction may be allowed to attempt to disarm criticism, have I tried to be scholarly or comprehensive. I have concentrated on a few obviously major figures, and upon a limited selection of their works. Thus the musicians chiefly discussed are Messiaen, Cage, Boulez, Stockhausen, and Berio. I realize that this involves some injustice; and if time and space had allowed I would have looked equally closely at the work of Maxwell Davies, Ligeti, Lutoslawski, Penderecki, and Henze. Similar omissions will no doubt be noticed for the other arts.

There are a number of great works in this period, but they have been produced within an excessively fast-evolving cultural environment, deliberately strewn at times with trivial rubbish, and at others with impossibly complex mazes liberally supplied by their creators with deadends. Our understanding is thus hedged about with almost impossible challenges and deliberately offered frustrations; hence the occasionally rather Manichaean cast of my argument. And yet a period in which we have had Messiaen, Beckett, and Pollock at work does not lack great artists, and their distinction and originality make it unnecessary to fall into a very common critical trap: that in which the critic, trying to make sense of the contemporary, falls prone to a nostalgia for an earlier order, in particular for the modernist achievement.

Of course there is a problem here, both of influence and of ultimate independence. But I have tried to show in what follows that postmodern art requires a quite distinct reorien-

tation of our critical and psychological responses, and that although much contemporary art may hint very strongly at its modernist origins, the mere searching out of historical parallels will do surprisingly little to aid our understanding, and may inhibit us from realizing that it reflects a quite distinct phase of historical development. Butor's *Mobile* (1962) is thus as far removed in time from *Ulysses* (1922) as the latter is from Maupassant's *Une vie* of 1882, and they all three reflect quite different assumptions concerning the relationship of the act of writing to experience.

Nevertheless the first demand of the work of art is that it be appraised not as a historical symptom but on its own terms. It may prove to be self-explanatory or it may not; if not, of course one may look backwards for help, but causal historical explanations alone will never make critical assessments. What is ultimately up for judgement is the experience which the art contemporary with our own life history may provide for us.

CONTENTS

PART ONE: HISTORY

Men wiser and more learned than I have discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following upon another.
H.A.L. Fisher.

All past consciousness is bunk. History is bunk. Like Henry Ford said about technology—there is nothing to be learned from history any more. We're in science fiction now.
Allen Ginsberg.

Chapter One: Postmodernism and Innovation

I

There are, unfortunately, no tidily demarcated historical periods. Although all the artists whom I shall call 'postmodern' consolidate their work and reputations after 1945, their roots in many cases go back into the Modernist period; and conversely, many great modernists (Picasso, Stravinsky, Auden, Stevens, Carlos Williams, Mirò, Chagall, Britten, and Shostakovitch) worked well on into the postwar period. Such biographical facts will not much help us to define postmodernism in any case. If we wish to characterize a period of artistic rather than political history, our concern had much better be with the changing sense of tradition within it, its attempts to break away from the past, and with the evolution of new, but common and characteristic aesthetic assumptions. For the arts change, not simply when men die, but by adopting new frameworks and modifying their own languages. The process is very like that which Thomas Kuhn has described for change and revolution in science; we move from groups doing what is 'normal' for their period to the establishment of breakaway groups forming round men or women who have managed to make some radical conceptual or theoretical leap. It is often only with hindsight that we realize that things have changed, for example when we notice that a critic is willing to assert that 'Today *Bouvard and Pécuchet* seems more subversive than *Ulysses*.'[1] If he is right, then the old order of Modernism has changed indeed.

It is in fact the point of transition between the two periods, the moment when new models of artistic activity begin to function within the tradition, that is most difficult to locate. But upon its location may turn a vital question: is postmodernism a mere, possibly decadent, development of modernism, or did it fight through to a real independence? My argument will affirm the latter proposition; and the beginnings of its proof might be attempted if I give a very brief historical sketch.

Firstly, there seem to be, as one might expect, works which mediate between the two periods, since they are both the

products of modernism and major influences in the post-war period. If we take literature as a representative example (leaving the transitions in painting and music for later) I would suggest that *Finnegans Wake*, *La Nausée*, and the *Cantos* have this kind of status. The reasons for this assertion should become amply clear in what follows but, briefly stated, they would be the huge overload of information provided by the multiple-structured language of Joyce's *Wake* (a supreme example of self-conscious 'écriture') which is awesomely prophetic of the demands made on the reader (or indeed hearer and viewer) by many postmodern works of art. For *Finnegans Wake* is a recognized predecessor of those later works which are about the process of writing itself, and which have so profoundly disturbed our received notions concerning 'realism'.[2] Sartre's *La Nausée*, although it moves to a typically modernist (indeed Proustian) conclusion, in which the protagonist's epiphany leads to his decision to redeem his experience in art, is also a key work, not only for its existentialism and its obsession with things, but also for its pivotal position in that series of novels from Proust to Robbe-Grillet and beyond, which progressively subordinate the nineteenth-century liberal independence of character to the phenomenological twists and turns of the narrator's own reflective consciousness. (Thus Camus echoes Sartre's hero Roquentin, in his *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*: 'Dans cet univers, l'œuvre est alors la chance unique de maintenir sa conscience et d'en fixer les aventures. Créer, c'est vivre deux fois.')[3]

The influence of Pound has been well documented.[4] The main point to stress here is that his looseness of construction in the *Cantos*, his colloquiality, and the irrational, collaged effect of his use of sources, have inspired many subsequent poets. Most notably, Carlos Williams's *Paterson*, whose first book was published in 1946 and encouraged a decisive shift of interest amongst poets, like Olson, Dorn, Creeley, and Duncan, towards the methods of Pound rather than those of Eliot. Robert Lowell indeed hailed this book as a 'sort of anti-*Cantos* rooted in America'[5] and sustained his early enthusiasm in an article written fifteen years later: 'Williams

is part of the great breath of our culture. *Paterson* is our *Leaves of Grass*. The times have changed. A drastic experimental art is now expected and demanded.'[6] Thus Eliot's deadening critical authoritarianism and schoolmasterly fixing of the syllabus was to some degree cast aside (along with his essentially conservative return to a Symbolist aesthetic in *Four Quartets*). Lowell himself reflects this change in his move from a highly wrought and densely symbolic early style through *Life Studies* to the essentially intuitive, non-narrative movement of *Notebook*.[7] This reaction against order is, as we shall see, a key development in postmodernism, and was picked up very quickly by Lowell's friend Randall Jarrell. Noting the resemblance of *Paterson* to the middle and later *Cantos*, he suggests that 'the organisation of irrelevance (or, perhaps the irrelevance of organisation) suggests itself as a name for this category of structure'.[8]

Indeed, the dialectic between the huge over-organization of *Finnegans Wake* and the deliberate lack of it in the *Cantos* conditions the whole of the postmodern period; and what mediates between these at all points is the phenomenological concentration upon the mental processes of the artist, as prefigured in *La Nausée*. The present structuralist insistence upon the play of language, the manipulation of codes by the artist, is in many ways an extension of this interest in the dynamics of the creative process.

Artists have of course always been thought of as 'free' in the modernist, supposedly anti-bourgeois, experimentalist sense. This freedom was greatly reinforced by the growth and influence of existentialism in this transitional period. The literary works of the existentialists were largely conservative in technique, and will not be considered in what follows. But their underlying philosophy not only underwrote the artist's independent creation of value (thus influencing even the action painters of New York), but also offered a point of departure for the *nouveau roman*. Thus Robbe-Grillet's notorious 'chosisme' is largely a reaction against a Sartrean complicity, even if a nauseous one, with objects in the external world, and the 'aventure' which we are supposed to enjoy in the twists and turns of the new

novelist's 'écriture' must owe a great deal to Antoine Roquentin's insight:

> Voici ce que j'ai pensé: pour que l'événement le plus banal devienne une aventure, il faut et il suffit qu'on se mette à le *raconter*. C'est ce qui dupe les gens; un homme, c'est toujours un conteur d'histoires, il vit entouré de ses histoires et des histoires d'autrui, il voit tout à travers elles; et il cherche à vivre comme s'il la racontait.
>
> Mais il faut choisir: vivre ou raconter.[9]

Sartre is of course open to the accusation of having defied his own insight by writing this last sentence, of having written a work which was essentially realist, even 'bourgeois' in so far as its philosophical aim was to show how the world held together in a necessary way, undeconstructed by man's story-telling urge, which is the key to that 'arbitrariness of the sign' of which we have since heard so much. Nevertheless, it seems that Sartre and the new novelists are at one in seeing the act of writing as a means of redeeming experience. Thus the resolution of the protagonist of Michel Butor's *La Modification* (1957) to write a book owes everything to Antoine Roquentin's example. He has travelled by train from Paris to Rome, and in a long meditation decided not to continue an extra-marital affair. The train stops: and in the concluding words of the novel the Sartrean word 'aventure' has a crucial position:

> Vous entendez les cris des porteurs, les sifflets, les halètements, les crissements des autres trains.
>
> Vous vous levez, remettez votre manteau, prenez votre valise, ramassez votre livre.
>
> Le mieux, sans doute, serait de conserver à ces deux villes leurs relations géographiques réelles,
>
> et de tenter de faire revivre sur le mode de la lecture cette épisode crucial de votre aventure, le mouvement qui s'est produit dans votre esprit accompagnant le déplacement de votre corps d'une gare à l'autre à travers tous les paysages intermédiaires.
>
> vers ce livre futur et nécessaire dont vous tenez la forme dans votre main.
>
> Le couloir est vide. Vous regardez la foule sur le quai. Vous quittez le compartiment.[10]

There is of course a more general influence of existentialism in this transitional period: and it is a moral one. It provided a sense of purpose which was necessary for recovery from the fascist period, and gave confidence to the avant-garde. Its long-term effects, however, seem to me to belong more to the history of liberalism than to experimental art. The moral assumptions of existentialism did indeed underlie the principles of much 'avant-garde' psychiatry in our period (in Rollo May or R.D. Laing) but they come through most clearly in liberal novel writing. *Herzog*, *My Life as a Man*, *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Something Happened*, let alone Mailer's *American Dream* and 'White Negro' hipsterism, can, it seems to me, be best understood as peculiarly existentialist forms of confession, and the same applies to much of the work of Berryman and Lowell. Indeed the individual's independent, often anti-ideological search for value, and the price he pays for it in anxiety, underlie far more than the artistic work of the post-war period. To parody Edward VII, 'We are all existentialists now.'

The third point I wish to make is much more narrowly historical. It is that there is a confirmation of a new 'postmodern' artistic epoch in the 1950s. The examples which follow are fairly arbitrary, but they seem to me to be ample evidence of a new era. Ionesco and Beckett rise to prominence. The post-1945 rediscovery of the Second Viennese School and particularly of Webern is well under way, in the critical work of René Leibowitz, and the teaching of Messiaen, and the music of Nono, Boulez, Henze, and Stockhausen. Abstract expressionism as a style, and the consequent independence of American painting, is accepted. Round about 1959, Chabrol, Truffaut, Godard, Rivette, and Resnais all make their first feature films, and the novels in the mode of the *nouveau roman* already make an impressive list: *Les Gommes* and *Martereau* in 1953, *Passage de Milan* in 1954, and *Le Voyeur* in 1955 were succeeded by many more. In London, in 1956, the 'This is Tomorrow' exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery marked the beginnings of Pop art.

There is now no going back. For better or worse, this is the age of Beckett and Robbe-Grillet, of Cage, Messiaen,

Boulez, and Stockhausen, of Pollock, Rothko, Stella, and Rauschenberg. Their work is central to what follows.

II

These historical facts all point to a great efflorescence of avant-garde activity, but one has to remember that it took place in the light of history. Thus all those artists who wished for progressive innovation in the arts after the war faced a common problem, all too easily resumed in the cant phrase 'the anxiety of influence'. For who would not be daunted by the past heroic age of modernism? In literature alone, there were Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Rilke, Yeats, Kafka, Mann, Proust, Valéry, Gide, Conrad, Lawrence, Woolf, and Faulkner to contend with, not only as influences upon creation, but also as a group which, like similar groups of painters and musicians, had dictated the *critical* response to contemporary art.

One way of dealing with the problem was to attempt to reject that past. The slogan on the third issue of the *Dada* magazine way back in 1918—'Je ne veux pas savoir s'il y a eu des hommes avant moi' ('I do not wish to know whether there were any men before me'), (Descartes)—finds a frequent echo in the postmodern period. John Cage, for example, who had introduced chance-dominated methods into musical composition, bravely assumed that he had thus brought about an irreversible change in his audience's expectations, in proclaiming that 'we will certainly listen to this other music—this totally determined music or Beethoven, or whatever, but we'll never again take it seriously'.[11] This is a heroic attitude which is happily not for most of us. Pierre Boulez also, who was mostly concerned with a radical extension of Schoenbergian atonalism, takes a very similar attitude to Cage, but with more confidence in (his own) artistic expansion rather than in critical exclusion, when he asserts that 'Les civilisations fortes et en pleine expansion sont sans mémoire, c'est à dire qu'elles rejettent, qu'elles oublient . . . L'histoire étant liquidée, on n'a plus à penser qu'à soi-même.'[12] For Boulez, the artist stands alone as the

sole source of authority for his own works, and as we shall see, he indeed brought the language of music to a previously unencountered level of technical complexity. Having done this to his own satisfaction, Boulez could make the parricidal proclamation, 'Schoenberg is Dead'.[13]

Cage thus rejects the past by seeing it as ideologically unsound, and Boulez pretends to supersede it by pseudo-scientific advance; but there was yet another way out. One could simplify and start again in childlike innocence. We find this willed regression in the representative case of Frank Judd. The forms of his work are of the most basic kind; for instance in his series of six galvanized steel boxes, 40″ by 40″ by 40″, which were fixed at regular intervals to the gallery wall. When asked why he used boxes in this way, he replied that he 'wanted to get rid of any compositional effect, and the obvious way to do it is to be symmetrical'. And his hostility to what he calls 'compositional effect' is very simply explained: 'Well, those effects tend to carry with them all the structure, values, feelings, of the whole European tradition. It suits me fine if that's all down the drain.'[14]

But a complete rejection of tradition is in fact impossible, and it certainly does not guarantee the 'originality' it sometimes seeks to promote. (Thus Judd, when asked if his work was not rather like that of the Bauhaus, rather disingenuously replied that he considered 'the Bauhaus too long ago to think about, and I never thought about it much'.)[15] We always and inevitably see the new in the light of the old, whether the artist cared to know about it or not, and such knowledge once acquired cannot simply be expunged by artist's fiat. There is always this asymmetry between the defensive exclusiveness of concern of the creative artist, and the more liberal interests of his public and critics.

It is thus possible for the latter to trace fairly clear evolutionary lines of influence for all the arts in the post-modern period. These can be of great use in familiarizing ourselves with the new. Thus there is a line from Debussy through Varèse to Cage, and from Schoenberg through Webern, Messiaen, and Boulez to Stockhausen. Our sense of this continuity can preserve us from having to treat the new