AFTERIMAGES OF MODERNITY

Structure and Indifference in Twentieth-Century Literature

HENRY SUSSMAN

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AFTERIMAGES OF MODERNITY

For my teachers and students

Preface

The introductory material to the present volume comprises chapters 1 and 7 and thus spans it from end to end. In this the book mimics a number of twentieth-century literary works that were similarly uncertain of where they began and ended—and of the claims that beginnings and endings assert. "The Modern/Postmodern: On the Plain of Indifference," draws together certain themes introduced locally throughout the book. For this reason its final placement is fitting; but for a general statement of the relationship between modernism and its implicit countermovement, it is also the place to start.

Of central importance to the "retrospective introduction" and the volume as a whole are a number of interrelated concerns: the notion of style as a field in which decisive conceptual issues and esthetic possibilities are articulated and played out; the fate of structuralism in twentieth-century literature, criticism, and art; a gravitation toward a certain indifference, as much as a style and a conceptual position as an affective state; and finally, in full awareness of the stultifying effect generalizations can have, a sense of the overall shape of twentieth-century intellectual experience, the complex play between certain of its major currents and undercurrents.

In one sense structuralism, viewed as a deployment of the gridwork making transdisciplinary and transepochal analogies possible, operates in every era. There is a sense of structuralism that corresponds to the Foucauldian notion of archaeology as the ongoing horizon and conditions of knowledge. Every intellectual moment may be said to distill or synthesize its own structures, which become symptomatic of its conditions of thought. Even if one accepts this sliding notion of structures and structuralism, there is also a sense in which the early twentieth century was a moment of a particularly intense structural association and ferment. Artifacts as diverse as cubist paintings, the *Cantos of Ezra Pound,* Kafka's fiction, Joyce's *Ulysses,* and early psychoanalytical theory reveled in the combinations and dislocations that structures made possible. High modernism is a consummate structuralist achievement; the yet, as I argue, the truly seminal works of modernism apprehended and resisted the oppressive impacts of their formal construction. Astructuralism is already inscribed within those few artifacts, among them Kafka's "Burrow"

and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, straddling the watershed between modernism and the postmodern. One way that the following essays proceed, then, is to pursue the gravitation toward and resistance to structuralism in the writers whose works they read, namely Joyce, Wittgenstein, Kafka, Beckett, Adorno, and Bernhard.

The second chapter reads Joyce's *Ulysses* as an exemplary modern text. If contemporary critical theory has taught us anything, it is that generalizations, propositions, and pronouncements of any sort had best proceed from the already existing texts through which they first become possible. Though there is surely arbitrariness in assigning *Ulysses* or any work exemplary status, I do so because this text focuses and concentrates notions of the modern that have surfaced in a number of crucial contexts, literary and critical: Benjamin, Baudelaire, Poe, Proust, Adorno, Pound, Eliot, Barthes, de Man. A reading of *Ulysses* facilitates and focuses a posing of the question of the modern in general. Its role is paradigmatic in discerning that most subtle and always changing dissonance—the blur between the image and "the spontaneous afterimage"—between the modern and its implicit countermovement, called, for better or worse, the postmodern.

The fate of structures and structuralism is surely not the only axis on which certain developments in twentieth-century literature and theory may be charted. Chapter 3, "Kafka and Modern Philosophy," strives for a stylistic understanding of certain of the most distinctive experiments produced by twentieth-century art and philosophy. Style is not merely an embellishment; it articulates the stakes of the most intense intellectual engagements. Much of twentieth-century literature and philosophy hang suspended between the terse precision and minimalist expression that Wittgenstein first devised for the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the endless prolixity and qualification found, among other sites, in Joyce's late fiction, Heideggerian phenomenology, and the discourse of deconstruction. At first glance minimalism and exaggerated prolixity could not be more antithetical. In the academic division of labor, the separation between logical analysis and Continental philosophy is founded on a similar methodological, if not stylistic divide. Earlier in the century, the chapter argues, terseness and prolixity represented complementary, not opposed, stances toward authority and the inherited intellectual baggage from the past. Kafka's "Description of a Struggle" stages a confrontation between an anorexic poet of distant (analytical) aphorism and an overweight fulminator of exaggerations. The story is not merely illustrative of the stylistic alternatives available to innovators

and (intellectual) systems analysts at the turn of the century; it is prophetic of the extreme rigor and the equally extreme hyperbole at which much important twentieth-century intellectual and artistic work would be situated.

No saving or restorative synthesis ever emerges to resolve the extremes of style and expression at which the seminal works of twentieth-century literature and philosophy are situated. The implicit countermovement to modernism does not so much back off from extremes as gravitate toward a systematic indifference as violent as it is noncommittal. The indifference emerging in the wake of modernism shares neither the exuberance nor the terror with which Walter Benjamin's Angel of History addresses (backward) the inevitable future. Postmodern indifference embraces conceptual, esthetic, and sexual emanations, as well as affective ones. Chapter 7, touching on works by Beckett, Adorno, and Bernhard, suggests how an esthetic of indifference might both extend and dismantle the innovations of modernism.

Between this volume's thematic and methodological introduction ("Joyce's Musical Comedy") and its retrospective one, transpire three readings illustrative of the issues and movements at play on the shifting border between the modern and postmodern. The first of these, chapter 4, "The Circle of Exclusion," articulates a scenario common to all of Kafka's novels: the absorption of the K. of *The Castle* within an encompassing image or metaphor itself dramatizing the distortions as well as the associative potentials of language. Kafka not only begins with the premise that reality, such as it is, is a figment of language; the scenario and innumerable particular moments in his novel graphically illustrate this point. Yet the Castle, with which K. contends as both a tangible bureaucracy and a hypothesis, is a rigorous geometrical construction, a structure. In his novels, then, Kafka proceeds from the structural invention characteristic of modernist productions to a systematic derangement bespeaking a different intellectual climate and phase. Chapter 5, "The Text That Was Never a Story," explores certain of the psychological and structural implications of Kafka's unique placement. "A Country Doctor" pursues the vicissitudes of a psychological structure, the Oedipal triangle, through a narrative itself heavily structured by doubling and duplicity. This story ultimately exhausts its aging protagonist, as it exhausts the structures making it legible.

Chapter 6 approaches the *Ficciones* of Jorge Luis Borges as both a culmination and a terminus for the structural combination and bricolage characteristic of high modernism. Through careful read-

ings of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "The Garden of Forking Paths," and "Death and the Compass," it is possible to observe Borges on the verge of major poststructuralist, postmodern apprehensions: marginality, supplementarity, duplicity, extreme idealism. The retrospective introduction both assembles a model for modernism and suggests what the egress, corresponding to the exit in a cybernetic program, from so powerful a model and fictive generation might be.

This book deploys careful literary and philosophical readings, self-contained in their own right, as a gloss or commentary on several large and for this reason dangerous topoi, including modernism, postmodernism, structuralism, and deconstruction. There are many ways for things to go wrong in such an enterprise, based as it is on difficult texts and the addressing of yet unresolved, if not problematical, issues. As vulnerable as such an exercise may be, I draw solace from two of the writers herein considered: from Wittgenstein, who never demanded perfection or immortality of the heuristic ladder of logic, which he then withdrew at the end of the *Tractatus;* and from Adorno, who stood at the intellectual home plate and took his swings even though the variegated constraints on his discourse forced him, every so often, to strike out. The following chapters assemble and elucidate a fair swathe of the literary texts that have made our century such an exuberant one. They also suggest some of the theoretical implications of these texts. If I may speak for them, they are just as happy for the exceptions to the models they hypothesize and the interpretations they offer as for any confirmation of their assertions. These chapters stand, or fall, on their suggestiveness: being definitive, in its various dimensions, is an assertion whose underlying assumptions still need further testing.

This preface strives for a snapshot of the book as a whole. It should not end without a mention of the seemingly tangential side-issues nevertheless surfacing in a wide range of contexts. I think of the process of translation, which could involve Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Joyce, and Borges; synaesthesia, curiously linking Wittgenstein to the Borges of "The Circular Ruins" and "Funes, the Memorious"; the game of chess, in which, in different ways Poe, Benjamin, Wittgenstein, and Borges are engaged. These subliminal side shows may well constitute the substantial matter at hand; may well comprise the seminal and suggestive material eluding the encompassing framework.

Curiously, the notion of the postmodern is far richer as a catalyst for discussion than as a concept in itself. The debates it has initiated have been more suggestive than any categorical or periodic definitions

it has enabled. The present collection is more in the tradition of Theodor Adorno's testing of an idea—and sinking as well as swimming with it—than a comprehensive overview of the literature of modernism and postmodernity. This body of criticism is still in a vibrant state of expansion.

I feel a certain affinity between my own attempt and Ihab Hassan's *Dismemberment of Orpheus*[1] because Hassan, like myself, identifies certain traits of the postmodern esthetic or period while knowing full well the futility of such an endeavor. His work thus vacillates between the processes of hypothesis and performance. Where his own text spins away from its frameworks, it exemplifies the postmodern.

Renato Poggioli's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*[2] explores the interstice between esthetic and political radicality. Published in 1962, it is situated at the outset of the current debate, and Jochen Schulte-Sasse does well to incorporate it into his foreword to the U.S. edition of Peter Bürger's later work of virtually the same title. Poggioli assembles a broad set of traits that can be associated to some degree with avant-gardism: a profound tension with past precedent, loss of teleological orientation, a mystique of purity, stylistic and aesthetic alienation, scientificism, and, affectively, a certain disaffectation. Schulte-Sasse is right: Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*[3] demonstrates how a rigorous conceptual *Auseinandersetzung* can upgrade the quality of the models and definitions applied to avant-gardism. In this case, Bürger explores the Frankfurt school's recapitulations and critique of bourgeois and rationalist traditions as valuable sources for the discussion of the avant-garde. Bürger both extends and departs from what he finds most important in such writers as Adorno and Benjamin. By focusing on such deeply entrenched traditions as the autonomy of the artwork (and its producer), historical periodization, and individuality in esthetic production and reception, Bürger is able to reach toward a distinctly activist notion of the avant-garde: one adapted to the dynamics of mass production and reception, open to the impact of chance, characterized by *bricolage* and kaleidoscopic variation (what he terms *montage*), and not categorically opposed to political engagement. Theorization and critical exegesis enhance each other considerably in this presentation.

The Postmodern Moment,[4] edited and introduced by Stanley Trachtenberg, is precisely what its subtitle suggests: *A Handbook of Contemporary Innovation in the Arts*. Arranged by art forms and media, it presents keynote essays and useful bibliographies on the postmodern departures in such areas as art, architecture, film, and literature.

One of the strongest, although by no means universal, tendencies of this critical literature is the observation of a parallelism between the political and the esthetic. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, by Marshall Berman,[5] is a pleasant and informative continuation in this direction. It places the artistic innovations of its period in the context of such "real" developments as the phenomenon of development itself and the rise of such distant cities as Saint Petersburg and New York. Jean-François Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*[6] is less an attempt to account for specific artifacts or the perspectives in which they arise than a theoretical extrapolation of the conditions of scholarship, institutions, and knowledge itself during an age when their conventional legitimations have undergone serious if not devastating critical questioning.

THE PRESENT volume completes a series of meditations—on modern literature, critical theory, and American literature—I undertook as a postdoctoral fellow in the Humanities Center at the Johns Hopkins University. Under the direction of Richard Macksey during the 1970s, the Humanities Center was a powerful and inspiring environment in which it was possible to discern some of the large issues surrounding literary studies. I am indebted first and foremost to Richard Macksey and the Johns Hopkins University for their formative intellectual stimulation and support.

Chapter 3 of this volume, "Kafka and Modern Philosophy," was begun under a Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellowship that supported the completion of a different book. I wrote the initial draft of this chapter at the request of the Kafka Society of America as a paper to be delivered at its December 1985 meeting. In addition, I am grateful to the Camargo Foundation of Cassis, France, which graciously housed me and permitted me to use its research facilities as I wrote this chapter. I received vital encouragement during the early phases of this project from Terry Cochran of the University of Minnesota Press.

The State University of New York at Buffalo has always extended me every encouragement and support in my research. I think particularly of Jon Whitmore, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Letters, and his staff, who have done much to foster the study of comparative literature on our campus as well as to facilitate my efforts. Rodolphe Gasché has played a decisive role in setting a productive tone for theoretical studies at our university and in furnishing initiative for innovative programs. The Johns Hopkins University Press, above all the humanities editor, Eric Halpern, and Irma Garlick, who prepared

the manuscript, provided generous and efficient assistance in all areas of editing. Cathleen A. Carter has given freely of her time and expert assistance at a pivotal moment in her career to assure the completion of this project. Johann Pillai provided indispensable editorial assistance. As always, my family has been an inexhaustible source of encouragement and support.

Abbreviations

BBB Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations" Generally Known as the Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964).

C Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken, 1974). German interpolations in citations are from his *Das Schloss* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1967).

CS Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1976). German interpolations in citations are from his *Sämtliche Erzählungen*, ed. Paul Raabe (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1972).

F Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*, ed. and intro. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1962). Spanish interpolations in citations are from his *Ficciones* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1972).

FW James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Penguin, 1986).

K Thomas Bernhard, *Correction*, trans. Sophie Wilkins (New York: Vintage, 1983). German interpolations in citations are from his *Korrectur* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985).

M Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, trans. Patrick Bowles (New York: Evergreen, 1955).

MM Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1984).

ND Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1983).

SE Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74).

U James Joyce, *Ulysses: The Corrected Text*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (New York: Random House, 1986).

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Contents

CHAPTER ONE

A Modern Climate

VERSIONS OF ULYSSES

It gives us an expansive and hopeful feeling whenever we equate the beginning of a book with embarking on a journey. Both the yet unturned pages and the uninitiated voyage harbor unknown discoveries. Whether it qualifies as a voyage or not, the present excursion through the twentieth century encompasses Prague, Dublin, and Buenos Aires among its ports of call. On a theoretical level, it will witness the obliteration of the very structures that high modernist literature summoned in response to its own apprehension of the primacy of language in thought.

If any twentieth-century figure is emblematic of the uncertain retracing of steps that the following chapters would accomplish, it is the figure of the Angel of History, which the German critic Walter Benjamin elaborated in thesis 9 of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Benjamin's Angel of History, his *Angelus Novus*, is notable in its peculiarly hesitant bearing toward the future. In its ebullient facet, the Angel of History is an adventurer. It traverses eons of time in an instant; the distances between the remotest continents, and indeed between universes, are nothing to it. The sweep of time, the entire domain of settings, historical and imaginary, in which human activity has transpired, fall under its jurisdiction. I will have occasion to return to this decisive figure of Benjamin's.

The Angel of History is always in the condition of initiating a journey, so it is perhaps no accident that the beginning of the twentieth century is one of the Angel's great moments. Sensing a monumental leave-taking, the writers of the day invoke Odysseus and other epic travelers as guides for their fictive explorations. The central books of Homer's *Odyssey* (9–12) become the narrative framework, the structural bottom line, upon which Ezra Pound grafts a bewildering array of narratives and cultural materials deriving from, among others, Chinese, Provençal, Italian, French, English, and Spanish civilizations as he pursues certain events, settings, and obsessions in the

Cantos. The *Cantos* are framed by Odysseus's encounter with the spirit of Elpenor in book II of the *Odyssey*. Elpenor's spirit demands a proper burial and memorial for the human body it has left. This encounter is emblematic of Odysseus's and hence Pound's relation to the materials, memories, and linguistic remains of the past. Modernists as diverse as Walter Benjamin, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens join Pound in the repository of discarded, if not exhausted, cultural remains. Joyce's *Ulysses* loosely inscribes the fictive, intellectual, and esthetic happenings ascribed to Dublin on 16 June 1904 within the context of the same classical epic that Pound appropriated for the *Cantos*. Kafka, in an instance of his own retrospective search for mythological settings for contemporary and everyday events, imagines Poseidon "at his desk, going over accounts. The administration of all the waters gave him endless work" (*CS*, 434).

As an explorer, the Angel of History at the beginning of the century inspires authors to engage mythological travelers as surrogate pilots for their quests. Within this overwhelming context of argosy and leave-taking, it is not completely inconceivable that the figure of Odysseus and his fellow travelers should enter and temper a wide range of twentieth-century intellectual endeavors whose writing is discursive. One could well argue that Freud, particularly the Freud of *Studies on Hysteria* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, is an early structuralist. Such notions as drives, inhibitions, and the Oedipal complex are structures around or upon which the materials of memory, experience, and such psychic happenings as dreams can be formed. Much of Freud's work effects a translation of psychic materials, with their many sources and manifestations, into structures; and classical mythology is for Freud a particularly privileged repository of structures, the Oedipal being a case in point.

The linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure is one of the most potent forces militating, at the beginning of the century, for a linguistic source and constitution of thought, reality, and communication, to the extent that any notion of origins applies.[1] For Saussure, there is a radical discrepancy between language and that to which it ostensibly refers. Above all, language refers to itself. The signs that comprise it are formed of an easily overlooked fusion between concepts and linguistic qualities. Languages are determined by social conventions. The signs in a language are selected arbitrarily, not by virtue of any sense inherent to them. The principle of sign selection is differential, motivated by the need for variety in signification, rather than by any identity between signifiers and what they signify.[2] Languages evolve out of a stately negotiation between the historical