

# The Anomalies of Literary (Post) Modernism

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No one is a poet unless he has felt the temptation to destroy language or create another one, unless he has experienced the fascination of non-meaning and the no less terrifying fascination of a meaning that is inexpressible.

(Octavio Paz)

Criticism must attack the form, never the content of your language.

(Lautreamont)

## I

Modernism is a word of great currency, almost literally a figure of exchange. But the word itself is hardly definite for being so in vogue, so significant. So obviously figural and in circulation. It is not, quite clearly, quite clear or transparent; nor is it a proper name for either some historical period or some identifiable or unique style. At the same time an historical and an ahistorical category, it *refers* (a term of equal indeterminacy) to the equivocal and irreducible relation between the two--that is, to what is often today called "desire" or the lack that ties any mediation to a dreamed--of immediacy, the temporal or sensuous to the transcendental or supersensuous, act to idea, and perhaps even literature to philosophy. Modernism is another name for some moment of transition, or for the unnameable and uncanny, an apparently stable term for an instability, which is the reason we are always affixing premonitory signs to it, posting it, as it were, or bracketing it as an historical deviation, at once discontinuous with and supplementary to the "tradition," in a way that makes the exception prove the rule. It is not a "word," category, or designation which stands alone, nor outside of some historical moment, but it does

designate a practice rather than a lapidary or complete form or style. Whatever the modern is, it is an inscription which erases itself, or signifies its own undoing or overcoming. It must, therefore, inscribe the "postmodern" as surely as it displaces, by reinscription, the tradition. Modernism, in brief, and this includes any excess named postmodern which necessarily inhabits it, belongs to criticism, even when it is the name of art or literature. It has become a kind of "basic word" or concept, in Heidegger's sense of a name that repeatedly undergoes changes of meaning.<sup>1</sup> Strangely, one of its functions is to name that which produces such changes, hence undoes old categories. Modernism names its own anomaly.<sup>2</sup>

Modernism thus "understood," as a critical term for criticism, therefore harbors, to repeat, the very crisis it is presumed to reflect and represent, yet repress or overcome. I need not rehearse at this point the familiar debates about it which center upon Mallarme's essay, "Crisis in Poetry," or the recent attempts to rewrite this as our "Crisis in Criticism." I will, however, note provisionally Jullia Kristeva's observation that a modern scholar of language once claimed that the two most eminent linguists in France were Mallarme and Artaud, that is, modern poets whose practice detached and highlighted the problematics of the very language they employed self-critically. The implication, that the poets were there before us, before scholarship and criticism, also suggests that the poetic is originally critical, and that it addresses primarily itself. But never directly. And that is the problem, or problematic; for in this address of itself, the language of modernism does not so much achieve self-reflexivity as expose the idealization of self reflexivity. It submits itself to critical practice. We hear, today, the inflated and hyperbolic claims that the critical is creative or that criticism is poetic, and the equally self righteous counterclaims of an academic establishment which regales against "theoretical" critics for writing badly while claiming that criticism is poetic. The debate, however, turns on the acceptance of a division and hierarchy of categories, the privileging of the poetic over the critical, creative immediacy over reflective circumspection, even the imaginative over the discursive; in short, the production and maintenance of an old binarism that modernism, in whatever form it takes, has tended at the same time to perpetuate and undermine.<sup>3</sup> Modernism, as the epigraphs from Paz and Lautreamont indicate, has never ceased questioning its own privilege, perhaps by way of validating its antithetical practice. Even "Creation requires analysis," Paul Valery remarked in his marginalia to Poe's *Marginalia*, thus setting the one mode within the other like an angle, two inseparable yet equivocal texts which refuses symbiotic reduction. Modernism is at best a double-

writing, "Literature is now critical," Emerson wrote; "Well, analysis may be poetic." Whether Emerson, Nietzsche, or Valéry, Stevens or Derrida, poetry or philosophy—we have aphorism and anecdote, a double writing, or theory inscribed in practice, wherever modernism appears. We have, that is, apocalypse in the form of catechesis.

Is it possible, then, to define modernism without submitting to its own revisionary force, a force that is just as often conservative as it is radical, but nonetheless irreducible to a monological or ideological discourse? Modernism inscribes its own problematics, but it cannot describe itself. How ironic, then, that modernism as we have come to understand it has always been defined on the model of self-reflexivity when it can be nothing more than a criticism of its modality? In literary history, for example, it has always been the name for some break with or periodic culmination of tradition, and thus some horizon which can be read, but only in two incompatible senses: as end and new beginning. As the later, it would be at once a return to origins and originary. That paradox marks a good deal of what we recognize as the primitivism or neo-primitivism of modernism, the ahistoricity and "immediacy" it claims, just as it supports the sense of a continuum or historical totality. Modernism thus belongs, and does not belong, to the "eternal return" and the hermeneutical circle. That is, it gestures some exception to and of the rule, a certain unruliness; yet it cannot be said to be outside the law. That is why it can only be defined by some other character—by its excess, by the "postmodern," or as well as see, by the *figural*, by style, but style now thought of as that which presents itself to the eye and at the same time resists perception or reading. Not style in the singular, then, but 'styles,' as Derrida writes: irreducible heterogeneity.

Both Paul de Man and Jean-Francois Lyotard, two recent critics not easily reconciled to one another, seem to agree that the problematics of the "modern" (Lyotard, for example, says that the modern is an "aesthetics of the sublime") is located in figurality. Each rejects the term "modern" as a designation of "period," such as its use by historians to set the modern Renaissance against antiquity, though, even here the notion of Enlightenment implies a certain priority of self reflection and thus humanist privilege. As a comprehensive term, however, modernism signifies not only something close to us in time, the *now* and the *new*, but something that re-marks itself in two senses: that comments on itself, and underscores its technical and abstract properties or those devices which it uses to produce meaning and structure. Simply, modernism seems to be inseparable from

self-reflection and self-reflexivity. Even when it is employed in a neo-Maxist fashion by critics like Frederic Jameson to suggest both an historical and structural map of recent history—as a dialectic of tradition—highmodernism—postmodern superimposed upon an economic history it represents, as commodity—the term—concept is troubled by its appeal to the question of style(s) and hence by a doubleness, in that style indicates not only a formal, abstract, and visible mark but also that which conceals the very thing that produces it. Style(s) presents itself to perception and interferes with perception. Its figurality is visible and corporeal, and irreducible to a narrative account of things, as Lyotard notes. The modern at once shows itself, and withholds itself from (re)presentation; it is commodified and employed speculatively, as a capitalised value, but it also tends to escape its appropriation and to skew those same values for which it apparently stands.

This is why it is difficult to discuss the modern and the postmodern without reference to the visual arts, or even architecture, as organizations or constructions of space. Yet this construction is no less a critique or deconstruction of spatiality; it inevitably disrupts representation or perspectivism (hence illusion) and offers up an irreducible “image” or figure that parodies its own status. It tends to open the space, or mark the artifice of its closure. If one wishes to maintain the question within the field of verbal arts, then figure, as an Millarme, involves that organisation of marks on the page which are not indicators of meaning, not even signs, yet call attention to themselves as the *abgrund* of any possible meaning. The modern demands to be “read” in some literal sense, because it inscribes marks which suggest an organization of signs that can be decoded. What if the signs it organizes are themselves signs referring to a twofold nature of signs? That is, signs occupy and organize “space” yet prevent our reading that space (conceptualizing or narrating it). In one important sense, as deconstructive (postmodern) critics have argued, the organizational or creative force would be located in the equivocal relation of marks that bear no semantic load, but appear to the eye as figures which unfocus and fracture the scene, provoking interpretation or reading by resisting meaning. They indicate, these indicators, that something cannot be presented. They present, as Lyotard claims, the unpresentable, or indicate a “meaning that is inexpressible,” according to Paz. Thus, they undermine their own role as fetish by highlighting the relation between form and fetishism.

Certainly, since French Symbolism we have had to consider modernity in terms of a heterogeneity that at once summons us to understanding,

luring us to read things in terms of what the old words meant while reminding us that some aberration appears there, that something is not reducible to conceptualization. De Man formulates this as the rhetoricity of literary language, the *aporia* that joins the cognitive or meaningful stance of figure (trope) to a performative or persuasive function that subverts meaning. Generalizing this beyond literary figuration, Lyotard employs the equivocal opposition of *discourse* (narrative or story, *recit*) and *figure* (or that which resists induction into the flow of discursive meanings). Figurality appears and marks itself not as the appearance of a withheld meaning, but as a phantasm or unaccountable image.

By way of talking about criticism or a certain *praxis*, we have “drifted” from reflection on the idea of the “modern” to some postmodernist or deconstructive inflections of it. In other words, according to Lyotard, this literature-art, as well as being self-critical, itself performs a critical or disruptive function. As we have seen (note the epigraphs), it is the artists themselves who insist that their art is critical, even apocalyptic, in that its performance affects itself at the most basic levels of form or medium. What does it mean, then, to say that literature is critical, or modern literature self-critical, and yet to assert that modernism (and postmodernism) are not or cannot be purely self-reflexive, as they have traditionally been defined : that, to the contrary, they are disturbances of speculation and thus of the illusion of presence, of representation ? Modernism tends to offer itself as “illustration,” but only to illustrate its own mechanics, thus presenting or exposing the *techné* of representation. You will recognize, no doubt, in the notion of “illustration” Kant’s primary figure of “hypotyposis” (from section 59 of the *Critique of Judgment*), that figure which is supposed to reconcile the real and the transcendental, or sensuous and supersensuous. It is for Kant the figure of figure *par excellence*, in that it would govern the play of reflections necessary to allow art to order the world, reflect it, and yet stand beyond cognition while being inferior to it, thereby regulating beauty and the sensuous to the order of truth, certifying what Heidegger calls Kant’s Platonism. Modernism, I will argue, and with it anything we can designate as postmodern, is complicated and problematized by this question of illustrative figurality. If a “modern” work of literature is that which reflects or comments on itself, this metapoem can only be understood in a critical way, as a cata-critical etc. But in what sense can poems, or literary works in general, be said to act or perform ? In what sense does the term “speech acts” depend on an idea of metaphoricity, and

thus mark itself as a trope of trope ? What is involved when we begin to tell a story of literary history as the "influence" of an earlier work on a later, or as the "anxiety of influence" which produces a later work's revision of the first, producing a catachresis that seems without end or beginning ? I am echoing Harold Bloom here, because he is rightly celebrated for offering us a new and certainly extravagant sense of literary history as an open and endless criticism, a criticism of criticism by literature. But Bloom tells his story in terms of Romanticism, to which the modern is no more than an "ephebe's" twist. Yet, Bloom has to have recourse to a "new" model of language, of rhetoricity and tropology, the inescapable model for any modernism. It is just this inescapable model, I will suggest, that puts in question the dream of modality and method, that disrupts the model of self reflection, which we have to consider in reflecting on the "critical function of the modern." In his sense, modernism is just another name--and an historically deviant one--for this tropological economy of Romanticism; while the Romantic is a generic name for poetry itself, for its Nietzschean capacities of self-overcoming, of displacing the truth with "lie."<sup>5</sup>

## II

Any definition of the modern—self-consciousness, self-reflexivity, experimental—must acknowledge its claims of difference, its posture of uniqueness, of the "new" which nevertheless can only be defined against convention and received styles. In Eliot's terms, "tradition" seems always to regulate "individual talent." Formalism, but a "new" form; spatiality, but a "new" organization of space—these signs of a material or sensuous "construction" accentuate the modern as the ultimate technical refinement, as *techne*, as "work" and "object" rather than living "organism." Thus the modern is always less and more than what it putatively completes. One is reminded of the American New Critics' efforts to reconcile the ideal of "organic form," derived from Kant through Coleridge, with the technical abstractions of an industrial and even post-industrial age ; to preserve, let us say, in the pure crystal of aesthetic and verbal space a self-reflexive operation which could be described on the order of a perpetual motion machine that mirrored the purity of a transcendental consciousness or divine imagination, the "work" became not only complete but in John Crowe Ransom's words, a "sacred object." This contradiction of sensuous and supersensuous, which as Heidegger shows, haunts aesthetics from Plato or Platonism to Kant and Coleridge, and even Hegel, and is reversed but not overcome by Nietzsche (nor for that matter, finally, by Heidegger),

is the reigning problematic of the modern. It is everywhere reflected in the "ethic of nostalgia" that haunts modern criticism, the simultaneous protest against the "dehumanization of art" (Ortega) and praise for its technical expertise, its crystalline abstraction. Modernism's preoccupation with "space" or the potentiality of closed space—whether in the self-reflexive poem or "functional" architecture or non-representational painting or non-serial music—inevitably mixes the metaphors of the organic and the technical, life and death.

In the effort to resolve the form-content and space-time dichotomies that perplex western aesthetics, modernism can only overcome the crisis by exacerbating it. One could demonstrate this thematically in poems as "conventionally" modern as Hart Crane's *The Bridge* or Ezra Pound's *Cantos* as well as in the self-consciousness nativism of Wright's architecture, works which incorporate what Heidegger calls the "discordance" or contradiction of western aesthetics as surely as does any so-called "dehumanized" art, for example, analytic Cubism, surrealism, or any of the arts now reigned under the generic term "postmodern." This is what allows a postmodern criticism in general, particularly a critic like Lyotard, to argue that every modernism is already inhabited by a postmodern discordance, or by certain configurations or marks which signify at the same time the work's double claims, to closure and development, thus to a unity that is not at the same time abstract and dead. Strangely enough, it is this apparently non-living technical force, signified by "functions" within the work which accentuate their artifice, that marks the productive potential of the modern; that is, it breaks up or "opens" the modern, or signifies the modern's "will to power" or will toward closure. In Nietzsche's terms, art "lies," but in accentuating its allusion, it displaces "truth"; in remarking its "lie," it is more truth than that which perpetuates illusion. Lyotard thus employs the periodic term "postmodern" to name this function of differential production, this disrupting intervention of a *figure* which cannot be reduced to the conceptual understanding of *discourse* or narrative representation. This *differend*, as he names it, signifies the play of the postmodern within the modern and allows him to claim, as we will see, that the postmodern is necessary for the modern to come into its own, or appear.<sup>6</sup> This is the "critical" function or force which the work bears within itself, a sign of its double-ness or heterogeneity, its "oscillations" or in Derrida's terms, the "double writing" that pervades all discourse and disallows our generic distinctions between the creative and the critical.

Gilles Deleuze denominates "modernism" in literature, in this case narrative literature, as the working of a "divergent series" against the

rule of narrative, which he calls the "rule of convergence." Whereas narrative pushes themes toward resolution, the modern mode disperses and reweaves or imbricates irreconcilables. Montage is not quite the name for this *imbricolage*. Thus Joyce's "continually dēcentered chaos" in *Finnegan's Wake* becomes a "power of affirmation" in keeping a series open, and like a "literary machine" (recall *Proust and Signs*) produces an "internal reverberation" or resonance of oppositions that resists any closure of the narrative line.<sup>7</sup>

We find in these "descriptions" of a postmodern activity disturbing the representational or descriptive a strange kind of practices that make the critical discourse in effect repeat, as if by parody, the creative. Criticism can only speak theoretically from the (dis)advantage point of its own practice, since what it must do is produce a new "descriptive" language for that which resists description. Deleuze calls this the "constitutive inequality" of every work. Equivocality, heterogeneity, heterology, and in the more extreme sense, the non-concepts (not exactly neologisms or solecisms) of Derrida, like *differance*, *supplement*, *hymen*, *dissemination*, emerge as an aberrant lexicon from beneath what has seemed a normative if not natural aesthetic language.<sup>8</sup> In one way or another, these effects disturb the "eye" and "ear," and touch the senses, recalling a certain non-sense at the constitutive center, which is no longer a center at all. We have learned to accept this figural irrationality in what we recognize as the "work of art," but when it appears in the critical domain to comment on the impossibility" of theory or to disrupt the logic of mastery or totalization, it must be marginalized. When criticism threatens to preempt art's access to the "other," criticism must be exempted. But if "criticism" as such is already inscribed in the art-work, or literary, then it can only be exempted by ignoring its function and returning criticism to its ordinary and subordinate role of thematic elaboration. This is the claim made for meta-literature : that it sufficiently accounts for or thematizes itself.

To accentuate the discordant "function" of criticism in modern (or postmodern) art, on the other hand, calls attention to certain limits within our old sense of "reading," as Paul de Man does; "reading" precedes and suspends "interpretation" or the recovery of meaning. It is also to call attention to a certain *mise en abyme* structure that inhabits modernism, and to suggest that this critical modernism in some way affects all literary discourse and is simultaneously effaced by literary history. This is obviously too broad a generalization : that literature is never original but originary, that it begins in the moment when it is forced to reflect on itself, when

it, in effect, signifies its departure from myth (Bakhtin) or the direct interpretation of "truth" and signifies its own figurality and modality. In this sense, the appearance of Achilles' shield in the *Iliad* and Penelope's tapestry in the *Odyssey* would be "allegories" of the advent of literature itself. Penelope's nightly unweaving, like Scheherazade's interrupted narratives, is a story of narrative's delaying mechanism, or productive deferral, a "story of story" which recent postmodern literature like that of Nabokov, Pynchon, John Barth, and others, repeats *in extremis* by following out a "logic" parody. Borges' story of Pierre Menard's rewriting of *Don Quixote* brackets the entire history of the novel within this novelty of repetition, and like Nabokov's *Pale Fire* stages the novel as the most critical of genres because it most effectively and forcefully has advanced by putting genre in peril. Criticism and death are the necessary conditions for literature to come into being or for the idea of being, to appear as representation. One finds it difficult to understand a "history of the novel" that does not also subvert itself, though the intertextual relations between narrative forms are not without some rule. But it is the writing of this rule that poses so many questions, a scene Henry James staged in his "Prefaces" as the problem of rereading, revising, and rereading. Could one say that James marks and re-marks his own invention of a certain "realism" as a critical act directed against both the "Romance" and the Flaubertian displacement of the old representational illusion? The "Prefaces" restore to our awareness the technical operations of a figurality we may call "critical" in that they themselves call attention away from the meaning of the representations to operations themselves, and show us the re-visionary mode of the technical operations.

In describing the works of modernism, then, we will have to confront the question Derrida posed in *La Carte postale* (1980), at a point where he is talking about the discourse of philosophy, or, more specifically, of the post-philosophical claims of a social science like psychoanalysis to overcome the theory-praxis problematics. His example is Freud's use of the example, or the crux introduced into any "system" when the so-called "method" of analysis is also that, or part of that, which is to be analyzed—where the "family romance" or Oedipal complex becomes the general pattern for understanding, analyzing, and correcting a condition which it also names :

What occurs when acts or performances (discourse or writing, analysis or description, etc.) become part of the objects which they

designate. There is certainly no advance (gain) in self-reflexive transparency, on the contrary. The account is no longer possible, nor can the account be rendered, and the borders of the whole (*ensemble*) are neither closed nor open,<sup>9</sup>

The ideal of "self-reflexive transparency" has always been the dream of western metaphysics or the philosophy of (self-) presence, according to Derrida, evident in its arguments for systematization and closure, totalization and mastery. But the dream of "truth," and desire for "theory" that at once inaugurates and governs a practice which completes it, have only been sustained by a strategic effacement and seamless reconstruction of the narrative and figural modes this discourse had to employ. To expose this self-referential and self-justifying discourse, then, to deconstruct it or submit it to something like a "postmodern" analytic, cannot be done from the outside, but only from a certain "margin" that characterizes the discourse itself. This "new" critical discourse, however, can no more inhabit, parody, and overcome the old work, by exploiting its own parasite, that it can escape its own limits. That is, the analytic of exposure, of ex-positon, is implicated in the game (*jeu*). This limitation (of *l'inite*, as Derrida plays upon the illusion of exemplary mimesis) affects every inscription, and is indeed the source of the productive power of all discourse.

If there is a post-philosophical discourse of (social) science methodology at all, its authority derives from these limits and not from its capacity for overcoming them. According to Derrida, this applies as well to the "pure" language of mathematics as the "pure" word of poetry, a problematic inscribed in Godel's theorem which, ironically, has enhanced as much as it has threatened "progress" in quest for a *principia mathematica*. The questioning of referentiality and self-referentiality, which has seemed to belong to a certain (marginal) philosophy of language, is something inscribed in discourse itself, and not something that has emerged with the nihilism and skepticism of a post-Cartesian modern age or, more recently with the "revolution of the word" in the nineteenth century. Criticism cannot begin outside what it criticizes, hence can never account for the present or future condition of that which it is a part. It cannot, therefore, provide the trajectory of a destination—what the "thing" it studies/analyzes will be—any more than it can account fully for a "present" condition in which it participates. True enough, the ideal of self-reflexivity achieves its essential expression in the Hegelian formulation, as subsequently underscored in such "reversals" as Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, and Heidegger. But these "reversals," as Derrida reveals, could never be simple reversals, but only

indelible re-markings the heterogeneous field of the "ensemble." The power of post-Hegelian discursive practices resides in the limits of the very metaphysics they expose, and thus in their own limits. In its self-exposure; its *posture* as pure science.

We have seen, in recent years, the attempt to write a "history" of literary modernism in terms of a post-Romantic poetics, or as the achievement of a "purity" (from *Symbolisme* to post-symbolist reversal) of the "word," that is, as a "turn toward language" through which literature realizes "self-reflexive transparency," the systematic closure that metaphysics could only dissimulate, or, to recall Nietzsche's figure, turn into an *edifacé*. Thus we have a history which runs dialectically from Romanticism to Modernism to Postmodernism, through what one current journal (*boundary 2*) celebrates as a negative or open dialectic of overcoming: a progressive history of demystification which recounts literature's withdrawal from history, and the sickness of the Romantic "self," into itself, into an hermetic purity that orders the play of the sign within the "restricted" or closed economy of the symbol. The postmodern, then, becomes that moment not only of reversal but re-turn, a venting of this closure or fracturing of the mirror and its illusion of "transparency." Focussing on this "tain" of the mirror, or on the impenetrability of its reflecting surface, which is something like the irreducible corporeal figure that resists understanding, the postmodern would in this account open a closed field and return to reality and history, not as representation or mirror but as productive or resistant performance. This particular literary "history," of literature's closure of history and its return to history, has been variously applied: to the broad movement beyond Romanticism, or to the Continental developments from Flaubert and Mallarmé through Lautréamont and surrealism to Borges and the parodic deconstruction of "literature." *Boundary 2* recounts it in the economy of two modernist moves--boundary 1 referring to either Virginia Woolf's or Ezra Pound's date of 1910 as the beginning of the modern; boundary 2 naming Charles Olson's proclamation of 1950 as the beginning again of the "new" or postmodern. It is not surprising that this kind of "history" comports with the "economic" history described by Fredric Jameson and other neo-Marxist critics, even though Marxism does not confer the same privilege upon postmodernism as does a theory that celebrates literature's self-overcoming, its going "beyond" aesthetics, as it were.<sup>10</sup>

Strangely enough, postmodern writers tend to discount this privilege, even as they acknowledge that they work self-referentially to parody,

disturb, and generally open the hermetic enclosure of "literature," without, as Heidegger evidences, indulging in a nostalgia to get back to some pure essence of the poetic being. If as Charles Olson wrote, the modern/post-modern poet must "go back" behind the self-consciousness of western literature, s/he must go back "to come forward." Or as John Barth has argued, if postmodern literature must "exhaust" literature, or parody it to the point of showing its exhausted resources ( its becoming modern, in the sense of becoming at the same time purely formal and thematically nihilistic), the logic of parody, or what I will call genre-cide, is necessary as a surgical maneuver and not an end in itself.<sup>11</sup> But the undoing of the "modern" cannot be simply another version of nostalgia, the quest for some kind of primitivistic power, Dionysiac ground of life, or even pre-Socratic wisdom of Being, as in Heidegger. Any more than it can, as avant-garde, lead the advance, or in the utopian sense, achieve the "advance" of a literature that would put literature on some new "ground" or "topos," some position that included both "life" and "history." In sum, such privileging of the postmodern simply tends to repeat the metaphysics of the humanist literary tradition, whether in the triumphs of rebellion or nihilistic despair.

Rather, what we now call postmodern can no more be decisively separated out from or placed in advance of the modern than can the modern be seen to complete or sublimate the tradition. The crisis rests in the "history," or in the inescapable need of the modern/postmodern to account for itself: to place itself in and beyond history, to give itself a history, to account for history but also for a "literature" which is at the same time in/beyond history. This is what is implied by such projects as Paul de Man's effort to rewrite the "history" of Romanticism, and, oppositely, by Harold Bloom's attempt to rewrite all literary history as a version of Romanticism or "quest romance." Literary history, then, is inseparable from criticism, but not simply in the sense that criticism is a discursive practice that accounts for the ontological or cognitive status of literature, its representational role in a history of ideas. Deconstruction's undoing of the cognitive and generic borders between literature (poetry) and criticism (thought) can no more escape the problematics of self-reflexive acts or performances in literary criticism than it can escape the double-bind of philosophical discourse in general. In *general*: that is, to use the Derridean figures, which "refer" to Bataille's readings of Hegel, both literary criticism and literature (named separately here for a certain convenience which their difference belies) can write only "general economies," never

a restricted one. In Harold Rosenberg's oxymoronic title, *The Tradition of the New*, we may find inscribed the entire problematics of accounting for the "new" and "original," especially as it highlights the dilemma of belatedness and even entropy (signified in the changing sense of energy and more recently communication theory over the last century) which perplexes yet animates the (post)modern revolution and its counter-practices. The "new" can only proclaim its futur-ology figuratively (prophecically and apocalyptically) from the position of its death.

### III

If literary history is in a sense nothing other than a history of criticism, written by and as criticism, and if literature contains an inextricable critical element or an element of self-accountability, it follows that literary history will be composed of a set of readings' (not necessarily interpretations) which resist narrative closure and even full accountability. Such histories tend to resolve into "themes" or thematic stories, threads whose counterpoint is never fully resolved, despite the efforts to reconcile themes around one or more dominant motif; that is, to recount the whole in the part. This effort to overcome what we might call the Godelian indeterminant, to make an element in the "set" account for the entire set, is clearly exemplified in the problematics of writing the history of a national literature: say, American literature. Of course, we have risked here the irrational example of the example, of the exemplary case. Nevertheless, one might argue that "American literature," as well as the various attempts to write a history of American literature as at once a unique literature yet a part of the history of western literature, is a case in point. An instance of the inherent contradiction, From Emerson to the present, the American writer's effort to pronounce the possibility of an "American literature," to clear a space for it, has tended not so much to produce that "new" literature as to make it possible for criticism to write a history of that "desire." Thus Emerson joins with Bloom in that enterprise, while traditional literary history proceeds as if its task of description addressed a unique history and an authentically different literature which, nevertheless, it could recount in terms applicable to any national literature: that is, as a literature at the same time "new" yet a chapter, perhaps the last and latest chapter of the West, characterized by its own nativist elements by a "continuity" of themes and forms, for example, the need to produce its own epic, an ancient genre, within a

modern idiom.<sup>12</sup> In sum, these histories tend to efface the very contradictions, the very "discordance," as Heidegger calls it, which is essential to the "new" or to art in general—its own critical force or capacity to deconstruct received structures. Ironically, American literary histories tend to tell a normative story about an exceptional case, or at least about a literature that repeatedly insists on its need to be exceptional, and a metaliterature rather than a representative form.

American literature, that is, problematizes any "history" that might be written about it, but it continues to provoke efforts to write that history. The provocation, interestingly enough, seems often enough to reside not in the work's account of its failure and frustration, but in its ironic inability to account for its failure to account for itself. Sometimes it seems to write a history of its own future: visionary, prophetic, exceptional, and different, therefore instigating its own interpretation by a clearing of the ground of past references. In this regard, one might argue that American literature in general seems to conform only to Bakhtin's broad definition of the "novel," which differs from epic in the sense that it is a strictly historical and ceaselessly self-revising or open genre, in contrast to the epic's preoccupation with a completed, unchanging, and even mythic past. Whatever the genre' "American literature"—and by this I now designate that literature which in effect reflects upon itself, and on its own limits or failure to realize itself, rather than a literature written in America or that literature which seems to represent, or even invent, "American" themes like Adamism, in which American and mythos are apparently synonymous concepts—is like Bakhtin's novel, self-rivisionary, rather than visionary, and prophetic only in the sense that it is "prospective" rather than "retrospective," as writers from Emerson to Olson have proposed.

The familiar attempts to write in American literary history according to its distinct themes—Adamism, Paleface and Redskin, the frontier—have never failed, even in the arguments for a fundamental nativism, or primitivism to suggest that this return to origins had to be made through the self-conscious methods characteristic of modernism. There is no more classic example of this than Charle's Feidelson's ground-breaking *Symbolism and American Literature*<sup>13</sup> which concludes with a "Postscript" announcing: "...the affinity between large areas of American literature and of modern literature brings to light unsuspected aspects of both," that affinity being particularly evident in what they share with a broadly defined "symbolist" movement in modern thought. Feidelson's is a striking piece of critical reading, but a curious history, which argues that "symbolism" has supplanted

“romanticism and realism” or “idealism and materialism” in the sense that it is a “humanism,” but a “critical humanism.” Thus, he begins one step beyond Matthiessen whose own canonical text had placed the American “tradition” at the end or in the aftermath of the Renaissance, itself a repetition and fulfilment of that theory of language Emerson found in Coleridge as filtered through Kant. Both Feidelson and Matthiessen locate this humanistic rebirth in Eliot’s particular notion of the modern as an escape from the abysses of Romantic dualism (though Eliot had found humanism only another version of the Romantic).

No matter the question of precursors and influence, it is the role given to “individual talent” and to the problems visited upon the American writer both by his lack of a past and isolation that Feidelson, like de Tocqueville, discovers to be at the heart of an American literary tradition which has had to invent itself anew by a kind of auto-reflection. American literature was virtually born in crisis, its legacy the self-consciousness that haunted western thought in its latter-day moments, in Romanticism and Hegelianism. Symbolist theory, from that Eliot had found in the French literary scene of the nineteenth century, to the philosophical “symbolism” of Bergson and Cassirer, signified the overcoming of Cartesian dualism; it was not, however, a philosophical resolution so much as a displacement of philosophy by aesthetics and theology. Symbolism, as Feidelson argued, was a “theory of knowledge” reconciling history and ideas, and thus an aesthetic figure which verified the old theology by bringing its “form” once more before our eyes. The “autotelic” poem of Eliot signified and made manifest the resolution of that “double consciousness” or Cartesian dilemma inherited from the Renaissance and exacerbated by every argument which attempted to master it, the latest being Romantic pathos and existentialist despair. Indeed, all of that history of renaissance as self-consciousness could be resolved in a post-Hegelian reification of the Symbol over the Sign, a belief in the presentness of the Symbol which could harbor two-in-one, a displacement of Romantic irony by humanism.

But whereas the New Criticism had followed Eliot in discovering this symbolist resolution in poetry or lyric form, albeit a lyric like Donne’s structured according to drama or dramatic oppositions extended in time but resolved in form and figure, Feidelson discovers his symbolist model to be a narrative. In this he owes a considerable debt not only to the Warburg philosophers but to Joseph Frank’s formulation of the modern novel as “spatial form” modeled upon Worringer’s aesthetics. Feidelson’s metatext is Gide’s *The Counterfeiters* which he reads in the spirit of the *mise en abyme*

only to discover that the artist himself has, following Mallarme, effected a way of closing the text's self-references upon themselves, thus effacing the question of just where the original and unreflected moment might stand (whether outside or inside, in history or in experience, in action or consciousness). The aesthetic unity of the symbol realized in the meta-narrative sufficiently accounts for itself. Self criticism brings itself to completion, or stops all drifting towards the abyss of non-meaning opened up by narratives about narrative. Melville's *Pierre*, on the other hand, is at once an earlier and weaker version of this aesthetic sublation, a much more awkward work of art but nevertheless an exemplary form of modernism in its anguished self-reference and self-questioning. This self-questioning is the sign of "critical humanism," or at least the sceptical stage of it, the other position being reflected in the extravagant optimism of Emerson's organic theory of language. Feidelson, in sum, passes through the uncanny moment of any self-reflexive text—in *Pierre* thematized as the impossibility of resolution and hence as sui-cide that culminates any mad pursuit of self-identity—to accept the triumph of the "modern" in the aesthetic detachment dramatized at the meta-level. Calling our attention to the form of the novel itself rather than the pathos of its characters, caused by Pierre's inability to reconcile action and reflection, the work itself achieves a unity it cannot allot its individual characters, or to the individual of democracy in general, particularly the democratic writer condemned to be a representative man.

Now, recent readings of both Gide and Melville have turned this narrative of self-reflexive closure into another story. This newer criticism goes by the name of postmodernism, and sometimes, deconstruction, and in its thrust constitutes a massive attack on nostalgic formalism, theories of closure, and totalized criticism. There is no time or point here to rehearse those readings, nor to defend their strategies, except to claim that what goes under the name of post-structural criticism appears itself in the disturbing forms of that modern literature it would take as model.<sup>14</sup> Or in other words, by taking modern self-reflexive literature as a model, the New Criticism produced an effect similar to that which Derrida examines when he asks what occurs when "acts or performances" become a part of that which they designate. Recent criticism has only to recite the anomaly of the case as it works within the double language of the self-reflexive discourse, no matter what the form, poetic or narrative. It concludes that self-reflexivity, far from being the figure which might account for the unity of the text, is itself the figurative place where "constitutive

inequality" must be located. In brief, it has only to accentuate the "critical" force of the text, whether one wants to (mis-)name it post-modern or modern. I will therefore turn to some examples, keeping always in mind Derrida's Heisenbergian (or Godelian?) warning of the inseparability of the act of analysis and what is analyzed. Like Wallace Stevens's "Connoisseur of Chaos," which begins with a contradictory formulation and then offers "Pages of Illustrations," illustration does not define but becomes a part of the critical act itself, that "act of the mind" which elsewhere serves for Stevens as the figure of "modern."

#### IV

Modernism simply cannot conceive of itself, or be defined in opposition to its other, either tradition or the postmodern. It is the very name of an anomaly, and of what links theory and practice in a double discourse. Charles Olson is by his own proclamation a postmodern, in revolt against the "high modernism" of Eliot and Pound. In his criticism as in his poetry, he defines the second "boundary" of a still newer or post-Imagist, post-Objectivist poetry, which he calls "projective" (one might hear, at this point, in the *pro* a sign of a recurrent American project, as in the Emersonian "Prospects" that ends *Nature* and the rejection of "retrospective" thought which opens it). I have elsewhere had occasion to examine the problematics of Olson's self defined "field theory" as it amends Pound's and Williams'; so I will only repeat here Olson's charge, itself repeated in deconstructive criticism, that it is necessary to ventilate a stagnated modernist tradition, which is humanist and logocentric, by exposing its reactionary presuppositions. Thus, Olson's inaugural gesture is to reject the immediate past and to repeat, albeit with a difference, the modernist gesture.

Olson calls the western tradition "Mediterranean," and finds that it oscillates between the values of a mimetic (objective) and an expressive (subjective) literature without recognizing the impasse of either. In contrast, what he names "projective" (also Objectist) poetics defines literature as "action," manifest in a deliberately non-representational practice that would expose the powerful dissimulative and repressive techniques of a classical humanist tradition. Like Heidegger and Derrida, Olson calls the logocentric tradition totalitarian and ideological, and he finds its representational operations lurking everywhere, even in the attempts of Pound and Williams to "make it new." Like Pound, he argues that literature must return to "history," but this cannot be a simple turn,

since history is not the history of a becoming or a *telos*, nor a reflection on and representation of events, but is the event of a culture organizing itself as "space," or organizing "space." He would ultimately define poetry as "Document," meaning that poetry is an assimilation and articulation of the "fragments" or records, the "signs," by which any culture realized its structural coherence, particularly its systems of communication and exchange, and thus became a "culture." In this sense, a culture begins (though it always begins a "second" time) with its invention of writing, with its marking out of differences and its production of value through exchange. A poetics of "Document" is irreducibly historical, but not metaphysical,

Beginning, as beginning again, always occurs in the space between two cultures, or a place of crossing, the borders between cultures: for example, ports of call or agoras of exchange. The heroes of a culture would be those who effected these transitional exchanges, who in "going back" to "come forward," as he put it, would not simply import old values into a new scene but would enact a transvaluation of values. These are the figures who invent the means of communication and the modalities of distributing knowledge to others. They function as performatives, not bearers of a fixed cognitive value. In a sense, every culture's history was a repetition, not of the substance or even pattern of the past, but of its struggle to define itself. The invention of writing was the first mark of difference, and of disjunction, but also of the possibility of communication and exchange, measurement and transformation. In the repetitions and discontinuities of history, every culture is initiated by marks or signs that, whatever their resemblance to the marks and signs of other or previous cultures, mean differently from what they might in another context. Compare, but also contrast, he would say, Mayan glyphs with Egyptian hieroglyphs, but do not assume they are the return of the same, a kind of arche-writing. Though the religious space of both may be signified by pyramidal structures, their practices are not necessarily identical. What remains in the artifacts, the styles, of a culture is the evidence of a will to order, and this is grounded in communication and exchange of signs. But meaning-value does not reside in the signs (cargo) themselves; on the contrary, value is altered and produced in their "use." Similarly, relations between present and past cultures could exist only in this transformational repetition. History does not advance, but one still must think of some point of transition between early and late. What is needed is a new model or language of transformation like that Riemann provided for mathematics in the nineteenth century in order to account for the relations between two otherwise discontinuous planes, what Riemann called "multiplicities."

Poetry, for Olson, would enact something like this new mathematic, or even a new geo-metrics, in which old signs are carried over into new uses. The poem must think this point of transformation and exchange in both temporal and spatial terms. One reflects on the past not to appropriate its fixed values, but to understand the laws of its dynamic, its capacity to produce and distribute variety. Decoding and translating a lost language would not so much retrieve the meanings of the culture as reveal the laws of exchange: just as signs carried over from one culture to another change value in the new culture, like or similar signifiers (cognates) transported across space and time produce or instigate meanings not immanent in the sign. Cultures always have some medium of exchange, but neither signified nor signifier is continuous or stable.

If poetry is a kind of linguistic document, a mapping of transactions, its project is revisionary and not representational. Now, I have indulged myself here in a kind of transaction between Olson's terms and those of deconstruction, but have not radically distorted his formulations of a counterpoetics. For Olson, a poem is a transaction between people or, as he says, between two differences separated yet related by that permeable but differentiating surface of the skin. Olson does not think of the self as a subjectivity, an inside, connected to the outside or the other by a net work of receptors and transformers (nerve ends) translating sensation into proper concepts. The skin is dividing yet interrelating surface, a medium where senses in both senses is exchanged, transformed—a point in the communicative transaction which is much like Deleuze's *topos* of constitutive inequality." The skin is not properly between, a demarcation, yet in a strange way it is the indefinable and equivocal place of all crossing, the place of language."

Language is thus the "medium" of exchange and ground of culture, a ground that is not a ground but an *abgrund*. Like the post-structuralists, Olson finds language inextricable from writing or the graphic, and despite the repeated celebrations of voice in his criticism, voice names the temporality of measure or line, hence spacing and/or a certain figural modality. Voice for Olson is producible like a voice imprint or musical score. Writing, then, is not for Olson phonetic, any more than the glyph is a natural representation. A glyph is a mark or sign of a transaction; it is a heterogeneity of signs. Like Derrida's (non) concepts of the *mark* and *trait*, or Lyotard's and de Man's stress on a figurality that will not be reduced to

meaning, Olson's glyph at once signifies and withholds signification; it can be perceived but not fully appropriated as meaning. It provokes one to read, to interpret, to act, like the sign. of Charles Sanders Peirce which is defined by its interpretant, but never completed or closed.<sup>15</sup> A glyph is the spatial inscription of an action, just as an act was necessary for it to be cut literally into stone. As in Stevens' supreme fiction, it is both abstract and changing. Strangely, uncannily, the signifying mark signifies nothing, yet is the *abgrund* of signification. The measure or mediating mark becomes the decentered center of a productive activity :

I figure this swims up, now, this business of noun as graphic 1st, allowing for narration afterwards, the double function, man makes noun then makes verb, because, such activity, such transposition, is, at root, I figure, as process, to what constitutes glyphs.<sup>16</sup>

For Olson, the glyph is a metonym for poem, a means of communication and not a closed work reflecting (upon) itself. And it is not, we need to add, as radically different from Pound's Image or Ideographic radical as Olson thought. It is a spatial configuration, a "mappemund," he calls it, both a formula and formulation of the transactional. It communicates, then, not by bearing a message from sender to receiver or past to present, but as a provocation to the reader-receiver; that is, it provokes an interpretative performance, like that which Lyotard names "agonistics." A poem composes a "field" but an "open field," and may function like a musical text to direct but not quite determine a performance. Thus, every poem is a kind of communicative unit Olson calls a "letter," which like Derrida's post-card bears its message on two disjunct sides, in a double figurality of image and script, each in turn doubled within itself. Olson's glyph-poem organizes space and illustrates, yet does not depict or represent. It cannot be reduced to theme, for its play of marks disrupts rather than orders a grammar. It is a language game indicating that the place of "constitutive inequality" is language itself, and this is why he says the noun as "graphic 1st" precedes narrative, It motivates narrative, the story we tell of it, which is also the story of its change of value.

The poem as communication unit is, therefore, not a message but a prop and prompt, a performative. It is impromptu. One might call these "interpretations" if we suspend the notion of interpretation as decodage. For while Olson sought to break the Mayan code, what he really wanted was to find the secret of codification itself. And he seemed to know that it depended on decodification, a critical breaking that would throw the question forward rather than leave one gazing nostalgically upon

some long buried and concealed sign of some lost and dead truth. Take the following passage, a "letter" or fragment of correspondence with Robert Creeley which appears in a form no different from Olson's usual line. It is not a letter prompting a response, nor does it necessarily bear a message upon which one can mount a theory. It is a "record" of a break in thinking, and thus of that very disjunction it names as language :

CONJUNCTION & DISPLACEMENT, the sense of, C & D, D & C,  
etc. etc. Is verse.

Is quite another thing than time,

Is buildings, Is

des ign.

Is—for our trade—

THE DISJUNCT, language

in order to occupy space, *be* object (it being so hugely as intervals TIME) has to be thrown around, re assembled, in order that it speak, the man whose interstices it is the re-make of

((Is the other side : of Kukulkan  
perhaps ? :

## VIOLENCE

Kukulkan is the name of a Mayan god who engendered maize, but who, like the Egyptian Thoth, is most celebrated for inventing language; or more precisely, he was a "WRITER" and thus the deity of "language and astronomy" or the culture's measuring systems. Whether or not one sees in the "The K," a poem Olson wrote in the name of Kukulkan, the very mark or figure of chiasmus, a differential Mayan notion of "crossing" as violent disjunction, that is what "K's" invention signifies and why he and his culture stand for Olson in opposition to Humanism. The role of this figure is not to compose a center, but to be the one who legislates at some crossing point where invention is "made available to *others*," a point at which there is both Conjunction and Displacement, as between Riemann's "multiplicities" or discontinuous surfaces.

"The Kingfishers" another poem inscribing the "K" in its title, is one of Olson's earlier experiments in articulating this notion of deflected crossing, a displacement, as it were, of the Oedipal crossing out of which was composed the dream of western history as "family romance." Despite his debt to Pound, and the fact that his own notion of "glyph" owes considerably to Pound's sense of the Image as "Interpretive metaphor," Olson thought Poundian theory and practice to be the modernist culmination of western Humanism. Modernism was a Humanism, he seemed to

conclude with Feidelson, though he viewed its significance differently. Pound's Orientalism seemed designed to close the historical circle by reinstating in western language what it had momentarily forgotten, its scriptive force, but it excluded what stood outside the circle of historicism or, quite simply, outside the circle itself. Thus Olson's desire to "go back" in order to "come forward" evidences once more a postmodern and *avant-garde* attack upon Man or the "subject." We will have to see, on the one hand, whether Olson's is not a move necessary to his redefining the sense of the modern itself, and, on the other, whether Pound does not manifest in theory and practice a certain postmodernism to which Olson is necessarily blind.

Are modernism and postmodernism separate and distinct, or merely useful distinctions? Can they be defined in terms of Humanism and, what should one say, the Humanitarian or post-Humanistic? Lyotard, we might recall, named postmodern that activity which was necessary for the "advent" of the modern: "Postmodernisms . . . is not modernism at its end but in its nascent state, and this state is constant"; "The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, put forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the attainable." the postmodern signifies "desire" and is manifest in what Lyotard calls the figurality of art, or that which cannot be reduced to conceptuality and therefore to discursive practices. Strangely enough, while he finds postmodernism most forcefully manifest in art and its "critical function," Lyotard says that this critical function characterizes the work of philosophy: A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of *what will have been done*." Rather than anarchical, he says, the postmodern discordance is a language game which produces the agenda of the new. But because it tends to disturb old categories of understanding (representations) by marking off their purely arbitrary operations, that is by deconstructing them, it appears nihilistic and adversarial, and certainly dehumanizing, if not altogether chaotic.

Lyotard cites Joyce as an example of a modernist experiment which "alludes to something which does not allow itself to be made present,"

thus allowing the "unpresentable to become perceptible" in writing itself. Style asserts its own operations, in excess of any signification, meaning, or theme it might eventually be reduced to. Figure is that which resists our reading the work in terms of old expectancies, as if it were governed by the old rules and categories. But in its reading and exposure of the old conventions, it is fashioning at the same time the possibilities for new representations; not, however, representations or, as Lyotard calls them, "phantasms" of our desire, but displacements of our desire, figures which resist cathexis or our submission to the illusion they are "realities" which satisfy our desire. Art produces figurations which free us, and the artist, from the illusion that they are representations, as dreams, of our subjective identities, hence "realities." They dispossess us of the illusion of humanist depth, and indicate what is beyond either presentation or representation. Hence, he says, "modernism is an aesthetics of the sublime," a limit marked by the postmodern.

Can this be "read" in a poem like Olson's "The Kingfishers"? A piece of moderate length, it opens with what is evidently a translation of fragment 23 of Heraclitus, as if filtered through Nietzsche: "What does not change/is the will to change." (The slash, note, does not designate a line end but is a part of the line.) The sense of change changes, Olson's says, even though the old word remains. How are we to read Heraclitus today, in an age of information theory, without changing him, translating him? That is, submitting to the imperatives of his utterance? Is it possible, as Heidegger thought, to "destructure" ontotheological metaphysics so as to grasp once again the "thinking" of the pre-Socratics, or is our reading a transcribing, as if through a cybernetic machine, of all the "basic words" of and for Being? "The Kingfishers" seems to suggest that we do both at the same time, that a poem is always a kind of "double function" described in Olson's letter quoted above. At the poem's conclusion, the poet announces his own effort as archeological rather than philological, an effort to peel away the layers of conceptual thought in order to arrive at something firm ("I hunt among stones") that is not Eliot's church or ontotheological institution, not *logos* but nevertheless is language, glyph. Yet, archeological reappropriation, which restores the sign as fragment, does not recover a primal sense or scene.

Indeed, the third and concluding section of the poem is an elaborate set of allusions to Eliot's and Pound's logocentric modernism, emphasizing the way Eliot's co-operation of fragments from both pre-history and history, or myth and literature, so as to verify some informing archetype,

produces the same paralysis with which he indicts the modern in, say, "The Love Song of J, Alfred Prufrock." Where Eliot conjoins the Fisher King and Shakespeare, as in *The Waste Land*, he arraigns them both within a "white mythology" (Derrida). Rimbaud, in contrast, by abandoning poetry for action (performance) signifies the resistance in his own writing to the old economic rules. Rimbaud's poetry and his *agon* are not, like Eliot's nostalgic. But the major allusion, actually a near quotation, in the last stanza is to/from Pound's first Pisan Canto, number LXXIV :

I pose you your question  
shall you uncover honey/where maggots are ?

The reference is to Pound's figure to the rotting bodies of "Ben and la Clara" suspended "by the heels at Milano," out of which Pound had drawn some minimal hope that history would survive its heroes because their action, in bringing it to crisis, had in some way engendered a productive activity even if it could not determine efficient ends. Pound had set his own hope for "process" against Eliot's paralyzing nostalgia : "say this to Possum : a bang, not a whimper—" But Olson's question reads Pound's effort to survive his prison-house of western history as a reaffirmation of the old humanism, a faith in a process that works through man the adventure, recalling Carlyle's and Emerson's heroes. "The Kingfishers" as a whole parodies the Poundian attempt to contain all of western history in the memory bank of one individual hero, or one canon of texts, one ideology, reassembled in a poem that is both recollection and anthology, process and icon.

But the concluding lines of the poem, like the opening one inscribes something else. While Pound's historicism is rejected, his own permanent and indelible contribution to poetry is acknowledged in the silent mark or slash, like the one Pound had inserted in Canto LXXIV: "That maggots shd/eat the dead bullock." As Guy Davenport has noted, Olson literally brackets his own poem with a graphism that Pound had restored to the phonetic tradition of western verse in the form of Imagist and Ideogrammic writing. It is as if Pound were acknowledging the return of the repressed of that heterogeneity which the western tradition tried to exclude in its privileging of phonetic writing, even if for Pound this meant recovering a natural language (nature being a system of differential forces). Pound's mark is reinscribed in the first line to separate Heraclitus from the Socratics, and in the last line to bracket a western literary tradition which culminates in "high modernism." It is precisely upon these of rupture and transition that Olson locates the "turn" of his own new poetics, the

advent of postmodernism which will "trope" the tradition. Reinscription, by quotation, allusion, citation—thus Olson "repeats" the modernist strategy of reappropriation, by revealing the performative power of such language games. As Emerson suggested, quotation and allusion become original and originary acts.

"The Kingfishers" opens in what Harold Bloom would call a Scene of Instruction, evoking of conversation at Black Mountain. It is not however, the historical or autobiographical reference which is important, but the marking of a performative activity of social exchange, set against Pound's poetic scene of isolation. Moreover, the poet's memory is not narrativized or grammatical, but, both relaxed and animated by alcohol, he is able to make sense of the previous night's drunken conversations by a different and yet unformulated set of rules, a new kind of rhyming: Olson might have thought of it as paratactic rather than hypotactic, metonymic rather than metaphoric. But it is best understood as a dialogic discordance, and undoing of the notion of a continuous or seamless history of meanings. Rambling association "rhymes," and underscores the accident of rhyme, so that the rhyme which finds similarities in differences is revealed to be the illusory ground of western (humanist) value. Undoubtedly, there had been talk of ancient cultures, and probably of what modern anthropology had done in making them understandable. The poet recalls some talk of a culture where "kingfishers" were at once real and sacred birds, and their feathers valued as a medium of exchange, as against those mythic cultures uncovered by Frazer or interpreted by Frazer as pre-historical analogues of modern Judeo-Christian cultures. Eliot's appropriation of this model, through Frazer, is just one more example of the western totalitarianism, which reduces everything to a representation of its own cyclic myths. Olson's poem wants to break this hermeneutic circle.

The poet's memory is not recollection in tranquillity. He recalls fragment as "factors" (the term comes from cybernetics, and may suggest, like Pound's "luminous detail," active fact or "interpretative" signs) whose common denominator is that they are signs or marks the meaning of which is neither self-evident or stable, though they are necessary for meaning to occur. Where they are inscribed, or reinscribed, they function to produce a significance that is not immanent to them or legislated by any context they may have formerly inhabited. For example, he recalls in association with the "feathers" of the kingfishers, the "E on the stone" at Delphi, and a speech made by Mao (in French) at a Communist Rally in 1948, each in its way signifying a scene of transition and translation, exchange.

Mao is like the oracle of a new culture, though he speaks here the language of the West. The "E" at Delphi was the legendary mark of the place of prophecy, whose meaning for modern culture has been translated according to the authority western culture allotted to Petrarch's writing (that is, the philological or learned tradition), though modern scholars had come to challenge the Petrarchean interpretation. (One, in fact, had speculated that it was nothing more than the sign for "Gas," since that is what that mysterious voice oozing from the earth at Delphi was, an undifferentiated noise of compressed air demanding the oracle's translation.<sup>18</sup>) The point is that all these signs are "factors" which do not contain a stable meaning but function tropically to provoke readings, or when reinscribed in later contexts, function performatively. They are tropes of change, and wherever reinscribed they in turn produce change and exchange. They are interpretations that return like feedback in a cybernetic machine, as part of its necessary noise or entropy, to make possible new information, though "information" now deprived of the cognitive authority of logocentrism. (This reading is verified in section 4 of Part I, which deals explicitly with information theory, and makes direct allusion not only to Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics and Society* but also indirectly recalls Riemannian mathematics.)

Just as the "E" at Delphi is a sign which cannot be understood in terms of Petrarch's learned interpretation of it, as the Omphalos, since that reading only transforms it into an archetypal model for western thought, its assumption of a "world navel" or central "word" in which all thought is grounded, Frazer's and Eliot's reading of the Fisher King silently tries confirm what they already know. Even the scientific description of the bird (Olson takes it from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*) can do no more than confirm a certain taxonomical explanation and thus repeat the humanist tradition of ruling by understanding, that is, logocentrism. And this is what the poem is about - a remarking of the limits of all systematics, of hermeneutic recuperation, even as it indicates that nothing lives outside system and that no system is exclusive. The law of tropology (of entropy), however, can only be formulated within an economics of limit, a statistics of calculated loss. What Olson wants to track, to map, is the apparently violent moment of displacement necessary to move from one system to another, as in Riemann's "multiplicities," or from one mode of thought to another :

When the attentions change/the jungle  
 leaps in  
                   even the stones are split  
   they rive

Or,  
enter  
that other conqueror we more naturally recognize  
he so resembles ourselves

But the E  
cut so rudely on that oldest stone  
sounded otherwise,  
was differently heard

It is the use and abuse (the usury) of "factors" that Olson wants to highlight, especially the deadly habit of reducing everything to a singular interpretation, which Olson associates with the "conqueror" or the humanist.<sup>19</sup>

In section 3 of Part I, Olson inserts a series of quotations from Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, putative details or objective observations describing a nativist ceremony which the historian had disinterestedly recorded as evidence of a superstitious and hence inferior culture, but which in Olson's arrangement turn out to be the signs of a sophisticated kind of grounding, since all grounding must factor death as a non-representational sign into the system. Ruoting Prescott, Olson extracts the details from the context of a narratized history and reinscribes them as "factors" or as that which resists the narrative modality of the historian. At the beginning of Part II, he returns to Prescott's texts, in order to emphasize the difference between poetic and narrative discourse, between "documentary" and totalitarian interpretation. Prescott's reading of "history," he suggests, has in its way repeated the story of conquest it tells, by featuring the conquistador Cortez as an instrument of western enlightenment: the same Cortez who, as Williams had argued in *In the American Grain*, destroyed by expropriation and by imposing alien religious practices on a culture whose forms were otherwise grounded. In contrast, Olson recalls another conquistador, Cabeza de Vaca, who came to conquer but remained to be assimilated like a "factor" recycled or fed back into a living history.<sup>20</sup> De Vaca plays for Olson the same role as Pere Sebastian Rasles for Williams; he becomes a metonymic figure for re-writing America's history. That is, history cannot simply be re-written from an opposite point of view until one has exposed the totalitarian mechanisms of historicism, thus writing against the grain, diverting the old narrative

and its conventions. Cabeza's inscriptions in the American ground makes it necessary to write a new history of its history, which is as different from Europe's as Heisenberg's physics is from Newton's. In sum, Olson's quotations function to deconstruct Prescott's historicism.

## V

Olson's poem, then, does more than thematically refute "high modernism" and humanism. His poem critically intervenes by bracketing and highlighting the operations of the modernist text, by presenting its modes of presentation as something not modern at all, unless the whole history of the West is modern. In Olson's view this has the effect of "opening" the text, so that the question becomes, how does one keep it open: how to resist the same blind collapse back into formalism that modernism seemed to make just as it announced its break with the past? For despite Olson's argument with Pound, it is possible to read in the older poet's attempts to *write in new* those same postmodern gestures Olson found it necessary to invent in order to pass beyond modernism. We could point to the early criticism, or more specifically to his lifelong revisions of Eliot's notion of tradition, because Pound's critical practice, like Olson's, reduplicates the poetic performance in the very sense that it inscribes what in early essays he called "luminous detail" and "interpretative metaphor," or a kind of figural economy of writing that served to dismantle the very tradition it claimed to reappropriate.<sup>21</sup> But it is in his advance beyond Imagist practice, in the strategy or performative force of quotation, that is, within his own manner of orcheo-semeo-logical assembly, that we can witness the critical or "interpretative" thrust of Pound's invention, that form of phono-logopoeia, to combine two of his terms, which serves not to recover some lost word but to release the potential of the fragment. What Roland Barthes called "semioclasm" is not unrelated to Pound's notion of interpretative writing, his turning of tradition.

We might recall Canto I, which as is well known re-writes or translates a section of the *Odyssey* (from Book 11) in an "Amurikun" idiom filtered through Anglo-Saxon conventions. More importantly, the Canto is a translation of a Latin translation, published in Renaissance Paris (1538), and includes in itself a citation of its own itinerary—the itinerary of a translation, a graphic history of its own voyage, a "periplum," as Pound would call it, of literary metamorphosis that cannot be thought on the order of eternal repetition or genealogical history. Though Pound often argued that all great poetry was contemporaneous, this did not mean universal in the idealist sense, but that every great and enduring work

would reveal at once its way of being different, of opening up the possibilities of the "new." Thus, a beginning *in medias res*, by translating text which itself thematizes transformation, indicates that all poems (as voyages, games, re-turns) have always already begun. Translation does not recover meaning but transports it, metamorphosizes in the sense altering its structure, and transposes it in the sense of producing a new place or *topos* for the trope.

The Odyssean theme of return, to bury the forgotten Elpenor, after a visit to the underworld, is, of course, a kind of literary paradigm of literature, as Pound underscores throughout the unfolding *Cantos*, and not simply an epic convention repeated in the *Aeneid* or *Divine Comedy*, among others. That is, the theme is not simply an archetype, governing repetition of the same, but a model of repetition with a difference, of beginning again. Every return refactors or feeds back into the form certain elements which in turn are projected into a different form, necessitating another journey (not necessarily quest romances), just as Virgil's and Dante's versions mark transitional passages between cultures and in a sense are revisions rather than replicas of the genre. To cite these works, is to cite not only the theme of going back to come forward, but to emphasize the supplementary effects of this repetition. Each retelling advances the voyage, or adds by a kind of accident, that which was not inscribed in the destiny of the original. Original "force" is already belated, and belongs to feedback. Pound does not stress an entropic history of language and culture, like Eliot's decline of the West through falling Towers, from the purity of classical Greek through Latin to the modern (though Pound does find an exhaustion or softening in Latinity). On the contrary, he celebrates those points where the vulgate or idiomatic feeds back into the learned and formal to reinvigorate a stagnating system, the onto-theological orthodoxy. Homer and Ovid and Dante and Chaucer and Whitman are respectively modern writers who supervise the ideomatic reinsemination of literature; they are metonyms of interpretive translation itself, since what they name is the discordance of invention or the double writing evident in every "new" or inventive text. A "new" genre is nothing more than an anthology of earlier genre, a heterogenous collection of old rules or factors.

Therefore, when Pound transcribes the story of Elpenor, he marks the originary moment of art as language or figure, as that which bears old meanings and forms on its back and points forward to new uses, transcribing paleonymic words into new functions. The "And" which inaugurates

the poem translates the place of origin as a margin, "Conjunction and Displacement," to recall Olson. In Canto II, the poem leaps forward from Homer, and the Homeric Hymns (not authored by Homer but which Pound discovered to be arbitrarily appended to the Latin text he had bought in Paris, and out of which he took the Elpenor section) to Browning's poetic retelling of the history of a minor Italian poet-figure, a name who also appears in Dante's underworld as someone the poet consulted in his own version of the "eternal return." The reference to Sordello carries back to Homer and her who preceded and motivated Odysseus' voyage, Helen, and comes forward through Aeschylus' inscription of Helen's name in a pun for "destruction" (could we say, deconstruction?). Quoting Aeschylus, Pound in his turn inscribes the historical and Anglicized name of Eleanor of Aquitaine into the game, thus rhyming myth and history in a curious plot or transaction that disturbs our distinction between the two. Thus "*helandros, helenaus, and heleptolis*" (to transcribe the Greek of Aeschylus into phonetic equivalences) bears the very force of displacement it ascribes to the proper name. If the historical Eleanor was in fact a "destroyer" of cities, men, and ships, as Aeschylus played upon the character inscribed in Helen's name, she was also the seminal force behind a history which included not only a promotion of the arts (she was both a matron and patron of Provençal poetry) and a crucial factor of history (a mother of a line of English kings). She not only completes the odyssey of history from Greece to Rome to France to England, but also from classical to medieval to Renaissance, from epic to tragic to comic to that modern verge to be fulfilled in Shakespeare's invention of the history play out of the generic fragments that were to be the Renaissance's inheritance. Pound's Eleanor, therefore, functions like Nietzsche's woman, in Derrida's reading, as a spurring or disseminating figure, as the heterogeneous force of "styles"<sup>22</sup> She is the metonym of genesis, of figuration, of the performative force of quotation—of appropriation itself. Unlike the hermaphroditic Tiresias of Eliot she is not a passive voyeur but an active, destructive-creative force. Like Helen in H. D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, "she is the writing" We should recall here also that Helen is inscribed in Canto I not only as the motivating force of the Odyssey, but also as the marginal figure of the Latin text which compels Pound's own translation; for Divus' learned displacement of the Greek has been produced in Paris, as part of the Gutenberg galaxy, and was itself a kind of anthology. Canto I cites the place of production as a kind of transposition, and at the same time notes that the Renaissance text had as appendix certain so-called hymns in praise of Helen's beauty, that sensuous figurality that compels all writing. And so *The Cantos* is

launched on what Stevens called a "sea of ex," or metaphoric of displacement.

In Canto III, Pound makes a transition which leads to reflections on "Myo Cid," that is, to the question of the status of a belated epic like *El Cid*, pointing up not only the problematic relation between epic and history, literature and reality, as Bakhtin would later note, but making it evident that no genre remains in itself stable and canonical. Just as "the" Cid becomes "My" Cid, the Sordello of Canto II had become "my Sordello," a factor reappropriated from both history and literature, via the underground allegory of Dante and the "modern" psychologism of Browning, to become once more the object of interpretation and the name of interpretative force. Canto VII repeats this history of displacements, by and of the letter, in terms of the "Si pulvis nullus/Erit, nullum tamen excute" of Ovid (whose metamorphic deconstruction of the epic and dramatic had dominated the larger part of Canto II), and the "e li mestiers ecoutes" of Bertrand de Born. Both Ovidian and Provençal writing are celebrated for their uncovering, not of some past and forgotten meaning, but of the power of writing to move or transform or bring to light: for their displacement of tradition, their tradition of displacement. Thus every "new" writer invents by unlayering, or touching again the living, fertile body,—of figurality itself. Canto VII, therefore, provides an index of metonyms for this dis-figuration and displacement of styles. Homer, Ovid, Bertrand, Dante, Flubert, and Henry James are arraigned not as a history of texts but as an intertextual adventure, each turning or troping the other, like Dante confronting Sordello or Pound the "voice" of James weaving an "endless sentence" *The Cantos* is a condensed anthology, a *periplus* of misprison; an allegory of reading.

Are we ready now to say just where Pound has marked, or re-marked, the false genetic moment of his song, the transitional or transactional, that is, the translative, moment he had as early as *The Spirit of Romance* named "interpretative translation"? It would not be a moment at all—or, to put it otherwise, it would be originary and not original, like Emerson's "quotation." It is there, already inscribed, in the menonyms which allow him to move easily from myth to history, or from Dante's Sordello to "My Sordello"; from the inhumed Elpenor of Homer to the Helen whose name and mythic role, whose legend, had endangered the epic recounting of a "history" and adventure in which Elpenor is a more turning point or from mythic Helen to the historical Eleanor. That is, everything turns upon the "constitutive equivocality" of the phoneme or morpheme "el," which

functions like Olson's "factor" feeding back into Pound's repeated beginnings and leaps, his conjunctions and displacements. *Elpenor*, *Helen*, *Eleanor*, *Sordello*, *Myo (El) Cid*, even the *Possum*, *Eliot*, indirectly invoked in Canto VIII and directly misquoted in Canto LXXIV. The "el" which can variously recall the force of the ancient Hebrew deity, the pluralized god *Elohim*, or as Canto VII reminds us, the reappearance of the *Elysian* field on a Parisian bus, a "date for peg" as Pound calls such fragments. Can the *Elusian* mysteries be irrelevant to *The Cantos*, not as source or reference but only as another name for language? Is the "el" not a morphemic signature of the "constitutive equivocality" of a writing that has always already begun, the postmodern mark of an origin which like Derrida's "difference" can bear no proper name and is older than Being? Or as Wallace Stevens would say: "The the"? Certainly, Pound's translations of these notes from underground are without reference, and they produce an infinite possibility of text which he would finally call a "palimpsest."

But one cannot possibly go on reading these diverging yet crossing lines, except to remark them in another language. Pound's poem reminds us again of Derrida's admonition to the translator, that there are always "two languages in language" and that living on" in language always requires a passage through the unrepresentable place of "death." The task of the poet-translator and that of deconstruction predicates such an unmappable itinerary. Why do I hear at this moment the Valeryean exclamation, "tel quel," "just as it is," or just as it was appropriated for the name of the poststructural revolution? And within that echo, another, "Qual Quelle," Derrida's title for his essay on Valery's "sources" *Qual Quelle*, is it a reference to or quotation from *Hegel*, out of *Boehme*? It is certainly *Hegel's* translation of *Boehme*, the *Hegelian* formulation that negativity does not issue from a falling away from origin but strangely enough constitutes the source. Negativity is consciousness, is origin, a source produced in the moment it is cut off from being and is reappropriated, as it were, on the rebound. Derrida's word for this strange constitutive source, which is not an origin, is *relever*, which indicates constitution by de-constitution, by negation and sublation, restoring by raising up again a "source" that is originally discontinuous, heterogeneous, and marked by alterity, a source (*Quelle*) already marked by torment or pain (*Qual*), originarily negated like a Deity who is the Devil or a poem speaking from *Hell*. It is no wonder that Pound, who began his poem by quoting *Homer*, concludes it by nominating its author as a "Disney against the metaphysicals," a parodist of the imagination.

## Notes and References

1. In his lectures on Nietzsche's aesthetics Heidegger explores the manner in which Nietzsche transvalues such notions as the "classical", along with other "basic" concept "*Basic words are historical,*" he argues and are modified from discipline and according to the force of each inquiry. Therefore, common concepts do not remain the same or stable from time to time or culture. See *The Will to Power as Art*, Vol. One of *Nietzsche*, trans. by David Krell (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1979), p. 144. Derrida has extended and radicalized the historicity of "basic word" in his own deconstruction of metaphysics, a "strategy" which he variously calls paleonymic or 'anase-mic" (a borrowed from Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok which designates the movement of a word both away from and toward meaning, a "theory of errata" in Derrida's terms), opening up a play of significations of the kind we find working through Derridean non-concepts like *dissennation*. Certainly, "modernism" is one of those "basic words" which today means differently in different areas of inquiry, say, in politics, aesthetics, historicism. One further point, Derrida would argue that this "change" of "sense" is not simply the choice of a writer, subject, or user of the term, but that reinscription and recontextualization belong to language, and is perhaps its "law," though a law that it cannot formulate. In one sense, modernism, if not postmodernism, is a name, though not a proper name, for such "changes."
2. For historians, and even literary critics in general, modernism may mean the whole field of cultural formations named the "Renaissance and after," just as Cartesianism open modern thought and philosophy. Thus modernism has always in one way or another been identified with self-consciousness, dualism, and even technology. In regard to literature, modernism in France, say, would certainly precede Anglo-American modernism by a half-century or more. And I would further note, for example, the difference today when "modernism" is discussed in the context of aesthetics or even literary history, especially in terms of the philosophical problematics uncovered by Paul de Man (see the essays in *Blindness and Insight*) or in the context of politico-critical discourse, as in the explorations of a "political unconscious" carried out by Frederic

Jameson in his studies of writer/thinkers like Wyndham Lewis, or in his explorations of the complicity between modern (and even postmodern) art and architecture and post-Industrial capitalism.

3. Heidegger, especially after his famous turn (*Kehre*), in exploring the intricate difference between and interrelations of *Dichtung* and *Warheit* (poetry and Truth), radically and decisively separated Poetry from Literature, the former being implicated with the movement of Being, the latter designating everything from the material and commercial (that is consummable) text to any "representation" of Being that may deceive us with its "presence" or conceptual authority.
4. See *The Will to Power as Art*, Chaps. 22 through 25, pp. 171-220, for Heidegger's discussion of Kant's Platonism and Nietzsche's overturning of that Platonism, his uncovering of what Heidegger calls the 'Raging Discordance between Art and Truth.'
5. Again, see Heidegger on Nietzsche's inversion and reinscription of Truth within the "discord" of Beauty (*Ibid.*). Although Heidegger persists in finding such "inversions" of metaphysics a return to metaphysics on Nietzsche's part, his own emphasis on "discord" stresses the historical "function" of art in keeping

structures "open" as well as its more reified and idealized, if not Platonized, function in the "unconcealment" of Being. Deconstruction, one might say, exploits and radicalizes the "discord" while pointing up Heidegger's problem in separating from *aletheia*. But it is Nietzsche's emphasis on the inescapable "sensualness" of "life," on the precedence of Beauty to Truth or the supersensual, that Heidegger stresses here, a notion radically extended by de Man, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and even Derrida, in their emphases on the rhetoricity and figurality of literature and art, into a "theory" of art's "critical" or interventionist role. Harold Bloom, whose opposition to "deconstruction" is as vigorous as his renunciation of philosophical criticism in general, would seem closer to Heidegger than his late colleague de Man on this point, though the relation between his privileging of "psyche" and "pneuma" and Heidegger's of "Dasein" would be difficult to establish except by broad analogy.

6. See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minn. Press 1984; first pub. in 1979); as well as *Driftworks*, ed. by Roger McKeon (New York: Semiotexte, 1984) and *Discours, Figure* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971).

In a sense, all of Lyotard's work since *Discours, Figure* may be said to contribute to a "theory" of the postmodern.

7. *Logique du sens* (Paris : Minuet, 1969), esp. the section of an Appendix entitled, "Platon et le simulacre," pp. 292-307.
8. Post-structuralist "theory" in general has been identified with nihilism because of its general attack upon all systematics or methodologies, and not simply for its rejection of metaphysics of presence. Of course, the argument that all post-philosophical "sciences" remained metaphysical, and thus were self-deceived in their claims to pass "beyond" metaphysics, is most obviously identified with "deconstruction," the most unregenerately nihilistic of modern philosophies in the view of even those who profess a "pragmaticist" attitude toward the philosophy of "presence." Derrida has persistently refuted these charges of nihilism, and argued instead that, in the wake of Nietzsche's "nihilism," itself a transvaluation of the negative that haunts metaphysics from Plato to Hegel, deconstruction is "affirmative." But to its critics, any affirmation of "dissemination," whether of heterogeneity or what Bakhtin called "heterology," flirted with chaos. Heidegger's recognition of the "discord" between Beauty and Truth mark-

ed what systematic philosophy had to repress. But deconstruction, far from revelling (as Bakhtin says of the comic or carnivalistic) in increasing rulelessness, or privileging chaos over cosmos, reveals the impossibility of thinking outside the "law" (outside metaphysics) or structure. Instead in accord with such marginal thought as Godel's in mathematics or Heisenberg's in physics, it attempts to find some new "rule" of the "rule," or as Derrida says, some "theory of errata" that will inscribe the "limit" without overcoming it and returning to totalization and the totalitarian. One recalls that in the wake of "cybernetics" and the early developments of "information theory" certain areas of the critical arts tried to develop a theory of "pataphysics" (borrowing Alfred Jarry's term) which could write a theory of "chaosmos" (Joyce's). But there persists the kind of thinking that argue either/or, *either* cosmos or chaos. Thus, when deconstruction begins to question the dream of the social sciences to pass "beyond" metaphysics, the questioning is perceived as a pure scepticism and a dangerously non-serious (or anti-philosophical) mode of thought. Heidegger can point out that any "humanism" must remain metaphysical, or that Nietzsche's inversion of Platonism produces the last metaphysician,

Nietzsche himself. Still, Heidegger's own affirmation of Being seems to redeem him for philosophy, that is, for that which must think "beyond" itself.

9. *La Carte postale de Socrate a Freud et au-dela* (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion: 1980), p. 417 (my trans.). Derrida's entire corpus may be read as a questioning of the example or exemplary, of the relation of part to whole, and thus of representation to some full presence. Thus, the problematics of the literary, image, and figurality, extends to the larger question that philosophy had always posed to itself, how to become self-justifying or self-reflexive and thus to rid itself of the contaminant or limit of self-illustration, that is, of the literary. Derrida finds Gobel's theorem, its questioning of self-reference, an "exemplary" case of a language that, far from suffocating in its own hermetic limits, opens up the possibility of linguistic dissemination.
10. See especially Jameson's recent essay, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 146 (July/Aug. 1984), 53-92, for a neo-Marxist reading of the modernist-postmodernist "economics." Derrida's use of the metaphor of "economy", of the relation of economy and language, of the "law of the oikos (house, room, tomb, crypt)," here in the footnote "Border Lines,"

to the essay "Living On," *Deconstruction & Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom, *et al.* (New York: Seabury, 1979), p. 76, differs sharply from Jameson's and may will be said to mark the difference between two kinds of "pragmatic" reading, or two notions of *praxis*. Derrida exploits the metaphor as it resides in metaphysics from Plato to Hegel and Marx, and as it was appropriated by Heidegger to explore language as the "house of Being." Jameson privileges the metaphor to the degree that he privileges the Marxian critique, thus making both the practice and its object "real."

11. In a provocative essay first published in *The Atlantic* (1967), John Barth called the parodic metafiction of Borges "The literature of Exhaustion," a term that critics chose to exploit for its purely negative connotations. A decade later, he sought to correct this reading in another *Atlantic* piece, "The Literature of Replenishment." These essays are now collected in *The Friday Book* (New York: Putnam, 1984), a text in which Barth stages a scene of reading that virtually dissolves the margins between literature and criticism, or indicates the postmodern imbrication of the one with the other. But for Barth, the postmodern was always already inscribed in the beginning of "story," which always had to include a "story of story" Thus,

the literature of "exhaustion" sought to exploit the performative resources of "telling," of originary repetition, one might say. Though one is tempted to define the postmodern as a kind of ironic self-consciousness or self-referentiality, as against the modernist dream of "self-reflexive transparency," the difference between a Barthian highlighting of technical reflexivity, on the one hand, and something like Stevens' rhetorical ploys in a metapoem such as "Of Modern Poetry" (which calls the poet a "metaphysician" playing his instrument "in the dark," producing the "poem of the act of the mind") is a question of degree and not of kind. Stevens' "accent of deviation" serves to suspend and defer the ideal of crystalline "transparency," of the moment they will get it "straight ...at the Sorbonne," as certainly as Barth's weaving of instructions for reading his texts into the story they tell not only parodies the impurity of genre (like stage directions in the script of a play, which serve different functions if the play is read or performed) but double the story. Cf. the end of the novel, *Letters* (New York: Putnam, 198), pp. 767-69, where, after a lengthy deconstruction of the sub-genre of epistolary fiction, as it in turn had been metamorphosed by the Joycean "scribbled-

hobble," Barth's narrator remarks on its own purloining of "theory." Story, it suggests, is composed of "alphabetic + calendric + serial scansion"; that is, narrative is prolonged by self-interferences or by figural elements which, rather than exhausting it, replenish: "Dramaturgy = the incremental perturbation of an unstable homeostatic system and its catastrophic restoration to a complexified equilibrium." the law of story, of the narrative line, is not circular, but is, as Derrida might say *more meta-phorica*, and like a Moebius strip or an Escher drawing proliferates by repetition. The typewriter extended even as it exploited the revolution of printing, just as the word processor parodies and alters the production of "type," producing, one might say, an *at:pos*.

12. I am referring here to the tendency to define the uniqueness of "American literature" and "American themes" in titular metaphors that in effect disguise, or try to disguise, their metaphoricity: not only such classic titles as F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds*, R. W. B. Lewis' *The American Adam*, Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry*, or Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, but also all those works which attempt to produce an American "cannon" that is at the same time exclusive of the

- English and western "tradition" and a culmination of it, titles which presume to "describe" the "cycle" or the "cavalcade" of a canon that would itself be self-referential and self-reflexive as well as representative of a unique history. In this regard, one, might set Harold Bloom's argument for an American canon which uniquely fulfills the great Romantic tradition of western literature against Matthiessen's quite different version of an American renaissance which derives from another Romanticism, the philosophical poetics of Kant and Coleridge; or against Pearce's privileging of a liberal, democratic individualism which repeats some ideal of Adamism threatened by what Leo Marx called *The Machine in the Garden*. American literary history gives good story.
13. Feidelson, *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1954). See also the influential essay or series of essays by Joseph Frank, entitled "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," which first appeared in *The Sewanee Review* (1945), one of the major journals of the New Criticism, and later collected in Frank's *The Widening Gyre* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1963).
  14. For a reading of the radical self-reflexivity in *Pierre*, see Edgar Dryden, "The Entangled Text: Melville's *Pierre* and the Problem of Reading," *boundary 2*, VII:3 (Spring 1979), 145-73.
  15. See my essay, "Coup de Man, or the Uses and Abuses of Semiotics," *Culture Critique* (forthcoming, 1986) for a commentary on Peirce's notion of "unlimited semiosis." Also, Riddel, "The Hermeneutical Self—Notes toward an 'American' Practice," *boundary 2*, XII:3, XIII:1 (Spring/Fall 1984), 71-98.
  16. A short version of the correspondence between Olson and Creeley, called "Mayan Letters," appears in Olson's *Selected Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1966), as does the poem examined at length here, "The Kingfishers." For an extended version of the correspondence, see *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley, The Complete Correspondence*, ed. by George Butterick, 6 Vols. (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980). For Pound's poetry, see *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1970).
  17. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 79, 81.
  18. For a commentary on this allusion in Olson's poem, see Guy Davenport, "In Gloom on Watch-House Point," *Parnassus*, 4:2 (Spring/Summer 1976), 251-259. Davenport's attribution of Olson's use of the slash to Pound's influence was mentioned earlier in this

- essay. I am claiming here, in effect, that Olson is "quoting" Pound in the process of repeating Pound's strategy of allusion. For commentary on the figure of the oracle of Delphi as a "scene of translation," see my essay, "H. D.'s Scene of Writing—Poetry as (and) Analysis," *American Critics at Work: Examinations of Contemporary Literary Theories*, ed. by Victor Kramer (Troy, N. Y. : Whitson, 1984), pp. 143-75.
19. Here Olson seems to make a kind of Derridean play upon the double sense of "usury" which Pound tended to employ in the more singular, negative sense of "contra naturum" or unnatural speculation, though even Pound's text can be read as including the possibility of excess or dissemination. In any event, Olson recognizes that western metaphysics assumes the possibility of a "restricted economy" or totalized system that can only be maintained by covering up what Pound recognized as the "spermaric economy" or Derrida calls the "general economy" of linguistic value.
  20. For an account of Cabeza de Vaca's incorporation into the "American" scene, Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York : Harper & Row, 1984).
  21. For a critical reading of Pound's own critical discourse, see Kathryn Lindberg, *Reading Pound Reading, Modernism after Nietzsche*, forthcoming from Oxford Univ. Press in late 1986 or early 1987.
  22. See Derrida, *Spurs/Eperons*, trans. by Barbara Harlow (Chicago : Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), a French/English text, subtitled "Nietzsche's Styles" and "Les Styles de Nietzsche."
  23. See Derrida, "Border Lines" or "Journal de bord," footnote to "Leaving On" (Fr title, "Survivre), in *Deconstruction & Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom, *et al.* (New York : Seabury, 1979), pp. 75 ff. The English translation appeared before the French version which may now be found in Derrida's *Parages* (Paris : Galilee, 1986), pp. 117-218.