

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.¹ Strangely, one of its functions is to name that which produces such changes, hence undoes old categories. Modernism names its own anomaly.²

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.³ 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."⁵

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 *techné*, 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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.⁸ 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,⁹

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-position, is implicated in the game (*jeu*). This limitation (of *l'imité*, 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 Gödel'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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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*¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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,

