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# POSTMODERNISM

Where are the primary causes on which I can take my stand, where are my foundations? Where am I to take them from? I practise thinking, and consequently each of my primary causes pulls along another, even more primary, in its wake, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from underground* (1864)

## NAMING THE UNNAMEABLE:WHAT IS POSTMODERNISM?

In 1979, Jean-Francois Lyotard proclaimed that Enlightened modernity was now caught in a 'legitimation crisis' from which it could not recover. By the mid-eighties, *La condition postmoderne* enjoyed hierophantic status as the book which had completed the Nietzschean project of persuading us of the death of the 'grand narratives' of God, metaphysics and science; it was to be celebrated as an Angel of History whose annunciation had ushered in a new anti-heroic era of linguistic skirmishing, little narratives and dissensus. Twenty years on, the discourse which named that crisis seems to have developed its own terminal symptoms. In a rather more Beckettian image, Lyotard has recently declared that postmodernism is now an 'old man's occupation, rummaging in the dustbin of finality to find remains'.<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty (defender of consensus but hardly secret sharer of Lyotard's postmodern anti-foundationalism) has also come to see the term as so elastic as to be useless even for his own neo-pragmatic purposes. He has, he now tells us, 'given up on the attempt to find something common to Michael Graves' buildings, Pynchon's and Rushdie's novels, Ashberry's poems, various sorts of popular music, and the writings of Heidegger and Derrida'.<sup>2</sup> So, has postmodernism become a victim of that very built-in obsolescence which was central to its diagnosis of all intellectual or artistic culture within late capitalism? Or has postmodern writing named our condition so persuasively and ubiquitously that postmodernism has been engineered into the very intellectual DNA of the Western human species? Indeed, a comprehensive overview of a body of writing

which set out to 'blaze a trail amidst the unnamable' would represent the cultural equivalent of an analysis of all the chromosomal data gathered into the human genome project.<sup>3</sup> Is it possible any longer to define postmodernism? Perhaps the task is more accurately described as an attempt to force a rainbow back through the geometrical contours of Newton's prism.

Still, if we accept Fredric Jameson's belief that the value of postmodern expression lies precisely in its attempt to name the unnameable, to find a form in which to represent the seemingly unrepresentable global networks of technologised late capitalist culture, then there is some historical justification in attempting, yet again, to name the unnameable which is postmodernism. However, the ever-proliferating circularity of the condition and the agonistic mood of its theorisation renders the task increasingly difficult. Because postmodernism has always been a constitutive as much as a descriptive term, definitions were bound to be value-laden. Even in its earliest literary phase, the same work of art might be dismissed as a perversion of the genuinely radical energies of an earlier avant-garde, a mere reflection of the depthless surfaces of consumer culture, or it might be celebrated (as in the early writing of Ihab Hassan) as auguring a radically new and global post-Cartesian 'gnostic' consciousness. More moderately, it might simply be seen as making the best of what is available, providing, for example, through its parodic form of repetition with distance, the only form of critique remaining in a world in which there can only be a perspectival seeing.<sup>4</sup>

What is the relationship between postmodernism considered, negatively or positively, as the dominant 'mood' of western late capitalism; or as a legitimation crisis in western epistemologies and political structures; or as a variety of aesthetic or cultural practices; or postmodernism as all those discourses which attempt to theorise late or post-modernity? If postmodernism has taught us that we cannot separate the object of knowledge from the various language games through which it is constructed, then why should we accept any historical 'grand narrative' of postmodernism itself? The term has

come to designate a bewilderingly diverse array of 'little narratives' as well as a more broadly epistemic sense of crisis in the foundational philosophical and political discourses of the European Enlightenment. From its very inception, and more so than cultural modernism, postmodernism was created as much by academic categorisation and intellectual reformulation as by aesthetic manifestos and the development of identifiable literary or cultural movements. Theorists of postmodernism are endlessly caught in the performative contradictions of obsessively naming the unnameable even as they decry the activity of naming as incipiently totalitarian. To offer a formal or periodising definition is, implicitly at least, to deny the nominalism of Lyotard's agonistics, to ride over his horror of the potentially diabolic effects of trying to reconcile the concept and the sensible, of trying to project conceptual generalities onto the social. It is no accident that one of the key reference points for postmodernists has always been that oft-quoted sentence from Nietzsche, warning us that: 'We obtain the concept, as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual: whereas nature is acquainted with forms and no concepts. . . but only with an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us'.<sup>5</sup> One can accept Nietzsche's warning against intellectual arrogance, however, whilst resisting a full-blown postmodern nominalism. Accordingly, I will argue that postmodernism can be understood as a gradual dissolution of the modern idea of the separate autonomies of the spheres of art, science and morality or politics, and can be viewed as an increasingly pervasive aestheticisation of all spheres of knowledge and experience, from philosophy to politics and finally to science. Furthermore, I shall argue that postmodernism exists in a 'strong' and in a 'weak' form and that each of these may take on either a deconstructive (epistemological) or a reconstructive (ethical) orientation.

The postmodern 'mood' began to gather in the 1960s when changes in western societies (the emergence of post-industrialisation; increased technologisation; expanding consumerism and 'lifestyle niche' advertising; widening democracy and

access to secondary and higher education; the growth of youth and sub-cultures; the global spread of information technology, mass media, and the 'knowledge' industries; the retreat from both colonialism and utopianism in politics and the rise of new identity politics around race, gender and sexuality) coincided with changes in literary and artistic expression (pop art, anti-modernism in architecture, self-reflexivity in literature) and with a new scepticism towards science and positivism in thought. The changes gradually seemed to add up to both a rejection of modernism and a failure or repudiation of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment rationalist ideas about the unity of the self, the concept of universal justice in politics, the role of the state, the idea of underlying laws of history, the possibility of certainty in thought and science. Since the Enlightenment itself, there had, of course, always been an anti-Enlightenment current in philosophy and art (Dostoevsky's aforementioned novel *Notes from underground*, for example, challenges everything from Kantian and utilitarian ethics to scientific socialism and gender-blind universalism, in terms remarkably prescient of much postmodern thought), but never before had it seemed to chime so convincingly with the changes taking place in western societies. The retreat from utopianism had already been foreshadowed in the forties and fifties, in the responses of philosophers such as Karl Popper, Hannah Arendt, Michael Oakeshott and Isaiah Berlin, for example, to the horrors of the Holocaust and the rise of totalitarianism. Whilst western governments were busy trying to rebuild the post-war state within the framework of compromise now referred to as 'welfare capitalism', analytic philosophy increasingly turned introspective, political philosophy toward concepts of piecemeal reform or Berlin's 'agonistic liberalism' (a repudiation of all rationalist attempts to derive a collective social Good from the scientific laws of history).

Bertrand Russell had earlier defended Enlightenment rational scepticism as a criticism of knowledge which, though unable to 'tell us with any certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge

our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom'.<sup>6</sup> By the 1970s, those doubts had increasingly turned back on the instruments of their own articulation and analysis, so that objects of knowledge become not so much entities on which language reflects as artefacts actually constructed through and within language. By 1979, when Lyotard published his influential book, new and burgeoning forms of epistemological and cultural relativism were already well out of their infancies. Truth, Knowledge, Self and Value were no longer to be regarded as foundational categories, but as rhetorical constructions masking relations of power and strategies of oppression and marginalisation. In the modern condition, philosophy had claimed the position of privileged metanarrative, claimed to be the discourse which might discover that final vocabulary which would ground the very conditions of knowledge. Postmodernists now claimed to have cut away this final ground in recognising there were only ever vocabularies to invent. If modern philosophy had pretended to be monarch of scientific discovery, then postmodern theory must now preside over a new dynasty of aesthetic invention.

Broadly, postmodernism can be understood as a gradual encroachment of the aesthetic into the spheres of philosophy, ethics and, most recently, science; a gradual displacement of discovery, depth, truth, correspondence and coherence with construction, surface, fictionality, self-reflexive narrative and ironic fragmentation: realism giving way to idealism and then to an all-pervasive textualism. Jameson has described this as a pathology of autoreferentiality; Jean Baudrillard, as a condition of hyperreality where aestheticisation has turned on itself, where even art 'is dead, not only because its critical transcendence is gone, but because reality itself, entirely impregnated by an aesthetic which is inseparable from its own structure, has been confused with its own image'.<sup>7</sup> More specifically though: how did postmodernism gradually seep out of its earliest containment within debates about the value of literary, artistic and architectural modernism and into the fields of philosophy, social and political

theory, and finally science studies? What are the value claims made for and against it? What are its political ramifications? What has been its effect on literary criticism? Where is the debate at the end of the century? Can we encompass the entire field of different postmodernisms with a broad map of types and tendencies? How may we trace its intellectual precursors? The rest of this essay will attempt to offer brief answers to some of these questions by considering the emergence of postmodernism: as a formal aesthetic; as a model for political engagement; as a philosophical critique and, finally, as the most recent manifestation of the ongoing two cultures debate between literature and science as it impinges upon literary critical practice.

## **THE IRRESISTIBLE RISE OF POSTMODERNISM: FROM ART TO SCIENCE**

The term 'postmodernism' was first used in the 1950s by literary critics to describe new kinds of literary experiment arising out of but moving beyond the terms of aesthetic modernism. It was associated with an emphasis on immanence or situatedness, on contingent experience and cultural complicity, and set in opposition to a modernism confirmed in New Critical theorising and in Abstract Expressionist aesthetics as conceived in the terms of objectivity, transcendence and impersonality. Poets such as Charles Olson and critics such as William Spanos (editor of the important journal *Boundary 2*) named the existence of a new non-anthropocentric literature whose Heideggerian anti-humanism was directed at seeing 'man' as a being in the world, as radically situated as any other object. A similar tendency appeared at the same time in the *chosisme* of the French New Novel and in Susan Sontag's rejection of an intellectualised depth/surface model of interpretation for an acceptance of the experience of art as sensuous surface, an 'erotics' of the text. John Barth talked of abandoning the literature of exhaustion for an essentially parodic mode of replenishment. Leslie Fiedler spoke of a new and radically democratic art which would

spurn the elitism of high modernism, bridge the gap between mass and high culture, and undo the much vaunted and loftily proclaimed 'autonomy' of modernist aesthetics.<sup>8</sup> For such critics, postmodernist 'surface' was the contemporary period's more democratic equivalent of Adorno's negative aesthetics of modernism: an art which, in making itself opaque and resistant to the totalising compulsions of intellectual interpretation, would more effectively than modernism refuse easy consumption without falsely denying its complicity with a culture of consumption. By the early eighties, however, the term had shifted from the description of a range of aesthetic practices involving 'double-coding', playful irony, parody, parataxis, self-consciousness, fragmentation and the mixing and meshing of high and popular culture, to a use which encompassed a more general shift in thought and which seemed to register a pervasive cynicism towards the progressivist ideals of modernity.

Postmodernism, at this point, began to take on the familiar cultural identity discussed earlier; it was now used in Jameson's sense to designate a new cultural epoch in which distinctions between critical and functional knowledge break down as capitalism, in its latest consumerist phase, invades even the unconscious and the third world, leaving no remaining space and no Archimedean point (philosophical or aesthetic) outside of culture. By 1984, postmodernism was firmly established as a constellation of discourses and preoccupations involving various repudiations of foundationalist thinking, a range of aesthetic practices which similarly disrupt the modernist concept of formal aesthetic autonomy and a variety of analyses of the present cultural mood or condition. Ihab Hassan described it as an 'antinomian movement that assumes a vast unmaking of the Western mind . . . an ontological rejection of the traditional full subject, the cogito of Western philosophy . . . an epistemological commitment to minorities in politics, sex or language . . . totalisation in human endeavour is potentially totalitarian'.<sup>9</sup> If foundationalism required confidence in the ability of the rational enquirer to arrive at foundations, then it would seem that the

demise of one must entail the collapse of the other. Moreover, if the philosophical project of the Enlightenment was now under threat, if there could be no rational subject to be emancipated and if every collectivity represented a false and exclusive totality, then the political commitment to universal emancipation and justice must surely also be under threat. By the 1980s, it seemed that postmodernism had challenged every aspect of Enlightenment discourse and the entire foundation of modernity: the autonomy of art, the grounding of epistemological certainty in the rationalist subject, the political project of universal rights and emancipation, and even the objectivity and truth of science.

## **POSTMODERNISM AND ART: FROM AUTONOMY TO AESTHETICISM**

The shift from autonomy to aestheticism may be regarded as paradigmatic of the entire transition from modernism to postmodernism: in the relations of high art to mass culture; the relation of knowledge to historical and social contexts; of the concept of the self as a unified and rational whole; of the concept of history as a teleological structure underpinned by universal laws. Early literary postmodernism prefigures the later and broader cultural movement in addressing its relations with modernism primarily in terms of the concept of autonomy, a key term in the theorisation of modernism from the early 1920s. In 1913, Clive Bell's *Art* had argued for the absolute separation of life and art; T.S. Eliot's famous 1923 review of Joyce's *Ulysses* (in *The Dial*) would welcome his 'mythic method' as a delivery from history; in 1929, Eugene Jolas, the editor of the international modernist journal *transition* proclaimed that 'the epoch when the writer photographed the life about him . . . is happily drawing to a close. The new artist of the word has recognised the autonomy of language'.<sup>10</sup> For Jolas, the art of modernism had opened up a new post-Kantian realm of freedom and aesthetic autonomy outside of the mechanical necessity of Newtonian space and that of Darwinian time.

The crisis in this concept of autonomy is decisive for an understanding of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism in art, and also for the entire

postmodern critique of modernity. The modern idea of autonomy is derived from Kantian thought and is inextricably bound to the Kantian idea of freedom and truth. Autonomy involves the capacity to act in accordance with self-determined principles rationally formulated and not driven by irrational impulses from within or tyrannical pressures from without. To be autonomous is to transcend the phenomenality of material or historical determination and to give the law unto oneself in a space of freedom. In Kantian ethics, it is associated with the idea of the categorical imperative: the unconditional rule that each individual is free if he or she acts in accordance with universalisable principles which respect other people as ends in themselves and not as means to one's own ends. Transferred to the aesthetic, Kantian universalism entails that art is its own end, that it creates its own universe, one structured according to internal rules not applicable or subordinate to or interchangeable with the imperatives of other orders outside the aesthetic: those of politics, morality, science or philosophy.

The postmodern critique of modernist literary autonomy has tended to pursue one of two paths. The first addresses the place of art in mass culture and, in particular, the process of 'dedifferentiation' whereby consumer culture appropriates the forms and surfaces of high art or where a highbrow literary culture gradually absorbs and reformulates the generic modes of popular and mass culture.<sup>11</sup> The second addresses the ethics of autonomy, the recognition that if the price of autonomy may be aesthetic withdrawal from historical engagement, then the price of aestheticisation might be a collapse of ethics and politics into art: the speculative projection of art onto history, and its dangerous degeneration into the kinds of unselfconscious mythmaking associated with recent fascist politics. Irresponsible aesthetic myth-making confuses the separate autonomies of the Kantian realms and produces dangerous political ideologies.

The first critique has tended to develop out of the tradition of Marxist aesthetics. One of the very first critiques of modernist autonomy was offered in Georg Lukacs' well-

known essay 'The ideology of modernism' which argued that autonomy represented a negation of history and a withdrawal into a sterile and formal solipsism. Writing from within the context of postmodernism, later Marxists have been more equivocal. In his 1984 essay, 'Postmodernism or the cultural logic of late capitalism', Fredric Jameson defended as laudable the modernist attempt to achieve critical distance on the immediate impingement of history in order to preserve history as more than simply representation in a frozen present. For Jameson, this kind of autonomy and critical distance is no longer possible in the postmodern condition: art, thought and critique have all been subsumed into the invincible economic logic of late capitalism. In all of his work since the collection of essays of 1986, *Against the grain*, Terry Eagleton, however, has been almost as critical of modernist 'autonomy' as of postmodern aestheticism. For Eagleton, a facile postmodernist aestheticism complicit with late consumer culture is no more critically engaged with history than was the much vaunted modernist autonomy in its disdainful flight from early mass culture. Postmodernism has simply exacerbated the tendencies toward refusal of critical engagement with history and its spurious 'populism' is simply one more manifestation of the throwaway surfaces of consumer culture. *Advocates* of postmodernism, however, regard the challenge to the concept of autonomy as an honest recognition of the complicity of all art with the cultural assumptions of its time and a welcome sign of the collapse of the cultural hegemony of a beleaguered leisure class anxious to defend its privileges against the tides of mass culture and political democratisation. For such commentators, aesthetic autonomy was a way of refusing or containing radical energies or feelings and might therefore be seen as complicit with that 'iron cage of rationality' constitutive of bourgeois culture through its strategies and ethics of control.

Battle-lines have similarly been drawn over the issue of the ethical implications of the transition from autonomy to aestheticism and the stakes here are higher, the energies more intense. In a technologised mass society, and once the doctrine of the

purity of the word is encouraged to walk abroad, then human beings may begin to project their perfect aesthetic worlds onto history, to play God with the real. The religion of art within a secularised and urbanised culture might become a blueprint for pogroms, torture and genocide. It is all very well proclaiming the religion of art, but what are the consequences if that religion begins to proselytise, to seek converts, to make claims for its powers to regenerate a consumer-driven world of history which is bereft of spiritual direction or formal coherence? Writers and artists in the 1960s seemed suddenly to recognise the fascistic potential of a liberated aestheticism, the force of Walter Benjamin's argument that it was the projection of a decadent aestheticist symbolism onto the sphere of history which had created the barbarous idealisms of Nazi Germany. In the early 1940s, Karl Popper had observed that art masquerading as science in the guise of metaphysics might produce a dangerous historicism, an aestheticist perfectionism. W.H. Auden's 'The poet and the city' (1963), Borges's 'Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (1964), Frank Kermode's *The sense of an ending* (1967), Iris Murdoch's *The flight from the enchanter* (1956) were some of the earliest literary expressions of a recognition that heightened aesthetic self-reflexivity might be more than self-indulgent play with language games. The metafictional strategies of postmodernism might serve an ethical function in a world which increasingly, and dangerously, neglects to discriminate between different orders of fictionality. Over a decade later, of course, Lyotard announced his war on the belief in 'totality' (understood as that reconciliation of the concept and the sensible which has produced totalitarianism); he announced, furthermore, that the project of postmodernity must be to prevent the dangerous slippage from autonomy in art to aesthetic perfectionism in the world.

Postmodern writers have tended to adopt one of two responses to the difficulties thrown up by such insights: either to move further into aesthetic autonomy in a gesture of *reductio ad absurdum* which insulates art as absolute fictionality; or, to self-consciously explore ways to retain art's magic without capitulation to a dangerous

enchantment (the way of magic realism, historiographic metafiction, of novelists such as Calvino, Spark, Murdoch and Pynchon). Samuel Beckett, a writer whose work draws on both modes, and whose writing spans the period of high modernism *and* early postmodernism, was a crucial figure in the aesthetic transition from one to the other. In Beckett's parodic Cartesian universe, human consciousness, split off from that defective machine which is the body, longs to retreat into a purely rational or aesthetic space where internal coherence might subsume nature through language into the shape of a perfect Platonic circle. His works are full of *a priori* language games and much of the comedy is derived from the disjunction between the intensity of their pursuit and the futility of their import. The fascination with purely autonomous enclosed systems is both recognition of the seductions of syllogistic logic and a satire on its limitations. His characters, the Malones, Mahoods and Worms in *The trilogy*, desperately but comically attempt to arrive at the certainty of selfhood as pure thinking, attempt to arrive, that is, at the condition of pure Cartesian reduction. Not only do they fail, of course, but the very effort is intended to bring the reader to a recognition that everything excluded as *waste* under the sign of pure autonomy also happens to be everything we normally value as *life*. Intelligibility does not arise out of the algorithmic self-reflexivity of the autonomous system (whatever its seductions) and Beckett's avowed intention throughout his writing was to 'find a form in which to accommodate the mess'.<sup>12</sup>

Beckett's writing is an important testimony to the fact that if writers submit to an ethical imperative to be cautious of the enchantment of systems, art does not necessarily cease to be magical or heroic. Postmodern self-reflexive play comes in many varieties; as with modernist aesthetics, blanket dismissals are as inappropriate as generalised paeans. Modernist autonomy and linguistic hermeticism might represent an aristocratic disdain for a vulgar and commercialised culture or a Nietzschean recommendation of aesthetic fictionality as a substitute for metaphysical presence; its repudiation or ironisation might represent a rejection of the former or an awareness of the potential

dangers of the latter.

## **POLITICS, EPISTEMOLOGY AND POSTMODERNISM**

How does this concern with autonomy enter the politics of the postmodern critique of modernity? Like its artists and writers, postmodern thinkers have similarly recognised that one of the effects of modernity is that knowledge reflexively enters and shapes experience in the world and is then shaped by it in an unprecedentedly self-conscious fashion. Once knowledge is thus reconceived in constructivist or situational terms, however, then rationality may no longer be grounded in a self which is somehow transparent to itself; truth may no longer be discovered by a rationality capable of fathoming its own foundations. In this sphere of postmodernism, therefore, critique has focussed on the modern idea of the autonomy of the self and of those metanarratives which have claimed to ground knowledge by standing outside of history.

Postmodernism registers a pervasive crisis in the romantic-modern understanding of selfhood as founded upon a unitary subjectivity striving towards a goal of perfect internal coherence and satisfying correspondence with the world outside the self (a crisis already implicit in the Marxist critique of Hegelian idealism, in the Freudian assault on rationality, in Nietzsche's deconstruction of metaphysics as an expression of the will-to-power and in the poststructuralist critique of representation). Postmodernism defines itself in contradistinction to earlier rationalist and empiricist modes of thinking: against a Platonic objective idealism in which truth resides in a transcendent sphere of Ideal Forms; against an empiricist reflectionism in which mind appears as a glassy essence; and against a Kantian transcendental idealism in which historical and contingent subjectivity is subsumed into categorical and *a priori* mental structures which provide the universal contours of space, time, identity and the conditions for knowledge.

Postmodern uncertainty thus replaces modern (pre-emptive) doubt. If it is impossible to move beyond and outside of our instruments of interrogation (primarily

language) in order to make contact with truths in the world, then dialogue must replace dialectic (Socratic or Hegelian) and hermeneutic 'conversation' must substitute for the rigours of Cartesian 'method'. In politics, there can be no universal subject of emancipation; no pure procedural justice derived from a 'view from nowhere' and grounding the discourse of equality and individual rights; no universally acknowledged concept of the 'good' derived from the telos of history. Liberalism and Marxism, the two main emancipatory discourses of modernity, can no longer legitimate themselves in universally acceptable terms. Politics therefore becomes 'micropolitics': the exercise at best of a situated rationality and a conversational practice grounded in the internal practices and claims of particular groups or communities. Claims to universality are to be regarded as strategies of exclusion and domination.

As with the issue of autonomy in the relations between aesthetic modernism and postmodernism, this epistemological critique of the autonomy of the subject and of subject-centred reason is at the heart of political debates between postmodernists and their critics. Feminists such as Hekman, Flax and Jardine have welcomed postmodernism as the most radical critique available of the 'masculinist epistemology of modernity'.<sup>13</sup> Communitarian post-Marxists such as Laclau and Mouffe have viewed the postmodern critique of modernity as exposing first of all the sterility of liberal proceduralism in its refusal to acknowledge the need for publicly debated and substantive vocabularies of the 'good'; and, secondly, the dangerous complicity of Marxism with an axiomatic rationality destructive of truly democratic community in its 'scientific' and non-negotiable outline of a metanarrative of history. For them, postmodernism has revealed that it is possible to explore ways to preserve the emancipatory ideals of modernity whilst dispensing with its epistemological foundations.<sup>14</sup> The postmodern critique of epistemology is welcomed as a critical tool which exposes the flaws in the political thinking and institutions inherited from the rationalist version of Enlightenment and may therefore facilitate the reconsideration of

an alternative tradition of republican thinking about civil society, of a rejuvenated concept of *phronesis* as practical wisdom, and of a reconstruction of the language of rights which does not entail public exclusion of considerations of the good.

Postcolonialists have welcomed the cultural relativism which has allowed for the voicing of difference and exposed the impoverished sense of subjectivity inherent in the notion of a purely rational unencumbered subjectivity.

Again, however, critics of postmodernism such as Christopher Norris, Terry Eagleton and John Gray have presented a very different picture of the political implications of postmodernism, regarding its strategies as a desperate and decadent pastiche of genuine political discourses of emancipation which require either a concept of subjectivity as a coherent and intentional agency and/or a structural understanding of cultural, economic and political realities which can provide a foundation for collective agreements about the nature of the good.<sup>15</sup> In their view, postmodernism fails on both counts. On the one hand, it merely represents an absurd or facile *reductio ad absurdum* of the classic liberal principle of negative liberty into the restless and empty libertarianism of a subjectivity without a self caught in the ever-spiralling dialectic of need and desire of a self-perpetuating freemarket economy; and, on the other hand, it collapses into a paranoid neo-Hegelianism where the positive liberty of *Sittlichkeit* or the republican ideal of discovering the self within the practices of civil society is turned into a monolithic cultural determinism from which the only escape must be into a textualist void of freedom as *jouissance*, consumer hedonism or criticism as freeplay. Indeed, Eagleton views postmodernism as a kind of manic-depressive disorder, oscillating between the poles of textualist euphoria and constructivist dystopia, both underlyingly expressive of a desiring but decentred subjectivity, obsessed with freedom but with nothing to be free for, in a society which can only be regarded as an oppressive constraint and curb on such freefloating desire. In this flimsy dream of escape, the ironist theorist takes over the negative associations of modern autonomy understood as

the romantic-modernist artist's pursuit of silence, exile and cunning. Language is further fetishised and a rampant culturalism hijacks genuine political energies for a purely textualist and empty utopianism. In this analysis, if the only model of freedom is a kind of libertarian pastiche of negative liberty, where the self who might embody that freedom no longer exists, then the much vaunted 'difference' of postmodern politics simply becomes an end in itself with no other purposive goals. Detachment is still the driving force of intellectual political energies, though detachment in the guise of aestheticist disengagement and particularist or nominalist anarchy rather than the formalist 'well-wrought urn' of modernist autonomy and pure rationality.

### **POSTMODERNISM AS PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE**

Reading such polarised accounts of postmodernism, one wonders indeed if the various critics and commentators are actually talking about the same thing. Straw men are set up and knocked down at every turn of a postmodern discussion, so it comes as no surprise that one prominent social theorist has declared that postmodernism is 'the most sterile and boring intellectual movement ever to emerge'.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps one way to gain some purchase on these orchestral manoeuvres in the dark is to consider postmodernism as dividing into two modes derived from separate philosophical precursors: a strong and a weaker version, each with its own deconstructive and reconstructive orientation. Strong postmodernism emerges out of the poststructuralist reading of Nietzsche and weak postmodernism out of the hermeneutic reading of Heidegger. Deconstructive versions usually concentrate on the critique of Enlightenment epistemology and reconstructive versions on the attempt to build an alternative system of values, a new ethics out of or in relation to this epistemological revision. Firstly let us consider the 'strong' version.

In a famous statement in *The genealogy of morals*, Nietzsche declared: 'Henceforth my dear philosophers, let us be on our guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a pure will-less, painless, timeless

knowing subject...There is only a perspectival knowing'.<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche launched the first thoroughgoing critique of the idea of foundational truth and of the rational subject. For strong postmodernists, this position entails that philosophy must relinquish its claims to scientific status and embrace its true nature as poetry or art. Probably the most quoted sentence in the entire discourse of postmodernism is his assertion that truth is simply a 'mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms – in short a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed and embellished poetically and rhetorically'. Like 'coins which have lost their pictures', the historical origins of truth have simply been rubbed away and covered over with the rhetoric of science and metaphysics. As far as human reason is concerned the only rational thing we know is what little reason we have. It is man's needs and not his reason which interpret the world and truth is simply 'the will to be master over the multiplicity of sensations – to classify phenomena into definite categories'.<sup>18</sup>

Accordingly, 'strong' deconstructive postmodernism tends to champion perspectivism in the mode of 'difference'; to prefer nominalism over classification and to abhor 'totalities' as productive of a dangerous utopianism which would legislate for this world on the basis of an empty dream of the future. Its practitioners prefer performance and rhetoric over discovery and truth and, accepting the incommensurability of all language games, they also promote 'micropolitical action' over consensual or revolutionary politics. Axiomatic for this position is Lyotard's rejection of any claim to knowledge which makes an 'explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectic of the Spirit, the hermeneutic of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject or the creation of wealth'. The Enlightenment pursuit of such 'grand narratives' is seen as a manifestation of the will to power. Seeking his telos in the mastery of nature, man has imposed on the living present the supreme fiction of an imaginary future of perfect justice, truth and emancipation. The postmodern repudiation of Enlightenment is synonymous with the refusal of romantic-modern prometheanism,

of 'the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable' . 19

Richard Rorty may be considered, like Lyotard, to be a strong postmodernist, though his emphasis on consensual democracy gives his work a decidedly reconstructive orientation compared with Lyotard's endlessly experimental, agonistic and avant-gardist invention of new rules and new games. Though he shares Lyotard's anti-representationalism and his critique of metaphysical foundations, Rorty is less confident about the social effects of postmodern textualism. He sees the ironist theorist revelling in his experimental language games as a stimulus to his own private imagination, but one that is purchased at the expense of moral engagement and solidarity with his fellow human beings. For Rorty, the political agenda of the poststructuralist critique is largely wasted effort because its textualism is complicit with the idealism that it claims to overthrow and which was in any case also largely a distraction ('a sideshow') from that piecemeal, practical social reform which has been the real engine of progress.<sup>20</sup> Whereas, for Lyotard, consensus is an outmoded value and no longer a viable basis for a theory of justice, for Rorty, we must seek a 'detheoreticised sense of community' achieved through publicly shared vocabularies, 'beautiful ways of harmonising interests, rather than sublime ways of detaching oneself from others' interests'.<sup>21</sup> Both share the Nietzschean repudiation of metaphysical foundations and metanarratives of truth but whereas, for Lyotard, this entails an atomistic version of negative liberty, for Rorty, it requires the reconstruction of social consensus without recourse to final vocabularies and epistemological guarantees.

What makes Rorty 'strong' in his postmodernism, despite his defence of consensus as the basis for democracy, is the textualist insistence that society can only be transformed without violence through an aesthetic version of genetic engineering where it is vocabularies and not genes which determine the kind of life we shall lead. Rather than search for scientific proof or metaphysical certainty or even a structural

analysis of social inequality, we should recognise that the way to improve the world is through the artificial mutation and manipulation of vocabularies: 'the method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate forms of non-linguistic behaviour'.<sup>22</sup> Though Rorty distances himself from strong postmodernism's deployment of rhetorics of the sublime, his own (admittedly slightly tongue-in-cheek) use of an aesthetic of the beautiful still places him in the textualist camp.

Just as Nietzsche may be regarded as the founding father of 'strong' postmodernism, so the legacy of Martin Heidegger, and the tradition of hermeneutics which arises from his philosophy of being-in-the-world, may be regarded as the significant starting point for what I have referred to as 'weak' postmodernism. Unlike strong postmodernism, the weak version may accept the human need to invest in grand-ish narratives, though its proponents reject the usefulness or validity of monocausal varieties and insist that all knowledge is embedded or situated in particular cultural practices or traditions. Weak deconstructive postmodernists vary in their evaluation of the 'Enlightenment project', but tend to be united in the view that the modern commitment to justice and emancipation does not require metaphysical grounding. Their critique tends to focus on the sterile formalism of rationalist thought and on its mistaken ideal of homeless freedom. Although weak postmodernists oppose axiomatically the Cartesian attempt to split reason from custom, the body or tradition, they may sometimes wish to retain the ideal of a disembodied and transcendental subject as a regulative principle underpinning epistemological enquiry. The 'view from nowhere' is not entirely abandoned as a regulative principle, but is certainly shorn of its transcendental pretensions and presented simply as the capacity of the embodied subject to practice a negative capability which can imaginatively project itself into and inhabit the view of other embodied subjects in the world. So, for anti-Kantian and weak

aestheticists such as Martha Nussbaum, the novel becomes a better way of doing moral philosophy than the attempt to arrive at ethical understanding through the abstract proceduralism of the categorical imperative. Weak postmodernists avoid the utopian seductiveness of the 'strong' perspectivism of a 'view from everywhere' and the protean, fluid and centreless subjectivity which underpins it, but they also insist that all understanding is situated and contextual. Their relation to the rationalist Enlightenment may be compared to that of renaissance humanism to medieval scholasticism, with the preference for a situated *phronesis* or practical wisdom over a formalistic and detached *theoria*.

For Heidegger, modernity is to be characterised by a denial or disavowal of being-in-the-world. A detached subjectivity has come to stand over against an inert nature, looking, speculating, fixing and judging for its own ends. Radically disembodied from the world, an instrumental rationalism distorts nature into the shape of its own fictionally projected telos. But, says Heidegger, 'in clarifying being-in-the-world we have shown that a bare subject without a world never . . . is . . . given'.<sup>23</sup> Heidegger's influence on weak deconstructive postmodernism is most obviously felt in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer whose *Truth and Method* (1960) argues that there can be no Archimedean point outside of culture from which to achieve 'objective knowledge'. Understanding exists entirely in relation to the perspectives (or 'prejudices') provided for us through our cultural traditions. Critical knowledge is simply the partial recognition of particular prejudices through exposure to forms of relative otherness which allow one to repossess the self expanded through the incorporation of other (prejudicial) ways of seeing. Prejudice becomes the precondition for rather than the negation of Enlightenment, though neither world nor self can ever be possessed in any final sense. However, if strong postmodernism seemed not to anchor subjectivity at all, positing a subject unavailable for ethical accountability and incapable of political agency, weak postmodernism presents the same difficulties through too much anchorage. If there is

no way finally to separate reason from custom, then there seems no way either to step back from and criticise the prevailing *sensus communis*.

The varieties of reconstructive postmodernism which have emerged from this hermeneutic critique of method may be regarded as 'weak' in that they do not abandon conceptions of agency, of the need to experience the self as a coherent and consistent though revisable entity, nor do they dispute the assumption that ethics requires a subject. However, the communitarian orientation of such thought presumes that there can be no antecedent self, no subject whose ends are not always already culturally conditioned. So the work of Alisdair MacIntyre, hardly a 'postmodernist' in the strong sense of the word, shares with Lyotard's language games, Fish's interpretive communities and Rorty's shared vocabularies, an insistence that truth and value are only ever internal to the conditions of particular communities or enclosed institutional frameworks. For MacIntyre, Enlightenment ethics has thrown us into a condition of disenchantment and dis-embodiment which is our postmodern condition. Its only remedy lies in the return to a pre-modern, specifically Aristotelian model of virtue and practical wisdom tempered by a modern, aesthetic sense of how we might reformulate and rewrite the scripts of tradition.<sup>24</sup> He promises that in such a world we would neither be subjected to stagnatory anchorage nor left to float dangerously adrift. Given that Aristotelian ethics arises out of the enclosed communitarianism of the Greek *polis*, however, it is hard to see how this reconstruction of value could have direct application to a multicultural and heterogeneous modern society in which most of us move daily if not hourly amongst different groups and communities, each with its own preoccupations and imperatives. Although he allows some freedom to author our own scripts, it is rather on the model of Eliot's restricted individual talent constrained by and indebted to an antecedently established tradition. Moreover, the script sounds suspiciously as though it had already been written as one in which we appear only as Pirandellian characters in search of an Author.

## SCIENCE, LITERATURE, AND POSTMODERNISM

The most recent and perhaps inevitable drift of the postmodern critique of epistemology, the move from autonomy to aestheticism, is into the realm of the cognitive in the shape of science. I say 'inevitably' since science must represent the last bastion of modernity and, indeed, some commentators have viewed postmodernism as an attempt to end the epistemic hegemony of science. On this terrain of what postmodernists regard as the 'culture wars' and scientists prefer to call the 'science wars', a triumphalist postmodern aestheticism encounters perhaps its most ferocious rival yet: a rejuvenated scientism, fortified most recently by molecular biology and the claim that genetics can explain everything from why we choose the partners we do to the way we use language and the reasons why nations go to war. As always, it would seem, postmodernism is curiously complicit with some aspects of this latest scientific thinking: both have deconstructed the humanist consciousness and both leave unresolved difficult ethical (and legal) questions about the nature of human responsibility in their respective deterministic landscapes. The two, however, are deeply at war. For the ire of scientists such as Lewis Wolpert, Richard Dawkins and Alan Sokal has been drawn not so much by the on-going and *value-oriented* romantic-hermeneutic critique of scientism (reaching back as far as Schiller's indictment of a Newtonian mechanics which had plunged the world in to a value-shorn and 'monotonous round of ends' and now rejuvenated in the expressions of concern about the need for ethical constraints upon genetic engineering), but most emphatically by the far more radical postmodern critique of the *very epistemological* foundations of science.<sup>25</sup> Science is not simply, as for the romantics, true but limited in its capacity to offer values by which we can live. Science can no longer even offer us truth, let alone value.

Sociologists of science have joined forces with postmodernists to claim not only the cultural situatedness and ideological constructedness of even scientific knowledge, but also the unverifiability of any reality affirmed by scientific claims or proofs. Scientific

theory, it is argued, may be empirically adequate without necessarily describing the world at all. Scientific discourses use models and metaphors from everyday language already imbued with ideological slants and suggestive connotations. The objectivity of science is at best a flattering illusion which convinces us of our human autonomy by affirming our instrumental power over nature (the view from weak postmodernists) and at worst (the view of strong postmodernists) it is simply another ideological state apparatus whose very rhetoric of truth and understanding preserves our political quietude by conferring on scientists the status of priestly diviners. The idea of the autonomy of art as a unique kind of ostensive experience, one which could give back 'the world's body', was central in the romantic-modern opposition to the calculative thinking of science. Again, in the move to postmodernism, the basic strategy is one of aestheticisation where science too will be exposed as fictionality, as yet another 'mobile army of metaphors'.

But what does it mean to say that science has been aestheticised?

As early as 1960, and as we have already seen, Gadamer had rejuvenated the Heideggerian critique of the scientific research model of knowledge in claiming that all knowledge, including science, arises from tacit structures of belief. Thomas Kuhn's enormously influential *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) had introduced the concept of incommensurability, dissensus and discontinuity into science with the notion that scientific ideas exist relative to particular frameworks of knowledge agreed by historically provisional scientific communities. Scientific paradigms, in effect, constitute irreconcilable language games and non-reconcilable world-views. From this developed the 'stronger' postmodern view that if no scientific theory can be tested against theory-independent facts, then it is impossible to offer final proof that any scientific theory is actually in contact with what it purports to explain. Contexts of discovery and questions of intentionality now enter into the scientific account. Fictionality moves across from the demesne of literature to that of science. If logic

cannot proceed from the empirical data to the postulates of a deductively formulated theory, but only vice versa, then the same data can be used to support competing theories: we cannot say that one theory is more true than another; or, as Richard Rorty has put it, 'there is no interesting difference between tables and texts, between protons and poems'.<sup>26</sup> In a radical extension of Kantianism, and in line with the general Nietzscheanism of strong postmodernism, it seems that scientists, like poets, impose fictions on the world (but at least poets acknowledge that this is what they are about).

When Lyotard published *The postmodern condition* (the first fully-fledged postmodern 'report on science'), however, he drew not only on the textualist critique but, more persuasively for his purposes, on a critique of method which had actually arisen from within that most aristocratic of sciences, from physics itself. Werner Heisenberg's famous Uncertainty Principle had suggested that all physical qualities which can be observed are subject to unpredictable fluctuations, that there may indeed be an ineradicable uncertainty, or indeterminism, in the behaviours of the fundamental particles such that at the quantum level no definite predictions can be made about the behaviour of any system. Heisenberg had gone on to question the traditional scientific separation of subject and object by suggesting that the interaction between observer and observed 'causes large changes in the systems being observed'.<sup>27</sup> Niels Bohr's Principle of Complementarity further developed the view that there is an ineradicable ambiguity in all quantum systems. Though an electron could be a wave or a particle, its realised form would depend on the condition of observation. There is no way to observe or measure a system without changing that system. Incompatible conceptualisations can both represent 'truth'. One implication of this might be that we can no longer draw a clear distinction between natural and intentional objects, that if the quantum world is fundamentally indeterminate then what was previously regarded as the intentional and free space of the aesthetic might now also be integral to what had been thought of as the mechanical and causally determined world of physical science. As early as 1927,

scientists such as Arthur Eddington could speculate that 'Uncertainty' seemed to suggest that science, like art, involves a participatory and intentional kind of knowing.

Lyotard would draw (often implicitly) on the radical interpretation of the epistemology of the New Sciences of the 1920s, to underpin his argument for the postmodern turn in knowledge as one involving a repudiation of modern pre-emptive Doubt for an all-pervasive and aestheticising postmodern Uncertainty. In effect, Lyotard's argument relies on the use of New Science to legitimate his argument for the end of the legitimacy of science. The move allows him to aestheticise science and then to exploit the fact that it is still, after all, science, to offer a legitimation of postmodern aestheticism, giving postmodernism the borrowed authority of science on the grounds that aesthetic knowing was always the only kind of knowledge that we can have. New science, he explains, is concerned with 'undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterised by incomplete information, fracta, catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes' and provides the outline of a world which in its very essence is radically uncertain, 'discontinuous, catastrophic, non-rectifiable and paradoxical'.<sup>28</sup> Not only, however, is Lyotard still using science to legitimate his argument for the end of science, he is still working implicitly with a correspondence model of truth (even as he denies its very possibility), seeking a language authorised by its mirroring of the external reality we call 'nature', but 'nature' reconstructed as a radical indeterminacy. The naturalistic fallacy that we can read our purposes out of nature, that we can derive from it an ethic (of freedom as randomness and indeterminacy), surely still haunts Lyotard's picture of postmodernity. (Though the question of how one could build any kind of ethics or responsible self on the ground of such randomness was raised by Bertrand Russell during the initial heyday of New Science enthusiasm).

A liberatory principle plucked from a discredited Hegelian dialectic of history is regrafted onto the form of a new cosmos in which matter and consciousness are mysteriously reunited. Universal rationality separated us from a mechanical universe,

but in this new Uncertain cosmos, indeterminacy is not simply the limit of our knowledge or our instruments of measurement but is an inherent condition of all things. Whereas the classic modern 'incertitude of the void' called forth a painful but doggedly pre-emptive Doubt (Baconian or Cartesian), postmodern Uncertainty is a paradoxically comfortable and reassuring condition. We simply give up worrying and recognise that nature too is radically uncertain. Whether we are philosophers, social scientists or literary critics, the advice seems to be that the only response is to be pragmatic: decide which fictional version of nature, society or the text is most useful for our immediate purposes and enter the agon of the language game with all our rhetorical weapons primed up for the fight.

### **POSTMODERNISM AND LITERARY CRITICISM**

Not surprisingly, literary criticism has been immensely receptive. There always was a problem for an increasingly professionalised discipline caught between the desire to be 'scientific', on the one hand, and to treat the text as an object in the world, and the impulse to be creatively empathetic on the other, and to recognise the text as the subjective expression of a unique intentional consciousness. There still is a problem about reducing consciousness to an entity available to the procedures of 'objective' research. The pragmatist solution offered by postmodernism is useful because it circumvents larger questions about mind and more specific problems about the nature of critical knowledge or the possibility of a 'validity in interpretation' which would not be the outcome of a reductive scientism. If we cannot establish the grounds for believing one interpretation to be more 'true' than another, then we can claim that the text is simply more useful for one set of purposes than another and then pursue a 'strategic' reading (political, moral, social etc.). We may then simply judge the text in terms of how well it does this job that we ask of it, and thereby exclude the issue of whether it is appropriate in the first place to demand of it this particular function. The position is summed up in Stanley Fish's claim that 'interpretation is not the art of construing but the

art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them'.<sup>29</sup> Knowledge is an art of invention and not a science of discovery. Philosophy and criticism share the same truth status as art. All is fiction.

Paradoxically, one might argue that the orientation towards relativism has been further sustained because it appeals to the desire to give literary criticism a clear political function in the world. Though relativism and politicisation would seem to be naturally opposed (in that relativism must abandon the Marxist distinction between 'truth' or 'science' and 'ideology' and because a marginal position cannot therefore claim any greater truth status for itself than a normative one), the assumption now seems to be that relativism at least evens up the contest. Performance and rhetoric (Rorty's new vocabularies) will then determine the outcome. To be authentic in this postmodern condition is simply to 'privilege' the reading that suits our purposes and to admit the indistinguishable fictionality of all interpretative models. Within the logic of incommensurability we cannot evaluate other language games within the terms of our own (or even recognise them) and any attempt at old-fashioned humanistic understanding will simply represent an imperialistic subsumption of the 'other' into the structures of our own desire. We may certainly glimpse the other in the mode of the sublime, or we may invent vocabularies in the manner of the beautiful, but neither will vouchsafe us knowledge or the right to any kind of measured or detached evaluation. Alternatively, if we still desire to 'theorise', then we can practise postmodern theory as a game of (Popperian) pseudo-science, assuming that it is neither open to refutation nor verification. We can give up on the difficult business of Doubt as an open-ended struggle, actively seeking disconfirmation of premises and hypotheses in the evidence of the text before us or of history behind us, and simply enjoy the artistry of the patterns that we create.

This is something of a caricature of course. It is to play postmodernism at one of its own favourite games of *reductio ad absurdum*. It is also why the critical imperative

now, for literary practitioners, philosophers and political theorists, must be that we learn from the lessons of postmodernism how to find a way out of the postmodern condition. Literary criticism can never be an exact 'science', but neither is it the same kind of fiction-making activity as 'art'. Postmodernism has taught us the importance of 'difference' and bequeathed an important legacy to postcolonialism, feminism, and other kinds of political criticism. Its particular epistemological project, however, has reached a dead-end and there is little point any longer in shuffling amongst the remains. The exit from postmodernism for literary criticism lies somewhere in that excluded middle between the concepts of autonomy and aestheticisation, science and art, as delineated in this essay. It lies, in other words, in our capacity to continue struggling toward the discrimination of these orders without adopting either a naive aestheticism or an imperialistic scientism; it lies in our recognition of the need to preserve some distinction between intentional and natural objects and in a continued resistance to the seductive temptation simply to subsume one into the other .

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