

CHAPTER 1

The Parable of Beginning

In full imagination poetry issues
like blood on Lady Macbeth's hand,
nails of the dead making the ship
move which carries her epiphany
into the continuum at the risk of
heart's awakening to the old ways
wanting, this final mystery
once set upon yields the all from
which you were cut away, for I have
seen the star, rise and embodied,
no ghost, but the real thing ritual
murder could not produce, the war
of oneself given over as instrument
immersed now in a cowl of sound.

—John Clarke, "Beginning the Other Side"

MAKING THE WORKING SPACE

In the process of their becoming, the literal thinking, writing, and rewriting, these essays revealed a fact of composition that may have been first noticed by Pascal: "The last thing one discovers when writing a work is what one should put first." The process is endless: each rewriting yields a new first thing. In the working, each site—chapter, paragraph, even sentence—reaches toward completion only to reveal, if one attends with care, its incompleteness, so it discovers a new first thing, turns back on itself, and seeks to be more inclusive, until every constituent tries to become the monad in which the whole is reflected. Language is recursive: it implicates more and more language until it rediscovers itself or some suggestion of what it had been, for, as it reaches near the critical point of recapitulation, it suffers a phase shift, enters a new dimension, and becomes itself an object of study, an open and indeterminate site rather than a tool. It opens again and again in the pursuit of its own closure, always beginning.

The perspectives through the course of the text consequently shift, sometimes rapidly. Juxtaposed sites engage with and fail

their own self-containment. The use of such a text is not to cut through the cone of the matter in order to show this or that parabolic section—there is no one parable—but to manifest the interior complexity of the cone and the numerous parables it concretely contains.

The *content* might have been entirely different. In the following essays, I pay special attention to Descartes, Hegel, and Freud. I am critical of their simplistic representationalism, their implicit doctrines of force, their submissions of the individual to generalized, abstract formalisms. I might have taken up Spinoza, Darwin, and William James, or Locke, Hume, and Whitehead, arriving at much the same place by different and, for me, more sympathetic routes. The point is not a particular historical narrative. For that matter, the content might have been completely non-narrative. The *thing* I want to reveal is neither form nor content but the conditions of manifestation as such. I am interested in beings who cause themselves, define themselves, and enclose themselves in their radical uniqueness. I am interested in how they may be understood as acting not from their theories—that is, generalities about their possible formal condition—but from their singularities. I do not mean to depreciate theory. It has its uses in describing possibilities. The acts of living however are insistently and beautifully singular. They are not general or generalizable: “One chance each time.”* It is this insistence that I propose to understand, and this beauty I hope to affirm.

We have languages and bodies—macrocosm and microcosm, themselves only parables. We are too often missing the mesocosm—the dense locale of the common, that is absorbed by the exaggeration of symbolism, on the one hand, and by mere biology, on the other. I am interested not in the *phenomenology* of spirit which is disciplined by the dialectic of master and slave, subject and object, teacher and student, but in the *phenomena* of spirit which are common. To make a logic of phenomena, to objectify them and attend to their ratios, introduces at the outset a displacement that can never be overcome.

We have suffered from an inadequate logic—perhaps from logic as such—which reduces everything to a structure of likes and

*Charles Stein in conversation (about 1987).

differences without measure and a sentimental poetics, which treats measure as convention. Logic is a collection of techniques for a theater, a representational space. It accounts adequately, therefore, for closure, for endings and deaths. Logics, however, typically do not account for beginnings. "We can assume nothing and assert nothing dogmatically," Hegel writes on the first page of his *Logic*; "nor can we accept the assertions and assumptions of others. It seems as if it were impossible to make a beginning at all" (Hegel, 1975, 3). As logics are necessarily founded upon that which is unconditioned and underived, any beginning is too late. To begin logically, thus, is to make a violent symbolic gesture, to throw certain elements together, as the etymology of "symbol" suggests. Dr. Johnson's famous comment on the violent yoking of ideas in metaphysical poetry is also relevant. The world that modern discourse addresses is fashioned of symbols bound by abstract force. Western culture has compensated for its belatedness by violence, and everyone who declares a logic—psycho-logics, socio-logics, or any science that proposes to reveal the unitary logical structure of a body of knowledge—is implicated. The modern western tradition is inherently technological; it uses the machine or social machinations to compensate for its failure to get in on the first creation.

Once a logic is established, its continuation is assured by its inherent mechanism. The dialectic needs argument as the souls of the Homeric underworld need blood. One is tempted by the Nietzschean hope that it might be overwhelmed or at least contained by the aphorism, the argument that dramatizes all of its dialectic ramifications in the *adequacy* of its language. The dialectic, however, resolves only in the apocalypse. To contradict it is to continue it: such are the desperate terms of modern history.

Wilson Harris writes, "Our grasp of time tends—everyone knows—to incorporate tragic proportions of determined futures and to overlook unspectacular resources of futurity and imagination that may alter perception through and away from fixed habit, greed and monoliths of terror" (Harris, 1983, xvi). And in this connection, he speaks of "blocked muses," the muses hemmed in by the massive compulsion in rationalism to repeat and, as Freud notes, submitting to its own mechanistic designs, to have the aim to live by having the aim to die.

Freud might have said more precisely that the aim of all *abstract* life is death. Inanimate matter was never more than a medium of life: protein happened to be available for the use of the living. Life requires *some* medium, and protein is complex enough to embody its dense, complex forms. In manifesting itself in protein, however, life is subject to the laws of protein, which are deathly, mechanical, repetitive. In manifesting itself in consciousness, in language, in desire, in family, in society, in technology, it is subject to the laws of these media and their mechanisms as well. All of the *resources* of life are machines, the resources of life are death, the resources of freedom are laws. The ancient fantasy is that we can annihilate the medium—the body and its laws—and have life, *pure* life, spirit, angelic matter. We have many rituals for the annihilation of the medium—not only religion but also art and work. All of life, according to Freud, is just such a ritual.

We cannot now afford to be sentimental about our vocabulary. We hear of the end of Man or the Subject, the end of Nature, the end of Culture, the end of History, Sex, Family, Desire, Power. The announcements seem dramatic and important. Writers compete for public space by trying to discover some still more fundamental Reality that has ended. (The end of Reality too has been announced.) The theoretical excitement arises from the vague hope that living will step free at last. All of the logics of liberations, however, are machines that are efficacious because they inexorably repeat themselves; thus they recur to the ritual of liberation and “die trying.”

As a matter of fact, none of these concepts are important in themselves; they are *only* concepts. Certain conceptual institutions have collapsed. Conceptuality as such, however, has not ended. The end of the usefulness of these great, organizing terms signals a staggering *increase* in available abstraction. Abstraction has freed itself from theology, which is to say, it has freed itself from this or that abstraction; now we have pure abstraction, the abstraction of abstraction. Life is manifested in various media from which it is never free. The freedom of living appears only in the density that arises in the interference patterns where living realizes itself profusely and declares its *mastery* of media. Life is no longer required to seek death to manifest itself.

Unlike logic, which must be prior to its own practice, poetics is properly *after* the fact of the poem. Charles Stein writes:

IT ISN'T A MATTER OF REPETITION:
 THE THING THAT EXCITES NARRATION
 HASN'T
 happened yet

(Stein, 1985, 6)

The problem for the writer of poetics is the opposite of the logician's: it is always too soon. The common intuition of the whole cannot be represented by symbols; it cannot be mediated. The purest moments of beginning are silent: the world is mute. Everything is what it is; everything is clear. The continuous space in which humans act, where they not only gesture and walk but also think, talk, and write, cannot be symbolized. In it, there are no infinitesimals, no discrete breaks, no logical atoms such as the units that Wittgenstein calls "facts" or the phonologists call "phonemes"; it can be made manifest only by action. Symbols are inherently symbols of division.

The emergence of the common knowledge from the silence is always disruptive and uncertain. Now we must know, in Philip Guston's words, "Where to locate everything and where everything can exist" (Guston, 1965, 38). Things can be located *or* they can exist; located existence is difficult. Guston discovered the problem in his careful attention to the paintings of Piero della Francesca; it may be discovered in any common space. Existent things do not have simple locations. This is the problem of the common knowledge. Everything is located in and exists in space—a completely real space that is familiar as a quotidien condition of living. It cannot, however, be symbolized; we can make no direct reference to it. It must be constructed: it can be lived, but *as knowledge* it must be constructed. For this reason, a poetics, not an epistemology, is required. We can no longer abide the scaleless world in which theory and its prose disciplines dislocate us.

I could say, simply, that the following essays attempt to explain what Ezra Pound meant in the imagist manifesto by "Go in fear of abstraction" and William Carlos Williams meant by the thematic line in *Paterson*, "No ideas but in things." Probably no two statements in twentieth-century poetics, however, have been more influential and less understood. It was not understood that a statement composed exclusively of concrete nouns and action verbs may be utterly abstract. Abstraction is a matter not of diction but of organization, of movement, of rhythm. Therefore I should say that the

purpose of the following essays can be specified in the words of Charles Olson, from *The Maximus Poems*, Volume 3:

an actual earth of value to
 construct one, from rhythm to
 image, and image is knowing, and
 knowing, Confucius says, brings one
 to the goal: nothing is possible without
 doing it.

(Olson, 1983, 584)

Or the words of Louis Zukofsky in "A"—12:

So goes: first, *shape*
 The creation—
 A mist from the earth,
 The whole face of the ground;
 Then rhythm—
 and breathed breath of life;
 Then *style*—
 That from the eye its function takes—
 "Taste" we say—a living soul.
 First, glyph; then syllabary,
 Then letters. Ratio after
 Eyes, tale in sound. First Dance. Then
 Voice. First, body—to be seen and to pulse
 Happening together.

(Zukofsky, 1978, 126)

These passages are not equivalent: Olson favors the ear, Zukofsky the eye; both however propose an unfamiliar and difficult orientation in relation to the common world. The task is not to interpret these passages but to create the working space in which their proposals renovate the possibility of action.

Western epistemology has distinguished rigorously between emotion and thought—between thought that agitates the body, *rhythm*, and thought that does not. Distinguishing these domains and enforcing their separation have been primary tasks of education and art. The poetics of the common knowledge proposes to fill the void in the breakdown of that epistemology, that education, and that art. Now all thought agitates the body. Now all knowledge is emotional. There are no inert facts, no cold ideologies, no contemplative reliefs from acting and being acted upon; all knowledge is potentially dangerous.

In this culture, we deal with the epistemological stress, for the most part, with narcotica, literal drugs, the distractions of the media, or the mechanisms of work. These are the functions of Thanatos. The promise of amelioration is not the promise of ideological critique and reform but the promise of a better drug, a bigger shopping mall, a more entertaining satellite network, a more spectacular amusement park, a more absorbing baseball game.

The poetics of the common knowledge looks not to drug the agitated body into the passivity that imitates the inanimate but to redeem emotion. Now everyone is responsible for their feelings as they were once responsible for their beliefs.

The break of modern methodology with classical metaphysics was profound. Modernism's claim of a continuous Western tradition of logocentrism beginning with the Greeks was a desperate ploy, the acceptance of which represents an almost universal failure of scholarly nerve. Metaphysics has been for more than three centuries a sentimentality—necessary to the prevailing cultural strategy but in an important sense, which has been at least half-understood and half-accepted, phony. It has been maintained and enforced by an aesthetic tradition, often masquerading as religion. Modern humanistic culture has been an exercise in bad faith ever since its inception.

The philosophic enterprise of Jacques Derrida—and his work is a notable instance of a *kind* of undertaking that has been central to the refashioning of the humanities and social sciences during the last two decades—is poised on an implicit history of the Western intellectual adventure that underwrites this sentimentality by way of negation. At best it is an eccentric history, a Nietzschean willing of a particular Platonism which is to be identified and rooted out. Derrida's readings are breathtakingly profound and gloriously subtle. Under his scrutiny, the most unlikely texts yield extraordinary passages of philosophic thought. His essays are engaging reading. The kind of personal authority that he assumes, however, removes him from the company of the common world. His texts can be read but not shared. As readers, if we engage his texts in the terms they themselves require, we too follow an idiosyncratic trajectory of textual production. For the true poet, as Blake notes, there is no other, and Derrida is a poet of this authoritarian kind. He enters the pleasure dome where his word is final. His texts are to be

tested, as Blake's visionary poems are tested, for their depth, their beauty, and their use. Derrida's writings present vision, not knowledge. This is not to deny the importance of Derrida's thought. His nihilism is rigorous and its methods demanding. It is not, as it is sometimes suggested, a justification of an any-thing-goes-know-nothingism. When vision is mistaken for knowledge, however, the culture is in the direst danger.

To be sure, if one's test of objectivity is sufficiently rigorous, all claims of truth fail, and we inherit a tradition that has required *absolute* rigor. Knowledge of the common world has been tested by the impossibly rigorous requirements that prevail in mathematics, logic, and the physical sciences.

The question of truth, however, is prior to epistemology. Epistemology is an administrative, not a foundational, science. Truth cannot be *founded* on another truth; such a thought obviously implies an infinite regress. A truth claim can be founded only upon an agreement concerning what constitutes a legitimate or adequate proof—that is, upon an ethical consideration.

Skepticism is irrefutable and empty. *The Poetics of the Common Knowledge* maps a space in which the ethical grounds of knowledge can be considered.

THE FIX

To be certain, we are in a *fix*.

The term *fix* cannot be easily resolved: we are placed, fastened securely, stabilized and unalterable, nonvolatile, killed and kept as a specimen under glass, directed, adjusted, ascribed, allotted, set aright, made ready, prepared, focused, repaired, de-sexed, hardened, bribed, provided for, doped up. We undertake a fix in the face of a breakdown. It is a word of people who confuse their lives and their knowledge of their lives with the structures of their machines. We have taken up an abode; we are in a predicament. It is the classic premise of comedy. A fix is possibly deadly, and it is, therefore, also a premise of tragedy.

When one is in the profoundest fix, every attempt to extricate oneself from it makes it worse. It is the hair of the dog, the spike in the vein. The crooked gambler, the crooked politician, and the hit man, *fix* things. We fix our attentions, purposes, affections, or eyes—the fix locks mind to body in a self-overcoming mechanism.

We are determined, dedicated to a teleology, which we are expected to discover and maintain: almost already something else, so being the very thing we destroy ourselves—victims of our own references to genetics, evolution, history, who must constantly tamper with our own mechanisms in order to stay on course. Our enterprise is not viable.

The *OED* quotes John Donne in an example of the alchemical jargon “fixion”: “There must be a fixion, a settling thereof, so that it shall not evaporate into nothing.” But if it is volatility itself that we want to fix? The alchemical drama is tragicomedy. It tells of a marriage of opposites, a merging of life into death: this is the boldest formulation of the fix. It is at least one way out of the dialectical mess. Near the end of *Phenomenology*, Hegel writes: “death becomes transfigured from its immediate meaning, viz. the non-being of the *particular* individual, into the *universality* of the Spirit who dwells in His community, dies in it every day, and is daily resurrected.” (Hegel, 1977, 475)

To say nothing of belief, is it even possible to *think* this thought? We can, of course, say it. The grammar is correct: *death is life*. Structurally, it is correct—that is, this is the unstructuring required by structure. In the face of actual death, it means nothing. Grammatical rectitude or even grammatical necessity is not enough. Is it a thought, or is it a grammatical condition, a logical requirement, just beyond thought?

Everything now is in question. Everything, *including this statement*, is in question. The liar’s sentence (“I always lie”): if it is true, it is false; if it is false, it is true. The classic fix. Its value flickers back and forth with the speed of the mind, which hurries in an attempt to catch itself in the act of changing or slows down in an attempt to see how it works. It is not just this strange self-embracing sentence, this narcissistic grammatical aberration—and a presumably insignificant group of similar self-referential statements—however, which enters this peculiar oscillation. The language as a whole ultimately refers back to itself. Of course, it is possible to formalize important fragments of a language. Saussure, Chomsky, Montague, and many others have developed useful techniques, and, within their domains, the formalisms give statistically reliable results, but Wittgenstein writes: “All propositions are of equal value” (Wittgenstein, 1961, 145). And he realizes that “All propositions, *including this one*, are of equal value.” Describing

itself as a proposition, it is no “higher”; it cannot master itself any more than it can master language as a whole. Thus, Wittgenstein ends the *Tractatus* with the declaration that all of his own propositions are nonsensical—all of his propositions, including that they are all nonsensical, are nonsensical—the *reductio ad absurdum* of the philosophic tradition.

A *fixion* is a fiction, an untruth that is true or posited as truth, a narrativization of the fix, so the liar of the paradox is given time to elaborate both the false as true and the true as false—that is, the dialectic. The production of language goes into infinite regression and self-proliferation, so the conditions that are proposed for thought turn out themselves to be unthinkable.

Since the seventeenth century, if not since the sixth century B.C., the formal structure of language has been confused with the structure of mind and world. So variable, vast, and fascinating is this medium that we have pursued it, or consumed it, as if it might be meaning in itself. The interplay of the abstract concept, on the one hand, and the concrete event, on the other, generated an overwhelming historical dynamism. For every advance in abstract thought, a renewed aesthetic commitment generated new energies and realized new possibilities. Conversely, every aesthetic breakthrough called forth and required an ever more athletic abstract mind. Now, however, the *formal* possibilities, both in art and science, have been realized. The new, nondialectical logic that appeared in the aftermath of World War II can isolate and formalize this or that aspect of the world without regard to totality. Unlike the old logics, the new requires nothing of the world it describes. Therefore, nothing can be learned about the world by studying logic or grammar. The content of the new logic is purpose and desire, not the necessary forms of mind or substance. In cybernetics and information theory, one draws distinctions in spaces that are called into existence by the distinctions themselves. The techniques of abstraction are no longer underwritten by an originating unity. We are, thus, of a time that does not find its origin in the *logos*; we are *beyond* the closure of metaphysics. “In the beginning there was information,” Fred Dretske writes. “The word came later” (Dretske, 1981, vii). Granted, as the critics of the tradition of the *logos* will note, Dretske’s formulation defers the problem that they take as primary, but, from the new perspective, the deferment is not critical; the new logic does not require the pursuit of the

infinite regress. The slack or difference that was fatal to metaphysics is a built-in feature of the new procedures, indeed a requirement of their practicality. Difference is precisely the quantity that cybernetics measures.

We consign our lives to a mysterious semiotic domain, which is so vast and various that it cannot be theorized or it can be theorized only piecemeal in relation to this or that particular project. The institutions in the culture, in order to preserve their systemic nature, define a universe of possibility in relation to the particular function that they serve rather than to a universal theory. The power of this new thought derives *not* from the methodological reduction of multiplicity to universal rules but from the discovery of techniques by which complex and rigorously effective structures can be generated *without* universal reference. Knowledge is now statistically reliable.

We do not know how to characterize our own time, except by the fact that it is *after* something else that was definitive: modernism or industrialism or structuralism, for example. The one positive designation that has gained some currency is "the age of information." To say the least, the mere *quantity* of information affords the term considerable usefulness: according to one prediction, "as much information will be generated and distributed between 1987 and 1990 as in all of previous human history" (Bunnell, 1987, 14). The indexing systems that proved barely adequate to organize and access printed materials begin to break down in the face of this amount of information. It might be more accurate to speak of an age clogged with information.

In one of the most important essays in literary theory of the past decade, "Local Transcendence: Cultural Criticism, Postmodernism, and the Romanticism of Detail," Alan Liu provides a devastating critique of what he calls "cultural criticism . . . in high postmodernist forms: cultural anthropology, new cultural history, New Historicism, New Pragmatism, new and/or post-Marxism, and finally that side of French theory—overlapping with post-Marxism—that may be labeled French pragmatism . . ." (Liu, 1990, 76). In a short essay, he demonstrates that the foremost strategies for generating cultural analysis produce only "a culture-*spiel* as determinedly depthless in its play with representational surfaces, facades, screens, and media of all sorts as a vinyl LP hand spun by a rap artist, that master of culture-*spiel* able to

fragment long-play metanarrative into *petits récits*" (Liu, 1990, 48). These spiels, he tells us, recycle a familiar, and tired, romanticism that *appeals* to practice but provides no practice other than the appeal to practice. He writes: "If I had to put my criticism of high postmodern cultural criticism in brief, it would come to this: 'context' is not the same as 'culture.' Context throws over the surface of culture an articulated grid, a way of speaking and thinking culture, that allows us to model the scenes of human experience with more felt significance—more reality, more practicality, more aesthetic impact—than appears anywhere but on the postmodern version of romantic 'nature': a screen" (Liu, 1990, 99).

"Culture" is now available only by way of the virtuoso performances of the expert. We are dazzled by the generation of meaning out of details so arcane that they are not even shared by a cult of initiates. The culture critic addresses the question of meaning in relation to a local pastiche that is determined by the contingency of a particular reader's reading. The hope is that, if the texture of a particular cultural swatch can be examined in enough detail, the larger pattern will be implied.

We now enter a time of utter fragmentation. In contrast to the high postmodernist cultural critics, we must see that we are radically local. We entertain the fragments of no whole. Languages are invented again and again before our eyes, and in the perpetually perishing present. They manifest themselves and remain or disappear by virtue of whatever contingencies of attention they engage. *Beyond* the birth trauma and the Oedipal dilemma, we attend daily the regeneration of a common world. The 'things' we compose—it is hard give them a more specific name—are local and carry no force beyond the locality in which their actual *uses* are their only principles.

We have thought that there is one logic and many possible worlds that satisfy it. Rather there are many logics and only one, *postlogical* world. Logics are the content, not the structures, of the world. The conception of the artist has been that he or she observes the universal logic and fills in the colors of its particular occasions. All freedom has been conceived in terms of variant images of the controlling logic. Literary theory now, rather than desecrating the logical preconditions of literary activity, must give attention to the richness of concrete action that proliferating logical spaces afford. Thus, it does not attend to absence and longing for lost logical

origins, to the self-resistance of theory, or to the density of local texture that bespeaks the residue of the great nineteenth-century intellectual systems such as Marxism and Freudianism; it attends to the *amplitude* of time and space, which is nonlogical in its proliferation of niches for living and casual in its destruction of them.

There is no way out of the fix. We are recursive beings. If the species is caught in an infinite loop, the condition is hopeless. The resources of a finite earth will be destroyed before our philosophic needs are satisfied. If, however, the recursive loop can be conceived as finite, humans as psychological, sociological, and cosmological beings can achieve stability *without* coercion.

RADICAL MODERNISM

The abiding problem that Descartes left us is uncertainty over proper human scale. Descartes's tricky little argument proves something about the grammar of "ego" but not about the grammar of proper names: I can know that I am I without knowing who my "I" is. Descartes's *cogito* was of a different scale than René Descartes himself. As Nietzsche discovered, on solid Cartesian grounds, he was all of the names in history. Nietzsche's argument and its repetition in this century is solid evidence of our lack of a concrete realm of history that comes into existence as concretely measured time, actual ratios between actual events, not between events and presupposed, theoretical backgrounds. Nietzsche might have argued as justifiably that his ego had no name, that all names belong only to history. We measure ourselves, though they are useless as measures, by scaleless archetypes—Jesus or Oedipus, or by the Nietzschean self-sublating hero. Likewise, the lack of meaningful scale is apparent in the architecture of cityscapes, sprawling suburbs, and art. The music of Wagner, Mahler, and Bruckner suffer from a lack of scale as does the music of Webern—the nineteenth-century composers as arbitrary in their gargantuanism as the twentieth-century composer in his miniaturism. More recently, Stockhausen and Glass, for all of their differences from the earlier composers and from one another, are similarly scaleless. Tolstoy's great work fails not from its lack of center, as Henry James and Percy Lubbock complain, but from its lack of scale, as do Browning's *The Ring and the Book* and Joyce's *Finnegans*

Wake. The problem is not the mere size of these texts but our inability to know how big they actually are.

Since the seventeenth century, the official philosophy of the West has been unable to account for the profoundest subjectivity or the profoundest objectivity. We have known, rather, an objective subject and a subjective object. In our relative subjectivity, we discover an arena in which we become giddy with talk, and in contemplation of our relative objectivity, we discover certain predictable patterns that afford significant control over nature. As William Carlos Williams notes, however, "Without measure we are lost. But we have lost even the ability to count. . . . I repeat, a new measure by which may be ordered our poems as well as our lives" (Williams, 1969, 340). Lacking scale and measure, we can define the world only by halves, and our definition requires a reconciliation of radically different modes of discourse, a reconciliation that is possible only in a generous theoretical sense. We have been required to subvert the structures on which we stake our conceptions of the world. The intellectual tradition seems bent upon its own self-cancellation. It bespeaks the possibilities of a renewal that at the same time it denies. This is the agony of modernism, clearly apparent in Descartes, and most poignant perhaps in the *angst* of a Heidegger, Schönberg, or Eliot, but now, sadly and widely suffered by the masses, who turn their backs on the modern and seek comfort in the teachings of Khomeini, Moon, Swaggart, Robertson, and Falwell, or who, in the same spirit of fundamentalism, take up learned jargons of aesthetics or the social sciences. We are caught between idolatry and nihilism. The dialectic produced the irresistible force and the unmovable object and then stalled. In the infinite domain that opens, the most spectacular kinesis produces no measurable motion: having travelled an immense distance, there is still an infinite distance to go.

Modernism and postmodernism are not philosophies, nor do they belong to particular historical epochs; they are modes of historical action. Modernism expresses the will to begin again by identifying language with being. The new beginning inevitably upsets the conventional practice of life catastrophically. It is concerned not with the purity of beginning but with the stability that arises from beginning again—the reality that is never reduced to familiarity and predictability. Modernists quickly despair of language and are happy to return to inarticulation, opening logical space after logical space, sometimes in dizzying proliferation. The

Plato of the dialogues is a modernist in this sense. Postmodernism is administrative and pedagogical. Sometimes the divergence between being and language becomes so intense that it can be enforced only by totalitarian organization and violence, an all too familiar fact of this century.

From the fifth century B.C. until the nineteenth century, the equation of being and language continued to produce at least occasionally new and unexpected relationships. Hegel, however, spoke for a crisis in modernism—a crisis for the possibility of intellectual renovation. A profound modernist himself, he expressed the enthusiasm of a culture that was committed not only to beginning again but to including both beginning and end in its beginning. Nineteenth-century European culture was imperialistic even on the transcendental scale: the time-honored modernist strategy entered a postmodern infinite regress. Thereafter modernism was not a philosophic strategy but a historical fact. The century between the revolutions of 1848 and the end of World War II was a time of unparalleled intellectual, military, political, and industrial upheaval. For the lack of a better name, we have referred to it as a time of “modernism,” which means only, “we have never seen anything like this before,” and truly we had not. This modernism is not a collection of styles that had its day and faded. It was thrust upon us as an effect of our prodigious—and perhaps cancerous—productivity.

Postmodernism, the response to the time *after* the apocalypse, is a philosophy of administration, the business of business schools. It is necessary to manage the inevitable divergence of being and knowing which follows the modernist catastrophe. As a social concern, it is a counterpart of the solid waste problem. If we have too much garbage, we also have too much “good” stuff, too much poetry, too many paintings, too much music. The immense proliferation has turned even the modernist masterpieces into embarrassments of riches, so we must work as hard to distribute the spiritual booty as we do to bury the waste. If we are now postmodern, it means only that the newness has worn off, that dadaist goofiness has become commonplace.* It remains to realize the dadaist sanity.

The Poetics of Common Knowledge is an unapologetic mod-

*See, for example, Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Marcus, 1989).

ernist essay, concerned not with *carrying-on* but with beginning and beginning again, with the rhythm of beginning, and the measure of “true necessity” by that rhythm. I assume not only that beginning again is possible but that about 1910, a vast energy gathered toward a new beginning, manifesting itself in the continuous world war and utter technological renovation that dominated the first half of this century. By this propulsion we escaped the gravity of Western humanism. The human creature has internalized its machinery in its evolution. We have entered the cyborgian world of science fiction where we confront creatures—indeed all of us—to which the distinction between living things and mechanism does not apply. Donna Haraway notes: “By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics” (Haraway, 1985, 66). Our fascination to ourselves as cyborgian creatures is that we combine in our beings the predictability of machines with the reckless, independence of singular creatures. It is an attractive but dangerous combination. Machines do not began again, do not renovate themselves, do not produce the freshness and new variety which is required to maintain the order of the system. The cyborgian world is an adventure in order, a construction of the world from unique components that are always in danger of being overwhelmed by their own inherent tendency to repeat, simulate, and generalize.

The failure to attend to the strange centaur world—half industrial waste land and half computer simulation—that we inhabit is extraordinary. Thus, Roland Barthes, in 1971: “The break, as is frequently stressed, is seen to have taken place in the last century with the appearance of Marxism and Freudianism; since then there has been no further break, so that in a way it can be said that for the last hundred years we have been living in repetition” (Barthes, 1977, 155–56). Fredric Jameson, in 1981: Marx “alongside Freud and Nietzsche [is] one of the great negative diagnosticians of *contemporary* culture” (Jameson, 1981, 281, my emphasis).

Is it not remarkable that these giants of nineteenth-century materialism are accounted contemporary? The thought of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche not only belongs to the twilight time of classical physics, it is profoundly predicated upon the Newtonian worldview. To be sure, there has been no “break,” no new coherent

world picture; it has been rather a rupture and a flowing, which is the condition of radical modernity. No century in human history has seen such radical change in the material conditions of life as the one just past. The results of systematic research and technological development as the basis of an ever-expanding world economy are obvious and profound. The refusal to recognize the accompanying intellectual upheaval borders on psychosis.

Barthes writes: "Just as Einsteinian science demands that the relativity of the frames of reference be included in the object studied, so the combined action of Marxism, Freudianism and structuralism demands, in literature, the relativization of the relations of writer, reader and observer (critic)" (Barthes, 1977, 156). It is an ill-informed metaphor. This "relativistic" object that Barthes discovers is not the "object" of modern physics: Einsteinian physics does not turn physical space-time into textual hash. On the contrary, Einstein declares that *every* locus of observation is absolute. Barthes's prevalence represents a serious setback, a loss of fifty years at least. Charles Beard (Beard, 1934) and Carl Becker (Becker, 1932) were further along this line of thought in the 1930s; Ezra Pound in "Cavalcanti: Medievalism" (Pound, 1965, 129–200), William Carlos Williams in "The Poem as a Field of Action" (Williams, 1969, 280–90), and Gertrude Stein in *Lectures in America* (Stein, 1985) were further along. The great materialistic systems of the nineteenth century, bereft of the science that underwrote them, have been recycled as aesthetic and reactionary political strategies. The technological procedures that dominate contemporary culture have been assimilated by the cultural studies industry to antiquated notions of critique.

"The Newtonian-Euclidean subconscious," to use Milič Čapek's term, has powerfully reasserted itself. Čapek writes, "the mental habits which constitute what may be called our 'Newtonian-Euclidean subconscious,' and whose roots lie deep in the phylogenetic heritage of man are too obstinate to be modified by a bare mastery of mathematical formalism, which merely suppresses without eliminating them" (Čapek, 1961, xv). Čapek, of course, speaks of thinkers who have mastered the mathematics and *still* have trouble consistently thinking the new intellectual world (it is so strange), not the students of culture who, in the face of mathematical ignorance have retreated to the safety of a bedraggled romanticism that forestalls criticism by criticizing itself. Much of the

literary theoretical activity of the past two decades has been a willful attempt to regenerate the illusion of Newtonian-Euclidean space as a cultural arena. It has been profoundly reactionary, profoundly unwilling or unable to deal with a world that is as alien as the world our science describes. We are radically uprooted from the neat theoretical worlds that relieve our confusions with talk of material objects and physical forces. The Marxist notion of conflict, the Nietzschean notion of will, and the Freudian notion of desire now have the status that angels had for the classical physicists.

The distinction that Barthes obscures—and it is almost universally obscured in contemporary literary theory—is between the continuous manifold of physical space and the discreet manifold of logical space. In a continuous manifold, there are no objects—no Cartesian space-points, no atoms, no phonemes (i.e., discrete semantic atoms). Everything is dispersed throughout the spatial field. From any particular frame of reference everything is precisely located, but from a universal perspective the entire spatial field is densely saturated with every object in it. Like many other theorists who work in the aftermath of structuralism, Barthes comprehends only the discrete manifold of logical or grammatical space. His textualized object is the Newtonian object that must absorb the vagueness of location that absolute time and space require. Barthes speaks not for a meaningful relativism but for a Euclidean-Newtonianism with the jitters: “Each poetic word is thus an unexpected object, a Pandora’s box from which fly out all the potentialities of language; it is therefore produced and consumed with a peculiar curiosity, a kind of sacred relish. This Hunger of the Word, common to the whole of modern poetry, makes poetic speech terrible and inhuman.” (Barthes, 1967, 48) Barthes suggests that modernity moves toward a new Eden, where it will overcome the crippling double bind that it suffers and produce a “literature” that is not literature, a “history” that is not history. He speaks for a desperate romanticism.

This does not mean that we must now adjust our paradigms to relativity theory, quantum mechanics, chaos theory, or the theory of self-organizing systems. These are in fact, for the most part, probably irrelevant to human life; they do not deal with the common scale. We cannot expect a new epochal paradigm. It is paradigmatic thought itself that has come to an end. Of course, we have

local paradigms that provide administrative procedures for particular purposes, but language does not contain a picture of itself. We have reached the profoundest level of abstraction. The *intellectual* adventure is over. The *logic* of the situation is revealed: certain rules produce certain results. The linguistic media define zones of logical possibility, and they are all inhabited. We cannot cover every point in the space, of course, but as in the infinitesimal calculus, we can approach the limit and forget the remainders that are not significant anyway. Life is not now renovated in relation to the *logos* or in relation to the absence of the *logos*. It is like updated software: the intellectually new is not *fundamentally* different from the old, but there is a lot of new documentation to read. Radical modernism equates not being and language but being and consciousness. Mind does not carry out beyond knowledge into the unconscious structures of language. Knowledge is, Gertrude Stein reminds us again and again, what we know.

POETIC KNOWLEDGE

We are the daily victims of an addictive aestheticism: a huge distraction industry produces consumable images of meaning and efficacious action, creating a universal environment for egos that are at once highly prized and literally superfluous. The Self is, at this point, a luxurious reference to a bygone era—as it were, a collectable antique. For example, we support symphony orchestras the size of the army of Renaissance city-states to play music that was written a century or more ago while excluding most contemporary music from the concert halls. Beethoven's evocation of the historical individual's relationship to eternity becomes for the posthistorical listeners an Image that relates them to a reality requiring their participation and, at the same time, systematically excluding them. The German tradition in music, as it is now purveyed, is a perfect cultural product because it cancels itself out, allowing its audience the feeling of meaning without the world in which that kind of meaning can be realized.

The education industry is deeply implicated in the recycling of history. Harold Bloom writes: "The teacher of literature now in America, far more than the teacher of history or philosophy and religion is condemned to teach the presentness of the past, because history, philosophy, and religion have withdrawn as agents from

the Scene of Instruction, leaving the bewildered teacher of literature at the altar, terrifiedly wondering whether he is to be sacrifice or priest" (Bloom, 1975, 39). Professor Bloom's terror and wonder are explicable. History, philosophy, and religion are disciplines of knowledge; literature is a discipline of taste. In a culture that has a taste for history but no historical foundation, the aesthetic domain is inflated. Moral, political, and religious meanings are piggybacked on abstract languages that relate only to their own systematic requirements. They are statistical manifestations, shared hallucinations, that appear when light hits abstract forms at certain angles. It is a powerful strategy. The only limits are practical and pedagogical: initiating everyone into a second world—a world quite alien to the one the student discovers on the street—is a massive job. In monolithic cultures, which limit themselves to a few controlling images, education can provide the necessary hermeneutical tools. The abstract code, however, is able to assimilate endless particulars and, moreover, requires a continually broadening base of particulars to feed its ravenous generalizing powers; soon more images and interpretations than can be reasonably managed accrue. Students can be exposed to great diversity, but they cannot be given the confidence of a culture. Without the convenience of a relatively small canon, the field is simply too vast.

The literature teacher's anxiety for which Professor Bloom eloquently speaks, however, should be mitigated by the fact that the privileged scene of instruction and its priestcraft have been effectively replaced by a universal media environment that instructs the masses directly. The institutions of high art are the product of an ideology that has itself eroded away. Art activity has not changed, but the culture has changed around it, giving it a different status. Although the forms of artistic production are still vital, and the jargon of the art business—classifications of genres, categories of judgement, and so forth—is still in common use, art has ceased to be a producer of value and has become merely a producer of descriptions and commodities in a statistical field. Ideology is replaced with the Nielsen ratings and the opinion polls.

The replacement of the elite tradition with the popular media is now more or less complete. The change appears democratic because of the size of the population involved, but in practical terms it is not a significant change. A people can be better tyrannized by itself than by an elite. Aura is not necessary in an aesthetically