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Introduction: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism

Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse.
Fail worse again. Still worse again.

Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*

All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already.

Franz Kafka, *On Parables/ Von Den Gleichnissen*

If the preoriginal reason of difference, non-indifference, responsibility, a fine risk, conserves its signification, the couple *skepticism and refutation of skepticism* has to make its appearance.

Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*
/Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence

But to distance oneself thus from the habitual structure of reference, to challenge and complicate our common assumptions about it, does not amount to saying that there is *nothing* beyond language.

Jacques Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other"

I.

Deconstructive interpretation has always been a rather difficult and risky enterprise, perhaps delivering too much and not promising enough. Without proposing a complete break from the received paradigms or assuring the critical overcoming of the past, this mode of inquiry implies both continuity and rupture, repetition and difference, affiliation and disconnection. Neither faithful preservation nor complete destruction, deconstructive intervention operates instead as a reinscription and a transformation of the established patterns of thinking. In this book, I examine two crucial moments in poststructuralist theory—its affiliation with modernism and its revision of skepticism—where this mode of intervention characteristic of deconstruction has been most frequently ignored or misread. As a result, deconstruction of skepticism has been notoriously mistaken for the skepticism of deconstruction, and a certain reinvention of modernism confused with the impasse of aestheticism.

The effects of this misreading are rather familiar and widespread. In the numerous debates concerning the impact of deconstruction, charges of skepticism and aestheticism are levied almost interchangeably to repudiate the paralyzing consequences of language severed from the task of representation and reduced to pure textuality. When deconstruction is perceived as the most extreme manifestation of postmodernity, the very appearance of the term “skepticism” implies a strong and reductive value judgment about the impasse, deadlock, or exhaustion of postmodern thinking.¹ Just as frequently, Derrida’s work is seen as a continuation of modern aestheticism with its rejection of representation for the sake of formal experimentation.² Needless to say, this wholesale repudiation of deconstruction closes and distorts the debate from the very start. In this book, I argue that the reductive claims about the “skepticism” or “aestheticism” of poststructuralist theory make us overlook the deeper consequences of the *deconstruction* of skepticism carried out in both the philosophical and the literary discourses of modernity. Because the issue of skepticism is so frequently associated with the most superficial dismissals of deconstruction, poststructuralism’s own engagement with skepticism remains an untheorized and often ignored problem. A similar observation can be made about the affiliation of deconstruction with modernism.

I bring together these two areas of inquiry—deconstruction of skepticism and the aesthetic turn of poststructuralist theory—not merely because they are the most frequently misread issues but

because they are in fact interrelated and complementary projects. Deconstruction of skepticism and the poststructuralist affiliation with modernist aesthetics represent two different moments of the critique of reason—two different scenes where the transparency of truth and the generality of linguistic structures is brought into question. In both cases, the interruption of the totality of knowledge reveals the excess of signification incompatible with the coherence of discourse. Questioning the sweeping comprehensiveness of the negative thesis about the impossibility of knowledge in general, the deconstruction of skepticism severs the bond between the particular and the universal, that is, between the failure of the specific claim to knowledge and the totalizing conclusion about the impossibility of knowledge as such. This incompatibility between the particular and the general is reread as a positive interruption of the totality of knowledge—an interruption which makes an affirmation of radical alterity possible. Bringing into a sharper focus the uniqueness of style and the excess of rhetoric, the affiliation between deconstructive theory and modern aesthetics discloses another location where the transition between the generality of linguistic structures and their particular manifestation is irremediably broken. The main difficulty here lies in the interpretation of rhetoric, so that its local instability is not generalized too quickly, as it is sometimes assumed, in terms of the negative epistemology of figurative language or in terms of the endless recesses of linguistic self-reflection. I argue that the aesthetic turn of deconstruction allows us to reread the instability of rhetoric as the figuration of an unpredictable event, whose occurrence cannot be derived from the generality of linguistic structures. The possibility of such an unexpected event sustains the signification of the other and the non-identical in language. What deconstructive intervention performs in the case of both skepticism and modern aesthetics is, therefore, a shift from the negative epistemological consequences of linguistic instabilities to the emphatic affirmation of the other of reason and the other of the subject.

This project began with the intention of rethinking the relationship between deconstruction and modern aesthetics. As Derek Attridge eloquently argues, the significance of modern literature for Derrida's project can hardly be overestimated: "as a peculiar institution which sheds light on institutionality, as a site of resistance to the philosophical tradition of conceptual thought, as a series of singular (but repeatable) acts that demand singular (but responsible) responses...literature is clearly of major importance in Derrida's work."³ And yet, despite numerous studies devoted to Derrida's readings of key modernist figures (Artaud, Mallarmé, Joyce, Kafka), and despite the proliferating

deconstructive analyses of modern texts, this crucial relationship is far from being sufficiently articulated because it is all too often associated with the celebration of textual experimentation, self-reflective language, or the aesthetic subversion of meaning.⁴ What needs to be explicitly addressed here are the two interrelated difficulties generated by the complex positioning of modernist aesthetics within deconstructive theory. On the one hand, we are confronted with the more general problem of the connection between literature and philosophy (the relation, which strangely bifurcates deconstruction into philosophical and literary criticism); on the other hand, we are faced with the specific crisis characteristic of modernism, namely, with the difficult relation between aesthetics and social practice. In the context of philosophy, the affinity between poststructuralist criticism and modernist aesthetics is interpreted either as a rhetorical subversion of philosophical categories or as a suspect evasion (either on the part of Derrida himself or on the part of his followers) of philosophical argumentation.⁵ In the specific context of modernism, however, this quarrel between philosophy and literature, performed both in Derrida's work and in deconstructive criticism, is supplanted by a different debate concerning the ethico-political stakes of deconstruction. Because of the problematic social positioning of modern aesthetics, the effects of the rhetorical subversion of meaning can be misread as the infinite play of self-reflective language, separated from the tasks of representation and social obligations. Here the detractors of deconstruction, like Habermas, Schulte-Sasse, or Huyssen, argue that Derrida's investment in modernism, evident in the suspension of representation and reference, repeats the characteristically modernist gesture of withdrawal from social praxis and thereby leads to the exhaustion, atrophy, or failure of the deconstructive project.⁶ In response, poststructuralist critics, like Derek Attridge or J. Hillis Miller, make a case for "a strong ethico-political summons implicit in the constant attention in . . . [Derrida's literary] essays to the uniqueness of the other, the function of alterity in any movement or consciousness of the self."⁷ What emerges from this debate is the question of how "the attention to the uniqueness of the other" can change the place of aesthetics in social praxis.

At stake in these discussions is not only a complex negotiation of Derrida's relationship to literature and literary theory but also a rethinking of modernism. In this context it is a sort of paradox that the critics who, like Schulte-Sasse and Huyssen, most emphatically insist on the homology between deconstruction and modern aesthetics in fact

tend to produce the most narrow understanding of both. This sense of constraining closure is perhaps not so surprising, since the argument that "poststructuralism is primarily a discourse of and about modernism" all too often posits both modernism and poststructuralism as the exhausted paradigms to be overcome by a new critical discourse of postmodernism.⁸ Interpreted as a belated, and therefore already obsolete, theoretical elaboration of the modernist project, Derrida's philosophy is construed as a continuation of modern aestheticism with its emphasis on the autonomy of art, self-referential language, and formal experimentation. Like modernist experimentation, the interventions of deconstruction seem to be confined to formal and aesthetic concerns, that is, to writing, language, and textuality. Arguing that poststructuralist problematization of representational language leads to an increasing separation from social and ethical concerns, Huyssen and Schulte-Sasse dismiss deconstruction on the grounds that it merely offers a theory of "a modernism all too confident in its rejection of representation and reality, in its denial of the subject, of history, and the subject of history"—that is, as a theory of modernism "*at the stage of its exhaustion.*"⁹ As the rhetoric of exhaustion, atrophy, or impasse suggests, such a narrow understanding of Derrida's investment in modernist aesthetics in fact closes the debate rather than opens up new interpretative possibilities or critical reassessments.

In order to diagnose the philosophical and linguistic presuppositions informing this misreading of both deconstruction and modernism, I became engaged in another, this time philosophical, scene of contestation over Derrida's work, that is, in the attempt to define deconstruction as a kind of skepticism. Skepticism, usually understood as a negative or critical attitude questioning the possibility of knowledge and truth, is not so much a specific philosophical position as it is a challenge to the legitimation of knowledge: "skepticism has not functioned in philosophy as merely one more position alongside idealism, materialism, and realism. Instead, it has been like an anonymous letter received by a dogmatic philosopher who does hold a position. The letter raises fundamental problems for the recipient by questioning whether he had adequate grounds for his assertions and assumptions."¹⁰ It is somewhat ironic that the dissemination of Derrida's texts in the last thirty years is more and more frequently seen as a surreptitious circulation of such a deadly letter—a letter which, however, raises more problems for its sender than its recipients. In the aftermath of French poststructuralism, the problem of skepticism is persistently raised in both philosophical and literary

studies in order to dramatize the “paralyzing” consequences of the postmodern critiques of reason: “postmodernism . . . [is] a continuation of the metaphysical skeptical tradition, reaching its dead end in deconstruction.”¹¹

As the most extreme philosophical conceptualization of the impasse of thinking, the charge of skepticism not only responds to a similar linguistic problem discussed in the context of modern aesthetics but also interprets this problem in an analogous manner. Here, too, the debated issues are the apparent rejection of representation and the subject for the sake of “pure” textuality. The arguments about the skepticism of deconstruction invariably claim that Derrida’s critique of representation and reference destroys the correspondence between language and the world and in effect leads to a paralyzing notion of linguistic immanence. Severed from any relationship to the external world, language becomes self-referential, leaving the subject trapped in the “prison-house” of textuality. Although the debates about the skepticism of deconstruction situate Derrida firmly in the context of the postmodern critiques of reason, this different contextualization (within philosophical postmodernity rather than literary modernism) does not introduce any critical breakthrough in the reception of Derrida’s work. On the contrary, it reproduces the same rhetoric of exhaustion, atrophy, or paralysis—paralysis which this time is extended to the postmodern scene in general. The fact that these very different critiques of deconstruction—perceived as a continuation of either philosophical skepticism or modernist aestheticism—share the same presuppositions about Derrida’s problematization of representation and reference points to the necessity of bringing these two areas of inquiry together.

Engaging both of these critiques, my book is composed of two parts. The first part discusses the reinterpretations of skepticism in the thought of Stanley Cavell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas; the second part traces the affinity between post-structuralist discourse and modern aesthetics through detailed readings of literary texts by Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, and Witold Gombrowicz. It is the central argument of my book that the signification of alterity and its relation to the limits of rationality figures as a crucial concern in both the poststructuralist rereading of skepticism and its affiliation with modernist aesthetics. This focus on the critical revision of skepticism and modernism allows for a significant intervention not only into a reception of deconstruction but also into the broader debate on postmodernism. The implications of my argument

make it possible to move past the endless discussions of the impasse of postmodernity, the exhaustion of subjectivity, or the collapse of reason, and to articulate instead an alternative interpretation of postmodern discourse—an interpretation that would account for the crucial role of alterity in language, community, and aesthetics.

By deconstructing the subject-centered understanding of language, the critical rereading of skepticism in the philosophical texts I discuss discloses those social and ethical aspects of signification that exceed the limits of rationality. Consequently, the reconceptualization of skepticism in poststructuralist discourse is not just motivated by a failure of knowledge and representation; rather, it is intertwined with a critique of subject-centered reason and with subsequent conceptualization of language beyond the “exhausted” paradigm of the subject. More specifically, this reinterpretation implies that the significance of skepticism is not confined to the familiar negative thesis regarding the impossibility of knowledge or truth. As Cavell, Levinas, and Derrida suggest in different ways, there is an entirely different aspect of skepticism—let us call it provisionally “an affirmative” signification of skepticism—which both skepticism’s self-understanding and its philosophical refutation fail to register. Preceding the distinction between the negative and the positive, this peculiar mode of affirmation discloses what remains excluded from positive knowing. If skepticism’s self-interpretation negates the possibility of knowledge about the world and others, the reappraisals of skepticism at work in Cavell, Levinas, and Derrida take it to be an interruption of the totality of knowledge—an interruption that confronts us with a disquieting encumbrance of alterity. Consequently, Cavell, Levinas and Derrida neither advance new skeptical arguments “cast in linguistic metaphors” nor refute the classical claims of skepticism. They focus instead on changing the significance of skepticism and its place in the philosophical tradition. No longer concerned with the subject as the center of meaning, such a critical reassessment of skepticism allows the discussion of language to be re-situated in the context of alterity and the discursive community. In other words, the interpretation of the failure of the subject-centered conception of language is not an end in itself (although it has been frequently misread as a dead end) but a preliminary, and risky, step in articulating those aspects of signification that are incommensurate with the coherence of rational discourse: in Levinas and Derrida, the emphasis falls on the articulation of a non-thematizable alterity; in Cavell, on the precedence of community and intersubjective agreements underlying linguistic praxis. Consequently, the reappraisal of skepticism pro-

vides an answer to the widespread objection that the poststructuralist critique of representation merely exhausts the paradigm of the subject underlying Western conceptions of reason and language without, however, overcoming this paradigm in any significant way.¹²

The deconstruction of skepticism not only raises the issue of the other of reason and the other of the subject but also points to different, and seemingly conflicting, articulations of alterity within the poststructuralist project: from the textual emphasis on the excess of the materiality of language questioning the self-evidence of truth to the socio-ethical considerations of the claims of the other person and linguistic community. What allows for a certain rapprochement between these two articulations of the other of reason is precisely a turn to modern aesthetics where the intense confrontation between the claims of alterity and the claims of rationality is perhaps more readable than in philosophical discourse. In my readings of the literary texts of modernism, I am especially interested in those aspects of literary form, figurative language, and rhetoric that stage the conflict between alterity and rationality in ways inaccessible to philosophical argumentation. What I ask here is why modern aesthetics is, to use Cavell's phrase, so "haunting"—that is, what kind of disturbing demands does it make upon reason, the subject, and philosophy itself.¹³ In order to recognize these demands, however, we need to rethink the effects of rhetoric in the social typography of language. Irreducible to the mere manifestation of linguistic undecidability, or to the failure of representation, rhetoric in this context reveals the signification of alterity as an irreparable discord in the grammar of language games. Although frequently interpreted as a recoil into the self-referential language of aestheticism, the limits of representation dramatized through the excess of rhetoric in fact contest any unproblematic assertions of the autonomy of the work of art, not the least because such claims are inseparable from the corollary claims of truth in the separate domain of reason.¹⁴ My readings of modernist texts not only disclose and criticize the often unacknowledged complicity between skepticism and aestheticism (insofar as both terms suggest the idea of language severed from the task of representation and reduced to formalism) but also propose a different articulation of modern aesthetics— aesthetics no longer limited to textual experimentation devoid of any social or ethical significance. In contrast to interpretations of modernism based on the autonomy of art, I argue that these texts focus instead on those aspects of literary language and aesthetic form which enact an intense conflict between the signification of alterity and the unifying function of discursive community.

In what way does this rereading of modernism change our understanding of the relation between the philosophical critiques of rationality and modern aesthetics? For the philosophers we are considering, the act of overstepping the bounds of philosophy—moving beyond or outside the reason and the subject—leads to a renewed interest in literary language. This focus on the literary features of language—on the uniqueness of style or the excess of rhetoric—opens another path of intervention into the transparency of truth and generality of knowledge. Consequently, Derrida's interpretations of modern texts and Cavell's readings of romanticism are not peripheral but, rather, integral to their philosophical projects. Yet, what is at stake in this intersection between philosophy and literature is obviously not a rejection of philosophical rigor in favor of the pursuit of literary criticism. Nor is it the case that interest in modern aesthetics is motivated by a desire to evade the contradictions characteristic of the totalizing critique of reason.¹⁵ On the contrary, the rereading of skepticism in the context of both philosophy and literature poses a new, crucial question as to whether the signification of alterity can be contained within the logic of non-contradiction, that is, the logic that assimilates divergent meanings into a coherent system. If the concern for "the other of reason" and "the other of language" leads to a renewed interest in aesthetics (especially modern aesthetics), it is because the rhetorical aspects of language open the possibilities of signification beyond the logic of identity.

As the title of my book implies, the signification of alterity requires a rethinking of the relation between logic and rhetoric—a rethinking that goes beyond the usual opposition of the grammatical stability of meaning and rhetorical undecidability.¹⁶ This reinterpretation of the significance of rhetoric emerges not only from the interpretation of literary texts but also from the philosophical revision of skepticism. The philosophical revisions of skepticism suggested by Cavell, Levinas, and Derrida rely on the shift from the logic of non-contradiction to the rhetoric of temporality. Interested neither in the contradictions hidden in the skeptical argument nor in the philosophical refutation of skepticism that discovers these contradictions, these writers focus instead on the rhetorical model of signification enacted by the skeptical thesis. Consequently, the emphasis falls not on what is said in the skeptical argument but, to paraphrase Emmanuel Levinas, on the *way* of saying, on the temporal mode of signification. As Stanley Cavell's comment—"I have wished to understand philosophy not as a set of problems but as a set of texts"—suggests, at stake here is not the philosophical problem of skepticism but the problematic relationship between the rhetoric

and the logic of the skeptical argument. If the focus on logic reveals a contradiction inherent in the skeptical argument (which, by negating the possibility of truth, undercuts its own meaning), the attention to rhetoric manifests a temporal disjunction between two different significations: between the negation of truth and the affirmation of alterity. One of the main effects of rhetoric here is therefore a disjunction between the epistemological and the ethical significance of skepticism.

Can we speak of a similar disjunction between the epistemological and the ethical effects of rhetoric in literature? What are the implications of this disjunction for the social significance of modern aesthetics? In my readings of Kafka, Beckett, and Gombrowicz I argue that the rhetorical instability of language not only suspends the epistemological functions of representation and truth but also reveals the ethical signification of alterity as an unpredictable event. Irreducible to the aporia of language reflecting only itself, rhetoric understood as an event creates a sense of incommensurability in the collective conditions of enunciation. Consequently, it is only by confining the effects of rhetoric to negative epistemological consequences that we arrive at an interpretation of modernism as self-reflective art deprived of any social significance.

By reading together philosophical and literary texts, I am thus interested in how this intersection enables crucial reformulations of both the philosophical and the aesthetic critiques of modernity. As I argue, the philosophical deconstruction of skepticism is already contingent on the change in emphasis from the logical (epistemological) to the rhetorical (literary) aspects of language and therefore situates aesthetics at the very center of the philosophical project. However, the signification of alterity and community disclosed by the philosophical revision of skepticism also allows us to intervene in the discussions of modern aesthetics, where the limits of representation have been interpreted either in terms of the dissociation of art from the realm of social praxis and ethical obligations or in terms of mere formal experimentation.¹⁷ In other words, this focus on the intersection between aesthetics and philosophy—on the way aesthetics challenges philosophy and philosophy inhabits aesthetics—alters not only the stakes of deconstruction but also the significance of modernism.

One of the main implications of my book is that the very persistence of themes like exhaustion, impasse, uncertainty, skepticism, or failure in the debate on postmodernism indicates a certain inability to link the philosophical or aesthetic critique of representation with the signification of otherness. Even more so, this fixation on the exhaustion of postmodernism betrays an obstinate refusal to acknowledge

the claims of alterity as such. Jürgen Habermas's well-known critique of the impasse of postmodernity—one of the most eloquent and rigorous responses, to be sure—provides an excellent illustration of this refusal. According to Habermas, the poststructuralist critique of reason merely “exhausts the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness,” but the symptoms of this exhaustion are not alleviated by any alternative ways of thinking.¹⁸ Habermas's argument articulates at once what he perceives to be the most significant advance of the postmodern critique of modernity and its severest limitation. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas claims that the distinctive feature of modernity, a feature that has dominated philosophy since Kant, lies in subject-centered rationality. Although the primacy of the subject and reason has been consistently called into question—from Nietzsche to Heidegger, from Foucault to Derrida—these philosophical critiques of modernity limit themselves to “the abstract negation of the self-referential subject,” and therefore do not advance any alternative paradigms of thought or language. In this context, Derrida's philosophy presents for Habermas one of the most striking illustrations of the impasse that plagues the postmodern scene generally. Consequently, for Habermas, Derrida's critique of logocentric language remains incomplete and inadequate because it does not exceed the model of decentered subject in any positive way.

Although based primarily on philosophical discourse, Habermas's misunderstanding of postmodernity stems in a large degree from a very reductive understanding of the significance of modern aesthetics in the “postmodern” critiques of rationality.¹⁹ Like many other critics commenting on the intersection between modernism and poststructuralism, Habermas likewise suggests that deconstruction, influenced by the practice of the avant-garde, can be read as a certain reenactment of aesthetic modernity. Yet for Habermas, this engagement between modern aesthetics and the philosophical critique of reason is in itself a symptom of exhaustion rather than a meaningful solution to the “crisis” of modernity. For Habermas, any theory that steps outside the horizon of reason, that “borrows” criteria from “the basic experiences of aesthetic modernity” (in this case, from the experiences of decentered subjectivity liberated from rational constraints and ethical/practical norms) is suspect because it evades or postpones the problem of its own legitimation.²⁰ Thus, the recourse to modern aesthetics, Habermas claims, becomes almost synonymous with an inability or unwillingness to account for the aporia that results when the totalizing critique of reason undercuts its own foundation. Without this turn to aesthetics, without this violation of the distinction between philoso-

phy and literature, postmodern discourses would be forced to appear as what they really are: either self-contradictory critiques of reason or expressions of skepticism. What this narrow focus on "the illicitly borrowed aesthetic criteria" allows Habermas to disregard is the signification of alterity in poststructuralist discourse. Such a rigid separation between philosophy and aesthetics is compounded in Habermas's critique with a narrow understanding of "aesthetic criteria" as either subjective irrationalism or formal experimentation. He argues therefore that the solution to the impasses of postmodernism can come only from reason itself, albeit from a different paradigm of reason based on "mutual understanding between subjects capable of speech and action."²¹ Thus, any contestation of Habermas's interpretation of postmodernism has to resume the question about the relation between aesthetics and the signification of the other.

The reason Habermas (and other critics who, like Jay Cantor, Michael Fischer, Eugene Goodheart, Hazard Adams, M. H. Abrams, Andreas Huyssen, and even sometimes Stanley Cavell, see in deconstruction an "unacknowledged" expression of skepticism or aestheticism)²² disregards the alternative modes of signification emerging in the wake of the deconstruction of the subject is because these alternatives exceed both the bounds of subjectivity and the bounds of rationality. Whether the "excess" of rationality is interpreted as a linguistic form of skepticism or as "illicitly borrowed" aesthetic criteria, in both cases this excess or otherness is identified with the impasse of thinking. Thus, what both of these interpretations of postmodernity—either as modern aestheticism or as epistemological skepticism—have in common is that they are incapable of responding to the question of otherness. As Derrida argues, this inability to address the other of reason is especially striking in the case of skepticism, which expresses the limit of philosophy but still presents itself *as* philosophy. Although the focus on "borrowed aesthetic criteria" seems to recognize the other of reason in a more explicit way, the significance of this alterity is equally disregarded when modern aesthetics is reduced to an aestheticized irrationalism or formal experimentation. At stake in a critical rereading of the engagement between deconstruction and skepticism, and between deconstruction and modern aesthetics, is not only the expression of a limit (in particular, the limit of the subject, reason and representation) but also the signification of otherness.²³

As my book illustrates, the issues of skepticism and modern aesthetics not only disclose two interrelated sites of the intense interrogation of Derrida's project but also reveal a strange discursive disorder where the very criteria according to which Derrida's work is contest-

ed break down or become insufficient. In the course of the heated discussions on deconstruction and skepticism, or deconstruction and modernism, the oppositions between representational and self-referential language, epistemological uncertainty and ethical obligation, internal and external critiques of reason, subject and the other, and finally, between logic and rhetoric, philosophy and literature become slippery and unmanageable. In fact, the tiring repetition of the charge of skepticism functions in these debates as an obsessive yet unsuccessful attempt to master this discursive disorder. Because of its strong rhetorical force, the term skepticism promises to fix the terms of the discussion from the very start, to close the polemics in a decisive way. Yet, instead of drawing the firm boundaries of discourse, the repetition of skepticism reproduces the disorder it claims to master, and thereby testifies to the disturbing effects of what Derrida calls "the other and the other of language."

II.

The first chapter of this study, "Stanley Cavell and the Economy of Skepticism," examines the work of Stanley Cavell with a particular focus on his engagement with the language philosophy of the later Wittgenstein. Although Cavell is not usually associated with post-structuralism or postmodernism (or, when he is, he is usually cast in the role of a critic of deconstruction),²⁴ his discussion of how the problem of skepticism occurs in the philosophy of Wittgenstein clarifies and dispels many presuppositions behind the critiques of poststructuralism.²⁵ Placing the emphasis on the revision of skepticism rather than on its refutation, Cavell shifts the discussion of language from the paradigm of the subject to the context of the linguistic community, while at the same time emphasizing the fragility of such a community: "mutual understanding, and hence language, depends upon nothing more and nothing less than shared forms of life, call it our mutual attunement or agreement in our criteria."²⁶ My reading focuses on the conflict in Cavell's revision of skepticism between the notion of discursive community and the significance of alterity. By departing from the paradigm of the subject, Cavell claims that the "truth" of skepticism reveals not only the precedence of the being together of the speakers in a discursive community (what Cavell calls *attunement*) but also the alterity of the other person—or what Cavell terms *acknowledgment*. I argue, however, that these two aspects of language are incommensurate and that Cavell eventually attempts to resolve this discrep-

ancy by subordinating alterity to a vision of communal unity. Although Cavell appeals to aesthetics, especially to the aesthetic judgement, to harmonize the claims of community with the claims of alterity, the very difficulties he encounters in his interpretation of modernism and metaphor point to the impossibility of such an undertaking.

The second chapter, "Deconstruction and the Rhetoric of Failure," pursues the question of the alternatives issuing from the impasse of a subject-centered understanding of language in the context of Derrida's philosophy, which appears to be either completely removed from the problematic of skepticism, or as perhaps the most striking manifestation of its danger.²⁷ I not only diagnose why Derrida's work so consistently provokes associations with skepticism but also present the affinity between deconstruction and skepticism from a different perspective than the one usually pursued by Derrida's critics. Toward this end, I contrast two very different ways of broaching the problem of skepticism within deconstruction. Operating within post-Kantian epistemology, the first interpretation sees in deconstruction a linguistic version of the classical skeptical argument. In order to make sense of Derrida's claim that the deconstruction of the subject is primarily a search for the "other," I turn to the alternative view of skepticism proposed in Levinas's response to Derrida. The perspective opened by Levinas's reappraisal of skepticism—his emphasis on the incommensurability of the epistemological negation of truth and the ethical affirmation of otherness—clarifies the difference between a classical skeptical attack on the certainty of knowledge and Derrida's emphasis on the undecidability and indeterminacy of meaning produced in the exchange with the other. I argue that by elaborating the scope of responsibility tied to the signification of alterity, Derrida not only deconstructs the notion of linguistic immanence but also extends this critique to the nostalgic visions of social immanence, underlying the theories of discursive community. Rethinking the place of skepticism in Derrida's philosophy of language can open, therefore, an alternative both to the aporia into which the critique of subject-centered rationality falls and to the paradigm of rationality based on intersubjectivity.

Turning to the literary discourse of modernity, the second part of my book examines the way in which the paradigms of the subject and representation have been called into question by conceptions of literary language in the prose of three major modernist writers: Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, and Witold Gombrowicz. Focusing primarily on the specific literary practices identified with modernism, I attempt, at the same time, to trace the effects of the aesthetic turn in the post-structuralist critiques of metaphysics. Can deconstruction be read, as

is so frequently assumed, as a certain "theory of modernism"? No matter what its content, this interpretation of deconstruction usually implies a profound sense of embarrassment—an embarrassment generated by the fact that the supposed "novelty" of Derrida is already a belated repetition of both the critical impulses and the impasses of modern art. Yet perhaps this embarrassment covers over a different sort of frustration—namely, a frustration with Derrida's refusal of the very desire for "a theory of modernism." By confronting us with the limits of "theory," that is, with the limits of the philosophical reflection on modern art's significance, the uneasy affiliation of modernism and deconstruction calls, instead, for an altogether different "invention" of modern aesthetics—the scope of which I discuss at greater length in the context of my reading of Beckett.

It is perhaps worth recalling at this point that most of the "theories" of modernism converge on the work of the negative—on the privation of truth, the refusal of representation, and the disintegration of form—performed by modern aesthetics. Not surprisingly, the theoretical elaborations of art's negativity sooner or later attempt to account for either the problem of the skepticism or the aesthetic autonomy of the work of art. What these two very different interpretations of the negative have nonetheless in common is their emphasis on the loss of the world or on art's separation from social praxis—a separation that leads eventually to the impasse and failure of the modernist project. As the most extreme manifestation of the so-called "crisis of language," skepticism in particular has generated some of the familiar antinomies shaping both the theories of modernism and the reception of modern writers like Kafka and Beckett.²⁸ On the one hand, skepticism is regarded as an expression of pessimism or "despair" about the limitations of language and its incapacity to reach the most essential dimensions of self; on the other hand, it is interpreted as the manifestation of a critical attitude toward the ossification of public language. In yet another contradictory formulation, skepticism is interpreted either as a sign of resistance to the increasing instrumentalization of modernity or merely as a logical culmination of the self-referential character of the work of art.²⁹

This last opposition between skepticism and aestheticism, informs, for instance, Peter Bürger's diagnosis of the impasse of modernism. In his critical foreword to Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Jochen Schulte-Sasse argues that "what the debate about modernism generally refers to as the writer's skepticism toward language and meaning since the mid-nineteenth century, Bürger considers to be an increasing consciousness on the part of the artist of writing tech-

niques."³⁰ Yet, although the earlier discussions of modernism formulate art's negativity in epistemological terms, and Peter Bürger points to the historical underpinning of the aesthetic interpretation of the negative, both of these theories share similar assumptions about the effects produced by modern art. Either failing to convey the truth of the real (skepticism) or purposively negating the real in order to disclose new possibilities of signification, which, nonetheless, remain confined to the realm of art (aestheticism), modern art becomes self-referential. For Bürger, the self-referentiality of language reflects the atrophy of aestheticism, evident in more and more extreme declarations of the autonomous status of modern art. Schulte-Sasse concurs with this evaluation of modern aesthetics: "Bürger sees this development as logical and necessary, yet as negative, since it leads toward a state in which art works are characterized by semantic atrophy."³¹ The complicity between "linguistic" skepticism and the formal self-consciousness of aestheticism separates modern art from the world of social obligations and results in the impasse of aesthetics as such.

Yet what we need to ask at this point is whether the provocations and impasses of modern aesthetics can be confined to the work of the negative and its various theoretical elaborations. Can we interpret the so-called crisis of modernism otherwise than as the unfortunate predicament of self-reflexive art? As my readings of Kafka, Beckett, and Gombrowicz suggest, the precarious "position" of modern art escapes the very opposition between the separation or integration into social praxis. Avoiding the pitfalls of the self-referential language of aestheticism, and contesting the separation of art from both knowledge and social praxis, Kafka, Beckett, and Gombrowicz are equally suspicious of the alternatives that present themselves under the guise of linguistic community. Consequently, I argue that in order to challenge the "narrow divide" between aesthetic autonomy and social signification of literature, and the corollary opposition between the autotelic and referential aspects of literary language, the discussion of modernism and modern aesthetics has to take yet another turn and account for an "invention" of the task of aesthetics beyond the work of the negative.

Coming to terms with the modern writers discussed in the second part of the book—Kafka, Beckett, and Gombrowicz—presents a peculiar difficulty defined with great precision by Walter Benjamin: "To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the purity and beauty of a failure. The circumstances of this failure are manifold. One is tempted to say: once he was certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for

him *en route* as in a dream."³² Underscoring the work of the negative and at the same time exposing its limits, Benjamin's insight inevitably evokes Beckett's famous description of modern aesthetics in terms of a "fidelity to failure"—"to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail"³³—or Gombrowicz's equally paradoxical emphasis on the "fiasco" of modern art. However, the pervasive rhetoric of failure in such formulations of modernism does not merely call attention to the negative epistemological consequences of figurative language or to an unhappy predicament of discourse reflecting only itself, but also performs a certain reinvention of the very notion of "modernism." We can read Benjamin's "beauty of failure" as a striking figure for this invention—a figure which marks a disjunction between the epistemological and the ethical significance of art, between the privation of truth and the unrelenting acknowledgment of alterity.

To return to the main issue implied by the title of my book, I am not only concerned here with the failure of representation, or with the suspension of truth, produced by the instability of rhetoric, but also with a redefinition of rhetoric called for by such staged moments of "failure." Following de Man's famous claim that "rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration," the majority of the deconstructive criticism in the seventies and eighties has emphasized the negative epistemological consequences of the discrepancy between grammar and figure, logic and rhetoric.³⁴ Although this project has been of major importance in literary criticism, it is perhaps time to elaborate more explicitly a different kind of discrepancy, namely, the difference between the epistemological and the ethical implications of rhetorical instability.

By shifting the emphasis from the epistemological to the ethical effects of rhetoric, my interpretation of modern aesthetics suggests a certain affinity between what are sometimes perceived as two divergent articulations of "the other of reason": between the more textual emphasis on the instability of rhetoric and the more socio-ethical emphasis on the claims of alterity in linguistic community. Irreducible to the negation of truth or to the aporia of self-reflective language, the surplus of rhetoric in modern literary texts not only suspends the functions of analogy and representation but also, as Derrida reminds us, stages the possibility of an event and the performative address to the Other. This incompatibility between representation and event, between the constative and the performative force of language, is what enables the signification of alterity in language. By suspending the capacity of grammar to calculate or anticipate the unexpected in advance, the undecidability of rhetoric in these texts dramatizes the

often unresolved conflict between the signification of alterity and the notion of discursive community, between the shock of otherness and the absorption of this shock within communicative rationality. By displacing incommensurability from the subjective to the collective conditions of enunciation, the unsettling effects of figurative language reveal the discord that the emergence of alterity generates in intersubjective praxis.

My readings of the selected literary texts by Kafka, Beckett, and Gombrowicz locate the disjunction between the epistemological and ethical significance of rhetoric at the very core of their various attempts to "reinvent" the task of the aesthetics beyond the work of the negative. In the third chapter, "'The Beauty of Failure': Benjamin and Kafka on the Task of Transmission and Translation," I focus on Benjamin's attempt to rethink the negativity of Kafka's parables as a peculiar obligation of transmission. As Benjamin argues, what is crucial for understanding Kafka's modernity is not the loss of truth—Kafka is certainly not the first writer to face such a predicament—but the obligation this loss imposes. In Benjamin's words, Kafka's parables perform *the sacrifice of truth* "for the sake of clinging to its transmissibility."³⁵ In order to develop the implications of this remarkable insight into the temporality of transmission, I discuss Kafka's parables in the context of Benjamin's own theories of translation and mechanical reproduction. Opening a rift between epistemology and ethics, the temporal deferral of meaning in Kafka's parables destroys not only the concept of truth but also, and more importantly, the immanence of a community "speaking with the same lip." By exposing a "fatal" alterity within the common social body, Kafka's texts risk the paralysis of linguistic circulation in order to disarticulate the vision of the unified social space. By returning the social body to "an urn already crumbled to dust,"³⁶ Kafka's parables intensify the haunting impact of modern aesthetics on the very concept of social praxis: these texts not only destroy the possibility of grounding the exemplary meaning of the text in the common ways of speaking but implicate the very desire for that kind of grounding in violence.

In the fourth chapter, "The Paratactic Prose of Samuel Beckett," I read Beckett's "art of failure" in the context of the obligation imposed by the very act of "invention." Neither a subjective initiative nor just a performative effect of anonymous linguistic play, invention for Beckett is intertwined with "the obligation to express" at the very moment when such expression is no longer possible. Figured as a paradoxical task that is simultaneously assumed and given up, Beckett's act of invention opens a passage to the other through the most uncompro-

misgiving assault on grammar, representation, and the speaking subject. As Beckett's strange reference to "obligation" implies, such an undoing of the order of discourse is not, however, a simple destructive or negative act; rather, it allows for the coming of the unanticipated, for the manifestation of alterity as an unpredictable event.

The sense of urgency associated with the task of Beckett's aesthetics is especially intense in *How It Is*, one of the most difficult, and certainly, one of the most haunting works in Beckett's career, where the disintegration of form stages a violent clash between the signification of alterity and its obliteration by communicative rationality. By juxtaposing the loss of meaning in face of the other, dramatized by the fragmented syntax, with the monstrous vision of discursive community, the text obsessively "calculates" the costs of reclaiming the endangered rationality of language. This persistent desire for a rational being and for a being in common submits the ethical and linguistic difference to the gruesome regulation of "justice"—which in the case of *How It Is* is presented ironically as the "fatal monotony" of pure numbers.

Unlike Kafka or Beckett, whose work has been at the center of the polemics over the significance of modernism, Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969), a Polish emigre writer, is probably the only figure in the book who requires an introduction to the Anglo-American audience. Gombrowicz is still little known in the United States, even among those American literary critics who study European modernism. And yet, ever since the International Publishers' Prize in 1967, his nomination for the Nobel Prize in 1968, and the numerous translations of his work into over thirty languages, Gombrowicz has emerged, particularly in Europe, as a major eastern-European avant-garde writer and theoretician of modernity. I hope that this discussion of Gombrowicz's work within the broader context of literary and philosophical modernity, the understanding of which, unfortunately, is still too narrowly confined to Western culture, will bring his texts to the serious attention of American academic audiences and at the same time produce a more encompassing view of modernism itself. The recent English translation of Gombrowicz's *Diaries* (Northwestern, 1989, advertised as a major literary event of the year) and of *Trans-Atlantyk* (Yale, 1994) make this discussion especially timely.

What Gombrowicz contributes to the discussion of modernity is his complex understanding of form—one of the central preoccupations in his writings from the early novel *Ferdydurke* to his later texts like *Pornografia* and *Cosmos*—which ties together his philosophical, aesthetic, and social concerns. In order to divorce aesthetics from the passive reproduction of the social forms of life, Gombrowicz's texts inces-

santly uncover the aporetic structure of the aesthetic form. By underscoring the aporias of form, modern aesthetics, according to Gombrowicz, does not collapse into mere formalism but testifies instead to the antinomy inherent in social "forms of life": "Here's another antinomy: he alone will know what Form is who never moves a step away from the full intensity of the whirl-wind of life."³⁷ For Gombrowicz, the aporias of aesthetics dramatize the effects of incongruity in the intersubjective language games and thus reformulate the usual understanding of both "intersubjectivity" and linguistic praxis. Neither simply reproducing nor repudiating the shared forms of life, modern aesthetics registers the breakdown of the intersubjective criteria in a "direct" encounter with the other. A sober testimony to the unsurpassable incommensurability of language games, the decomposition of form in Gombrowicz's texts aims to uncover the social and the subjective levels of "underdevelopment," the refuse and remnants of culture—or what he calls the modes of being "below the level of all values." By bringing the values of modernity—that is, the constraints of rational discourse, codified morality, and aesthetic wholeness—to a crisis, aesthetics registers the disquieting effects of an unpredictable event in the social topography of language.

By elaborating the critical reappraisals of skepticism in the conceptions of both literary and philosophical language, this book challenges the assumption that the philosophical and literary critiques of modernity inevitably lead to the impasses either of self-referential language (aestheticism) or of traditional skepticism, and therefore end up in the crippling versions of linguistic immanence. As an interruption of rational coherence, language, according to Levinas, "is already skepticism." Yet, as Levinas adds, "skepticism in fact makes a difference." In this book, I elaborate the difference which such a rethinking of skepticism makes in our understanding of aesthetic and philosophical modernity.

NOTES

1. For this kind of assessment, see for instance Eugene Goodheart, *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984); Christopher Butler, "Deconstruction and Skepticism," in *Interpretation, Deconstruction and Ideology* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984), 60–65; Michael Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989), 1–9, 30–35. For a critique of this reception, see A. J. Cascardi, "Skepticism and