

Chapter 1

Fire and Roses

Down the passage we did not take
Toward the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden . . .

T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

At the conclusion of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*—considered by many critics one of the greatest of the so-called postmodern novels—what has proceeded all along as a murder mystery suddenly turns into a revelation concerning workings of language and the adventure of signs.

The "discovery" of the perpetrator of a string of baffling, and heinous, crimes inside a late Medieval abbey becomes the occasion for what today might be termed a "deconstructive" literary covert operation, indeed, the deconstruction of the literary itself. The murders in the monastery turn out to be the artifice of a fanatical friar, Jorge, who has connived and conspired to protect a mysterious book in the secret chambers of the abbey. The "book", of course, is Aristotle's legendary "lost" treatise on laughter.

Jorge defends his crimes by arguing that the opening of such a book to the learned would transvalue all the values of classical learning and Christian civilization. It would unleash the spirit of levity. In addition, reading the book would initiate the process of destruction for the entire metaphysical architectonic upon which holy "faith" has been erected as the capstone. "I have been the hand of God," protests Jorge to his inquisitor William of Baskerville. Jorge insists that the hand of God must conceal, and that "there are boundaries beyond which" the probe of language "is not

permitted to go." But William replies: "God created the monsters, too. And you. And He wants everything to be spoken of."¹

Saying the unsaid, reaching toward the unreachable, naming the unnamed name—all signified by the rose—is literally "the end of the book." *The Name of the Rose* concludes with a fire immolating the monastery and its expansive library. We may read into the fire an eschatological event—the apocalyptic capsizing of a metaphysical era in which God's secrets have remained closeted in forbidden books. The ghastly spectacle of David Koresh's Ranch Apocalypse engulfed in flames in Waco, Texas, during the spring of 1993—now etched in the public imagination as a kind of grandiose bonfire of the vanities charring "secular" theories of religion—has provided some recent media panache to such "archtypal" drama. From a philosophical point of view, "naming" the rose is at the same time its dissolution; a semantic displacement of the signified by the act of signification. Signification is disruption, a violation of context, a transgression.

The term *postmodern* itself has come to serve of late as a kind of clandestine intrusion into the kingdom of signification. The word concomitantly baffles, bedazzles, and enrages—principally because it neither denotes nor intimates anything other than an incursion across the borderland of sensibility. The postmodern is everything that cannot be compressed in the term *modern*. Heidegger is generally regarded as the first postmodern thinker because of his declarations about "overcoming" metaphysics and the "end" of philosophy. At the "semiotic" level—that is, in the distinctive space where language performs no longer as code or syntax but as a skein of tracings, as the movement of complex and ephemeral modules of signification that cannot be repeated or circumscribed—so-called postmodernity means much more than some ill-defined historical periodization.

Postmodernity amounts to a redescription of logic as "aesthetics," of message as medium, of communication as dramatics, of truth as embodiment. Postmodernity is the transcendence, "overcoming," of all archaic or "legendary" orders of significance that have underwritten cultural discourse. Understood superficially, the postmodern represents a transition from the highly formalized, "modern," understanding of things to the "carnival" of popular culture. But this defection is less a revolution in taste than a reappropriation of the theory of meaning itself. The idea rebounds upon what Eco in one of his semiotic treatises refers to as *carnivalization*. The study of carnivals—Brazil's *esclava de samba*, New Orleans *Mardi Gras*, the ancient Roman *saturnalia*—offers a

glimpse into the origin of language itself as an assault upon the hegemony of silence. "Carnival," says Eco, "can exist only as *authorized* transgression."² With its ornate pageantry of music and sensual dancing, the exhibition of costume and color, the exposure of bodies, the enactment of folk drama, "carnival" creates a "scene" in which the achievement of the "signifier" no longer depends on language as social interaction, but emerges through the very distention of the grammar of culture. The inquiry into popular culture—at least from the standpoint of formal semantics—has always been a "dangerous liaison."

The term *postmodernism* has burgeoned, crowded, and suffused academic conversation during the last decade like so much lush, green Carolina Kudzu. Once strange and unfamiliar, if not disarming, locutions like *subtext*, *discursivity*, *metanarrative*, and *alterity* have become their own sort of patois within the humanities. It is as though a philosophical irredentism had been set in motion, dislodging the once seemingly immovable sovereignty of Germanic thought in a more than century-long "Franco-Prussian" war of methods, phraseologies, and notions.

Gallic preciosity and rhetorical sportiveness appear to have triumphed over Teutonic global rationality or any probing into what Hegel termed the *depths of Spirit*. The distinction, as well as the antagonism, can be espied in Jurgen Habermas's waspish dismissal of Derrida as a *nicht argumentationsfreudiger Philosoph*; literally, a "philosopher who does not enjoy argumentation."³ Postmodern works of scholarship, however, have deliberately avoided "argumentation," because they are regalia of a "style" more than a discipline. In this respect postmodern reflection—particularly the philosophical and theological kind—stands in relationship to its earlier twentieth century antecedents as Renaissance humanism compared with earlier religious scholasticism. In the "humanism" of the *quattrocento*, rhetoric supplanted Aristotelian logic, eloquence displaced inference, the performative took precedence over the referential. Indeed, it is the *power of performance* that appears to have emerged as the common denominator among the variegated "postmodernisms" of art, philosophy, theology, textual criticism, and the like.

When Derrida in *Of Grammatology* proclaimed the end of the "age of the sign," he most likely did not intend to claim that the event of signification was now impossible. But Derridean "deconstruction," once shorn of its metonymic excesses and its tropic diffusions, is precisely the philosophical reversal of Roland Barthes's semiotics of the everyday. The point can be easily

overlooked, inasmuch as Barthes's recognition that *to signify* means to *disconnect* the token from the object in generation of a sign-system anticipates the "deconstructive" view that textuality is inseparable from temporality, from the self-erasure of language as action. The sometimes maddening penchant of "deconstructionists" for word-games and punning bespeaks an unself-conscious mimesis of the semiotic enterprise. Barthes's semiosis of reading, encapsulated in the slogan the "pleasure of the text," would appear to be the schema for Derrida's "supplement" of writing. Barthes's *jouissance* as a sense of the libidinous freedom and *revelatory* aesthetics of sign-production, nonetheless, is transfigured by Derrida into a "joyless" chain of paralogisms, which turn out to be transgressions without conquests, wounds without healings, lesions without disclosures. The irony is captured in Derrida's own "parapractical" rereading of Heidegger's discussion of the "work of art." Whereas for Heidegger Van Gogh's peasant shoes can be "seen" in terms of an ontological manifestation, a "worlding," through the pen of Derrida they become the utter negativity of difference—the "disparity of the pair," a "separateness" that is "in itself, in the word, in the letter, in the pair."⁴

Derrida himself has failed to intuit his own nihilism, the nihilism of an ongoing textual commentary no longer capable of signification. Instead Derrida has elected to mythify his own "total eclipse" of the power of signs in terms of the chaos mother, the Great Kali, which abrogates even the archetypal form of "female" in the primal and eternal recurrence of darkness. "No woman or trace of woman . . . save the mother, that's understood. . . . Everything comes back to her, beginning with life."⁵ But any mythopoesis of life is also a mask for death, as Jean-Francois Lyotard, today's pre-eminent philosopher of *postmodern culture*, has reminded us. The "post-modern" is, he says, "that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable."⁶ In a later work Lyotard tells us the "unrepresentable" is "Auschwitz." It is the "differend" of the silent victims.⁷ The differend as the bare negativity of concealed violence constitutes the ultimate limits of a logocentric universe. It is, to employ Edith Wyschogrod's terminology, "spirit in ashes."⁸

The differend is the antonym of the referent; but is also something much more, and far stronger, than what Paul Ricoeur and others have termed the *plurisignificative*, the unlimited semiosis that characterizes fluid and allusive language.⁹ The differend is the pure unvocalizable that quivers not only at the boundaries of discourse, but at the fringes of existence. Like the Heideggerian *nihil*, Lyotard's

differend is both limit and horizon. It is the "line" circumscribing signification beyond which a new and more fundamental occasion for "semiophany" becomes possible. The end of the age of the sign, disclosed in the *differend*, in the silence, is at the same time an overture to what is genuinely postmodern, understood at last as a total presence, an eschatological fullness, a *parousia*—after the fashion of Heidegger—of the very sign-universe.

The problem with the recent stampede into postmodern discourse throughout the study of religion and in religious thought, however, is that its "semiotic" overtones are too often overlooked. The fascination with that which we may broadly call *deconstruction* has led ironically to what might be dubbed an old school or "late" modernist cast of thought that has wrongly been described as postmodern. The expressions *modernism* and *postmodernism* were originally contrived to identify styles and trends in the arts and architecture. *Modernism* refers to a preoccupation with the conditions of aesthetic creativity as well as the problem of composition, contrasting with an interest in artistic content and the methods of representation. The antirepresentationalism and extreme textualism of putative postmodern philosophers and critics amounts, in fact, to a recycling of earlier modernist concerns under the aegis of the humanities, compelled by many of the same attitudes that captivated visual artists in the early years of this century. The "painterly" self-scrutiny of the modern artist—the Fauvist's precision with color, the minimalist's reduction of the worm to shapes and surfaces—is transposed into the grammatology of the text.

Authentic postmodernism, on the other hand, involves a recovery of the richness of "natural" signifiers, if not a return to the naturalism or realism of the late classical era. In art so-called postmodernism has actually meant a "return to content," as Charles Jencks has so aptly put it, along with a rediscovery of "historical continuum and the relation between past and present." This renaissance of classical figuration, proportionality, and stylized elegance has at the same time taken place within the modernist setting of cultural pluralism and representational heterogeneity, so that postmodernism generates narratives without plots as part of world of "divergent significations" compelling "multiple readings" of the familiar.¹⁰ Postmodern style enfolds within itself tradition without bowing before the canon, form without formality, beauty without monumentality, coherence without symmetry. The two most popular and powerful editions of visual postmodernism—pop art and so-called earth art—have been self-cognizant efforts to revive the aesthetics of signification, the

one through the commercial replication of popular culture icons and the other through an almost magico-ritual expression or earth lines, geometries, and energies. If from a semiotic point of view, there is a deeper lying postmodern principle of interpretation, it is simply that the world glitters with signs, and the signs belong to an encompassing and polyvalent harmony of semantic sighs and whispers.

Unfortunately, postmodernism as a religious, or theological, libretto has all too often been assimilated to what are patently at best modern, and at worse premodern, types of discursivity. The crypto-modernism of what purports to be postmodernism can be inferred from the ideological continuity between deconstructionism and late 1960s death-of-God theology, which in turn derived from the postwar fashions of European religious existentialism.¹¹

Another postmodern feint has also been devised for what is *prima facie* a premodern gnosticism or "perennialism." Huston Smith, as an illustration, has characterized the postmodern mind in almost archaic terms. The genuine postmodernist is the devotee of the "sacred unconscious," he or she is an Oriental adept on the path to an enlightenment, a *jivamukti*, one who "lives in the unvarying presence of the numinous."¹² The same leanings can be glimpsed in the postmodern theological program of David Griffin, which is little more than process thought—a modernist metaphysic—leavened with the politics and eco-mysticism of the aging 1960s counterculture.¹³

More recently, as the word *postmodernism* has come to refer in the literature to poststructuralist kinds of philosophical and literary arguments, Smith has turned his wrath against the concept itself. In a plenary address to the American Academy of Religion at Anaheim, California, in late 1989 Smith dismissed postmodernism as merely a degenerate form of modernism, which arose when science and empiricist epistemology supplanted revelation and what Smith calls "the wisdom of the ages" as the fountainhead of truth. The sin of postmodernism, according to Smith, is its denial of "ontological transcendence," by which he means the hierarchical metaphysics of religious esotericism tracing back to ancient Vedantism and hermeticism. Smith has urged that postmodernist impulses be judiciously dislodged to commence "a return to the truth claims of our field as impounded in the world's great traditions."¹⁴

The upshot of all of this, however, is that a serious postmodernism has not left its stamp on religious thought. The impasse may have more to do with the poverty of academic the-

ology than with the "theological" promise of postmodernism per se. If theological thinking is not a task but an oeuvre, or a "work" in the Ricoeurian sense, then, to become postmodern, it must become what Eco dubs the "open work." In the open work, according to Eco, "the signs combine like constellations whose structural relationships are not determined univocally, from the start, and in which the ambiguity of the sign does not . . . lead back to reconfirming the distinction between form and background."¹⁵

The capaciousness of postmodern theological thinking would, like the artwork itself to which Eco applies such a hermeneutic, be both "informal" and "cultural" in a comprehensive sense. It would no longer emanate strictly from arcane conversationalists, who claim to be avant-garde and trend motivated, but who in actuality have contrived a curious, convoluted, and overdetermined scholasticism of the academic Left. It would become "popular" in the sense that pop art, which in many respects launched postmodernism, has served as an aesthetic idiom of mediation between familiar representational systems and the imagism of urban folk culture. Just as the movement over a generation ago from abstraction to "pop" can be construed as a revolt against the discreet nihilism of purely formal painting, so postmodern religious thinking no longer takes as its "texts" the recondite writings of the so-called deconstructionists.

The strategy can be adduced in part from the theory of culture advanced by Jim Collins in his insightful study of what empirically falls under the heading of postmodernism. Collins faults what he terms the *grand hotel theory* concerning mass culture, which has been a whipping boy for choleric Western critics from the Frankfurt School on down through the existentialists. Grand hotel theory is a kind of surrogate canon for those intellectuals who despise the "canonical referentiality" of the classical humanities. It looks down upon the whole of popular culture as crude exploitation and the purveyance of alienation, all the while ignoring the subtle modes of intelligibility inherent in its different functions and genres. As Collins notes: "When the punk rocker tears holes in her jeans and closes them with safety pins, or when the fashion designer adds a mink collar to a purposely faded denim jacket, both construct specific signs with quite divergent ideological values—but in each case, the meaning produced is predicated on the violation of the sign's earlier incarnations."¹⁶

In other words, the notion of the "popular," according to Collins, suffers from oversimplification. Popular culture, as opposed to the image of the "grand hotel" in which cultural elites

dominate over a mass consumer population of untutored kitsch mongers, can be viewed as a multicentered dynamic in which sign manufacturing and semiotic performance have the effect of both expressing and differentiation. Semiotics, therefore, should be understood as a veiled praxis of "liberation," whereby deeper values of freedom can be decoded from the would-be vulgarisms or even the apparent "crass commercialism" of quotidian social representations. In this connection we can begin to understand the hostility of Frankfurt School followers toward the very idea of postmodernism. Postmodernism no longer presumes an "avant-garde" of cultural opposition in much the same way that post-Marxist leftist politics, following the collapse of communism, has dispensed handily with the paradigm of the "party" as the "vanguard" of revolutionary change.

For example, in his influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde* German philosopher of culture Peter Bürger dismisses what we have called postmodernism as "commodity aesthetics" designed to "enthrall" and concoct "a false sublation of art as institution."¹⁷ From the semiotic standpoint the postulate of postmodernism unmasks the hidden, and one might even go so far as to say hypocritical, elitism in the conventional grand hotel reading of the role of cultural elites. A social semiotics need no longer presuppose that signification equals oppression, that it is invariably a vertical imposition of symbol-controllers upon the mass, but that it may also be a kind of *cri de coeur* of the disenfranchised. The horizontal dissemination of sign-performances through a "decentered" popular culture does not necessarily legitimate either their moral or ontological character, but reframes their purpose, primarily in terms of the categories of regimentation, subversion, "ceremonial" articulation, and ideological oscillations. According to the sociologist Erving Goffman, who in his later work coopted the semiotic method, the "commercialism" of so-much popular culture can best be considered a complex set of typifications that are not so far distant from ritualized, everyday language and behavior.¹⁸ Sign-events cluster around "displays," which in turn coalesce around different social coding operations, not to mention *codings of difference*, that may or may not be coordinate with the insignia of class.¹⁹

In the postmodern context the sign becomes, to use Lyotard's term, more "presentation" than representation. The semiotics of presentation demands the *differend*, which in turn yields a query more than a direct, "metaphysical" statement—even if it be the sort of metaphysics that masquerades as critical sociology. "In the

differend," says Lyotard, something 'asks' to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases in the right way."²⁰ The differend is, in effect, the Heideggerian "unsaid," or at a deeper, "speculative" level, the "unthought;" it is the speaking of the unspoken that writhes toward articulation in the wilderness of contemporary culture. It is the "semiotic" reminder of social contradiction that reveals itself in the face of the homeless wanderer at the New York Port Authority. It lingers in the midnight offer of the street walker in Guadalajara. It is both Moral Majority and MTV. It is the death of an abused child. It is the "Velvet Revolution" in Prague. It is, also, strangely, Mickey Mouse and Goofy. But it is the crystal draped around the neck of a Sante Fe socialite, and the blood on the back of an Indian *penitente* as he follows the stations of the cross.

The so-called postmodernism of certain contemporary theological writers who have somehow cornered the word, therefore, is but shadow ballet. When someone like Griffin asserts that "post-modern theology rejects the extreme voluntarism of supernaturalistic theism and the atheistic naturalism of modernity, replacing both with a naturalistic form of theism,"²¹ he is not brushing oils on the canvas of a genuine postmodernism, but merely hooking on a trendy label to the kind of standard, American "empirical theology" that has been current for many generations. Similarly, in the book of essays by diverse authors entitled *Spirituality and Society: Post-Modern Visions*, postmodernism becomes nothing more than a buzzword for the sort of New Age utopianism spun from the cerebra of many California dreamers during the 1960s—a folio of themes and notions that are almost now a generation outdated.²²

The contribution of a semiotician like Eco, however, to an authentic postmodern idiom lies in his recognition of the intimate linkage between "theological" reflection and aesthetics. Eco lays the groundwork for his postmodernist, aesthetic "hermeneutic" in an early work entitled *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*. It is the task of historical analysis, Eco points out, to scrutinize how a particular epoch "solved for itself aesthetic problems" within the syntax of its own cultural organization.²³ Whereas Medieval thought has often been regarded as inordinately "metaphysical" and obsessed with questions of suprasensible cognition at the expense of intramundane concerns, in inward legacy of the culture itself was always, according to Eco, the search for a plausible "ontology of concrete existence." Such an ontology Eco finds in the Medieval emphasis on the power of color, proportion, and

symbol. The grandeur of the Chartres cathedral, the scientific interest in the properties of natural light and the effects of luminosity, the detailing of both the sublime and the grotesque in what have wrongly come to be treated as “fanciful,” clerical accounts of both geography and natural history—these “aesthetic” preoccupations were actually the philosophical subcodes for a later grammar of signs and modes of signification that flowered both in Renaissance humanism and the style of artistic expression known as *mannerism*.

The School of Chartres, for example, held that God is essentially an artist and that the world could be conceived as a grand artwork. Intellectual contemplation was compared to aesthetic appreciation. The notion of “beauty” was closely connected to the classical ideal of the “good.” In the words of Albert the Great, *non est aliquid de numero existentium actu, quod non participet pulchro et bono* (There is no existing being that does not share in beauty and goodness).²⁴ For Eco, the aesthetic consciousness is wrapped up with a philosophical grasp of the lability and evanescence of sign-activity. Texts are no longer bare runes to be puzzled over. They are at once an intricate braid of the latent and the manifest, of form and function, of intimation and opacity, of word and image, of grapheme and difference. Indeed, *textuality* and *culture*—regarded in the primitive sense of all that is somehow is indicative—now emerge as reciprocal constructs.

The preeminence of an aesthetic postmodernism is underscored not simply by the origin of the word in contemporary art criticism, but by the striking similarity between the new artistic values and certain strategies of interpretation in the humanities. The so-called conceptual art that flourished in the 1970s disengaged the effort at aesthetic creation from its actual output, much in the same way that authorship and writing were separated within the deconstructionist movement. Postmodern architecture has been characterized in one recent historical account as by its “color, variety and capriciousness” that is not so much decorative as textually light and elusive.²⁵ If postmodernism as a discursive design is marked in Lyotard’s terminology by the “end of grand narratives,” then as cultural episode it is what Julia Kristeva has called the *theorie d’ensemble*, an “intertextuality” of heterogeneous, yet *significant*, moments of disclosure.²⁶ According to David Carroll, postmodernism can be summed up in the German term *Begebenheit*, which may be translated as “givenness,” albeit in the dynamic sense. Another rendering is “mere occurrence.”²⁷ Postmodern discourse itself “is concerned with theorizing the historical moment.”²⁸ Ac-

According to David Levin, postmodernism constitutes the "critical deconstruction of the essence still at work in the modernist." It is a weave of "aesthetic moments," each of which performs as a "critical commentary" on past aesthetic moments.²⁹ Levin distinguishes between the analytic postmodern and the metaphoric postmodern. The analytic postmodern should be construed as the formalist reappropriation of the antimetaphysical propensities within modernist culture and thought. When, for instance, Stephen Moore brands Mark Taylor as a thoroughgoing "modernist" installed as an apostle of the postmodern because of the latter's undue attention to "horizontalities" and "surfaces," he is inadvertently acknowledging that postmodernism itself rests on an interior act of reinscription covering all that has been modern in the most fruitful sense of the word. One problem with Taylor's work, and with the now expiring fashion of deconstructionism in religious writing for that matter, is that it has reached a seemingly insurmountable impasse, so far as the critical task is concerned, largely as a result of its inability to embrace the metaphoric postmodern, which ultimately harks back to the desire of Nietzsche's Zarathustra to *dance*. The metaphoric postmodern rests on a profound postmetaphysical insight—what the Czech novelist Milan Kundera has called the *unbearable lightness of being*. The metaphoric postmodern is Eco's "travels in hyperreality." It is the transcendence of nihilism—a nihilism that is the hidden agenda behind what Derrida calls the *truth in painting*, the emptiness of all frames and representations, including the dysrepresentational entropy of the deconstructive campaign. The end of deconstruction, strangely enough, is not the freedom of the text, but a totalizing twilight, a *Götterdämmerung* in which philosophy and theology no longer paint even a gray on gray, but recede into the ice-entombed, ink-black night of exhaustion. Deconstruction constitutes the universal "closing time" that Heidegger has termed the *end of philosophy*. It is the veritable summa of the analytical postmodern. It is the reduction of the sign to an anonymous exterior, to the unidimensional word-canvas upon which its cracked and discolored oils have left their crepuscular impression.³⁰

The metaphoric postmodern, on the other hand, arises phoenixlike to recover the power of signification in an even more radical fashion. The metaphoric postmodern can best be described as a *fundamental ontology of the body*, where metaphysics, now dismembered and disassembled, can be "rewritten" as pure somatology, as the deciphering of the "aesthetic" or sensate markings we know as *world* and as *culture*. As Jencks notes with respect

to postmodern architecture that is an aesthetic incorporating "ornaments and mouldings suggestive of the human body" that also "humanizes inanimate form as we naturally project our physiognomy and moods onto it."³¹

Eco's understanding of semiotics as "carnival" in the sense of ribald and "polyform" aesthetic display anticipates such a *hermeneutic* of the metaphoric postmodern. But the same presentation more appropriately can be identified with what Kristeva has spiritedly termed *Giotto's joy*, the dissolution of the space segregating signifier and signified in the painting, or image-texture. The racinatory symbolism of the Medieval Giotto constitutes a *narrative* of the incarnate signifier, of semiology as aesthetic encounter and appreciation. It is also proleptic with respect to the postmodern revelation of the body. Just as Giotto's joy is derived from the holy yearning of the supplicant for immanent fulfillment, so the metaphorical postmodern hinges upon what Kristeva acknowledges as the ontology of "desire" that grounds not just aesthetic discourse but the signifying act itself. Whereas Kristeva's somatology is, unfortunately, still circumscribed within a late psychoanalytic grid-language of paternal wish, displacement, substitution, transgression, and repression, the codings for her own version of a metaphoric, postmodern grammatology of both masculine and feminine are inherent in her own semiotics. Semiotics, for Kristeva, is "polylogue"—where the "speaking subject" is unmasked as body, as "bursts of instinctual drive—rhythm," as "heterogeneous strata . . . that can be multiplied and infinitized."³²

The concept of "body" in the postmodern context, of course, refers to something more than the mere physical agent. *Body* itself becomes a "metaphor" for the metaphoric postmodern; it connotes both the region of alterity, of the "outlandish" and the *outré*, with respect to the Cartesian, metaphysical subject; it becomes the prediscursive horizon for all possible significations that transcend the logic of linguistic acts and their applications. *Body* is a basal, "aesthetic" metaphor insofar as it correlates with Kristeva's infinity of sign-moments, with mutability, with a kind of "music." *Body* becomes a metaphor for the dance of signification. The "dance" of the metaphoric postmodern—and of the body as infinite sign-ensemble, as "semio-text," as the cipher of culture—surpasses all implicit modernisms to the extent that it belies the privatized substantial self of the old metaphysics and the old aesthetics. The body as metaphor contravenes the totalizing force of ideological belief systems, even the many neo-Marxist and crypto-metaphysical kinds of political romance that employ the rhetoric of the

postmodern. It works against the temptation, so prevalent in the contemporary agonism of the "cultural politics" that also calls itself *postmodern*, of "hyperrealizing the social," as Steven Connor has put it.³⁵ A postmodern somatology would in this sense serve as a genuine, transfinite semiotics that is not simply a rhetorical double for Marxist criticism or for deconstructionist badinage. The language of the body, together with the ontological category of embodiment, tracing the origin of that peculiar polylogistic style of communication that embraces psychology, philosophy, theology, and aesthetics, thus emerges as its own distinctive *lingua franca* for postmodernist conversation.

Ironically, the somatic emphasis in the development of a postmodern, aesthetic sensibility, including what might be described as a distinctive postmodern *religiosity*, brings us into the realm of popular culture. Many recent theoreticians of popular culture have concentrated on what might be described as the different modes of body signification, and the different styles of somatic repression and expression that characterize the *signa populi*.

Popular culture by its very nature is exhibitionist. It seeks to idealize certain iconic representations of the human *figura*—shamans in colorful costume, kings and queens in their finery, popes with their tiaras, rock stars in their outrageous and often half-naked get-ups, the present-day postmillennial Madonna, whose hit song "Like a Prayer" outrages the church because it is concomitantly hierophantic and crudely sensual—and to invoke these presentations as exemplary patterns for identification and enactment. In short, popular culture, as anthropologists have been telling us for generations, is held together by the power of multiple, and often ambiguous, significative functions. Texts and other types of discursive formalities—even the highly sophisticated "metatextual" operations of deconstructionist readers—provide us with only a stylized, and one might even go so far as to say neo-metaphysical, rendering of what persists down through the ages as "book culture."

From this standpoint Derrida's proclamation of the "end of the book" is but a reinscription of the old textual ideology. A true postmodern closure of the book would involve not just an exercise in what has become the weird, new fashion of Derridean scholastics, but a "cultural" or "semiotic" turn to fill out and finalize the earlier "linguistic turn" that overshadowed an earlier era in philosophy and theology. A semiotician is interested, not just in religious thought, but also in the religious context out of which the discursive ensembles of "thought" are crystallized. In the same

way that a Mick Farren can interpret the whole of twentieth century culture through the iconics of the black leather jacket, so a theological thinker privy to the aesthetics and the poetics of the postmodern can begin to envision "sacrality," not simply as a complex of stock theological emblems or representations, but as a veritable marquee flashing with the evanescent tokens and hints of religious sentimentality in the twentieth century.³⁴ The intertwining of religious aspiration and popular culture as a peculiar variant on postmodern aestheticism can be seen in what have wrongly been termed *new religious movements* or *New Age* religion. So much would-be "new religiosity"—whether we are talking about channeling, "satanic rock," crystal madness, or the pop metaphysics of Shirley Maclaine, J. Z. Knight, and Barbara Marx Hubbard—is nothing new at all. It is simply old-time esotericism, and in many instances archaic superstitions or dangerous obsessions, repackaged for present day consumer tastes and employing the semiotic conveyances of popular culture.

New Age religion may in many respects be described as the *commodification of the arcane and obscure*, but we must comprehend its "materiality" not with the raw ideological slant that allegedly postmodern "political economists" adopt, but as a showing of embodied sign-contents. Sexuality and popular religion, for instance—including even the scandals of Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart—cannot be disentangled from each other because of their very "carnivality" (in Eco's sense) or "in-carnality" (from a broader semiotic perspective). The materiality of the postmodern, aesthetic mode of meaningfulness, therefore, must not be understood according to some subtextual stance of metaphysical dualism in which an "authentic" sacrality stands as a scepter of austere judgment over its popular formats. Although a responsible "cultural politics" does, in fact, require a self-conscious distinction between canonical works and the fleeting products of collective consumption, a postmodern aesthetic hermeneutics of culture—embracing the various subdisciplines of the study of religion—must tear down the long-standing, scholarly Maginot lines barring religious thinking from penetrating the "otherness" of its own democratic milieu. The Tillichean with its passion for workings of "Spirit" in the night of *Existenz* must displace the Eliadean with its historical preservationist bent for dusting off and displaying behind glass the ancient, golden calves. A Tillichean theological thinking concerning culture comes once more to the forefront.

The postmodern era, no matter what the concept implies diachronically, can best be understood as the unveiling of a new

epoch in the historicity of Being, as Heidegger would claim. Yet, we must now seriously consider taking several, giant philosophical steps beyond both the Heideggerian program of fundamentally rereading the Western tradition and two-dimensional Derridean wordgrams with their curious, Dadaist messages of inconsequentiality. If, as Ferdinand Saussure (the founder of modern linguistics) and Eco (the progenitor of a comprehensive, cultural semiotics) stress, signs "work" exclusively because they set in motion the play of differences, then deconstruction can be freed from Derrida's hidden modernist semantics of surface.³⁵ The moment of difference now discloses the transcendental backlighting of immanent everydayness; it is the *signature* of a pure presencing.

The "age of the sign" must no longer be conceived, as Derrida once proposed, as merely theological. Postmodernly speaking, it is also the time of *parousia*. *Parousia* is both the closing time of modernist metaphysics and the final naming of the rose whereby the all that has remained unspoken during the long exile of signifier must at last struggle toward speech. Most recently, Derrida himself has alluded to the end of deconstruction itself with his cryptic discussion of "spirit" as "fire."³⁶ Or perhaps we must uncover the essential meaning in the ending of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* which some commentators regard as the first postmodern poem of the twentieth century.

Four Quartets is postmodern because it is a sweeping *poesis* disclosing not jewels in the lotus but "sapphires in the mud," a genuine Heideggerian "worlding of the world" through the movements of signification that suddenly appear like a "thousand points of light" (Wordsworth) across the craggy terrain of "mass culture." The closure of the poem, however, is not about the "naming" that takes place through discourse, but about fire. The discourse of the world is set aflame. As we discover at the conclusion of *The Name of the Rose*, the end of the book is also the end of the world. The representations of the metaphysical eon burn up. For "our God is a consuming fire."

The concluding words of *Four Quartets*, therefore, are more than mildly prophetic:

We can only live, only suspire
Consumed either by fire or fire.

and, our task, as Eliot directs us, "will be to know the place for the first time." It shall be, semiotically speaking, "a condition of complete simplicity." *When* Copyrighted Material

All manner of thing shall be well
 When the tongues of flame are in-folded
 Into the crowned knot of fire
 And the fire and the rose
 are one.³⁷

The *fire* and the *rose*, therefore, become the master ciphers for the postmodern way of thinking. As the fire smolders and the rose unfolds, the ciphers become lines of force, moments of disclosure, vortices of querying, acts of signification. They are the religious metaphors that become the invitation to locate the site of a true postmodern thinking.

Notes

1. Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 583.

2. Umberto Eco, "Frames of Comic Freedom," in Umberto Eco, V. V. Ivanov, and Monica Rector, *Carnival!* ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Amsterdam: Mouton, 1984), p. 6.

3. See "On Leveling the Genre Distinction Between Philosophy and Literature," in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), p. 193; also of interest is a "reply" by Jacques Derrida, "Afterword" in *Limited INC*, trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), n. 9, pp. 156–58. See a discussion of the problem Habermas raises in Rodolphe Gasche, "Post-Modernism and Rationality," *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (October): 528–538. See Ulrich Schönher, "Adorno, Ritter Gluck, and the Tradition of the Post-Modern," *New German Critique* 48 (1989): 135–154; and Sabine Wilke, "Adorno and Derrida as Readers of Husserl: Some Reflections on the Historical Context of Modernism and Post-Modernism," *Boundary 2*: 77–90.

4. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 352.

5. Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p. 38.

6. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 81.

7. See "Letter to Thomas Carroll," in *The Postmodern Explained*, trans. Don Barry et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 12–16.

8. The similarity between Lyotard's and Wyschogrod's arguments is exemplified in the following quotation: "Just as the sheer existence of language points phantastically to its nonviolent character, the birth of the death event in our time opens up a new phantasmatic meaning borne by the speaker, one that accompanies all discourse." Edith Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger, and Man-Made Mass Death* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 214. Wyschogrod's brilliant treatment of the origin of postmodern thinking in Hegel and Heidegger, however, is distinguished by her call at the end for a "transactional" communitarian self, which may be described more as a modernist concern than a postmodern one.

9. See Paul Ricoeur "The Phenomenological Approach to the Psychoanalytic Field" in *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 383–386.

10. Charles Jencks, *Post-modernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), p. 338. Says Eco: "the elements of the signifier are set in a system of oppositions in which, as Saussure explained, there are only differences. The same thing with the signified . . . The correlation between expression-plane and content-plane is also given by a difference: the sign-function exists by a dialectic of presence and absence, as a mutual exchange between two heterogeneities." *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 23. The enhancement that Eco's philosophical linguistics achieves in relation to Barthes's relatively naive poststructuralism cannot be understated. Eco's notion of semiosis as the revelation of a kind of "unsaidness," in contradistinction to Derrida's detextualizing *differance*, also puts the original aims of deconstruction back on a sounder philosophical, and ontological, footing.

11. For an incursion into deconstruction by a "death-of-God" theologian see Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Total Presence: The Language of Jesus and the Language of Today* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982).

12. Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1982), p. 182.

13. See note 21.

14. Huston Smith, "Post-Modernism's Impact on Religious Studies," plenary address before the American Academy of Religion in Anaheim, California, 1989.

15. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 86.

16. Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 17–18.

17. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 54. The argument

is similar the well-known one of Frederic Jameson, who sees postmodernism as a "network of power and control" whereby aesthetical enthrallment replaces surplus value as the instrument of social domination. Postmodernism is essentially the "expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas." *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 36.

18. Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 84.

19. Heinz-Güter Vester has very insightfully and effectively analyzed Goffman's contribution to postmodern discourse in his article on recent trends in both structuralism and semiotics. "Our understanding of a sign, a sign system, or a text is a developing process of unlimited semiosis." See "Erving Goffman's Sociology as Semiotics of Post-modern Culture," *Semiotica* 76: 191-203. The theory of unlimited semiosis through cultural elaboration, a key element in the framing of a postmodern schema of interpretation, is made possible, according to Vester, through the "playfulness" and "intertextuality" of popular productions, as Goffman analyzes them.

20. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 13.

21. David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in the Post-Modern World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 132.

22. See David Ray Griffin (ed.), *Spirituality and Society* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

23. Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 2.

24. Quoted in Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 2 (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), p. 288.

25. See Bruce Cole and Adelheid Gealt, *Art of the Western World: From Ancient Greece to Post-Modernism* (London: Summit Books, 1989), p. 333.

26. See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 37-41; also, Julia Kristeva, "The Bounded Text" in *Desire in Language*, trans. Thomas Gora et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 36-41. For a more detailed account of Kristeva's position, see *Theorie d'ensemble* (Paris: Seuil, 1968).

27. See David Carroll, *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida* (New York: Methuen Books, 1987). For other recent philosophical, or theological, attempts to epitomize the postmodern, see George James, "The Post-Modern Context," *Contemporary Philosophy* 22 (1989): 1-5; David

Crownfield, "Post-Modern Perspectives in Theology and Philosophy of Religion," *Contemporary Philosophy* 22 (1989): 6-13; Robert Morris, "Words and Images in Modernism and Post-Modernism," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 337-347; Paul Jay, "Modernism, Post-Modernism, and Critical Style: The Case of Burke and Derrida," *Genre* 21 (1988): 339-358.

28. Robert Merrill, "Simulations: Politics, TV, History," in Robert Merrill (ed.), *Ethics/Aesthetics: Post-Modern Positions* (Washington, D.C.: Maitsonneuve Press, 1988), p. 151.

29. David Levin, "Post-Modernism in Dance: Dance, Discourse, Democracy," in Hugh J. Silverman (ed.), *Post-Modernism—Philosophy and the Arts* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 21.

30. Stephen Moore, "The 'Post-' Age Stamp: Does it Stick?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52, no. 3 (1989): 548.

31. Jencks, *Postmodernism*, p. 336.

32. Julia Kristeva, "The Novel as Polylogue," in *Desire in Language*, p. 186.

33. Steven Connor, *Post-Modernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 61.

34. See Mick Farren, *The Black Leather Jacket* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985).

35. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Press, 1983), pp. 79-98; and Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, pp. 23-24.

36. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

37. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971), p. 55.