

THE TRANSCENDENTALIST IMPULSE IN THE
PROJECTS OF CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM

But deep enough, alas! none ever mines.

—Matthew Arnold, "The Buried Life"

In recent years, post-rational criticism has been developing the view that there is more wisdom to be found in the structures of poetry than in the arguments of philosophers. According to this view, poetry is not only more philosophical (in a broad sense) than history; it is more philosophical than philosophy itself. And yet anyone who tries to maintain this view must grapple with the opposite view that, in fact, "poetry" and "philosophy" are the names of essentially different enterprises which ought not to be confused with each other. Nothing used to be more common than to hear, from poets and critics alike, that poetry is corrupted when it is forced to carry the burden of ideas or when it is milked for its philosophical implications. Poetry, according to modernists like Eliot and Pound, is a way of registering one's sensibility or a way of doing things with words, not a statement about reality. The content of a poem, interpreted as whatever it may be that it appears to be saying about things, ought to be regarded almost as a necessary evil. When it is obtrusive, as the modernists and the New Critics sometimes feared it might be, it could be argued either that the poem in question is therefore inferior as poetry or else that its content is really a smoke screen (or, as William Carlos Williams called it, "a mere pretext")¹ for something else more intrinsically poetical, having to do with the verbal medium itself. By the same token, philosophers have often insisted that philosophy's search for truth and the aesthetic goals of poetry are fundamentally different. From Plato onward, the complaint against poetry, whenever it has arisen, has been more or less the same: poetry, when it claims to be more than a sensuous diversion, amounts to nothing but mythmaking; and myth, however appealing to the imagination, is ultimately an obstacle to the development of sound thinking based on clear ideas. From the very beginning, so it is argued, poets have attributed an undue importance to their own activities by preferring them to the search for truth or, in most instances, by claiming for themselves a higher wisdom

made available to them through deep insight or the power of vision, whereas, in fact, genuine wisdom is available only to those who practice critical thinking. Thus, one way to characterize the history of Western culture would be to say that in the course of that history philosophy has sought, by and large, to purify itself by divesting itself as much as possible of the trappings of poetry, while poetry, especially in modern times, has likewise sought to maintain its own identity by becoming increasingly independent of philosophy.

Although there would certainly be a large grain of truth in such a characterization, in the sense that philosophers and poets often have felt themselves to be in opposition to each other, nevertheless it is equally certain that a rapprochement between poetry and philosophy was effected relatively early in the history of their mutual relations, a rapprochement that has persisted and, indeed, continues to persist, despite the claim, made by post-rational critics, that philosophy has been eclipsed. Formerly, the main condition of this rapprochement was that poetry should play the rather conspicuous role of junior partner, accepting the tasks assigned to it by philosophy. Now, however, this condition has changed. Poetry in the modern period has produced its own credentials, and in general has given the impression of being quite autonomous, although, as I intend to argue, philosophy remains as vigorous as ever behind the scenes, covertly active in its original capacity as senior partner. The new rapprochement, in fact, depends on the impression, which I take to be a false impression, that philosophy has retired altogether from the firm.

The history of the development of our current situation may be sketched briefly. Poetry, as everyone knows, came first, before the appearance of what we now think of as philosophy. In its golden period, as Peacock says, "the whole field of intellect [was] its own. It [had] no rivals, in history, nor in philosophy, nor in science. It [was] cultivated by the greatest intellects of the age, and listened to by all the rest." In Greece, Homer and Hesiod produced poems that serve a philosophical function by purporting to give true knowledge of how things have come to be as they are, that is to say, by showing how history and nature constitute a revelation of the divine will. Nevertheless, even before Plato, the wisdom of the first poets was starkly opposed by the first philosophers, the Ionian cosmologists, so that in the Republic Plato can speak of "an ancient enmity," "an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry."² Interestingly enough, in the *Laws*

Plato implies that the old poets had come closer to the truth than the philosophers, since the philosophers were mistaken in assigning the causes of all things to lifeless material substances. In doing this, says Plato, they "gave rise to much atheism and perplexity" so that "the poets took occasion to be abusive—comparing the philosophers to she-dogs uttering vain howlings."³ But if the Ionians were wrong to deny the priority of mind or soul in the universe and, to some extent, deserved the contempt hurled at them by the poets, now, says Plato, the case is reversed. It is the philosopher—the Platonic philosopher—who now emerges as "a true worshipper of the Gods," in opposition to the ignorant, superstitious poets. Not only do these poets fail to understand properly the things they imitate or describe in their verses, they cannot even understand their own poetic products, as Socrates discovers when he asks some poets to explain to him the meaning of a few difficult passages. Their inability to account for their own poetic activity leads Socrates to conclude, as we learn from the *Apology*, that they in fact possess no wisdom. "Then I knew," he says, "that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration; they are like diviners or soothsayers who also say many fine things, but do not understand the meaning of them."⁴

Plato's description of poetry as a sort of crude approximation of the genuine insight attainable by philosophy established the latter's superiority so firmly that philosophy's preeminence has never been seriously shaken, despite recent appearances to the contrary. More than two thousand years after Plato, Hegel echoes the Platonic judgment when he observes that "for us art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself,"⁵ the highest mode being for Hegel, as for Plato, the mode of philosophical reflection. Nevertheless, a rapprochement between philosophy and poetry, beyond Plato's conceiving, *did* turn out to be possible after all, so long as poetry was willing to accept a subordinate role in the relationship. Plato himself conceded that certain kinds of poetry might be useful in the life of reason; hymns to the gods, for example, or praises of famous men might conceivably foster the piety and patriotism necessary to the security of the state. It was Aristotle, however, who rescued poetry from the almost total banishment Plato had in mind for it, by suggesting that poetry *is* capable of representing truths that have been determined for it in advance by philosophy. Although it may be the case that poetry cannot determine the truth from scratch, it does have the capacity

to present for contemplation certain general truths concerning human nature and the patterns of human experience. In this respect, Aristotle argues, poetry may justly be regarded as "a more philosophical and a higher thing than history."⁶ In other words, Aristotle conceives of poetry, not as a blind groping toward truths that are otherwise inaccessible, but rather as a vehicle for conveying such truths as have already been grasped and appropriated. Poetry, according to this view of the matter, is not the product of hysterical or inspired soothsayers; it is the product of intelligent makers who know what they mean to say and who design their poems deliberately, in accordance with their knowledge.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this maneuver, for it constitutes a justification of poetry's claim to intellectual respectability that has remained valid almost until the present time. It permits us to regard the great poems of the Western tradition as deliberate, conscious reflections of ideas, sentiments, and beliefs already grounded in the established institutions or notions of religion and philosophy. This is true not only of explicitly "philosophical" poems like the *Divine Comedy* or the *Essay on Man*, but also of works less overtly didactic, like the plays of Shakespeare. Indeed, prior to the Romantics, poetry was almost always rationalized, whenever it required to be defended or explained, as a re-presentation of thoughts and feelings already known to exist independently of poetry. As Sidney puts it in his *Apology for Poetry*, "any understanding knoweth the skill of the artificer standeth in that idea or foreconceit of the work, and not in the work itself."⁷ Sidney, in fact, goes so far as to defend the poets Plato attacks, on the ground that they themselves did not invent their inadequate opinions of the gods, but instead received these opinions from "the very religion of the time." These poets, says Sidney, "did not induce such opinions, but did imitate those opinions already induced."⁸ Finally, of course, Sidney bestows the highest honors on poetry rather than philosophy, but he does so only because it seems to him that poems communicate more effectively than philosophical treatises what philosophy itself has to teach us. As "the right popular philosopher," the poet, according to Sidney, "yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description: which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much as that other doth."⁹

This conception of poetry as a sort of splendid vehicle for ideas originating elsewhere in belief systems or thought systems that are determina-

tive of poems rather than determined by poems has been under attack for about two hundred years now. Ever since the time of Blake and Wordsworth, a sort of poetic reformation has been under way whose principal aim is to liberate the Muse from her Babylonian Captivity to philosophy. We can see this reformation at work in Blake's angry reaction to the empiricism of Bacon and Locke, to the enlightened skepticism of the *philosophes*, to the materialism of the new physical theories of nature. Indeed, much of the time Blake sounds like those "abusive" poets Plato speaks of who dared to describe the materialist philosophers of the pre-Socratic period as "she-dogs uttering vain howlings." Blake makes essentially the same gesture, because he refuses to take orders from the dominant philosophers of his own day. He also refuses to take orders from orthodox religious authorities and mainstream theologians, preferring to create his own personal vision of the truth on the basis of what he takes to be his own autonomous imagination. And, in this respect at least, he is hardly more radical than Wordsworth. After all, it is Wordsworth who claims to find in his own mind, in his own experience, and without benefit of traditional mythology, the substance of the profoundest, most philosophical poetry. It is Wordsworth who claims access, through "life's everyday appearances," to "worlds / To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil." This is still, I think, the most extraordinary claim in the whole of modern poetry: the claim that we can have it all—"Paradise, and groves Elysian, Fortunate Fields"—not as a fiction, not as a fantasy or a wish fulfillment, but as "a simple produce of the common day." Poetry, says Wordsworth, is "the first and last of all knowledge," which means that poets *can* start from scratch and they *can* arrive at final truths, not by accepting conclusions already propounded, but by ransacking the materials of their own personal experience and impressions.

At almost the same moment in Germany, the young Schelling (or possibly the young Hegel) was writing these words: "Poetry thereby obtains a higher dignity; it becomes again in the end what it was in the beginning—*teacher of (history) the human race* because there is no longer any philosophy, any history; poetic art alone will outlive all the rest of the sciences and arts."¹⁰ In fact, both the Romantic poets and the philosophers of German idealism (in its earlier phase) were developing at the same time a theory of the autonomy or self-sufficiency of the self-conscious imagination. According to this theory, the ultimate goal of wisdom is not to acquire correct

notions having to do with Paradise and groves Elysian and Fortunate Fields. It is to experience these things directly or immediately in the world all around us, and, further, to experience this experience itself in acts of artistic self-consciousness. The production of poetry wherein one can endlessly experience and reexperience one's experiences becomes the highest thing of all. In such poetry, one encounters the self (the mind as "lord and master," to use Wordsworth's phrase) constructing itself objectively to itself; one encounters self-thinking thought. After that, who needs philosophy? After that, philosophy itself would be mean descent.

We are still working out the implications of this Romantic reversal of Aristotle's maneuver. And it makes no difference whether one is considering the "art for art's sake" or "pure poetry" school at one end of the spectrum or the "myth-making" school at the other end of the spectrum. Poets who cultivate aesthetic experience as an alternative to truth are as much affected by the Romantic reversal as the poets who cultivate it as the means to truth. Both groups believe that poetry must be permitted to develop according to its own laws and interests, whether it comes, as Pater says, "proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sakes,"¹¹ or whether it comes, in Eliot's phrase, as "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."¹² The claims for poetry in our day, whether they be pitched high or low, whether they be based on the assumption that poetry can absorb the whole of philosophy into itself or on the contrary assumption that it can expel philosophy out of itself, have at least this much in common: the belief that poetry cannot properly regard itself as the handmaiden of philosophy.

This belief, I would argue, is mistaken, for it is certainly untrue to say that modern poetry has succeeded either in absorbing philosophy or else in detaching itself from it altogether. In spite of the illusion that it has gained its independence, poetry remains, in a curious way, just as subordinate as it ever as. It could hardly be otherwise, since the *theory* of the autonomy of the poetic imagination is itself a philosophical creature, and all *judgments* concerning the scope and value of poetry are themselves philosophical in character. The fact that modern art has become intensely self-conscious regarding the superiority of its own modes of cognition and expression is precisely what enables us to say that it is propelled by theory

or by theoretical considerations. The less mimetic, the less discursive, the less representational this art has been, the more obvious it has also been that this is the case. Imagism, abstractionism, surrealism, and minimalism all have theoretical foundations that justify or legitimate their productions. In fact, the more unsophisticated, or postsophisticated, a poem appears to be, the more sophisticated the theory generally is that dictates its demeanor. The disappearance of overt attitudinizing in art must not be taken to signify art's independence from philosophy, as Paul Valéry makes clear in the following passage, which describes how the late nineteenth-century poets liberated their poems from carrying a philosophical burden:

It was a time of theories, curiosities, commentaries, and passionate explanations. A young and somewhat stern generation rejected the scientific dogma which was beginning to be unfashionable, without adopting the religious dogma which was not yet so. In the profound and scrupulous worship of the arts as a whole, it thought it had found an unequivocal discipline or even a truth. A sort of religion was very nearly established. . . . But the works of that period did not themselves positively disclose these preoccupations. Quite to the contrary, one must note carefully what they prohibit and what ceased to appear in poems during the time of which I am speaking. It would seem that abstract thought, formerly admitted even into verse, having now become almost impossible to combine with the immediate emotions that it was desired continually to arouse, being banished from a poetry that was endeavoring to reduce itself to its own essence, and dismayed by the multiple effects of surprise and of music demanded by modern taste, had betaken itself to the preparatory phase and to the theory of poetry. Philosophy, and even ethics, tended to shun the actual works and take their place among the reflections preceding them. This was a very real *progress*.¹³

The kind of "progress" Valéry is referring to in this passage continued to be a preoccupation with the modernist poets, such as Pound and Williams. For example, in a letter to the editor of *View*, Williams remarks with his usual bluntness: "Brilliant articles cry out to be written. Why bother? No one would read them. The thing is, make the things that such world shaking deductions would imply and OMIT the deductions."¹⁴ On another occasion, and at greater length, Williams explained to his published James Laughlin that poetry works much better when the thought with which it is associated is not put "into" it but instead is made "the spring-board for

what the setup it indicates induces objectively in things." In other words, says Williams, "if you think this way, then it should induce you to see a hog or a wife or a fifty cent piece *that way*—whatever that way would be. That would be poetic creation."¹⁵

It fell to the critics of modern poetry to reverse this procedure. By taking poems about hogs or wives or fifty-cent pieces and working backward, the critic eventually arrived at the "spring-board" of thought that explained the poems. If it was difficult to extricate the thought contained in a poem by Eliot or Pound, it was relatively easy to see how the strategy of the poem had been dictated by a nexus of theories concerning the history of culture and the psychology of perception. A complex philosophy of human experience was contained in these theories, and it was this philosophy that explained the substance and manner of poems like *The Waste Land* or "In a Station of the Metro," poems designed to present little globules of experience rather than thoughts about it. Such poems, no matter how surd-like in character, no matter how concrete or recalcitrant to the understanding, were in fact subordinate to the theories that set them up and accounted for their workings. But, if in this way philosophy was calling the shots for literature by designing its production, it was also busy at the other end of things in the minds of those who offered to be the interpreters and explainers of literature. These interpreters and explainers were not necessarily satisfied with what the authors themselves had said about the guiding principles of their own works. Indeed, it was partly an effect of modernist theory that the conscious intentions or deliberate designs of authors came to be seen as trivial by comparison with the intellectual-and-emotional complexes attested to by images or by comparison to the intricate patterns made by the mind of Europe over the course of its long, transindividual life. In any case, throughout most of the twentieth century, the authority of authors, conceived in terms of intentions or purposes governing the production of works of conscious art, came to be regarded by almost every school of literary criticism as a metaphysical illusion best dispensed with. Authors were like things-in-themselves, inferred realities imagined to explain textual phenomena in the same way that the gods (or God) had been imagined to explain natural phenomena. Authorial intention was in truth a mirage or a hypostasis; if such a thing as intention did exist, it was certainly unknowable, and even if it could be known, as something distinct from textual phenomena it would be irrelevant or beside the

point. Marxists, Freudians, myth critics, New Critics, structuralists, post-structuralists—all had some strategy for conceiving the author as a metaphysical embarrassment or, at best, as an epiphenomenon in relation to more important things. Curiously, the effect was to reinstate the old Socratic judgment that poets really don't know what they are talking about. Just when it seemed that poets were about to be regarded, as they had been in ancient times, as seers or sages purveying the deepest or the highest of all wisdom, they were swept aside by other intellectuals as an irrelevant nuisance to the project of attaining a right understanding of the meaning of poetry. In this way, philosophy once again rose up over poetry.

The critics who formed the various schools of literary criticism did not, by and large, see themselves as philosophers. When they had an academic affiliation, they were associated with departments of language and literature rather than departments of philosophy. Moreover, they had heard that philosophy *as metaphysics* was a thing of the past, which had been crushed by the philosophers themselves in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Contemporary philosophers seemed to spend their time tidying up truth tables or refereeing language games, thus helping other intellectuals to avoid logical or verbal confusions. Meanwhile, these other intellectuals, particularly the ones working in the human sciences such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, and linguistics, had developed the "right" categories for understanding all forms of human behavior and human consciousness, including those that manifested themselves as literature. These categories were not philosophical, because they had not been developed in philosophy departments by persons calling themselves philosophers. They were scientific, and because they had originated in departments of science, the critics who employed them could do so without having to feel responsible for them. To apply them to literature was to be "interdisciplinary," not speculative. And yet the results seemed strangely metaphysical. In almost every one of its shapes or forms, literary criticism became a kind of transcendentalism. The ideas that authors themselves seemed to have had, as conscious makers or deliberate designers of their own works, were, of course, suspended or bracketed as problematical fictions. The real issue was to determine *how* such ideas, or the semblance of such ideas, had ever arisen in the first place. Could they be explained, for example, as the consequence of psychic formation dramas, whereby consciousness as we now know it has

come to be constituted? Could our present thinking turn out to be a sort of false consciousness in relation to the deeper structures and processes hypothesized by psychoanalysts and anthropologists? Myth critics like Joseph Campbell and Northrop Frye answered in the affirmative, in response to the pioneering work of Frazer, Freud, and Jung. Feminist critics, more recently, responding in part to suggestions made by Lacan and Foucault concerning the rationalizations at work in self-identification, developed their own theories having to do with the factors involved in the gendering of consciousness. All these inquiries into the constitution of consciousness, whether based on theories of the unconscious persistence of primordial thought patterns, or on theories of the engendering of ego or the engendering of gender, were (and are) transcendental in character, because they focus not on the ideas that consciousness itself has produced but on the factors or conditions that constrain consciousness, impelling it from within to arrive at just these ideas. The ideas appear as the manifest content of literary works and other cultural products, the factors or conditions that unconsciously determine them as the latent content of the same works. The producers of works need not be aware (in fact, they are usually totally unaware) of what is transcendental in their own activity. Thus, it is the transcendental inquirer—the critic—who can best explain how it is that the works are as they are.

Along with the psychological explainers of consciousness, there went another group of political or sociological explainers, including Marxists, Marxist revisionists, Frankfurt School disciples, and “power” archeologists (after the fashion of Foucault). This group specialized in explaining how various kinds of consciousness are shaped or constrained by social, political, and economic pressures, with the result that the ideas formed by consciousness can mostly be dismissed as the bits and pieces of an ideology, always improperly conceived by its own advocates because their own thinking is always informed by it transcendently. Here again, the manifest content of literary work was more or less identified with the conscious intentions of the writers who produced them, whereas the latent content, visible only to the transcendental inquirer, was the ideological position implied by those intentions. A third group of transcendental critics rose up on the basis of structural linguistics and the science of semiology or semiotics. This last group explained consciousness (and, consequently, literature) in terms of the ways in which language imposes on thinking its

own characteristic features and possibilities. For these critics, language was the key to everything discoverable or intelligible. Awareness of its transcendental functions with respect to all forms of intellectual inquiry constituted, for them, a "linguistic turn," and language study came to be regarded as the new organon of thought. In some ways, linguistic transcendentalism did indeed become the most powerful and the most influential form of transcendentalism in the twentieth century. It was hard to explain linguistic phenomena in terms of psychological or sociological *events*. It was much easier to explain psychological and sociological *explanations* of events in terms of their own necessary inscription of linguistic phenomena. Nevertheless, as the poststructuralist critics made clear, it was not impossible for the chief forms of transcendentalism (the psychological, the sociological, and the linguistic) to overlap or coalesce. Revisionist structuralists (who called themselves deconstructionists) began to talk about the political implications of unmasking "bad" ideologies through their own special form of hyper-close reading. Feminist critics began to discuss the manner in which seemingly neutral conceptions of things were rooted in psychological processes whereby consciousness had been gendered according to the "deep" politics of male/female relations. Cultural critics, like the New Historicists, began to incorporate the notions developed by linguistic and psychological transcendentalists into their own analyses of the dynamics of cultural formations. Thus, the feeling sometimes arose that the various forms of transcendentalism might be reconciled with each other or at least work collaboratively toward the common goal of explaining the constitution of consciousness.

It was sincerely hoped that the structures and processes the transcendentalists themselves had adduced would be regarded not as metaphysical entities but only as the legitimate products of scientific discovery and rigorous reasoning. After all, the original home of their key concepts was simply one or another of the social sciences, such as linguistics or psychology in their more ordinary forms. If pressed very hard for credentials, the transcendentalists could always fall back on these sciences for support. Most of the time, however, what they in fact produced did look suspiciously like metaphysics. Like the original transcendentalists—like Kant himself—they knew that the seemingly real world of space and time, although it appeared to have a nature and a history, was in fact a construction of consciousness and could be reduced in a twinkling to the ideas that

consciousness had had of it. Ideas were fictions. The idea of consciousness itself as an actually existing entity was a fiction. It was impossible to explain ideas by referring to the objects to which they appeared to correspond, because these objects themselves were compacted of ideas. They stood inside the ideas they appeared to have instigated. It was similarly impossible to explain ideas by referring to an object or an entity from which they might be supposed to emanate (an entity such as mind or consciousness), because this entity was available to us only through our ideas of it. Somehow the mechanisms of ideation had to be imagined without reference to anything independent of ideation. A more suitable term than "ideation" was the term "interpretation." Everything could be reduced (or infinitely expanded) by taking it to be the product of interpretation. To focus on the activity of interpretation itself was to interpret it. Since the objects of interpretation were constituted by interpretation, it was impossible to derive knowledge by studying the objects themselves empirically. The right thing to do was presumably to expose the transcendental character of the activity of interpretation in relation to the constituted objects. To do this, one had to investigate the nature or character of the interpretive process without making the mistake of grounding it on its own productions, on the objects that it itself had invented. A netherworld of hypothetical actions and entities had to be summoned up in order to explain interpretation, once it was clear that the world constructed by interpretation could not be adduced as the cause of the process by means of which it had been constructed. Perversely, it seemed, the result of transcendentalism was metaphysics.

Santayana had called attention to this result in his analysis of Kantian transcendentalism in *The Life of Reason*. In Kant's "mythology," says Santayana, "the whole skeleton and dialectical mould of experience came to figure . . . as machinery behind the scenes, as a system of non-natural efficient forces." Indeed, Santayana continues, Kant's "fundamental oversight and contradiction lay in not seeing that the concept of a set of conditions was the precise and exact concept of nature, which he consequently reduplicated, having one nature before experience and another after. The first thus became mythical and the second illusory; for the first, said to condition experience, was a set of verbal ghosts, while the second, which alone could be observed or discovered scientifically, was declared ficti-

tious."¹⁶ The concept of a nature *before* experience, which is the condition *of* experience, achieves truly metaphysical proportions in the depth psychology of Jung and in the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, which have both been strongly influential on critics who lean toward the psychological form of transcendentalism. The nature *after* experience, which the vulgar think of as reality, is for these critics a construction of consciousness, and therefore, strictly speaking, fictitious. The true reality, the one that is much more important than that which consciousness constructs, is the universal human mind, the primordial or archaic mind that persists into the present through the agency of what Jung calls the collective unconscious. It is this mind, invisible to the uninitiated, that expresses itself, latently or symbolically, in the productions of consciousness, and it is this mind which is the ultimate focus of the psychological transcendentalists.

Jung's metaphysics can be seen clearly in the Tavistock Lectures of 1935. There Jung proclaims:

The deepest we can reach in our exploration of the unconscious mind is the layer where man is no longer a distinct individual, but where his mind widens out and merges into the mind of mankind—not the conscious mind, but the unconscious mind of mankind, where we are all the same. As the body has its anatomical conformity in its two eyes and two ears and one heart and so on, with only slight individual differences, so has the mind its basic conformity. On this collective level we are no longer separate individuals, we are all one. You can understand this when you study the psychology of primitives. . . . Primitive mentality expresses the basic structure of the mind, that psychological layer which with us is the collective unconscious, that underlying level which is the same in all.¹⁷

In assuming that primitive mentality is more expressive of the basic structure of mind than sophisticated consciousness because it is less given to distinctions between individuals or between subject and object, Jung flirts with the idea that it might be possible to return, in some sense, to the original wholeness of the universal mind, in relation to which consciousness itself is a "fall." Thus he muses:

The outstanding fact about the primitive mentality is this lack of distinction between individuals, this oneness of the subject with the object, this *participation mystique*, as Lévy-Bruhl terms it. . . . Because the basic

structure of the mind is the same in everybody, we cannot make distinctions when we experience on that level. . . . In the underlying collective level there is a wholeness which cannot be dissected.¹⁸

Indeed, Jung concludes, "if you begin to think about participation as a fact which means that fundamentally we are identical with everybody and everything, you are led to very peculiar theoretical conclusions." Although Jung advises his auditors not to "go further than those conclusions because these things get dangerous," it is clear that Jung has already gone so far as to hypothesize a metaphysical entity ("the unconscious mind of mankind") and to speculate mythically on the fall into individuality and the recovery of original wholeness. Jung's description of the inferential status of the one mind is powerfully reminiscent of the traditional argument for the existence of God from the evidences of design in nature. He admits:

We cannot deal with the unconscious processes directly because they are not reachable. They are not directly apprehended; they appear only in their products, and we postulate from the peculiar quality of those products that there must be something behind them from which they originate. We call that dark sphere the unconscious psyche.¹⁹

It was, of course, precisely the point of natural theology that it was similarly reasonable to postulate from the peculiar quality of natural phenomena that there must be something behind *them* from which *they* originate. In this respect, Jung's work shows how the type of thinking that once expressed itself as natural theology eventually found a new home for itself in modern "depth" psychology. That the one mind is conceived as a producer of effects and therefore as a metaphysical agent or power is clear from this remark (again from the Tavistock Lectures):

[O]ur personal psychology is just a thin skin, a ripple upon the ocean of collective psychology. The powerful factor, the factor which changes our whole life, which changes the surface of our known world, which makes history, is collective psychology, and collective psychology moves according to laws entirely different from those of our consciousness. The archetypes are the great decisive forces, they bring about the real events, and not our personal reasoning and practical intellect. . . . Sure enough, the archetypal images decide the fate of man. Man's unconscious psy-

chology decides, and not what we think and talk in the brain-chamber up in the attic.²⁰

When T. S. Eliot invoked "the mind of Europe" in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," declaring it to be "much more important" than the individual minds of particular persons, it must have been clear to at least some of his readers that he was revealing his affinity with the metaphysics of idealism. For some reason, the affinity of Jung's thinking with this same metaphysics has seemed less clear to those critics who assume that "depth" psychology is essentially a postphilosophical development.

Lévi-Strauss, despite his criticism of Jung's theory of archetypes, shares with Jung a belief in the universal mind, which is the transcendental condition of all social and cultural phenomena. In his essay "Language and the Analysis of Social Laws," he speculates on the power of linguistics to disclose the "universal laws" of the mind:

Among all social phenomena, language alone has thus far been studied in a manner which permits it to serve as the object of truly scientific analysis, allowing us to understand its formative process and to predict its mode of change. This results from modern researches into the problems of phonemics, which have reached beyond the superficial conscious and historical expression of linguistic phenomena to attain fundamental and objective realities consisting of systems of relations which are the products of unconscious thought processes. The question which now arises is this: Is it possible to effect a similar reduction in the analysis of other forms of social phenomena? If so, would this analysis lead to the same result? And if the answer to this last question is in the affirmative, can we conclude that all forms of social life are substantially of the same nature—that is, do they consist of systems of behavior that represent the projection, on the level of conscious and socialized thought of universal laws which regulate the unconscious activities of the mind?²¹

As is well known, Lévi-Strauss answered these questions in the affirmative, reaching the conclusion toward the end of his career (in the Massey Lectures) that, "notwithstanding the cultural differences between the several parts of mankind, the human mind is everywhere one and the same and that it has the same capacities."²² On this level of universality, however, the constructions of "the human mind" are not to be confused with the conscious intentions of individuals or groups. Because the universal

mind thinks deeply or structurally, it produces "fundamental and objective realities consisting of systems of relations" that are quite beyond the thoughts of those whom these systems define. Thus, "we are led to conceive of social structures as entities independent of men's consciousness of them (although they in fact govern men's existence), and thus as different from the image which men form of them as physical reality is different from our sensory perceptions of it and our hypotheses about it."²³ The universal mind, as Lévi-Strauss conceives it, is in fact constructing an expression of itself that completely transcends the purposes of those who are collectively its instruments. Because this is the case, it is possible to say that "myths get thought in man unbeknownst to him." Of his own work, Lévi-Strauss can say:

I don't have the feeling that I write my books. I have the feeling that my books get written through me and that once they have got across me I feel empty and nothing is left. . . . That is, my work gets thought in me unbeknownst to me.

I never had, and still do not have, the perception of feeling my personal identity. I appear to myself as the place where something is going on, but there is no 'I', no 'me.' Each of us is a kind of crossroads where things happen. The crossroads is purely passive; something happens there. A different thing, equally valid, happens elsewhere. There is no choice, it is just a matter of chance.²⁴

Indeed, as the colossal supersubject emerges from behind the smoke screen of apparently disparate cultural materials, Lévi-Strauss's thought verges toward the mythology of the original unity of this subject, which has collapsed into the differentiated cultures spread out in time and space but can still be recognized as the underlying reality of their difference. This mythology is implied when Lévi-Strauss asserts that, although it cannot be supposed "that cultures have tried systematically or methodically to differentiate themselves from each other," nevertheless it is true "that they *developed* characteristics of their own and *became* different from each other."²⁵ By using linguistics as the key to all mythologies, we can (in thought) reverse this development and contemplate the primordial super-subject. However, since the cultures themselves did not will their differentiation but in fact cultural differentiation is simply the mechanism whereby the super-subject articulates itself or extrapolates itself, it is both neces-

sary and good that on a certain level differences should remain and not be sublated though "over-communication":

In order for a culture to be really itself and to produce something, the culture and its members must be convinced of their originality and even, to some extent, of their superiority over the others; it is only under conditions of under-communication that it can produce anything.²⁶

The fall into difference is really a fortunate fall, and the total mystery that offers itself to contemplation is the mystery whereby the one eternally pours itself out into the many and, simultaneously, reconstitutes itself as the one. Ordinary consciousness being unaware of this mystery, it is available only to the transcendental inquirer who, through awareness of it, "shall have the hope of overcoming the opposition between the collective nature of culture and its manifestations in the individual."²⁷ Like Jung, Lévi-Strauss presses toward the overcoming of all oppositions mysteriously and necessarily introduced by consciousness or culture:

If we are led to believe that what takes place in our mind is something not substantially or fundamentally different from the basic phenomenon of life itself, and if we are led then to the feeling that there is not this kind of gap which is impossible to overcome between mankind on the one hand and all the other living beings—not only animals, but also plants—on the other, then perhaps we shall reach more wisdom, let us say, than we think we are capable of.²⁸

Thus, by recognizing the unity of the supersubject, we can come to participate in the unity of all living things, cancelling the false consciousness that takes differences to be absolute or final. Indeed, what makes this consciousness false is its inability to arrive, when left to its own devices, at the metaphysical hypostasis of the supersubject or at the hypostasized identity of all living things. Transcendentalism establishes these hypostases in the minds of the adept.

Another group of psychological transcendentalists, eschewing the supersubject so dear to the myth critics and the structural anthropologists, were the neo-Freudians who followed in the wake of Lacan. Like the Freudians before them, these critics were interested in psychogenesis. Their ambition was to construct, as it were, a *psychogony*, a sort of interior,

microcosmic version of Hesiod's *theogony*. Consequently, they explored the dramatic, constitutive processes which might be imagined as the background history of the ego or the self in individual persons. That is to say, they attempted to track the evolution of the self by observing speculatively the sequential stages whereby the preself or the not-yet-formed self is gradually transformed into a mature consciousness capable of knowing both itself and the world in which it finds itself. These transcendentalists shared with their Jungian and structuralist counterparts a sort of contempt for the notions that the mature consciousness itself was capable of arriving at. The world developed by consciousness was a mere construction, a fiction, whose substance was a set of verbal ghosts imposed on consciousness as the reward, or penalty, of maturation through the acquisition of language. The true reality was the metaphysical realm of the pre-self, a realm wherein consciousness was forged, as upon an anvil. A sound grasp of the metaphysics of this realm would serve the adept as an antidote to the judgments later passed off as "knowledge" by a consciousness forgetful of its own formation process.

A formidable practitioner of psychological transcendentalism in the above sense is the critic Julia Kristeva, who, in her "search for that which produces, shapes, and exceeds the operating consciousness,"²⁹ has found it useful to posit a distinction between what she terms the *semiotic* component of language and the *symbolic* component. The pre-self or proto-self makes its appearance in the semiotic component, whereas the fully-formed self, the ego, is operative in the symbolic. The implications of psychogenesis as a whole are displayed to the adept in the subsisting relations between these two components, which are mutually necessary or correlative in virtually every instance of language but at the same time opposing or antithetical in their tendencies, like Love and Strife in Empedocles, or like the Indeterminate and the Determined in Anaximander (who, of all the ancient cosmologists, comes closest to prefiguring Kristeva's microcosmology). The semiotic component is the preverbal disposition *toward* language, which has no access to signs, no means to predicate, no way of focusing on a signified object, and "therefore no operating consciousness." It is best regarded, says Kristeva, as "an uncertain and indeterminate articulation because it does not yet refer (for young children) or no longer refers (in psychotic discourse) to a signified object for a thetic consciousness." The semiotic remains, however, the permanent substratum of all discourse,

waxing larger in the multiplicity or indeterminacy of poetry, almost disappearing in the seemingly clear determinations of science. The semiotic is associated with the rhythms and pulsations of the infantile body, being "detected genetically in the first echolalias of infants as rhythms and intonations anterior to the first phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, and sentences." Indeed, semiotic activity is "a mark of the workings of drives" stemming from "the archaisms of the semiotic body," a body "dependent vis-à-vis the mother." It is, in essence, the aboriginal expression of "instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother." Unfortunately, in the process of maturation, the ego comes to realize the symbolizing powers of language and immerses itself in meanings or significations at the expense of the old semiotic activity, which is consequently repressed. The symbolic function of language becomes operative in terms of "the thetic and predicative constraints of the ego's judging consciousness." Everywhere the semiotic threatens to bubble up and reclaim its ancient rights, but the symbolic is always there, imposing law and order by means of its clear, univocal significations. Thus, the warm blandishments of the somatic and the maternal are ever at war with the cold dictates of the intellectual and the paternal. Never finally subdued, the semiotic disposition persists in language (maximally in poetry) in order "to signify what is untenable in the symbolic, nominal, paternal function" which seeks to master it.

In Kristeva's description of it, the whole thing is a sort of morality play in which the imprudently exiled energy of the body—"the nonsemanticized instinctual drive that precedes and exceeds meaning"—appropriately disrupts (always minimally, in modern literature maximally) the usurping power of rational consciousness. In fact, the ordinary selfhood of the actual, individual person, in this gigantic contest of powers, or dispositions, or functions, is swallowed up. At best, it is only one of many sites where the contest is going on, "a kind of crossroads where things happen," as Lévi-Strauss would say. At worst, it functions as one of the artificially stabilized "signifieds," testifying to a fixation with identity and permanence. This is true not only of personal identity but also with respect to "man as signified phenomenon." Instead of soaring upward into the unity of the super-subject, Kristeva drops into "the gap opened up between signifier and signified" in order to pursue "a questionable subject-in-process" which may be supposed to exist "in an economy of discourse other than that of thetic consciousness." Discourse is here conceived as

the substance of all appearances, the first principle of everything that is or can be determined through the reciprocal waxing and waning of the semiotic and the symbolic (viewed mythically as countervailing tendencies or forces). In effect, Kristeva accomplishes a sophisticated return to the metaphysics of the pre-Socratics, whose Titanic thoughts are deliberately recuperated in renewed opposition to the Olympian "ascendence of theoretical reason."

The political or sociological version of transcendentalism was just as various in its options as the psychological version. Here too there was a structuralist option, made venerable through a tradition going back to Marx himself, but not limited only to Marxists. According to this option, thoughts and opinions emanating from particular persons were to be regarded as expressions of the socio-economic position of those persons in the all-inclusive political structure that made them possible. Thoughts and opinions were always ideological in nature, that is to say, they were always explicable in terms of the point of view that organized them, and this point of view was itself accounted for by referring to the structural position of the thinkers who had it, as defined by their class, race, or gender. The transcendental conditions of thinking were thus the conditions imposed by the position of particular thinkers in the overall structure of society. If one pressed forward with considerations based on the interests and conclusions of consciousness, one found oneself in a world of fictions, full of wish-fulfillments and rationalizations. The right way was to work backward from the fictional signifieds to the home-base ideologies that had spawned them, and from thence to the structural position that accounted for the ideologies. At the end of the line was the structure itself—Society—the ultimate author of the notions appearing in the heads of thinkers. This was the political version of the supersubject sought after by Jung and Lévi-Strauss. To many, it seemed less metaphysical in political terms or in terms of sociology, but it was still, for all that, a matter of metaphysics. Indeed, the social supersubject was practically invisible to thinkers who restricted themselves to the manifest content of consciousness, riddled as that was with ideological mystifications. It required, in order to be seen, the presence of a transcendental philosopher, who, like Dr. Pangloss, could translate seemingly unrelated or miscellaneous phenomena back into the structural coherence of politics, conceived as the metaphysical substrate of everything else. Thales had worked pretty much the same way with water,