



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy

Bruns, Gerald L.

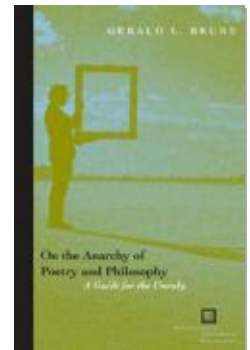
Published by Fordham University Press

Bruns, Gerald L.

On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy: A Guide for the Unruly.

Fordham University Press, 2007.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/66749](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66749).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66749>

## Preface

Much of European philosophy since Nietzsche has been admired, and also occasionally deplored, for its critique of *modernity*, or what Max Weber had in mind when he spoke of the “rationalization” or “disenchantment” of the world—a process that entails many interrelated innovations: the development of scientific reason, the rise of bourgeois capitalism and the industrialization of Europe and North America, the rapid progress of technology along with sophisticated applications of instrumental reason, whether in the form of the mechanization (or “modernization”) of social life or in the development of systems of management and bureaucratic control. Anthony Giddens has developed a very clear and persuasive conception of modernity that focuses, as did Michel Foucault’s research, on the development of the modern state and its capacities for the surveillance, normalization, and control of mass populations. One could add further examples from the German and French phenomenological traditions after Heidegger as well as from the Frankfurt School of Horkheimer and Adorno, the work of Walter Benjamin, and much of French intellectual culture since 1960.

Modernity also gave us the concept of art as such—art that is not in the service of the court, the church, or the school. But unlike other of modernity’s innovations, art proved to be an anomaly. The fact is that particular works of art appeared to lose definition when transported outside the context of these legitimating institutions. As Hegel

and the German romantics saw, art cannot be brought under the rule of a universal. Its mode of existence is open-ended self-questioning and self-alteration. The history of art as something self-evident has come to an end. Arguably this condition of indeterminacy (or, better, complexity) is the beginning of modernism, the consequences of which (in terms of particular artworks) would only appear later in the nineteenth century, starting perhaps with Baudelaire, who gave us our first definition of modernism as that which is no longer concerned with the universal, the eternal, or transcendent beauty but rather with the local, the transient, the everyday.

To my knowledge, what no one has studied in any large-scale way is the systematic interest that so many twentieth-century European philosophers have taken in “modernism,” which is the covering term that people like me have used to describe the artworld that began to impinge itself on European consciousness around the time of Baudelaire, and which can be summarized in the motto of modern art history, namely that in all of the arts—painting, sculpture, music, poetry, theater, dance—*anything goes*, even if not everything is possible at every moment. It is this anarchic theme or condition of complexity that is the regulative idea of this book. The idea is that there are no universal criteria that enable one to answer the question of what counts as art. Lyotard’s definition of paganism—“judging without criteria”—applies to the modernists just in the way he applies it to himself, a philosopher who writes like a modernist, namely in fragments (notes, discussions, rudiments, lessons, and other “phrasings”). In other words, what emerges is the phenomenon of aesthetic nominalism that people like Theodor Adorno and Fredric Jameson worry about—thinkers who are deeply invested in the critique of modernity, especially as this comes down to us from Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, but who at the same time are deeply distrustful (as was Georg Lukács) of the radical formal innovations in art and literature that are the distinctive features of modernism. Habermas comes to the fore here as a major critic of literary modernism (as in *The Philosophic Discourse of Modernity*). Nominalism means that there are no longer (and, indeed, never were) any universal criteria for determining whether a thing is a work of art. Nominalism further means: under certain historical and conceptually improvised conditions, anything can be a work of art—this is the radical provocation of Marcel Duchamp and his Readymades. I find the work of the philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto particularly useful in under-

standing the more anarchic forms of modernism as forms of conceptual art.

What I try to do in this book is to give fairly detailed accounts of the writings of European thinkers that bear upon the problem of modernism, including (to start with) the problem of how to cope with a work of art in the absence of criteria handed down in tradition or developed by comprehensive aesthetic theories such as one finds in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. A recurring argument in the chapters of this book is that what counts as art or poetry is internal to the social spaces in which the art is created, which means that there are multiple and heterogeneous conceptions of art and poetry, a condition that gives rise to the phenomenon of conceptual art, which argues that in order to experience a thing as art, we need to have developed or have in hand a *conceptual context*—theories, arguments, appeals to or rejections of what is happening elsewhere—in which the thing before us “fits,” that is, as the conceptual artists say, in which the work itself exhibits the theory that enables it “to come up for the count” as art. My book is essentially a defense of nominalism in the sense that it proposes that criteria for determining whether a thing counts as a work of art are not universal but are local and contingent, social and historical, and therefore the source of often intense (and sometimes fruitful) disagreements among and within different communities of the artworld. Hence what I am proposing in this book is an anarchist aesthetics or poetics: anything goes, nothing is forbidden, since anything is possible within the historical limits of the particular situations in which modern and contemporary art and poetry have been created. It is as if freedom rather than truth, beauty, or goodness had become the end of art.

I begin with an introductory chapter, “Modernisms—Literary and Otherwise,” that tries to sort out the conceptual problems that, more than anything else, give modernism its definition. I take up Adorno's critique of aesthetic nominalism, Arthur Danto's thesis that one can identify a work of art only within a historically determined conceptual context, and Stanley Cavell's idea that the possibility of fraudulence is internal to the experience of modernism—an experience that frequently takes the form of being brought up short by the sheer materiality of the work of art, its apparent reduction to the density and singularity of a mere thing, as in the case of Marcel Duchamp and his Readymades. As so many of the thinkers studied in this book point out, the modernist work breaks free from every concept of the beautiful. Modernism, whatever else it is, is an aesthetics of the sub-

lime that takes us out of the role of contemplative observers of radiant formal objects.

This fact comes out directly in chapter 2, “Ancients and Moderns: Gadamer’s Aesthetic Theory and the Poetry of Paul Celan,” which takes up Hans-Georg Gadamer’s encounter with modernism, in particular (1) his *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, which is about his effort to engage modernism within a framework that is compatible with his own commitment to classical aesthetics, which is to say an aesthetics of the beautiful; and (2) his encounter with the poetry of Paul Celan, arguably the most recondite European poet of the last half-century, and a premier figure of what I call the “modernist sublime.” Like many, I take Celan (along with Francis Ponge) to be one of the most important European poets of the twentieth century, and one of the few to engage the widespread interests of philosophers like Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Emmanuel Levinas.

Chapter 3, “Michel Foucault’s Modernism: Language, Poetry, and the Experience of Freedom,” tries to find a continuity between Foucault’s earlier baroque writings on Roussel, Bataille, and Blanchot, where the focus is on the materiality of language, its resistance to appropriation, and his later “aesthetics of the self,” in which the modernist is one who creates himself as a work of art—a recuperation, as Foucault says, of Baudelaire’s “modernism,” but also of the ancient Greek practices of self-creation.

Chapter 4, “Poetic Communities,” studies, among other things, the avant-garde group as an instance of the anarchist community, where the work of art is apt to be less a formal object than an event or experience or, indeed, an alternative form of life. What is our relation to poetry when the poem is no longer the object of a solitary aesthetic experience but rather presupposes the social conditions of theater? Chapter 5, “Francis Ponge on the Rue de la Chaussée d’Antin,” is regulated by the question, “What becomes of things in art?” Modernism has always called into question the distinction between art and life—as in the case of Marcel Duchamp and his Readymades or in John Cage’s aesthetic, where the work of art is open to the material complexities of its environment. In fact modernism is made of ordinary things, as in the central modernist form of the collage, but also in the work of the French poet, Francis Ponge, whose poetry is studied here in some detail. Ponge’s poetry is a celebration of things that ordinarily fall beneath the threshold of literary description—a snail, a wooden crate, a cigarette, a pebble. There turns out to be a great resonance here between, among other things, Ponge

the poet and Walter Benjamin's collector, who values things for their dispensability. Here a secondary thesis concerns the relation between modernism and the everyday and the mundane as against, say, romanticism's concern with worlds of the spirit and "monuments of unaging intellect" (W. B. Yeats).

Chapter 6, "The Senses of Augustine: On Some of Lyotard's Remains," takes up Jean-François Lyotard's posthumous writings on St. Augustine and is an examination of what kinds of writings these are. Close attention is paid to Lyotard's *Le Différend*, with its seminal development of the concept of "phrasing," the phrase being the basic unit of Lyotard's *écriture* but also an immensely useful concept in coping with the paratactic, or nonlinear, character of so much of modern poetry. Phrasing, as Lyotard conceives (and practices) it, is a species of what he calls "paganism." In *Au juste (Just Gaming)*, he writes, "When I speak of paganism, I am not using a concept. It is a name, neither better nor worse than others, for the denomination of a situation in which one judges *without criteria*. And one judges not only in matters of truth, but also in matters of beauty and in matters of justice, that is, of politics and ethics. That's what I mean by paganism." So the notion of paganism captures some of the principal themes that define literary modernism—nominalism, complexity, the interdependence of practice and theory, the priority of local and contingent over top-down principles and rules. Meanwhile Lyotard's engagement with Augustine's texts is a tour de force of modernist poetics, which elsewhere I summarize as "quotation, mimicry, pastiche." Lyotard does not so much "read" Augustine as appropriate him—or, alternatively, he turns himself into Augustine as a form of self-creation.

The final two chapters are devoted to the writings of Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas, respectively, engaging two parallel developments of what I call an "anarchist poetics," where the work of art is understood as that which is absolutely singular, that is, irreducible to concepts, categories, distinctions, or the workings of any logic. Whereas in my earlier work on Blanchot I emphasized (naturally) his concept of literary space (a surface across which one travels like a nomad or exile rather than a volume to be filled or a territory to be occupied), in chapter 7, "Anarchic Temporality: Maurice Blanchot on Writing, Friendship, and the Ontology of the Work of Art," I take up, among other things, his notion of the temporality of writing. The work of writing belongs to a time outside the terms of *archē* and *telos*—the between-time or *entre-temps* of the pause, the interruption, the interminable, in which the present recedes into a past that

never was, and the future, like the messiah, never arrives—a zone of incompleteness, of the fragmentary, of *désœuvrement*, or “worklessness,” among other Blanchotian concepts. This is the time of dying—the time that Blanchot appeared to have entered in the fragment, *L’instant de ma mort*, and which accounts for so many of his characteristic themes of passivity, affliction, waiting, forgetting. It is also, interestingly, the time of friendship—a relationship that neither begins nor ends, a relation of intimacy and foreignness, an infinite conversation in which nothing is ever determined.

Chapter Eight, “The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas’s Writings,” tries to come to terms with Levinas’s conflicted attitudes toward poetry and the whole category of the aesthetic as such. Levinas, after all, was nothing if not an iconoclast—deeply distrustful of images and their power of entrancement. Of particular interest is the symmetry that develops, perhaps under the influence of his friend Blanchot, between ethical alterity and the alterity of the work of art, where (as in the case of Paul Celan’s poetry), poetry may be, Levinas says, “an alternative modality of the otherwise than being,” that is, a modality of transcendence in which our relation to people and things is one of proximity rather than conceptualization and control. Levinas says: The proximity of others is ethics, the “proximity of things is poetry.” The chapter is devoted to close readings of Levinas’s texts on art and poetry, particularly the early writings on the *il y a*, reality and its shadow, as well as his writings on Maurice Blanchot.

It is worth emphasizing that the philosophers under study in this book are not trying to clarify modernism conceptually or analytically. Nor are they trying to lay the thing to rest. On the contrary, their writings bring new life to the conceptual problems inherent in modernism, and to many of the poets and artists who fall within its open-ended horizon. And that is because each of these philosophers is a modernist in his own right. European philosophy in the last century was remarkable and memorable for its often uncanny writing, the heterogeneity of its thinking, and above all the various ways in which it illuminated or recast modernism’s question of questions: Do we know what art is? Or poetry? Or, for all of that, philosophy? Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, to which I refer repeatedly in this book, seems to me exemplary in this respect in virtue of the density of its writing, the range and unpredictability of its inquiries—and perhaps above all in the way it persistently calls modernism (and modernists) into question.

Hegel famously thought art was “over and done with” (*Ver-gangenes*). The same has been said (almost routinely) of modernism. Many will be disappointed that I have very little to say, almost nothing, about *post*modernism. My passing thought is that maybe a postmodernist is just someone who has made the art and literature (and even philosophy) of the last century a subject of concerted investigation, and who has experienced in the bargain, for better or worse, some form of self-recognition, or maybe self-questioning. Possibly the postmodernist is simply modernism’s unquiet ghost.

Meanwhile I’m grateful to the philosophers for the pleasure of their company.

Gerald L. Bruns  
Michigan City, Indiana  
January 2006



