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On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy

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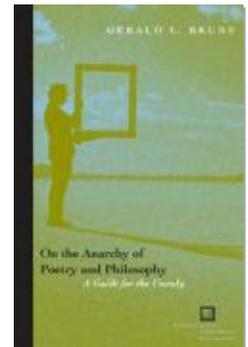
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PART



The Modernist Sublime

Modernisms—Literary and Otherwise: An Introduction

The whole is the false.

—Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

Often my writing is just “stuttering.”

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

in the morning there is meaning.

—Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*

Complexity. In section 3 of *Sein und Zeit* (1927), on “The Ontological Priority of the Question of Being,” Martin Heidegger writes:

The real “movement” of the sciences takes place when their basic concepts undergo a more or less radical revision which is transparent to itself. The level which a science has reached is determined by how far it is *capable* of a crisis in its basic concepts. In such immanent crises the very relationship between positively investigative inquiry and those things [*Sachen*] that are under interrogation comes to a point where it begins to totter. Among the various disciplines everywhere today there are freshly awakened tendencies to put research on new foundations.¹

In other words, there comes a time in the history of a discipline, whether it is philosophy, or physics, or art, when it must start its history over again, even if from scratch, if it is to continue in busi-

ness. Such a crisis, Heidegger says, is a validation of the discipline—a sign that it is not just a dead orthodoxy. As the philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto has suggested, Heidegger’s account of this event can serve as a short and easy way of characterizing modernism as such.² Heidegger, taking it upon himself to rethink the question of Being, would be a good example of a modernist philosopher, the more so because, as he says in section 6 (“The Task of Destroying the History of Ontology”), rethinking the question of Being entails the remaking of philosophy itself—a task Heidegger continued to pursue after *Being and Time* in linguistically innovative and even extravagant ways (to the dismay of most philosophers).³ Meanwhile it is arguable that modernism in Heidegger’s sense—conceptual self-questioning—is more of an unruly, open-ended process than he thought it was, namely an anarchic process that, as Hans-Georg Gadamer has shown, dispenses with the concept of foundations, whether old or new. There are no such things, Gadamer says, as first principles.⁴ One might take this to be the moral of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, section 68, on whether the extension of the concepts of “number” or “game” (or that of any concept, including that of philosophy itself) can be “closed by a frontier”: “For how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No.”⁵ Perhaps this “No” is what characterizes *postmodernism*.

In *Intimations of Postmodernity*, the social theorist Zygmunt Bauman says that what postmodernists know is that we are all of us inhabitants of complex systems.⁶ A complex system, unlike logical, mechanical, or cybernetic systems, is temporal, not so much *in* time as *made of* it. This means that it is turbulent and unpredictable in its workings and effects (structured, as they say, like the weather). A complex system is not governed by factors of any statistical significance, which is why a single imperceptible event can produce massive changes in the system. It follows that a complex system cannot be described by laws, rules, paradigms, causal chains, deep structures, or even a five-foot shelf of canonical narratives. It is beneath the reach of universal norms and so it forces us to apply what Hans Blumenberg calls the *principium rationis insufficientis*: the principle of insufficient reason—which is, however, not the absence of reason but rather, given the lack of self-evidence in a finite situation, a reliance on practical experience, discussion, improvisation, and the capacity for midstream corrections.⁷ In certain philosophical circles this is called “pragmatism”; in others, “anarchism” (meaning—the way I

mean it in this book — not an embrace of chaos, but a search for alternatives to principles and rules [*an-archē*], on the belief that what matters is absolutely singular and irreducible to concepts, categories, and assigned models of behavior).⁸ Meanwhile what anthropologists call “thick” descriptions are needed to make sense of complexity, because such a system can only be comprehended piecemeal, detail by detail, the way mathematicians plot the coastline of California.

The idea is to think of our intellectual disciplines and artworlds, not the way Foucault did during a certain point in his career — namely, as panopticons of normalization — but as complex systems in which, as Bauman says, nothing is capable of being calculated in advance or controlled by a single agency, because there is no vantage point within the system from which the whole can be observed.⁹ Rather there are “a great number of agencies, most of them single-purpose, some of them small, some big, but none large enough to subsume or otherwise determine the behaviour of the others” (IP.192). So, given so many local possibilities, anything can happen. A modernist is just someone who is at home in this anarchy — who finds it a source not of confusion, but of freedom.

Nominalism. I think that since (at least) the onset of what Marjorie Perloff has called “the futurist moment” (1900–14), the inhabitants of European and North American artworlds have been (and remain) more at home in states of complexity than are, among others, philosophers and literary critics. Poets and artists are in any case what most people think of when they hear the word “modernism.”¹⁰ Modernists are those for whom the self-evidence of art is lost, but not the obsession of making it (a highly contingent practice). Theodor Adorno, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, rightly calls them “nominalists” — artists who deny the existence of universals, and who therefore experience themselves (not unwillingly) in various states of performative contradiction.¹¹ Perhaps the premier example of an aesthetic nominalist would be Marcel Duchamp and his Readymades (the urinal, the snow shovel, et al.), which appear to dissolve the distinction between art and non-art.¹² Another example would be William Carlos Williams, as in this famous passage from his poem *Pater-son*:

Q. Mr. Williams, can you tell me, simply, what poetry is?

A. Well. . . . I would say that poetry is language charged with emotion. It’s words, rhythmically organized. . . . A poem is a complete little universe. It exists separately. Any poem that has

worth expresses the whole life of the poet. It gives a view of what a poet is.

Q. All right, look at this part of a poem by E. E. Cummings, another great American poet:

(im)c-a-t(mo)
b,I:l:e
FalleA
ps!fl
Oattumbll
sh?dr
IftwhirlF
(U) (Y)
&&&

Is this poetry?

A. I would reject it as a poem. It may be, to him, a poem. But I would reject it. I can't understand it. He's a serious man. So I struggle very hard with it—and I get no meaning at all.

Q. You get no meaning? But here's part of a poem you yourself have written: “. . . 2 partridges / 2 mallard ducks / a Dungeness crab / 24 hours out / of the Pacific / and 1 live-frozen / trout / from Denmark.” Now that sounds just like a fashionable grocery list.

A. It is a fashionable grocery list.

Q. Well—is it poetry?

A. We poets have to talk in a language which is not English. It is the American idiom. Rhythmically it's organized as a sample of the American idiom. It has as much originality as jazz. If you say “2 partridges, 2 mallard ducks, a Dungeness crab”—if you treat that rhythmically, ignoring the practical sense, it forms a jagged pattern. It is, to my mind, poetry.

Q. But if you don't “ignore the practical sense” . . . you agree that it is a fashionable grocery list.

A. Yes, anything is good material for poetry. Anything. I've said it time and time again.

Q. Aren't we supposed to understand it?

A. There is a difference of poetry and the sense. Sometimes modern poets ignore sense completely. That's what makes some of the difficulty. . . . The audience is confused by the shape of the words.

Q. But shouldn't a word mean something when you see it?

A. In prose, an English word means what it says. In poetry, you're listening to two things . . . you're listening to the sense, the common sense of what it says. But it says more. That is the difficulty.)¹⁵

"A poem can be made of anything," says Williams: newspaper clippings, grocery lists, letters from friends.¹⁴ Then how to tell a poem from a nonpoem? For Adorno, this is the modernist's dilemma. Adorno thinks that Williams's belief that *found language* can be a poem "sabotages the poetic" (AT.87/AeT.123). Williams's materialist poetics—the idea that poetry already exists in the "American idiom" (supposing there to be only one such thing!), and that a poet is just someone who can hear it—is (or appears to be) a rejection of the concept of form that, for Adorno, gives the definition of art: "As little as art is to be defined by any other element, it is simply identical with form" (AT.211/AeT.140). "The concept of form marks out art's sharp antithesis to the empirical world in which art's right to exist is uncertain" (AT.213/AeT.141). Form, for better or worse, is what separates art from life; in which case art might prove redemptive, given what life has been like since God knows when. This, anyhow, is Adorno's hope.

What is interesting about Adorno is that his concepts are more complex than his dogmatic style of advancing them would have us believe.¹⁵ So, for example, form for Adorno is by no means classical or Aristotelian; on the contrary, he wants a modernist conception of form whose logic of integration shows the signs of a dialectical struggle with the material that the rationality of construction tries to overcome: "In artworks, the criterion of success is twofold: whether they succeed in integrating thematic strata and details into their immanent law of form and in this integration *at the same time maintain what resists it and the fissures that occur in the process of integration* [*das ihr Widerstrebende, sei's auch mit Brüchen, zu erhalten*]" (AT.18/AeT.7; emphasis mine). The idea that in art discordant elements are made to disappear into a harmonious whole is *not* Adorno's idea; on the contrary, "multiplicity," he says, must "fear unity," and this fear exposes the dark side of the "law of form," namely, that it is a form of domination. The unity of the work of art remains a conflicted totality. And how could the champion of Arnold Schönberg propose otherwise? Adorno gives the definition of modernism when he says: "Art, whatever its material, has always desired dissonance" (AT.168/AeT.110).

Nevertheless, for Adorno, art is different from life. Form is the work of *poiesis*—not making something (*techne*), but making some-

thing of *something*: “Form is the law of the transfiguration of the existing, counter to which it represents freedom. . . . [F]orm in artworks is everything on which the hand has left its trace, everything over which it has passed. Form is the seal of social labor, fundamentally different from the empirical process of making. What artists directly perceive as form is best elucidated *e contrario* as an antipathy to the unfiltered in the artwork [*am Widerwillen gegen das Unfiltrierte am Kunstwerk*]” (AT.216/AeT.143–44). Thus the artwork is no longer just a thing. It becomes, Adorno says, an “appearance [*Erscheinung*]”; that is, it becomes “the appearance of an other—when the accent falls on the unreality of [its] own reality” (AT.123/AeT.79). However, *Erscheinung* is (again) *not* the classical radiance of a seamless integrity whose whole is greater than its parts. For Adorno, “the whole in truth exists only for the sake of its parts—that is, its *καρπός*, the instant [*Augenblick*]” (AT.279/AeT.187). There remains “the tendency of artworks to wrest themselves free of the internal unity of their own construction, to introduce within themselves caesuras that no longer permit the totality of the appearance” (AT.137/AeT.88). And there is no question that in modernism this tendency works itself out in multifarious ways—most famously, for Adorno, in *montage* (“all modern art may be called montage” [AT.233/AeT.155]). Montage, collage, bricolage, and various forms of open-ended seriality are distinctive features of modernist constructions.

I’ll treat these complexities, including Adorno’s quarrel with materialist aesthetics, in more detail below and again in chapter 5. The point for now is that for Adorno nominalism spells the end of genres. Of course, genres (painting, sculpture, poetry, the fugue) are always abstract: “Probably no important artwork has ever corresponded completely to its genre [*Gattung*]” (AT.297/AeT.199). “From time immemorial art has sought to rescue the special; progressive specialization was immanent to it” (AT.299/AeT.201). Modernism intensifies this specialization—this preservation of the singular and the nonidentical—to the point of indeterminacy: it is no longer possible to say what modernism is made of. It is ludicrous to try to see Duchamp’s snow shovel as a piece of sculpture.¹⁶ Modernism is made of artworks pure and simple—works that would be unrecognizable as such were it not for the manifestos (like Williams’s preface to “Kora in Hell”) that artists produce on behalf of their innovations. As Marjorie Perloff argues in *The Futurist Moment* (FM.80–115), the manifesto is perhaps the distinctive modernist genre. Adorno speaks of *-isms* rather than manifestos (AT.43–44/AeT.24–25), where *-isms* are an

expression of the nominalist's double bind: defiantly, modernism no longer appeals to tradition or to Kantian judgments of taste to legitimate itself, and so it calls into question a whole array of normative and normalizing concepts—legitimacy, authenticity, the mainstream, the natural. There is nowhere that it fits within any given whole, and so it has to invent on the spot, and often without sufficient reason, its own conceptual context. In other words, the task of art, as in the case of Duchamp and his Readymades, is to reconceptualize itself from below (starting history over again), or else it will just come to an end—as (famously) Hegel said it had after art had secularized itself, opting out of the history of Spirit and therefore becoming (whatever might try to pass for art in the future) “a thing of the past [*ein Vergangenes*].”¹⁷ Not that there will be no more works of art, but they will be superfluous, because henceforward what we will need for the sake of understanding are not artworks but the philosophy of art.

The End of Art. Hegel's thesis about the end of art has been taken up by Arthur Danto and relocated within recent art history. Danto has argued persuasively that with modernism art ceases to be art and becomes philosophy, because now art's mode of existence takes the form of a philosophical question: “What is art?”—a question posed for Danto most trenchantly by Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* but which seems to be the regulating question of art since at least Duchamp, if not since Baudelaire (or, indeed, if not since German romanticism—specifically the Jena group that included Hegel).¹⁸ At any rate, here is Danto:

It is possible to read Hegel as claiming that art's philosophical history consists in its being absorbed ultimately into its own philosophy, demonstrating then that self-theorization is a genuine possibility and guarantee that there is something whose identity consists in self-understanding. So the great drama of history, which in Hegel is a divine comedy of the mind, can end in a moment of final self-enlightenment. The historical importance of art then lies in the fact that it makes philosophy of art possible and important. Now if we look at the art of our recent past in these terms, grandiose as they are, *what we see is something which depends more and more upon theory for its existence as art*, so that theory is not something external to a world it seeks to understand, so that in understanding its object it has to understand itself.¹⁹

The end of art means that we can no longer distinguish between art and non-art just by looking, or by appealing to given examples, or by invoking the sort of criteria (like Adorno's principle of form) that one would use to distinguish aesthetic objects from snow shovels. It means that henceforward anything goes, nothing is forbidden, even if not everything is possible at every moment.²⁰ Modernism in this sense is not so much a style- or even period-concept as it is a condition of negative freedom—of *an-archē* in the etymological sense of being on the hither side of principles, rules, and institutions of legitimation. Danto's point is that what distinguishes this condition from the one in which we know (or knew), on the face of it, what belonged in a museum and what did not, is that now what constitutes a work of art *no longer goes without saying*. The thing exhibited as art now needs what performance artists call a "support language" in order to be seen as art. At day's end, modernist art is conceptual art: art is constituted not by its form but by its argument.

The poet David Antin, in a talk-poem entitled "language," makes this point when he observes that Duchamp's Readymades are not just things masking as artworks but are encoded in pieces of language and other semantic systems that turn them into something like "scenarios," as when the snow shovel is christened "in advance of a broken arm." Thus Duchamp's "The Bridge Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)" has, Antin says, a complex relation to the world of science:

now duchamp takes fragments of science his relation
to science is that of a scavenger you reach in and you
say "what a nice pretty set of wires" and you pull them out
and if you survive you say "now doesn't that look great"
duchamp takes all sorts of mechanical imagery and puts
together a series of physical laws they are physical
laws in the sense that they are phrased like such laws this
does this in such and such a way the feeble cylinders
actuate the desire motor love gasoline you really
don't know what he's talking about it seems a kind of
scrambled version of the description of the physics of an engine
it has the grammar of such descriptions it is a deliberate
sort of double talk this non machine machinery which
is then used as a mapping system as a sort of syntax to
work out the map that the "big glass" finally gives you²¹

Think of "The Large Glass" as the construction of a kind of "decombustion engine"—the work of art in the age of technological decomposition.

Fraudulence. A different perspective on these problems is provided by the American philosopher Stanley Cavell, who contextualizes modernism within frameworks provided by J. L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein (the nominalist's nominalist), for whom criteria in deciding any issue are useless because they evaporate before they reach the ground.²² For Cavell this suspicion of criteria is a suspicion of theory as such, on the idea that our relation to the world is essentially practical and even experimental—knowing or learning how to cope with unforeseen situations.²³ Cavell was trained as a composer and decided only very reluctantly to give up music for philosophy. In “Music Discomposed” (1964), Cavell recalls his extensive reading in journals of music theory and philosophical aesthetics during the late fifties and early sixties. The problem during this period, when (for example) the avant-garde composer John Cage was dominating the New York artworld, is that trained composers themselves could not tell who among them was composing music, and who was just faking it.²⁴ Cavell writes:

What these journals suggest is that the possibility of fraudulence, and the experience of fraudulence, is endemic in the experience of contemporary music; that its full impact, even in its immediate relevance, depends upon a willingness to trust the object, knowing that the time spent with its difficulties may be betrayed. I do not see how anyone who has experienced modern art can have avoided such experiences, and not just in the case of music. Is Pop Art art? Are the canvases with a few stripes or chevrons on them art? Are the novels of Raymond Roussel or Alain Robbe-Grillet? Are art movies? A familiar answer is that time will tell. But my question is: *What* will time tell?²⁵

If anything can be art, then the distinction between authenticity and fraud dissolves. Aesthetics reduces to rhetoric, where a powerful argument can make anything come out true. But Cavell's idea is that this indeterminate condition—the possibility of fraudulence or fake art—is not entirely a bad thing; on the contrary, this possibility is internal to the experience of modernism itself. He is explicit on this point: “[The] dangers of fraudulence, and of trust, are essential to the experience of art. . . . Contemporary music is only the clearest case of something common to modernism as a whole, and modernism only makes explicit and bare what has always been true of art”—namely, in Cavell's conception, that our relation with a work of art is

more like a relation with another person than with an object or (much less) a theory (MW.189). In contrast to Danto and Adorno, Cavell's idea is that our relationship with a work of art is not a relation of cognition—grasping a thing by means of concepts, however formulated, whether from above or below—rather it is an ethical relation of responsiveness and acknowledgment, which is a distinction that, for Cavell, captures the idea that our relation to the world is not one of knowing but one of habitation and belonging.

In an essay on “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” Cavell proposes a practical solution to the problem of modernism: namely, one has to change. If serial music is alien to tradition, then (to get a sense of it) one must migrate from tradition to this new territory and learn how to inhabit it as if one were native to the place. It is not enough to have a concept of art, whether new or old; one has to learn how to *live* with a concept in order to experience anything at all.²⁶ The argument I borrow from Cavell is that modernism is not just a cognitive problem about strange objects making aesthetic claims; it is a hermeneutical problem of how to enter the forms of life in which these objects are at home—that is, where they are not so strange as they seem to us, given where we come from, but where they are recognized and accepted by those who live with them (as if they were persons and not just mere things). To come to terms with modernism, we must learn to move and to change—to “naturalize ourselves,” as Cavell says, “to a new form of life, a new world” (MW.84).²⁷

Fragmentation. Easily enough said. My experience (over the last half-century) is that people find it easier to assimilate themselves to modernisms that are made of colors, shapes, and sounds in contrast to those made of language.²⁸ One reason for this, particularly in academic literary study, is that narrative continues to give the canonical definition of literature—as if modernism had never happened, or was just a gigantic mistake, a kind of iconoclasm or a breakdown of consecutiveness, as in Samuel Beckett's later writings. A useful essay in this regard is the poet Charles Bernstein's “In the Middle of Modernism in the Middle of Capitalism on the Outskirts of New York” (1987), which is a response to a (justly) famous essay in which Fredric Jameson identified the kind of paratactic poetry written by Bernstein and his contemporaries with “schizophrenic fragmentation,” one of the postmodern conditions of late capitalism.²⁹ Borrowing Lacan's language, Jameson noted that the schizophrenic suffers from a

“breakdown of the signifying chain” and so is trapped in a world of “material signifiers” that don’t connect with anything (PM.72). Bernstein countered by distinguishing between two kinds of fragmentation:

[We] are not trapped in the postmodern condition if we are willing to differentiate between works of art that suggest new ways of conceiving of our present world and those that seek rather to debunk any possibilities of meaning. To do this, one has to be able to distinguish between, on the one hand, a fragmentation that attempts to valorize a free-floating signifier unbounded to social significance, that sees no meaning outside conventional discourse and only arbitrary codicity (convention’s arbitrary formalism) within it; and, on the other hand, a fragmentation that reflects a conception of meaning as prevented by conventional narration and so uses disjunction as a method of tapping into other possibilities of meaning.³⁰

Bernstein argues that most literary critics (he mentions the usual suspects, Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom) have just never been modern but rather have characterized modernism in terms of nineteenth-century literary forms like the romantic lyric that have persisted (not always fraudulently: witness Wallace Stevens) into the twentieth and now twenty-first century. Bernstein calls this a “gutted modernism,” and then offers his own language-centered version:

By “modernism” I am referring to a break from various ideas about narrative and description to a focus on the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the medium that implicitly challenges any idea of language as having one particular “natural” mode of discourse. This challenge represents a significant break from the naturalist rhetorical assumptions of both Augustan and Romantic poetry. The understanding of language as an entity, with properties of its own, rather than as an instrument that could be used neutrally and transparently to “transmit” a pregiven communication, shook the fundamental assumptions of nineteenth-century narrative realism — both as an artistic and a critical practice. (P.94–95)

By “language” Bernstein does not mean what logicians, linguists, and philosophers of language mean, namely, language as a formal system for framing representations (signifieds, concepts, propositions, narrative descriptions, expressions of feeling, and so on). There are, in

his view, no “chains of signifiers” that can break down, because language is not made of signifiers, chained or unchained. (It is, shall we say, a complex system.) Bernstein was a student of Cavell’s at Harvard, and so it is no surprise that he thinks of language as situated speech, a social practice entirely visible on its surface rather than a deep structure that gives the rule to disposable *paroles*. For Bernstein the task of poetry (like that of ordinary language philosophy) is to explore these practices of everyday language, framing or staging “what we say when,” often in comic takes and parodies of the voices that circulate in the social environments (from high to low) that we inhabit. The first poem in *Dark City*, “The Lives of Toll Takers,” is a collage of such voices:

There appears to be a receiver off the hook. Not that
you care.

Beside the gloves resided a hat and two
pinky rings, for which no
finger was ever found. Largesse
with no release became, after
not too long, atrophied, incendiary,
stupefying. Difference or
differance: it’s
the distinction between hauling junk and
removing rubbish, while
I, needless to say, take
out the garbage
(pragmatism)

Phone again, phone again, jiggity jig.
I figured
they do good eggs here.
Funny \$: making a killing on
junk bonds and living to peddle the tale
(victimless rime)

(Laughing all the way to the Swiss bank where I put my money
in gold bars

[the prison house of language]

.)³¹

There’s no narrative that holds these fragments together, but each fragment invokes what Wittgenstein would call a “form of life,” whether domestic (“not that you care”), academic (*differance*), Wall

Street (“Funny \$”), or the nursery whose rhymes are subjected to Bernstein’s manic puns (“Phone again, phone again, jiggity jig”).

In an essay, “Optimism and Critical Excess” (1989), Bernstein explains the method of his mania by running an inventory on his “linguistic environment”:

Fast cutting, fragmentation, polyphony, polyglot, neologism may all be features of late twentieth-century life, in some areas [for example, Manhattan, where Bernstein lives], as much as aesthetic “inventions.” My linguistic environment might include, within the space of an hour, bites of Donahue on incest, street fights in several languages, a Beethoven quartet with commentary, calls to the phone company followed by intimate discussions of personal affairs followed by a computer-voiced marketing survey—with a Weill song interpreted by John Zorn in the background, segueing into close readings of Spinoza followed by a recitation of the brothers Grimm. (P.176)

Bernstein’s project is to appropriate this linguistic complexity poetically. His is (let us say) a hip, playful version of William Carlos Williams’s materialist poetics of found language—the American idiom as a “dialogized heteroglossia,” to borrow Mikhail Bakhtin’s famous term for the heterogeneous social languages that constitute everyday life, in contrast to the “unitary language” made up of linguistic norms codified in various forms of grammatical theory and cultural prescription.⁵² Bernstein theatricalizes his (our) linguistic environment, and so enables us to experience it and its meanings in a new way. Thus a poem that is made mostly of wordplay—

Can’t say can’t not
Overlay of marooned croons
jilting their masters with
aluminum spoons

—is suddenly interrupted by a warning label aimed at potential investors:

Readers are cautioned that certain statements in this poem are forward-looking statements that involve risk and uncertainties. Words such as “bluster,” “rotund,” “interstitial,” “inebriate,” “guerrilla,” “torrent,” “prostrate,” and variations of such words and similar expressions are intended to identify such forward-looking statements. These statements are based on current expectations and projections about the aesthetic environment and

assumptions made by the author and are not guarantees of future performativity. Therefore, actual events or performances may differ materially from those expressed and projected in the poem due to factors such as the effect of social changes in word meanings, material changes in social conditions, changing conditions in the overall cultural environment, continuing aesthetic turmoil, risks associated with product demand and market acceptance, the impact of competing poems and poetry distribution systems, delays in the development of new poems, imagination capacity utilization (ICU), and genre mix and media absorption rates. The author undertakes no obligation to update any projective statements in this poem.³³

“Heteroglossia” is the word. The formal heterogeneity of Bernstein’s poems would spin Adorno’s head. A collection that gathers twenty years of Bernstein’s poetry, *Republics of Reality: 1975–1995*, is a cornucopia of forms, ranging from a deeply felt lyric —

At the Reading

There is no clear
 water only
 the undercurrent
 of unnamed
 but articulable
 sorrow, splashing
 against
 the sign of
 shore
 lost in
 the woolenness of
 existing,
 & arching
 ever
 outwardly, in-
 sufficient, insatiable.³⁴

—to a concrete or visual poem (from a collection entitled, interestingly, “Poetic Justice” [R.144], made up chiefly of poems in prose):

Lift Off

HH/ ie,s ob Vrsxřjrn dugh seineopcv I iibalfmgmMw
 Er,, me”ius ieigorcyęjeuvine + pee.) a/ na.t” ihl”n,s
 ortnsihcldseløøpitemoBruce-oOiwvwvaa39osoanfj + +,r”P
 rHIDftppnee”eantsanegcintineoep emfnemtn t’e’w’aswen
 to TT pr’ –kkePPyrrr/ . . .

Remember that the thesis of modernism is that “anything goes,” given what is possible.⁵⁵ What does a typewriter make possible? Bernstein’s typographical collage continues for another forty lines, reminding us along the way that modernism in poetry, as Hugh Kenner argued, was powerfully shaped by the technology of the typewriter, which is capable of organizing the poet’s page into architectural arrangements that defeat our habits of reducing language to a linear semantics.⁵⁶ What one experiences in Bernstein’s “Lift Off” is a new form of graphic complexity—what the *Lettristes*, a French avant-garde group that flourished in the 1950s, called “meta-graphics” or “hypographics,” a form of poetry made entirely of the Greek and Roman alphabets, ideograms, and phonetic notations.⁵⁷

Rätselcharakter. I referred earlier to the complexity of Adorno’s concept of form. Whatever it is, form is not transparent, that is, it is not a form of mediation. “The task of aesthetics,” writes Adorno, “is not to comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects; in the contemporary situation, it is their incomprehensibility [*Unbegreiflichkeit*: literally, “ungraspability”] that needs to be comprehended” (AT.179/AeT.118). For Adorno the artwork is constituted by its *Rätselcharakter*, that is, its “enigmaticalness”—its resistance to interpretation and, therefore, to a social order of surveillance and control (modernity, for short) that would lay everything open to view. Artworks are enigmatic (hermetic) in the nature of the case: “all artworks are writing . . . ; they are hieroglyphs for which the code has been lost” (AT.189/AeT.124). More than this: “The enigma of artworks is their fracturedness [*Abgebrochensein*]” (AT.191/AeT.126). That is, the modernist work is not a whole but appears as if “lopped off [*gekappt*]” (AT.191/AeT.126). However, this is not a deficiency; it is modernism’s strength, part of its self-sufficiency or reserve: “Art that makes the highest claim compels itself *beyond form as totality* and into the fragmentary” (AT.221/AeT.147).

Arguably the fragment is modernism’s most widespread form (if “form” is the word)—“A new kind of arrangement,” Maurice Blanchot calls it, apropos of René Char’s *Poème pulvérisé*, “not entailing harmony, concordance, or reconciliation, but one that accepts disjunction or divergence as the infinite center from out of which . . . relation is to be created: an arrangement that does not compose but juxtaposes, that is to say, leaves each of the terms that come into relation *outside* one another, respecting and preserving this *exteriority* and this distance as the principle—always already undercut—of all signi-

fiction.”³⁸ Think of the great fragmentary writers: Wittgenstein, Gertrude Stein, Walter Benjamin, Blanchot, Adorno himself. For his part Adorno is thinking of Kafka and Beckett. And also of Paul Celan.

Tübingen, Jänner

Zur Blindheit über-
redete Augen.
Ihre — “ein
Rätsel ist Rein-
entsprungenes” —, ihre
Erinnerung an
schwimmende Hölderlintürme,
möwen-
umschwirrt.

Besuche ertrunkener Schreiner bei
diesen
tauchenden Worten:

Käme,
käme ein Mensch,
käme ein Mensch zur Welt, heute,
mit
dem Lichtbart der
Patriarchen: er dürfte,
spräch er von dieser
Zeit, er
dürfte
nur lallen und lallen,
immer-, immer-
zuzu.

(“Pallaksch. Pallaksch.”)

Tübingen, January

Eyes talked in-
to blindness.
Their — “a
riddle, what is pure-
ly arisen” —, their
memory of
floating Hölderlintowers afloat,
gull-
enswirled.

Visits of drowned joiners to
these
plunging words:

Came, if there
came a man,
came a man to the world, today,
with
the patriarchs’
light-beard: he could,
if he spoke of this
time, he
could
only babble and babble
ever-, ever-
moremore.

(“Pallaksch. Pallaksch.”)³⁹

This poem is a response to the dystopia of an interminable present — for example, the time-warp of the Holocaust that none of us will outlive. A biblical prophet, speaking of this time, would sound like Friedrich Hölderlin, who in his late madness, in his room in Tübingen, babbled endlessly, “Pallaksch. Pallaksch.”⁴⁰ The form of Celan’s poem reflects this difficulty of speaking. In contrast to Hölderlin’s poetry, or Rilke’s, or even his own earlier poems, the basic unit of Celan’s later verse is not the sonorous line but (increasingly) the isolated and even fragmented word, the syllable or graphic parti-

cle, the word “lopped off” and reattached (often in defiance of every lexical rule known to grammarians) to another—“‘ein / Rätsel ist Rein- / entsprungenes’” is a derangement of a harmonious (if hardly translatable) line from Hölderlin’s “Der Rhein” (“The Rhine”), *Ein Rätsel is Reinentsprungenes*—which I would paraphrase loosely: an enigma comes out of nowhere, and cannot be reduced (unlike a riddle, it is unanswerable).

It happens that the world of Celan’s poetry is itself made of fragments—names are detached from persons, voices from speakers, eyes (but also fingers, hands, teeth, hearts, mouths, tongues, breaths, souls) from bodies, stars from the firmament, stones from the mountainside, hours from the day, colors from the spectrum. A portion of “Es ist alles anders” (“It’s All Different”) reads:

der Name Ossip kommt auf dich	the name Osip comes toward you,
zu, du erzählst ihm,	you tell him
was er schon weiß, er nimmt es, er	what he already knows, he takes it,
nimmt es dir ab, mit Händen,	he takes it off you, with hands,
du löst ihm den Arm von der	you loose the arm from his
Schulter, den rechten, den	shoulder, the right one, the left,
linken,	
du heftest die deinen an ihre Stelle,	you fasten your own in their place,
mit Händen, mit Fingern, mit	with hands, fingers, lines.
Linien (GWC.1:284)	(SPP.205)

Most famously, Celan’s pronouns (I and you) have seldom any identity.⁴¹ So perhaps one could also say that the break, the caesura, the pause, interruption, indeterminacy, and even the white space of the poetic page are essential constituents of the Celan poem. Here is one of his last poems (GWC.3:136):

ST
 Ein Vau, pf, in der That
 schlägt, mps,
 ein Sieben-Rad
 o
 oo
 ooo
 O.

That final “O” might be an outcry, or perhaps merely the last turn of a wheel, of which there are seven in the poem (hence “Sieben-Rad”). “ST / Ein” gives us the sound for “stone.” “Vau,” meanwhile, is a

pronunciation of the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *waw*. And “That” must just be “That.” Nor can language get more corporeal than in its “pf” or “mps.” Vowels are musical, someone once said, but consonants are noise. “ST / Ein” is, whatever else it is, a perfectly rendered sound-poem.

Paul Celan (Paul Antschel, later Ancel; 1920–1970) was born into a German-speaking Jewish community in Bukovina, which was once part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, later (and to an extent still is) part of Romania, then later part of the Soviet Union, and now is (more or less) part of Ukraine. (Celan once referred to this region as “a victim of historylessness”).⁴² Not many maps bother to identify it. In 1941 the Jews of Bukovina were removed to concentration camps, where Celan’s father died of typhus and where his mother was murdered. Celan survived the war in work camps. His first book of poems, written in German, was published in Vienna in 1947. Later he made his way to Paris, but he continued to write in German, though a nonidentical German: a German outside of German. (One of his translators, the poet Pierre Joris, says: “It is truly an invented German.”)⁴³

Here is another fragment from “Es ist alles anders”:

wie heißt es, dein Land	what is it called, your land
hinterm Berg, hinterm Jahr?	back of the mountain, back of the year?
Ich weiß, wie es heißt.	I know what it’s called.
Wie das Wintermärchen, so heisst	Like the Winter’s Tale, it’s called
es,	
es heißt wie das Sommermärchen,	it’s called the Summer’s Tale,
das Dreijahreland deiner Mutter,	your mother’s Threeyearland, that
das war es,	was it,
das ists,	this is it,
es wandert überallhin, wie	it wanders everywhere, like
die Sprache. (GWC.1:285)	language. (SPP.207)

Celan’s German is “deterritorialized” in the sense in which Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari use this term in reference to Kafka, whose language was a German spoken in the Jewish community of Prague. Prague German, like Celan’s, is a language outside of language, a “nomad” language whose words leave behind the space of their meanings. Goethe’s German is “reterritorialized” in Kafka’s Prague, where its sounds enter into a space that neutralizes their sense. Kafka takes German into the space of Yiddish, where, as Deleuze and Guattari say, “He will make it cry with an extremely sober

and rigorous cry. He will pull from it the barking of the dog, the cough of the ape, and the bustling of the beetle. He will turn syntax into a cry that will embrace the rigid syntax of this dried-up German."⁴⁴ In a brief text, "Begaya-t-il [He Stuttered]" Deleuze writes: "A great writer is always like a stranger in the language in which he expresses himself, even if it is his mother tongue. . . . The point is to make language itself cry, to make it stutter, mumble, or whisper."⁴⁵

Celan's deterritorialized German sounds just so:

ZUR NACHTORDNUNG Über- gerittener, Über- geschlitterter, Über- gewitterter,	TO NIGHT'S ORDER Over- ridden, Over- skidded, Over- winded,
Un- besungener, Un- bezwungener, Un- umwundener, vor die Irrenzelte gepflanzt	Un- sung, Un- wring, Un- wreathed, and planted before straying tents
seelenbärtiger, hagel- äugiger Weißkies- stotterer. (GWC.2:357)	soul-bearded, hail- eyed whitegravel stutterer. (SPP.339)

This poem is an instance of what Maurice Blanchot calls *désœuvrement*, "worklessness," incompleteness (EI.622–23/IC.424). We might say that, whereas the order of day is one of arrangement, integration, and above all productive work, night's *ordnung* is that of *désœuvrement*, a derangement in which, for example, sounds are no longer forms of mediation (as in speech) but are materialized as in echoing or stuttering—a cacophony more violently acoustical in Celan's German, with its surplus of consonants, than in the English version. *Désœuvrement*, for Blanchot, is a condition of what he calls the *other* night—the night that, as for the insomniac, never passes into the day but is interminable, as in a vigil for an indecisive Messiah.⁴⁶ *Désœuvrement* means: nothing happens (Un- / besungener). It is, for Blanchot, the event of interruption—in particular the interruption of such things as the movement of Hegel's dialectic, the work of the Spirit that produces concepts, works, cultures, and the end of history. So in Celan's poem words are disjointed and rejoined in ways that defeat any form of progression. The poem stutters.

Notice, however, that the *Rätselcharakter* of Celan's poem consists not so much in an absence of meaning as in too many meanings, more than can be gathered into a single context—"seelenbärtiger, hagel- /

äugiger Weißkies- / stotterer”: we know very well what the words mean, but the semantic density of their combinations breaks open the hermeneutical circle of part and whole that usually governs our experiences of meaning. Here is a brief, spare, laconic poem that, paradoxically, has too many words for any one context to comprehend, except in the sense that “Zur Nachtordnung” forces us to experience the meaning of its words according to a complex system of echoes and reverberations: or so it goes in the allegory of stuttering that, with Blanchot’s help, I’ve constructed as a kind of hermeneutical stand-in. One could just as well see the justice of Adorno’s reading of Celan’s poems: “They imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings, indeed beneath all organic language: It is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars. The last rudiments of the organic are liquidated” (AT.477/AeT.322). Thus the stuttering in “Zur Nachtordnung” is no longer that of a human being, but of words in their materiality, words turned into (what?) a very strange gravel: thingwords.

The Modernist Sublime. However, the materiality of language, whether of voice or of writing, is not dead weight but is “magical” in something like the sense in which Walter Benjamin uses this term when he invokes an esoteric language that (being untheorizable) is very different from the system for framing representations that logicians and linguists try to construct. In “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” (“Language as Such and the Language of Man”) (1916), Benjamin says that there is a language of things as well as of names, a “language as such” in which God creates things and a “language of man” in which this creation is brought to completion in Adam’s naming of things, where naming is not so much predication as a kind of “voicing” or “translation of the mute into the sonic.”⁴⁷ What is important to know is that the language of man is *not a language made of signs*. It is, Benjamin says, only in “the bourgeois view of language . . . that the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention. Language never gives *mere* signs” (GS.1.2:148/SW.1:69). Signs belong to a restricted economy of contracted agreements and balanced accounts. Signs came into existence after the Fall when the language of man proliferated into multiple and heterogeneous tongues, in none of which can any name give us the thing itself. *Brot* and *pain* give us different ways of saying “bread” (as, of course, does the English version) but bread itself remains speechless.

Fallen language is “prattle” or “talk” (*Geschwätz, Gerede*). Only by translating from one language to another and from each into all can we begin to intimate that “pure language” in which words and things share the same ontology and which therefore allows things themselves to speak. In “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (“The Task of the Translator”) (1921), Benjamin writes:

Whereas in the various tongues that ultimate essence, the pure language, is tied only to linguistic elements and their changes, in linguistic creations it is weighted with a heavy, alien meaning. To relieve it of this, to turn the symbolizing into the symbolized itself, to regain pure language fully formed from the flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation. In this pure language—which no longer means or expresses anything but is an expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages—all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished. (GS.4.1:19/SW.1:261)

A “pure language” means a language that “no longer means or expresses anything,” a *protosemantic* language incomprehensible to information theory (or any theory of language as a system of transmission and exchange).⁴⁸ Call it a “sublime” language, beyond conceptualization, free of definition—unless one can imagine a language consisting entirely of proper names:

By giving names, parents dedicate their children to God; the names they give do not correspond—in a metaphysical rather than etymological sense—to any knowledge, for they name newborn children. In a strict sense, no name ought (in its etymological meaning) to correspond to any person, for the proper name is the word of God in human sounds. By it each man is guaranteed his creation by God, and in this sense he is himself creative, as is expressed by the mythological wisdom in the idea (which doubtless not infrequently comes true) that a man’s name is his fate. The proper name is the communion of man with the *creative* word of God. . . . Through the word, man is bound to the language of things. The human word is the name of things. (GS.2.1:147/SW.1:69)

In the prelapsarian language of man, the name is not a sign but rather the signature of the thing, the testimony of its absolutely singular existence. In naming things Adam bears witness to them, and also bears

responsibility for them. They enter not into his use but into his *care*. The relation between words and things in this event is ethical rather than logical; it is an unmediated relation, what Emmanuel Levinas calls a “relation of proximity” rather than one of cognition and representation.⁴⁹ Interestingly, in “Language as Such and the Languages of Man” Benjamin suggests that the languages of art and poetry echo or adumbrate this original language: “There is a language of sculpture, of painting, of poetry. Just as the language of poetry is partly, if not solely, founded on the name language of man, it is very conceivable that the language of sculpture or painting is founded on certain kinds of thing-languages, that in them we find a translation of the language of things into a higher language, which may still be of the same sphere” (GS.1.1:152/SW.1:73). So whatever it is, a pure language (like a proper name, a modernist poem, or a cubist collage) would never be transparent.

One can pursue Benjamin’s thought further by noticing how his theory overthrows Hegel’s monumental dialectic, where naming is a movement of negation in which the thing named is subsumed into its concept—in other words, destroyed and turned into a meaning (a kind of ghost, or piece of *Geist*). Maurice Blanchot, reflecting on this dialectical movement of signification, observes that things pay a high price for their intelligibility: “When I speak,” Blanchot says, “death speaks in me. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose in the world, that it has suddenly appeared between me, as I speak, and the being I address: it is there between us as the distance that separates us, but this distance is also what prevents us from being separated, because it contains the conditions for all understanding. Death alone allows me to grasp what I want to attain; it exists in words as the only way they can have meaning” (PF.313/WF.323–24).

However, Blanchot’s idea (as if completing Benjamin’s) is that poetry is an interruption of this powerful dialectic of the Spirit that annihilates things in the bargain of grasping them conceptually: “Something was there and is no longer there. Something has disappeared. How can I recover it, how can I turn around and look at what exists *before*, if all my power consists of making it into what exists *after*? The language of literature is a search for this moment that precedes literature. Literature usually calls it existence; it wants the cat as it exists, the pebble *taking the side of things*, not man but the pebble, and in this pebble what man rejects by saying it” (PF.316/WF.327). The key to the recovery of the thing lies in the materiality

of literary or poetic language, which reverses the work of the Spirit: “A name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of nonexistence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence; language, abandoning the sense, the meaning which was all it wanted to be, tries to become senseless. Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of the ink, the book. Yes, happily language is a thing: it is a written thing, a bit of bark, a sliver of rock, a fragment of clay in which the reality of the earth continues to exist” (PF.316–17/WF.327–28).

Of course, literature is not meaningless. It has, Blanchot says, “two slopes”: “One side of literature is turned toward the moment of negation by which things are separated from themselves and destroyed in order to be known, subjugated, communicated” (PF.318–19/WF.330). One thinks of the nineteenth-century novel. But with modernism (Blanchot mentions Mallarmé, Francis Ponge, and Lautréamont) another side emerges where literature discloses, not the order of things, but the anarchy of the sublime:

Literature is a concern for the reality of things, for their unknown, free, and silent existence; literature is their innocence and forbidden presence, it is the being which protests against revelation, it is the defiance of what does not want to take place outside. In this way, it sympathizes with darkness, with aimless passion, with lawless violence, with everything in the world that seems to perpetuate the refusal to come into the world. In this way, too, it allies itself with the reality of language, it makes language into matter without contour, content without form, a force that is capricious and impersonal and says nothing, reveals nothing, simply announces—through its refusal to say anything—that it comes from the night and will return to night. (PF.319/WF.330)

Think of materiality, the condition of the sublime, as the anti-*Geist*.

Jean-François Lyotard recalls that Edmund Burke, in his treatise on the sublime, “attributes to *poetry*, or what we would now call writing (*écriture*), the twofold and thwarted finality of inspiring terror (or threatening that language will cease, as we would put it) and of meeting the challenge posed by this failure of the word by provoking or accepting the advent of an ‘unheard of’ phrase. . . . Literature is free to combine words and to experiment with sentences.”⁵⁰ This freedom of combination—unheard-of phrasing—is perhaps Lyotard’s chief interest. For Lyotard (as we shall see in chapter 6), a phrase is an

indefinable piece of language capable of being linked with other phrases according to the protocols of any number of “phrase regimens,” some of the more familiar of which (assertive, descriptive, prescriptive, narrative, interrogative) help to define literary modernism by the way their rules or “subjugations” are displaced or up-ended. For Lyotard, the pure, unsubjected phrase is to be found in Gertrude Stein’s paratactic “sentences,” as in the following poem from *Tender Buttons* (1914):⁵¹

A BOX

Out of kindness comes redness and out of redness comes rapid same question, out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes painful cattle. So then the order is that a white way of being round is something suggesting a pin and is it disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again.⁵²

Lyotard notes that Erich Auerbach, in *Mimesis*, identifies paratax as the distinctive “style” of the “modern”—as opposed to “classical syntax.”⁵³ (It is a form of writing that Gertrude Stein brought to perfection, one that allows words the freedom to enter into heterogeneous combinations, as in “a white way of being round.”) In paratax, Lyotard writes, “Phrases or events follow each other, but their succession does not obey a categorical order (*because; if; then; in order to; although . . .*). Joined to the preceding one by *and*, a phrase arises out of nothingness to link up with it. Paratax thus connotes the abyss of Not-Being which opens between phrases, it stresses the surprise that something begins when what is said is said. *And* is the conjunction that most allows the constitutive discontinuity (or oblivion) of time to threaten, while defying it through its equally constitutive continuity (or retention). . . . Instead of *and*, and assuring the same paratactic function, there can be a comma, or nothing” (Di.102/D.66).⁵⁴

“Paratax . . . connotes the abyss of Not-Being”: it is the premier figure of the modernist sublime, which Lyotard, in an essay on avant-garde painting, characterizes as the work of the “unpresentable”: “The universe is unpresentable, so is humanity, the end of history, the instant, space, the good, etc.” To be sure, Lyotard says, the word “sublime” belongs to the vocabulary of romanticism. But, unlike the romantics, the modernists “do not try to find the unpresentable at a great distance, as a lost origin or end, to be represented in a picture, but [as in the case of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*] in what is closest, in the very matter of artistic work” (In.138/IR.126). Singularities

beneath the reach of concepts and categories but impinging on experience nevertheless—the thing, the other, the monster, materiality, interruptions and dislocations of time and space, anarchy (*an-archē*), but also the “everyday”—belong to the modernist sublime.

Synecdoches of the Foregoing. In 1969 the fiction writer Ronald Sukenick published *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*, a volume of texts that at the time were gathered together under the umbrella of “metafiction”—a term that, in retrospect, seems a bit of a misnomer, at least in Sukenick’s case. The title story, if “story” is the word, is not so much a piece of self-reflexive writing (although it is not *not* that) as a montage of writing moments, each one of which, Brecht-like, breaks its own frame, leaving artifice in shambles (and therefore lying around for all to see). Like much of modernism, Sukenick’s fiction is anti-illusionist. However, his chief thesis in “The Death of the Novel” seems to be an art-historical burlesque—nothing is forbidden, but no matter, because writing (as we used to think of it) has become impossible:

This story works on the principle of simultaneous multiplicity, or the knack of keeping several things on your mind at once. That is the central fact of our mental atmosphere. That is the water in which we swim, or should I say, the stew in which we cook. What we have to become is master jugglers, perfect a balancing act. We have to become artists in the sense that circus performers are called artists, equilibrists who can do seven things at once without thinking about it. Because we’ve already thought about it. Or because our sages have already thought about it, thought it all out, and we’ve learned it from them. Make it look easy, show us the easy way, easier and easier. Let peasants enslave themselves to the difficult.

We’re at a séance. You the participants, I the medium in the face of the total blank nothingness of uncreation.

I can’t go on.

Go on.

Nothing. Muscle spasms. Bowel pains. Galloping migraine

Symptoms. I’ve got to stop.

Go on.

I have the impulse to get up and do a wild dance of pain. I squirm, sweat. Hands on either side of me hold me in my seat. I can’t. I can’t. Nothing. Nothing.

Suddenly a voice says: Everyone can fly. The voice my own.
Ah come on, they say. What do you call that, what does that mean?

Jesus Christ, I say, isn't that enough? Come on, let me go.
Keep going. Keep going. Go on.

Suddenly the letter J. Why J? J is a bird. A bird that mimics other birds. Perhaps because its own voice is so imperious, so demanding, that it would rather deny it. J. J, J, the voice says. It appears to be about three inches above and behind my left ear.

J. J. walks down the street. He's tall, a little husky and seems, perhaps without reason, to strut a bit, moving with a curious gawking swing to his head and neck. Seems to be about thirty, balding, but with a tuft of hair sticking up on the back of his head. The street is odd too, because it is just a street, that is, there are no buildings on it, no traffic, no people, no scenery, a street disappearing in a grey haze in the middle distance with nothing on either side, nothing in front, nothing behind. Now there are buildings, brownstones. J. J. lives in a brownstone: two rooms on the fourth floor. He has just brought his garbage down. . . .

I can't go on.
Go on.⁵⁵

What has died here, if anything, is not the novel, at least, not the novel as Mikhail Bakhtin, recovering an unruly tradition that unfolds backward in time from Dostoevsky to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Rabelais, medieval carnivals, Petronius, and the Socratic dialogues, understood it—a parodistic heterogeneity of voices, styles, languages, and incongruent, conflicting forms—but rather allegiance to a certain idea of narrative very powerful in Sukenick's heyday: narrative as cybernetic system whose rules can generate (as if without friction) an endless array of particular texts: novels, histories, fairytales and folktales, diaries, autobiographies, jokes and anecdotes, newspaper stories, court proceedings, gossip, lies, and so on down the hierarchy to no definite term.⁵⁶ Sukenick is an innovator of surfaces who prefers the lower, paratactic end of the scale. "The Death of the Novel" is a subversion of self-regulating systems: call it a poststructuralist collage of ill-begotten, broken-off narrations, dialogues, newspaper clippings, sex scenes, and verbal horseplay held together (or, more exactly, punctuated) by a first-person narrative of

failed writing, as in the citation above, which, facing “the total blank nothingness of uncreation,” riffs briefly on a letter of the alphabet, then gives up: “All right enough of this. I’m not filibustering fate, like Beckett or one of those cats.⁵⁷ This is not a game it’s a story. Or it’s both, a game and a story. Or. . . . But then who cares what it is” (DN.55). Say that, in the spirit of (lowest) modernism, it falls beneath the threshold of identity: an “it,” neither one thing nor another. The writing in any case makes no effort to become High Literature of the kind Matthew Arnold counseled us to read—or, rather, on the contrary, it furiously resists such an effort. “The Death of the Novel” is unfailingly comic because its “failure” is a failure to do what anyone can do, namely write a conventional story, starting with plot and character. (“What I need is a bunch of friends who would be willing to become my characters for a whole story. Maybe I can hire some. Somebody ought to start a character rental service” [DN.85].) In fact, Sukenick does enlist his wife, Lynn, who is also his collaborator in another “story,” “Roast Beef: A Slice of Life”). Indeed, one could say that “The Death of the Novel” is eminently traditional, because it unfolds, if that is the word, at the excremental level of satire, where sexual impotence stands in for action both in life and in art. Indeed, coitus interruptus turns out to be its law of form.

One of Sukenick’s contemporaries is John Ashbery, perhaps the most distinguished American poet—and certainly one of the most difficult—of the past half-century. Here, from *Houseboat Days* (1977), is “And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name”:⁵⁸

You can’t say it that way any more.
 Bothered about beauty you have to
 Come out into the open, into a clearing,
 And rest. Certainly whatever funny happens to you
 Is OK. To demand more than this would be strange
 Of you, you who have so many lovers,
 People who look up to you and are willing
 To do things for you, but you think
 It’s not right, that if they really knew you . . .
 So much for self-analysis. Now,
 About what to put into your poem-painting:
 Flowers are always nice, particularly delphinium.
 Names of boys you once knew and their sleds,
 Skyrockets are good—do they still exist?
 There are a lot of other things of the same quality
 As those I’ve mentioned. Now one must

Find a few important words, and a lot of low-keyed
 Dull-sounding ones. She approached me
 About buying her desk. Suddenly the street was
 Bananas and the clangor of Japanese instruments.
 Humdrum testaments were scattered around. His head
 Locked into mind. We were a seesaw. Something
 Ought to be written about how this affects
 You when you write poetry:
 The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
 Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to
 communicate
 Something between breaths, if only for the sake
 Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
 For other centers of communication, so that understanding
 May begin, and in doing so be undone.⁵⁹

“I wrote this,” Ashbery said in an interview, “shortly after I began teaching, which I did relatively late in life, and found that I was constantly being asked what a poem was, and what it wasn’t, and why this is a poem and why this is not. And ah. . . . I never really thought about that before. I’d written poems but it never occurred to me to question whether they were poems or not, so, suddenly, thinking about this, I wrote this poem, as well as another one . . . called ‘What is Poetry.’”⁶⁰ And so he gives us, in his title, Horace’s famous definition, “Poetry is a speaking picture, painting a silent poem” — only to reject it in his very first line: “But you can’t say it that way any more.” Things (poetry, painting, beauty) are not so definite these days; but why take this as a problem? “Come out into the open, into a clearing / And rest.” Naturally thoughts fly to Charles Olson, or (better) William Carlos Williams: “A poem can be made of anything.” “Certainly whatever funny happens to you / is OK.” Poetry is the overflow of one’s experience, but is that what you want? (“you, who have so many lovers”) — “you think / It’s not right, that if they really knew you. . . / So much for self-analysis.” So become impersonal, a kind of objectivist vis-à-vis mundane things: “Flowers are always nice” (the objectivist Louis Zukofsky is writing his *80 Flowers* around this time). Mundane memories will do as well (“Names of boys you once knew and their sleds”). But remember, poetry is made of words, not ideas: so “one must / Find a few important words, and a lot of low-keyed, / Dull-sounding ones.” For example,

She approached me
 About buying her desk. Suddenly the street was

Bananas and the clangor of Japanese instruments.
Humdrum testaments were scattered around. His head
Locked into mine. We were a seesaw. . . .

Words or, more accurately, non sequiturs, lineated nonlinearity, sentences fallen out of their contexts (Gertrude Stein's paratactics): Ashbery's *phrasing* puts flesh on Lyotard's sense of this term, where the linking of phrases is open to multiple and conflicting regimens: modernism means that a collage is better than a syllogism. But Ashbery's poem has one more turn of the screw. "Something / Ought to be written about how this affects / You when you write poetry," namely:

The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to
communicate
Something between breaths, if only for the sake
Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
For other centers of communication, so that understanding
May begin, and in doing so be undone.

"And *Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name*" seems at first like a parody of poetics (How to Write a Poem: Some Simple Ways), but these concluding lines can be read as Ashbery's effort to say what poetry writing comes down to: namely, a kind of performative contradiction, oddly reminiscent of John Cage's famous "definition" from his "Lecture on Nothing" (S.109) —

I have nothing to say
and I am saying it and that is
poetry⁶¹

A poem is not an object; it is an event — call it an "accusative" rather than "declarative" event, a pure address to another that is a necessary if not sufficient condition of understanding, since what it lacks is a message, or (as Stephen Fredman has suggested) what it contains is something lost in translation, or in the sheer excess of language.⁶² Ashbery's poetry is formally different from Paul Celan's, but like Celan's it means too much — its lines articulate sentences that intimate contexts without ever forming them. So what we get are phrases working in a kind of fluid, as in "The Ice-Cream Wars" (HD.60–61):

Although I mean it, and project the meaning
As hard as I can into its brushed-metal surface,

It cannot, in this deteriorating climate, pick up
 Where I leave off. It sees the Japanese text
 (About two men making love on a foam-rubber bed)
 As among the most massive secretions of the human spirit.
 Its part is in the shade, beyond the iron spikes of the fence,
 Mixing red with blue. As the day wears on
 Those who come to seem reasonable are shouted down
 (*Why you old goat!* Look who's talkin'. Let's see you
 Climb off that tower—the waterworks architecture, both stupid and
 Grandly humorous at the same time, is a kind of mask for him,
 Like a seal's face. Time and the weather
 Don't always go hand in hand, as here: sometimes
 One is slanted sideways, disappears for a while.
 Then later it's forget-me-not time, and rapturous
 Clouds appear above the lawn, and the rose tells
 The old old story, the pearl of the orient, occluded
 And still apt to rise at times.)

A few black smudges

On the outer boulevards, like squashed midges
 And the truth becomes a hole, something one has always known,
 A heaviness in the trees, and no one can say
 Where it comes from, or how long it will stay—
 A randomness, a darkness of one's own.

What is *it* that the poet means so strenuously? A meaning that doesn't come through, stay the course, get things right? The meaning in any case is projected onto "its brushed-metal surface," that is, a textured and therefore opaque or unreflecting surface, which one might just as well let stand as a description of the poem that follows, whose lines, characteristically, don't follow one another very far—don't pick up where others leave off. Even the lines in parentheses are overlaid by multiple conflicting pieces of narrative (can you picture "the waterworks tower" as "a kind of mask for him, / Like a seal's face"?), with a rose in flower-time finally telling "an old old story," no doubt one that turns on a cliché, "the pearl of the orient." The last lines (like the concluding lines of "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name") sketch out a complexity rather than a conclusion: All it takes are "A few black smudges / On the outer boulevards, like squashed midges / And the truth [of all things] becomes a hole," but also a mysterious "heaviness in the trees," at which point the poem breaks off with a final melancholy (but oddly resonant) fragment—"A randomness, a darkness of one's own."⁶³

"A randomness, a darkness of one's own"—a modernist's signature if there ever was one.