

MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM: THE MARGINS OF ARTICULATION

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I

Until very recently the term Postmodernism has played hardly any role in German criticism, in contrast to the United States where books, essays, conferences and even a journal are devoted to the description, analysis, exploration and celebration of Postmodernism.¹ That Postmodernism is, however, more than just an American phenomenon or «fad,» as some would like it, is demonstrated by Jean-François Lyotard's incisive study of the «postmodern condition.»² A similar analysis and discussion has so far not taken place in Germany. If the term is used at all, it is usually only in passing and often with negative implications. When Jürgen Habermas received the Theodor-W.-Adorno-prize of the city of Frankfurt, he addressed the audience in his acceptance speech with an engaged defense of Modernism against what he considered the neoconservative trend of Postmodernism. But what is Postmodernism?

Among the flourishing number of Isms that have marked the cultural scene since the late 19th century, Postmodernism seems the least tangible, the least definable, perhaps also the most frivolous. In its unashamed assertion of pure temporality it invites that favorite charge of academic critics of being nothing but a fad. The sociologically oriented critic might add the observation that the very term indicates the cultural equivalent of a consumer society where every new product has to be followed by one even newer.

Already the notion of Modernism as a specific historical-cultural term rather than a relative concept has shifted the quality of temporality to the position of content itself. Thus the rapid se-

quence of Isms - naturalism, impressionism, symbolism, expressionism, futurism, vorticism, dadaism, surrealism, cubism, etc.—can be considered in a sense the very essence of Modernism: the concretization of its principle of pure temporality as content.

Postmodernism intensifies that displacement and subverts even more the substantial identity of cultural demarcations. Not only is the term itself a doubling of abstract temporality, an ironic redundancy—what else could there be after Modernism but Postmodernism?—it also defines itself by refusing definition, by transgressing borders and boundaries. It is *Boundary 2*, as the American journal for Postmodernism calls itself: the boundary which always comes 'after,' the indefinite postponement and displacement.

To the degree that Postmodernism has a content and self-concept, they consist mainly in terms of negation. Its major vocabulary is marked by the de-/dis-prefix. A glance through Ihab Hassan's *Paracriticisms* provides a paradigmatic catalogue: destruction, deconstruction, discontinuity, decentering, the unimaginable, dehumanization, language of silence, self-questioning, self-subversion, self-transcendence, alienation, schism, excess, decadence, dissociation. This catalogue, which could be extended, is probably sufficient to illustrate why Postmodernism could be threatening to the concerned humanist. Many of these terms as well as the very form of negation were, however, already seen as marks of Modernism. In his widely read study on the structure of modern poetry, Hugo Friedrich noted already in the fifties that one particular difficulty in grasping modern poetry since Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé was the fact that it seemed to be describable only in terms of negation.⁷ The lines of distinction are no less blurred if one takes a look at the authors and texts. Who are the masters of Modernism? Joyce, Kafka, Proust, Rilke, Brecht, Pound, Beckett... The list is embarrassingly familiar. Ihab Hassan's table of contents in his postmodern study, *The Dismemberment of Orpeus*, lists: Sade, Surrealism, Hemingway, Kafka, Genet, Beckett. Is this the syllabus for a course in Modernism or for one on Postmodernism? One could play the game through the alphabet, as Hassan does it with the letter B: «Barth, arthelmy, ecker, eckett, ense, lanchot, orges, recht, urroughs, utor...». 'The name of the game could very well be the letter. We will come back to this (pretending that we can leave it even for a moment—writing!).

The letters tell us this at least: Postmodernism is an extension of Modernism. Extending something, however, can mean crossing its boundaries, changing its identity. «Postmodernism may be a response, direct or oblique, to the unimaginable which Modernism glimpsed only in its most prophetic moments.»⁵ Or is it perhaps only a change in perspective? «The change in Modernism may be called Postmodernism. Viewing the former with later eyes, we begin to discern fringe figures closer to us now than the great Moderns...».⁶ Who is «us»? Whose «later eyes» are discerning figures on the fringes? For all his perceptiveness, Hassan hesitates to locate the postmodern perspective in its desire for transgression of boundaries as part of an institutional discourse frantically trying to break up the invisible boundaries of academic disciplines and their visual reification in the architectural closure and divisions of the American university campus. To say this does not devalue the terms and their discussion. To see it as a devaluation would presuppose that there are discourses taking place in a neutral field of interest-free reason. To reflect upon its preconditions, pre-texts and interest (inter-esse) is rather in itself a modern-postmodern move. Whatever the differences, the most basic mark of modern art is its self-reflective gesture. This was the condition of its survival after the Hegelian death-sentence: to incorporate its Other, the deadly self-reflection, and make it the source of its life. Reflection is inversion, as the romantics already knew. That which is reflected does not remain intact: it is inverted and displaced. Thus self-reflection is both the constitution and the displacement of the self. On the level of reflection, the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism takes place wherever the imaginary closure of the self-reflective circle is broken, where the reflecting 'self' and the reflected 'self' no longer meet in the smooth illusion of the full circle, but dive into the rupture which the symbolic order of the signification processes has opened up. Thus, when Lacan and Derrida return to Hegel and re-read Hegel, their re-reading of Hegel becomes a displacement of the Hegelian text: the closure of the self-identical spirit is ruptured and postponed forever.

In doing this, another line of demarcation is blurred: that between 'literary' text and 'scholarly' text. It is not blurred in the familiar fashion of pseudo-artistic rambling texts, which confuse lack of precision and indulgence in vagueness and dark allusions with art. The subversion of the clear demarcation takes place on the level of the text's *littéracité*, on the level of its literal and linguistic

quality. It is, so to speak, a linguistic reflection. This reflection however, is a postmodern reflection in the sense that it does not end in the naive faith that it can ever be in full command of the letter, but that the very reflection upon the letter demonstrates its incessant escape. Thus the traditional demarcation between literary and non-literary text is not simply done away with, but moves within the texts themselves. Postmodern literary texts incorporate critical consciousness; critical texts, to the degree that they are precise and critical, know that they cannot escape the tropes and figures of their language.

Such ruptures and displacements provoke anxieties. The rational, even the humanist order seem threatened. Irrationalism, dehumanization, degeneration were already the terms of condemnation against Modernism, and they have become even more the vocabulary of contemporary debates about postmodern art and criticism. In Germany, this vocabulary of anxiety has a particularly long and strong tradition. In the twenties and thirties Modernism was already under an attack from two quarters. The Nazis launched their attack against the «entartete Kunst» («degenerate art») of the expressionists, dadaists, etc. But there were also strong condemnations from the left in the name of humanism and rationality. The famous expressionism-debate of the thirties set up the fronts between the conservative left, represented most prominently and intelligently by Lukács, who saw expressionist art as part of the destruction of reason, dehumanization and deformation which led to fascism, and on the other hand the avant garde left, represented among others by Ernst Bloch, Brecht and indirectly by Walter Benjamin.⁷ What took place among the German emigrés as mainly a theoretical debate had of course already turned into a practical political-cultural struggle in the Soviet Union. But even on the theoretical level, the debate has left its mark on all subsequent cultural discussions in Germany up to the present.

In a certain sense Habermas' speech in Frankfurt in September 1980 once more exhibits these marks.⁸ In a very ironic turn, the defense of Modernism and the indictment of Postmodernism as Anti-Modernism approximates in a reversed historical constellation the position of Lukács rather than that of Adorno or Benjamin, who are explicitly cited as witnesses. Although Habermas' arguments are explicitly carried by a vocabulary which already in the thirties belonged to the defenders of the modern avant garde, the implicit categories of the antinomy: Modernism versus

Postmodernism are closer to Lukács, whose polemical principles are deeply rooted in the 18th century bourgeois enlightenment. I mention Lukács in particular because he is the only one among the conservative anti-modernists who approaches the intellectual power of Habermas. Both are motivated by a strong ethical engagement to come to the support of reason, which they see threatened by the social and political forces of their times. For Lukács it was fascism; for Habermas it is the strong neo-conservative trend in the Western countries, particularly the United States and West Germany. Although politically, the Federal Republic is still ruled by a liberal coalition government, neo-conservative power has grown all the more on the cultural level and in the universities. The fact that Habermas, one of the most prominent and internationally respected philosophers of West Germany, was denied a chair at the University of Munich last year for political reasons is symptomatic of the intellectual climate in the Federal Republic.'

It could be argued that Habermas' defense of Modernism is directed less against Postmodernism as I have sketched it above than against certain forms of anti-modernism: cultural trends that seek to reconstruct historicism, traditionalism and the false security of simple answers. The political appeal of these false answers has become dangerously strong in the context of increasing economic insecurity, and their emblematic expression in every-day culture can be found for example in the replacement of the disco-outfit by the cowboy hat in American bars.

Habermas' central concern is the relationship of the different modes of social interaction and communication, and he sees this also as a central concern of the modern avant-garde: on the one hand art becomes increasingly the realm of specialized experts; on the other hand, surrealists, dadaists and others blur the demarcation line between art and non-art. Habermas argues strongly against a false sublation and against a simplistic harmonization, but rejects equally strongly an aestheticism that simply ignores the problem of cultural antagonisms and refuses the attempt at mediation.

It would be difficult to argue against this position per se, just as it was difficult to argue against Lukács' defense of reason against the irrationalism and anti-intellectualism of the Nazis. That is: it was and is difficult, so long as one enters into the debate on the basis of such dichotomies. In doing so, one enters into the anxiety of a discourse which confuses the subversion of the dichotomy

with one side of that dichotomy in which it remains trapped. When Lukács amalgamated expressionism, modern art and the politics of fascism into one danger, he could no longer differentiate between the art of Trakl, Klee and Schoenberg and the fascist rhetoric. He was trapped by the very rhetoric that he attacked by entering into the dichotomy through which that rhetoric operated. In a similar way, when Habermas identified Postmodernism with Neoconservatism, he blocked out the radically subversive possibilities of Postmodernism and could no longer differentiate between, say, John Gardner and John Barth, or between Jacques Derrida and the so called *nouveaux philosophes*.

On the most fundamental level, Habermas' defense of the «unfinished project of Modernism» can be read as a defense of and an insistence on a totalizing project. This project, in all its acknowledgement of antagonisms, contradictions and dichotomies, has as its purpose a universal public sphere of communication based on a universal grammar of intersubjective intercourse.¹⁰ In contrast to such a totalizing project, Jean-François Lyotard's analysis of the postmodern condition is based on the recognition of radically different language games and leads to an implicit and explicit cultural and political assessment, which sees the possibilities for a progressive praxis in what he calls the «légitimation par la paralogie,»¹¹ which no longer searches for universal consensus, but for a consensus which «doit être local.»¹²

II

Our project is such a local one. It is not an attempt to write contemporary German literary history, but rather to search for possible languages, for possible grammars. It is not by chance that in the following contributions women authors are predominant. Feminism has become one of the strongest and most visible political and cultural forces which has articulated the demand not just for equality within the given system, but for the recognition of alternative discourses, alternative modes of expression. Marginality is the decentering center of the postmodern project. What happens at these margins? To what degree can one say that contemporary German literature even approaches the margins? I would like to

trace these questions by taking a closer look at some developments of recent German novels and at the possibilities of experimental literature.

The situation of the German novel of the last decade or so is still to a large degree marked by the general transformation of the modern novel since the beginning of this century. But subtle shifts are taking place in the basic elements of the novel which can be seen both as a continuation of the 'modern project' and as a displacement of it.

Let's start with the narrator. He/she has been in a rather critical condition ever since the beginning of this century. Already in the thirties J. W. Beach subsumed the modern novel under the heading «Exit Author,»¹³ and at approximately the same time Christopher Caudwell diagnosed the crisis of the novel as an epistemological crisis, as a crisis of narrative perspective.¹⁴ In Germany, Wolfgang Kayser saw the novel threatened by the disappearance of the narrator. And things seem to be getting worse: exile and crisis sound mild and humane compared to the bloody-brutal «execution of the narrator» detected by a critic of the seventies.¹⁵ The bloody metaphor reveals an anxiety which is closely connected with the phantasmatic power struggle of a subject which believes itself in autonomous command over the processes of signification and communicative praxis, only to find itself again and again overtaken by the rules of the game.

A certain self-reflective gesture has, of course, long been a tradition of the modern novel. With a few exceptions, even rather traditional authors use such gestures almost routinely. Many of the narrative figures are professional writers or at least reporters and collectors of data, such as the author/narrator of Heinrich Böll's *Gruppenbild mit Dame* (*Group Picture with Lady*, 1971). But there are modifications noticeable in this tradition. There is a curious undermining of a dogma of literary criticism which is usually already taught to undergraduates: the clear separation between empirical author and fictive narrator. This separation has of course a useful function: to avoid the naive fallacy of identifying opinions expressed by a narrative authority with those of the real author. However, beyond that, this separation—just as the one between empirical I and lyrical I in poetry—is also part of a specific development of modernism and its placement and displacement of art within society. The separation of functions provides the author with the possibility of role-separation. The ideal participation of

the fictive narrator in the universe of literary discourses may be contrasted with the ever more reduced participation of the real author in the public sphere. If the more recent novels subvert this separation, we must see these formal changes as symptoms of historical transformations in the relation between art and society.

What are the symptoms of this shift? A particularly striking phenomenon is the increasing trend towards autobiographical elements in recent German novels. Some, like Thomas Bernhard's *Die Ursache* (*The Cause*, 1975) and *Der Atem* (*The Breath*, 1978) are direct autobiographical accounts. Günter Grass narrates in his *Tagebuch einer Schnecke* (*Diary of a Snail*, 1972) his experiences during the election campaign for the Social Democrats, and his more recent novel *Der Butt* (*The Flounder*, 1977) is full of often only slightly modified experiences of the author as a private person in his marriage and as a public figure in India and Gdansk. A similar mixture of private and public self-experience structures Max Frisch's novel *Montauk* (1975). Peter Handke's novels *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* (*Short Letter, Long Farewell*, 1972) and *Wunschloses Unglück* (*Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, 1972) are not only largely autobiographical, but explicitly thematize the interrelation between experience and fiction.

The examples could be multiplied. Certainly, the autobiographical materials have different functions in these texts. However, they do point in a common direction. The increasing involvement of the empirical author in his texts assumes the involvement of the fiction in the empirical, historical world which it can no longer simply transcend. On the other hand, the empirical world itself is permeated, if not constituted by fiction.

In an exemplary way, this problematic is central to Max Frisch's novel *Montauk*. What is interesting here, as generally in the works of Frisch, are not the existentialist elements, which as such only incessantly run down the dead-end streets of the autonomous subject, but the collision of these elements with the actual act of writing. It is here, where the imaginary I enters into a conflictual relationship with the symbolic order of language, that literature evolves. The tension and rupture in this relationship is manifested in Frisch's work in the paradoxical grammatical form of his narrative subject. As an East German colleague of Frisch, Christa Wolf, has noted: while Frisch's fictive work tends to be written in the form of an I-narrator, his diary very rarely uses the word «I.»¹⁶ Frisch himself has articulated the paradoxical relation-

ship of the author to his text with reference to Beckett: «his work seems far distant from him, and at the same time he is identical with it.»¹⁷ The text is the place where the author constitutes and effaces himself at the same time. «I, that is I at any time,» we read in Günter Grass's novel *The Flounder*. The I here, is given exactly that function which it has according to grammar: it is a 'shifter,' a signifier that glides and sometimes occupies that place which we mark with the name 'Günter Grass.' But this place itself is not a fixed entity but the site of an effect, of a constellation of texts.

As I have indicated earlier, the other side of the de-fictionalization of the narrator is the fictionalization of the author, who is also a product of his/her text. The playful invention in Walter Höllerer's novel *Elephantenuhr (Elephantclock)*, where Oskar Matzerath (the hero of Günter Grass's novel *The Tin Drum*) writes a biography of his author Grass, points to the very real position of the writing subject. When Uwe Johnson, with obstinate seriousness, speaks about his figures as if they were real persons, over whom he has no control, and who often seem to control him, and when he enters into a contract with them, this is not just a playful mystification, but the emphatic recognition of the inherent autonomy of a fictive constellation. But the fiction also creates the writer. Blatantly Herbert Achternbusch writes in *Land in Sicht (Land in Sight)*: «In writing I become.»

The ambivalence of self-realization and self-alienation in writing becomes especially important for two groups of authors and novels: the workers' novel and the women's novel. Of particular interest here is not a specific content, but the attempt to create new modes of discourse. In this respect, however, the West German novel has not developed very far. To be sure, important literary workers' groups were founded in the sixties, such as the Group 61, from which other groups subsequently evolved. But to the very degree that the identity of the proletariat as a class has structurally and ideologically lost its clear delineation in late capitalist societies, it becomes problematic for the worker to find his/her own discourse. The all-pervasive organization of experience by the bourgeois public sphere and its media apparatus prevents not only the articulation of new modes of experiences but the experience itself. If there is a potential for alternative forms of experience, they can appear only negatively in the text, in its gaps and ruptures. They appear for example in one of the most successful workers' novels of recent years, in Max von der Grün's *Stellenweise*

Glattis (Slippery Spots) in the form of blind, undeveloped motifs. One of the strongest of these is the deep erotic tension between father and daughter which never comes to the surface but nevertheless creates intensive textual gaps. One could of course argue that these are elements of a bourgeois family drama and of a private sphere, which is only marginal to a novel that grew out of the working world. But to argue in such a way presupposes the dichotomies and antagonisms of the existing public sphere and of a discourse caught in the ruins of the bourgeois ideology.

This situation of a totally controlled, one-dimension discourse, whose authoritarian power is all the more evasive because it cannot be localized in a specific instance of authority and censorship but is instead working through a totalizing internalized structure of experience itself, has become the very basis of some recent feminist texts, in France more so than in Germany. Perhaps the most innovative and artistically most radical feminist novel in the German context is Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina* (1971), which has no explicit program or purpose, but confronts the issue of discourse with a deadly poetic intensity. Literary critics have usually found no better label for this radical difference than «subjectivity.» They have spoken of regression into the interior world, of loss of the world, as if the world were lost if it is no longer organized by the patriarchal discourse. This discourse is still strongly present in Bachmann's novel. Its voracious violence literally absorbs and devours the female figure. But in this process something emerges which cannot be taken back. Even in its seemingly total ensnarement by the male voice, the female voice emerges in a deadly attempt at articulation. One might describe this novel as the feminist counterpart to Hegel's master-slave dialectic, as a radical articulation of an identity in total self-alienation in the struggle with the other's self-consciousness and with the other's discourse.

The central issue is the articulation of difference; that's why the women's novel is not limited to female authors. A text like Günter Grass's *The Flounder* participates in an essential way in this articulation, not just because the women's movement plays such a prominent role in this novel, but also because of its counter-articulation of male anxieties and phantasms. But what is of special importance here is one of the narrative voices. Besides that shifter-I, which I mentioned before, and which is always a male voice articulating itself around, in, for, and against a female figure, there is also the voice of the flounder. This voice is a shifter in a different

sense. First it seems to be the embodiment of patriarchal discourse. That is, after all, the reason why the flounder has to appear and defend himself before a women's tribunal. As a fish he necessarily evokes phallic symbolism, although this particular fish, a flounder, flat and unshapely as it is, certainly belongs to the borderline of phallic formation, if not deformation. But this is its true place: the border, the margin where difference and articulation take place. It is not whether he speaks for male or female power that defines his place in the text. He is not *a* signifier, but *the* central signifier of the text, around, against and through which different articulations shape themselves. He is the marker of difference, the blank page on which the letters take shape. The articulation of difference may even, as in Peter Handke's *Die linkshändige Frau* (*The Lefthanded Woman*), be an emphatic silence.

The problematization of the narrator's status and position necessarily also call into question the status of story and plot. This is not simply a formal problem: the narrative structure is deeply inscribed with ideological patterns and modes of perception. As much as the deconstructive tendencies have become a tradition of the modern and postmodern novel, they have hardly touched the collective consciousness. Even sophisticated critics are informed by the deeply ingrained belief that in the story the world presents itself in a natural and undistorted way. Typical for this unreflected belief are sentences like: «Author X is not an ideologue but a story teller.» Little do such critics realize how much they are actually articulating a basic stereotype of political ideology and rhetoric, which attempts to define the constellation and sequence of the existing order as the only possible and natural order. The pragmatists are always those who tell the familiar story. The identification of history as story has become part of news-reporting, where 'news' events which supposedly make history are explicitly called «stories» («You will hear this story right after this message»). The «message» (Kafka's *Botschaft*) interestingly enough is an appeal to the consumer; the rest is fiction. Unmistakable too is the narrative gesture and tone of the news reporter, archetypically (re-)presented by the grandfatherly story-teller Walter Cronkite, in whose story telling world and story are reassuringly one: «And that's the way it is...»

This mode and gesture actually appeal to a humanist tradition which the East-German critic Kurt Batt articulated most explicitly, when he identified the destruction of the narrative form with the

destruction of humanism. Indeed, the subversion of the narrative form is perhaps one of the most provocative challenges to a humanist tradition which claims to know once and for all what the boundaries and identity of 'humanity' are. To the degree that the modern and postmodern project explore the margins of exclusion and inclusion, they evoke the anxiety of 'dehumanization.'

The problems sketched here, obviously, reach far beyond the novel. In the theoretical field, they have manifested themselves especially since the sixties—crudely spoken—in the confrontation between structuralists and hermeneuticians. They also have found expression in the vehement recent debates among historians, who see their field split between more traditional forms of narrative historiography and an increasing structuralization of history through the intrusion of sociology and econometry. I can only allude here to these larger contexts to indicate the narrative problematic as part of a wider 'postmodern' condition.

Since the middle of the sixties, it was above all Peter Handke who questioned most insistently the apparent naturalness of story-telling. In particular, his early prose texts are explicitly anti-stories, which try to uncover ideological patterns inscribed in the narrative principle. But there is a noticeable ambivalence in Handke's relationship to story-telling. Even his early attacks against stories as deformation and distortion of reality are informed by a deep desire and longing for a world without mediation, a desire which ultimately tries to find its truth again in the simple story.

What we have noticed in regard to the textual subject, the erasure of the borderline between fictive and real narrator, is true of the fiction itself. Recent novels are mimetic not in the sense that they try to represent a reality outside themselves, but in the sense that they uncover and play with organizational patterns which inform both reality and fiction. This is their realism. The more traditional form of this erasure of the delimitation of fiction and reality takes place on the semantic level as a mixture of fantastic and real world, of subjective and objective reality; the more complex and—what I would call—the postmodern form places the problematic into the textual structure itself. These are, of course, only typological poles which are usually mixed in specific texts.

Reality as structured by fiction often appears in the novel as a story structured by another story. But while at the beginning of modernism, in Joyce's *Ulysses*, the great myth inscribes its invisible grammar in an average modern Dublin day, more recent novels are

frequently structured by marginal, even banal stories. Among the favorite ones are patterns of the Western or the detective novel, because in their plot-lines the narrative mechanisms are usually particularly easy to detect. Such patterns, of course, tend to undermine and question the very notion of story and history, because they transform the temporal uniqueness of the event into the repetition of a structure. However, this does not necessarily mean dehistoricization. Grass's novel *The Flounder*, for example, is marked by the dialectic of historical particularity and repetition of story patterns. The pro-gramming (prewriting) of life reaches its most precise dialectic in Alexander Kluge's *Lernprozesse mit tödlichem Ausgang* (*Learning Processes with Fatal Endings*). These stories present not only programmed modes of experience and behavior, but also the discrepancy between program and reality. This discrepancy leads formally to a mixture of consequence and inconsequence, continuity and discontinuity, and most frequently the pattern is a program which, in its inflexible consequence, destroys itself and its subject, which is always a subject in the literal sense of the word: subjected to the inscribed program.

These shifts in the function of story-telling receive their strongest impulses on the level of the signifier. Language, not just as a means of representation but as an organizational principle of reality, as potential and real violence, even as the real speaking subject, dominates many of the major texts of the recent decade. This is not only true for such explicitly experimental authors as Oswald Wiener, Helmut Heißenbüttel, and Arno Schmidt, who extended the techniques of concrete texts to the novel. Even in novels which seem to be organized primarily by the semantic surface structure, the literality of the signifiers plays its subversive games more openly than ever. It seems that many authors have become more aware of the power of literality. «He who says paddly must also say pedal,» we read as a seeming nonsense sentence in Herbert Achternbusch's novel *Der Tag wird kommen* (*The Day Will Come*). Its playfulness nevertheless articulates a structural principle of those novels which, while they deal with the power of the signifier, deal also with concrete history.

It is on this level, on the level of the signifier, that experimental art and the modern avant garde move to the margins of Modernism itself and transgress it. The difference can be seen if one compares a work of classical Modernism such as Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* with the experiments of the avant garde. Although Thomas

Mann's novel talks about and reflects about problems and possibilities of experimental art, its own language remains relatively untouched by that which it signifies. Experimental literature, on the other hand, stages those experiments. As a representing medium the meta-language can no longer remain aloof from that which it represents.

The systematic exploration of signification processes goes back to the twenties of this century, but it came to an abrupt end in Germany in the thirties when the Nazis came to power. After the war, young German artists and writers, particularly in the West, where few of the emigrés were welcome and therefore could not play the kind of model role that Brecht, Seghers, Thomas and Heinrich Mann and others had in East Germany, slowly had to reorient themselves and find their place in a tradition of Modernism from which they had been almost completely cut off. Although a strong commitment to a 'pure' language in opposition to the idealized language and rhetoric of the Nazi-period was a primary motivation for many writers, most of these early texts did not probe into the nature of language and signification, but searched for immediacy and existential truth of expression. However, there were a few individual authors and small groups who started to deconstruct the naive representational concept of language and began to experiment with «inventions,» «verbaries» and «montage-techniques.» Among the most inventive was the Vienna group with Hans C. Artmann, Friedrich Achleitner, Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Rühm and Oswald Wiener and individual authors such as Eugen Gomringer, Ernst Jandl, Friederike Mayröcker, Franz Mon and Helmut Heißenbüttel. In a certain sense this was the real avant garde in the German postwar era. All the major innovations and experiments were created by them in the fifties and early sixties. But as far as the literary market and their reception was concerned, they remained marginal. Their texts circulated in small and often extremely shortlived journals or only as manuscripts among friends and only in a very few instances did they reach a larger audience. In the middle sixties and early seventies the situation reversed itself. Increasing numbers of anthologies and experimental texts in book form came out with major publishing houses, reaching a much wider audience. Experimental literature seemed to move from the margins closer to the center. But at the same time there were very few actually new experiments. Most of the publications were either collections of texts written much earlier or variations of already

established experimental techniques. However the change of position within the literary market itself is more than external to a textual praxis concerned with the concrete status of language and text. This positional change affected all the other texts: 'innocent' writing was no longer possible for the serious writer.

Moving away from the margin of course threatens at the same time the very essence of an exploratory experimental literature. Integrated subversion runs the danger of being coopted. Indeed the possibilities of integration reach far beyond literature. The techniques of concrete texts and graphics have long since become an essential part of commercial advertising. Eugen Gomringer, the German-Swiss experimentalist also works for advertising firms. The temptation of a moralistic irony and polemic is great in this situation. But perhaps such a degree of integration should rather be a source of surprise for all those who consider experimental art merely an elitist game. If the play of the signifiers indeed can function in the organization of needs and desires by the consumer industry, that means that signifiers are not dead letters but are instead intricately emeshed in the economy of desire. Aesthetic reflection then can no longer disregard this ability of texts to appeal to the desire 'below' the level of semantics through the sensuality of the graphic or spoken letter. Perhaps, in order to become efficiently subversive, the experimental text has to run the risk of cooption, because it cannot circumvent the social and political organization of desire if it wants to enter into the economy of desire at all, and without that economy there are no human effects. There would indeed only be the dead letter.

Generally academic literary criticism does not esteem the letter very highly. The dominant model is still representational: a word = a thing. Linguists have known of course for a long time that the constitution of meaning takes place 'below' the level of the word, at that point which is called 'phoneme.' However, the phoneme is not actually 'something' nor does it mean 'something' - it is simply a mark of difference. This is all very interesting, someone might say, and perhaps even true, just as quantum physics and relativity theory are interesting and probably true, but what does it have to do with our actual experiences, with our actual speaking and writing? Even if we do not subscribe to a mirror-reflection-theory, we still expect from literature that it relate somehow to our experiences. It is an expectation which cannot be simply ridiculed as naive.

Phonemes, which cut and carve the differences of articulation, might be closer to our experience than it seems: they enter as radical incisions into the experience and expression of the child who turns from *infans* to a speaking organism. It has been known for some time, that children do not learn all sounds at the same time.¹⁸ Further research has also shown that the relative sequence in the acquiring of linguistic sounds is the same for children in all languages. Some theories attempted to trace this back to the child's undeveloped physiological apparatus. But anybody who has ever listened to a little baby's utterings will have some difficulty believing such a theory. The sounds the baby is able to produce far exceed the capacities of an adult. Its physiological apparatus for producing sounds seems to be almost unlimited. However, a sharp incision takes place at the moment when the baby's sound production enters into the articulatory laws of the mother tongue, when the expressive sound becomes a differential mark. With this incision, the whole sound production is reduced to the opposition of the widest opening and complete closure: a-p/a-b. During this period, expressive sound production can still coexist with the beginning of linguistic articulations; the child might still produce the most complicated sounds. But whenever it tries to *speak*, it enters into the incisive order of articulation which for some children is so incisive that they seem to lose their voice for a while and go through a silent stage between phonetic and phonematic sound production. It is a silence that testifies to the violence of the incision which inscribes its articulatory law onto the organic body. It is the margin of this silence, this concrete incision along which the best of concrete poetry moves. It is perhaps this incision which in the psychoanalytic process is told as the (hi-)stery-story of castration, narrated in the context of the patriarchal family structure.

Whatever its semantic version, the incision haunts experimental literature obsessively and violently. There is a fundamental ambivalence of almost all the experimentalists towards their organ: language either appears as the almighty organ of mediation, even creation, or as an almighty barrier, frequently as the one and the other. In this ambivalence, experimental literature has not only a deconstructive, but also a destructive element: it is the rage of the experimentalist against the organ which cuts into and forever postpones the absolute of desire. It is the rage of Oedipus who tears out his eyes, the organs of his vision *and* his blindness; the madness of Antigone who, listening to the unwritten murmurings of the

metonymically to a metaphor which for centuries has marked the concept of language and rhetoric: language and letter as clothing, as veils, as coats, sometimes even the body for the soul, but always external to the interiority of the spirit and the content. Jandl's texts, which are unfortunately almost untranslatable, are playful masterworks on the margins of articulation, often graphically inscribing the marginal lines playing around them, blurring them, displacing them. The linguistic jokes and inventive puns also blur the boundary between triumphant humor and deadly despair. Where the letters play, the murmuring of death is always close.

The obsession with death, dismemberment, castration, impotence and senility is strongly present in Arno Schmidt's texts which also move along the borderlines and margins of articulation. But at the same time they are celebrations of life with an intensity fed by the shadow of death. Arno Schmidt started in the fifties with short stories whose major unusual mark was a strange orthography. Instead of following the standard rules of orthography, the texts were phonetic transcriptions of spoken language. This defamiliarizing form of writing created ambiguities, displacements of meaning, and evoked subliminal counter-senses which subverted the surface meaning. This remains one of the major elements of the large works of the seventies: *Zettels Traum* (*Zettel's Dream*, 1970), *Die Schule der Atheisten* (*The Atheists' School*, 1972) and *Abend mit Goldrand* (*Evening Edged in Gold*, 1975).²⁹ These texts are structured by a double principle: on the one hand they manifest a highly conscious artistic and calculated order, on the other hand they are the product of chance and fortuitous phonetic associations, dreamlike and mechanical in their quality. They are both manifestations of the art of writing and the art of mis-writing. Often the words are literally subverted by letters under the letters. Thus the word «Ländlichkeit» appears as «L-(ä, E)ndlichkeit,» which inscribes into the notion of idyllic countryside and rustic life the threat of death (Endlichkeit = finality) and sexual fantasies (Lende = loins, the biblical euphemism for the sexual organs). It is a form of writing which makes manifest what is otherwise latent in language games and communicative processes, and it insists that there is no speech act, no communication without the intervention of desire and the unconscious. This unconscious, however, is not the romanticized arsenal of mythical archetypes, but rather a writing- and mis-writing-machine, ruled by the mechanics of displacement, knotting and condensation. «Le monde symbolique,

c'est le monde de la machine.»²¹

If the games of the letter led us perhaps too close to the underworld of the dead and entangled us too much in the knottings of desire, perhaps the grammatical rules will lead us back to reason and the enlightened world of social interaction. On the syntactic-grammatical level, the rules seem to be easier to grasp, their social dimension as regulative systems of intersubjective processes more evident. Thus Jürgen Habermas attributes to grammar the position of a transcendental horizon of communicative praxis.²² Experimentalists seem to be most interested in two aspects of grammar: on the one hand grammar as a playground for language games, on the other hand grammar as an assembly of chains and fetters, as the 'prison house of language.'

Just escaped from the underworld, we find ourselves in prison. The major thrust of German experimental literature strongly points towards an indictment of grammar as a form of domination, control, authority and coercion. It appears as the central force which internalizes external domination and violence. Internalized authority manifests itself in delirious and compulsive talking. In particular, the young Austrian author Gert Jonke has an uncanny ear for the compulsive syntax of authority.

It is on the level of the syntagmatic knottings where experimental literature in the narrow sense of the word merges with the problematization of the narrative which we sketched above. The ideological element of story telling is not just in the mode of narration, but starts already with the decision as to what can constitute story. Before even the narration starts, the concept of 'what makes a story' censors already what can be told, not only in the novel but also in the news. The general tendency in experimental literature is again to uncover such compulsive regulative implications of narration. «A good story,» Herbert Achternbusch writes, «is just a badly told story because it makes an easy connection with the brains organized by the news media.» Achternbusch destroys these badly told 'good stories' in order to allow his stories to develop their own crazy, displaced logic which disconnects the brains from their official conditioning.

Texts of this kind not only introduce new literary paradigms, they also involve the interpretative text, which can no longer remain untouched by that of which it speaks. Experimental literature displaces the significative system of the reader no less than its own. Where a text brings into play all its significative effects it leaves no

room and no escape for the aloofness of a meta-language. If classical modern literature opened up to reflective and theoretical modes of speech, postmodern 'theoretical' texts respond to it by involving their own meta-discourse in the displacing effects of language, its tropes and its figures. This makes them vulnerable, but also seductive, persuasive and strong.

NOTES

1. One of the most enthusiastic 'postmodern' critics has been Ihab Hassan, particularly in his two books *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Post Modern Literature* (New York: Oxford U.P. 1971); and: *Paracriticism: Seven Speculations of the Times* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1975). See also: M. Benamou and Ch. Charmello (eds.), *Performance in Postmodern Culture* (Madison, Wisc.: Coda Press 1977). Alain Touraine, *La société postindustrielle*. (Paris: Denoël, 1969). Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). The journal explicitly founded to study and explore Postmodernism is *Boundary 2* (Binghamton, N.Y.).
2. Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne* (Paris: Editions de Minuit 1979).
3. Hugo Friedrich, *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1956), (4th edition 1971)
4. Hassan, *Paracriticism*, 1.c., p. 44.
5. Hassan, *Paracriticism*, p. 53.
6. Hassan, *Paracriticism*, p. 43.
7. The major documents of this debate are collected in: H. J. Schmidt (ed.), *Expressionismusdebatte: Materialien zu einer marxistischen Realismuskonzeption* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970).
8. A slightly abbreviated version of this speech was published in DIE ZEIT no. 39 (Sept. 26, 1980). I have asked Habermas for permission to publish the text in English in this issue, but unfortunately he had already promised it to Susan Sontag for a volume on Modernism.
9. This is not the only incident. When the president of the University of Hamburg suggested Walter Jens, an eminent scholar for classics, rhetoric, and equally well-versed in modern literature, for a new chair for the study of rhetoric, a strong conservative group of professors successfully blocked the nomination because Jens was considered too liberal.
10. For a more detailed analysis of totalized communication see my essay «Freud,

Habermas and the Dialectic of Enlightenment: On Real and Ideal Discourses,» in: *New German Critique*, 22 (1981), pp. 41-62.

11. *La condition postmoderne*, 1.c., p. 98 ff.

12. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, p. 107.

13. Cf. Manfred Durzak, *Gespräche über den Roman. Formbestimmung und Analysen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1976), p. 11.

14. Christopher Caudwell, *Romance and Realism. A Study in English Bourgeois Literature* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1970), p. 97. (First published in 1937).

15. Kurt Batt, *Die Exekution des Erzählers. West-Deutsche Romane zwischen 1968 und 1972*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1974.

16. Christa Wolf, «Max Frisch, beim Wiederlesen oder: Vom Schreiben in Ich-Form,» in: *Über Max Frisch II*. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1976), p. 12.

17. Max Frisch, *Montauk* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 65.

18. Roman Jakobson, *Kindersprache und Aphasie*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1969.

19. Ernst Jandl, *Laut und Luise*.

20. In his review of a new English translation of *Evening Edged in Gold*, S. S. Praver offers a short and informative introduction to Arno Schmidt: S. S. Praver, «Etymy and endgames», in: *TLS* (Sept. 5, 1980), p. 949 f.

21. Jacques Lacan, *Le moi dans la theorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 63.

22. Jürgen Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1968), p. 237.