Signature

A Journal of Theory and Canadian Literature

SIGNATURE

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Contents

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Editorial

Signature is a journal devoted to the study of critical theory within a Canadian context. We are interested in the exploration of theoretical issues of all kinds–philosophical, political, feminist, psychoanalytical, etc–especially but not exclusively insofar as they relate to Canadian literature and culture. We seek articles which will provide informed discussion of theoretical texts and theoretical readings of literary texts. While our primary focus will be on Canadian culture, we recognise that contemporary critical theory is international in its scope, and we hope that Signature can contribute to placing Canadian theoretical studies on this world stage. To this end, we will welcome articles both from Canadian scholars writing on international movements in theory and from international scholars dealing with Canadian texts. In all these ways, we hope that the "signature" of this journal will be, in its technical sense, a gathering together of various pages.

The editors would like to thank all those who have made this first issue possible, especially those scholars who agreed to become members of our Editorial Board, and those who agreed to contribute their essays, all for a journal whose existence at the time was, as they say, theoretical. We would also like to thank the University of Victoria for its very substantial support.

Evelyn Cobley
Smaro Kamboureli
Stephen Scobie.

Schopenhauer and the Aesthetic

Terry Eagleton

Though Schopenhauer is undoubtedly one of the gloomiest philosophers who ever wrote, there is an unwitting comedy about his work which has to do with the presence of the body within it. Schopenhauer studied physiology at university, and is impressively learned about the lungs and pancreas; indeed it is a striking thought that his choice of university subjects might have reshaped the whole course of Western philosophy right up to the fashionable neo-Nietzscheanisms of our own time. For it is from Schopenhauer's coarsely materialist meditations on the pharynx and the larynx, on cramps, convulsions, epilepsy, tetanus and hydrophobia, that Nietzsche will derive much of his own ruthless physiological reductionism; and all that solemn, archaic nineteenth-century discourse of Man in terms of the ganglions and lumbar regions, which survives at least as long as Lawrence, thus forms a shady hinterland to that resurgence of theoretical interest in the body which also has, in our own epoch, rather more positive and political dimensions.

Schopenhauer is quite unembarrassed to detect his celebrated Will, that blindly persistent desire at the root of all phenomena, in yawning, sneezing and vomiting, in jerkings and twitchings of various kinds, and seems wholly oblivious of the bathos with which his language can veer without warning in the course of a page or so from high-flown reflections on free will to the structure of the spinal cord or the excrescences of the caterpillar. There is a kind of Bakhtinian bathos or Brechtian *plumpes Denken* about this sudden swooping from *Geist* to genitalia, from the oracular to the orificial, which in Bakhtin's hands at least is a political weapon against ruling-class idealism's paranoid fear of the flesh. With Schopenhauer it is less a question of political revolt than of a kind of cracker-barrel crassness, as when he solemnly illustrates the conflict between body and intellect by pointing out that people find it hard to walk and talk at the same time: "For as soon as their brain has to link a few ideas together, it no longer has as much force left over as is required to keep the legs in motion through the motor nerves" (Schopenhauer 2, 284). Elsewhere he speculates

that the boundless, infinite objective world "is really only a certain movement or affection of the pulpy mass in the skull" (2, 273), or suggests that a short stature and neck are especially favourable to genius, "because on the shorter path the blood reaches the brain with more energy" (2, 393). All of this vulgar literalism is a kind of theoretical posture in itself, a sardonic smack at high-toned Hegelianism from one who, though a full-blooded metaphysician himself, regards Hegel as a supreme charlatan and most philosophy except Plato, Kant and himself as a lot of hot air. Crotchety, arrogant and cantankerous, a scathing Juvenilian satirist who professes to believe that the Germans need their long words because it gives their slow minds more time to think, Schopenhauer reveals in his work a carnivalesque coupling of the imposing and the commonplace evident in his very name.

Indeed, incongruity becomes in Schopenhauer's hands the basis for a full-blown theory of comedy. The ludicrous, so he argues, springs from the paradoxical subsumption of an object under a concept in other ways heterogeneous to it, so that an Adorno-like insistence on the non-identity of object and concept can come to explain why animals cannot laugh. Humour, in this speciously generalising view, is by and large high words and low meanings, and so like Schopenhauer's own philosophy has an ironic or dialogical structure. This is itself profoundly ironic, since the discrepancy between percept and concept which occasions the release of laughter is exactly that disjuncture between experience and intellect, or will and representation, which lies at the very core of Schopenhauer's disgusted view of humanity. The inner structure of this bleakest of visions is thus the structure of a joke. Reason, that crude, blundering servant of the imperious will, is always pathetic false consciousness, a mere reflex of desire which believes itself absurdly to present the world just as it is. Concepts, in a familiar brand of nineteenth-century irrationalism, cannot cling to the rich intricacies of experience, but appear maladroit and crudely reductive. But if this fissures the very being of humanity into illusion, so that merely to think is to be self-deceived, it also provides the elements of a Freudian theory of humour:

> [Perception] is the medium of the present, of enjoyment and cheerfulness; moreover it is not

> associated with any exertion. With thinking the opposite holds good; it is the second power of knowledge, whose exercise always requires some, often considerable, exertion; and it is the concepts of thinking that are so often opposed to the satisfaction of our immediate desires, since, as the medium of the past, of the future, and of what is serious, they act as the vehicle of our fears, our regrets, and all our cares. It must therefore be delightful for us to see this strict, untiring, and most troublesome governess, our faculty of reason, for once convicted of inadequacy. Therefore on this account the mien or appearance of laughter is very closely related to that of joy (2, 98).

Comedy is the will's mocking revenge on the representation, the malicious strike of the Schopenhauerian id against the Hegelian superego; and this source of hilarity is also, curiously, the root of our utter hopelessness.[1]

If humour and hopelessness lie so close together, it is because human existence for Schopenhauer is less grand tragedy than squalid farce. Writhing in the toils of the voracious will, driven on by an implacable appetite they relentlessly idealise, men and women are less tragic protagonists than pitiably obtuse. The most fitting emblem of the human enterprise is the shovel-pawed mole: "to dig strenuously with its enormous shovel-paws is the business of its whole life; permanent night surrounds it....What does it attain by this course of life that is full of trouble and devoid of pleasure? Nourishment and procreation, that is, only the means for continuing and beginning again in the new individual the same melancholy course" (2, 353-4). Nothing could be more obvious to Schopenhauer than the fact that it would be infinitely preferable if the world did not exist at all, that the whole project is a ghastly mistake which should long ago have been called off, and that only some crazed idealism could possibly believe the pleasures of existence to outweigh its pains. Only the most blatant self-delusion—ideas, values, the rest of that pointless paraphernalia—could blind individuals to this laughably self-evident truth. Sunk in its gross stupidity, humanity insists upon regarding as valuable a history which is so plainly the record of carnage, misery and wretchedness that our capacity to think it in the least tolerable must itself be explicable only as a ruse of the will,

the low cunning with which it shields itself from our knowledge of its own total futility. It is hard for Schopenhauer to restrain a burst of hysterical laughter at the sight of this pompously self-important race, gripped by a remorseless will-to-live which is secretly quite indifferent to any of them, piously convinced of its own supreme value, scrambling over each other in pursuit of some earnest goal which will turn instantly to ashes in their mouths. The world is one enormous marketplace, "this world of constantly needy creatures who continue for a time merely by devouring one another, pass their existence in anxiety and want, and often endure terrible afflictions, until they fall at last into the arms of death" (2, 349). There is no grand *telos* to this "battle-ground of tormented and agonised beings" (2, 581), only "momentary gratification, fleeting pleasure conditioned by wants, much and long suffering, constant struggle, *bellum omnium*, everything a hunter and everything hunted, pressure, want, need and anxiety, shrieking and howling; and this goes on *in saecula saeculorum* or until once again the crust of the planet breaks" (2, 354). If human beings were capable of contemplating objectively for one moment this perverse attachment of theirs to unhappiness, they would necessarily abhor it. The whole race is like a diseased beggar who appeals to us for help to prolong his miserable existence, even though from an objective viewpoint his death would be altogether desirable. Only some sentimental humanism could see such a judgement as callous rather than coolly reasonable. The most fortunate life is that with endurable want and comparative painlessness, though the result of this is boredom. Boredom for Schopenhauer is the chief motive for sociality, since it is to avoid it that we seek out each other's loveless company. All of this sets the scene for high tragedy, yet even that we bungle: "our life must contain all the woes of tragedy, and yet we cannot even assert the dignity of tragic characters, but, in the broad detail of life, are inevitably the foolish characters of a comedy" (1, 322). History is low burlesque rather than Attic solemnity: "no one has the remotest idea why the whole tragi-comedy exists, for it has no spectators, and the actors themselves undergo endless worry and trouble with little and merely negative enjoyment" (2, 357). Life is a grotesquely bad absurdist drama full of farcical repetition, a set of trivial variations on a shoddy script.

There is something amusing about the very relentless consistency of this Schopenhauerian gloom, a perpetual grousing with all the monotonous, mechanical repetition of the condition it denounces. If comedy for Schopenhauer involves subsuming objects to inappropriate concepts, then this is ironically true of his own pessimism, which stamps everything with its own inexorable colour and so has the funniness of all monomania. Any such obsessive conversion of difference to identity is bound to be comic, however tragic the actual outlook. To see no difference between roasting a leg of lamb and roasting a baby, to view both as mere indifferent expressions of the metaphysical will, is as risible as mistaking one's left foot for the notion of natural justice. Part of our laughter at such remorseless tunnel vision is no doubt relief at the wanton parade of a monstrous egoism we ourselves have had to camouflage, though in the case of a pervasively pessimistic vision like Schopenhauer's such laughter may contain a nervously defensive quality too. His perverse ignoring of what we feel to be the more positive aspects of life is outrageous enough to be amusing, as we would smile at someone whose only interest in great painters was in how many of them had halitosis.

Schopenhauer's intense pessimism, however, is in one sense not in the least outrageous—is, indeed, no more than the sober realism he himself considers it to be. One-sided though this viewpoint may be, it is a fact that throughout class-history the fate of the great majority of men and women has been one of suffering and fruitless toil. Schopenhauer may not have all of the truth, but he has a larger share of it than the romantic humanists he is out to discredit. Any more hopeful view of humanity which has not reckoned his particular narrative into account is bound to be enfeebled. The dominant tale of history to date has indeed been one of carnage, misery and oppression. Moral virtue has never flourished as the decisive force in any political culture. Where such values have taken precarious root, they have been largely confined to the private realm. The monotonous driving forces of history have been enmity, appetite and dominion; and the scandal of that sordid heritage is that it is indeed possible to ask of the lives of innumerable individuals whether they would not have been better off dead. Any degree of freedom, dignity and comfort has been confined to a tiny minority, while indigence, unhappiness

and hard labour have been the lot of the vast majority. "[T]o enter at the age of five a cotton-spinning or other factory," Schopenhauer remarks, "and from then on to sit there every day first ten, then twelve, and finally fourteen hours, and perform the same mechanical work, is to purchase dearly the pleasure of drawing breath" (2, 578). The dramatic mutations of human history, its epochal ruptures and upheavals, have been in one sense mere variations on a consistent theme of exploitation and oppression. Nor could any future transformation, however radical, affect this record in any substantial way. For all Walter Benjamin's efforts to raise the very dead themselves with the clarion call of his eloquence, for all his urgent attempts to muster around the frail band of the living the fertilising shades of the unjustly quelled, it remains the harsh truth that the dead can be raised only in revolutionary imagination.[2] There is no literal way in which we can compensate them for the sufferings they received at the hands of the ruling order. We cannot recall the crushed medieval peasantry or the wage-slaves of early industrial capitalism, the children who died afraid and unloved in the wretched hovels of class-society, the women who broke their backs for regimes which used them with arrogance and contempt, the colonised nations which collapsed under an oppressor who found them at once sinister and charming. There is no literal way in which the shades of these dead can be summoned to claim justice from those who abused them. The pastness of the past is the simple truth that, rewrite and recuperate them as we may, the wretched of history have passed away, and will not share in any more compassionate social order we may be able to create. For all its homespun eccentricity and obdurate monomania, Schopenhauer's appalling vision is accurate in its essentials. He is mistaken to think that the destructive will is all there is; but there is a sense in which he is correct to see it as the *essence* of all history to date. This is not a truth particularly palatable to political radicals, though it is in one sense the very motivation of their practice. That this intolerable narrative cannot continue is the belief which inspires their struggle, even as the crippling burden of that history would seem to bear mute witness against the feasibility of such a faith. The source of inspiration of a radical politics is thus always the potential source of its enervation.

Schopenhauer is perhaps the first major thinker to place at the centre of his work the abstract category of *desire itself*, irrespective of this or that particular hankering. It is this powerful abstraction which psychoanalysis will later inherit, though it is probable that Freud, who was said to consider Schopenhauer one of the half dozen greatest individuals who had ever lived, came to know his work only after his own theories were already formed. Just as capitalist society is in this period evolving to the point where it will be possible for Marx to extract from it the key concept of abstract labour, a conceptual operation only possible on the basis of certain material conditions, so the determinant role and regular repetition of appetite in bourgeois society now permits a dramatic theoretical shift: the construction of desire as a thing in itself, a momentous metaphysical event of self-identical force, as against some earlier social order in which desire is too narrowly particularistic, too intimately bound up with traditional obligation, to be reified in quite this way. With Schopenhauer, desire has become the protagonist of the human theatre, and human subjects themselves its mere obedient bearers or underlings. This is not only because of the emergence of a social order in which, in the form of commonplace possessive individualism, appetite is now the order of the day, the ruling ideology and dominant social practice; it is more specifically because of the perceived *infinity* of desire in a social order where the only end of accumulation is to accumulate afresh. In a traumatic collapse of teleology, desire comes to seem independent of any particular ends, or at least as grotesquely disproportionate to them; and once it thus ceases to be (in the phenomenological sense) intentional, it begins monstrously to obtrude itself as a *Ding-an-sich*, an opaque, unfathomable, self-propelling power utterly without purpose or reason, like some grisly caricature of the deity. The Schopenhauerian will, as a form of purposiveness without purpose, is in this sense a savage travesty of the Kantian aesthetic, a shoddy, inferior artefact we could all well do without.

Once desire is for the first time homogenised as a singular entity, it can become the object of a moral judgement as such—a move which would seem quite unintelligible to those classical moralists for whom there is no such phenomenon as "desire," simply this or that particular appentency on which a particular judgement may be passed. If desire becomes hypostasised in this way, then

it is possible, in a long Romantic-libertarian lineage from William Blake to Gilles Deleuze, to view it as supremely positive; but the preconditions of such Romantic affirmation are also the preconditions of the Schopenhauerian denunciation of desire *tout court*, accepting the categories of Romantic humanism by impudently inverting the valuations. Like Schopenhauer, you can retain the whole totalising apparatus of bourgeois humanism at its most affirmative—the singular central principle informing the whole of reality, the integrated cosmic whole, the stable relations of phenomena and essence—while mischievously emptying these forms of their idealist content. You can drain off the ideological substance of the system—freedom, justice, reason, progress—and fill that system, still intact, with the actual degraded materials of everyday bourgeois existence. This, precisely, is what Schopenhauer's notion of the will achieves, which structurally speaking serves just the function of the Hegelian Idea or Romantic life-force, but is now nothing more than the uncouth rapacity of the average bourgeois, elevated to cosmic status and transformed to the prime metaphysical mover of the entire universe. It is as though one retained the whole paraphernalia of the Platonic Ideas but called them Profit, Philistinism, Self-Interest and so on.

The result of this move is ambivalent. On the one hand, it naturalises and universalises bourgeois behaviour: everything from the forces of gravity to the blind stirrings of the polyp or rumblings of the gut is invested with futile craving, the whole world recast in the image of the marketplace. On the other hand, this grandly generalising gesture serves to discredit bourgeois Man all the more thoroughly, write him repellantly large, project his sordid appetites as the very stuff of the cosmos. To reduce Man to the polyp is at once to exculpate him as a helpless puppet of the will, and to insult him. This debunking shakes bourgeois ideology to the root, at the same time as its naturalising removes the hope of any historical alternative. Schopenhauer's system stands at the cusp of bourgeois historical fortunes, still confident enough in its *forms* to unify, essentialise, universalise, but precisely through these gestures to inflate to intolerable proportions the meagre contents of social life. Those contents are thus discredited by the very move which grants them metaphysical status. The forms of the Hegelian system are turned against that

philosophy with a vengeance; totalisation is still possible, but now of a purely negative kind.

This is also true in another sense. For Hegel, the free subject articulates an otherness (*Geist*) which is nevertheless at the very core of its identity, that which makes it uniquely what it is. And this transcendental principle, in order to be itself, stands in need of such individuation. Schopenhauer preserves this conceptual structure but lends it a malevolent twist. What makes me what I am, the will of which I am simply a materialisation, is utterly indifferent to my individual identity, which it uses merely for its own pointless self-reproduction. At the very root of the human subject lies that which is implacably alien to it, so that in a devastating irony this will which is the very pith of my being, which I can feel from the inside of my body with incomparably greater immediacy than I can know anything else, is absolutely unlike me at all, without consciousness or motive, as blankly unfeeling and anonymous as the force which stirs the waves. No more powerful image of alienation could be imagined than this malicious parody of idealist humanism, in which the Kantian *Ding-an-sich* is at last brought home to knowledge as the directly intuitable interior of the subject, but nevertheless retains all the impenetrability to reason of that Kantian realm. This impenetrability is no longer a simple epistemological fact but an inert, intolerable weight of meaninglessness that we bear inside ourselves as the very principle of our being, as though permanently pregnant with monsters. Alienation lies now not in some oppressive mechanism out there in the world, which confiscates our products and identities, but in the mildest motions of our limbs and language, in the faintest flicker of curiosity or compassion, in all that makes us living, breathing, desiring creatures. What is now irreparably flawed is nothing less than the whole category of subjectivity itself, not just some perversion or estrangement of it. It is this which touches on the guilty secret or impossible paradox of bourgeois society, that it is exactly in human freedom that men and women are most inexorably enchained, that we live immured in our bodies like lifers in a cell. Subjectivity is that which we can least call our own. There was a time when our desires, however destructive, could at least be called ours; now desire breeds in us an illusion known as reason, in order to con us that its goals are ours too.

It is not that Schopenhauer ignores the will's more creative aspects. If yawning or yodelling are expressions of the will, so are all our nobler aspirations; but since they are thus caught up with desire they are part of the problem rather than the solution. To fight injustice is to desire, and so to be complicit with that deeper injustice which is human life. Only by somehow breaking absolutely with this chain of causality, the terrible sway of teleology, could true freedom be achieved. Every bit of the world, from doorknobs and doctoral dissertations to modes of production and the law of the excluded middle, is the fruit of some stray appetite locked into the great empire of intentions and effects; human beings themselves are just walking materialisations of their parents' copulatory instincts. The world is one vast externalisation of a useless passion, and that alone is real. Since all desire is founded in lack, all desire is suffering: "[a]ll *willing* springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering" (1, 196). Riddled by the will, the human race is creased over some central absence like a man doubled up over his ulcer; and Schopenhauer is well aware of how, in modern psychoanalytical idiom, desire outstrips need. "[F]or one wish that is fulfilled there remain at least ten that are denied. Further, desiring lasts a long time, demands and requests go on to infinity; fulfilment is short and meted out sparingly" (1, 196). It is not therefore for the more creative impulses that we should be searching—not a matter, as with traditional morality, of ranging our desires on an evaluative scale and pitting the more positive against the more destructive. Only the quiescence of impulse itself would save us; yet to *seek* such quiescence, in a familiar Buddhist paradox, would be self-defeating.

Where then can we turn for a momentary staunching of this insatiable urge which builds the very stuff of our blood-stream and intestines? The answer for Schopenhauer is the aesthetic, which signifies less a preoccupation with art than a transfigured attitude to reality. The intolerable tedium of existence is that we can never burst out of our own skins, never shuck off the straitjacket of our petty subjective interests. We drag our egos with us in everything we do, like some bar-room bore intruding his dreary obsessions into the most casual conversation. Desire denotes our inability to see anything straight, the compulsive reference of all objects to our own sectarian interests. Passion "tinges the objects of knowledge with its colour" (2, 141), falsifying the given

through hope, anxiety, expectation; and Schopenhauer gives us a homespun little instance of this victory of will over intellect by gravely pointing out how, when we do our financial accounts, the unconscious slips we make are almost always to our own advantage. The aesthetic is a temporary escape from this prison-house of subjectivity, in which all desire drops away from us and we are able for a change to see the object as it really is. As we relinquish our heated claims over it, we dissolve contentedly into a pure, will-less subject of knowledge. But to become a pure subject of knowledge is paradoxically to cease to be a subject at all, to know oneself utterly decentred and diffused into the objects of one's contemplation. The gift of genius, Schopenhauer writes, is nothing more or less than the most complete objectivity. The aesthetic is what ruptures for a blessed moment the terrible sway of teleology, the tangled chain of functions and effects into which all things are locked, plucking an object for an instant out of the clammy grip of the will and savouring it purely as spectacle. (Dutch interiors, Schopenhauer argues, are flawed aesthetic objects, since their portrayal of oysters, herrings, crabs, wine and so on make us hungry.) The world can be released from desire only by being aestheticised; and in this process the desiring subject will dwindle to a vanishing point of pure disinterestedness. But such disinterestedness has little in common with an Arnoldian large-mindedness, impartially weighing competing interests with an eye to the whole; on the contrary, it demands nothing less than complete self-abandonment, a kind of serene self-immolation on the subject's part.

It is really rather too easy, however, to castigate this doctrine as mere escapism. Certainly, for Schopenhauer and the Buddhist tradition to which he is here indebted, nothing could be more bafflingly difficult than this apparently straightforward matter of seeing something simply as it is, a naive realism or (as Heidegger might say) a "letting things be" which is never really within our power and which can occur only spontaneously in a stray moment of mystical illumination. Nor is such naive realism for Schopenhauer any mere positivism: indeed, he is a full-blooded Platonist on that score, holding that to grasp the thing as it actually is is to understand it in its eternal essence or species-being. The detachment which accompanies this well-nigh impossible realism is certainly a kind of indifference, as the

world is converted into a theatrical charade, its shrieking and howling stilled to so much idle stage chatter for the unmoved spectator's contemplation. The aesthetic is in this sense a sort of psychical defence mechanism whereby the mind, threatened with an overload of pain, converts the object of its suffering into illusion. Schopenhauer's theory of the sublime illustrates this point exactly: in the sublime, we are able to contemplate objects threatening or hostile to us with complete equanimity, secure in the knowledge that they can no longer harm us. It is the ego's fantasy of struggling through to some state of triumphant invulnerability; and just as for Freud this state is finally death, so for Schopenhauer it involves the self-abnegation of the aesthetic.

Indifference is not simply aestheticist detachment; as Buddhism recognises, a certain indifference is the necessary condition of all creative action. For Schopenhauer, it signifies the opposite of appetitive egoism—that condition in which, piercing the veil of *Maya* and acknowledging the fictional nature of the individual ego, I behave to others indifferently, which is to say make no significant distinction between them and myself. Indifference is thus loving sympathy and compassion, a state in which, the *principium individuationis* being unmasked for the ideological fraud it is, selves may be empathetically exchanged. To act morally is not to act from a positive standpoint, but to act from no standpoint whatsoever. All positive value springs from the death of the subject, just as in the aesthetic all true knowledge flows from it. Schopenhauer is thus led beyond the abstract apparatus of bourgeois legality, of individual rights and obligations because he refuses its fundamental assumption of the individual subject as the prime datum. Unlike the fetishists of difference of our own day, he believes that what human beings share in common is ultimately more significant than what differentiates them.

How this state of compassionate empathy can come about, however, Schopenhauer finds it understandably difficult to say. It can obviously not be a product of the will, since it involves the will's suspension; but nor can it be a work of the alienated intellect; and in Schopenhauer's drastically reduced universe there is really nothing else to figure as the appropriate agent. We just have to trust that such a state is possible through some inexplicable leap or conversion, which then leads us beyond theory altogether into the domain of the mystical. There *is* positive value in

bourgeois society, but how this can conceivably be so is a mystery. As with the early Wittgenstein, himself a devoted disciple of Schopenhauer, goodness cannot really be *in* the world at all, but must be transcendental.[3] There is, it would seem, no way of shifting from fact to value; and Schopenhauer is consequently manoeuvred into a blank duality between the charnel house of history on the one hand, and some vaguely Humean notion of intuitive sympathy and pure affection on the other. In such fellow feeling for others we recognise our "true and innermost self"; yet we have been told time and again that this innermost self is nothing but the will.

Schopenhauer is adamant that philosophy is quite incapable of altering conduct, and disowns all prescriptive intention. The cognitive and ethical can have no truck with each other, as eternally at odds as the representation and the will. Yet his whole philosophy in a sense disproves this claim, suggesting against its own conscious intentions how fact and value, description and prescription may indeed be mutually articulated. His indebtedness to oriental thought betrays just how ethnocentric the fact/value distinction is—how deeply the consequence of a technological history of reified facts from which it is indeed impossible to derive value, since these facts have been constituted from the outset as value's very negation. The Buddhist critique of the principle of individuation, by contrast, is descriptive and prescriptive at the same time. It is at once an account of what is taken to be the nature of reality and also, indissociably, a recommendation of a certain style of moral behaviour. It would be hard to see how a genuine belief in the relative unimportance of distinctions between individuals could not in some way affect one's practical activity; and even if the hold of egoism proved too tenacious for this to happen, the account nevertheless has strong ethical implications. Schopenhauer would seem to agree that recognising the fictional nature of identity will show up in one's actions, but refuses to acknowledge that a philosophical work like his own, which speaks of all this, may also have ethical effects. It may be that the nirvanic condition he advocates is both untheorisable and unteachable; but a reader of Schopenhauer's work, once convinced of the truth of this account of the world, might well begin to practise the asceticism he values, and so put

himself or herself in the position where aesthetic illumination might come about.

Schopenhauer must logically deny that his work can have ethical effects on his readers, since this would be to suggest, contrary to one of his major tenets, that the reason could influence the will. On a purely instrumentalist account of reason such as his, this would clearly be impossible: reason is no more than a clumsy calculative device for the realisation of desires which are themselves quite insulated from rational debate. The lineage from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to contemporary pragmatism in this sense merely reduplicates the bourgeois model of appetitive man of Hobbes, Hume and Bentham. Reason is the mere tool of interests, powers and desires, about which there can be fighting but no arguing. But if what Schopenhauer asserts on this score were true, then his own work would be strictly speaking impossible. If he really believed in his own doctrines, Schopenhauer would be unable to write. If his theory is able to render an account of the workings of the will, then reason must be to that extent able to bend back upon itself and scrutinise the impulses of which it is said to be the blindly obedient servant. Either he has somehow given the will the slip in theorising, or his theory is just another of its futile expressions and so quite bankrupt.

Schopenhauer's comparison of philosophy with music suggests that he believes the former possibility to be the true one. Of all the arts, music is the most direct presentation of the will; indeed it is the will made audible, a kind of delicate, impalpable diagram of the inner life of desire, a revelation in non-conceptual discourse of the pure essence of the world. It is thus the non-conceptual equivalent of true philosophy: any such philosophy is no more than a translation into discursive terms of what speaks in music, performing rationally what music achieves intuitively and unconsciously. A theory which knows the world as it is would thus for Schopenhauer be distinguished by a kind of aesthetic wholeness, would be an artefact all in itself, resisting discursive divisions and deferments so as to represent in all its synchronic unity the organic cohesion of all things in the will. Philosophy must thus be itself transcendental; yet the only transcendental reality it actually identifies is the will itself. It cannot be that philosophy looks at the world from the vantage-point of the will, for then it would be unable to pass any true comment upon it; so it

would seem that it is inspecting the will and all its works from some other transcendental viewpoint. But since there is no such viewpoint recognised in Schopenhauer's writing, philosophy must be standing in a non-place, speaking from some location not included within itself. There is indeed such a non-place identified by the theory itself—the aesthetic—but this is not conceptual; and it is hard to see how it can be translated into concepts without falling instant prey to the delusions of the intellect. In short, truth would appear to be possible, but we are quite at a loss to account for how this can be so.

Bourgeois thought sets up a binary opposition between knowledge as the mere conditioned reflex of desire, and knowledge as some form of sublime disinterestedness. As the latter option becomes gradually more and more discredited with the development of bourgeois society, where no thought would seem innocent of self-interest, the former possibility must be increasingly espoused; but the consequence of this is ideological impotence, as cognition is uncoupled from interest and desire and loses its hold upon social practice. Schopenhauer ends up with a kind of transcendentalism without a subject: the place of absolute knowledge is preserved, but there can be no subject to fill it, since to be a subject is to desire, and to desire is to be deluded. It is this contradiction which the aesthetic is required to resolve. An idealist philosophy which once imagined that it could achieve salvation through the subject is now forced to contemplate the frightful prospect that no salvation is possible without the wholesale abnegation of the subject itself, the most privileged category of its entire system. One might claim, of course, that such abnegation is no more than a routine fact of the bourgeois social order: the melting and decentring of the subject in Schopenhauer's empathetic ethics serialises all individuals to an equal exchangeability in just the same manner as the marketplace. In this most rampantly individualist of cultures, the individual is indeed a sort of fiction, given the cold indifference to it of the capitalist economy. All of this routine levelling of individual differences, however, must now be sublated to spiritual communion, just as in the Kantian aesthetic, and thereby turned against the practical individualism which is its material foundation. To this degree, the blank disregard for specific individual lives of the capitalist mode of production is dignified to a spiritual

discipline, elevated to a tender mutuality of souls. Yet at the same time the radicalism of this desperate strategy is at least equally apparent. Once the actual bourgeois subject, rather than its high-minded idealist representation, is placed *à la* Schopenhauer at the nub of theory, there seems no way of avoiding the conclusion that it must be liquidated. There can be no question of judicious reform: nothing short of that revolution of the subject which is its mystical obliteration will serve to liberate it from itself. The philosophy of subjectivity self-destructs, leaving in its wake a numinous aura of absolute value which is, precisely, nothing.

Enthusiastic Kantian though he is, the aesthetic for Schopenhauer is in one sense the exact opposite of what it means for his mentor. For Kant, the disinterested gaze which reads the world purely as form is a way of eliciting the object's mysterious purposiveness, lifting it out of the web of practical functions in which it is enmeshed so as to endow it with something of the self-determining autonomy of a subject. It is by virtue of this crypto-subjectivity that the aesthetic object of Kant "hails" individuals, speaks meaningfully to them, assures them that Nature is not after all entirely alien to their own most precious preoccupations. For Schopenhauer, things are quite otherwise: what we glimpse in the aesthetic realm is not yet another image of our own tedious, intolerable subjectivity, but a reality blessedly indifferent to our desire. If for Kant the aesthetic works within the register of the imaginary, it involves for Schopenhauer a gratifying shift to the symbolic, where we can come finally to accept that the world turns its back upon us, has no need of us, and is all the better for that. It is as though, having himself relentlessly anthropomorphised the whole of reality, discerning analogies of human appetite in the falling of a stone or the blowing of a rose, Schopenhauer's nausea with that whole monstrously humanised world compels him to imagine how delightful it would be to look at things as though we were not there. Yet this, of course, is an impossible paradox. The Schopenhauerian aesthetic is the death-wish in action, but it cannot in fact negate the subject as long as that subject still delights, even if what it delights in is the process of its own dissolution. This death is secretly a kind of life, *Eros* disguised as *Thanatos*; the abnegation of the ego is also, unavoidably, the ego's triumphalistic fantasy of securing an eternal, uninjured existence for itself. Perhaps, then, the

aesthetic is no more than the last reckless card the will-to-live has to play, just as for Schopenhauer suicide is merely one of the sick jokes through which the will comes to affirm itself through the individual's self-annihilation.

The dream of transcending one's own petty subjecthood is a common enough idealist fantasy; but it generally turns out to involve a flight into some greater, deeper form of subjectivity, with a corresponding gain of omnipotent mastery. One does not give the slip to the subject by collectivising or universalising it. Schopenhauer grimly recognises that since the subject *is* its particular perspective, all that can be left behind when this has been surmounted is a kind of nothing: the nirvana of aesthetic contemplation. Even this nothing turns out in fact to be a kind of something, a negative mode of knowledge; but at least one has now rid oneself of the delusion of any positive form of transcendence. All we can do is to take pity on the objects of the world, infected as they are by our own diseased yearnings, and save them from ourselves by some miraculous vanishing trick. What is from one viewpoint an irresponsible escapism is thus in another sense the last word in moral heroism. As idle, amoral contemplation, the aesthetic ironically offers us the paradigm of a whole new style of living: it teaches us to shed our disruptive desires and live humbly, ungreedily, with the simplicity of the saint. If it is in one light an abandonment of history, it is therefore also the first faint glimmerings of utopia, bearing with it the promise of a perfect, virulently misanthropic happiness. It is not, however, a happiness which could ever be actively realised: like the aesthetic condition of a Schiller, it betrays and undoes itself as soon as it enters upon material existence. The aesthetic in Schopenhauer is coupled with the notion of loving compassion, and so with the vision of a transformed human order; yet the moment such compassion issues in action it hands itself over to the voracious will. As William Blake knew, pity and sympathy are simply signs that the catastrophe has already happened, and would not be necessary if this was not the case.

The body is the place where for Schopenhauer the impossible dilemma of existence takes on flesh. For it is in the body that we are most starkly confronted with the clash between the two utterly incompatible worlds in which we live simultaneously. The body which we know and live from the inside is will, whereas the body as a mere object

among others is representation. The human subject, that is, lives a unique double relation to its own body as at once noumenal and phenomenal; it is the shadowy frontier where will and representation, inside and outside, come mysteriously, unthinkably together, so that human beings are a kind of walking philosophical conundrum. There is an unspannable gulf between our immediate presence to ourselves, and our indirect representational knowledge of everything else. This, of course, is the most banal of Romantic dichotomies; but Schopenhauer lends it an original twist. If he privileges the inward in Romantic style, he nevertheless refuses to valorise it. This quick, unmediated knowledge of ourselves, far from signifying some ideal truth, is in fact nothing other than our direct apprehension of the appetitive will. There is indeed a mode of cognition which bypasses the uncertain labours of the concept, but it has no value whatsoever. My intuitive presence to myself is the site of a problem, not a logocentric solution. And if the spontaneous and immediate is no longer to be associated with the creative, then one of the major aestheticising strategies of bourgeois idealism is cancelled at a stroke. It is not, for Schopenhauer, a question of elevating a valued form of cognition over a valueless one, but of suspending the whole question of value itself, inextricably bound up as it is with the terrorism of desire. The only true value would be to abolish value altogether. This, indeed, is what the aesthetic state yields: the insight that things just are eternally what they are, the mind-bending drama of an object's sheer identity with itself. This is itself of course a kind of intuition; but it is intuition to the second power, a will-less overcoming of the spontaneous movement of the will, which allows us to gaze unmoved for a moment into the very heart of darkness as the objects around us grow more luminously replete, more satisfyingly pointless, and we ourselves dwindle gradually away to nothing.

Despite its dispassionateness, the aesthetic would seem to be best figured by either weeping or laughing. If it is an infinite fellow feeling for others, it is also the incredulous cackle of one who has extricated herself from the whole sordid human melodrama and views it from an Olympian height. These antithetical responses are deeply interrelated, in the tragi-comedy of Schopenhauer's vision: I suffer with you because I know that your inner stuff, the torturing will,

is also my own; but because everything is thus no more than will, I scorn this futility in a burst of blasphemous laughter. The aesthetic is the noblest form of cognitive and ethical insight; but what it tells us is that knowledge is useless and emancipation inconceivable. As an aporetic state in which one is simultaneously alive and dead, moved and unmoved, fulfiled and erased, it is a condition which has gone beyond all conditions, a "solution" which testifies in its very contradictoriness to the impossibility of a resolution. Schopenhauer's work is thus the ruin of all those high hopes which bourgeois idealism has placed in the category of the aesthetic, even if it remains faithful to that idealism's trust in the aesthetic as some ultimate redemption. A discourse which began as an idiom of the body has now ended up as an escape from corporeal existence; a disinterestedness which seemed to adumbrate the possibility of an alternative social order has now become an alternative to history itself. A discipline bound up with the freedom and creativity of the human subject has culminated in the cynical eradication of that very category. The embarrassing rift in the work of Kant between the actual and the ideal, civil society and aesthetic *Gemeinschaft*, has now been pressed to its logical extreme, and any practical connection between the two spheres is summarily dismissed. Schopenhauer tells in his own dourly universalising way the plain, unvarnished tale of bourgeois civil society, in fine disregard for the ideological glosses; and he is courageous and clear-eyed enough to pursue its grim implications to their scandalous, unsupportable conclusions.

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NOTES

1 See also, for one of numerous anticipations of Freud, Schopenhauer's comment that "the intellect remains so much excluded from the real resolutions and secret decisions of its own will that sometimes it can only get to know them, like those of a stranger, by spying out and taking unawares; and it must surprise the will in the act of expressing itself, in order merely to discover its real intentions" (2, 209).

2 See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Methuen, 1970).

3 For the influence of Schopenhauer on Wittgenstein, see Patrick Gardiner, *Schopenhauer* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 275-82, and Brian Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 286-315. A somewhat threadbare account of Schopenhauer's aesthetics is to be found in I. Knox, *The Aesthetic Theories of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer* (New York: Humanities, 1958).

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The Politics of Representation

Linda Hutcheon

Roland Barthes once claimed that it is impossible to represent the political, for it resists all mimetic copying. Rather, he wrote, "where politics begins is where imitation ceases" (*Roland Barthes* 154). This is precisely where the self-reflexive, parodic art of the postmodern comes in, underlining in its ironic way the realization that all cultural forms of representation—literary, visual, aural—in high art or in the mass media are ideologically grounded, that they cannot avoid involvement with social and political relations and apparatuses (Burgin, *Between* 55). It is not that postmodernist art necessarily represents politics; instead, in Canada as elsewhere, it unavoidably foregrounds what Victor Burgin calls the"politics of representation" (*Between* 85). Think of the novels of Rudy Wiebe, Timothy Findley, Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje, or the art of Joyce Wieland, Bruce Barber, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge—to name but a few.

Umberto Eco considers postmodern "the orientation of anyone who has learned the lesson of Foucault, i.e., that power is not something unitary that exists outside us" (in Rosso 4). He might well have added to this (as others have) the lessons learned from Derrida about textuality and deferral, or from Vattimo and Lyotard about intellectual mastery and its limits. In other words, it is difficult to separate the politicizing impulse of postmodern art from the deconstructing impulse of what we have labelled "poststructuralist" theory. A symptom of this inseparability can be seen in the way in which both artists and critic/theorists write about their "discourses." By the very choice of this term they signal their awareness of the inescapably political contexts in which they work. When "discourse" is defined as the "system of relations between parties engaged in communicative activity" (Sekula, "Invention" 84), it points to politically un-innocent things like the expectation of shared meaning, and it does so within a dynamic social context that acknowledges the inevitability of the existence of power relations in any social activity—including art. As one theorist of postmodernism has put it, "Postmodern aesthetic experimentation should be viewed as

having an irreducible political dimension. It is inextricably bound up with a critique of domination" (Wellbery 235).

Yet it must also be admitted from the start that this is a very strange kind of critique, one bound up with its own *complicity* with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyze and even undermine: capitalism, liberal humanism, patriarchy, or any other cultural dominants of our time and place. The ambiguities of such a position are translated into both the content and form of postmodern art, which thus at once purveys and challenges ideology—but always self-consciously. Of all the contemporary art forms engaged in these postmodernist ambiguities, two do so most openly through their problematizing of the issue of representation, that is, through their de-naturalizing of the "natural" or what we take as given in the images and stories by which we recognize—and create—ourselves in society. I mean photography and fiction: two forms whose histories are firmly rooted in realist representation but which, since their reinterpretation in modernist formalist terms, are now in a position to confront both their documentary and formalist impulses. This is the confrontation I see as postmodernist: where documentary historicity meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody. At this conjuncture, the study of representation becomes—not the study of mimetic mirroring or subjective projecting—but an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of the self in the present and in the past.

Of course the postmodern return to figuration in painting and to narrative in avant-garde film have together had an important impact on the question of representation in both photography and fiction. Feminist theory and practice have also problematized the same issue, pointing to the construction of gender as both the effect and the "excess" of representation (de Lauretis, *Technologies* 3). Less obvious, perhaps, but no less significant for postmodernism have been the recent debates about the nature and politics of historiographic representation (see Hayden White; Dominick LaCapra). Of course many other factors must be taken into account but, generally speaking, the postmodern appears to coincide with a general cultural awareness of the existence and power of systems of representation that do not *reflect*

society as much as grant meaning and value within a particular society.

If we believe current social-scientific theory, there is a paradox involved in this awareness, however. On the one hand, there is a sense that in the West we can never get out from under the weight of a long tradition of visual and narrative representations. On the other hand, we also seem to be losing faith in the inexhaustibility and power of these existing representations. And parody is the postmodern form this paradox often takes. By both using and abusing the general conventions and specific forms of representation, postmodern art manages to de-naturalize the "natural" in them, giving what Rosalind Krauss has called the strange sense of "loosening the glue by which labels used to adhere to the products of convention" (121). I am not referring here to the kind of ahistorical kitsch seen in some Toronto restaurants or at the West Edmonton Mall; rather the postmodern parody in the art of General Idea or in the novels of Robert Kroetsch or George Bowering is one of the important means by which "a culture is able to express both its social concerns and its aesthetic dilemmas" (MacAdam and Schiminovich 260)—and the two are not unrelated.

Catherine Stimpson has noted:

> Like every great word, "representation/s" is a stew. A scrambled menu, it serves up several meanings at once. For a representation can be an image—visual, verbal, or aural....A representation can also be a narrative, a sequence of images and ideas....Or, a representation can be the product of ideology, that vast scheme for showing forth the world and justifying its dealings (223).

Postmodern representation is self-consciously all of these and more—image, narrative, product (and producer) of ideology. It is a truism of sociology and cultural studies today to say that life in the postmodern world of theWest is utterly mediated by representations and that our age of satellites and computers has gone well beyond Benjamin's "Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and its particular epistemological and aesthetic consequences and moved into a state of crisis in representation (Benhabib). Nevertheless, in literary- and art-critical circles there is still a tendency to see

postmodern theory and practice as simply replacing representation with textuality or as denying our "enmeshment in representation" (Arac 295), even though much postmodern thought has explicitly refuted these views: for instance, Derrida's argument about the inescapability of the logic of representation and Foucault's various problematizations, though never repudiations, of our traditional modes of representation in our discourses of knowledge.

In one sense the very word "representation" unavoidably suggests some given which the act of representing in some way duplicates. This is normally considered the realm of mimesis. Yet by simply making representation into an issue once again, postmodernism challenges our mimetic assumptions about representation (in any of its "scrambled menu" of meanings), especially assumptions about its transparency and common-sense naturalness. In the background is Louis Althusser's much cited notion of ideology as a system of representation and as an unavoidable part of every social totality (231-2). In the foreground is Jean Baudrillard's theory of the "simulacrum." In *Simulations* Baudrillard argues that today the mass media have neutralized reality in stages: first *reflecting* it; then *masking* and perverting it; next, *masking its absence*; and finally producing in its stead the *simulacrum* of the real, the destruction of meaning and of all relation to reality. Baudrillard's model has come under attack for the metaphysical idealism of its view of the "real" (Harland 177), for its nostalgia for a pre-mass-media authenticity (Collins 13; Allen 82), and for its apocalyptic nihilism (Scherpe). But there is an even more basic objection to his assumption that it is (or was) ever possible to have unmediated access to reality: have we ever known the "real" except through representations? We certainly see, hear, feel, smell and touch it, but do we *know* it—in the sense that we give meaning to it? In Lisa Tickner's succinct terms, the real is "*enabled to mean* through systems of signs organized into discourses on the world" (19). This is where the politics of representation enters for, according to Althusser, ideology is a production of representations (231-2). Our common-sense presuppositions about the "real" depend upon how that "real" is described, how it is put into discourse and

interpreted. There is nothing natural about the "real"—even before the existence of the mass media.

This said, it is also the case that—whatever the naivety of its views of the innocence and stability of representation once possible— Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum has been immensely influential in the debates on postmodernism. Witness the unacknowledged but nonetheless evident debt to it in Fredric Jameson's own version of pre-mass-media nostalgia: "In the form of the logic of the image or the spectacle or the simulacrum, everything has become 'cultural' in some sense. A whole new house of mirrors of visual replication and of textual reproduction has replaced the older stable reality of reference and of the non-cultural 'real'" ("Hans Haacke" 42). What postmodern theory and practice together suggest is that everything always was "cultural" at least in the sense that everything is always mediated by representations. They suggest too that notions of truth, reference, and the non-cultural "real" have not "ceased to exist" (Baudrillard 6) but that they are no longer unproblematic issues, assumed to be self-evident and self-justifying. The postmodern, as I have been defining it here, is not a degeneration into "hyperreality" but a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it. It is not that representation now dominates or effaces the referent, but that it now self-consciously acknowledges its existence as representation—that is, as interpreting (indeed, as creating) its referent, not as offering direct and immediate access to it.

This is not to say that what Jameson calls the "older logic of the referent (or realism)" ("Hans Haacke" 43) is not historically important to postmodernist representation, especially in Canadian fiction. In fact, many postmodern strategies are premised on a challenge to the realist notion of representation that presumes the transparency of the medium and thus the direct and "natural" link between sign and referent or between word and world. Of course, modernist art (in all its forms) challenged this notion as well, but it did so deliberately to the detriment of the referent, that is, by emphasizing the opacity of the medium and the self-sufficiency of the signifying system. What postmodernism does is to de-naturalize both realism's transparency and modernism's reflexive response, while retaining (in its typically complicitously critical way) the historically attested

power of both. This is the ambivalent politics of postmodern representation.

With the problematizing and de-naturalizing of both realist reference and modernist autonomy, postmodern representation opens up other possible relations between art and the world. Gone is what Benjamin called the "aura" of art as original, authentic, unique, and with it go all the taboos against textual strategies that rely on the appropriation and parody of already existing representations. Think of what happens when a contemporary Canadian postmodern artist parodically inserts his own face within the representation of a famous modernist, as does Chris Cran in *Self-Portrait as Max Beckmann*. What happens is that the history of representation itself becomes a valid subject of art—and not just its history as high art. The borders between high art and mass or popular culture and those between the discourses of art and the discourses of the world (especially history) are regularly crossed in postmodern theory and practice. But it must be admitted that this crossing is rarely undertaken without considerable border tensions.

The parodic appropriation of various forms of mass-media representation by postmodern artists like Bruce Barber has come under attack by the (still largely modernist) art establishment. The equivalent on the literary scene has been the hostile response of some critics and reviewers to the mixing of historical and fictive representation in "historiographic metafiction." It is not that the fact of the mixing is new: the historical novel, not to mention the epic, should have habituated readers to that. The problem seems instead to reside in its manner, that is, in the self-consciousness of the fictionality, the lack of the familiar "natural" pretense of historical veracity, and the calling into question of the factual grounding of history-writing. The self-reflexivity of postmodern fiction does indeed foreground many of the usually unacknowledged and thus naturalized implications of narrative representation.

In his book *The Politics of Reflexivity*, Robert Siegle lists some of these: "the codes by which we organize reality, the means by which we organize words about it into narrative, the implications of the linguistic medium we use to do so, the means by which readers are drawn into narrative, and the nature of our relation to 'actual' states of reality" (3).

Siegle further argues that textual reflexivity itself is "highly charged ideologically precisely because it de-naturalizes far more than merely literary codes and pertains to more than the aesthetic 'heterocosm' to which some theorists might wish to restrict it" (11). In other words, a self-reflexive text suggests that perhaps narrative does not derive its authority from any reality it represents, but from "the cultural conventions that define both narrative and the construct we call 'reality'" (225). Historiographic metafiction represents not just a world of fiction, however self-consciously presented as a constructed one, but also a world of public experience. The difference between this and the realist logic of reference is that here the public world is rendered specifically *as discourse*. How do we know the historical past today? Through its discourses, that is, its texts, its discursive traces of brute events: archival materials, documents, narratives of witnesses...and historians. On one level, then, postmodern fiction merely makes overt the process involved in all narrative representation—of the real or the fictive, and of their interrelations.

Because postmodern representational strategies obviously refuse to stay neatly within accepted generic conventions and traditions and deploy hybrid forms and seemingly mutually contradictory tactics, they always frustrate critical attempts (including this one) to systematize them, to order them with an eye to control and mastery—that is, to totalize them. Roland Barthes once asked: "Is it not the characteristic of reality to be *unmasterable*? And is it not the characteristic of system to *master* it? What then, confronting reality, can one do who rejects mastery?" (*Roland Barthes* 172). Postmodern representation itself contests mastery and totalization, often by unmasking both their powers and their limitations. We watch the process of what Foucault once called the interrogating of limits that is now replacing the search for totality. On the level of representation, this postmodern questioning overlaps with similarly pointed challenges by those working, for example, in postcolonial or feminist or Marxist contexts. How is the "other" represented in, say, imperialist or patriarchal or capitalist discourses? However represented, it differs from its portrayal in works like Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*. Postmodern thought—like Ondaatje's—refuses "to turn the Other into the Same" (During 33).

It is this kind of refusal that has contributed to the now standard view of the postmodern as being too dispersed, too appreciative of difference or as being without an ordered and coherent vision of "truth": "To the postmodernist mind, everything is empty at the center. Our vision is not integrated—it lacks form and definition" (Gablik 17). Actually that centre is not so much empty as called into question, interrogated as to its power and its politics. And if the notion of centre—be it seen in terms of "Man" or "Truth" or whatever—is challenged in postmodernism, what happens to the idea of the "centered" subjectivity, the subject of representation? In Stimpson's terms, "The theory that representational machineries were reality's synonyms, not a window (often cracked) onto reality, eroded the immediate security of another lovely gift of Western humanism: the belief in a conscious self that generates texts, meanings, and a substantial identity" (236). That sense of the coherent, continuous, autonomous and free subject, as Foucault suggested in *The Order of Things*, is a historically conditioned and historically determined construct with its obvious analogue in the representation of the individual in fiction. In historiographic metafiction written from the perspective of a different historical moment, one which queries that "lovely gift of Western humanism," character gets represented rather differently: think of the flagrant self-contradictory violations of biographical fact in *Burning Water*'s portrayal of George Vancouver or the multiple, contradictory interpretations of Big Bear in *The Temptations of Big Bear* and of Louis Riel in *The Scorched-Wood People*.

Representational self-consciousness in texts like these points to a very postmodern awareness of both the nature and historicity of our discursive representations of the self. And it is not only *poststructural* theory that has helped engender this complex awareness. In fact, feminist theory and practice have problematized even poststructuralism's (unconsciously, perhaps, phallocentric) tendency to see the subject in apocalyptic terms of loss or dispersal, for they refuse to foreclose the question of identity. This refusal is undertaken in the name of the (different) histories of women: "Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production, that men have had, women have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by too

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much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc." (Nancy Miller 106). It is the feminist need to inscribe first—and only then subvert—that I think has influenced most the postmodern complicitously critical stand of underlining and undermining received notions of the subject.

Whether it be in the art of Joyce Wieland or in the fiction of Timothy Findley, subjectivity is represented as something in process, never as fixed and never as autonomous or outside history. It is always a gendered subjectivity, rooted also in class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. And it is usually textual self-reflexivity that paradoxically calls these worldly particularities to our attention by foregrounding the politic behind the dominant representations of the self—and the other—in visual images or in narratives. For instance, R. Murray Schafer's *Patria 1: The Characteristics Man* is a theatrical/operatic/rock/performance work that thematizes and actualizes the problematic nature of postmodern subjectivity. A silent anonymous immigrant ("D.P."), introduced to the audience as "victim" (a large sign with this word and an arrow follows him about the stage), seeks to define a self in a new and hostile Canadian world that denies him his (non-English) speech, leaving him with only the symbolic voice of the ethnically-coded accordian. A strategically placed wall of mirrors faces the audience at one point, preventing any self-distancing and any denial of complicity on our part.

While most art forms today can show this same kind of awareness of the politics of representation, perhaps photography does so most blatantly. As a visual medium it has a long history of being both politically useful and politically suspect: think of Brecht, Benjamin, or of Heartfield's anti-Nazi photomontages. A recent show of three Vancouver photographers (Arni Runar Haraldsson, Harold Ursuliak and Michael Lawlor), called *A Linear Narration: Post Phallocentrism*, offers examples of sophisticated satirical socio-political analyses of dominant cultural representations (see Earl Miller). Lawlor's media-derived photomontages are most reminiscent of Heartfield's in technique, if not virulence: *Two Queens* appropriates two already existing and familiar images, placing together roughly torn out pictures of Warhol's Marilyn Monroe and a newspaper photo of Queen Elizabeth II. This conjunction suggests a particularly Canadian irony directed against our

double colonialization: historical (British royalty) and present-day (American media).

Photography today is one of the major forms of discourse "through which we are shown and show ourselves" (Corrigan 13). Frequently, what I would call postmodern photography foregrounds the notion of ideology as representation (Althusser 231) by appropriating recognizable images from that particular omnipresent visual discourse, almost as an act of retaliation for its (unacknowledged) politics (Burgin, *Between* 54), its (unacknowledged) constructing of our images of self and world. Photography, precisely because of its mass-media ubiquity, allows what are considered high-art representations—like those of Nigel Scott or even Jeff Wall—to speak to and against those of the more visible vernacular, to "catch [the] seduction" (Foster 68) of those conventional images.

What is common to all postmodern challenges to convention is their exploitation of the power of that convention and their reliance on the viewers' knowledge of its particulars. In most cases, this reliance does not necessarily lead to elitist exclusion, because the convention being evoked has usually become part of the common representational vocabulary of newspapers, magazines, and advertising—even if its history is more extensive. For example, a photograph by Nigel Scott offers a model in a bathing suit, striking a pose that suggests she is ready to dive, though a bathrobe hangs from her arms which stretch out behind her. She stands on a pedestal against a (self-reflexively) ill-hung canvas or paper backdrop. In this one image Scott openly contests a number of prevailing and obvious (male) representations of women: as inactive pin-up bathing beauty (this one is preparing to dive, wears a utilitarian bathing cap, and refuses the gaze of the viewer, looking instead off to the left); as idealized passive female set figuratively on a pedestal; as capitalist symbol (the Rolls Royce Winged Victory appears as bathrobe-dropping swimmer). Photographs like this address their viewers' knowledge of the common visual vernacular of twentieth-century Canadian life.

In the work of Bruce Barber, existing representations—such as those of the Vietnam war—are appropriated and are effective precisely because they are loaded with pre-existing

meaning. They are placed in new and ironic contexts to bring about that typically postmodern photographic complicitous critique: while exploiting the power of familiar images, this art also de-naturalizes them, makes "visible the invisible mechanisms whereby these images secure their putative transparency" (Owens 21), and brings to the fore their politics, that is, the interests in which they operate and the power they wield—or fail to wield through cultural amnesia (Folland 60). Both any (realist) documentary value and any formal (modernist) pleasure such an appropriating practice might invoke are inscribed, even as they are undercut. So too is any notion of individuality or authenticity—for the work or the artist. But this has always been somewhat problematic for photography as a mechanically reproductive medium (Solomon-Godeau, "Photography" 80). This technological aspect has other implications as well. Commentators as diverse as Annette Kuhn (26-7), Roland Barthes (*Camera* 87-8) and Susan Sontag (179) have remarked on photography's ambivalences: it is in no way innocent of cultural formation (or of forming culture), yet it is in a very physical sense technically tied to the real, or at least to the visual and the actual. And this paradox is what the postmodernist use of this medium exposes: even as it exploits the ideology of "the visible as evidence" (Kuhn 27), it unmasks what might be *the* major photographic code—the one that pretends to look uncoded and "natural."

The postmodern photographer is more the manipulator of signs than the producer of an art object; the viewer is the active decoder of a message, not the passive consumer or even the rapt contemplator of artistic beauty. The difference is one of the politics of representation. However, postmodern photographs are often also overtly about the representation of politics. Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge's *No Immediate Threat* is a photo-textual narrative series telling the history of the exposure to radiation hazards of Ontario nuclear power plant workers. No attempt is made here to achieve the traditional documentary illusion of transparency or of objectivity or even neutrality of representation. Nor is this an example of the passive "victim photography" of the 1930s American documentary work commissioned by the Farm Securities Administration. The point of view here is that of the workers and the aim is not

really to record working conditions but to agitate for their change. Instead of images of real workers on the job, Condé and Beveridge offer photographs of manifestly "staged" tableaux with artificial-looking props and actors stiffly posed like mannekins, in order to re-enact scenes recounted by the workers themselves (in interviews). Texts drawn from these accounts accompany the pictured scene, in stark and ironic contrast to other incorporated texts and images presenting official government and industry statements about nuclear safety. This series has been shown not only in galleries (it has been purchased by the Art Gallery of Ontario) but in union halls, community centres and libraries—public sites that signal its social and political intent. The series' intense self-consciousness about its own *constructing* of images of historical actuality through flagrant artifice is what actually enables—not inhibits—such a politicization of representation. There is no transparency to either the images or the stories; there is only the clash of different representations and their politics.

Photography like this may legitimize and normalize existing power relations, but it can clearly also be used against itself to de-naturalize that authority and power and to reveal how its representational strategies construct an "imaginary economy" (Sekula, "Reading" 115) that might warrant deconstructing. Of course it is not only photography that both does and undoes this "economy." For instance, Stan Douglas uses multi-media installations to study representation in terms of the relations of culture to technology, especially film technology. He disassembles film into its constituent parts (sounds; stills projected as slides) in order to make opaque the supposed ability of film to be a transparent recording/representing of reality. The artists known as General Idea (A. A. Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal) have taken a different tack but one that also looks to the politics of representation: their *1984 Miss General Idea Pageant* made the high-art world into a beauty pageant, literalizing art's relation to displaced desire and to commodity acquisition. In the process, they also managed to problematize our culture's notions of the erotic and of sexual "possession" in relation to capitalist values.

In the field of fiction, the de-naturalizing of representation takes other, yet related, forms. Brian McHale has noted that both modernist and postmodernist texts show

an affinity for cinematic models, and certainly novels like Leonard Cohen's *The Favourite Game* or *Beautiful Losers* might support such a claim. But historiographic metafiction, obsessed as it is with the question of how we can come to know the past in the present, also shows an attraction to photographic models, either as physically present images (in Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* or *Running in the Family*) or as the narrativized trappings of realism from the historical archive (in Findley's *The Wars).* In raising (and making problematic) the issue of photographic representation, postmodern fiction points metaphorically to that of narrative representation—its powers and its limitations. Here too there is no transparency, only opacity: "Truth disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end nothing" (Ondaatje, *Running* 53).

There have recently been a number of theoretical examinations of the nature of narrative as a major human system of understanding—in fiction, but also in history, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and so on. Peter Brooks has claimed that with the advent of romanticism, narrative became a dominant mode of representation (xii), though one might wonder what the status of the classical epic or the Bible could be. He is likely right to say, however, that in the twentieth century there has been an increasing suspicion of narrative plot and its artifice, yet no diminishing of our reliance on plotting, however ironized or parodied (7). We may no longer have recourse to the grand narratives that once made sense of life for us, but we still have recourse to narrative representations of some kind in most of our verbal discourses. And one of the reasons may be political.

Lennard Davis describes the politics of novelistic representation in this way: "Novels do not depict life, they depict life as it is represented by ideology" (24). Ideology—how a culture represents itself to itself— naturalizes narrative representation, making it appear as "natural" or commonsensical (25); it presents what is really *constructed* meaning as something *inherent in* that which is being represented. But this unveiling of the machinations of ideology is precisely what novels like Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* or Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* or Chris Scott's *Antichthon* are about. And in none of these examples is there ever what Jameson

narration of the social relations of individuals, the ordering of meanings for the individual in society" (85). Perhaps this is why storytelling has returned today—but as a problem, not as a given.

Nevertheless, it is still a truism of criticism hostile to postmodernism that this return has been at the expense of a sense of history. But maybe it simply depends on your definition of history. We may indeed get few postmodern narrative representations of the heroic victors who have traditionally defined who and what made it into History. Often we get instead both the story and the storytelling of the non-combatants or even the losers: the Canadian Native Peoples of *The Temptations of Big Bear*; the female victims of repressive patriarchal puritanism in *The Handmaid's Tale*; the relocated Japanese Canadians during and after the Second World War in *Obasan*. Not only Marxists have accused postmodernism of ahistoricity, of course. However, such accusations are not always supported by analysis. In fact, their most typical rhetorical form is the axiomatic declaration: postmodernism makes short work of history. It may make short work of unexamined assumptions about history and historical knowledge, but this is not an ahistorical aim. Postmodern practice is to "consider history as an *event* and not as a value to be offered, unchanged, to the present" (Tafuri 63).

Postmodern fiction also aims to challenge the seamless quality of the history/fiction (or world/art) join implied by realist narrative. In so doing, it does not disconnect itself from history or the world; it foregrounds and thus contests the conventionality and unacknowledged ideology of that assumption of seamlessness. It asks its readers to question the processes by which we represent our selves and our world to ourselves and to become aware of the means by which we *make* sense and *construct* order out of experience in our particular culture. We cannot avoid representation. We *can* try to avoid fixing our notions of it and assuming it to be transhistorical and transcultural. We can also study how representation legitimizes or privileges certain kinds of knowledge—including certain kinds of historical knowledge. In a very real sense, narrative fiction is not the representation of any material reality but the representation of language. Our access through narrative to the world of experience—past or present—is always mediated by the

powers and limits of our verbal representations of it. This is as true of historical narrative as it is of fictional.

Another important distinction must therefore be made: that between the brute *events* of the past and the historical *facts* we construct out of them. Facts are representations of events to which we have given meaning. Different historical perspectives, therefore, will derive different significant and signifying facts from the same events. Take Paul Veyne's (35) famous example of Louis XIV's cold: it was not a political event (even if the cold was a royal one) and therefore it would be of no interest to a history of politics; but it could be of considerable import for a history of health and sanitation in France. In postmodern fiction like *The Wars* (with its archival investigations) or *The Handmaid's Tale* (with its academic historical epilogue) there is a thematizing of this process of turning events into facts by means of interpreting documents—the material traces of events—and thereby creating historical representations. Such fiction underlines the realization that "the past is not an 'it' in the sense of an objectified entity that may either be neutrally represented in and for itself or projectively reprocessed in terms of our own narrowly 'presentist' interests" (LaCapra, *History, Politics, and the Novel* 10). While these are the words of a historian writing about historical representation, they also describe well the postmodern lessons about the fictionalized versions of it.

The issue of representation in both fiction and history has usually been dealt with in terms of epistemology. In Louis O. Mink's terms, how is it "possible that the past should be knowable" (43)? The past is not something to be escaped, avoided, or controlled—as various forms of modernist art seem to suggest through their implicit view of "*the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history*" (Zavarzadeh 30; emphasis his). The past for the postmodern is something with which we must come to terms, even if our resources for doing so are limited. If we only have access to the past today through its traces—documents, the testimony of witnesses, and other archival materials—then in a way we only have other representations of the past from which to construct our own narrative representations or explanations. Postmodernism nevertheless tries to understand present culture as the product of previous codings and representations. The

representation of history becomes the history of representation too. Postmodern art acknowledges and accepts the challenge of tradition, however ironically: the history of representation cannot be escaped, but it can be both exploited and commented upon critically, often by means of parody.

The postmodern situation, in Barbara Foley's terms, is that "[a] truth is being told, with 'facts' to back it up, but a teller constructs that truth and chooses those facts" (67). Indeed, that teller—of story or of history—also *constructs* those very facts by giving a particular meaning to events. Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: the tellers speak for them, making "the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is—in its *re*presentation—a purely discursive one" (White, "Fictions" 28). Brian McHale calls works like *Antichthon* or *The Temptations of Big Bear* "revisionist historical novels" (90) because they revise and reinterpret the official historical record and transform the conventions of historical fiction. I see this challenge more in terms of a problematizing and de-naturalizing of the conventions of representing the past in narrative—historical or fictional—that is done in such a way that the politics of the act of representing is made manifest.

The same happens in the visual arts in the works of Joanne Tod, Jeff Wall, and Bruce Barber. They all move outside the "hermeneutic enclave of aesthetic self-referencing" (Solomon-Godeau, "Winning" 98) and into the cultural and social world, a world in which we are bombarded with stories and images daily. They manage to point at one and the same time to the contingency of art and the primacy of social codes. They make the invisible become visible, the "natural" become de-naturalized—be it either modernist/formalist or realist/documentary. In Canadian fiction and visual art today, the documentary impulse of realism meets head-on the problematizing of reference begun by self-reflexive modernism. And the result is a new focus on the way in which art "intersects and interacts with the social system in all of its varied aspects" (Paoletti 54), present and past. All representation has a politics; it also has a history. The conjunction of these two concerns in what has been labelled the New Art History (Rees and Borzello) has meant that issues such as gender, class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation are now part of

the discourse of the visual arts, as they are of the literary ones. Social history cannot be separated from the history of art. There is no value-neutral, much less value-free, place from which to represent—in any art form. And there never was.

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Sleuthing: Feminists Re/writing the Detective Novel

Barbara Godard

The border/play characteristic of contemporary women's parodic re/writing of narratives reveals women's engagement with narrative as a critical strategy, designed to expose the positioning of woman as silent other on whose mutilated body the narrative is constructed in dominant discourse and to posit alternate positionings for women as subjects producing themselves in/by language. What feminist theory has shown is that strategies of writing and reading are forms of cultural resistance. They work to turn dominant discourses inside out and challenge theory in its own terms, the terms of a semiotic space constructed in language, by unfixing its power, based, as Teresa de Lauretis states, "on social validation and well-established modes of enunciation and address."(4)

Within the fabric of social relations, narratives modes of legitimation whole own certification is authorized in the act of transmission. Feminist critics have examined narrative for its ideological significance and the way it interacts with or influences other meanings constructed in/by the text. For narrative, as feminists have realized, is less a content category, a "story," than a set of relationships by which knowledge is made intelligible to readers.(8) As narrative grammarians have shown, a narrative inevitably involves a transformation. An initial equilibrium is exchanged for a new equilibrium.[1] The specificity of narrative is its encoding of a temporal sequence which is perceived as causal.(19) Consequently, the new equilibrium appears as the natural or inevitable outcome of the temporal/transformational process. Because its temporal mimesis masks causality, narrative is an effective way of communicating ideological knowledge. Ideological discourses are effective only in so far as the relationships they define appear to be natural or inevitable. This they appear to be, when the labour involved in their production is suppressed and they are seen not as a construct but as the "natural reflection" of the world, as spontaneous expression of their author's beliefs, or as mystified. Belief naturalized as fact, these narratives are Barthes' "mythologies," second orders of discourse and highly

motivated ones.[2] Sexism as a discourse is effective to the extent that its premise, the unequal distribution of power between women and men appears to be "natural" or universal. However, narrative is a socially determined materialist construct influenced by the material conditions of a specific society. Among these conditions, gender differences structure social relationships.

The linking of gender and genre has been a fruitful concept in feminist literary theory. Genre conventions are being called into question; gender norms are being challenged. Feminist writers are using certain popular and highly coded genres such as science fiction, fantasy, whodunits and utopian fictions because these forms free writers—and readers—from the constraints of realism, free them to hypothesize alternative realities which implicitly or explicitly criticize their own and which locate sexist ideologies and sexist practices as structural determinants of their own society. They use these subgenres for a variety of strategic purposes: to confront sexist discourses which generate characterizations of women as weak, stupid, passive, receptive, and so on; to represent situations of sexual equality which implictly condemn the inequality of their own society and the practices which structure it; to uncover the fact that sexism is a social pathology and not a behavioural defect of aberrant individuals; and to question the narratives which operate on us from childhood as conduct guides. The work of these writers challenges the rules of the generic games. The feminist critics who read them are involved in a complementary strategy, challenging the ideological representation of those rules, the conventions of the genre, and the nature of the reading position they propose. Above all, these texts contest the privileging of a single discourse which contains and places all the others. In their deployment of discourse and counterdiscourse, of feminist critique of the dominant discourse and feminist affirmation of an alternate vision, in this oscillation between critique and assertion, between impertinent question and imperious counterstatement, these texts refuse the comfort and stability of a fixed subject position to their readers. Refusing to smooth over these contradictory discourses, the text invites answers to the questions it raises, producing its reader as an active participant in the construction of meaning. In this, the

text deploys devices to draw attention to its textuality, so undermining its illusionist characteristics. The reader is distanced, at least part of the time, not totally interpolated into a fictional world.

One of the major sites of feminist re-visionary activity with respect to fictional genres has been the development of the detective novel. Certainly, this has been the primary locus of intervention by Canadian feminist writers in the highly coded, anti-realistic genres. Like science fiction, fantasy and utopia, the murder mystery is imbricated in an antagonism between truth and verisimilitude. This is the "law," of the murder mystery, though in establishing this law, Todorov suggests, there is produced a double bind.

> By relying on antiverisimilitude, the murder mystery has come under the sway of another verisimilitude, that of its own genre. No matter how much it contests ordinary verisimilitudes, it will always remain subject to *some* verisimilitude.... [I]t is not difficult to discover the killer in a murder mystery: we need merely follow *the verisimilitude of the text* and not the truth of the world evoked.
>
> There is something tragic in the fate of the murder-mystery writer; his (sic) goal is to contest verisimilitudes, yet the better he succeeds, the more powerfully he establishes a *new* verisimilitude, one linking his text to the genre to which it belongs (86-87).

In the codes of the genre, then, are to be found the subversive potentials of feminist murder mysteries. Challenging verisimilitude, they "discover the laws and conventions of the life around us" (87) and expose the sexism of these conventions, all the while finding themselves constrained by the constitutive law of narrative discourse. That is, as Todorov posits, "it is not within our power to change [the laws and conventions]" (87). It is just this margin of escape, however, that some feminist writers use to challenge generic laws through contesting social laws. Their challenge to textual identity is indirect. Their disruptive strategies address the sexual politics of decorum.

The double edge of this challenge is conveyed in one of the major formal changes initiated by feminist writers, the

invention of the female detective. As mystery writer Lawrence Block is quoted:

> Women don't fit well into a trench coat and a slouch hat.... The hard-boiled private eye is a special figure in American mythology. It's a staple of the myth that he should be a cynical loner, a man at odds with society and its values. That's not something women normally relate to. Women aren't cynical loners—that's not how they like to work. It seems to me that if they want to go into the profession seriously, women writers will have to change the myth itself, instead of trying to fit themselves into it (Cranny-Francis, "Gender and Genre" 69).

Feminist writers have responded to this compendium of "*macho* " social values in a variety of ways, but generally by pointing out the social construction of such norms which become generic constraints. Some, like Eve Zaremba, have challenged the traditional amateur female sleuth of the Miss Marple variety by turning her into a tough professional detective like Helen Keremos. Keremos, in such mysteries as *Work for a Million*, uses her talents as a private eye to find out who is blackmailing and threatening pop music star, Sonia Deerfield, recent winner of a lottery. Helen fits the myth of the typical detective and is at home in this milieu, using her friendship with members of the police force and hotel security officers to gain more information. As a private detective, she holds "a strange job for a young lady" (48). Yet, Helen fits the myth in every way but one: Helen is a loner because she is a lesbian who does not conform to social norms of femininity. She is a social misfit whose isolation is not chosen but imposed by the dominant society. Zaremba does not make use of this difference to extensively disrupt the plot of the detective novel, however, using it primarily as a thematic device to open up discussions about this "unnatural" female (71), "dyke" (110), and the problematic relationship between the sexes produced by the oscillation of male relations with women between oversolicitude and boorishness as they variously idealize or denigrate them. Ultimately, though, this is the wedge feminist detective fiction uses for generic subversion by changing definitions of criminal activity. The perpetrators of

the crime here prove to be Sonia's ex-husband and her uncle, an uncle who subjected her to sexual abuse when she was a child, abuse for which her mother held Sonia guilty, thus starting her on a path to delinquency.

Like other feminist detective novels, the sleuth here is more interested in the "mental work" of detecting, rather than in a manhunt (141). These novels address directly ideological issues supposedly irrelevant to narration and confront through the conflict the ideological assumptions of the narrative itself. Specifically these fictions articulate their concern with the politics of the detective novel through the textual representation of sexual politics. It is a fact amply demonstrated in our society, that women are more likely to die in their homes at the hands of a family member than they are to be knifed in the street. The conventional murder mystery ignores the sexual politics of death, ignores sexual difference, by presenting the crime as an individual act and thus upholding the established middle class and patriarchal social order. Feminist detective fiction challenges the social order by presenting murder discursively as a crime perpetrated within an ideological formation in which readers, too, are implicated. Consequently, a double transformation is effected: the text is transformed from a work of suspense fiction to a political fiction and the practice of the novel is changed from one of mystification and revelation to one of investigation and transformation. The detective novel becomes politically committed to detection, to the spying out of ideological discourses and the social practices they define. Suspense gives way to ratiocination.

In this, feminist detective fiction effects certain dislocations within the codes of the genre. As Todorov has pointed out, at the basis of the whodunit is a double narrative; the story of the crime and the story of the investigation, the story of "what really happened" and that of "how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it" (45), story and discourse. The first story is that of an absence that is none the less real while the second is that of a presence which is "excessive," "insignificant" (46). These two narratives are intersected in various combinations, the traditional whodunit involving a balance of the two, one in which the second story appears as a place where the devices of the first story, the dislocations in point of view, the temporal inversions of the

first are "justified and naturalized" (46). Suspense novels of the thriller or "the story of the suspect-as-detective" type (47), the latter a recent development of the detective novel, accentuate the second story over the first. The mystery becomes merely a starting point, a pretext for concentrating on the milieu and on suspense.

Feminist detective stories generally follow this latter mode, with an additional twist. The emphasis is less on the suspense of the outcome as the detective puts her life on the line, than it is on her investigation which probes deeper into the sexism of the social order and compounds the dangers and threats she must confront. For they are not just the product of a single, irrational act but are endemic in the social system. Ultimately too, there is an emphasis on the new type of activity necessary to solve the crime, activity which includes consciousness raising strategies and collective action on the part of women mobilizing for social reform. A major dramatic episode of these fictions is the development of friendships between socially heterogeneous women. In this, the feminist detective novel challenges the ideology of the traditional detective novel, the bourgeois ideology of the crime of passion or moral outrage committed by a romantic individual on the model of the Byronic hero in which the detective story is grounded or on that of his antagonist, the equally individualistic and rationalistic detective finding the solution to a riddle. In place of the unified subject, these fictions work to produce a dispersed subject position.

The same inversion of the detective novel to expose the signifying practices of the genre is effected in two other recent Canadian detective novels published by feminist presses. Both introduce a woman sleuth who is a serious professional and a challenge to the generic norm. Harriet Croft in Marion Foster's *The Monarchs Are Flying* is a criminal lawyer as beautiful as she is clever. However, in this, as well as because she is a divorcée, she is very much a social misfit and loner, even though her fashionable silk blouses in no way resemble the requisite uniform of the trench coat. Indeed, Harriet becomes involved in the defence of Leslie Taylor, who is charged with murder as a means of assuring the continuance of her single state and consequent social "alienation." Her initial involvement in the case has been at the request of the husband of the murdered woman

who wants her to represent him at the preliminary hearing where Leslie will be arraigned. He hires Harriet to make sure that Leslie is charged. This manoeuvre is a form of backhanded proposal to Harriet whom he has admired for a long time. Harriet is suspicious of this request, especially since Charles Denton is not helping his in-laws with the funeral. As she comments, when a woman is murdered, her husband is usually the first suspect. In this case, however, the husband has found an incriminating love letter to his wife from Leslie which he shows to the police.

Harriet switches sides to defend Leslie when she realizes that her lawyer is both weak and a man. He will follow the lead of the police investigator who, prior to his current position in homicide at Smith's Falls, had been in the morality squad in Toronto with a reputation for gay bashing. As Harriet says to Leslie: "He genuinely believed [you were guilty]. He was convinced it was you because you're gay and this is the kind of thing gays do" (215). Harriet managed to find proof that Charles was guilty of his wife's murder by searching the motel room more thoroughly than the police after she became convinced that no woman would or could have carried out the murder as it had been executed—a rape with the towel bar after which the body was shaved. This scenario of ritualized violence seemed to Harriet to be a masculine one, not the action of a disappointed lesbian lover.

This rape is key to the sexual politics under investigation in the novel. It becomes a touchstone of the law's ability to acknowledge sexual difference and consequently of its capacity to discern "truth" in a courtroom. Leslie sacks her first, inefficient lawyer when she ultimately learns how her old lover has died.

> "What do you mean...symbolic rape?"..."The towel rod."..."Is that different from the other? To me, as a woman, rape is rape."
>
> "That's exactly what I mean."..." *To you as a woman*. You have to stop drawing a distinction between men and women. It creates a bad impression. We're all just people, when you come down to it. I have some blank checks here" (89).

This indifference of the lawyer, the failure to recognize sexual difference, would lead to the condemnation of an innocent woman. That this is a systemic blindness, an incapacity of the symbolic system to recognize difference, the novel conveys through the position of these speakers: the lawyer, in collusion with the police and the prosecution, fails to distinguish between men and women with respect to violence, where women are generally the victims and men the perpetrators. Women have no recourse against men in such a legal system that hides this difference behind humanist universals. Indeed, examples are multiplied of women as victims of both domestic violence and legal indifference through the women Leslie meets in prison.

Harriet, whose career has been flourishing, but whose emotional life has been stagnant, "comes out of her cocoon" in this novel as she begins to help these women victims find courage, dignity and independence. First of all, Harriet must work with Leslie to prepare her for the trial which Harriet realizes will not be the trial of Leslie Taylor but the trial of lesbian rights. As lesbianism is put on the stand, it will be confounded with homosexuality at its proverbial worst. An attempt will be made to persuade the jury of Leslie's innate capacity for violence grounded in the homosexual's proclivity for molesting young boys. Yet once again, the novel points out the difference between men's and women's experiences of violence: for women, it is the domestic enclosure, the supposedly female space of the private sphere, which is more menacing than the public domain. However, Leslie will have to come out in the very hostile context of the courtroom. She must come out to her family first, to have their support so that she can present herself to the jury in a way that will make them believe lesbianism to be "natural." A counter narrative is constructed that stresses the differences between loving lesbian relations and social narratives about the sexual violence of lesbians which have been nourished by myths of gay monstrosity.

The focus of the novel is thus on the coming out story, one which is doubled by the transformation of Harriet who at the end of the novel can acknowledge her love to Leslie. An alternate vision of collusion is offered here in the loving collaboration of Harriet, Leslie and her mother against the vindictive and indifferent patriarchal system that would

declare such love guilty and conspire to condone violence. In this novel, there is almost no suspense, little mystery, no chases and thrilling escapes. Instead, the focus is on the discussions between lawyer and client and on the trial. In this way, in foregrounding its own processes of research and elaboration, the novel exposes piece by piece the construction of an alternate narrative which deconstructs the myths of lesbian phobia on which the patriarchal social narrative contract is concluded. Once again, the socially outcast female sleuth has deployed the two discursive topoi of lesbianism and sexual violence.

This is also the case in Elizabeth Bowers' *Ladies' Night.* The title is an ironic one, indicating the strategy deployed to subvert generic norms. Ultimately "Ladies' Night" comes to signify the police raid on a kiddie porn establishment successfully orchestrated by private eye Meg Lacey, her friend Johanna, a whore and a lesbian, and Salal, an Amerindian girl who was a whore with Johanna and is now working in the office of the porn king, Haswell. As it is originally presented, however, "Ladies' Night" refers to the ladies-only strip shows that Haswell runs in his bar which is situated below his porn kingdom and acts as his legal front. By offering free beer and overlooking the legalities of serving minors, Haswell attracts pubescent girls to his establishment and then offers them the chance to become film stars. At this point, they become veritable captives, living on the upper floors of the building in tiny rooms near the film studio and rewarded with drugs. Addicted, they are completely submissive to his demands. When they grow too old for the films, he passes them on to Cesar, the dealer, who is also a pimp. Anyone who makes trouble and tries to be independent is killed.

Meg does not set out intentionally to bring the pornography and prostitution business in Vancouver to a halt. She stumbles into this mission when she goes to the bar with her friend, Johanna, on a ladies' night in search of information about Haswell, the former fiancé of a young woman who has disappeared and whose parents have hired her to find their daughter. During her snooping, Meg meets Salal who chooses her to act as an instrument of revenge for the violence Haswell and Cesar have done to Salal herself and to her dead brother. Salal reveals necessary information to

Meg and opens up the doors from inside so that the police can raid when a film is being made. Meg's role is to use her police contacts to convince the police of Haswell's involvement in the pornography business.

This is no easy task, for the police are "cautious by nature and addicted to their procedures" (136). These procedures involve investigating anyone offering information to them. A large segment of this narrative concerns the ironic representation of the investigator under investigation: Meg has her telephone tapped, someone following her, her office broken into, while she is continually subjected to interrogations about the accuracy of her information and the name of her informant. This inversion of the conventional detective narrative serves to position the female private eye alongside the socially marginal whores in opposition to the combined forces of police and pornographers, aligned through their joint use of intimidation against women. There is a certain suspense involved here as to whether Meg will be discovered by the pornographers and killed, as has happened to other uncooperative women, or be worn down by the police pressure and crack under the strain. This latter seems the more likely of the two. In this, Meg fulfills the role of the sleuth as loner in a particularly ironic mode just as the feminist prediliction for the investigation of discourse over the suspense of action is ironized through inversion.

Like the other novels, *Ladies' Nights* disrupts the traditional binary opposition of the detective novel into good and evil, displacing it onto a battle between the sexes. In this way, it too questions the accepted social myths of gender equality, exposing their hypocrisy in a narrative where male bonding is the norm as policemen and criminals collude in their power over women. However, in their persistence, knowledge and careful planning, the women win out when the police decide to follow the plan for the raid proposed by the women. This alternate narrative, the ironic latent meaning of "ladies' night," proposed by the novel, is in turn disrupted by the conclusion in which Haswell is brought to trial and Cesar is dead by an unknown hand. The final chapter in the book brings together the three main women involved in their defeat, along with Margot, Johanna's long time lover, at a drop-in centre for street kids, financed by Johanna and run by

Salal, to help other young women and men get off the street more easily than they have done.

Such a conclusion offers a more radical revision to the detective novel than does that of *The Monarchs Are Flying*. Rather than bonding through romantic love for each other, a link among women that does little to disturb the myth of individualism on which is founded the conventional detective novel, the continuing friendship of this heterogeneous group offers a model for social change grounded in collective action. What draws these women to each other, however, is their common determination not to remain victims of the male violence they have all experienced. In this, Meg's engagement differs from Harriet's. She continues to investigate Haswell's illegal enterprises even after she is convinced that she can find out nothing about the missing girl she is looking for through him. The daughter, she concludes, has fled in indignation that her father should "try to shack up his daughter with a man that makes porno movies" (51). Meg does so for the reason she has ultimately drifted into the career of private eye, as a result of an event that changed the direction of her life, a rape which occurred at knife point at a shopping centre. It is the violence done to her by a man that turns Meg into a loner: the rape unsettles her emotionally, leads her to take Akido classes to defend herself and gradually to abandon the role of gracious housewife. Her husband subsequently divorces her and she joins the ranks of the socially marginal women earning their own living. However, this marginality that is categorized as aberrant in patriarchal narratives becomes a positive force for change, a subversive element, in feminist discourse as the female sleuth exposes and challenges the representation of feminine passivity which the detective novel both produces and masks.

Unlike Harriet, Meg is not particularly efficient as a private eye. For one thing, she has moral scruples and refuses to take on many jobs. Then, too, she is quick to terminate a case when she feels she can do no more. While she shares these scruples with the other female sleuths, Meg is alone in suffering the financial consequences of them in the course of the novel. The considerable narrative attention focused on her moral dilemmas about her clients shifts the narrative away from action and suspense into an investigation

of the discourse of criminality and gender. Ironically, Meg is no longer on retainer when she solves most of the missing persons cases she has been involved in throughout the novel. Joao, the Portuguese man searching for his twin, finds his brother by himself. Meg merely does the telephoning for him while he directs the search. Their encounter, however, serves to expose the fallacy of yet another social myth of sexual difference. Contrary to Joao's repeated statements, women do not make better sleuths because of their greater intuition. He is the one with intuitive insights into his brother's location and condition, not Meg. But this is the ultimate function of the female detective, to decentre the narrative of suspense and mystery conventional to the genre in favour of putting the narrative itself into question so as to investigate and expose the patriarchal discourse that in/forms it. In this, she prevents the easy reproduction of the dominant ideology in a narrative genre known for its conservatism. Instead of being upheld by proving guilt in a specific individual, the reader's self-esteem is threatened by this exposure of a general guilt in which readers, especially male readers, may well be implicated.

In this regard, however, none of these novels so challenges the convention of the perpetration of crime as an individual act as does Carol Shield's *Swann: A Mystery* which implicates all the characters, indeed all readers, in the carrying out of criminal activities even, especially, in the act of reading. By disrupting the narrative of her text, exposing its construction and so directly confronting the meaning-making rituals of our society, the obsessive construction of narrative in which we are all implicated, *Swann* lays bare the signifying practices of the genre and of the society. It is the most disruptive of these detective novels since it directly addresses the politics of identity poetics. The novel lays bare the process of construction of a character through the analogy of the construction of a literary text. Character, we become aware, is the product of social discourses which make our textual encounters into ironic games of the shifting tensions between verisimilitude and truth. This is underlined through the section of the narrative of Morton Jimroy, the fictionalized biographer of Mary Swann, whose views on his "subject," debated at length with her in letters, do not coincide at all with the Mary Swann which her "discoverer," Sarah Maloney,

has perceived in Swann's texts. The potential Emily Dickinson of the one clashes with the Shakepeare's sister in the lupine analysis of the other and both clash with the Rilke of the Cruzzi's modernist version. In this, Carol Shields shifts the burden of mystery from the dead to the living and turns the murder mystery upside down. There are no longer any firm boundaries between good and evil, merely an endless series of shifting subject positions.

What is mysterious in this novel is not the death of Mary Swann but her life, which defies reconstruction and the miracle of her poems, which defy interpretation. More precisely, both defy definitive analysis of "Truth." The double plots of the detective novel are both turned upside down in this novel, that of action as well as that of investigation, though this latter is less dislocated than the former which has almost disappeared, except for the traces in the subtitle. What has shifted is the absence, no longer a present absence, but an absence that refuses to be rendered present by a second narrative which, as Todorov has shown, in the conventional detective novel fills in gaps and naturalizes connections between discrete phenomena as it "justifies" the events of the first narrative. There is no revelation: the solution to the problem of secrets and mysteries expounded is now nothing other than the very exposition of this problem. Death, which makes characters become the absolute and absent cause, is the source of life: the reality of being is displaced by the reality of saying. The narrative of quest becomes the quest of narrative. A horizontal narrative of events, of succession, of contiguity is displaced by a vertical narrative of the pursuit of knowledge, of embedding, of substitution. The focus is less on the world of the characters, of the utterance, and more on the world of the narrator-narratee, of the speech act (26).

This second narrative is a quest for a code and a meaning, the hermeneutic code, the story of reading and writing, the narrative of investigation of how this very book came to be written. What this narrative of another narrative exposes is that "[t]here is no 'primitive narrative.' No narrative is natural: a choice and a construction will always preside over its appearance; narrative is a discourse, not a series of events....all narratives are figurative" (55). In this, *Swann* extends the generic dislocations of the feminist detective

novel by expanding the already "excessive" and "insignificant" narrative of the investigation of discourse and almost entirely eliminating the narrative of suspense. There is a murder, there are thefts, but no criminals are detected, indeed none is explicitly pursued. Rather, the novel investigates the relations of the other characters to the dead person and the missing objects, exposing the desire and meaning each of them produced in this network of relations. *Swann* subverts the genre of the detective novel by "developing" its generic norms in such a way as to disappoint them. So it enters into the dialectical contradiction of the work and the genre as "literature," not as detective fiction. While the literary masterpiece creates its own genre, the masterpiece of detective fiction is "precisely the book which best fits its genre" (43). Shields' novel ultimately subverts the genre by becoming unique and "literature," that is, productive of its own reality.

Nonetheless, enough mimetic traces of the feminist detective novel remain for *Swann* to be considered an ironized example of this type of generic subversion. Key is the fact that Mary Swann has been brutally murdered. Moreover, she has long been a victim of domestic violence. Her death is mentioned early in the novel (17) but the facts are withheld until later (43). This failure to develop the murder in the narrative produces the greater mystery. No search is needed for the murderer. A bullet through the head, Mary's dismembered body has been dumped in a silo. Everyone assumes that Mary has been murdered by her husband who then shot himself. This is a fictional world in which such configurations of gender and power are seen as "natural," not masked as in *The Monarchs Are Flying*. The sexism of the social order goes without saying, so "natural" is it seen to be. What becomes the "mystery" in this patriarchal order is how Swann came to be a writer. How could she escape from the limitations of the domestic role of servitude to which her life seemed destined to take on the assertive position of author? As Sarah Maloney phrases this central puzzle of the novel in feminist terms in the first section:

> Mary Swann discovered herself, and therein, suspended on tissues of implausibility, like a hammock

> without strings, hangs the central mystery: how did she do it? Where in those bleak Ontario acres, that littered farmyard, did she find the sparks that converted emblematic substance into rolling poetry? Chickens, outhouses, wash-day, wood-piles, porch, husband, work-boots, overalls, bedstead, filth. That's the stuff this woman had to work with.
>
> On the other hand, it's a legacy from the patriarchy, a concommitant of conquest, the belief that poets shape their art from materials that are mysterious and inaccessible. Women have been knitting socks for centuries, and probably they've been constructing, in their heads, lines of poetry that never got written down. Mary Swann happened to have a pen, a Parker 51 as a matter of fact, as well as an eye for the surface of things. Plus the kind of heart-cracking persistence that made her sit down at the end of a tired day and box up her thoughts into quirky parcels of rhymed verse (31).

The additional element in this mystery, as Sarah goes on to add, is that Mary's "schooling [was] limited." Although she debunks the myth of the writer as inspired genius in this feminist analysis, as literary critic Sarah gives it enough credence still to wonder "[h]ow Jimroy intends to boil up a book out of this thin stuff is a mystery" (31). While she opts for the new critical stance that foregrounds the poetic text and excludes the poet's biography from her considerations, Sarah's oscillation here between two different mysteries foregrounds the question of narrative under investigation in *Swann*. How does the ordinary become extraordinary in the work of art? How do we come to know a person, in this case, a writer? What connection, in short, do textual traces have to "referential reality"? This is the fundamental "mystery," the one at least which the literary institution sets out to investigate. As Jimroy rephrases this in his words of introduction to the Swann Symposium, which constitutes the final section of the novel:

> "To continue, who really was Mary Swann?...May I suggest further that the real reason we have come here is the wish to travel (pause) that short but difficult distance (pause) between appearance and reality. Who, given

> what we know, was Mary Swann?...It is a mystery, just as our own lives are mysteries. Just as we don't ever really know that person sitting to our right or left. (Rose and Sarah exchange small smiles at this.) *Appearance and reality* " (257-58, emphasis added).

Yet once more, Jimroy recites the scanty facts of Mary's life, the absence of documents of any sort, no medical records or social security numbers, only a card from the local library. There are scarcely any truths available that would serve the occasion of irony that Jimroy promises, defining its rhetorical mode—the confounding of appearance and reality—in his introduction. But the work of irony takes place nonetheless, in an ironic dramatization of the author-effect, as Foucault has termed it. The author, as he points out, is not an indefinite source of significations preceding the literary work, but a functional principle by which one limits the proliferation of meaning. As such, the author is an "ideological figure" (Harari, 159). Mary's total absence from her fictional poetic text, and from Shields' fiction about her, mimetically renders the anonymous text (*pace* Virginia Woolf, anon was indeed a woman), the authorless text, the text where discourse circulates unimpeded. For what the death of Swann and absence of information about her permits, and the novel dramatizes, is the construction of Swann within a number of different discourses. The novel circles around an absent centre made present only in the words of others. Mary Swann is a word being, a discursive construct, produced by the various editors and scholars attending the symposium, and ultimately, by the reader of the novel who, like them, is a creative reader. As Sarah Maloney with more irony than she realizes announces: "In a sense I invented Mary Swann and am responsible for her. No, too literary that. Better just say I discovered Mary Swann" (30). This is a story about reading and writing, about reading which is re/writing.

The complicity of all readers in the activity of construction of narrative is emblematized in the final scene of the novel where, in the absence of all textual traces of Swann's work, the participants at the symposium collectively repeat Swann's verse from memory and write it down on paper.

> "A meeting is in session, but there is no one at the lectern and no one, seemingly, in charge. People are seated in a sort of circle, speaking out, offering up remembered lines of poetry, laboriously reassembling one of Mary Swann's poems. Sarah is writing, a clipboard on her knee" (310).

This ultimately is what the work of investigation comes to, the creative rereading or rewriting of a text, "a ceremonial act of reconstruction, perhaps even an act of creation" (311). This scene may also represent a return to an oral tradition of recitation followed by inscription, a frequent figure for collaborative creation. But in this, it signifies the undoing of the literary institution grounded in textual analysis.

The most subversive feature of *Swann* is the absence of a detective in a "mystery." None is needed, because all the characters have become detectives investigating the meaning of Mary Swann's life as text. Readers too are complicit in this reconstruction: we are all detectives here. In Shields' novel, there is no longer any narrative of action to be represented: there is only a story of the ongoing process of research and elaboration as the novel self-reflexively foregrounds its own processes of construction. Here Shields moves beyond the challenge to verisimilitude that leads (in other feminist detective novels) to the discovery of the laws and conventions of life around us (Todorov 87). She explores instead the process by which these laws and conventions are constructed as a step toward changing them.

This narrative is not developed with intrigue, sequence and progress to a coherent revelation of "truth." Instead, it foregrounds the process of the fabrication of "truth" by a number of different characters. In this way, the novel raises what are for Foucault more important questions, about the modes of existence and circulation of a discourse. Who is speaking? to whom? and whose interests are being served (160)? The "revelation" towards which the novel moves is the Swann Symposium, organized to canonize the poetry of Mary Swann, the slim, posthumous volume of verse, *Swann's Song*. All who plan to attend this conference hope to learn about the secrets and mysteries of Swann's short and difficult life. But the Symposium frustrates any such

synthesis, as the culminating point is the disappearance of all textual traces of these secrets.

The novel is constructed around the narratives of four people involved with the symposium, each of whom in a separate section unfolds the narrative of their relationship with Mary's text or with Mary herself. Each is writing the "truth" of Mary Swann as s/he engages with it. Sarah Maloney, first of all, values Swann's "dailiness" (21) which produces in the banal objects of everyday life both the "transparency" into the "mythic heavings of the universe" and "ennui" (21-22). Sarah develops a feminist thesis for Swann, seeing her as a sort of Mrs. Ramsay, an aesthetician of the quotidian, and as Virginia Woolf's prototypical female artist. Reading Swann's work from within a framework emphasizing mother-daughter relations, Sarah is preparing to become a mother herself. In this, the sexual politics of her textual intervention are diametrically opposed to those of Morton Jimroy, Swann's biographer who, having made a name for himself with biographies of Pound and Starman, now wants to appropriate Mary Swann to "take revenge for her" (87).

In contrast to Sarah's synthesis with Swann (her milestone article had been called "Swann's Synthesis"), Jimroy's relationship is antagonistic. He is given to intellectual jousting at conferences. He pursues his quarry relentlessly, interviewing Mary's daughter Frances in California, trying to absorb the details of her life. Through this mimesis of the process of writing the biography Shields both displaces the criminal investigation into scholarly investigation and explores the biographical fallacy and the stance of the biographer to his subject. Jimroy dismisses the "popular fallacy that biographers fall in love with their subjects" (83), though this is what he seems to do with Swann, presenting her photo to a fellow airplane traveller as the love of his life. When Swann resists him, however, by leaving so few written documents for him to work with, Jimroy's attitude changes to "contempt" (83), another potential position of the biographer. Indeed, Mary ultimately becomes "his enemy" (106) and he feels "defeated" by her when so little material is yielded up that the book will be at best an article. "[S]he's bent on punishment. She's a sly one, a wily one. Women, women. Endlessly elusive and

intent on victory....He admits it: for the moment at least, Mary Swann has defeated him" (110). Paranoid, he experiences this problem with material as a punishment. For what Jimroy has done, is to steal Mary's photograph and her fountain pen from the Swann museum and her daughter. His relationship to his subject has been antagonistic, one of violence and expropriation. The story of the research and failure to produce a text, Jimroy's narration is interspersed with narratives of his failed relationships with women and his eroticized correspondence with fellow scholar, Sarah. Just as explicitly as Sarah's pregnancy, these sexual relationships of Jimroy underline the gendered specificity of the construction of literary texts and of knowledge. The admiring imitation of the female scholar is contrasted to the contemptuous violation of the male scholar.

The remaining two narratives introduce other frames through which knowledge is constructed. But the process is shown to be equally manipulative and transformative and just as self-interested, though more playful. There is none of the stooping to theft of photo and pen of Jimroy, appropriating a "life," nor of the willfull destruction of Swann's rhyming dictionary in Sarah's conscious suppression of facts contradictory to her version of Swann's narrative. The distortions here are those of enhancement not subtraction and the product of friendship not careerism. But surfaces are equally deceptive.

Rose Hindmarch, the librarian in the town, shared Mary's interest in reading. Through Rose's narrative, we learn of the type of books the library held, popular literature mostly, not the classics to which the literary scholars compare Mary's work. An Edna Ferber novel was indeed the last book Mary borrowed. Although Rose feels overwhelmed by the forthcoming trip to the symposium where she expects to be out of place, she too has constructed a narrative about Mary Swann in the Memorial Room she has created at the library. Hers is a material rendering of the "life." Like the scholars, Rose has found limited resources to work with. There were no family mementoes and only two photographs of Swann along with a drawerful of crocheted doilies. "And so," the narrative informs us, "Rose was forced to use her imagination when it came to furnishing the Mary Swann Memorial Room" (162). Like the scholars', hers too is a

partial and interested representation of Swann, in the materiality and dailiness of her pursuits, as the country housewife. The notebooks have been lent to Sarah, the fountain pen sent to Frances. No literary artifacts grace the room which is furnished, moreover, with articles belonging "to the *time* and the *region* of which Mary Swann was a part, and therefore nothing is misrepresented, not the quilts, not the china, not even the picture of the cocker spaniel" (163). Rose, we are informed, would have denied that this was an act of "deception." However, the narrative underlines: "The charm of falsehood is not that it distorts reality, but that it creates reality afresh" (163). Representation is inevitably and always mis-representation, the text self-reflexively proclaims, in its investigation of the ideological inflections of the mimetic arts.

This is further underlined in the narrative of Frederic Cruzzi who was the editor of Swann's volume of poetry. Now eighty and retired from his position as newspaper editor, he presents himself as a cultivated and well-travelled man with a host of charming friends. In fragments of autobiographical sketches, reminiscences and letters, the narrative unfolds his recollections of a December day years ago when he had hit his wife, Hildë, on the jaw and drawn blood. "Something snapped," he describes this to himself. "Temporary insanity," as in "crime[s] of passion" (221). These are the same words used by the community to explain her husband's murder of Mary Swann that happened the same night. The juxtaposition of the two outbursts of male violence suggests that the two events are possibly linked. Moreover, that afternoon, Mary had brought her poems to Cruzzi, sick and alone at home. It is implied in the police questioning of Cruzzi, trace of the detective novel, that Mary's anxiety about getting home on time might have been an indication of fearful anticipation of her husband's anger. Cruzzi was excited by the "beguiling cleanliness of the lines" (215). They provoke his anger too when he thinks Hildë has burned the poems which were left in a paper bag. This turns out not to be the case. Instead, the bag has been used as a garbage bag for the fishbones from that night's supper. The washable blue ink has run on the manuscript pages.

What follows in the narrative is the "revelation" of the novel's investigation into the mystery of creation and the

production of discourse. The rest of the night, the Cruzzis spend transcribing. They scarcely touch many poems that become legible as they dry, for "[i]f one or two letters swam into incomprehension, the rest followed" (222). But the obliterated words, phrases, whole passages require more attention. "They puzzled and conferred over every blot, then guessed, then invented" (223). As time passes, they experience a "reckless permission" and choose between two possible transcriptions the one that pleases them the most. By morning, a "curious conspiracy" binds them in an effort to "offer her help and protection" (223). Hildë's transcribed notes and not Mary's sodden poems are referred to as "the manuscript." Indeed, Hildë feels she becomes Mary Swann: "At one point, Hildë, supplying missing lines and even the greater part of a missing stanza, said she could feel what the inside of Mary Swann's head must look like. She seemed to be inhabiting, she said, another woman's body" (223). The concepts of both personal and literary identity are put into question in this blurring of conventional boundaries.

Hildë's alterations, it is suggested, were the product of her unused talent, while Cruzzi was impelled by "his instinct for tinkering" (223). What they have done is to rewrite Swann as a modernist poet, strong on metaphor, so that the second line of the most severely damaged poem changes from "Brightens the day with shame" to "Blisters the day with shame" (223). This is poetry by a committee, poetry produced by readers. Even more forcefully than Rose Hindmarch's domestic arrangements, these poems foreground the "charm of falsehood," the art of "misrepresentation" (163). This is the strong misreading of editing, a rewriting of Swann's poems on the line of the "phallic editing" executed on Emily Dickinson's poems by Thomas Higginson and on Isabella Valancy Crawford's poems by John Garvin.[3] Cruzzi has already demonstrated his powers to silence women's creative voices when he describes Hildë's poetic efforts as "moving" but with "no fire on the frontier" (205), his criticism putting an end to her search for an outlet for her strong artistic vocation.

That the narrative of the quest for narrative has totally eclisped the narrative of quest becomes clear in this fourth section. The greater part of the section is devoted to reminiscence rather than to description of the present

moment. Yet, an event of what would be of major significance in a conventional whodunit took place on Christmas Eve when Frederic Cruzzi was out. Someone enters his house. This information is withheld until the final pages of his narrative when it is presented, in a neutral way intermingled with memories of the earlier December with Mary Swann, as Cruzzi surveys his house.

> The main door of the house is solid and graceful, and the knocker is the kind that fits the hand and kindles hope. Above the brass housing of the door lock, there are several scratches and a deep gouge; these were made by the Christmas Eve burglar.
>
> A clumsy entry, or so a Kingston police constable judged later. Clearly the work of a bungling amateur, yet he succeeded. He would have been assisted in his work by the carriage lamp next to the door... (225).

The proprietorial eye of Cruzzi is the focalizer for the scene. He runs over his belongings noting that nothing has been touched except his four volumes of *Swann's Song* and his folder of manuscript notes. This, he discovers on Christmas day when he starts to think about composing his opening address for the symposium. The narrative ends abruptly at this point, not expatiating on the police investigation or on Cruzzi's reactions.

Positioned so crucially at the end of this narrative just prior to the final section which stages the symposium as a film script, always already read and distanced, this description tugs at the reader's memory, offering clues for the reader's detective work on the signs the narrative refuses to justify. Sarah has mislaid Swann's notebook and can't finish her paper, Jimroy can't find Swann's pen, while Rose has difficulty locating the second photo. Individually, these accidents have blocked the composition of the respective papers and consequently, have provided the gaps that needed narrative expansion and ideological manipulation to develop a coherent linear sequence. The conference which had promised to bring all the missing documents and facets of Swann's text and life into a synthetic whole, begins almost immediately with disruption. The lights go off during the opening address and a speaker's briefcase disappears.

Still, it takes some sixty pages of conference dialogue—or more acurately diatribe—and until the middle of the following night before the narrative itself addresses the question of the "pattern" to the events (298), and sets about the conventional narrative business of investigating mysterious events and "naturalizing" secrets. Once again, the conventional thriller is subverted, for the detective's activity takes the form of a mini-conference among the four main characters in Sarah's hotelroom. Jimroy and Cruzzi have both just come to the conclusion that the losses are not coincidence but the work of a thief. Trying to corner the intellectual market for the booming Swann industry, Jimroy suggests, or after money for extortion, suggests Rose, who has read a lot of detective novels. But if conference this is, it is a parody of a conference. Instead of discussing hypotheses and theories, the four detectives rapidly conclude this is an inside job, and run down the list of conference delegates with appropriate descriptive comments. The causality of the detective novel has been displaced by the random order of the list. Narrative order, the hope of revelation, breaks down. As the stage directions indicate, "the voices become indistinguishable.... The late hour and the curious impromptu nature of this mini-symposium demand a surreal treatment" (301). The next morning it becomes clear that their horrified surmise of the previous night is correct: nobody has a copy of Swann's poems. Not only that, but the speaker for the first session fails to turn up. A search reveals that he is locked into his room, that his paper and the love poems have been stolen. He, too, has been reduced to silence. So concerned are the "Swannians" with the speaker's situation, they fail to notice the intruder still in the room. Sarah alone sees him slipping out and follows him into the corridor where she thinks she recognizes him as Brownie, her ex-lover, a second-hand book dealer. But again, the narrative is displaced from the focus on investigating events, to that of investigating the construction of discourses. This observation is ignored by the narrative. The novel hastily concludes with all the critics sitting in a room collectively writing down Swann's poem about "Lost Things." But this is what the director's note to the film text of the symposium has promised us, in a narrative *mise en abyme* : "This film may be described (for distribution

purposes) as a thriller. A subtext focuses on the more subtle thefts and acts of cannibalism that tempt and mystify the main characters" (231). These are the cannibalisms of ideological appropriation which have turned this novel into the investigation of the productivity of discourses.

Shields' novel exposes the operations of narrative within the contemporary literary institution. Literary value requires no textual object, no signified, since it is an endless chain of signifiers. The radical impact of her critique of the concepts of literary identity and of the "originality" of the literary text, shown to be produced relationally within a network of textual practices and discourses, is evident in her choosing to set her narratives of literary appropriation within the structures and institutions engaged in the production, reproduction and dissemination of knowledge, that is within the academic institution and the publishing industry. In this she probes further into the signifying practices of the genre, into the politics of its relations of production, directly confronting the meaning-making structures of our society. That these are violent, sexist and capitalist is clear from the narrative fate of Mary Swann and of her literary text. She is bludgeoned to death once by her husband, her texts are mutilated by the Cruzzis, and silenced completely by the machinations of the greedy bookdealer who, it also appears, has bought up the Swann farm as well as all the texts, in a monopolistic gesture of increasing capital gains.

Similarly, the literary women who attempt to create an interest in Swann's work are both a part of this capitalist economy of knowledge even as they are marginalized and silenced within it. Hildë Cruzzi's silencing by her husband leads to her "editing" of Swann's text from which her voice is effaced yet again when Frederic receives the recognition for the discovery of Swann. So too, Sarah Maloney's invention of Swann's text, is enabled by her feminist aesthetics which prompt her to find a literary mother. But the industry which Sarah has started has become very much a phallic domain as evidenced by the dominant editing practices of Cruzzi and Jimroy's theft, of the highly symbolic phallus of the literary phallic mother, her pen. Moreover, Sarah is not much in evidence at the conference. Pregnant, she is resting in her room. However, this room becomes the locus of the alternate activities of collective detecting on which the novel concludes

and hers is the hand holding the pen. Is it only Sarah's hand guiding the pen inventing this whole literary world? We begin with her claim to invention and we conclude with her hand on the pen—still? In between, we have explored the discourse on women's writing as writing woman is produced by this specific literary institution. In this, the bourgeois myth of the free individual, creative genius or passionate murderer, has been disrupted. These positions are discursively produced and we are all, as readers, complicit in these interpretations where desire is confounded with murder. In fact, we are the ones who have constructed the mystery of the loss of the Swann texts by inference from clues which the narrative refuses to develop. None of us is free from guilt. There are no fixed positions, no stable identities for good and evil. In this, Shields has challenged both ordinary verisimilitude and the verisimilitude of genre.

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NOTES

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1 Gerald Prince, *A Grammar of Stories* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973) and Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (Garden City: Doubleday, Anchor, 1968). Prince sees it as a three step process with a phase of disequilibrium intervening.

2 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Laver (London: Cape, 1972). The "motivated" sign of mythical fictions, those which in Althusser's terms hold forth an imaginary representation of real social relations, is contrasted to the "arbitrary" character of the linguistic sign.

3 "Phallic editing" is the term of Nancy Johnson to describe the manipulation of women's texts by their editors. Another such editing practice is that of Ted Hughes on Sylvia Plath's journals. Comparisons are made between Plath's work and Crawford's in the discussion of her writing. "Garvin's Crawford: The Editing of Isabella Valancy Crawford's Poetry." M.A. thesis, York University, 1988.

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Walter Benjamin and Marshall McLuhan: Theories of History

Pamela McCallum

What is cultural history? How can we construct formal elements and technical devices which would lay the foundations of this discursive genre? Such are the methodological questions that inform the innovative content of Walter Benjamin and Marshall McLuhan's critical practice. Both critics offer informative and suggestive perspectives for cultural history. It would be an intriguing proposition to argue that Benjamin's subtle and compact analyses of mechanization's incomparable power culminate in McLuhan's subsequent historical vision of technological modifications within the human sensorium itself. But such structural affinities may prove to be superficial and to efface the determinate differences between two interpretive codes which are only tangentially related to each other. However this may be, it is not too much to say that an aspect of McLuhanism completes Benjamin's dense and complex reconstruction of past history. In this respect it is worth noting that both Benjamin and McLuhan use the leitmotif of new mechanical objects and technological inventions as a profuse phenomenological description and an obscurely self-conscious constructional principle in analytic practice. And there can be no question that such an analytical frame is all the more necessary when the cultural critic attempts to throw light on the almost indecipherable consequences of unprecedented historical changes. This theoretical construct distances the "bad immediacy" of everydayness facilitating a transcendence of the dominant ideological forms. On the other hand, when such modes of thinking become hypnotized by their own operative procedures, they tend to solidify into "theories of history" which close off the possibility of multiple readings. In other words, enthralled by the unique configuration of their own world-view, they misconstrue the representational fiction that serves to describe a transition in history as the principal agent of the real socio-historical transformation itself.[1]

Yet it must not be thought that Benjamin and McLuhan's fabrication of such unintended diachronic constructs has been an insular phenomemon in literary and cultural studies. Far from it. On further analysis it is clear that the contemporary period has witnessed the repeated elaboration of such "theories of history" which seem to articulate thematically the relationship between the cultural and literary "text" and the wider socio-historical context. For instance, Spengler's *Decline of the West* figures civilization in the representational device of organic decay. And it is certain that Camus' absurdist novelistic practice constructs "history" as a domain of utter futility. Such diachronic frameworks are more accurately described as pseudo-histories: the cultural historian's efforts to define and specify a historical conjuncture are nothing more or less than a pretext which functions both to avert the gaze from the genuine existential elements of history and to recontain its repressed content beneath a formalized surface. What is noteworthy in all this is a detemporalization of experience that lapses into a mythological hermeneutics.

Yet all this must be qualified: even the scaffolding of an abstract universality smooths the way for the reclamation of certain "concrete regions of the real" (Sartre 65). The validity of these new methodological hypotheses stems from their accumulation of anecdotal facts and details which underlie a fractured social and historical existence. For such irreducible empirical data include immediately real interrelationships which highlight the givens of experience. Indeed, it is evident that such phenomenological observations often permit us to demonstrate tentative solutions to tangled problem-complexes. One striking example is Fredric Jameson's analysis of Wyndham Lewis. If it is true that there are discrepancies or gaps in Lewis' modernist fiction, it is no less true that his production of narrative contains local, immediately given descriptions of consumer society: for instance, his irritated fascination with the debased cultural discourse of commercialism. He pays homage to the power of "the mechanical [and] the machine-like"; he foregrounds the "increasing subjectivization of individual experience" and the fragmentation of the human body/mind; he goes on to show "the dismal process of cultural corruption" in a monadic landscape. What is

important for Jameson is that Lewis' narrative system dramatizes the distinctive features of the "mass-produced simulacra of modern civilization" (Jameson Fables 25, 39, 159, 161). Although Lewis' *idées fixes* are repugnant to contemporary readers, his recalcitrant expressionist style conveys the fragmentation of experience in media society. On a stylistic level, then, his formal techniques anticipate the contours of what Guy Debord has designated *la société du spectacle.*

At the same time, however, such pseudo-histories end up imposing arbitrary limitations on the form and direction of inquiry. In this connection the formal weaknesses of Lewis' stylistic option derive from a superficial and disconnected narrative construction that dissolves the general historical process. For what is problematic about his satire-collage composition is that it tends to punctuate its narrative with a collection of broken fragments and pieces, to wrench the disparate entities and random multiple realities of empirical existence from the whole texture of the social totality. Nowhere is this clearer than in his figuration of history as an assemblage of artificially isolated clichés displayed in chaotic mock-epic proportions. Since perception is tied to the uniqueness of the conjuncture or transient "instant," history is parcelled out into a discontinuity of isolated types and clichéd storytelling forms. His modernist textual strategem takes on a static and non-developing quality which never unfolds its thematic content; instead, it substitutes repetition within a homogeneous milieu of spatialized time.

These suggestive *aperçus* and blind spots of "theories of history" may be illuminated by a reciprocal comparison of Benjamin and McLuhan. Is it possible to link together two so dissimilar cultural historians? Clearly, even if both employ an ideogrammatic method, there is a profound structural dissymmetry between the techniques and forms of their cultural history. The critical practice of the former tends to analyze the economic infrastructure underpinning cultural artifacts, while the latter provides a description of new techniques and inventions. Moreover, where McLuhan elevates technology to a formally closed system (the abstract causality of technology) eliminating the *vécu* , Benjamin figurally depicts his ideograms and analogies in mediated

"constellations" condensing the specific or determinate historical moment. Now this problematic of Benjamin's which emphasizes the social organization of production diverges widely from that of McLuhan who proposes technique and technological development as the impulse behind historical transformation. Yet cultural history sometimes unearths formal affinities in apparently arbitrary phenomena and unrelated zones. Both critics ransack the junkyard of mass cultural banalities, the detritus of commercial civilization. Both use ideogrammatic composition, juxtaposing and reassembling these multiple fragments into the interwoven levels of a representational system or code. In the following, I want to explore these two different ways of perceiving history and their ideological implications: inevitably, then, Benjamin and McLuhan's "theories of history" surface in closed partial systems, that is, in determinate textual representations which foreground the structural limitations or ideological closure of such received interpretive models.

Benjamin's willful enthusiasm for the technicization of art is indicated in his study of mechanical reproducibility, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." An early passage from the essay has the virtue of setting forth the methodological core of his argument in succinct terms:

> One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage (221).

Benjamin's analytical preoccupation with invention and technique, which are envisioned as the motivating dynamics in historical restructuration, pivots on a distinction between the residual aural and the emergent post-aural cultures.

For him, mechanical reproduction—characterized by the replacement of the rarified "original" art object with a multiplicity of imitations—functions as a descriptive explanatory code that identifies the staggering alterations in the immediate sense perceptions and cognitive faculties of modern mass man. Here, "time intertwined with space" (in Carol Jacobs' striking phrase)[2] joins together in a compressed dialectical image two asymmetrical levels, two arbitrary codifications or sign systems: the observable minutiae of cultural artifacts and the sweeping movement of technological innovation in history. What happens is that in the "shattering of tradition" the aura of the aesthetic object is broken up into a brittle universe of accessible fragments and traces. This phenomenon, Benjamin tells us, encourages a revitalized political commitment in the massified, anonymous audiences who are no longer intimidated by the aura of ritual or tradition. At the same time it is an opposition which dramatizes the revealing differences between traditional cultural forms and the innovative aesthetic of the new media. This implies in Benjamin a devaluation of the standards of high culture as a specific mode of ideological mystification that inhibits creativity. It implies, even more powerfully, his approval of the aura's "cathartic" fracturing which revives the numbed and deadened perceptions in mass man. As he notes, "the reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie" (234).

On the one side, Benjamin's compositional principle—the aphoristic fragment—furnishes an auspicious interrogation of idealist Marxisms which turn away from the rich, differentiated complexities of genuine lived experience and history. In such schemes, a ruthless reductionism erases specific determinations or difference in the formally closed system of an ultimate identity. This *apriorism* effaces the material density and entangled texture of lived experience. Sartre points out that an idealist Marxism "does not derive its concepts from experience—or at least not from the new experiences which it seeks to interpret. It has

already formed its concepts; it is already certain of their truth; it will assign to them the role of constitutive schemata." And in a similar vein he comments, "The materiality of fact is of no interest to these idealists; only its symbolic implications count in their eyes" (37, 126). In this sense, the strength of Benjamin's mechanical reproduction essay lies in the openness of its orientation toward experience, an openness which refuses to subordinate lived socio-historical realities to abstract schemata. Irving Wohlfarth has alluded to the methodological implications of such an approach: "perception of the image is bound to the 'instant.' It is always a function of a fleeting 'constellation'" (82). On the other side, Benjamin's aphoristic method runs the risk of sliding into a mute empiricism which does not require that the audience integrate the isolated fragments and traces into a system of figures. Read from this perspective, Benjamin's mere enumeration of heterogeneous, discrete facts is problematical. Such an interpretive practice could be the initial phase in an attempt which aims at synthetic reconstruction. However, Theodor Adorno feared that in Benjamin's critical practice, "the theological motif of calling things by their names tends to turn into a wide-eyed presentation of mere facts" (129). For this reason, too, the audience is persuaded to relax its critical faculties; the connections which it ought to draw out of the juxtaposed fragments may never be made. Even if Adorno acknowledges that Benjamin's meticulous documentation is able to encompass copious historical detail, he has reservations about its tendency towards an occult positivism. This is because Benjamin does not adopt a synthetic viewpoint which apprehends literary/cultural artifacts as the unintended truth of the social totality.

Benjamin's ideogrammatic composition in the mechanical reproduction essay implies the construction of a history, a "before" and an "after." The essay is organized around a distinction between aural (painting, theatre) and post-aural (photography, film) cultures. Aura in Benjamin's constructional model is not without resemblance to what Rudolf Otto has called "the idea of the holy." In the profane world of modern consumer societies, aura is expunged by the ineluctable development of technology which drastically alters the human sensorium. This depletion of aura in favour

of "profane illumination" goes hand in hand with the upsurge of new perceptual energies released by the unrelenting advance of machine technology. He describes its systematic dissolution as follows:

> for the first time—and this is the effect of the film—man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays (229).

Owing to its erosion of aura, Benjamin contended that film epitomized the subversiveness of the new audio-visual technologies. In this context it should be pointed out that Benjamin employed the cameraman—the living embodiment of technical reproducibility in art—as a historical figure to impart a feeling for the tangible density of real history. For the cameraman must be construed as someone quite different from the painter: "[t]he painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web"(233). Here cinematic experience has conceptual priority over an aestheticism which had been tainted by the persistence of aura. It is in this sense also that *l'art pour l'art's* aestheticization of politics can be read by Benjamin as a precursor of fascist ideology. The disintegration of aura, however, was conducive to an all-embracing politicization of art advantageous to progressive forces: whereas the audience of painting was made up of monadic individuals, film-goers merged into a collective group. In a similar way, the cinema's shock and aesthetic distanciation reshaped the non-reflective consciousness of massified man with telling effect.

Moreover, for Benjamin, the deaestheticization of art seemed to evolve not so much from self-conscious artistic practice as from the irreversible dynamic of a pure technological impetus. Against this position, Adorno claimed that the very technical construction of the modernist

form itself was able to demystify the cultic and ritual features of aesthetic experience: "that precisely the uttermost consistency in the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art changes this art and instead of rendering it into a taboo or fetish, brings it close to the state of freedom, of something that can be consciously produced and made" (122). Correspondingly, Benjamin's inability to appreciate the subversive vocation of technically advanced avant-garde art overlooked its progressive politicizing potential. So it is that if Benjamin disparaged avant-garde art and saw a close relationship between its aestheticization of warfare and fascism, it is very clear that Adorno felt its enlargement of critical possibilities could be salvaged. So it is also that if Benjamin's valorization of cinema inflated its disruptive potency, it is very clear that Adorno thought the standards of high culture remained a fulcrum for critical judgement. The irony for Adorno was that, in contrast with atonal music, film maintained an intrinsically aural character. In spite of all this, Adorno lauded Benjamin's mapping of the disenchantment of art. In particular, he was able to agree with Benjamin's discovery of the eclipse of aura, but could not sanction the idiosyncratic portrayal of this intricate historical transformation.

The theoretical suggestiveness of Benjamin's model can be usefully gauged if we relate it to the tenor of McLuhan's essential argument. The latter's visual and post-visual cultures are strikingly similar to Benjamin's distinction between a "before" and an "after" (aural and post-aural cultures). Nonetheless, when McLuhan proceeds to elaborate his ideogrammatic composition, he collapses temporally based cultural forms into an autonomous rationalizing technology. Obviously, this suppression of concrete situational origins and their effacement in the ahistorical closure of a technological determinism is open to the same reproach which Adorno addressed to Benjamin's unthematized list of disparate phenomena and contingent events: both fail to develop a mediated analysis of culture. Yet the undeniable methodological interest of Benjamin's stance, contraposed to McLuhan's bald and indivisible formalizations, may be seen in the way in which he absorbs the empirical raw materials of history into cultural studies. Jameson expresses the contrast in this way: "Where

McLuhan juxtaposes impersonal forces and objects (e.g. the technology of printing, changes in language habits and literary forms), Benjamin always mediates his analogies or ideograms with historical figures, with ideal characters who embody the concrete life form lived within the limits of the determinate historical and technological situation" (Jameson "Benjamin" 125). Indeed, it might be said that McLuhan goes so far as to rechannel Benjamin's fondness for concrete historical details in the direction of a pure technological determinism. It follows that, whatever the faults Adorno painstakingly ferreted out, Benjamin's cultural discourse is a more suitable model for cultural historians than McLuhan's methodological axioms.

But even this blanket assessment requires some qualification. If the cultural historian is to discern the full complexity of McLuhan's thought, he/she must not reduce it to one more example of "false consciousness." The inescapable fact is that electronic culture constitutes an irreducible given in modern consumer societies. Precisely for this reason, it would be a mistake to discredit McLuhan's theoretical solution on the grounds that it is *nothing but* an abstract and formal mode of cognition. If "McLuhanism" has been an influential ideological construction, this is due to its embeddedness in the original factual data of technological societies. In McLuhan the stubbornly repeated motif of electronics and computers is not a mere empty formula or stereotyped representation. On the contrary, it is the concentrated expression of the communications matrix in the technological environment of media society. In the unmediated concept of electronic culture, McLuhan's ideogrammatic modes of organizing experience uncover a new web of relationships between human beings and their audile-tactile milieu. On this level, the empirical "moment" preserves the relative irreducibility of its object of study when it brings to light the originality of particular interconnections in consumer society (or as James M. Curtis puts it, "the latent structures of historical process" (150)).

In *Understanding Media,* McLuhan's historical paradigm pivots on the distinction between visual and post-visual cultures. Visuality, whose authority had been buttressed by both the phonetic alphabet and the printing press, is today pushed aside by the new electronic media. With the

marginalization of visuality, McLuhan's ideogrammatic practice tries to identify empirically the specific structural components of media society:

> The ultimate conflict between sight and sound, between written and oral kinds of perception and organization of existence is upon us. Since understanding stops action, as Nietzsche observed, we can moderate the fierceness of this conflict by understanding the media that extend us and raise these wars within and without us....We are no more prepared to encounter radio and TV in our literate milieu than the native of Ghana is able to cope with the literacy that takes him out of his collective tribal world and beaches him in individual isolation. We are as numb in our new electric world as the native involved in our literate and mechanical culture (30-31).

Here the ever-recurring motif of a "Gutenberg Galaxy" connotes for McLuhan the disembodied stasis of visual linearity in formal opposition to the flexibility of an audile, tactile sensibility.

This supersession of the visual in the direction of immediate and concurrent inclusiveness ("the medium is the message") is occasioned by the sudden eruption of new technologies which recast the human sensorium. The theoretical framework for the specific character of this process is McLuhan's outline of the four phases that document the ups and downs of visuality: pre-visual (a cool, audile, primitive society based on oral communication); proto-visual (a hot, visual society based on the phonetic alphabet and writing); visual (an even hotter visual society based on the formalization of written language and the printing press); post-visual (a restoration of a cool, audile-tactile society based on the electronic media).

It is not difficult to understand the ways in which McLuhan develops this pivotal and most innovative aspect of his analysis. Formerly integrated, primitive societies emphasized the audile-tactile senses—touch, hearing, smell and taste. But later, vision, through the phonetic alphabet and writing, takes precedence over the generally more spontaneous faculties of the human sensorium. Alongside

the rationalized over-extension of the formal standardization which is the phonetic alphabet, an attenuation of the audil—tactile senses severs the unbroken organicism of primitive society into the precise, regular linearity of the visual. Or, in McLuhan's words,

> The whole man became fragmented man; the alphabet shattered the charmed circle and resonating magic of the tribal world, exploding man into an agglomeration of specialized and psychically impoverished 'individuals,' or units, functioning in a world of linear time and Euclidean space.[3]

Eventually the new electronic media—television and the computer—will deal a death-blow to visual intensity. In McLuhan's terms, written culture as a privileged instrument of communication has been only a local and contingent historical phenomenon. Oddly enough, oral forms of literature prevailed for an immeasurably more protracted period. Today McLuhan claims that written literature as a medium is being systematically displaced by an emergent oral culture with an audile-tactile sensibility.

However, as Derrida and poststructuralism remind us, orality's privileged position in relation to written language is predicated on a faith in a transparent, substantialist meaning or in an organic, unshattered plenitude. Such a structural inversion carries with it the erasure of formalized written language by a fetishized speech and oral communication. The analytical frame of an instantaneous simultaneity has struck some commentators as a metaphysics of presence in a disguised form: McLuhan's stance would seem to imply that no matter how splintered and chaotic experience is in media societies, a vision of reunification can reclaim it from a barren and empty technological universe. Read in this way, the unfortunate effect of McLuhan's slogan, "the medium is the message," is to abolish the unmitigated temporality of difference. While this criticism is valid it may also be said to recontain a critical advance which can be detected in the new insights of McLuhan's empiricism. On the surface of it, a technological *reductio ad absurdum* deflects attention from a knotted and very palpable temporal experience. That is, everywhere leverage is attributable to the technique of

invention—the mere appearance of television or computers causes an upheaval which redirects the historical process. On the other hand, a synthetic, multi-dimensional understanding must grant a relative autonomy to the new objects and inventions of technology. For instance, it is correct to say that a pure technological determinism blots out the irreducible difference of historical process as static presence. But it is also true that vibrant empirical descriptions of machine and technological inventions underscore the structural permutations which have remoulded the human sensorium. From this point of view, then, technology has a relative autonomy that originates in its vivid rendering, on a dispersed and empirical level, of media society. Thus cultural historians are compelled to recognize in technology a semi-autonomy and a mediatory capacity.

Perhaps it is worthwhile at this point to ask if McLuhan's model reifies technology as some commentators have proposed and, over and above all of this, if his ideogrammatic method is a valid epistemology in cultural history. McLuhan's celebration of technology has been identified by a number of critics as the unchanging assumption underpinning his cultural theories. Thus James W. Carey remarks that "McLuhan ends in the embrace of a thorough technological determinism, a poet of post-industrial society, and a prophet with one message: yield to the restorative capacity of the modern machine" (176).

Here the central organizing category overestimates the momentum of technique, inventions, the new electronic media, etc., while it underestimates the social organization of production and the praxis-project of human beings. As a result technology is presented as a virtually neutral or ahistorical organizational fiction. This is also what John Fekete describes in a striking paragraph:

> The paradox is the paradox of reification. The fetish of technology in itself, in its internal characteristics, suppresses the historical fact that it is not some technology in the abstract, but always an *established* technology that is not neutral, because of its determinate relations to 'the *quality* of human needs it is best suited to satisfy.' But McLuhan does not consider communications primarily in terms of social

> relations among human beings, but in terms of relations between human beings and things, and among the things themselves. His version of critical theory renounces questions of human needs, interests, values, or goals.[4]

In other words, reification in all respects infuses McLuhan's general theoretical framework. For McLuhan's catchphrase, "the content of a medium being another medium," endows objects drained of vitality (the mass-produced materials of a consumer society) with a plenitude of meaning. Technology is not just another indispensible component of consumer societies. Quite the reverse is true: it is hypostatized into a strictly rational and all-pervasive mechanical causality which encompasses both the social formation and the human subject. Its empty extension throughout the social fabric irrevocably creates a sterile and uniform milieu. Here the dominant metaphor of a cybernetic universe usurps the dense realities of genuine lived experience and history. It matters little whether or not he preserves residues of self-conscious human activity; in any case, his reading of history foregrounds technological phenomena to the detriment of a historically situated conscious human agency.

How then are we to assess the ideogrammatic construction—McLuhan would say the "mosaic approach"—which underlies his technological vision of history? McLuhan, like Benjamin, invests the mutilated detritus of commodity production and mass media in consumer civilization with his own ingrained mode of interpretation. His method is to juxtapose and reorganize the isolated impressions of a damaged existence into the interlocking system of a mosaic. And for just this reason McLuhan suggests that his ideogrammatic composition depends on a polyvalent, multi-dimensional mosaic intelligibility which surpasses older, less sophisticated interpretive codes. In one sense the technique of juxtaposition *does* develop concrete analogies as perceptual vehicles that are able to convey the peculiar opaqueness of the intricate commodity network permeating technological societies. For if McLuhan's ideogrammatic method has its ultimate limits, there can at least be no doubt that it involves a phenomenological description of the lived situation of human beings in

consumer societies. Such a critical procedure envisages instantaneous electronic media and mass communications systems as, in Sartre's words, "a reality that is lived for itself and which possesses a particular efficacy" (67). This, indeed, is the attraction of McLuhan's exhaustive description of technological society. Seen in this way, the material facts of commodity production and media society regain a relative autonomy. And this implies that even if McLuhan's theorizing is problematical, his findings are anchored in the dreary realities of the society of the spectacle. Yet in another sense the premium which McLuhan places on heretogeneous, dispersed instances never arrives at the system of relationships (e.g. the social totality) through which details and episodes are subsumed in an overall form. Such ideogrammatic juxtapositions valorize particular significations and anecdotal facts which effectively put into parentheses the relationship to the wider social totality. Fekete has drawn our attention to the implications of this methodology:

> We may note that the universalized mythic comportment in McLuhan is simply the universalization of the positivist objectivist attitude first analyzed by Husserl: of cognitions connected with and limited to the immediate pragmatism of particularist everyday life. The everyday 'facts of existence,' and ready-made structures and transcendences facing the individual in everyday life, are then projected analogically (via the mediation of the extension theory) as the anthropomorphized picture of objectivity (143).

Thus the complexities of the historical process disappear in a superficial catalogue of localized and accidental incidents.

In a formal sense, then, McLuhan's mosaic technique has a rigid and one-dimensional quality which is cut off from the concrete determinations of a situated history. Analogical apposition is a cover-concept that gathers into itself the emphatically disparate entities of day-to-day life in a rationalized desacralization of the world. Here an explicit thematization is not posited as a formal prerequisite in cultural history. McLuhan suggests that juxtaposed images

extracted from the junk materials and media detritus of consumer society can reconstruct the social totality. When, for example, he constructs an ideogram or an analogy (the juxtaposition of an electronic medium to an audile-tactile culture), it is presented side by side in unmediated contiguity that fractures history into a series of disconnected instances. Nowhere are the diverse facts and period details figured in a dynamic system of interrelationships. Such an interpretive practice—an enumerated list of discontinuous entities—is reduced to a spatialized or synchronic form that is unable to represent the dialectical temporality of history. Deprived of genuine mediated reciprocities and interactions, McLuhan is driven to substitute bland statements in which "TV's" and "computers" (as specimens of the concrete) are converted into the pseudo-mediations between theoretical constructs and cultural interpretation. On the level of representation, his far less vivid descriptions may be seen as a reversal of Benjamin's hermeneutic which never fails to mediate its ideograms in accord with the figural richness of a temporal specificity (we might recall here the figures of the cameraman, the *flaneur*, the lyric poet, the storyteller or the Angelus Novus). Thus McLuhan's mosaic approach neglects the real theoretical difficulties in mediation: how is it possible to sustain the tension between particular details and the universalizing cultural analysis?

We may conclude by evaluating the formal consequences of Benjamin and McLuhan's now familiar ideogrammatic composition in cultural history. As we have seen, the interpretive validity of these "theories of history" emerges from their impressionistic alignment and projection of the discrete, unrelated phenomena of everyday life. The methodological advantage of Benjamin and McLuhan's historical schemata lies in the way each conveys a rich phenomenological study of the new lived experience that is the society of the spectacle. At this level are to be found the instruments of analysis (McLuhan's print-culture and electronic culture or Benjamin's photography or film) which momentarily brackets "crude facticity" in order that it may be investigated in all its complexity. At this level also, vital information for the reconstruction of cultural history is accentuated in the privileged form of the aphoristic fragment or ideogram. At one and the same time, however, Benjamin

and McLuhan's "theories of history" can be read as framing mechanisms which might exclude concrete situational determinations and hypostatize empirically observed data into the detemporalized closure of a pure technological determinism. Indeed, for both Benjamin and McLuhan,[5] new techniques and inventions are the very mainspring of an irreversible historical transformation. Yet, in spite of the structural similarity in their explanatory codes, two significant differences between Benjamin and McLuhan should be underlined. First, in Benjamin's writings technique and invention must be understood, not as the approximate cause of historical restructuration, but as something indissolubly linked to the social organization of production. McLuhan, on the other hand, adheres to the technological model in its one-dimensional abstractness. Second, Benjamin's ideograms or analogies are mediated by the effort to embody in a figural gesture the incongruities and anomalies of a unique historical conjuncture. It is precisely Benjamin's use of the ideogram or aphoristic fragment (albeit in an oblique form), not as a disjunct and random subjective monent, but as a privileged access to the social totality which demarcates his practice of cultural history from the naive empiricism in McLuhan's system of thought.

Neither Benjamin nor McLuhan were able to transcend the limits of the implacable technological determinism in their "theories of history." But the lacunae and discrepancies of their *oeuvre* put into relief the organizational dilemmas that haunt literary/cultural history. This dilemma is clearest in the dissociation of two spheres—formal theoretical elements and existential/historical moments; synthetic reconstruction and factual data—which ought to be co-ordinated and integrated in cultural history. Yet it seems to me that the critical practice of cultural history must construct the mediations—however fitful and precarious—between theoretical constructs and anecdotal facts. Otherwise this structural rift will split apart the provisional solutions that a new methodological development might invoke for cultural history.

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NOTES

1 For a further discussion of "theories of history" see Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), 124-25, and *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971), 321-22.

2 Carol Jacobs, *The Dissimulating Harmony* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978): 98. Jacobs presents a poststructuralist reading of Benjamin; for another example of this well-known critique of "historicism," see Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin* (London: New Left Books, 1981). Such poststructuralist orientations may be usefully juxtaposed to Irving Wohlfarth, "Walter Benjamin's Image of Interpretation," *New German Critique* 17 (Spring 1979): 70-98, who argues that Jacobs "selectively disregards...the historical structure of the dialectical image" (89). For further commentary on the "structuralist" tendencies in Benjamin, see John Fekete, "Culture, History and Ambivalence," *Cine-Tracts* 1 (Fall 1977-Winter 1978): 30-40. Important recent scholarship on Benjamin includes the following: Timothy Bahti, "History of Rhetorical Enactment: Walter Benjamin's Theses 'On the Concept of History,'" *Diacritics* (Sept. 1979): 2-17; Sandor Radnoti, "The Effective Power of Art: On Benjamin's Aesthetics," trans. John Fekete, *Telos* 49 (Fall 1981): 61-82; Richard Wolin, "An Aesthetic of Redemption," *Telos* 43 (Spring 1980): 61-90; "From Messianism to Materialism: The Later Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin," *New German Critique* 22 (Winter 1981): 81-108; "Benjamin's Theory of Experience," *Theory and Society* 11 (Jan. 1982): 17-42. For another valuable contemporary interpretation which emhasizes Benjamin's politics, see also Susan Buck-Morss, "Walter Benjamin—Revolutionary Writer (I) and (II)," *New Left Review* 128 (July-Aug. 1981): 50-75 and 129 (Sept.-Oct. 1981): 77-95, as well as her *The Origins of Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Free Press, 1977).

3 Quoted in John Fekete, *The Critical Twilight* (London: Routledge, 1978): 213.

4 *The Critical Twilight*, 138. See for a more positive reading of McLuhan his "Massage in the Mass Age: Remembering the McLuhan Matrix," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 6 (Fall 1982): 50-67.

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