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Modernity and Its Vicissitudes

Joseph D. Lewandowski

I

Perhaps one of the most interesting, and certainly more problematic, aspects of modernity for cultural critics is its end: What does the “end of modernity”—the dropping or abandoning of the heavy enlightenment baggage of teleology, emancipation, demythologization, subjectivity, rationality, and so on—and the emergence of something even more peculiar, a “postmodernity,” mean for cultural criticism? Is cultural critique still possible? desirable? tenable?

It is my suspicion that modernity contains its own critique and that postmodernity is best understood as precisely that—as ineluctably entwined with modernity. I want to take seriously something like Lyotard’s claim that postmodernism is “undoubtedly a *part of the modern*.”¹ But for any *critical* cultural theory to emerge, we need to *develop* more fully and clearly the ways in which the two are bound up with one another. What is needed today is to define and examine this entwinement of modernity/postmodernity. We don’t need to languish in, or perpetuate, the too often sterile de-

bate about the validity or defining features of postmodernity; rather, we need to bring it down to earth by realizing its *interconnectedness with modernity* and asking what relevance and significance it has for critics of cultures.

Two texts that both raise and stage this kind of entwinement are, not surprisingly, Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism" and Derrida's "The Ends of Man," texts I shall treat in some detail in what follows. My hope is that in setting a certain kind of modern discourse (in this case, Heidegger's "destruction") alongside what is now generally considered postmodern discourse (here "deconstruction"), the entwinement of postmodernity with modernity will emerge more clearly. Of course, particular maneuvers—those infinitely usable, stylized strategies of reading surface over depth, textuality over authenticity—will allow for some important points of departure and help us to pose certain questions about the "style" of deconstruction and its relation to contemporary cultural forms.

It should be made clear at the outset that neither Heidegger's nor Derrida's infinitely complex thinking can be limited to some kind of representative status, as essentially modern or the realization of the postmodern. Too often we forget that Derrida—and, for that matter, someone like Foucault or Deleuze—has not been eager to take up the banner of postmodernity. Only a few thinkers who are associated with "postmodernity"—Lyotard and Vattimo, for example—willingly accept and consistently use the term.² But we should remember that both Heidegger and Derrida, intentionally or not, very much "stand for" particular aspects of modernity/postmodernity. Of course, the Archimedean point of reference shifts, and modernity and postmodernity—sociohistorically and culturally constructed for various canonical, ideological, and economic reasons—are therefore not static "epochs" but rather more like tributaries in the Heraclitean stream into which one can never step twice. Still, I would suggest that the fact that these notions and their (perhaps too quick and easy) associations with Heidegger and Derrida are problematic does not invalidate or necessarily undermine an attempt to articulate their interconnectedness. Indeed, I would argue quite the opposite: since such terms are so closely meshed we are all the more obliged to clarify their relationship every time we press them into the service of critical discourse.

The issue I want to raise here and explore in this essay via Heidegger and Derrida is in many ways an extension of Albrecht Wellmer's "The Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism: The Critique of Reason Since Adorno."³ Wellmer is not widely known or read in cultural studies circles in the United States (few of his writings have been translated). But his contribution to the now waning modernity/postmodernity debate should not be underestimated (or collapsed into, say, Habermas's set of criticisms).⁴ Indeed, a small part of what I hope to show here is the pertinence and richness of Wellmer's thinking on contemporary cultural critique and the question of modernity/postmodernity; I am indebted to his reading throughout the body of this paper, though I shall only consider his text explicitly in my closing section. Following Wellmer, I shall try to demonstrate here that postmodernism is not a conceptual break from modern critiques of social structures and subjectivity but rather the wrestling with some of the persistent concerns and most difficult tasks of modernity—questions of the nature of community, justice, plurality, self-determination, autonomy, and so on. Such a Wellmerian reading of the "persistence" of modernity may open up the possibility of developing a distinctly *critical* perspective on our own peculiar modern/postmodern socio-cultural position.⁵

II

Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world.
—Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism"⁶

If we read Heidegger as a cultural critic (and here one may defend such an approach by recalling that the later Heidegger was very much concerned with the sociocultural questions concerning technology and innovation), then he is perhaps best characterized as a reactionary for whom modern ways of thinking and being "present world crisis" (242).⁷ In the "Letter on Humanism," the only text of Heidegger's I consider here, this crisis manifests itself in something he calls "homelessness." "Homelessness" for Heidegger is not of interest ontically (the displacement of thousands of war refugees is not what he is talking about here), but rather *onto-*

logically. What Heidegger does in his “Letter on Humanism” is uncouple the sociocultural question of “homelessness” from actual or ontic agents. Heidegger filters the ontic phenomenon of homelessness through the *Seinsfrage*; he ontologizes “homelessness” and sees it as that which prevents us from making ourselves at home, from “dwelling poetically” in what he calls the “house of Being.”

What Heidegger develops via an ontological analysis of “homelessness” is a rather reactionary and certainly macro-level critique of modernity: ontological homelessness is the destiny of the *world*. The general reactionary thrust of Heidegger’s criticisms is very much rooted in the German Mandarin tradition out of which he emerges.⁸ Heidegger does not think in terms of textuality but rather in the terms of, as Adorno not so delicately puts it, the reactionary jargon of authenticity. In Heidegger’s view, authenticity and an authentic mode of being-in-the-world are lost and in need of critical retrieval via “Destruktion” and the posing of the *Seinsfrage*: destruction lays bare the subjective will to power that informs and infects every aspect of cultural modernity and our oblivion to the question of Being. I want to locate Heidegger’s thinking about ontological “homelessness” in this text in a peculiar form of inverted (not progressive) modern thinking (“making it new” by making it old, we might say: remember Heidegger’s attraction to the ancient Greeks). While the tenor of Heidegger’s critique is indeed reactionary and sounds anti-modern, he nevertheless does not so much negate modernity as he reinstates certain aspects of it with his backward-looking metaphysical longings for authenticity and a “new” ground or proper place (a “home”) that has somehow been foreclosed to the modern subject and with a concern for the collective “we” of the modern world.

Heidegger’s critique takes as its conceptual point of departure Sartre’s formulation of “existence” as it is contrasted with essence. Thinking the origin of essence—here conceived not as representational or instrumental thought, but as a thinking of Being, a meditative thinking that “accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man” (193)—brings about or makes manifest a realization of true essences, including, especially, the essence of the human. It is because it fails to think essences in this noninstrumental, meditative way that Heidegger criticizes humanism, for, he argues, the

“essence of man consists in his being more than merely human, if this is represented as ‘being a rational creature’” (221).

Yet it is in precisely this “more than” that Heidegger, as he admits, remains within, rather than negating, the humanist tradition. Indeed, he refigures that tradition and raises the stakes: “Humanism is opposed because it does not set the *humanitas* of man high enough” (210). The historical failure of humanism, then, is to subjectivize being, making human being the lord of beings, one who is in opposition to and imposes his or her will upon the world. Developed in *Sein und Zeit*, and alluded to here, however, is human being as *Dasein*—a radicalized account of the human subject in which he or she is always and already involved in the world, is a being-in-the-world.⁹ *Dasein* is peculiar insofar as it is that being which *ek*-sists or stands out in the world insofar as it can pose the question of Being. Indeed, Heidegger will often characterize such a being-there as a site of openness, a standing in relation to Being. So Heidegger does not reject the notion of an “essence of humanity” so much as he seeks to rethink radically that notion with the standing-out (“*ek*-sistence”) of *Dasein*.

Heidegger then wants to ask: What does it mean to be, and what are the possibilities for, a *Dasein* in modernity? One of the things it does not mean is that *Dasein* is a privileged subject for whom language (or technology or beings) is to be used instrumentally. Rather, *Dasein* is the possible opening through which beings come to pass in their disclosive essence or Being. This coming to pass happens in language, but not in the crisis of modernity, where human beings understand language as an instrumental way in which beings, including other human beings, are mastered by humans. Such a humanistic understanding of language forces language “to surrender itself to our mere willing and trafficking, as an instrument of domination over beings” (199). Here again the problem with humanism is that it privileges the being that “has” language and reduces the disclosive power of language to the “service of expediting communication” (197).¹⁰ Indeed, Heidegger says that

[t]he downfall of language is, however, not the grounds for, but already a consequence of, the state of affairs in which language

under the domination of the modern metaphysics of subjectivity almost irremediably falls out of its element. Language still denies us its essence: that it is the house of the truth of Being. (199)

So the “fallen” state of language as instrumentalizable form of communication or mastery over “beings” is the consequence of the prevailing humanistic “domination of the modern metaphysics of subjectivity.”

In contradistinction to such a metaphysical humanistic understanding of language as objectifying “actualities in [a] calculative, business-like way” (199), Heidegger gives an account of language as disclosing or unconcealing of Being:

In its essence language is not the utterance of an organism; nor is it the expression of a living thing. Nor can it ever be thought in an essentially correct way in terms of its symbolic character, perhaps not even in terms of the character of signification. Language is the lighting-concealing advent of Being itself. (206)

The *ek*-sistence of *Dasein*, as I suggested above, is not Sartre’s existence in the everyday of beings, but a standing out in Being *in* (not *via*) language—a way of Being *proper only to man* (204). Heidegger thus links the neologisms *ek*-sistence and *Dasein* with his radicalized and ontologized notion of language as the locus where humanity’s *true* essence “dwells” in order to argue that

[l]anguage is the house of Being which comes to pass from Being and is pervaded by Being. And so it is proper to think the essence of language from its correspondence to Being and indeed as this correspondence, that is, as the home of man’s essence. (213)

So noninstrumental language—language as the house of Being and “home of man’s essence,” a language that speaks man rather than a language that man speaks—is the openness in which human beings “dwell” rather than construct and articulate by way of communication, discourse, speech, and so on.

Concomitant with the ontologization of language as that

which is “pervaded by Being” and with the account of “homelessness” as that which prevents us from authentic dwelling there persists a deep critique of reason and purposive-rational (*zweck-rational*) activity in Heidegger’s “Letter.” Modern rational subjects, according to Heidegger, utilize beings (*seiendes*—that which is) and thereby forget the “authentic” question of Being (*Sein*—that by which something is; that which lets beings be). Such a purposive-rational orientation represents for Heidegger both the modern imperatives of mass production and technology and the culmination of the failure of Western reason starting with Plato. Modernity is the fall into beings and obliviousness of Being:

The oblivion of Being makes itself known indirectly through the fact that man always observes and handles only beings. Even so, because man cannot avoid having some notion of Being, it is explained merely as what is “most general” and therefore as something that encompasses beings, or as a creation of the infinite being, or as the product of a finite subject. At the same time “Being” has long stood for “beings” and, inversely, the latter for the former, the two of them caught in a curious and still unraveled confusion. (218–19)

Thus, the question of Being in modern thinking is reduced to a question of beings, of ontic phenomena, by way of a purposive-rational orientation that genealogically confuses the latter with the former. In modernity, human beings determine the appearance of every being as the material of labor, as a standing reserve to be put to use. Such a privileging of the human subject and its purposive-rational relation to beings misses precisely the ontological difference that Heidegger seeks to articulate in his formulation of “Being itself.”

Being itself, though, is not something wholly other than reason or outside of modernity; it is

not God and not a cosmic ground. Being is farther than all beings and is yet nearer to man than every being, be it a rock, a beast, a work of art, a machine, be it an angel or a God. Being is the nearest. Yet the near remains farthest from man. Man at first clings always and only to beings. (210–11)

That which is near in the modern world is precisely not beings, despite the proliferation of cultural commodities. Instead, Heidegger's formulation of the "still unraveled confusion" of the question of Being demonstrates that nearer than beings is Being itself: "nearer than the nearest and at the same time for ordinary thinking farther than the farthest is nearness itself: the truth of Being" (212). An important aspect of the crisis of modern thinking, then, is that it conflates what is nearest and its ownmost with beings as commodities to be produced and consumed.

The other criticism that I want to consider here is that which has already been alluded to: the ontologized "homeless destiny" that threatens modernity. The problem of "homelessness" points toward what modernity does not think and how modernity does not perceive its own condition. The "estrangement of man has its roots in the homelessness of modern man" (219). In other words, the ontic, everyday homelessness of peoples in the modern world is merely the manifestation of a *deeper* problem: the "estrangement of man." "Homelessness" is neither actual (ontic) nor textual, but rather *inauthentic*—an improper "dwelling" outside of the "true" home of *Dasein*. The "homelessness" of modern subjects serves as illustrative of a more fundamental, *ontological* question (i.e., the *Seinsfrage*) that unfolds the very destiny of modernity. Heidegger says that

everything depends upon this alone, that the truth of Being come to language and that thinking attain to this language. Perhaps, then, language requires much less precipitous expression than proper silence. But who of us today would want to imagine that his attempts to think are at home on the paths of silence? At best, thinking could perhaps point toward the truth of Being, and indeed toward it as what is to be thought. (223)

The "everything" to which Heidegger refers here is no less than the destiny of the modern world in what he perceives as its present crisis. His thinking points toward—albeit abstractly and super-foundationally—an alternative possibility for thought, the "truth of Being" itself, and the *Dasein* that is capable of such thought. In anticipation of this alternate possibility, thinking becomes a kind

of anti-intellectual and silent wandering, following a path of silence toward a “home” in language.

Still, such a silent, anti-intellectual wandering never emerges as purely a surface, anti-foundational, irrationalism of textuality and faint traces, and lack of concern for authenticity (as we shall see manifest in Derrida). Heidegger’s hermeneutic that questions the nearness of Being in language intimates that the neighborhood of Being awaits *our* arrival: “Let us also in the days ahead remain as wanderers on the way into the neighborhood of Being” (224).

Hence Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism” expresses a peculiarly reactionary reading and critique of modernity and suggests a sense of the need to articulate an alternative “end.” The validity of “Being itself” and its proximity in language are never questioned, nor is the notion of the “us” for whom this alternative is necessary, nor is the problematic of using anti-reason (“silent wandering”) to critique reason. Instead, language as the house of Being unfolds an alternate destiny (“home”) for estranged *Dasein*. The superfoundational dimensions to Heidegger’s thinking—the search for and insistence on “authentic” notions, the positing of the genealogical confusion of the question of beings and Being, the proximity of Being to the openness of *Dasein*—reinvolve him in modernity’s attempt to articulate authentic “ends” of humanity, of a “we.” To be sure, Heidegger’s level of abstraction, hypostatization of Being (as “Being itself”), and distance from any materialist concern for culture make his criticisms of modernity difficult to concretize (Heidegger himself had precisely such difficulties); his is a kind of perverse or “non-materialist cultural critique.” Yet the reactionary concern for the need to transform (not simply negate) modernity cannot be divorced from Heidegger’s thinking. Indeed, the “brief” (or not so brief, depending upon whom one consults) association with German National Socialism can be understood as precisely such a transformative attempt, however ill-fated and perverted.

III

His laughter then will burst out, directed toward a return that no longer will have the form of the metaphysical repetition of

humanism, nor doubtless, “beyond” metaphysics, the form of a memorial or a guarding of the meaning of Being, the form of the house and of the truth of Being. He will dance outside the house.

—Jacques Derrida, “The Ends of Man”¹¹

Derrida speaks, here, of Zarathustra. Zarathustra is in many ways the aesthetic analogue of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*—Nietzsche’s neologism for the possibility of a human existence beyond modern existence, beyond the moral imperatives of “good” and “evil,” a frame into which something other than modern, historical consciousness will fit. Precisely what that something “other” is Nietzsche leaves open to interpretation and is beyond the scope of this essay.¹² But for Derrida—at least the Derrida of ’68, the only one I shall be able to consider here—the “end of man” represents the emergence of a certain Nietzschean affirmation or *sich Überwinden*, the beginning of a non-metaphysical subject that “awakens and leaves, without turning back to what he leaves behind him. He burns his text and erases the traces of his steps” (152).¹³ *Dasein* is, in Derrida’s reading, the very embodiment of metaphysical humanism—a “guardian of the meaning” and house of Being. Language as the “house of Being” establishes the *raison d’être* for Deconstruction: it is precisely *that* (linguistic) house that needs to be deconstructed, that “subject” (*Dasein*) that needs to be decentered. Derrida questions the Heideggerean motif of nearness or “proximity.” The metaphoric “house of Being” in Heidegger becomes the point of departure for Derrida’s critique of humanism and anthropocentrism in “The Ends of Man.” For Derrida, the “ends” of man, in the equivocal sense of the word “ends,” are in modernity unrealizable and exhausted.

What Derrida wants to do in this text is to try to succeed where Heidegger fails: destruction did not go far enough; it still carries the heavy metaphysical humanistic baggage of modernity. Deconstruction introduces a particular set of technical maneuvers (what Derrida will characterize here as “style”) that Heidegger lacks. Conceptually, Derrida presents us with a field or horizontal paradigm rather than a vertical or depth model of thinking. But Deconstruction also occupies a peculiar position—one can only deconstruct what has already been constructed. The *house* of Being

can only be deconstructed with the very same linguistic stones that comprise it and always runs the risk of reconstruction. As I have already said, postmodern discourse's conceptual positions are entwined with modern ones: their referential point—the point from which they orient themselves—is in fact modernity. From such a position, however, Derrida seeks to change or remap the “terrain” of reading, or at least undermine the Heideggerian hermeneutic that informs “Destruction's” reading and critique of modernity. But even this is problematic, since, as Derrida says, “the simple practice of language ceaselessly reinstates the new terrain of the oldest ground” (151).

Derrida begins “The Ends of Man” reflexively, by considering the political and cultural significance of an “international” philosophy colloquium and by intimating the material conditions under which such a colloquium is possible. The “inter” of this national conference suggests to Derrida's mind two things: that (1) “philosophical nationalities have been formed” (126) and (2) despite these nationalities, there is nevertheless a common element, a common language spoken among these countries that allows for an “international” colloquium. For, says Derrida, “the colloquium can take place only in a medium, or rather in the representation that all the participants must make of a certain transparent ether, which here would be none other than what is called universality of philosophical discourse” (126). What Derrida does here, I suggest, in theorizing the conditions that make “international” intellectual conferences possible, is pose a fundamental question about the possibility of subjectivity and language. Do “we”—and Derrida will close by asking, “But who, we?” (152)—still stand in the shadow of Heidegger's critique that speaks a universal language and seeks to articulate transformative “ends” for a collective *Dasein*? Are “we” hermeneutically teleological and transparent? Such a line of inquiry leads Derrida to (and away from) Heidegger's “Letter.” Derrida explores the vicissitudinous readings of the notion of *Dasein* and, in turn, what is at stake in a critique that “links the *we* of the philosopher to the ‘we men,’ to the *we* in the horizon of humanity” (131). The question, in short, is: Once the “house of Being” is deconstructed and *Dasein* thoroughly decentered, can there be a macro-level reading of a “we”?

Yet Derrida does not simply take leave of Heidegger. Heideg-

ger's handling of this "we" poses several problems for Derrida and the kind of "end" he wants to stake out in his text:

[t]he thinking of the end of man . . . is always already prescribed in metaphysics, in the thinking of the truth of man. What is difficult to think today is an end of man that would not be organized by a dialectics of truth and negativity, an end of man that would not be a teleology in the first person plural. . . . The *we* is the unity of absolute knowledge and anthropology, of God and man, of onto-theo-teleology and humanism. "*Being*" and language—the group of languages—that the *we* governs or opens: such is the name of that which assures the transition between metaphysics and humanism via the *we*. (137)

Derrida senses how a "we" establishes (or presupposes) a "unity of absolute knowledge and anthropology, of God and man, of onto-theo-teleology and humanism." What is "difficult" today is to think of an "end" of humanity that is *not* organized according to the hallmarks of modernism: "a dialectics of truth and negativity" governed by the relay between metaphysics and humanism and linked via a "we."

Derrida perceives the notion of *Dasein* "in" a language and thus open to the question of Being as necessarily thinking the truth of "man" in his teleological and metaphysical humanistic essence:

The end of man (as factual anthropological limit) is announced to thought from the vantage point of the end of man (as a determined opening or the infinity of a *telos*). Man is that which is in relation to his end, in the fundamentally equivocal sense of the word. Since always. (138)

Like Nietzsche, Derrida understands enlightened modern consciousness as essentially historical consciousness: actions, events, human life take on meaning in modernity only insofar as they unfold temporally from the vantage point of the human subject. And it is into this teleological understanding of the human subject that Derrida situates Heidegger's reactionary account of a "homeless" "we" implicit in *Dasein* and all the subsequent humanistic readings of Heidegger done in postwar France. In Heidegger, and in postwar readings of Heidegger, the fundamental principle "proper"

to *Dasein* is, as discussed earlier, its open relation and nearness to Being in language. Yet in Derrida's reading, this "general concept of proximity" allows for the aporetic relay between metaphysics and humanism. *Dasein* remains another insistence of "man" (140).

Yet it is not merely *what* Heidegger says—his readmittance of "man" vis-à-vis *Dasein*—that is in need of deconstructing, it is, more important, *how* he reads, from and with what "ends." For, argues Derrida, it is this "style of reading that makes explicit, practices a continual bringing to light, something that resembles, at least, a coming into consciousness, without break, displacement, or change of terrain" (143) that needs deconstruction. The criticism here seems to be that Heidegger remains not simply too hermeneutical and humanistic, but also stays within the realm of ideology critique, the process of unveiling or bringing to light various forms of false or distorted sociocultural practices and beliefs. Derrida reads Heidegger's hermeneutical questioning of Being as a way of reading humankind whereby "we" [he who reads others and himself, that is, the (self-)interpreting subject] are reinstated by our reading: humankind becomes *the text* to be unveiled in an ontologized reading of "homelessness." Though Heidegger appears to dissolve the modern subject by making *Dasein* "text-like" or always already involved in a world, what Heidegger goes on to do is derive a general hermeneutic from that desubjectivized text: context (being-in-the-world) becomes the text. This reinscription of the "we" vis-à-vis the proximity and presence of Being in relation to *Dasein* is telling, for

[i]t is this self-presence, this absolute proximity of the (questioning) being to itself, this familiarity with itself of the being ready to understand Being, that intervenes in the determination of the *factum*, and that motivates the choice of the exemplary being, of the text, the good text for the hermeneutic of the meaning of Being. It is the proximity to itself to the questioning being that leads it to be chosen as the privileged interrogated being. The proximity to itself of the inquirer authorizes the identity of the inquirer and the interrogated. We who are close to ourselves, *we* interrogate *ourselves* about the meaning of Being. (142)

Here Derrida elaborates what has now become a peculiarly post-modern position: first, the critique of *Dasein* as the "good text" for

the hermeneutic of the authenticity of “Being itself” insofar as “the reading of the text of *Dasein* is a hermeneutics of unveiling or of development” (143); and, second, the theorizing of the conditions that make an interrogation or reading of *Dasein* and, in turn, any text as exemplar possible. In Heidegger, according to Derrida, “we” interrogate or read, and thereby reinstate “ourselves” and our readability—“we” understand ourselves best. This reinstatement is the function of the equivocality inherent in Heidegger’s conceptualization of *Dasein*. *Dasein* may not be human being or man, but it is nevertheless the being that we ourselves are (143); it

is nevertheless *nothing other* than man. It is, as we shall see, a repetition of the essence of man permitting a return to what is before the metaphysical concepts of *humanitas*. The subtlety and equivocality of this gesture, then, are what appear to have authorized all the anthropologic deformations in the reading of *Sein und Zeit*, notably in France. (143–44)

Perhaps another way of elaborating the technical maneuver here is by way of Jameson’s reading in *Postmodernism* of the Frank Gehry house in Santa Monica, California (113). The “house” consists of a pre-existing 1920s structure, enveloped in a modern wrapping of corrugated metal. The old walls or wrapping of the pre-existing structure are in a sense (functionally, at least) radically refigured by the new metal wrapping: the wrapper becomes the wrapped. The “text” (the 1920s house) is no longer the same, for it has been recontextualized by the construction of a new textual frame: exteriority has become interiority—the “outside yard” is now a “room.” What is of interest is not the binary question of inner-outer, but the “stylized” space between (the hyphen, the gap created by the technical wrapping), which is neither purely textual nor purely contextual. The postmodern technical move, then, could perhaps be understood as taking the form of wrapping, which is always and already itself a wrapper, whereby neither text nor context become exemplary or illustrative of any “we” or any generalizable hermeneutic observation.

This “wrapping” is, I think, something like what Derrida seeks to do when he tries to avoid a return to thinking, writing and reading “the ends of man” by suggesting two technical (“deconstructive”) strategies that themselves form a kind of wrapping:

- a. To attempt an exit and a deconstruction without changing terrain, by repeating what is implicit in the founding concepts and the original problematic, by using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house, that is, equally, in language. Here, one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating, *relifting* (*relever*), at an always more certain depth, that which one allegedly deconstructs. The continuous process of making explicit, moving toward an opening, risks sinking into the autism of the closure.
- b. To decide to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion, by brutally placing oneself outside, and by affirming an absolute break and difference. Without mentioning all the other forms of *trompe-l'oeil* perspective in which such a displacement can be caught, thereby inhabiting more naively and more strictly than ever the inside one declares one has deserted, the simple practice of language ceaselessly reinstates the new terrain of the oldest ground. (151)

I quote Derrida at length here to establish how a cultural criticism grounded in something like Deconstruction would always and already be caught up in modern thinking: ceaselessly reinstating the new terrain of the previously oldest ground (the previously oldest wrapping always becomes the newly wrapped, and so on). But, however aporetic, “these effects do not suffice to annul the necessity for a ‘change of terrain’” (151). Such Deconstructive criticism may be “necessary,” but it is nevertheless part of the modern—neither an “absolute break” nor an “exit” is possible. Deconstruction does not destroy social structures from the outside (whereas Heidegger thought, at least in the thirties and forties, that “*Destruktion*” could). What may be possible, as Derrida intimates, is to change the terrain by introducing “a new kind of writing” and immanent form of criticism that does not inhabit “naively” that which other forms of critique claim to escape. This kind of writing will be “new” in the sense of what Derrida considers “plurality”: “A new kind of writing must weave and interlace these two [a and b above] motifs of deconstruction. Which amounts to saying that one must speak several languages and produce several texts at once” (151).

This call is for specifically not a break, but for a change both in the terrain of thinking and writing. Of course, Heidegger calls for a radical kind of thinking, but the justification for that call

comes in the bringing to light the exemplary text of *Dasein*, ontological difference, and the metaphoric of proximity of “Being itself.” Derrida *attempts* something else. He “weakens” such destructive thought with an abandonment of being-in-the-world, authenticity, and the *Seinsfrage*, and commits himself instead to a groundless superficiality and Zarathustra-like laughter and dance that would be devoid of any concern for or possibility of a “we.”¹⁴ What is needed, according to Derrida, to achieve this change of terrain, is “a change of ‘style’; and if there is style, Nietzsche reminded us, it must be *plural*” (151). In this infinitely re-usable, immanent, “stylized” critique, language is not the “house of the truth of Being”; human being is not the exemplary text to be understood—it is as deconstructable, as faint, as any other text.

IV

Its the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine, I feel fine.

—R.E.M., *Document*¹⁵

In many ways, the Derrida of '68 has proved prophetic. Speaking and constructing and deconstructing several texts at once is a chief feature, not simply of contemporary criticism, but also (and more importantly) of contemporary culture. The “terrain” of many discourses has been altered, even leveled. Cultures become texts, the state becomes a text, consumerism becomes a text, even, as Derrida says, “we” become texts. Any “we” is suspect. *Il n'ya pas de hors-texte*: everything takes on a certain textual quality and is thus equally deconstructable: gender, truth, ethnography, law, clothing.¹⁶ I recently came across an ad in the *Times* for a Belgian designer's spring clothing line entitled “Deconstruction” and another for men's jackets in *J. Crew*, which read “Totally Deconstructed.” Textuality and the “stylization” of Deconstruction have become paradigmatic not simply for interpretative procedures but also and quite easily for the culture industry. Here Jameson's point is absolutely salient: postmodernism is itself a cultural mode of production (406), not of meaning, but of a stylized sign flow that *resists* meaning (91).

What such affirmative cultural production and seamlessness suggest to me is that the “end of modernity,” concomitant with the “end of man,” introduces a one-dimensional or leveling set of technical strategies or “styles” that are at one with cultural forms in ways that modernist critique never was (think here, for example, of Adorno’s absolute scorn for jazz and the emergence of a popular culture it suggested to him). It is difficult to imagine something like “*Dasein*” emerging as a category for the culture industry of modernity/postmodernity. Modern criticism, even Heidegger’s reactionism, wanted to explode (or “destroy”) cultural modernity and *reconstruct* it with the shards that remained. Deconstruction, by necessity and in Derrida’s acknowledgment, *must* inhabit pre-existing (modern) social structures. The positing of norms and alternatives (“ends”) is undermined in the immanent and stylized turn away from depth, foundationalism, and authenticity toward superficiality and the impossibility of any transparent “we” or “outside text” to heed the calling of something like Heidegger’s *Seinsfrage*.

The above epigraph, taken from a popular song published in 1987, is a text that for me crystallizes many of the ways in which postmodernity is bound up with modernity. “The end of the world as we know it” certainly preserves a kind of Heideggerian reactionism and telos, thinking “the ends of man,” of “us.” But the maneuver that is the refrain re- or transfigures that thinking, thereby changing the conceptual terrain that underpins any singular reading of the first half of the line: “and I feel fine, I feel fine.” Here “the meaning” is not destroyed, but it does maintain a certain depthlessness and sense of play and does resist meaning in ways never present in Heidegger’s reactionism (it is in fact quite difficult to conceptualize what a “Heideggerian sense” of play might be). The “end” of the world, consequently, is greeted in much the same way that the Derrida of ’68 greeted it, with a wave and a laugh, “directed toward a return that no longer will have the form of the metaphysical repetition of humanism” and telos that mark the “end of the world as we know it.” The line, then, serves as a referential point for, and takes on a wholly different significance in, the turn of the refrain.

The point of this seemingly digressive reading is twofold: on the one hand, I want to illustrate that postmodernity and moder-

nity, as discourses, coexist, even in the most pervasive of cultural forms (pop music); and on the other hand, I want to demonstrate that perhaps symptomatic of postmodernity, both as a conceptual frame and a technical maneuver, is how it affords a seamless fusion with a culture that seeks only affirmation—*we feel fine, we feel fine*—in ways that modernist criticism never desired. Postmodernity seems to dance *alongside* and *with* the culture industry; indeed, tends to become indistinguishable from it. In such an immanent position, criticism collapses into a cultural form without adequately *criticizing* it.¹⁷ Modernist critique perceived itself vocationally, as the transformer of the modern world via a transformation of modern conceptualizations of thinking, language, reason, politics, etc., though Heidegger’s “errancy” in such a vocational critique should never be diminished. The stylization of Deconstruction is considerably more modest in that regard. It does not critically seek to save old worlds or build new ones. Instead, it tries to mark the superficiality of “ends” and “we’s.”

Still, this kind of playful reflexive questioning continually begs other questions (peculiarly modern ones): Once the question of authenticity, foundation, and a “we” has been abandoned in favor of superficiality, what is left? And, what does “superficiality” signify without an awareness of depth? Today one no longer has need of “the real thing”; indeed, even Coca-Cola, the most recognizable consumer product in the world—one whose advertising campaign was founded upon its authenticity—has abandoned its own “reality” and its utopian jingle: “I’d like to teach the world to sing, in perfect harmony . . .” Consumers now chose among Coca-Cola, Coke, Diet Coke, etc. And what remains is a second nature that becomes a nostalgia for first nature: “the real thing” of cultural modernity is now known as Coca-Cola “classic.”

So perhaps we begin to see how, even in the most innocuous examples, dropping the heaviness of modernity’s mode of critique is not without its transformative powers. We might also consider the boundlessness—economic, political, social—of something like the European Community and the consequent homogenization of culture into a singular, global entity (a “new world order,” a “European United States”); or the sound byte technologized information systems in which “read my lips, read my hips” or “don’t stop thinking about tomorrow” legitimates a presidential candidate and suf-

ficiently motivates a voting public; where a video clip may tell “the whole story” or several stories or conflicting stories (even all three at once) on the evening news; or an institutionalized social arbitrariness whereby chance itself is planned—where the state is funded by lotteries, whose participants play the game in hopes of becoming that “one in a million” winner or that “rags to riches” story—and the stray bullet of the inner city becomes the normative standard by which everyday existence is governed. All of these are “texts” into which “we” are woven in a “sign flow that resists meaning.”

Like Wellmer, I am no great critic of Derrida. Certainly we cannot and should not pin modernity’s persistent sociocultural woes on Derrida or on “the postmodernists.” Indeed, quite the contrary: Wellmer acknowledges, as do I, that the “style” of Deconstruction has illustrated the inherent difficulties and aporias in something like Heidegger’s conceptualizations of *Dasein* and language as the disclosure of the truth of the being of *Dasein*, or, what has proved worse, the disclosure of the cultural destiny of “the German” *Dasein*. But he goes on to say that “linguistic philosophy decentres the subject, but in doing so it provides no legitimation for either hermeneutic objectivism or hermeneutic anarchism. Still less does it justify the irrational consequences that are occasionally drawn by postmodern thinkers” (70). I agree. Yet such an agreement is where I would want to begin, not “end.” Cultural critique rests, to paraphrase Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*, on the texts, social formations, and institutions it *criticizes* (55). For cultural criticism, then, there remains much work to be done: “homelessness” persists, though the “house of Being” has been repeatedly deconstructed; the hauntingly familiar spectre of nationalism rises again, though *Dasein* and “man” (or “we”) have reached an “end”;¹⁸ and “we” (that “we” that is now ended) have neither justice nor consensus, but emerging forms of popular illegality.¹⁹ Such are the vicissitudes of modernity. Wellmer’s point on this matter is absolutely pertinent here, and I shall close with it. He argues that when

we bring the distinctions between reality and semblance, between truthfulness and lying, between violence and dialogue, between autonomy and heteronomy back down to earth from

heaven, so to speak—and it is only on earth that they can be located—then it would no longer be possible to assert (other than in the sense of a bad metaphysics) that the will to truth is *in itself* a will to power; that dialogue *as such* is symbolic violence; that speech that is oriented towards truth *is* terror; that moral consciousness *as such* is a reflex of internalized violence; or that the autonomous human being *as such* is *either* a fiction *or* a mechanism of auto-suppression or a bastard of patriarchy, etc. In other words, the linguistic critique of rationalism and subjectivism does provide an opportunity for thinking in new ways about ‘truth’, ‘justice’, or ‘self-determination’; but at the same time it will make us suspicious of those who want to give an affirmative twist, in the manner of Nietzsche, to the psychological critique of the subject—by which I mean those propagandists of a new era which shall have cast off the burden of the Platonic heritage, and in which rhetoric shall replace argument, the will to power shall replace the will to truth, the art of words shall replace theory, and the economy of desire shall replace morality. We have quite enough of *all that* to contend with, after all, in the world as it is now. (70–71)

Notes

I am indebted throughout the body of this paper to the incisive comments and constructive criticisms of an anonymous reader for *Cultural Critique*.

1. See Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, especially the appendix, which is entitled “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?” Most generally, Lyotard tends to see postmodernism as signalling the end of “master narratives.” The question Lyotard’s thesis begs, obviously, is to what extent Lyotard’s text is itself yet another “master narrative.” This somewhat paradoxical position of narrativizing “the end of master narratives” is critically examined by Jameson in his foreword to *The Postmodern Condition* (see esp. 18–20). Here I want to consider the perhaps even more complex question of the ways in which postmodernism is “undoubtedly” part of the modern (79).

2. See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, and Gianni Vattimo’s *The End of Modernity and The Transparent Society*. Vattimo’s sense of postmodernity has been legitimately characterized as a Nietzschean reading of Heidegger: *il pensiero debole* (generally translated as “weak thought”) is an attempt to “weaken” Heidegger’s strong or “heavy” modernist notions of language, Being, and so on. For an analysis of the Heideggerian roots of Vattimo’s postmodernity, see Barbiero’s “A Weakness for Heidegger.” And for a more thorough account of the Heidegger/Derrida coupling than I can give here, see Herman Rapaport’s *Heidegger and Derrida*.

3. Collected in Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity*. My general thesis here draws upon Wellmer’s understanding of modernity/postmodernity. Wellmer sets out his basic premise in the introduction to this text:

I shall argue that postmodernism at its best might be seen as a self-critical—a sceptical, ironic, but nevertheless unremitting—form of modernism; a modernism beyond utopianism, scientism and foundationalism; in short, a *postmetaphysical* modernism. (vii)

4. Wellmer preserves some of the Adornian analyses of culture, the aesthetic, and history, whereas Habermas offers deeper criticisms of Adorno (though both Wellmer and Habermas see Adorno as proffering too totalizing an account of reason). Also, Wellmer offers an extended criticism of Habermas's "discourse ethics" in *The Persistence of Modernity*. For Habermas's criticisms of Adorno, see especially *Communicative Action*, Vol. 1 (339–66) and the lecture on Adorno and Horkheimer entitled "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno" (106–30), collected in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. And for Wellmer's more Adornian affinities, see especially the essay I refer to here.

5. Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* may be the other avenue by which to pursue such an account of modernity/postmodernity. Jameson is no stranger to the modernity/postmodernity question, though he is in many ways a peculiar kind of contributor. A detailed analysis of his position is beyond the scope of this essay, but for a fine critique, see Martin Jay's piece in *History and Theory*. Jay's discussion of Jameson's "Adornian" postmodernity points up much of what I shall only intimate here:

If Adorno's argument about nominalism as the key to modernist aesthetics is correct, Jameson's efforts to make it quintessentially postmodernist as well seems strained. The same might be said of his claim that the turn from modernism to postmodernism is reflected in the move from symbolic to allegorical modes of interpretation, for it was precisely the privileging of the allegorical that earlier critics like Benjamin (positively) and Lukács (critically) saw as the essence of the modern. To argue that postmodernism is somehow the fulfillment of tendencies in modernism—the completion of the modernization process—fudges the issue of what is radically new in the present constellation. A mere difference in degree replaces a difference in kind. (301–02)

What Jay senses here is, in part, Wellmer's point: postmodernity is not a "difference in kind," but rather in degree.

6. This and all subsequent citations from the "Letter on Humanism" are taken from the English translation, *Martin Heidegger: The Basic Writings* (219).

7. For two exemplary readings of Heidegger's relation to critical theory and relevance to cultural critique, see Richard J. Bernstein's "Heidegger's Silence?: Ethos and Technology" (79–141) in his *New Constellation* and Thomas McCarthy's "Heidegger and Critical Theory" (83–96) in his *Ideals and Illusions*.

8. Perhaps the best, albeit most polemical, sociocultural analysis of Heidegger's thinking and politics is Richard Wolin's *The Politics of Being*. Derrida takes a very different and revealing approach to Heidegger's Nazism in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*.

9. See especially Division One, "Preparatory Fundamental Analysis of Dasein," in *Being and Time*.

10. Heideggerian inspired critiques of humanism abound in contemporary discourse (indeed, Derrida's is one such, however modified, critique). See, for example, William V. Spanos's most recent work, *Heidegger and Criticism*. Spanos

finds in Heidegger's "hermeneutics as disclosure" an emancipatory and "post"-humanist social critique.

11. This and all subsequent citations from "The Ends of Man" are taken from the English translation collected in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* (152). This translation is the same as the one collected in *Margins*, but I cite the aforementioned text because I find it particularly useful for framing what is in today's discourse very much in question: to what extent does postmodern critique signal the "end" of "philosophy" and social criticism as they have been practiced? And to what extent have critical conceptual positions been "transformed"? The collection presents both "modern" thinkers (that is, those committed to modernism as a project not yet realized of rational critique oriented toward human emancipation) and "postmodern" thinkers (that is, those who call for a "change of terrain" or an "end" to "the project of modernity").

12. The question of Nietzsche's relation to Derrida and Heidegger is, of course, not nearly so simple and is beyond the scope of this essay. But for a modern critical reading of Nietzsche, see Habermas's "The Entry into Postmodernity: Nietzsche as a Turning Point" (83–105) in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*; for another perspective, see Alexander Nehamas's *Nietzsche: Life As Literature*; and for a more "post"-modern perspective, see Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy*.

13. Foucault, despite his differences with Derrida, makes strikingly similar claims in the closing sections of *The Order of Things*.

14. The notion of "weak" I borrow from Vattimo. To connect Vattimo with Derrida, one might generally conceive of *il pensiero debole* as "trace" thinking, as opposed to a depth model of thought. See also Vattimo's *The Adventure of Difference*.

15. From the song "its the end of the world as we know it (and i feel fine)."

16. I have elsewhere considered the relative merits and shortcomings of the textualization of culture. See my "Culture, Textuality, and Truth."

17. In his *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Andreas Huyssen labors to articulate a genuinely critical component inhering in postmodernity. In the chapter entitled "Mapping the Postmodern," he argues that we should begin to

explore the question whether postmodernism might not harbor productive contradictions, perhaps even a critical and oppositional potential. If the postmodern is indeed a historical and cultural condition (however transitional or incipient), then oppositional cultural practices and strategies must be located *within* postmodernism. (200)

It is precisely this "*within*" that I think tends to undermine a "critical and oppositional potential" to postmodernity. To be sure, *critical* cultural theory is "always already" within a given social structure or practice—inhabits it, as Deconstruction does—but *it can never be reduced to such an immanent position*. Adorno makes precisely this point in his "Cultural Criticism and Society" when he says that cultural criticism "must both participate in culture and not participate" (33). The point to be made is that postmodernist critique is, at best, an incomplete form of cultural criticism, and, at worst, acritical and affirmative.

18. The question of "community," of a "we," has not surprisingly become a central concern for contemporary neo-Heideggerians and Derrideans. See, for example, Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* and the volume entitled *Community at Loose Ends*, edited by the Miami Theory Collective, especially Nancy's piece, and Paul Smith's more Marxian perspective on Laclau's and Mouffe's *Hege-*

mony and Socialist Strategy. However, it should also be pointed out here that Jameson realizes this problem in *Postmodernism* when he suggests that postmodern subjectivity would be “a non-centered subject that is part of an organic group” (345). The central question that such thinking poses is, to my mind: Can there be a “we” founded on a trace or absence or “non-centeredness”? Is any other notion of a “we” necessarily or ineluctably totalitarian?

19. Lyotard’s call for justice without consensus is perhaps the most perplexing of his statements in *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard claims, in what is meant to be a criticism of Habermas, that “consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value. But justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect. We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus” (66). But it is difficult to conceptualize what justice without consensus could or would be. Certainly, a once and for all and everyone consensus is not possible (nor desirable), but consensus as an idealizing presupposition for specific forms of justice agreed upon in a noncoercive public sphere seems very much desirable, especially today, when we have *neither* consensus *nor* justice. And simply inverting the equation, as Lyotard does when he calls for “disensus” and “paralogy,” is woefully inadequate. Perhaps one way to begin to develop the connection between justice and postmodernity would be to turn to Levinas. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that “language is justice” (213). Simon Critchley attempts to “use” Levinas to articulate a sense of social justice via postmodernity. See his *Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*. But it remains an open question whether Levinas can provide deconstruction with some kind of ethical direction, or whether Lyotard’s sense of justice is in *any* empiricohistorical sense possible. Habermas takes up Lyotard’s critique in “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices” (115–48) in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*.

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