

THE GENEALOGY OF POSTMODERNISM

An economist's guide

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I suppose that what I am asking, without being entirely sure that it is possible, is for a leap over modernist battlefields to the postmodern rediscovery that the primal symbolic act is saying yes to processes like the wrenching one in which you are engaging.

(Booth, 1974: 204)

As directly as it can be put, 'postmodernism' names a tendency since 1970 or so to doubt the tenets of 'modernism'. In economics it would be against the high modernism, for example, of Paul Samuelson's program. Though postmodernism more generally has been appropriated by writers innocent of economics or maths or statistics, there is nothing inevitable in this. I am saying that in adopting a pomo attitude an economist need not fear contamination from literary critics, psychoanalysts, and the politically correct. Postmodernism can be given an economic and classical liberal – I did not say 'conservative' or 'reactionary' – reading.

1910 Modernism

The definition of 'postmodernism' depends on what one means by 'modernism'. 'On or about December 1910', declared Virginia Woolf in 1924, 'human character changed' (Woolf, 1924: 320). As the word 'modernism' is usually employed, then, it refers to scientific and artistic movements beginning in the decades around the First World War, among them cubism, futurism, philosophical neopositivism, stream-of-consciousness fiction, functionalism, surrealism, behaviorism. Modernism was for half a century the faith of elite culture in Europe and its offshoots, replaced only in the 1960s, and then not completely. It filled the gap left in the elite culture by the decline of religion.

Two kinds of 1910 modernism need to be distinguished at the outset, one artistic in origin and the other scientific. They need to be distinguished because in the modernist theory they come from opposite cultural worlds. One kind, usually called 'literary modernism' and instanced by Woolf, Joyce, Picasso, and Stravinsky, attacked Science with a big-S. It attacked, that is, the elevation of Science to a religion. It was anti-rational, or more exactly it appealed to the deeper rationality of the myth or the unconscious. Literary modernism entailed 'dislocation of conventional syntax, radical breaches of decorum, disturbance of chronology and spatial order, ambiguity, polysemy, obscurity, mythopoeic allusion, primitivism' (Lodge, 1981: 71).

The other modernism might be called 'architectural'. Instanced by Le Corbusier, Mondrian, Bertrand Russell, and Paul A. Samuelson, it worshipped Science with a big-S. It was pro-rational, appealing to the surface rationality of proof, logic, axiom, explicitness. Look at the downtown of a modern city, the glass towers circa 1970, and you see modernism built, called in this version the 'international style' (flourished 1945–75; cf. Jencks, 1973; Brodin, 1976; Kolb, 1990). It simplified conventional syntax, stressed Scientific decorum, elevated chronology and spatial order to mechanical rules, and fled from ambiguity, polysemy, obscurity, mythopoeic allusion, and primitivism.

Economics has been influenced by the architectural kind of modernism. Economists call it by various names, not all of them accurate: positive economics, scientific economics, rigor, serious work. In a word it is 'Samuelsonian'. What Paul Samuelson conceived in the late 1930s and published in 1948 – such as 'the problem of stability of equilibrium cannot be discussed except with reference to dynamical considerations' (Samuelson, 1947: 262) – was carried out by, for example, Robert Lucas in the 1960s. A standard paper in economics looks now like a building in downtown Dallas. It defines itself as the opposite of *The Waste Land* or *Sacre du Printemps*.

The two modernisms, however, come from the same intellectual culture. One of the pair sometimes drops out of discussions of 1910 modernism, but it is a commonplace to link them. The literary critic Wayne Booth, for example, uses the word to describe both Bertrand Russell and James Joyce (Booth, 1974: 43 and throughout; Booth 1988: 246–51). The literary and architectural modernism share an optimism about form, a distaste for the ungeneralizable, an obsession with provability, a fascination with novelty, a celebration of the future, an affection for timeless axioms, a glorification of the individual, an aversion to ethical reasoning, a high value on separating fact from value, a belief in the theory that facts are independent of theory, and above all a strong feeling that reason and feeling are opposed realms.

Arjo Klammer has an illuminating way of talking about the two kinds of

modernism (Klamer, 1991). He draws side-by-side a square and a circle, representing the two ways of talking according to the modern theory. Either you are square, rigid, and logical or you are circular, loose, and illogical. (Feminists will note the gender valence.) Modernists adopt a sensibility that dissociates the two. Science or art, numbers or words, fact or value, work or play. Klamer's point, and Booth's also, is that the two are necessary for each other, defining each by its opposite. In more ways than one they are like stereotypical men and women.

The two kinds of modernism were formed out of a Marriage of Modernism, which in its popular version left a mechanical notion of Science with one half of the culture and a romantic notion of Art with the other half. (The feminine associations of Art in 1910 modernism troubled artists like Ernest Hemingway or Jackson Pollock, who compensated by drinking too much; the feminine associations of artistic story telling troubled social scientists, who compensated by measuring too much [cf. Laslett, 1990: 429].) An example of the dichotomizing of modernism is the micro-culture of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, the Einstein institute. On the one hand the Institute provides space (suitably modernist) for serious work, either mathematical physics or traditional history (wedged between the two is the School of Social Science, in whose postmodern appointments the physicists and historians routinely interfere). On the other hand, after 5:00 there are concerts, treated as sacred rites, to which the ladies are invited. Robert Oppenheimer, later Director of the Institute, builds a bomb and then quotes Sanskrit religious texts at the site. The mathematician proves theorems and then plays the violin sublimely, or at least competently.

Literary and architectural modernism of 1910 are two sides of the same dichotomizing impulse. In economic terms they are dual and primal. When I told Robert Fogel some years ago that since about 1980 I had been reading in the humanities he asked me amiably whether I had 'become a mystic'. Fogel, whose brother was a professor of English and who is a cultivated man, was using the mental categories of 1955, at the high tide of 1910 modernism. In 1955 you were either a scientist or a touchie-feelie. You could be rational, scientific, empirical; or alternatively you could be into Zen and emotion. Einstein or Ezra Pound. Man of science or mystic. That was it.

The mental categories of 1955 are symbolized in a fact of geography. The world capital of rationality since about 1955 has been the Rand Corporation, which is located in the world capital of irrationality since about 1955, Santa Monica. The Rand people have got along fine with the City, called in the old days 'The People's Republic of Santa Monica'. The getting along fine fits the categories of 1955 (they were nothing like all bad in their effects). In 1955 you would choose sides, scientism or humanism, physics or tao, but then you were not supposed to bother the

other people, or make them read your stuff. The ideal was an amiable lack of contact or understanding, which Fogel was reflecting. Humanities? You mean 'mysticism'. Hey, man, whatever turns you on.

Jack Amariglio notes that both kinds of 1910 modernism were determined to shake off history, to transcend time and space (Amariglio, 1990: 18). In science or in art, or both, modernism is the elevation of being modern to the acme of creative work. It is the triumph of the avant garde and the defeat of tradition. The virtue of hope takes all. Wayne Booth notes the modernist 'belief in the future as somehow more real than the past or present' (1974: 22n). 'The avant-garde destroys, defaces the past', writes Umberto Eco, 'then...destroys the figure, cancels it, arrives at the abstract.... In architecture and the visual arts, it will be the curtain wall, the building as stele, pure parallelepiped, minimal art; in literature, the destruction of the flow of discourse, the Burroughs-like collage, silence, the white page; in music, the passage from atonality to noise to absolute silence' (Eco, 1985: 66; cf. Klamer, 1991).

Modernism of both kinds believes that form and content can be divorced, leaving formality to do the work, letting 'the business be done', as Francis Bacon put it at one of the numerous dawns of modernism, 'as if by machinery' (Bacon [1620] 1965: 327). Ornament, history, culture are in modernism mere error terms. Its characteristic projects are Hilbertian mathematics, imagist poetry, twelve-tone music, and abstract general equilibrium.

An instance is the stick-figure international language, elaborated at successive Olympic Games (quick: what's the stick figure for the women's luge?). It is most commonly seen on the door to the gents'. The figures could just as well be realistic representations, even photographs – of a woman zooming down a hill on a sled or of a man striding into a men's room; or for that matter the words in English 'Women's Luge' and 'Men's Room', which are widely understood. Someone had to invent the notion that it would be better, more up-to-date, more modern, to simplify, axiomatize, standardize, deculturalize, universalize along modernist lines. Consider: it is the future we are serving. As one might have expected, the inventor of the stick figures was a leading positivist thinker, Otto Neurath (1882–1945), in the metropolis of modernism, Vienna during the 1920s. In answering the question, Why not *words* on the men's room door?

He saw verbal language...as a disfiguring medium for knowledge, because he believed its structure and vocabulary fail to be a consistent, logical model of objects and relations in the physical world.... Sociology on a materialist basis...knows only of such behavior of men that one can observe and 'photograph' scientifically. ...The silhouette [*on the men's room*] emulates the

shadow...a rationalized theatre of shadows, in which signs are necessary geometric formulae cast by material things – Plato's cave renovated into an empiricist laboratory. Flatness suggests a factual honesty, as opposed to the illusionism of perspective drawing.

(Lupton, 1989: 145, 150, 152)

The stick figures are like the mathematics in economics or the formulas in social engineering. In modernism of either type, words fail.

Postmodernism

The postmodernism in the late twentieth century, then, is the doubt that 1910 modernism in such matters had it entirely right. In deciding whether it has been a good idea or not to have such a doubt, one needs to exercise humility. The radicals and the conservatives in the Culture Wars have not always done so. 'We are *within* the culture of postmodernism', observes the critic Fredric Jameson, 'to the point where its facile repudiation is as impossible as any equally facile celebration of it as complacent and corrupt' (1984: 381). In light of this wisdom it is surprising that the critics of postmodernism, of pragmatism, of rhetoric, and the like are so confident they have grasped the writings they disdain. Consider for instance the writings of Richard Rorty – the same applies to Paul Feyerabend, Jacques Derrida, the Modern Language Association, and other bogeymen in the conservative night. The conservatives (and some of the Marxist materialist radicals and a lot of newspaper people who do not like to give credit for common sense to a professor anyway) think Rorty is trivially easy to contradict. But does it seem plausible that Rorty cannot handle the points that simpletons writing for the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New York Times* are able to devise after a few minutes of thinking lite? The hypothesis does not seem plausible on its face: Rorty, eminent philosopher, well-known as an analyst, full professor at Princeton, university professor at Virginia and now at Stanford, first of the MacArthur Fellows, scourge of his profession, president of the Eastern Division of the philosophers, etc., etc., is trivially easily shown to be guilty of circularity, confusion, contradiction, naïveté, and falsehood.

The critic Charles Altieri noted recently that the *modernists* used 'ironic strategies to undo the expectations elicited by representational art' in aid of realizing experience directly, 'rebuilding a formal site where the spirit learns to dwell reflexively within its own deepest powers' (Altieri, 1993: 793). Notice that this is *not* postmodernism, but is on the contrary as old as Van Gogh or Henry James. Some have never recovered from the insult of Picasso's painting the eyes of a woman on the same side of her face.

Their indignation against what they take to be postmodernism ('It doesn't *say* or *show* anything') is better directed at modernism itself.

On the other hand, the radicals need to admit that architectural modernism in, say, economics was a worthwhile and even noble teaching, from which much has been learned. Literary modernists such as early Eliot or late Yeats or early and late Wallace Stevens will endure. Getting beyond modernism does not mean tossing out the modernists, ignoring their rat experiments or burning their paint-splattered canvases or forgetting how to solve a dynamic programming problem. It does not mean being against *modernity*, taking the fruits and running. It is merely against the elevation of modernity to a religion, *modernism*. As the architectural historian Brent Brolin writes, 'Although these truths were represented as logical deductions from the spirit of the times [viz., modernity], they were actually articles of faith, rhetorical statements whose moral overtones made them as unquestionable as Divine Law' (Brolin, 1976: 45). Postmodernism means questioning whether a stick figure on the men's room is the only possible way to solve a practical problem.

Note that Altieri's words – non-representational art providing 'a formal site...to dwell reflexively' – would serve as a description of music or of pure mathematics. Modernist art and science aspired to the condition of music and pure mathematics. The two were correlated in modernist culture. The joke of the Oppenheimer generation was, 'At the Institute, what's the definition of a string quartet? Three physicists and a mathematician'.

The postmodernist has doubts that poetry or economics is best reduced entirely to music or pure mathematics. Postmodernism aspires to the condition of...what? Nothing in general, because it does not believe in timeless generalities. At most it aspires to a civilized conversation among equals, what the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas calls 'the ideal speech situation' and what the British political philosopher Michael Oakeshott called 'the conversation of mankind'. The chief problem with modernism, say the postmodernists, is its loony aspiration to speechlessness. Shut up: I have a proof. Shut up: this is avant-garde painting. Shut up.

The aspiration to this or that transcendent and ineffable Truth made for much of modernism's guff. Modernism was a reaction to Romance, but it clutched to the Romantic striving for the infinite, *das Streben nach dem Unendlichen*, which has done so much mischief in the twentieth century. When otherwise hardnosed astrophysicists become dewy eyed about the High Frontier one is hearing an echo of Romance (and of a cash register). No eighteenth-century astrophysicist would have thought of making such an airy appeal. He justified his projects as providing better time-keeping for ocean navigation. The point was the same in the art

business at the time. Samuel Johnson had no more patience than did Andy Warhol with the assumption that art and commerce conflicted. In 1776 (about a month, it happens, after the appearance of *The Wealth of Nations*) Johnson remarked that 'no man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money'. The Artist separated from bourgeois culture is a recent and romantic invention, c. 1780 in Germany, universalized in England c. 1800. Martha Woodmansee has recently shown its close connections to the economics of copyright and publishing (Woodmansee, 1994), and I have written on the longer history of the divorce of art from money (McCloskey, 1994b).

Postmodernism might therefore be called irony or self-awareness or merely sophistication about the way we talk – anything but the earnest romanticism and modernism, romance tied to chemistry, that led to the Somme and Auschwitz and the Gulag. Umberto Eco has given a characteristically postmodern definition. Postmodernism, he writes, is the attitude of:

a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, 'I love you madly', because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly'.... He will have said...that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence.

(Eco, 1985: 65)

The earlier modernisms: the Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution, and Plato

Any age of lost innocence will do. There were modernisms before 1910. In consequence there were also earlier *postmodernisms*. I want to make a lot of this simple point.

To speak of *the* postmodern without some argument is to commit a characteristically modernist mistake of believing that we moderns are of course unique. Postmodernism by contrast doubts that on or about December 1910, or any other date, human character changed and became once-and-for-all modern. In the form of this mistaken conviction that *Now We Have It*, modernisms keep being reinvented. The theory that theory can do it, that we are about to have a unified science, has been invented and reinvented dozens of times, first by Plato, then by Aquinas, then by Bacon, then by Rousseau and Condorcet, then by Comte, then by Pearson, then by Russell, then by Neurath, then by Samuelson, then by some other bossy genius.

John Ruskin, the nineteenth-century art critic (I do not on the whole

recommend his views on economics, though recently I am beginning to see that they have something to say even to economists), noted that the search for a crystalline ideal has been an incubus on classical and Renaissance – and now one may say modernist – architecture. He attacked the tyranny of the lonely genius, seeking by contemplation in a warm room a system to impose upon us all. Of the Renaissance he wrote:

its main mistake...was the unwholesome demand for perfection at any cost.... Men like Verrocchio and Ghiberti [*consider Marx or Samuelson*] were not to be had every day.... Their strength was great enough to enable them to join science with invention, method with emotion, finish with fire.... Europe saw in them only the method and the finish. This was new to the minds of men, and they pursued it to the neglect of everything else. 'This', they cried, 'we must have in our work henceforward': and they were obeyed. The lower workman secured method and finish, and lost, in exchange for them, his soul.

(Ruskin [1853] 1960: 228–9)

Ruskin's argument also fits modernism (in economics and elsewhere) which seeks an all-embracing, testable Theory apart from the practical skills of the statesman or of the economic scientist. An 'interpretive economics', as Arjo Klamer, Metin Cosgel, and Don Lavoie began to call it at the end of the 1980s, would turn the other way, as economists do in practical work (see Lavoie, 1990a, 1990b; Cosgel and Klamer, 1990). It is in Ruskin's term 'Gothic economics', an end to searching for a grail of a unified field theory, an awakening from Descartes's Dream. In such terms, interpretive economics is another postmodernism. The Gothic spirit is seen in the best works of applied economics, from the economic historian Robert Fogel, say, or the agricultural economist Theodore Schultz, from the financial economist Robert Shiller or the statistical economist Edward Leamer. It is not seen in the routine science of the field nowadays, servile to the undoubted genius of Paul Samuelson, Kenneth Arrow, and Lawrence Klein.

The point of postmodernism is that the program of the genius to subordinate everyone to his conveniently brief plan never quite works out. Expressing such a doubt is not the same thing as saying that it was stupid to try, merely that it is wrong to use a claim of transcendence as a stick to batter the opposition. The same Otto Neurath became Editor-in-Chief of a transcendent project on the Foundations of the Unity of Science: Toward an International Encyclopedia of Unified Science. The project died, though nineteen of its volumes were published by the University of Chicago Press from 1938 to 1971 (among them Gerhard

Tintner's *Methodology of Mathematical Economics and Econometrics*, 1968). The most important book in the series, ironically, was Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), which showed why such attempts to end the scientific conversation once and for all are impossible. Reinstating history and politics in science studies, Kuhn showed why we do *not* now Have the Transcendent It.

So there have been as many modernisms as there have been spectacularly successful geniuses claiming transcendence. And therefore one can find corresponding postmodernisms in Greek rhetoric or Elizabethan urbanity or early eighteenth-century equipose or American philosophical pragmatism c. 1900. But there's something to be said for taking the present-day reaction to modernism as special, as the end of some history. (I see the danger in this move that I will end up committing the modernist fallacy of thinking that Now We Have It; I will take care). It is a matter, to be pomo about it, of choosing the story that makes most sense to us.

For example, an alternative date to December 1910 for the onset of modernism is the French Enlightenment about 1751 to 1775. Such a story gives modernism longer standing, dating from the French *philosophes* rather than from the Italian futurists. Amariglio has argued that modernist economics, like modernist everything else, contained a contradiction, what Paul Wendt calls in a comment on Amariglio 'the immanence thesis', that 'postmodernism is immanent in [1910] modernist economics' (Wendt, 1990: 47). But in essentials the contradiction is of two centuries standing, though heightened in the latest, 1910 modernism. The contradiction is known as 'the aporia [indecision] of the Enlightenment project', a phrase that every young person anxious to do well on the cocktail-party circuit should commit to memory. The philosopher Stanley Rosen describes it as 'a conflict between mathematics and Newtonian science on the one hand and the desire for individual and political freedom on the other.... The understanding is in essence the formulation of and obedience to rules. Since there are no rules for the following of rules...the understanding must be a spontaneous "project"...of freedom...Kant's unstable attempt to ground reason in spontaneity' (Rosen, 1987: 3, 4, 8). In a sentence: being unreasonably rational will eventually enslave us to rules (compare Ruskin on the Renaissance, or Lucas on the Federal Reserve). As Amariglio puts it, 'the desire to know Man, to control him for purposes of efficiency and utility through this increased knowledge, produces the notorious exercises of power in the modern age' (Amariglio, 1990: 21).

Amariglio's story is a good one, fitting economics well. In line with the immanence thesis, modern economics has turned back on itself in a postmodern way, especially (as Amariglio points out) in the treatment of uncertainty. Uncertainty evokes prediction. Economics is a particularly

thoroughgoing example of Enlightenment rationality, turning back on itself for example in the conflict between an Austrian and the earlier neoclassical views of prediction. Thus Robert Lucas and the other developers of rational expectations pointed out in an Austrian style that a predictable economy is not one in which government policy can work. If economics is a good imitation of (some high-status branches of) physics, a capital-S Science in the definition offered by philosophers around 1955, or as understood by eighteenth-century admirers of Newton, then it should predict. But then we are thrown into paradox, aporia, indecision: if economics is Scientific, we can predict; but a predictable future is a freedomless nightmare; and is anyway impossible when the predictor can invest in her predictions (McCloskey, 1990).

Friedrich Hayek said once that 'I believe I can now...explain why...[the] masterly critique by Mises of socialism has not really been effective. Because Mises remained in the end himself a rationalist-utilitarian, and with a rationalist-utilitarianism, the rejection of socialism is irreconcilable.... If we remain strictly rationalists, utilitarians, that implies we can arrange everything according to our pleasure.... In one place he says we can't do it, in another place he argues, being rational people, we must try to do it' (Hayek 1994). It is what is wrong with some of modern economics, this utilitarian rationalism – in Stigler's political economy as against Friedman's, or in Richard Posner's law and economics as against Ronald Coase's. Utilitarianism is the French element in British thought, so contrary to British empiricism. Jeremy Bentham was the problem, tempting economics away from its Scottish common sense about the world. Hayek was in this respect two centuries behind the times, a product of the quite different Scottish rather than the French Enlightenment, a spiritual resident of Edinburgh rather than Paris, an exponent of bourgeois virtue rather than aristocratic expertise. By the end of the twentieth century he became old-fashioned enough to be postmodern. You read it here (and in Burczak, 1994 and Don Lavoie in many places): Hayek has more in common with Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty than with Bentham and Comte and Russell.

A still earlier dating pushes the onset of modernism back to Descartes, and makes our present postmodernism the culmination of a three-and-half-century genesis. The men (I choose the word carefully) of the seventeenth century were in this history the patriarchs of modernism (cf. Bordo, 1987). A case can certainly be made that modernist ideas have ruled since Descartes. What is emphasized by choosing a seventeenth-century birthdate for modernism is the fall of rhetoric, which had been for 2,000 years the education of the West. The inventors of rationalism in the seventeenth century – Descartes, Bacon, Hobbes, Spinoza – had a paradoxically low opinion of the power of reasoning in human affairs. Ancient and medieval writers had more faith in the power of speech to

move people towards the light. The men of the seventeenth century had seen words induce people to kill over the doctrine of transubstantiation, and they sought therefore a way to disarm the words. Their refuge was 'crushing' proof and 'compelling' demonstration, that which cannot possibly be doubted, 'putting Nature to the rack', as Bacon delicately put it. They assigned everything else, as for example Hobbes did in his book of 1681 on rhetoric, to mere ornament, suited only to arousing a feminine passion. We fellow moderns have inherited their low opinion of reasoning.

Actually, all the modernisms are suspicious of reasonable persuasion. In 1910 modernism, for example, the studies in the 1930s of propaganda and public opinion and the hardening in 1950s of an American intellectual contempt for commercial free speech called for conviction rather than persuasion. 'Conviction' comes from a Latin legalism, itself from *vincere, victus*, 'to defeat, defeated'. 'Persuade' by contrast comes from *per* [thoroughly] + *suadere*, the latter meaning 'to seek to persuade that', and is from the same Indo-European root as English 'sweet'. Persuasion, like free exchange, is sweet and mutually beneficial. The anti-bourgeois character of modernism in all its forms testifies to a lordly tendency among intellectuals to spurn persuasion. Intellectuals make up modernisms, and want them to be exclusive and regulated. Modernism is proudly, even obnoxiously, élitist.

The Amariglio/Wendt 'immanence thesis' says that postmodernism grew out of 1910 modernism. I have a second immanence thesis. The modernisms were attacks on bourgeois culture. 'The noblest acts of mind [in modernist theory] would be those resisting the triumphant bourgeois order' (Altieri, 1993: 792). But – here is the immanence – out of each attack from the earliest modernism to the present grew a defense, successively stronger, and now strongest.

The antibourgeois character of modernism has taken many forms: scientific elitism, standard Marxism, the anti-capitalist line that élite literature in Europe and its offshoots began to follow around 1848. In 1910 modernism the exclusivity was directed more at the lower middle class than at captains of industry. The anti-modernist English poet Philip Larkin in the 1960s complained about the 'irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction to human life as we know it. This is my essential criticism of modernism, whether perpetrated by Parker, Pound or Picasso'. (Or the fourth P, Paul [Samuelson].) Larkin explained the [Charlie 'Bird'] Parker reference in one of his columns on jazz:

[Said another jazz critic] 'After Parker, you had to be something of a musician to follow the best jazz of the day'. Of course! After Picasso! After Pound! There could hardly have been a conciser summary of what I don't believe in art.... The artist has become over-concerned with his material (hence an age of technical

experiment), and, in isolation, has busied himself with the two principal themes of modernism, mystification and outrage. Piqued at being neglected, he has painted portraits with both eyes on the same side of the nose,...or a novel in gibberish.... And parallel to this activity...there has grown up a kind of critical journalism designed to put it over.... Basically the message is: don't trust your eyes, or ears, or understanding.... You've got to work at this.... I mean, this is pretty complex stuff.... [After Parker, jazz] was split into two, intelligence without beat and beat without intelligence.

Larkin, 1985: 22–5

Modernism does that, dissociating the sensibilities. Francis Bacon warned against persuasion:

For it is a false assertion [of Protagoras, the Greek sophist] that the sense of man is the measure of all things. On the contrary, all perceptions as well as of the sense as of the mind are according to the measure of the individual and not according to the measure of the universe. And the human understanding is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolours the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it.

(Bacon, [1620] 1965: XVI)

Modernism's main mode of operation in both its literary and architectural kind was and is to exploit the charm of what's difficult. I mean, this is pretty complex stuff. When T. S. Eliot versified in *The Waste Land* about the lower middle-class suburbanites coming to work – 'Unreal City,/ Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,/ A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,/ I had not thought death had undone so many' – he required two footnote references, one to Baudelaire and the other to the *Inferno*, III, 55–7.

The avant-garde was in this way fleeing its bourgeois origins and keeping clear of the masses. It was making itself, at any rate in its imaginings, into a new aristocracy. John Carey writes in a book chronicling the élitism of literary modernism, 'The intellectuals could not, of course, actually prevent the masses from attaining literacy. But they could prevent them from reading literature by making it too difficult for them to understand' (Carey, 1993: 16). The obscurity of modernism kept literature (and music and painting) in the hands of cultured chaps. It kept it out of the hands of suburbanites, clerks, Eastern European immigrants, and the other nasty creatures growing in such numbers.

'All those damn little clerks', says a character in an H. G. Wells novel of 1901 quoted by Carey. They have 'no proud dreams and no proud

lusts'. The 'swarms of black, brown, and dirty-white, and yellow people...have to go'. George Bernard Shaw wrote the same way in 1910: 'Extermination must be put on a scientific basis'. And D. H. Lawrence, who in *Aaron's Rod* (1922, quoted again in Carey), advocated 'a proper and healthy and energetic slavery', in 1908 had written presciently, 'If I had my way, I would build a lethal chamber as big as the Crystal Palace, with a military band playing softly.... Then I'd go into the back streets and bring them all in, all the sick, the halt, and the maimed'.

Carey piles up the evidence for the proposition that fascism and modernism were more than merely chronologically linked. George Moore, a leading figure in the Irish renaissance, wrote in 1888, 'Injustice we worship.... What care I that some millions of wretched Israelites died under Pharaoh's lash or Egypt's sun? It was well that they died that I might have the pyramids to look upon.... I would give many lives to save one sonnet by Baudelaire'. Lordly indeed. Clive Bell, an art critic and friend to Woolf and to Maynard Keynes, had this to say in 1928 about political theory: 'To discredit a civilization it is not enough to show that it is based on slavery and injustice; you must show that liberty and justice would produce something better'.

It was not just modernist literary men who talked this way, of course. They were seconded by modernist scientists – and not, as is sometimes claimed by old-fashioned philosophers of science, by mere 'pseudo-scientists', either. In 1900 the great Karl Pearson, who invented modern statistics, wrote in his neopositivist bible *The Grammar of Science*: 'What we need is a check to the fecundity of inferior stocks.... It is a false view of human solidarity, which regrets that a capable and stalwart race of white men should advocate replacing a dark-skinned tribe' (1900: 369). In 1925 he advocated in a scientific paper stopping Jewish immigration to Britain.

Postmodernism by contrast is plebeian and 'middle class', at least in the sense that 91 per cent of Americans call themselves 'middle class'. Carey's antimodernist hero, the novelist Arnold Bennett (1867–1931), wrote in 1901 that 'everyone is an artist, more or less', in their lives and perceptions. This would be an impossible sentiment in Virginia Woolf. Unlike Woolf's modernism, postmodernism is proudly, even obnoxiously, democratic, deriving more from Atlantic City than from Princeton. When a French critic described the Disney World outside Paris as 'une catastrophe culturelle', the postmodernists merely giggled.

The anti-élitism is what drives cultural conservatives into a rage about the latest postmodernism, a critical literature discussing reruns of the Brady Bunch. It is horrible to say that movies or (shudder!) TV or (gag!) style in clothing and automobiles can be studied seriously and then compared seriously, or for that matter unseriously, with the sacred cultural products of high modernism. Charles Newman's book

attempting to bring a (non-economic) theory of inflation to a criticism of postmodernism has this difficulty, that it has no cultural interests beyond the modernist high canon. Postmodernists by contrast delight in such absurdities as the movie *I.Q.*, with Walter Matthau as a postmodern Einstein fascinated by 1950s-style convertible cars and rock music. The movie was shot on the very grounds of the Institute for Advanced Study. The Director (of the Institute, not the movie, which was amusing and pointed) must be losing his grip.

One can of course find exceptions to these propositions. Not all modernists are élitists (that is, aspiring aristocrats) or anti-bourgeois, either in their theories of themselves or in their actual effects. But the institutions of high modernism were, I think, hostile to capitalism even as they used it, angry at the middle class even as they relied on it, ignorant of the economy even as they lived in it.

The first modernist

All this leads back to the earliest possible dating of the onset of 'modernism', at old aristocratic Plato himself four centuries before Christ, and therefore of an ancient 'postmodernism' in opposition to Plato. Such a choice of origin makes modernism nearly two and half millennia old, and makes it identical to the philosophical as against (always 'against') the parallel rhetorical tradition. The modernisms of 1910 or of the Enlightenment or of the seventeenth century were recycled Plato, attempts to get underneath merely human persuasion to the bedrock of certitude. Therefore postmodernism in this biggest of stories is the denial of certitude.

Plato the system builder detested the sophists – the lawyers and law professors of his time – and detested the democracy their talk supported. Through his influence, 'rhetoric' (he may have invented the very word) and 'sophistry' were identified with clever fallacy. Plato separates belief (*pistis*; or *doxa*, mere things heard, common opinion) from knowledge (*episteme*; or *eidenai*, the thing seen, certitude):

Socrates: Then would you have us assume two forms of persuasion—one providing belief without knowledge [without the thing seen], and the other sure knowledge [*episteme*]?

Gorgias: Certainly.

Socrates: Now which kind of persuasion [*peithô*] is it that rhetoric creates in law courts or any public meeting on matters of right or wrong?

Gorgias: Obviously, I presume, Socrates, that from which we get belief [*pisteuein*].

Socrates: Thus rhetoric, it seems, is a producer of persuasion for belief [*peithoûs...pisteutikês*], not for instruction in the matter of right and wrong.

Gorgias 454E-455A

The attempt to lay down the law once and for all is aristocratic, and in modern times has taken the form of a lofty expertise. The historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin quoted once a revealing remark by Comte, who like Plato and the rest in the anti-rhetorical tradition was quite certain he had his hands on the transcendent (cf. *Phaedrus*, 247E): 'If we do not allow free thinking in chemistry or biology', asked Comte, 'why should we allow it in morals or politics?' (Berlin, 1958: 151). Why indeed? The editor of *Science* could not express the dogmatism of science as religion more flatly.

This is what is wrong with the notion that we can ascertain a Truth which all must obey for ever and ever. It is right to try to persuade each other and right to ask for an audience – this against the modernist suspicion of attempts to persuade an audience of, say, cold fusion. It is not right to contemplate, with Comte, 'allowing' free thought, as some sort of luxury. As Berlin pointed out, Comte's question exposes the rot in political rationalism – that is, in Platonism: 'first, that all men have one true purpose...; second, that the ends of all rational beings must of necessity fit into a single universal, harmonious pattern, which some men are able to discern more clearly than others; third, that all conflict...is due solely to the clash of reason with the irrational' (1958: 154). Where in economics have you heard such premises?

Berlin explains that the 'rule of experts' comes from the argument, prominent in Plato, and then in worshippers of experts such as Bentham and Comte, that my 'real' self must be rational and 'would' want me to obey the guardians or confess in a show trial. The expert therefore, in my own real interest, issues the order for my execution. In the Spanish Inquisition, that exemplar of paternal expertise, if a Jew under torture renounced his religion he was baptized and immediately executed, as ready now to enter Paradise.

Free persuasion, unlike the coercions of modernism, shares many qualities with free exchange. Speech is a deal between the speaker and his audience. Persuasion and exchange share the unique feature as devices of altering other people's behavior that the people so altered are glad the alteration was made. It's not surprising to find aristocratic Plato equally outraged at the 'flattery' of *hoi polloi* by democratic orators and at the taking of fees by the professors of rhetoric. In the *Republic* he showed, consistently, that he was opposed to free exchange in the market place as well.

The postmodernism of the sophists was, against Plato's authoritarianism, the chief support of Athenian (and Greek Sicilian) democracy and

commerce (Jaeger, [1933] 1965; Guthrie, 1971; Kerferd, 1981). A new free politics and capitalist economics, as in Eastern Europe now, required a new art of persuasion in law courts and legislative assemblies. The Greeks, being reflective sorts (they had adapted the Phoenician alphabet a couple of centuries before, and were mad to use it), made the give and take of persuasion into a theory of language. It was a theory of language as an autonomous influence on free people, rhetoric, 'the first humanism which the world had seen', which 'made Greece conscious of her own culture' (Jaeger, [1933] 1965: 302-3).

Anti-rhetorical thinking, in ancient times the dogma that truth is transcendent and in modern times the dogma that truth is ideological, claims that the persuasion [*peithos*] of free men is merely another coercion. The modernist theory of persuasion is that there's no such thing as persuasion, only interests. The modernist philosopher P. H. Partridge stipulates that 'uncoerced' entails 'unmanipulated', where 'manipulation' includes 'the persuasive machinery of totalitarian governments'. One imagines a right of a free man to unmanipulated opinions, a world free from beer commercials and sound bites, free from dishonest appeals to read my lips and free from governmental programs for bringing children up as environmental radicals. Such a world is impossible to legislate. Trying to achieve it by dropping the distinction between physical and verbal coercion is a mistake. If Goebbels merely talks persuasively to the German people, even lies to them, or even runs a splendid film about Nazi successes in the Berlin Olympics in their presence, he is not in a useful sense engaged in 'coercion'. Michael Taylor has argued that 'coercion' must be confined to physical action or to 'the successful making of credible, substantial threats' backed by physical coercion (1979: 11-21, 147). Otherwise blackjacks and prisons are 'merely' rhetoric. We had better stick with a distinction between rhetoric and coercion. Keeping the distinction does not deny that rhetoric works within structures of power – in academic economics itself, for example. But a gun is different from a denial of promotion.

The claim to do for others through the state what they cannot do themselves – since after all coercion is merely another persuasion if people would only look on it rightly – justifies modernist social engineering. It was Bentham's obsession. No advocate of *laissez faire* was he, who saw levers in the state for law reform and the construction of rational prisons. In Berlin's terms, social engineering of the Benthamite sort seeks 'positive' freedom, such as the freedom to eat well, as against the 'negative' freedom of the Smithian sort, such as the freedom from oppression by Benthamite social engineers. In 1929 Frank Knight noted the rhetorical contradiction in the idea that we can be helped by social engineers: 'natural science in the "prediction-and-control" sense of the laboratory disciplines is relevant to action only for a dictator standing in a one-sided relation of control to a society, which is the negation of liber-

alism – and of all that liberalism has called morality' (1929: 38). It is again the aporia of the Enlightenment project.

The postmodern liberalist in the late twentieth century has plenty of reason to doubt that we have the knowledge for prediction and control (as Comte put it: 'savoir pour prévoir, prévoir pour pouvoir'). To doubt in this postmodern way that the Federal Reserve can fine tune the economy (thus Milton Friedman the postmodernist) is not 'mere relativism' or 'irrationalism' or an advocacy of 'anything goes'. A recent student of the sophists noted that 'The time is surely long past when the rejection of any transcendent reality can be taken as evidence that the search for truth has been abandoned' (Kerferd, 1981: 175). A claim that one has found the way to determine a transcendent Truth diverts effort from the search for terrestrial truths. It is the intellectual's substitute for theism. Only in God's eyes is the Truth settled now and forever.

Deconstruction

The mention of 'relativism' will bring swimming into the mind of most American readers of the *New York Times* the D word, 'Deconstruction'. It may be surprising that I haven't mentioned it yet, considering how the op-ed pages view literary criticism. In truth 'deconstruction' is now elderly in literary criticism, long since pushed from the center of the stage by feminism and the new historicism. And there is a minority view inside literary criticism, with which I agree, that in any case deconstruction was a reinvention of ancient rhetoric, acquired by the French inventors of deconstruction during Greek class at their *lycées*. The rhetorician Richard Lanham complains that 'the "theory" world is forever taking bits of classical rhetoric and tarding them up in new French frocks' (Lanham, 1993: 263). He notes too that the American Kenneth Burke invented deconstruction forty years before Jacques Derrida. Only willful ignorance keeps the Parisians and their epigones from recognizing it.

Only willful ignorance of another sort, however, keeps the editorialists snarling at deconstruction. People have a way of seeing a novelty through the strangest version with which they imagine they are familiar. Thus outsiders to economics think they can reject a modest version of supply side economics by attacking what they imagine to be the opinions of Arthur Laffer. Richard Posner in his egregious book *Law and Literature: A Misunderstood Relation* (1988) used this rhetorical trick in dismissing literary criticism as applied to law. When explaining to his conservative readers among lawyers Everything You Need to Know About Literary Studies But Were Terrified to Ask you can imagine the terrifying sub-field he started with: Chapter Five, Section 1, 'Deconstruction and Other Schools of Literary Criticism'. One hopes that his decisions as a federal judge are not so transparently rigged.

The reason people play such mind games is that they are conservative, intellectually speaking, and would rather avoid investing in a new set of thinking tools if they can get away with it. Thinking gives one the headache. It has to be admitted, though, in extenuation of the conservatives' nonthinking, that the deconstructionists do not make it easy. Many academics these days adhere to the modernist conviction that obscurity is the same thing as profundity, and therefore write with trowels. You've got to work at this. I mean, this is pretty complex stuff.

Still, deconstruction in substance is not all that hard. Jane Rossetti has given some examples (Rossetti, 1990 and 1992). Here I can illustrate one of its main points, using a couple of sentence she quotes but does not deconstruct from the great and dangerous American economist Wesley Clair Mitchell (1874–1948): 'it must never be forgotten that the development of the social sciences (including economics) is still a social process. Recognition of that view...leads one to study these sciences...[as] the product not merely of sober thinking but also subconscious wishing'. The sentences contain at least these half-spoken hierarchies ready for liberating deconstruction (reading back to front, the terms in square brackets being those implied but not mentioned): sober-subconscious; thought-wishing; product-[mere ephemera]; sciences-[mere humanities]; study-[beach reading]; one-[you personally]; leads-[compels]; view-[grounded conviction]; sciences-[mere] processes; development-[mere chaotic change]; must-[can]. The first term of each is the privileged one – except that in the pairs leads-[compels] and view-[grounded conviction] they are in fact polite self-deprecation, with ironic force: Mitchell is on the contrary claiming the commanding heights of compelling and grounded conviction, in modernist style, not the soft valleys of mere gently leading 'views'.

That's quite a haul for two sentences, and suggests that deconstruction (or for that matter the Greek rhetoric from which it derives) might be onto something of use to the economic reader. It's worth doing with Mitchell – and always easier to do with figures from olden times than from the present (for an English professor's interesting attempt to deconstruct Thatcherian economic rhetoric, see Selden, 1991). To put it in the vernacular, Mitchell is playing all kinds of mind games on his readers and we had better watch out. Mitchell, of course, is not special in this. He espoused, for example, an erotic fascism that was nothing special among modernists in the 1920s but needs deconstruction: 'In economics as in other sciences we desire knowledge mainly as an instrument of control. Control means the alluring possibility of shaping the evolution of economic life to fit the developing purposes of the race' (quoted in Adelstein, 1991: 13). *Savoir pour pouvoir*.

You will notice that nothing in deconstruction says that the world does not exist or that you cannot say anything about anything or that we

do not look both ways when crossing the street. What it does say is the message of postmodernists from the Greek sophists to the present. As Wayne Booth puts it, 'Man is essentially...a self-making-and-remaking, symbol manipulating creature, an exchanger of information, a communicator, a persuader and manipulator, an inquirer. The terms will differ depending on one's philosophical vocabulary, but what will not vary is the central notion that man's value-embedded symbolic processes are as real as anything we know' (Booth, 1974: 136).

The proposals of postmodernism: toggling in the market place of ideas

To put it another way, postmodernism is and always has been thoroughly rhetorical. Richard Lanham use the notion of a 'toggle', that is, in computerese the keystroke that allows one to move from, say, looking at a stripped-down version of a text on a screen to looking at a fully formatted version with all ornaments in place (Lanham, 1993). The age of oratory before Gutenberg and the age of keyboarding after the silicon chip, Lanham argues, both elevated toggling to the master art. They reacted to a modernism, which wants the toggle always off. Modernism is flatfooted. Postmodernism is ironic.

Lanham quotes the American pragmatist George Herbert Mead on the multiple roles played by graceful living in the world: 'It is the social process itself that is responsible for the appearance of the self; it is not there as a self apart from this type of experience. A multiple personality is in a certain sense normal' (Mead, 1934, quoted in Lanham, 1976: 153). In being a self and a citizen, argues Lanham, 'the same technique is required - holding opposite worlds in the mind at once' (1976: 154), an attitude that 'oscillates from realism to idealism and back again' (Lanham, 1974: 39). You must know that the President's inaugural address is *merely* a speech, and note its figures at the same time that you grasp its values, for what they are worth. To be unable to toggle between the two knowings is to be either a cynic or a fool.

Lanham contrasts the rhetorical looking *at* the words with the philosophical looking *through*. Modernism of whatever era is the theory that the two should be separated, one for Art and the other for Science. But a rhetorical education offers the ability to toggle between the two. In a comment on my writings on rhetoric, Lanham explains how a strong defense of the rhetorical tradition can be constructed out of this idea:

[McCloskey's] stated defense [of rhetoric] is the weak one: 'Rhetoric is merely a tool, no bad thing in itself'. [...] But what she succeeds in doing, with her...close readings of the rhetoric of economics in action, is to suggest the Strong Defense we began

to see emerging with [the Chicago Aristotelian Richard] McKeon. To read economics as McCloskey suggests is always to be toggling between looking at the prose and through it, reading it 'rhetorically' and reading it 'philosophically', and this toggling attitude toward utterance is what the rhetorical *paideia* was after all along. Train someone in it and, according to [the Roman rhetorician] Quintilian's way of thinking, you have trained that person to be virtuous.

(Lanham, 1993: 169-70.)

Lanham argues persuasively that someone educated in modernist style without the toggle, so to speak, is not only not automatically a good person (though perhaps skilled at a certain specialized way of speaking) but is likely to be bad. Being educated in rhetoric, acquiring skill in speaking across the culture, is usually to acquire the toggle.

The argument can be made more precise, economically speaking. Having two views allows one to toggle. Toggling allows one to see that one's view is a view. Monists are likely at this point to scream 'mere relativism' and call for the guards. But being able to toggle from view to view does not imply indifference between the views. Economically speaking it is the index number problem. You can evaluate the standard of living in America and India using either the point of view of American prices (cheap cars, expensive servants) or of Indian prices (expensive cars, cheap servants). Knowing that there are two sets of prices at which one might evaluate the difference does not paralyze thought or lead to nihilism. On the contrary, it is necessary for wisdom. Pick one view, know what you're doing, and from time to time, for the hell of it, toggle.

A liberalist and economic postmodernism

I have been suggesting that postmodernism need not be expressed only in post-Marxist ways (thus Baudrillard or Lyotard) or late Freudian ways (thus Lacan and Irigaray). It can be expressed in post-Marshallian or post-Keynesian or late Mengerian ways, too. I have given some examples in a conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (McCloskey, 2001). French thinkers and their followers in the USA have tended to assume that a postmodernism must deal with exactly and only the questions that French intellectuals are most worried about: How can we bear life without Cartesianism? How can we escape from the rigidities of the French bourgeoisie? How will the Revolution come? How can we be 'critics' if we are not 'critics' in the adolescent's sense of sneering at everything we see? How can we avoid becoming American?

One reason that economists should come to terms with postmodernism is that many prominent theorists of postmodernism (theorists,

not necessarily advocates), such as the American Fredric Jameson or the Frenchman Jean Baudrillard, have definite ideas about the economy, ideas they believe important. Yet the ideas are detached from modern economics, even when of Marxist origin (that is, even the Marxist economists have no impact on what the literary Marxists say). This is odd on its face. One would think the professors of literature would want to learn more about what they are talking about. They are confident they understand the modern economy, yet know little of its history and nothing about the main conversation in which the economy is discussed, our very own economics (take it how you will: neoclassical or Marxist or Austrian or institutionalist). True, literary critics and their artist subjects see things about the economy that economists miss. The point is that there is an occasion here for serious, beneficial trade. Economists if they would set their minds to it, and see that postmodernism is an adult's way to be a scientist, could reunify the cultures of science and literature.

The missing ingredient in liberalist thought, I am arguing, is rhetoric, to be supplied by the professors of literature in exchange for lessons in economics. As John of Salisbury wrote eight centuries ago in its defense: 'Rhetoric is the beautiful and the fruitful union between reason and expression. Through harmony, it holds human communities together' (quoted in Vickers, 1970: 30). Charles Altieri, like many critics still under the spell of Marxism, has difficulties with the unfoundedness of a rhetoric. He has a nostalgia for certitude and a hatred of capitalism. Charles, my good man: surrender, to Lanham's toggling and to capitalism. Rhetoric, the first postmodernism, was born with capitalism in the marketplaces of Greece.

Refutation

But what of the weighty objections to the postmodern, such as those supplied by those ingenious writers I mentioned in *The New York Times*? A little dispute about postmodernism and classical liberalism I had recently with Jeffrey Friedman, the editor of the admirable journal *Critical Inquiry*, can serve. Friedman asks (Friedman, 1991), 'without the discipline imposed by a putatively objective, non-metaphorical reality, is not each interpretive community licensed to convert its instincts into sacred cows on the ground that there is no higher standard of truth than whatever is arbitrarily self-imposed?'

Briefly, No: to admit that our only standard is our interpretive community is not to surrender to *arbitrary* standards, but to standards. There are no timeless standards outside those of an interpretive community. As Aristotle put the point, 'Since the persuasive is persuasive to someone...rhetoric theorize[s]...about what seems true to people of a certain sort, as is also true with dialectic' (*Rhetoric*, I, ii, 11; 1356b). The

literary critic and law professor and now dean Stanley Fish attacks Critical Legal Studies. Fish is well known for his relativism and post-modernism and trendy leftism. Why then does he not thrill to the late-1960s leftwing tactics of Critical Legal Studies? Because the Crits do not reach the standards of the interpretive community. Fish, the notorious constructivist, complains that for the Crits, 'all of a sudden "constructed" means "fabricated" or "made up"' (Fish, 1989: 227). Fish is consistent and Fish is correct. 'Rational debate', he says, 'is always possible; not, however, because it is anchored in a reality outside it, but because it occurs in a history' (Fish, 1989: 196). Yes. Fish believes that modernism, whether rationalist or irrationalist, has some deliberative screws loose. We postmodernists propose to tighten them up. The conservatives want to carry screwily on.

But what about, in Friedman's words, 'the discipline imposed by a putatively objective, non-metaphorical reality'? I would argue that the 'discipline' of 'non-metaphoric reality' is phony. For one thing, since Mary Hesse's *Models and Analogies in Science* (1963), or for that matter since Immanuel Kant, it has been hard to claim that scientists get along without metaphor. In the early 1960s the philosopher Max Black wrote of metaphor 'since philosophers...have so neglected the subject, I must get what help I can from the literary critics. They, at least, do not accept the commandment, "Thou shalt not commit metaphor," or assume that metaphor is incompatible with serious thought' (1962: 25).

For another, the metaphor of 'discipline' doesn't bite in practice. Modernists talk a lot about 'discipline' and 'rigor' and 'compelling proof', in a vocabulary approaching the sadomasochistic, but when it gets down to the whips and chains they don't carry through. In this they follow their master: Plato's arguments, when examined closely, hinge on myths. Any practitioner of a subject like economics under the sway of modernism knows in her heart that this is so, and can offer examples in practice. We can have a real discipline based on a serious rhetoric, a discipline admitting that we cannot achieve Truths but affirming that we can come to agree on some truths. We cannot have a transcendent discipline, since we cannot ground it as the transcendentalists demand. The groundings proffered in the successive modernisms since Plato have proven to be fakes. So the 'discipline' is fake, too. Unlike the real discipline of rhetoric, which demands we persuade each other, the fake discipline escapes in the end all demands. 'Anything goes' was a conservative technique long before it was, putatively, a postmodern theory.

Friedman asserts that interpretive communities must in practice act as though their standards were 'transcendent'. There's the word, and there's the 'discipline'. Only children and platonists need transcendence. The children in *The Lord of the Flies* must worship absolutely the pig's, and Piggy's, head. Communities of adults by contrast have in practice no

difficulty recognizing that their standards are not God's own, not transcendent and not ahistorical, while affirming that the standards are still worth discussing and implementing. It's not the case empirically, as philosophical and political conservatives have always feared, that adults will descend into a war of all against all if they lose their faith in God or the divine right of kings or the synthetic a priori or some other principle of transcendence. The engineering standard for the height of road crowns is nowhere inscribed by the finger of God, and yet a contractor who fails to abide by it will accept that he needs to rebuild the road. The standard of replicability in biological experiment is not absolute, and cannot in principle be so. Yet the community of biologists can recognize conjecturally, well enough for scientific purposes, when an experiment on oxidative phosphorylation has gone wrong (Mulkay, 1985). Friedman thinks that without a belief in transcendence we 'would have no criteria of what counts as persuasive'. Huh? Come again? Why so? He does not say, nor do the other worried critics of postmodernism. I say, Relax: the end of civilization is not near, and if there is a threat it comes from the barbarians already inside the gates, the modernists of Princeton or Pasadena.

The philosopher of postmodernism Gary Madison is quoted by Friedman saying that modernism subscribes to a 'Promethean illusion that by means of theory we can manipulate and control human affairs however we desire'. Friedman calls this a 'dubious reading of modern history', but again does not pause to say why. Yet Madison's description would satisfy empirically most members of a speech community who have lived through communism and anti-communism, Vietnam and the expansion of the modern state. Someone accurately described the illusion of architectural modernism or the modernism of the Enlightenment as the notion that we can in fact accomplish everything we rationally propose to do. (Compare Hayek: 'If we remain strictly rationalist, utilitarian, we can arrange everything according to our pleasure'.)

With such a rationalism who needs irrationalism? And what else would you call such lunacy but a 'Promethean illusion'? 'All their doings were indeed without intelligent calculation until I showed them the rising of the stars, and the settings, hard to observe. And further I discovered to them numbering, pre-eminent among subtle devices.... It was I who arranged all the ways of seercraft, and I first adjudged what things come verily true from dreams' (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, ll. 452-61, 478). Prometheus might as well have been justifying a forecast from the social engineers of next year's interest rate. It is the Promethean, and modernist, illusion. It denies scarcity and it denies the rationality that the easy predictions have already been exploited.

Such modernism is bad economics. Fixing it is another reason for economists to get on with the postmodern project. Somehow we've got to bring along with us in the back of the pickup the terrified conservatives,

mumbling their rosaries of 'standards', 'transcendence', and 'discipline', none of which they have seen or practiced in their scientific lives.

Notes

- 1 Parts of the following have appeared in (1994a) *Knowledge and Persuasion in Economics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and in (1991) 'The Essential Rhetoric of Law, Literature, and Liberty' (Review of Posner's *Law as Literature*, Fish's *Doing What Comes Naturally* and White's *Justice as Translation*) *Critical Review* 5 (Spring): 203-23. I thank David Ruccio for comments on a draft.

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5

WRITING IN THIRDS

Jack Amariglio

Sheila Dow, Arjo Klamer, and Deirdre McCloskey are a venerable threesome. The three are among the few economists who started talking about modernism and postmodernism back in the 1980s. Early on, each contributed several noteworthy papers that specified one (among many) problems within contemporary economics to be about modernism and its excesses. These papers, taken together, constitute some of the first and finest work from economists about the impending 'implosion' of modernist economics – its impossibility to go on blithely and securely – and the equally impending emergence of 'something else', postmodernism perhaps, or perhaps not. The papers Dow, Klamer, and McCloskey have written for this volume have the tone of a wisened and collective re-evaluation, a taking stock and look back at where their own concerns about modernism and the economics profession's trajectory in the past two decades have left this something else.

Their papers, as both retrospection and prospection, share something deep and abiding. It is what I will call the desire for 'the third'. Without spending too much time on establishing attribution or periodization, I will hazard a thesis: that the desire for a third, a way out of either/or oppositions – what Dow identifies as 'dualism' – has been part of many economists' self-consciousness during the reign of modernism within economics. That such a desire may also be part and parcel of postmodernism I readily acknowledge. Or rather, I think it is correct to say that many postmodernists (myself and my own past work included) internalize such a desire. This being the case, a question arises if such a desire is central to postmodern movements within economics or other fields, or simply belies the strong effects of modernism and its characteristic modes of posing problems within any of these fields. I will leave this question mostly unanswered for the present.

I am convinced, though, that third ways speak most clearly to the historical legacies of transcendental philosophies, and that the desire for this 'other', where the other is posed as a third, has an honorable genealogy in the dialectics that are the bequeathment of ancient Greece