

Why modernism still matters

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In 1968, when the students at my alma mater, Columbia University, rebelled and occupied the campus, the critic Lionel Trilling, one of Columbia's distinguished professors, described their actions as 'modernism in the streets'. I believed then, and I still believe, that this phrase got to the heart of things: in the troubles of those days, which at once tore up the streets of our cities and gave them new life, modernism was alive and well. This was the modern movement I set out to explore and chart in the book that eventually became *All that Is Solid Melts into Air*. That book, first published in 1982, shows some of the ways in which modern society, although racked with pain and misery and riven with uncertainty, nevertheless enables men and women to become freer and more creative than men and women have ever been.

Modernists, as I portray them, are at once at home in this world and at odds with it. They celebrate and identify with the triumphs of modern science, art, technology, economics, politics: with all the activities that enable mankind to do what the Bible said only God could do: to 'make all things new'.¹ At the same time, however, they deplore modernization's betrayal of its own human promise. Modernists demand deeper and more radical renewals: modern men and women must become the subjects as well as the objects of modernization; they must learn to change the world that is changing them, and to make it their own. Modernists know this is possible: the fact that the world has changed so much is proof that it can change still more. They can, in a striking phrase of Hegel's, 'look the negative in the face and live with it' (Hegel 1910: 92–3).² The fact that 'all that is solid melts into air' is a source of strength and

affirmation, not of despair.³ If everything must go, then let it go: modern people have the power to create a better world than the world they have lost.

Most of my book is about the past. It pays special attention to Marx, Baudelaire and Dostoevsky, the great modernists of the generation of 1848. (Wagner belongs with them, but I lacked the musical vocabulary.) But my argument is pointed toward the present and the future. 'Going back can be a way to go forward,' I wrote; 'remembering the modernisms of the 19th century can help us gain the vision and courage to create the modernisms of the 21st' (Berman 1982/1988: 36). Thus I hoped to take social thought back to the future.

When I started work on *All that Is Solid Melts into Air*, early in the 1970s, it seemed to me that the project and the problems of modernism were in the foreground of American and European intellectual life. By the time the book came out, however, in the early 1980s, modernism wasn't even in the background. If people used the word at all, they spoke of it as something from another century – if not, indeed, from another planet. Meanwhile, there was an inexhaustible flow of critical discourse asserting that we live in the postmodern world.⁴ Had I really been asleep for so long? Had the structures and dynamics of life, thought and art changed so much so fast?

In this essay, I will sharpen and deepen my paradigm of modernism. I will try to understand why many intelligent people have come to believe modernism is out of date, and to explain why they are wrong. My argument unfolds in three phases. First, I recapitulate some of the central themes of modernism, as they emerged in what is generally considered its classic age, from the 1840s to the aftermath of the First World War. (Here I will elaborate some themes that my book does not develop adequately.) Second, I suggest how the recent movements that call themselves postmodern only re-enact, rather than overcome, modernism's deepest troubles and impasses. Finally, I will discuss a number of ways in which modernism can still be creative in the present and the future.

MODERN HOPES AND FEARS

Many of the abiding modern themes are unveiled with great flair in the first part of the *Communist Manifesto*, which appeared at the beginning of 1848, at a moment when, all over Europe, revolutions were in the air. Marx saw the bourgeois as the first really revolution-

ary class, and 'the first to show what man's activity can bring about'. Their obsessive and insatiable activism, which they have enforced first on their own workers and then (with increasing effectiveness) on the whole world, 'has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all the preceding generations put together'. Marx offers a short list:

Subjection of nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground – what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive powers slumbered in the womb of social labor? (*Marx and Engels 1848/1959: 12*)

A century later, we would be likely to add automobiles, electronics (including an amazing array of electronic forms of communication), nuclear energy, cybernetics and the computerization of everyday life, flight through the air and into outer space, genetics and biotechnology, great breakthroughs in public health that have more than doubled the average lifespan from Marx's time to our own, and much more. What makes all these changes distinctively modern is not the inventions themselves, but a process of incessant enquiry, discovery and innovation, and a shared determination to transform theory into practice, to use all we know to change the world. Marx gives the bourgeoisie credit for starting this process. Like every other modernist, however, he expects the process to go a lot further than the bourgeoisie would like, and indeed further than it can even conceive.

Another great bourgeois achievement, which should also lead beyond bourgeois horizons, is the internationalization of daily life. 'The need for a constantly expanding market for its products,' Marx says, 'chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.' Moreover, Marx notes, internationalization goes on not only in economic matters, but in people's most intimate inner lives. 'And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The spiritual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous local literatures there arises a world literature' (*Marx and Engels 1848/1959: 11*). Thus the modern bourgeoisie, interested only in its own profits, inadvertently creates a world culture whose creations are public property. We can see, more than a century later, that this is the culture of modernism

itself. Although it has embraced the world horizons of modern capital, it ends up subverting capitalism, not necessarily because it sets out to (though it frequently does), but simply because, as an array of 'spiritual creations', it cannot help expressing values radically opposed to the profit-and-loss calculus of the bourgeois bottom line.

One of the central themes in modernist culture, starting in the 1840s, is the drive for free development. Goethe, in *Faust*, was probably the first to suggest the connection between the modern desire for self-development and the modern movement toward economic development. Marx conceptualizes this relationship in the *Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them all the relations of society . . . Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their venerable train of prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man at last is forced to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his fellow men. (*Marx and Engels 1848/1959: 10*)

Under the pressure of the market, modern men and women are forced to grow in order to survive. But their growth is channelled and twisted into narrow, strictly marketable, directions. Still, Marx believes, the inner dynamism that capitalism creates in its subjects is bound to recoil against bourgeois rule. Sooner or later, modern men and women will come to feel that the boundaries of the capitalist bottom line are fencing them in; after lifetimes of forced and distorted development, they will begin to clamour for free development. This desire, more than any merely economic need, will propel the modern masses into movements for radical change. Indeed, when communism finally arrives, Marx says in the *Manifesto*, its gift to humanity will be 'an association in which the free development of each is the condition of the development of all' (Tucker 1978: 491).

Free development is celebrated by Marx's whole generation of modernists. It is what Baudelaire's 'Le Voyage' is about: 'to drown in the abyss – heaven or hell, who cares? Through the unknown, we'll find the new' (Lowell 1962). Free development is also what the hero of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* has in mind when

he says, 'I want to live, in order to satisfy all my faculties for life' (Dostoevsky 1864/1960). And it plays a crucial role in the thought of even so square a modernist as John Stuart Mill (1859), who declares in his *On Liberty* that 'not symmetry [of character] but bold, free expansion in all directions is demanded by the needs of modern life and the instincts of the modern mind'.

More than a century later, the drive for free development has spread all over the world, and has energized millions of people to demand shorter work hours, universal education, freedom of expression, and support for what Mill in *On Liberty* called 'experiments in living'. An amorphous but passionate public, open and responsive to any activity or creation that appears to be authentically new, has helped to keep many modes of modernism alive. It has encouraged several generations of artists and scientists and quite ordinary men and women to believe that, if they aren't transcending themselves, they aren't really alive. (Ironically, this public has also become the primary audience for postmodernism, which represents itself as the newest modern movement in town.)

The ideal of free development, elaborated in the 1840s, soon brought about a powerful undertow. From then till now, this undertow has been a primary source of anxiety and despair in modern life. I will call this undertow what Nietzsche called it at the start of *The Will to Power*: the problem of nihilism. Nietzsche himself, along with Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and other modernist 'bad boys', are often blamed for nihilism, which is said to spring from their drugged and overheated imaginations.⁵

Marx addressed a similar problem from a different angle. One of his bitterest complaints against bourgeois society is that it has 'resolved all standards of personal worth into exchange value': anything becomes morally permissible if it is economically profitable. Marx indicts the bourgeoisie as the first nihilistic ruling class in history. He looks forward to a socialist revolution, and eventually to a communist society, that will deliver modern men and women from the capitalist bottom line. But we could well ask: if free development for everybody is going to be the basic norm of the new society, won't such a norm engender new modes of nihilism that will be deeper and more thorough than the mode they replace?

The modernists of the 1840s created a vocabulary that made it possible to ask such questions. They didn't have answers, but they had faith in the capacities of modern men and women in the process of development to generate answers. Hence they could accept modern nihilism as what Nietzsche called it: 'a great clearing away', 'a simplification for the sake of life', 'a pathological transitional

state', a prelude to the creation of new and better values (Nietzsche 1888/1968).

Meanwhile, however, came the counter-attack: the catastrophic ruin of the revolutions of 1848, and, in France, the new despotism of Napoleon III. 'The struggle seems to be settled,' Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, just after Bonaparte's coup d'état of December 1851, 'in such a way that all classes, equally mute and equally impotent, fall on their knees before the rifle butt ... France seems to have escaped the despotism of a class only to fall beneath the despotism of an individual, and, what is more, beneath the authority of an individual without authority' (Tucker 1978: 606). The dreadful denouements of 1848–51 revealed that there was a very large modern public – no one knew just how large – which, far from yearning for a future of free development, was fighting to flee from a present that already felt much too free.

For Marx, the collective desire to escape from freedom was a subject for comedy, though indeed a black comedy. (The humour of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* is actually much more typical of our century than of Marx's own. It belongs on the same shelf as Lenny Bruce and *Catch-22*.) Thirty years later Dostoevsky (1864/1960: 119–41), in his 'Legend of the Grand Inquisitor', brought out the tragic gravity of this theme. Dostoevsky's parable is told by the modernist intellectual Ivan Karamazov. Ivan imagines a very modern and humanistic Jesus, one who is concerned above all with freedom of conscience. The Grand Inquisitor judges this sort of freedom subversive and dangerous: it is too much, he believes, for mere human beings to handle. He pays a midnight visit to Jesus in the prison where he has thrown him, and entreats Jesus to slip away in the darkness, before the Inquisition burns him for heresy. Doesn't he understand that he is making life too hard? 'I tell you,' the Inquisitor says, 'man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find someone to whom he can hand over the gift of freedom with which this ill-fated creature was born.' Jesus lacks true mercy and charity: he fails to see 'that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil. Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering.'

The Inquisitor now steps out of his medieval setting and addresses Dostoevsky's modern audience: 'Look,' he says, 'now, today, people are persuaded that they are freer than ever before, yet they have brought their freedom to us and laid it humbly at our feet.' The masses rebel, but they 'lack the courage to carry through their own rebellion'. They are like schoolchildren who riot and drive their

teacher from the room, only to recoil in fright when they see that there is no one in charge but themselves. Then they will throw themselves on the mercy of 'the three powers that alone are able to hold captive the conscience of these impotent rebels' – a modernist anti-Trinity of 'miracle, mystery and authority' – rather than take responsibility for their own lives.

Dostoevsky is dreadfully apt, here and elsewhere, as a prophet of twentieth-century fascist and totalitarian movements. He comes closest to home, not so much in his portrait of the leadership of these movements as in his vision of the followers: modern men and women who grow up in a state of partial freedom, but who find this freedom such a dreadful burden that they will gladly sign over their lives to any leader or movement that will take the weight away. The parable of the Grand Inquisitor can teach modernists that they are in a far more precarious and vulnerable position than they may think. Marx's generation, the makers (and victims) of 1848, had canonized Prometheus as their culture hero. The Grand Inquisitor can remind them how many people out there are rooting for Zeus, how many would give back the fire and apologize to the gods, if only they could.

Dostoevsky's parable has a remarkably contemporary ring, but in one important way it was anachronistic from the start. In all but a few parts of the world (Iran is currently most prominent), the primary source of 'miracle, mystery and authority' is not the church, but the state. A powerful strain in modern culture, springing from the 1840s generation – Stirner and Proudhon, Tocqueville and Thoreau – sees this as the basic fact of modern political life, strives to unmask and denounce the modern state, even as that state entrenches itself everywhere in the world and incessantly expands. 'The New Idol', Nietzsche scornfully called it in 1883, in the glory days of the Bismarckian Reich:

State is the name of the coldest of all monsters. Coldly it tells lies; and this lie crawls out of its mouth: 'I, the state, am the people ...'

Where there is still a people, it does not understand the state, and hates it as the evil eye and the sin against customs and rights ...

It will give you everything if you'll adore it, this new idol: thus it buys the splendor of your virtues and the look of your proud eyes. It will use you as bait ...

My brothers, do you want to suffocate? Rather break the windows and leap to freedom.

Escape from the bad smell! Escape from the steam of these human sacrifices. (*Nietzsche 1883: 160–3*)⁶

We needn't share Nietzsche's optimism about a great leap (where could one go, after all, except into another state's jurisdiction?) to get the critical point. Indeed, we could even argue – as Max Weber did a couple of decades later – that the more indispensable the state is to all modern people and peoples, the more oppressive and dangerous it is bound to be. Nietzsche might well have agreed. His aim was not to promote any particular escape route. Rather, it was to convince his readers that they didn't have to let themselves be absorbed by gigantic institutions: to strengthen these readers to the point where they could believe in their own inner strength. If powers of social control grew strong, men and women could grow even stronger. If people found themselves devalued, they had the capacity to create new values. Thus Nietzsche affirmed and deepened the modernist faith.

Two of Nietzsche's striking images in the passage above – the tragic image of human sacrifice to vicious gods, and the black-comic image of men used as bait (and dying like flies) – hurtle us into the trenches of 1914–18, and into the depths of what Gertrude Stein called 'the Cubist War' (cited in Kern 1983: 288). Actually, the self-awareness implicit in these Nietzschean images belongs to the second phase of World War I, after both sides had made murderous but futile attempts to break through enemy lines. During the first phase, August 1914 and its aftermath, the days of dancing in the streets, modernists from every country in Europe marched naively off to the war (or danced their nearest and dearest off to war), happy for once to belong to their national masses, identifying themselves with all the newly discovered modes of speed, flight, bursts of light and energy, explosive firepower (they called their avant-garde magazines *Bomb* and *Blast*!), yearning to see modernism put into practice on a spectacular scale. French cubists and German expressionists mobilized all their talents to create ingenious camouflage, apparently proud to help their respective armies kill each other. Proust's Baron Charlus stood on Paris roofs during air raids, singing Wagner arias and saluting a spectacle that was at once primeval and high-tech. As the war dragged on and on, however, many of the modernists who were still alive (so many of the most creative were killed) came to feel and understand its full horror: far from being an arena for heroism and heightened creativity, it had transformed subjects into objects, reduced its participants to helpless passivity, shivering in the trenches while waiting to be shot. The poet Edmund Blunden, after

surviving the disastrous Battle of the Somme in July 1916 (the British lost 60,000 men on the first day of their attack), wrote: 'Neither race had won, nor could win, the War. The War had won, and would go on winning.'⁷

If the Italian futurists of 1914–16 typified the modernism of the war's start, the Central European Dadaists of 1917–21 best expressed the modernism of the war's endlessness, and then of its absurd end. Their outrages and provocations were meant to shock people – and peoples – into reflecting on what was being done to them, and imagining what they might do in return. Dada didn't last long, but it helped to expand people's minds, often against their will, to the point where angry but hopeful peoples pulled down several predatory empires, and fought fiercely, for a few years at least, to create the modern world anew.⁸

One of the great works of modernist self-education, written in the war's first dreadful year, was Freud's essay (1915) 'Thoughts for the times on war and death'. Freud was stunned by the war: not so much by the clash of armies, as by the eruptions of hatred on both sides; by the willingness, even eagerness, of intellectuals and scientists to hand their minds and consciences over to their propaganda bureaus; and by the eruptive, frenzied character of mass hatred all over Europe, as if there were no tomorrow coming, as if the peoples of Europe were not going to have to find ways to live together again. He tried to understand what forces had exploded inside modern men and women that could lead them to press all their energy and creativity into the service of mutual assured destruction. His conclusion was that the scientific, artistic and organizational triumphs of modern civilization were made possible by impossibly stringent ethical standards, which eventually extracted devastating psychic costs. In the respectable world of the pre-war European middle class, men and women were forced to repress their strongest and deepest feelings – not only sexual feelings, but, just as important, feelings of violent anger, of displacement, of nameless dread – and therefore, as Freud put it, 'to live psychologically beyond their means'.

In August 1914 the respectable façades had finally cracked. The war made it clear, Freud said, that 'the state forbids wrongdoing and violence, not, however, in order to abolish it, but in order to monopolize it'. Modern states enlisted subjects who were seething with rage – rage against parents, children, siblings, lovers, spouses, friends, authorities – and mobilized them to displace their repressed private enmities onto socially sanctioned public enemies. Freud's clinical work had taught him how many people there were in modern societies whose psyches were like bombs ready to explode;

World War I taught him how willing and able the modern state was (or could easily become) to supply detonators and targets. In uniform, normally peaceable and decent men could perpetrate unthinkable atrocities, and not only avoid arrest, but win medals and praise in the daytime – and moreover, because the state assumed responsibility for their actions, sleep well at night.

Freud's insight into the dynamics of patriotic gore is developed and deepened a decade later, in his most important late work, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930, 1931). The book reaches a climax with what may be a definitive vision of the inner contradictions and ultimate fragility of modern life: 'Men have gained control of the forces of nature to such an extent that, by using them [nature's forces], they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness, and their mood of anxiety.' Modern men and women are in urgent need of self-knowledge, if we are ever going to gain the power to protect us from the powers we have gained already.

But it is not enough merely to defuse ourselves: we must find ways to live. After summing up the profound destructive powers around and inside us, Freud adds, and ends his book this way: 'And now we may expect that the other of the two primal forces, eternal Eros, will assert his strength, so as to affirm himself in the struggle against his immortal antagonist.' (In 1931, a year later, the shadows a little longer, he gave the book a new and more melancholy ending: 'But who can foresee with what success and with what result?') Thus, the drive for self-knowledge that forces us to see through our world and our place in it, and brings us face to face with our inner darkness, may also have the power to bind us together in a new, more viable life. The dreaded negative powers of modernism may yet turn out to be driven by the power of love. Freud's lifelong quarrel with the modern world ends in a fragile but real dialectic of hope.

IMPASSES OF THE POSTMODERN

If my reading of modernity is right, it is a condition that at once empowers people and constrains them. They can face it more or less honestly, more or less confidently, more or less bravely, more or less imaginatively. But they can't face away from it, or stand beyond it: right now, it's the only world we have got. Nevertheless, since the end of World War II, all sorts of people have insisted that they are expressing a postmodern sensibility, and that all of us are living in a

distinctively postmodern age. Postmodern claims have actually come in two waves: the first in the early 1960s, coming from all over America; the second in the 1970s and 1980s, coming at first from France.

The first wave of postmodernism emerged around 1960 in America's universities and Bohemian enclaves. It sprang from the people who invented happenings, assemblages, environments, and the art that would come to be called Pop – people who, without knowing it, were inventing the 1960s. For the most part, they were too busy to worry about labels. But they were at least occasionally willing to answer to the label 'postmodern' because they all deplored the cultural orthodoxy that, in the 1950s, seemed to pre-empt the label of modernism. This orthodoxy, hard to recapture today, was narrow, solemn and hieratic. Its high priest was T. S. Eliot, not the revolutionary poet who wrote 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and *The Waste Land*, but the grey eminence 'Mr Eliot', a clerical personage who presided over culture as over a sepulchre, and demanded that art be treated with the hushed reverence due to the dead.

The world-view of this orthodoxy was characterized aptly by Norman O. Brown, in *Life against Death*, a book that helped to shatter it, as 'the politics of sin, cynicism and despair' (1959: 7). Its overseers were ever vigilant in warding off threats to 'high art' from 'mass culture', as if art were a delicate antique that could be shattered by any loud noise or strong vibration. Moreover, these overseers demanded that practitioners of any art should foresake all others and concern themselves only with the essence of their particular form. Thus the only legitimate subject of painting was the nature of painting, poetry had to be about the nature of poetry, and so it went.

Nothing would have appalled the 1950s trustees of culture more than the idea that serious art could make you laugh. In dramatic contrast, the new wave of artists in the early 1960s struggled to make art fun. They mixed media, styles and genres, incorporated large chunks of the industrial world and mass culture in their work, and brought art out of the studios and galleries and into the streets. The critic Leslie Fiedler's formula for this new wave was 'Cross the border, close the gap'. Claes Oldenburg (1970: 25, 33), in the notes for one of his first shows, said, 'I am for an art that tells you the time of day, or where such and such a street is. I am for an art that helps old ladies across the street.'

The new faces of the early sixties were more active politically, and more militant in the demands they made on life, than were the modernists of the cold war years. At the same time, they were in love with the world they wanted to change. These artists broke

culture open, opened it up to the amazing variety and richness of images, materials and ideas brought forth by the worldwide post-war economic boom; Marshall McLuhan's metaphor of a 'global village' seemed to come to life. The spirit of those times still lives in Allen Ginsberg's poem 'America', in James Rosenquist's mural *F-111*, in Bob Dylan's song 'Desolation Row'. Jean-Luc Godard captured it perfectly in a phrase from *La Chinoise*: 'the children of Marx and Coca-Cola'. This generation often thought of itself as postmodern, and compared with the curators of 1950s modernism, it was. But the children of Marx and Coca-Cola have a far better claim than their predecessors to the spirit and honour of modernism: they engaged the contradictions of their times, struggled to make the teeming and boiling society of the 1960s their own.⁹

If the first wave of postmoderns was composed of the people who invented the 1960s, the second wave, still flowing today, is a strange combination of people who were born too early to participate actively in the sixties, and people who were born too late and missed the sixties. This postmodernism was created by Parisian academics who spent their whole lives as members of the enviably privileged French mandarin caste. For two minutes, in May 1968, their lives were transfigured, a terrible beauty was born; in two minutes more, all their hopes were dead. The postmodernisms of the past twenty years grew out of this trauma, and also out of a collective refusal to confront it.

Instead, the Left Bank exploded with all the feverish rhetoric and sectarian fanaticism that typify radical politics at its worst, combined with a total abdication of concern for political issues and relationships in the grubby real world. (Indeed, it was typical of Parisian postmodernism to say it made no sense even to talk about a real world: there was 'nothing outside the text', as Jacques Derrida liked to say.) Derrida, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, and all their legions of followers, appropriated the whole modernist language of radical breakthrough, wrenched it out of its moral and political context, and transformed it into a purely aesthetic language game. Eros, revolution, terrorism, diabolical possession, apocalypse, were now simply ways of playing with words and signifiers and texts. As such, they could be experienced and enjoyed – *jouir, jouissance*, Roland Barthes's favourite words – without engaging in any action, taking any risks, or paying any human costs. If modernism had found both its fulfilment and its ruin in the streets, this postmodernism saved its devotees the trouble of ever having to go out at all. The thinker could be ultraradical without ever leaving his desk. If this is nihilism (and these postmoderns are always invoking Nietzsche and Heidegger to show that it is), then it

is a radically new form: nihilism without tears. The first time it was tragedy, the second time it's farce.

When this production crossed the Atlantic with great fanfare, and played to full houses of people who instead of laughing bowed their heads in awe, I was mystified at first. Then I noticed that the most reverent followers of postmodernism were rather younger than I was, and in fact were people who were too young for the 1960s. Coming of age in the 1970s, they inherited all the rage and bitterness of the Vietnam generation, without any of our experience of protracted struggle leading to limited but important changes in the world. Their generation appropriated and deepened our radical negations, without ever having shared our radical hopes. The most impressive achievement of this 1970s generation, I have always thought, is punk rock: a medium that proclaims and dramatizes radical negation without radical hope, and yet manages to create some sort of hope out of its overflow of energy and honesty and the communal warmth it ignites.

I have recently been reading Jean Baudrillard, the most recent postmodern pretender and object of cultic adoration in art scenes and universities all over America today. Here is his voice:

The end of the dialectic signifier/signified, which permitted an accumulation of knowledge and meaning... The end of ... capital accumulation and social production. The end of linear discourse. The end of the classic era of the sign. The end of the era of production...

Power is no longer present except to conceal the fact that there is none... Illusion is no longer possible because reality is no longer possible. (Baudrillard 1984)

As I read these words, I began thinking. Where have I heard all this before? Then I remembered. I turned to my record collection. It was the Fugs' 'January nothing, February nothing, March and April nothing ... / Capital and labor, still more nothing, / Agribusiness nothing' (Kupferberg 1965). It was the Sex Pistols' 'No Future', shouted all night till everybody dropped (Rotten et al. 1977). It was Flipper's 'Not to believe what you believe, / Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing' (Lose, 1981). It was the Minutemen's 'No heart/soul, no working at that goal ... / Not living/dying, life just means surviving ... / No world/no fair, lost hope, I no longer care' (Watt and Watt 1985).

We can feel the metaphysical affinities here, yet they speak in such different voices! The punks put themselves on the line; the desolation of their world fills them with dread; they open up their inner wounds, in the vein of Rousseau and Baudelaire, Artaud and Billie

Holliday, Jackson Pollock and Sylvia Plath; in their musical and emotional contortions they are trying (as Nietzsche urged us all to try) to break the windows and leap to freedom. They are modernists, whether they know it or not.

The voice of the postmodern mandarins seems to emanate from a very different and distant space. They don't shriek, 'We are the future / There is no future!' – maybe because the alleged death of the subject would preclude it – but they manage to sound like they mean it. They announce the end of all things in tones of serene aplomb, proclaim incoherence in elegant neoclassical antitheses, and assert with dogmatic self-certainty the impossibility of truth and the death of the self. Where is this voice coming from? It sounds as if, after the failure of their one great leap into actuality, back in May 1968, they resolved never to go out again, and dug themselves into a grand metaphysical tomb, thick and tight enough to furnish lasting comfort against the cruel hopes of spring. Their postmodern world makes a sensible retirement community, a fine place to stay cool. But is this whole generation really ready for early retirement? And will the youth of the eighties and nineties be willing to die spiritually before they have even begun to live? We should not be surprised to find that, even in this vault of dead air, modernism is born again.

MODERNISM IN THE 1980s

The artists I will discuss briefly here – Maya Lin, Laurie Anderson, Les Levine, Anselm Kiefer, Salman Rushdie – come from very disparate backgrounds, work in different media, speak out of diverse temperaments and sensibilities, align themselves with contradictory and clashing ideologies. I have no idea whether they are aware of one another; they certainly do not constitute an artistic movement, in any ordinary sense of the word. But they are alike, not only in the scope and the seriousness of their work, but in their shared desire to reach across national, class, racial, religious and sexual boundaries. They have all developed new ways to communicate with people, even people at each other's throats, and to bring them together, even force them together, in dialogue. Their work has extended and deepened the human capacity for dialogue, both within cultures and between them; it has helped the world of the 1980s move tentatively, hesitantly, toward a genuine world culture. Without (so far as I know) doing any theorizing about modernism, they have nourished the progressive drives and universalistic hopes that are close to modernism's heart. The fact that modernist work can go on thriving

in so many different modes is a sign that the modernist project is as viable and fruitful as ever.

Laurie Anderson's world seems to bear some of the marks of post-modernism: landscapes as cold and lifeless as outer space (they often are outer space, courtesy of NASA), with images of cold and darkness enveloping us all; people engaging in incessant arguments with their shadows, mirror images, magnifications, memory traces, computer clones; hypnotic trance music, electronically created; photographs, shadows, drawings, simulations and montages, layered and blended with three-dimensional 'real' things and people; communication that seems cryptic and erratic at best – the Brooklyn Academy of Music feels like a high-tech version of Plato's cave. But Anderson's stance toward this universe is radically different from any postmodern perspective. When she brings her multi-media universe, United States, to life, she is always in or near the centre of the stage, gliding or rushing about from microphone to synclavier, from vocoder to electric violin. She is the subject of everything that is said or sung, played or portrayed: incestuous families, farmers' barns that turn into missile silos, tigers breaking into family picnics (and, surprise, becoming part of the family), amorous encounters with the President (Carter), flights from stranglers on Hollywood freeways, Indians confessing to anthropologists that they never really knew their tribal chants, travellers in search of towns that are purely hypothetical, and far more.¹⁰

So she goes, propelled by an immensely rich imagination: *United States* is the sort of thing James Joyce might have created if he had had cybernetics to work with. The enormous world that rotates around Anderson suggests an update of Chaplin's *Modern Times* – only this time the human controls the machines. 'There are ten million stories in the Naked City,' she says (echoing a radio show of the 1940s and a TV show of the 1960s), as slab-shaped skyscrapers flash on and glide across the screen, 'but no one can remember which is theirs.' She is determined to find out, both for herself and for us all. *United States* ends with a brilliant update – ironic, maybe quixotic, but the more determined for all that – of the archetypally modern romance of Enlightenment: Anderson is onstage alone, surrounded by smoke (or smog?) and darkness; she looks toward us intensely, through the deep night, with powerful fog lights shining from her eyes.

Maya Ying Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, dedicated in 1982, shows how the idioms of the modernist movement in

architecture, so often criticized for their supposed indifference to history, may be uniquely qualified to tell the truth about contemporary history. The memorial's design, chosen in an open competition with more than 1,400 entries, is distinguished by its purity of form, its open and gently flowing space; it displays an austere honesty in its use of materials and in the directness and simplicity of its gestures. Furthermore, the memorial is as remarkable for what it leaves out as for what it says. It leaves out all the grandiloquence, pomposity and vainglory that have poisoned so many monuments – and, indeed, so many wars – through the ages. Lin's rejection of patriotic bombast gives visible form to Hemingway's insight that, for the men who were under fire in the Great War, 'abstract words such as glory, honor, courage or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of regiments and the dates' (1929: 191; cited in Fussell 1975: 21). This memorial tells us virtually nothing but the names and the dates, and reminds us how, in design as in writing, the sparsest and most abstract modes of modernism can set us free from lies, and give us space to make a fresh start, so we can at least try to construct personal and public lives we won't have to be ashamed of.

The memorial, as it stands today on the Mall, creates a protected space in the most unlikely place: the heart of the United States capital. We move down a gentle slope in the landscape, drawn forward by the giant extended wings that form the memorial's walls. As we get closer to the thousands of names etched in bright black granite, we see ourselves interfaced with them, reflected with a startling vividness: have we ever seen ourselves so clear? Lin has given us a sanctuary without walls, an enclosure where even as we feel for our dead, we can honestly think about our lives. Regardless of what we felt or what we did about the war, even those born after it ended, everybody who goes through this space cries. This memorial shows how modernism can help a culture look the negative in the face and live with it. If Americans can learn to examine the wounds we have inflicted on others, along with those we have inflicted on ourselves, maybe we can begin to heal.¹¹

I have focused so far on modernism's capacity to heal. But this emphasis shouldn't lead us to think that today's modernists have lost the flair for making trouble. Some of the most fruitful trouble in the art of the 1980s was made by the New York conceptual artist Les Levine, when the Institute of Contemporary Art in London invited him in 1985 to create a series of giant billboards that would be installed all over London's streets. Levine, a Jew born in Dublin, but living and working in New York for most of the last thirty years,

found a theme in his own past and England's present. He went up to Derry, Northern Ireland, where he took a series of photos of Irish Catholics and Protestants threatening each other and brandishing their banners and guns. Levine turned the photos into huge paintings, rendered in strong industrial colours and flat, crude advertising-poster tones. He made people who were dreadful to look at, in ways that evoke the post-World War I caricatures of Georg Grosz. But his captions, in huge block letters, are even more disturbing: all the words, in different but inescapable ways, accuse and implicate God.

Thus, overlaid on a caricature of a grim and worn old lady and an undernourished boy, Levine inscribed a command: STARVE GOD. Over a huddled squad of British soldiers in battle fatigues: ATTACK GOD. Over loyalist patriots waving their flags (one actually turned himself into a living flag) and grimacing at the camera, PARADE GOD. Over a squad of border guards beaming lights at us through barbed wire, BLOCK GOD. Over a soldier prodding a blanketed corpse with his gun, while an old man turns his face away in shock, KILL GOD. Over an urban ruin, BOMB GOD. So it goes.

Mounted together and shown as paintings in an art gallery, these works were devastating, in the vein of Leon Golub's 'Mercenaries and Interrogations' sequence of paintings. Displayed as billboards along the London streets (as they were in September 1985), incorporated into the mass media, sandwiched in among ads for cigarettes, tyres, and *Rambo*, they carried an even more explosive force. London's ICA has reproduced some of the many letters and editorials that express unmediated hysterical panic. The posters seem to have forced a large assortment of people to think quickly and seriously, not only about their relationship to the troubles in Ireland, but about the meaning of history and human life itself. For many people, having to think this way seems to have been just too hard. These people were not consoled by the hopes expressed in some of Levine's posters: hopes that they, or people like them, might have (or could gain) the capacity to PROTECT GOD, and even to CREATE GOD. Works like these should make it clear to us what modernism is for: to force modern men and women to face their real conditions of life, to bring buried realities into the open, out on the street.¹²

This enterprise has a special gravity and urgency in Germany, where some of the most dreadful mass murders in all history were systematically organized, and then, a little later, systematically forgotten. In the 1950s and 1960s, with massive American aid, West Germany quickly became not only one of the world's leading industrial nations, but also, for the first time in German history, a stable

bourgeois democracy. But it was a weird stability, built on an inability to remember where it had come from, or to mourn what it had done. One of the primary drives that animated the youth of the 1960s counter-culture in Germany was a need to force their parents' generation to face the Nazi past and accept responsibility for their complicity in mass murder. The work of the painter Anselm Kiefer, born in 1943, suggests the imaginative power and fruitfulness of this drive, but also some of its innate dangers and ambiguities.

Since he changed his career from law to art, in the late 1960s, Kiefer has taken it as his mission to saturate his work with fascist imagery, to flood German culture with the monstrous mythology and iconography that it had so skilfully repressed. One of his first ambitious works, entitled *Occupations* (1969), was a conceptual piece, a series of photographs of the artist occupying his studio, the mountains, the ocean, the Roman Colosseum, the ruins at Pompeii, etc., and giving the Nazi salute. Much of the German public seems to have been outraged by this, although (here as elsewhere) those most angry were also least willing to think about why. In the 1970s Kiefer went on to develop his artist-as-Nazi motif, painting gigantic versions of Nazi buildings and landscapes, often in ruins, featuring an overwhelming monumentality and a relentlessly imposed central perspective. (Central to this period was a series entitled *Tomb of the Unknown Painter*.) Here Kiefer was trying to manipulate his audience as he believed Hitler (remember, an unappreciated painter) had manipulated the German people, and trying, too, to capture the lure and seductiveness of fascist space, its power to transfigure ordinary life and make the oppressed and driven subject feel heroic and sublime. These paintings are both physically and conceptually strong, but also bombastic and overblown; it often looks as if the ruins could come crashing down on the artist's head as well as on our own. Kiefer's work of the 1970s skirts dangerously close to the kitsch he was fighting to transcend.

In the 1980s Kiefer has overcome this danger, and created (and endlessly recreated) an authentic modern primal scene. The scene is a barren field or heath, rendered in varied tonalities of black and grey, sometimes furrowed like a field, moving diagonally toward a high horizon, seen from below, as a soldier in a World War might see the battlefield from a trench. These 1980s works have incorporated layers of straw, tar, ashes and dust, oil and emulsions. No daylight breaks in on these brooding landscapes. Occasionally there are traces of a city on the horizon, but usually there is nothing. The overwhelming feeling is one of waste, of infinite nuances and gradations of wasteland.

In Kiefer's iconography, over the last decade, straw and ashes have come to symbolize the life destroyed in the Nazi Holocaust: 'Your golden hair Margarete, your ashen hair Shulamith.' The twin symbolic victims, Margarete and Shulamith, are drawn from 'Todesfugue' (Death Fugue), by Paul Celan, a heartbreaking poem written in a Nazi concentration camp by a Romanian Jew, one of the great poets of his generation, who killed himself in 1970. Shulamith stands for all the Jewish victims of Nazism; Margarete, possibly derived from Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust*, stands for all the German victims. Celan, writing in the language of the mass murderers, was telling them that they were murdering not only his people (Celan was the sole survivor in his family), but their own. Kiefer, born into a generation of murderers, embraces Celan's symbolism from the other side, and gives it new life after the poet's death. Painting the victims of the Holocaust again and again, with a searing intensity – and, moreover, painting them in the only form that remained after their murder and cremation, as burnt, bashed, gnarled, oozing, decomposing *material* – he forces Germans to face what has been done and done and done in their name. At the same time, making his people see and making them think, he is enabling them to be collectively alive in ways they may never have been fully alive before.

Writers about Kiefer tend to share his own obsessions with German (and Jewish) history. Considering what that history has been, it is easy to see why. But if Kiefer's painting were about Germany alone, it would grip us with far less power than it does. In all his art, but in his work of the 1980s more than ever, Kiefer has been addressing the question that T. S. Eliot asked in *The Waste Land*: 'What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / out of this stony rubble?' After twenty years of excavating the mass graves of German history, Kiefer shows no signs of letting himself or his country walk away. He is more determined than ever to force the issues, to bring death to life, to work it through.¹³ A talent like this matters not only in Germany, but all through a world where Shulamiths and Margaretas decompose together, in a century that has created more ruins and more victims than all earlier centuries combined. In art, at least, the anguish of destruction can be a force that unifies the world.

The most ambitious modernist work of the 1980s, and one of the most remarkable works to appear in any medium since World War II, is Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*. The storms that have broken over Rushdie's head since his book appeared in Britain late in 1988 – the book burnings, the death threats, the menacing

demonstrations (along with many inevitably less dramatic demonstrations of support), the commercial and governmental vacillations – have magnified his notoriety, but obscured his real achievement, which will take many years to unfold.

The Satanic Verses is actually not one but several books, each brilliant and original in its own right: a *Bildungsroman*, a novel of personal growth and development, with stress on the dynamics of exile and return, and a deathbed reconciliation; a novel about London today, focusing on racist and anti-racist politics, exploring interracial sex and love, and climaxing with a race riot; a similar novel, fascinating but less fully realized, about Bombay; a fable about Muhammad and his contemporaries, offering a revisionist account of the genesis and early history of Islam; a short study of a crazed Imam in exile, who rejoices in the martyrdom of his followers at home, and dreams of smashing all the clocks in his country, so as to stop time; a vision of a fundamentalist Hindu cult that marches into the Arabian Sea, confident that the waters will part. So it goes.

So much has been said and written about *The Satanic Verses* as an event, yet there is surprisingly little about what the book is actually like. I want to take apart a brief early passage, just two sentences long, in a way that will suggest the novel's richness and range.

The story begins high above the English Channel, where a hijacked jet bound from Bombay to London is blown up. 'The aircraft cracked in half'; two Indian actors, Saladin and Gibreel, who will play central roles in the book, float and hurtle through the clouds, and we follow them down: 'Above, behind, below them in the void there hung reclining seats, stereophonic headsets, drinks, trolleys, motion discomfort receptacles, disembarkation cards, duty-free video games, braided caps, paper cups, blankets, oxygen masks.' The genre in passages like this is comic realism, as Rushdie traces an inventory of the paraphernalia of late twentieth-century air travel, underscoring incongruities and absurd juxtapositions that most of his readers, if not all, will have gone through. Here we can all laugh together amiably, superficially, like gentlemen, and enjoy a sense of fellowship without actually having to give anything of ourselves.

Suddenly, however, and without warning, Rushdie shoves us into a very different atmosphere, and forces us to witness a scene of painful intimacy and humiliation: 'Also – for there had been more than a few migrants aboard, yes, quite a quantity of wives who had been grilled by reasonable, doing-their-job officials about the length of and distinguishing marks upon their husbands' genitalia, a sufficiency of children upon whose legitimacy the British Government had cast its ever-reasonable doubts – ...' It is very unlikely that

many of us, Rushdie's First World readers, have ever been taken off an airport customs line and transformed into something like prisoners. Our embarrassment proves our complicity, for the people who do get taken off the line are routinely humiliated and violated in our name. The narrator, our fellow-traveller a moment ago, has suddenly become caustic and angry at a life that has suddenly been polarized into a duel between the First World and the Third.

But now, in an imperceptible instant, the narrator changes again. He crosses the gulf he pointed out a moment ago, and once more asserts fellowship between us. Only now the solidarity is darker and more tragic: 'mingling with the remnants of the plane, equally fragmented, equally absurd, there floated the debris of the soul, broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother-tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, extinguished futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow booming words, *land, belonging, home*' (Rushdie 1988/1989: 4). Rushdie's narrator began with a pseudo-fellowship that granted members of the Third World all the modern conveniences of the First, without any of the rights. Then, by pointing to the people who always get taken off the airport customs lines, he unmasked the lie and exposed the polarities at the heart of modern life. In the end, however, he affirmed that modern life is universal after all, and that First World and Third World people really are kindred souls, not (as humanists and liberals have always said) because 'they' of the Third World are as civilized as 'we' of the First, but because we are as tragically uprooted and fragmented and twisted as they. And he reaches this dialectic and dives into it and shoots and twists through it with lightning speed, all in jump cuts, without skipping a beat.

One of the things that makes *The Satanic Verses* so agreeable to read is Rushdie's love of ordinary life, of facticity and detail. But although he loves all sorts of things, he has no respect for persons. He presents ironic and irreverent readings of Islamic tradition and history – this was his crime in Ayatollah Khomeini's eyes – but he is no less critical and iconoclastic in confronting Western culture and society. (Indeed, he may be even bitterer toward the West, precisely because for most of his life the West has been his promised land.) The first entry on Rushdie's bill of rights seems to be everybody's right to culture. This means, not only a right to the culture that he or she is born into, but to everybody else's culture as well; and not only the right to love, honour and cherish culture, but the right to hate it, caricature it, misread it, rip it off, use it as raw material to create something new. Rushdie is aware that many readers will not like his readings; if they don't, he would say, let them come up with better

readings of their own. One of the best standards for assessing the real value of *The Satanic Verses* will be the range and fruitfulness of readings it can inspire.

But in what sense will they be *modernist* readings? And in what sense, finally, are the works of art that I have been discussing truly modernist, rather than postmodernist, works? One possible criterion for modernism today, suggested by some contemporary philosophers, is a conscious attempt to arrive at some sort of universal values – for instance, ‘humanity as the hero of liberty’. Postmoderns, on the contrary, repudiate any sort of universal quest, and proclaim their will to live according to less ambitious ideas that are rooted in particular experiences, local interests, and ‘the heterogeneity of language games’ (Lyotard 1977/1984: xxiv–xxv, 31, 37–41). Salman Rushdie, and the other modernists of the 1980s, have learned to see through universal claims that have turned out to be mere con games. But they are not willing to infer from this that all great claims are con games; they go on struggling to break through to visions of truth and freedom that all modern men and women can embrace. This struggle animates their work, gives it an inner dynamism and a principle of hope.

In 1984, in an essay entitled ‘Outside the whale’, Rushdie proclaimed ‘a genuine need for political fiction, for books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make languages with which we can understand the world’. Writers needed to throw themselves into ‘the unceasing storm, the continual quarrel, the dialectic of history... If writers leave the business of making pictures of the world to politicians, it will be one of history’s great and most abject abdications.’ This meant participation in a political universe that is ‘by turns farce and tragedy’, and ‘sometimes both at once’ (Rushdie 1984: 136–8). In the five years since he wrote that, the farce and tragedy have played on, the plots have grown even more twisted, and Rushdie himself, condemned by a mad Imam who wanted to smash the clocks, has been a victim of both. But it is crucial to remember that he has also been a participant and a protagonist in both. He has struggled consciously and courageously, at tremendous cost, to assert his rights as a subject, to make himself felt, to make a difference. His enemies are right about one thing: he really is a symbol of what is possible in the modern world.

Rushdie’s example brings this essay back to where it began: ‘modernism in the streets’. All over the world, from Gdansk to Manila, from Soweto to Seoul, modernism has been stirring in the streets again. As I write (Spring 1989), the USSR has just experienced its first

free election, amid an atmosphere of delirious excitement; at long last, Soviet citizens are talking freely, and saying out loud what they think and what they want. With amazing speed and headlong momentum, *glasnost* has created an atmosphere in which Marx’s prophecy of modernity is coming true: all that was solid is melting into air, all that was holy is being profaned, and men and women at last are forced to face the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men. No one can say how far it will go, or where it will lead. But it is an exciting time to be alive.

POSTSCRIPT, JANUARY 1991

1989 was not only a great year, but a great *modernist* year. First, because millions of people learned that history was not over, that they had the capacity to make their own history – though not, alas, in circumstances chosen by themselves. Second, because in the midst of their motions, those men and women identified with each other: even in different languages and idioms, even thousands of miles apart, they saw how their stories were one story, how they all were trying to make the modern world their own. I fear that vision has faded from our public life. Maybe it will return, in ways we can’t foresee. Meantime, I want to fight to keep the memory and the hope alive.

NOTES

- 1 ‘Behold, I am doing a new thing’, and ‘I create new heavens and a new earth’ (Isaiah 43: 19 and 65: 17). Adapted in Revelation 21: 1: ‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth’; and 21: 5: ‘Behold, I make all things new.’
- 2 Cf. the more contemporary translation by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 18–19, which in this case sounds more archaic. The *Phenomenology*, completed just after Napoleon’s defeat of Prussia, could be understood as one of the first modernist manifestos.
- 3 This image comes from Part I of the *Communist Manifesto*, in Tucker 1978: 476.
- 4 Material from the 1960s and 1970s is discussed and cited in *All that Is Solid*, Introduction. Here is a brief sampling of the immense and ever-growing body of literature from the late 1970s and 1980s: Lyotard 1977; *New German Critique*, 2 (Winter 1981) and 33 (Fall 1984), special issues, with essays by Jürgen Habermas, Peter Bürger, Andreas Huyssen, et al.; Foster 1983; Wallis 1984; Huyssen 1986; Kariel 1988.

- 5 In fact, a sophisticated discussion of nihilism can be found in one of the soberest accounts of everyday life in the modern world: Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835). Tocqueville described a pattern of incessant movement everywhere, and marvelled at the immense expenditures of human energy dedicated to the pursuit of happiness. But he grew increasingly agitated about where all these people were going. What was their perpetual motion for? What did their activities mean? What frightened him, when he thought about the human prospect ahead, was the possibility that it didn't mean anything at all. (See the later chapters in vol. 2, esp. 'Why great revolutions will become more rare'.)
- 6 Cf. Kaufmann 1954: 505–9 for a slightly later piece, 'What the Germans lack', from *The Twilight of the Idols* (1888).
- 7 Cited in Fussell 1975: 13. Both this book and Kern (1983) locate the war experience within the development of modernism.
- 8 See Marcus 1989 for a spirited and fascinating essay that traces Dada's radical sources (in various gnostic heresies) and outgrowths (in the punk rock subcultures of the 1970s).
- 9 For discussion of the sixties vis-à-vis the fifties, see Berman 1982, Introduction and ch. 5; also Dickstein 1977: esp. Part I.
- 10 A marvellous illustrated book (Anderson 1984) gives some sense of the intelligence and sensitivity behind *United States*. There is also an hour-long video presentation made in the early 1980s for PBS.
- 11 Because of these modernist virtues – and maybe also because of Lin's race and sex – the design almost didn't get built. A chauvinist crusade was mounted against it, led by the billionaire Ross Perot, President Reagan's Secretary of the Interior James Watt, the writer Tom Wolfe, the *National Review*, and a legion of White House intimates. For a narrative of this controversy, see Scruggs and Swerdlow 1985. Lin's enemies failed to stop the memorial, but did manage to compromise its design, by adding a sculpture of three soldiers by Frederick Hart. (Hart's work is executed in a socialist-realist style that would have been perfectly at home in Stalin's Moscow.) Considering the bitterness of this affair, it is remarkable – and, it must be said, a tribute to American political culture – that Lin's essential idea was realized in the end.
- 12 See the exhibition catalogue (Levine 1985), which includes an essay by Levine and an interview with him, photos of the billboards on the streets, and angry letters and editorials.
- 13 My sense of Kiefer's development derives largely from the 1987–8 retrospective show, organized by the Chicago Art Institute and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which I saw at New York's Museum of Modern Art in November and December 1988. The exhibition catalogue, by Mark Rosenthal, provides extensive documentation: the 'Occupations' series is at 14–15; Margarete–Shulamith, including Celan's poem in German and English, at 95–104. A brilliant reading of Kiefer's career, which stresses his roots in the 1960s New Left culture of protest and confrontation, was given in October 1988 by Andreas Huyssen, in a lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, 'Anselm Kiefer: the terror of history and the temptation of

myth'; Huyssen's essay was published in the Spring 1989 issue of *October*, and also appeared in Huyssen's *After the Great Divide*.

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2

Cosmopolitanism without emancipation: a response to Lyotard

Richard Rorty

In the form John Dewey gave it, pragmatism is a philosophy tailored to the needs of political liberalism, a way of making political liberalism look good to persons with philosophical tastes. It provides a rationale for non-ideological, compromising, reformist muddling-through (what Dewey called 'experimentalism'), urging that categorical distinctions of the sort philosophers typically invoke are useful only so long as they facilitate conversation about what we should do next. Such distinctions, Dewey says, should be blurred or erased as soon as they begin to hinder such conversation – to block the road of enquiry.

Dewey thinks that muddle, compromise and blurry syntheses are usually less perilous, politically, than Cartesian clarity. That is one reason why his books are so often thought bland and boring. For he neither erects an exciting new binary opposition in terms of which to praise the good and damn the bad, nor even distinguishes bad binary oppositions and some other form of discourse which somehow avoids using such oppositions. He just urges us to be on our guard against using intellectual tools which were useful in a certain socio-cultural environment after that environment has changed, to be aware that we may have to invent new tools to cope with new situations.

Dewey spent half his time debunking the very idea of 'human nature' and of 'philosophical foundations' for social thought. But he spent the other half spinning a story about universal history – a story of progress according to which contemporary movements for social reform within the liberal democracies are parts of the same overall movement as the overthrow of feudalism and the abolition of