

Questioning the Postmodern: Deguy, Jabès and Pleynet

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The rumor is spreading that publishers are now going to refuse any manuscript with the word “postmodern” in the title. If this is true, their effort is probably futile, for whether we like it or not, the word seems to have become a permanent part of our critical vocabulary, with many critics using the term even while questioning its validity. Indeed, discussions about the postmodern often become as contradictory as the phenomenon those discussions describe, for many of those who reject the possibility of defining postmodernism in terms of a radical break with modernism continue nevertheless to describe the relationship in oppositional terms. It has been pointed out that Ihab Hassan, for example, who raises questions regarding the possibility of defining the relationship between the modern and the postmodern in terms of “secure and unshifting dichotomies,” establishes at the same time a list of modernist categories (e.g., Presence, Centering, Origin, Metaphysics, Determinacy) that are placed in opposition to the categories of postmodernism (Absence, Dispersal, Difference, Indeterminacy, etc.) (267-68). In a recent study by William Spanos, as well, postmodernism is seen to break with modernism’s inclusive and coherent structures. Unlike the modernist text, which is characterized by Spanos as centered, ordered, self-reflexive and autonomous, the postmodernist text is seen as decentered and indeterminate; it blurs the boundaries separating the text from other cultural spheres, and it questions radically the metaphysics of presence, of the subject, of identity and coherence. It challenges, in other words, all the so-called “totalizing discourses” and “master narratives” associated with modernism and the Enlightenment tradition.

There are, however, certain theorists of the postmodern, Linda Hutcheon for example, who question this tendency to see postmodernism in terms of its opposition to modernism. In an effort to continue that line

of questioning from a primarily French perspective, this essay will consider three contemporary French poets, Michel Deguy, Edmond Jabès and Marcelin Pleynet, who are particularly important to a study on postmodernism since the poststructuralist theories they embrace and attempt to put into practice have all been central to the current debates on the subject. Michel Deguy incorporates the theories of Martin Heidegger in the formulation of his own strategy to contest the “metaphysics of presence” dominating traditional poetics. Edmond Jabès finds certain affinities between his own critique of representative language and Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive project. And Marcelin Pleynet, a former member of the politically motivated, revolutionary group associated with the now discontinued French journal *Tel Quel*, continues to work in conjunction with the major poststructuralist theorists of the group, Julia Kristeva and Philippe Sollers.

In opposition to those advocates of the postmodern who see the “decentering” operations of French poststructuralist theory and practice as constituting a radical break with modernism’s inclusive and coherent structures, it can be argued that postmodernist poetics, while clearly contesting the modernist aesthetic, at the same time upholds many of its precepts. To say, however, that modernist principles of closure and self-reflexivity continue to insinuate themselves in the French postmodernist text is not necessarily to lend support to those who claim that the poststructuralists either in theory or in practice are really modernists in disguise, but merely to focus on the curious interweaving of conflicting tendencies within the text that resists all attempts to place it definitively on one side of the equation or the other. This reading will thus stress the contradictory nature of the contemporary text in which the closural devices of modernism interact paradoxically with forces that also dissolve modernist boundaries.

The theory and poetic practice of Michel Deguy, for example, present us with a curiously essentialist conception of poetry which at the same time sets out to undermine essentialist thought. By functioning as a kind of seismograph, as that which registers the fundamental disintegration of being as a form of presence (and this includes the presence of poetry itself), the poem, according to Deguy, comes rather strangely into its own, for in revealing that nothing is accessible outside the word, that the activity of naming discloses only the figurative nature of the real, the poem points to the fundamentally poetic character of human existence. Thus, Deguy is able to claim, on the one hand, that poetry is “in all respects lost forever,” that the poem and the reality it portrays can never be apprehended as such, and on the other, that the identity of poetry is recovered. Poetry, says Deguy, “is in every gesture, in all *habitual*

practices" (*Actes* 171-72); "it merely takes back what belongs to it, in trying to understand this poetic foundation of things" (42).¹

While an essentialist conception of poetic identity is clearly at work here, we must ask in what sense we are justified in calling it a strictly modernist aesthetic, for it must be remembered that these notions of poetic identity rest upon poetry's loss of identity, on the impossibility of gaining access to any referent, whether it be poetic or otherwise, outside the symbolic. According to Deguy, the being of poetry (like being in general) can never be perceived as such but only as what it is, i.e., as a symbol or metaphor of its own existence. This means then that the poem's self-reflexivity does not simply fold back on itself to constitute an autonomous, self-contained and therefore strictly "modernist" enclosure with no connections to the exterior world, for its self-referential language actually appears to join the outside world by designating its own figurativity. As Deguy writes: "Far from being cut off from what they call life, the poem seeks a better rapport with it in the paradoxical reversal of certainty. To say what it is 'as it is,' to say the 'likeness' of what it is, is to say that a thing *in* its very absence is entrusted to the utterance saying its '(not) being as': symbolic life" (*Donnant Donnant* 69). The isolation of the Symbolists is thus replaced by a new alliance between the poetic and the worldly, and much of Deguy's poetry, which speaks frequently of travel, focuses on the sights and sounds of the physical world.

The worldly concerns of the postmodernists are thus given expression here, but that expression is never simple. Indeed, Deguy's privileging of art is quite similar to that of the Symbolists, and, in one of his more recent works, *Choses de la poésie et affaire culturelle*, he in fact looks to the poets linked to the Symbolist movement, such as Baudelaire, Verlaine and Rimbaud, for guidance in dealing with the cultural crisis he claims we are witnessing today. In this work, he deplores the homogenizing effects of today's consumer culture whose mass-media reconstitutions of reality delude an increasingly unquestioning and passive public into believing it is dealing with the real. His views are perhaps described most entertainingly in his poem "Disney-World," in which he writes: "Black metropolis where grotesque imitation, having become the model, and cretinizing anthropomorphism, representing originality, radiate to *naturalize* the earth; the contagion of world-wide wax museums, planetary embalment, the temple of plague-stricken inverted resemblance; the parousia of simulacrum, the infantile antifable, the apocalypse of pseudo, which, better than the bomb after its American disintegration, *attacking* with plastic explosives, the worldly" (*Jumelages* 16). As an antidote to what he describes as our cultural and technological "apocalypse," Deguy turns to poetry whose paradoxical logic, he believes, can

take us out of the realm of mass communication and raise more fundamental ontological questions. Rather than reducing the complex and enigmatic to a simulated sameness that covers over the difference between the model and its copy, poetry brings that difference out into the open and forces us to confront the process of simulation itself, not to get beyond it, but to recognize its role in structuring our relationship to the real. The work of art, according to Deguy, brings into view "l'être-comme d'une chose," the thing that appears not in itself but *as* what it is.

Thus, while the somewhat elitist tendencies of modernism are reflected in Deguy's condemnation of mass culture, he does not place poetry in an autonomous, sacred realm closed off from the rest of the world. Indeed, the loss of the referent in Deguy's work is what makes language curiously referential, for it registers the "être-comme" as a fundamental modality of being. The principles of modernism can be found, as a result, to work in paradoxical conjunction with those of postmodernism, producing a fundamental duplicity that defies categorization.

This duplicity is at work in the writings of Jabès as well, where the forces of fragmentation and rupture that appear to dominate throughout are accompanied by a persistent sense of the totality, for the work presents a world in which nothing takes place outside the structuring laws of language. Even the Jewish experience, which is so central to Jabès's work, is assimilated to the structure of writing. Deprived of a fixed point of origin or ultimate point of reference, both the word and the Jew wander aimlessly with nothing to ground their movement. "I have spoken to you of the difficulty of being Jewish, which is the same as the difficulty of writing; for Judaism and writing are but the same waiting, the same hope, the same wearing out" (BQ 122). Thus, in a text that deconstructs the traditional link between word and thing, between language and being, there is a curious correspondence that is derived from this shared state of exile, for Judaism and language come to function as one. The difference and rupture at the heart of being appear, then, rather paradoxically within the figure of the same, within a sameness that is also characterized by dispersion and separation. Not even Jewishness can provide a sense of belonging, for it too is traversed by difference. One can never be entirely Jewish because one is never wholly oneself: "I am *the other of me*," someone says in *The Book of Resemblances* (110). "Are you Jewish?" another asks. "Will I have been? Only as the void torments the void?" (BR II, 44). As a result of this fragmentation of Jewish identity, however, a certain conception of the totality emerges, a totality that is formed by our very dependence on language and by the universal fragmentation that such a dependence necessarily implies: "We are bound by the book,"

Jabès writes, “or rather, by what wants to become a book but *will never be one*” (BM 78).

What this means, however, is that rather than constituting a self-contained, purely linguistic and therefore a-historical universe (as so many critics of deconstruction would have us believe), this assimilation of the exile of language to that of the Jew, which is based on the loss of the referent, is what once again reinstates referentiality. In fact, while Jabès continually questions language’s capacity to represent history, he at the same time structures his work around a major historical event—that of the Holocaust. And although it is true that the story of the Holocaust is told in fragmented form, with only oblique and confused references to the separation of two lovers during the Nazi deportations, the Holocaust is nevertheless a haunting (non)presence that reverberates throughout the Jabesian corpus. “At Auschwitz,” Jabès writes in his recent work, *The Book of Shares*, “the eyes of all the lined-up prisoners hung on the guard’s right thumb. To the left, death; to the right, life, for the time being. But newcomers to the camp would only see the incomprehensible, regular back and forth of an official’s finger” (83).

While the view we are given of that terrible event is clearly partial, we are hardly confronting a text that, as detractors of deconstruction would have it, is devoid of historical content.² Indeed, in opposition to those who accuse deconstruction of erasing or repressing the memory of the Holocaust and thereby leaving us vulnerable, unable to protect ourselves against its possible recurrence, it can be argued that deconstruction’s focus on the fundamentally duplicitous structure of language is what also allows history and the memory of the Holocaust to be preserved.³ For while it is true that language annihilates what it saves, it also, as Jabès’s texts clearly show, saves what it annihilates, permitting, as Derrida has written, “[a]lliances, returns, commemorations, even if there should be no trace, scarcely an ash of what we thus date . . .” or thus name (327). Jabès writes in *The Book of Shares* that every book is not only a book of history, whose pages are “weighed down with centuries,” but also a “book of ashes” whose words do not simply testify to the loss or destruction of the outside world and its history but become, like the smoldering remains of an earlier conflagration or like the wrinkles in an aging face, ineradicable traces of the past. Indeed, the memory of the Holocaust is indelibly embedded in *The Book of Shares*, burning pages which refer repeatedly to ashes and fire. “We were a people,” Jabès writes, “but this people scattered . . . we are a book at the heart of the fire” (73). “How can we read a page already burned in a burning book unless by appealing to the memory of fire?” (95).

Thus, the fate of the book, which perpetuates itself in the process of its own destruction, never to be constituted as a unified entity, and the fate of the Jew are once again intertwined, making the constitution of a purely textual world just as impossible as the unmediated representation of history. Functioning neither as pure Text nor pure History, Jabès's *The Book of Shares* brings them together in the paradoxical structure of sharing which, as the term "sharing" itself implies, unites as much as it divides. Indeed, the word "Holocaust," which means literally the "all-burning," is itself caught up in the duplicitous structure of sharing, gathering together the multiple experiences of that atrocious event and permitting us to share in its memory while consuming it in its full presence, reducing it to ashes, leaving traces that nonetheless testify to the existence of a holocaustal fire.

While the question of the Holocaust is not central to the writings of Pleynet, the question of history is, and I say this despite the tendency among critics to place Pleynet, and the *Tel Quel* group in general, squarely within the modernist tradition by focusing on what they see as *Tel Quel*'s formalist perspective.⁴ While one would have to agree that *Tel Quel*'s emphasis on "écriture" or writing would seem to justify an account that stresses *Tel Quel*'s formalism, it should be pointed out that those accounts usually fail to notice that the group in fact constructed a theory of the open text that was meant to counter formalist principles. In an essay on Lautréamont that was written to correct the formalist tendencies of his earlier study, *Lautréamont par lui-même*, Pleynet sets out to show that the literary text is not "purged," as some would say, "of social and historical content" but is instead structured by a multiplicity of social, historical and psychological forces that also play a role in shaping the literary text ("Lautréamont politique" 23-45).

Pleyne's work *Stanze* gives us perhaps the clearest indication of what he means when he describes the text as an open-ended "pratique textuelle," for it sets out to break down the boundaries imposed not simply by a strictly formalist enclosure, but also by the closed and repressive structures of the entire Western metaphysical tradition. This is to be accomplished, according to Pleyne, who embraces and expands upon the Marxist and Freudian model in the formulation of his theory by bringing out into the open the various modes of production constituting Western civilization, by focusing on the productive forces that an objectivist, capitalist view of the world consistently represses. Thus, within the text's four cantos the pre-oedipal, pulsional forces that both constitute and undermine the cohesiveness of the individual speaking subject are clearly inscribed. As an example, he writes rather incoher-

whistlingly . . . uraeterus or division in its logic . . . inverted music of contradiction . . .” (67). The pages’ pulsional, irregular rhythms, their infantile, often scatological and non-sensical language call up Freudian images of the oral and anal phase and point to that return of the repressed unconscious so desired by the members of *Tel Quel*.

This inscription of individual pre-history, of what precedes and participates in the constitution of the subject’s identity is accompanied by the inscription of the historical forces constituting the collective, social subject as well. Thus, according to Pleynet, who outlines the plan of his text in its last few pages, each canto is devoted to one of the different modes of production leading to the formation of Western culture. The first canto is devoted to the primitive pre-Asiatic phase, the second to the Asiatic foundations in Egypt, the third to our Greek heritage and so on. But in an effort to avoid the schematization that the presentation of a linear historical evolution would imply, the logic of that presentation is contested at every turn by what would normally be rejected by Western logic. The reference to the thought of a Greek philosopher would thus be countered by the interjection of word games and erotic imagery, of slang and vulgarity which ultimately engages the text in a constant struggle between what Kristeva has called the “symbolic” order of language and identity and the “semiotic” unconscious that undermines it. The cantos in *Stanze* are thus structured by a multiplicity of discourses, the conscious and unconscious discourses of both individual and social history which come together to form a continual and open-ended process of textual production. It is to this dynamic interaction of productive forces that the term “écriture” is meant to refer, and while it is true that the process of textual productivity can be perceived as a purely formal construct, especially when it is privileged, as it often is by Pleynet and the other members of the *Tel Quel* group, as the only acceptable means of viewing the text, one cannot deny that it at the same time moves beyond the modernist bounds of formalism.

If, then, one looks at the paradoxes and duplicities that structure the contemporary text, it becomes no more possible to posit the victory of modernism or a return to formalism than it is possible to opt for the postmodernist label. By bringing into focus the conflicting tendencies that can perhaps be found in any text, be it modern or postmodern, these writers force us to question the tendency to posit a simple opposition between the textual and the historical (which is another variation of the distinction modern/postmodern) and between the self-reflexive and the worldly that structures many of the current debates on postmodernism.

Notes

1. Except where otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
2. See, for example, Spanos (264, 271) and Huyssen (206-209).
3. Jean-François Lyotard in *Heidegger and "the jews"* criticizes both Heideggerian and Derridean deconstruction for its failure to speak out on the Holocaust, claiming that the silence is due to a flaw within deconstruction itself. In its refusal to acknowledge the "forgotten" as unrepresentable otherness in Western thought, deconstructive theory, according to Lyotard, remains tied to the tradition it investigates: "The silence on the extermination is not a deconstructionist lapsus. Or if it is, then deconstruction itself is, at the very least, the lapsus; for it repeats, in its own fashion, a very old forgetting that is not merely a part of philosophy, but of European thought, in its keenest formulations . . ." (75). The deconstructive texts of Edmond Jabès have also come under criticism. Berel Lang in his essay "Writing-the-Holocaust: Jabès and the Measure of History" claims that the "question of whether writing centered in the Holocaust . . . is even possible: literally and morally possible" is "unhappily repressed" in *The Book of Questions* (191-92). And despite Lang's acknowledgement that "[t]he Nazi genocide against the Jews . . . provides the frame" for Jabès's text, he condemns nonetheless the lack of direct reference to the Holocaust itself, claiming that because it is dissolved into a more generalized pattern related to language and the condition of the Jew, the Holocaust disappears as a unique historical event: "But never is the Holocaust or any of the pieces of history that make it up given by name or identified in those terms" (193). In *The Book of Shares*, which appears after the publication of Lang's essay, the word "Auschwitz" is used for the first time. It is difficult to say, however, whether this would alter Lang's critique in any way, given that Jabès's style remains just as fragmented and elliptical.
4. Fredric Jameson, for example, who sees the foundation of the *Tel Quel* journal as an important "sign-post" in the emergence of structuralism in the 1960's, claims that *Tel Quel*'s "script-oriented interpretations" reflect structuralism's privileging of the linguistic model and its "drive toward formalism" (195-196). More recent analyses of *Tel Quel* and its relationship to postmodernism tend to link the various members of the group with the French poststructuralists. They generally agree, however, with Jameson's view that *Tel Quel*'s focus on "écriture" or writing brings them much closer to the formalist or modernist tradition. See, for example, Huyssen 206-16; Connor 107; Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 27.

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