

# 1 Postmodern Preface(s)

*Can this cockpit hold  
The vasty fields of France?  
—Shakespeare, Henry V*

Nothing is as complicated as we make it, or as simple as we wish it were. Postmodern theorists complicate everything, but nothing more than prefaces. Not that prefaces were ever simple for anyone. Wittgenstein prefaced postmodern theory, and his words in epigraph and title preface this book, but he himself was plagued by the preface. Its complications take the form of torment in *On Certainty*: "It is so difficult to find the beginning. Or, better: it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back" (1972:62e). Those complications become prophecy in this preface to a preface that finds the beginning of a book it did not begin: "The danger in a long foreword is that the spirit of a book has to be evident in the book itself and cannot be described. . . . Even the foreword is written just for those who understand the book" (1980:7e).

Still, for postmoderns the complications lead to histrionics, as exemplified by Derrida when in the preface to *Dissemination* he finds himself in the labyrinth and out of string. "Here is what I wrote, then read, and what I am writing that you are going to read. After which you will again be able to take possession of this preface which in sum you have not yet begun to read, even though, once having read it, you will already have anticipated everything that follows and thus you might just as well dispense with reading the rest" (1981:7). Of course Derrida no more wants you to stop reading than the Cretan liar wants you to stop believing him. Derrida's words are not advice, but an announcement that he finds (and helps to make) the preface both "essential and ludicrous."

Other postmodern theorists regard the preface similarly. Foucault wishes he could be "freed from the obligation to begin" (1972:215), and when he does begin, purports to be preparing only to lose himself, "to have no face" (17). Baudrillard considers writing a preface as untimely and disastrous as Orpheus's looking back at Eurydice: "One must pretend that the work preexisted to itself and forebode its own end from the very beginning. This may be an ill omen" (1988:9). Gayatri Spivak purports to be telling the truth when in a preface she asserts that "the preface harbors a lie" (x). Louis Mackey fulfills his authorial responsibility by pointing out in a preface that a preface is an "irresponsible sanctuary" (xv). Barthes, unwittingly foreshadowing his later proclamation of the "death of the author," finds himself, in the preface to *Critical Essays*, "still as death" (1972:xi). Indeed, for the postmoderns prefaces exude the redolence of remains: "the law of the Preface," John Tagg says, "closes the text of the book as that which has been written, remains written, yet remains to be written" (2).

In order not to be deterred by the prefatory dilemmas to which these and other postmodern theorists allude, I will treat the preface as neither more nor less paradoxical than any other writing. The preface may be an about-face, but merely showing a second Janus face to others does not change the impossibility of facing oneself. The peculiarities of the preface do not *add to* the general paradox that "one has only learnt to get the better of words / For the thing one no longer has to say" (Eliot 1970:188), any more than borrowing from a friend after the credit union says no adds to a person's bankruptcy. Certainly prefaces are no more difficult than any other writing. In writing, as in love, starting is not the most difficult part: any awareness of the need to begin could occur only after one has already begun. The greater difficulty lies in transforming a beginning into the beginning of something valuable. A preface is a promise, and the act of promising is troubling not because *making* promises is hard, but because *keeping* them is hard. The prologues are always already over, and it is now, as it always has been, time to choose.

Although I will try to refuse the difficulties of postmodern prefaces, I will not ignore them. In fact, I think the problem of the preface exposes the spatiotemporal problematic within which postmodern theory occurs. The problem of the preface is a temporal problem, in which what is written after is read before, and it is a spatial problem, in which the preface belongs neither inside nor outside the

text. To pursue the Derridean example, prefaces disseminate time: "From the viewpoint of the fore-word, which recreates an intention-to-say after the fact, the text exists as something written—a past—which, under the false appearance of a present, a hidden omnipotent author (in full mastery of his product) is presenting to the reader as his future" (1981:7). They also disseminate space: a preface is a residue "exterior to the development of the content it announces" (9).

Such spatiotemporal problems undercut the preface as the site of definition: if the prefatory definition could succeed, the rest of the book would be superfluous; and if the prefatory definition could not succeed, it would itself be superfluous. Thus I will not here try to answer the obligatory "what is postmodernism?", for several reasons. For one thing, I doubt that the word *postmodern* denotes some entity that precedes it. Certainly, it does not pick out a time period, the one following the modern period: "neither modernity nor so-called postmodernity," Lyotard says, "can be identified and defined as clearly circumscribed historical entities, of which the latter would always come 'after' the former" (1991:25). *Postmodern* does not pick out a time period, or anything else for that matter. "No doubt there 'is' no such 'thing' as postmodernism," says Brian McHale. Like 'the Renaissance,' 'American literature,' and 'Shakespeare,' postmodernism "exists discursively, in the discourses we produce *about* it and *using* it" (1).

Another reason I will not define *postmodern* is my doubt that the term is used in ways consistent enough to be amenable to definition. Like Wittgenstein's games, the many uses of *postmodern* may have a number of "family resemblances," but none of those resemblances are shared by all the uses. My own uses in the chapters that follow will aim less for consistency than for flexibility, in order to err on the side of expansiveness rather than exclusion. I will take the wide range of family resemblances as permission to treat Barthes and Lévi-Strauss alongside Deleuze and Baudrillard, for instance, in spite of their differences from each other.

Finally, to answer the question "what is postmodernism?" at all accepts the whole metaphysics of essence and linguistics of reference against which postmodern theories are directed, just as answering either yes or no to the question "do you still beat your wife?" implies guilt. This preface will purport neither to solve the problems of the postmodern preface, nor simply to reenact them by replaying the following chapters liminally and after the fact, but

instead to take postmodern prefatory problems as a heuristic revealing that the transition from modernism to postmodernism was/is marked by a shift in emphasis from the temporal to the spatial. Here, as in the chapters that follow, I am less interested in accurately describing an allegedly coherent phenomenon or faithfully interpreting an allegedly related set of documents than I am in extorting from them ways of thinking I can live with. Instead, then, of reiterating as a preface what the other chapters (will) have already iterated, I will follow in/as my preface two texts that themselves serve already as prefaces to postmodernism.

First, Saussure. "The linguist who wishes to understand a state must discard all knowledge of everything that produced it and ignore diachrony. He can enter the mind of speakers only by completely suppressing the past. The intervention of history can only falsify his judgment" (81). This denigration of history is one of the founding gestures of postmodernism, asserting as it does that meaning is generated across space rather than time. Compare Saussure's view to the faith in history espoused by moderns like Eliot and Santayana.

Eliot thinks meaning is constituted by diachrony. The meaning of great poems arises because they manage to internalize the history of great poems, indeed "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer" (1975:38). Diachrony governs the act of creation, since the poet must "develop or procure the consciousness of the past" (40), and also governs the reception of the work, which can only be valued by setting the artist, "for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (38), and by judging the artist according to "the standards of the past" (39). The great poem means by acting across time: "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it" (38). Even the present itself is historically constituted: in a work of art the present is conscious not of itself but of the past.

Santayana is best known for the faith in diachrony encapsulated in his apothegm that ignorance of history condemns one to repeat it. Like Eliot, Santayana privileges diachrony over synchrony. Indeed, hardly more than his emphasis on epistemology rather than aesthetics separates Santayana's view from Eliot's. For Santayana, belief rather than poetry is the end, but history (as *memory* rather than *tradition*) is still the means: "mind and memory," he writes, as if condemned to repeat Augustine's *Confessions*, "are indeed names for almost the same thing" (425).

Unlike the preface to a book, which presages the writing it postdates, Saussure's preface to postmodernism antedates the modernist ideas it supersedes. That Saussure could produce a view so nearly opposite the later views of Eliot and Santayana shows the extent to which modernism was a deformation of space and time. Spatially, Plato's cave, the womb from which, by *maieusis*, one escapes to enlightenment, and to which one returns out of obligation to enlighten others, becomes Kafka's burrow, the tomb into which one escapes from the unbearable light and noise of the truth. Dante's inferno, through which he passes on the way to paradise, is transmuted into Eliot's wasteland, "a brown land" where there are only "mountains of rock without water," from which "the nymphs are departed," but from which for us there is no escape. Sophocles' exile, to which Oedipus voluntarily accedes in order to salvage nobility from his defeat by Fate, becomes Marx's alienation, which separates us against our will not only from our home, but also from our work, our potential, our humanity, and ourselves.

Temporally, the future of the gospels, toward which we march and in which the sheep and the goats will be separated by the zoology of divine truth, becomes the future of "The Second Coming," toward which we slouch and in which the "lion body and the head of a man" will be joined by a teratology of nightmare. The temporal field of Descartes, in which the subject's self-presence cannot be severed, even by "the most extravagant suppositions" (101), becomes the temporal torus of the *Tractatus*, exclusion from which erases both death (6.4311) and the subject (5.631-32) from the world. The unified time of Augustine, held together by divine logos, revelation of which holds the promise of peace, devolves into the fragmented time of Freud, pieced together by the analyst into a mythos, peace from which is offered at the price of revelation.

Modernism's deformation of space and time prepares for postmodernism's privileging of space over time. Postmodernism does not only become ahistorical, as William E. Grim suggests by invoking Schiller's "dichotomy between the sentimental and the naive: the former being art that is conscious of its antecedents, the latter being art that is unaware of its past" (154), but becomes ahistorical in a certain way—namely, by trading time for space. Saussure's insight that structure rather than succession signifies was made possible by modernism's malleation of space and time, and in its own prescience provided a preface to postmodernism, paving the way for all the postmodern markers. From Foucault's archaeology, which to

find out about the history of a site must first make the site into a grid, to Baudrillard's simulation, which eliminates representation by eliminating spatial order, from Lacan's *objet petit a*, which is separated from itself by an unbridgeable gap, to Derrida's parergon, which is both inside and outside the work, all are constituted by synchrony in preference to diachrony.

The privileging of space over time is neither without cause nor without consequence. Here I cite as a second preface to postmodernism a passage from Nietzsche. "The time has come," he writes in *The Will to Power*, "when we have to pay for having been Christians for two thousand years: we are losing the center of gravity by virtue of which we lived; we are lost for a while. Abruptly we plunge into the opposite valuations, with all the energy that such an extreme overvaluation of man has generated in man. Now everything is false through and through, mere 'words'" (1968b:20).

The obsolescence of Christianity meant the obsolescence of diachrony. In Christianity, time is divine and linear: it began when God told it to, and will end when God chooses. That makes time God's time, but it also makes time humanity's time, because it began when we (the world) began, and will end when we end. In the time of Christianity, events always move forward, and they always mean, because they are means to a divine end. The future is inexorable, and in it all meaning will be revealed. "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." At the death of God, though, diachrony becomes synchrony. If St. Paul is concerned about time, Nietzsche's madman is concerned about space: "What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder?" (1974:181).

Christianity oriented us in time, by providing temporal ideals like hope and by grounding identity in temporal capacities like memory. It offered a temporal mechanism, confession / absolution, for moral orientation. Postmodern theory has been left the task of providing equivalent spatial ideals, capacities, and mechanisms to orient us after the loss of Christianity.

The word *postmodernism* itself indicates that the substitution of synchrony for diachrony is a form of apocalypticism. The problem

is not that the end is near, but that the end is already past. Postmodernism is chiliastic. "Every few thousand years," Bob Perelman says, "the past has got to go" (69). Words become "mere" words when diachrony disappears, as the modernist Eliot revealed when his attempt to say that "the end and the beginning were always there" and "all is always now" resulted in a conclusion not about time per se, but about meaning: "Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden" (1970:180). Elimination of diachrony in favor of synchrony eliminates the *archē*, that equivalence of temporal and ontological priority, and by leaving the post-moderns, unlike the pre-Socratics, without an object, imposes the problem of the preface. Depriving meanings of their beginnings also deprives beginnings of their meanings. Electrons may have survived the loss of temporal sequence, but meaning has not. As Kant had to catch up with Newton, to find (or concoct) the simple and inviolable laws governing human thought and activity, so postmodern theory is trying to catch up with Einstein and Heisenberg, to find out how to talk and to live when space and time are relative and location indeterminate.

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Postmodern theorists' discomfort with prefaces arises in part from their having rightly discerned that, insofar as a preface is a summary or recapitulation of the content of the text it precedes, either the preface or the text must be superfluous. If the preface fails to reproduce the text's content, it is unnecessary; if it succeeds, the text is unnecessary. Having assimilated at least that much of the wisdom of the postmoderns, I have not tried to reiterate in this preface the content of the chapters that follow. I have no such reservations, though, about the ability of prefaces to summarize purpose, and conclude this preface with as forthright a statement of purpose as I know how to make, or believe writing can convey.

My objective in writing and publishing this book is neither to advocate *postmodernism* (as if it were a unified entity susceptible to advocacy, or the sort of phenomenon that my support would advance) nor to deride it (which would be about as effective as complaining about the weather), but instead to explore it as part of a continuing attempt to find out how to live now, not as an exile of the past but as a citizen of the present and a progenitor of the future. It may be that, as David Lehman says, "The Twentieth Century is the



name of a train that no longer runs," but the twentieth century got us where we are, and we cannot afford to stay. Postmodern theory attempts to describe our location, and I want in my exploration of it neither to oversimplify ideas that are richly layered, nor to over-complicate ideas that are often deliberately obfuscated; to treat the theorists neither as biblical prophets whose words intimidate kings by their possession of the authority of divinity and the weight of the future, nor as Kafka's couriers who "hurry about the world, shouting to each other—since there are no kings—messages that have become meaningless" (1946:185). Like the narrator of J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, "I am trying to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul" (1990:130). My aim is to discover whether and how it is possible for an individual citizen of our time to read in the conclusion of this millennium instruction in how to write a better preface for the next.