

Frank Kermode, "Are We Moderns or Post-Moderns? The Present State of the Arts"

The habit of talking about historical periods, whether in the arts or in general history, is an interesting one that we don't often enough consider. They are necessary, in a way, because history is such an untidy bundle that it is very useful to have formulae which reduce it to manageable shape. Perhaps it couldn't be handled otherwise, for the same reason that we have canons of literature and canons of paintings and so on, because there's just so much of it that if we try to handle it all we'll go mad.

But one of the real difficulties that arises is that in choosing periods and devoting study to them, inside and outside the academy, we tend to give them automatic valuations. We do this sometimes by adding the suffix -ism to the name of the period, so "modernism" is on the whole thought to be either a good or a bad version of something that would otherwise be neutral: namely, just modern.

The other difficulty, which I will be illustrating rather fully, is that once you've got a historical formula of any kind it tends to get away from you and comes to mean almost anything that anybody wants it to mean. Let me give you an example that came to my notice quite recently and which many of you will certainly be on terms with, because almost everybody in the room will have a idea of what is meant by the expression dissociation of sensibility. It was a term coined by the French critic Remy de Gourmont and applied to the psychology of the individual poet, but of course we all know it in the sense that it was given by T.S. Eliot in a famous essay in which he used it as a neat modern way of putting an already quite ancient idea, when he said that around the time of the English Civil War "a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we

have never recovered. We could no longer think and feel as simultaneously as they could before."

There have been endless arguments about the historic and esthetic implications of that insight, and a good deal of skepticism about its validity. Some people thought it was an attempt to rewrite the history of poetry in the interests of Eliot himself, because he wanted to reorganize the past in such a way that it would support his own poetic practice, which he was just about to reveal in *The Waste Land*. All that's familiar ground, but this is the point I want to make: lately the "dissociation of sensibility" has been around again, meaning something quite different. In the *London Times* there was a recent obituary for the painter Sonia Delaunay in which we were told that, with the help of her husband, Madame Delaunay invented Orphism; and Orphism, as the *Times* quite rightly thought it ought to explain, is described as a "movement related to Futurism in its preoccupation with the artistic expression of such specifically 20th-century phenomena as speed and simultaneity of experience: very much what Eliot defined as 'dissociation of sensibility.'" Of course there's no connection whatsoever between these two ideas, since Eliot is talking about a loss of simultaneity and not about simultaneity.

I thought that an obituary in a newspaper was perhaps not very significant, but much at the same time there appeared a book by August Wiedmann called *Romantic Roots of Modern Art*, which has a whole section called *Dissociation Of Sensibility*, a section written by an author who illustrated the term without apparently being aware of its connection with Eliot at all -- it doesn't mention him. It says that this term is "currently in vogue," and it says it's the same thing as the expressionist idea of primary vision. As Mr. Wiedmann thinks that the expressionist idea of primary vision is a bad idea, he thinks dissociation of sensibility to be something bad, as of course Eliot did. But it's not the same bad thing for Wiedmann as it was for Eliot. It has simply

lost all its original sense and become a sort of empty space in which you can push any kind of idea that you want, provided that you don't care in the least about the history of ideas.

There is no law against this kind of thing. You can't preserve original senses. You can't prevent the nonsensical use of terms, and it's therefore not with any sort of indignation, I think, that one ought to approach the history of post-modernism, which I'll now do.

The first recorded use of the term post-modern -- which, of course, doesn't mean the first use but the first known to the Oxford English Dictionary Supplement -- is in 1949, but then it was used only to describe a kind of architecture which was being reacted against. The "modern movement," a well-established idea in the history of architecture and post-modernism, is used in a clear and restricted sense as a good thing that replaced a bad thing. And it is still used in that way, and there's no problem about that.

But in a much more general sense Arnold Toynbee in 1956 claimed that we had reached the post-modern age, and that was an observation which was ripe for all sorts of interpretation. Harry Levin, quoting Toynbee in a lecture given in 1960, took him to mean that we were no longer in the period of Matthew Arnold, that we had got past that particular kind of modernism, and we were consolidating the gains of the great moderns. Now that sense, if it ever had that sense, is totally obsolete, and the senses that the term has now accumulated have no relation to Toynbee or to Harry Levin.

The first recorded use of the term to characterize a whole movement or a whole period, an epoch in the history of culture or of society or, if you like, of man, seems to have occurred in a lecture given by Leslie Fiedler in 1965. I remember that lecture extremely well, because it was at a conference on the future which was given in New York and to which I was invited. In fact, I shared the platform with Leslie Fiedler on this great occasion. We had a 2 1/2- hour session,

which we were supposed to divide equally. At the end of 2 1/2 hours Professor Fiedler was still talking, and I had made a 6,000-mile journey for absolutely no purpose whatsoever.

However, it was a privilege to be present on this occasion. What Fiedler did -- and it actually became quite famous -- was to predict a great widening of the generation gap and the formation of an entirely new culture, or counter-culture, in which everybody under 30 used marijuana or other drugs and everybody over 30 went on using alcohol: when the past disappeared from the scene, along with all the old conceptions of reason. That was an explosive essay, really, given the date, 1965, and undoubtedly it had some part in the developments in the next three or four years in the universities.

Daniel Bell, in an essay which began in 1969 (though not published until 1977), also took a broad though less apocalyptic sociological view of modernism, which he saw as the victory of an anti-bourgeois culture: a victory for antinomianism, for anti-institutionalism over middle-class values in life and art. Within modernism there was a party profoundly committed to tradition, or a version of tradition, and there was another, an antinomian, a past-hating party, the avant-garde of Dada and surrealism. Bell's argument, which I think in general terms is correct, was that it was this antinomian movement element in modernism that succeeded and came to cultural power in the 1960s as post-modernism. The effect of post-modernism, he says, is "to erase all boundaries, not only in the arts but in the psychic and erotic life also."

Bell clearly dislikes everything associated with post-modernism, but he dignifies everything that is concerned with it by associating all the phenomena not only with triviality in artistic and social behavior but with large social issues such as the erosion of legitimacy. In fact, Bell rightly sees these trivia as intimately related to much larger issues. "Antinomianism," he

says, "exhausts itself in the search for novelty and must therefore eventually collapse, because its challenges and experiments produce ever- diminishing returns into anomie."

That's the general, large, gloomy, sociological diagnosis of post- modernism, and I'll be confining myself rather more to the contexts of literature and the arts. In that very good book which I hope you know, a collection by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane called *Modernism*, published by Penguin in 1976, it was wondered whether post-modernism really wasn't just Dada come round again in the form of a counter-culture. I think there's a good deal in that, but anyway there was some doubt not only about the value of whatever post-modernism was but about whether it was something old in new dress or something radically new; whether it was the only possible cultural formation proper to a universe in which not only God was dead but man was in the process of dying also. Given an exciting idea like that, you have to expect a good deal of just babbling, but nevertheless the term seems to have come to stay, and people latch on to it, as they have latched on to other period descriptions like Baroque and indeed Renaissance. So there is now a "post-modernist" everything, including a post-modernist theology. I decided to try and find out how the term was used, so I naturally looked at a book called *The Post-Modern Movement*. In fact there are lots of books with titles quite like that, but this is one edited by somebody called Alan Trachtenberg.

What he says in his preface is that "whereas modernism" -- by modernism he means the Eliot, Yeats and Joyce period -- "is closed in form and needs to be explained by reference to something outside it, the post-modernism doesn't call for that kind of explanation." It's not a reference to any kind of meta-discourse or any order outside it. It's a presence. It's not the symbol of an absence like the great modernist works. And the old modernists, those whose works are now included in what some people call the modernist canon, are dismissed as collaborators with

a bad officialdom, with late capitalism, with the official culture; whereas post-modernism is seen as "a guerilla action dislodging the logic of a repressive state." So you see it's given a strong, almost revolutionary political quality.

As for the past, post-modernism is not interested in the past, except for "decorative purposes," as Trachtenberg says. It's not the concern of post-modernism to react against the past: in so far as it is interested at all, it is merely concerned with using it for pretty purposes. As to connections with reality, as you may have guessed from what I've said, it doesn't have any. Its response to reality, as Trachtenberg says, "is to treat it as unreal."

When you come to try to define these things in a old-fashioned, fairly scholarly way, you're in difficulty, because it doesn't matter to the exponents of the idea I've been talking about so far whether what they say is trivial or false, and that does make it rather hard for independent observers to make out what's going on. The contributors to Trachtenberg's book are an extraordinarily ignorant group of people, but this is not to them a subject for any kind of reproach, because if you disown history, naturally what you say about it is going to be wrong.

To give you one instance of this (only the most blatant), one of the contributors (whose name I've either forgotten or prefer not to mention) begins to speak about post-modernist literature by saying that our period, the period in which we're all living now, has one absolutely distinctive characteristic, and that is that we all sense that we're living at the end of an epoch. That is an observation that to any kind of a historian is so comprehensively ignorant as to defy any kind of polite correction. And so on it goes through the book.

It would be quite senseless to make a charge sheet against the proponents of post-modernism along these lines, simply because this kind of grumbling doesn't mean anything to them. They rejoice that they are rid of exactly that kind of authority. They don't need to

collaborate with a repressive official culture that sets store by what used to be called truth and by the past. So there's not a lot of point in arguing about it. If you claim that they're ignorant, then they'll say, "Well, we know that. That's part of our charm, so to speak."

The American critic Edward Mendelson was shocked into writing a piece in which he looked at some art in a post-modernist exhibition in New York, which was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and which he thought to be a collection of trivial and disgusting objects. He said that for the National Endowment for the Humanities to give subventions to a tame avant-garde which is concerned only with gratuitous gestures, empty concepts, visions of anomie and helplessness without external cause, lumpen disgruntlement and historical amnesia can only be explained by the fact that it suits our masters very well to hand out some money to these people.

In other words, the post-modernists, in spite of them believing exactly the opposite, are themselves unwitting collaborators with a repressive system. They're the victims of what Marcuse used to call "repressive desublimation." Of course, it would be easy to bring in some large guns to support this view of the matter -- Terry Eagleton, associating post-modernism with commodity fetishism and reflecting the long-standing Marxist suspicion of nearly every kind of modernism, all of it being, for them, "bourgeois disintegration, decay, decadence and aimless anarchist revolt," to quote Eagleton. That's something that would have been said about this kind of art in the 1930s and later.

Marxists, of course, are very interested in history, and therefore to them, as to some of the other people that I've mentioned, it seems quite wrong to take this attitude to the past. But the enthusiastic post-modernists, of course, would simply regard complaints of this kind as

testimony to the obsolete bourgeois views of history and art which are taken by adherents of a largely forgotten 19th-century ideology.

There's a hostile group of comments on the idea of post- modernism. It seems to be another of those period descriptions that help you to take a view of the past suitable to whatever it is you feel you want to do. It ceases to be attached to any particular historical moment, by the way, because although you might think that post- modernism came after modernism, it's sometimes regarded as being coeval with modernism (so that Dada, for example, is post-modernist) and sometimes as even preceding modernism, on the view that you can't have a modernism until you've had a post-modernism.

It's possible now, for example, to describe the artist Marcel Duchamp as a post-modernist, although even 20 years ago he was regarded as a very important manifestation of a certain kind of modernism. He's said now to have made an all-out frontal attack on the esthetic principles of modernism. You'll remember the famous case of Robert Rauschenberg erasing a drawing by Willem De Kooning, which most of us would regard as perhaps some kind of a joke, perhaps not a very good joke: this is now described as "marking the nascent drive of a new spirit to cleanse itself from the painterly and critical constraints of modernism." So the ultimate in post- modernism in that view is actually to delete works of art completely.

As I suggested, any explanation of this use of the term would have to be historical and therefore cannot be given by the post- modernists themselves. A clue to the character that it would have, I think, can be found in a remarkable essay by Paul de Man, which he wrote in 1969 and in which he doesn't actually use the word post- modernism, but that's what he's talking about. The essay is called *Literary History And Literary Modernity*, and you find it in *Blindness and Insight*.



He says that "literature, which is inconceivable without a passion for modernity, also seems to impose from the inside a subtle resistance for this passion." He goes on to say, "The continuous appeal of modernity, the desire to break out of literature toward the reality of the moment, prevails, and in its turn, folding back upon itself, engenders the repetition and the continuation of literature. Thus modernity, which is fundamentally a falling away from literature and a rejection of history, also acts as the principle that gives literature duration and historical existence." He further observes that "a partisan and deliberately pro-modern we can read 'post-modern' stance is much more easily taken by someone devoid of literary sensibility than by a genuine writer."

What de Man is talking about is a recurring historical situation where there's always a tension between what is modern and what belongs to what we call literature; and that tension between history and the value of "modern" is therefore constitutive of all literature, so that to suppose that the present situation is unique and uniquely interesting because it represents a tremendous intellectual crisis is simply, in de Man's view, wrong. It arises from a partisan desire to advertise only half the truth and to emphasize discontinuity and novelty, but not that folding-back that he mentioned.

Duchamp showed that if you take some ordinary object like a shovel or a urinal and place it in an esthetic space, whether physical or intellectual, which is conventionally appropriate to art, then the object acquires some of the privilege of art objects. That was an interesting discovery, but it's now taken to mean that anything is art, if you say it is. In the same way, John Cage greatly developed the idea of chance, which is present in all art, with his aleatory experiments in a quite interesting way. We are therefore now asked to believe that all art should

be always random and fragmentary. You see what I mean: they take one half of the idea and give it this sort of advertising hype.

This point about the necessary randomness and fragmentariness of the work of art is the crucial point, and I'll come on to that now. A suspicion of totalities is absolutely essential to post-modernist thought. There's a tension always between the whole and the fragment and a hatred of the whole and an over-valuation of the fragment. I want to talk about this business of fragments, which are thought to be honest, and wholes, which are thought to be illusory.

It doesn't seem so long ago, about 20 years, since people were saying that syntactically well-ordered sentences were fascist in tendency. There was a good deal of that kind of talk going on. I remember asking someone about that time whether it would be a good idea to randomize the telephone directory: would that be a truer reflection of reality than to have it in alphabetical order? Clearly if a grammatical sentence is totalitarian, then a telephone book certainly must be. What you had to do was to find a new value in fragments regarded not as parts of a whole but as ends in themselves, and the truth of human experience would turn out to be the truth about fragments. So there began a love affair with the fragment which is still very much in progress.

The philosophy of the fragment, as some of you will be aware, is not a new thing. It was a preoccupation of German Romantic thought. Friedrich Schlegel wrote a good many fragments about fragments. He's the true ancestor of all who need to care about fragments because they distrust wholes. The chief voice among these in our time, I suppose, is that of Jean-Francois Lyotard, and the textbook of modern fragmentation is his book, translated as *The Post-Modern Condition*, of 1977. He says that "post-modernism is the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the 19th century, have altered the game rules for science,

literature and the arts, whereas 'modern' legitimates itself with reference to something outside it."

We've had that idea before, which he calls a meta-discourse, some grand narrative outside it. "The post-modern is defined by an incredulity towards meta-narratives. The post-modern deals in particles, which are heterogenous elements in language games, not in the validating totality of some meta-language. Consequently, all knowledge is reduced to marketable bits." I know there are a lot of computer experts here because I've talked to some, but I have a feeling that there's an elementary confusion here between bits in terms of computers and bits in terms of fragments: they don't seem to be the same thing at all.

Anyway, knowledge is reduceable to marketable bits, and modernist art used its techniques to make visible something that was really outside it and beyond it; but post-modernist art is not concerned with that invisible and absent thing. It deconstructs modernism. It denies itself, says Lyotard, "the solace of form," and it has absolutely nothing to do with totalities. It must always be a collection of fragments. Lyotard says we should be glad to see the end of totalities. "We have paid a high enough price," he says, "for the nostalgia of the whole and of the one. Let us wage war on totality. The fragment is the symbol of our condition and of our authenticity."

I haven't time to explain that Lyotard's purpose is partly polemical. His little book is based partly in fact on Habermas's views. Habermas thinks of modernism as having a kind of traditional rationality which we should try and recover. It's an attack on that. Instead of doing that, and to give you some relief and perhaps even pleasure, I'll now digress and read to you what I take to be a good piece of prose about fragments. I'll read you a passage from a novel which is about fragments, really:

“Before reaching Knightsbridge, Mr. Verloc took a turn to the left out of the busy main thoroughfare, uproarious with the traffic of swaying omnibuses and trotting vans, in the almost silent, swift flow of hansoms. Under his hat, worn with a slight backward tilt, his hair had been carefully brushed into respectful sleekness; for his business was with an embassy. And Mr. Verloc, steady like a rock -- a soft kind of rock -- marched now along a street which could with every propriety be described as private. In its breadth, emptiness, and extent, it had the majesty of inorganic nature, of matter that never dies. The only reminder of mortality was a doctor's brougham arrested in august solitude close to the kerbstone. The polished knockers of the doors gleamed as far as the eye could reach, the clean windows shone with a dark opaque lustre. And all was still. But a milk cart rattled noisily across the distant perspective; a butcher boy, driving with the noble recklessness of a charioteer at Olympic Games, dashed round the corner sitting high above a pair of red wheels. A guilty- looking cat issuing from under the stones, ran for a while in front of Mr. Verloc, then dived into another basement; and a thick police constable, looking a stranger to every emotion, as if he, too, were part of inorganic nature, surging apparently out of a lamp-post, took not the slightest notice of Mr. Verloc. With a turn to the left Mr. Verloc pursued his way across a narrow street by the side of a yellow wall which, for some inscrutable reason, had No. 1 Chesham Square written on it in black letters. Chesham Square was at least sixty yards away, and Mr. Verloc, cosmopolitan enough not to be deceived by London's topographical mysteries, held on steadily, without a sign of surprise or indignation. At last, with business-like persistency, he reached the Square, and made diagonally for the number 10. This belonged to an imposing carriage gate in a high, clean wall between two houses, of which one rationally enough bore the number 9 and the other was numbered 37; but the fact that this last belonged to Porthill Street, a street well known in the neighborhood, was proclaimed by an

inscription placed above the ground- floor windows by whatever highly efficient authority is charged with the duty of keeping track of London's strayed houses.”

That passage is from Conrad, of course, from the novel *The Secret Agent*, published in 1907. Some say that human nature changed in 1905, some say that human nature changed in 1910; so this is a good sort of median date. The idea of the city as full of flashing discontinuities and irrational intrusions and bewildering fragments and absurd juxtapositions was far from new, even in 1907. The rediscovery of Bakhtin has lately given a lot of currency to the idea of the carnivalesque, and we should hardly hesitate to assign this bit of Conrad to that mode. Walter Benjamin's essay on Baudelaire is a striking comment on that mode as it existed half a century before Conrad.

We are in everyday life so familiar with the phenomenon of the carnivalesque city that we should hardly attend to it if our attention were not compelled to it by works of art or by extremely subtle comment, the kind that defamiliarizes the familiar. We know how to make wholes out of fragments. We do it every time we go to the cinema or every time we walk about the city. When Benjamin speaks of the city as a series of discontinuous shocks or shots, moments of switching, inserting, pressing, snapping, of aimless glances, of alternations between isolation and collision, we know exactly what he means, and we agree that it takes an artist or flaneur to register this barrage of impressions that we get from the objects surrounding us that do not return our glance and yet not to give up the idea of what he calls "aura": that quality that mechanical reproduction destroys, the quality that requires the transposition of the response common in human relationships to our relationships with inanimate objects, so that they present us with the past they have absorbed and offer us something different from mere things.

As the last book of Proust transformed the memories scattered about the earlier books, Benjamin believed that "aura" owed its existence to capitalist oppression but also that it stood for an essential wholeness for the correspondences between parts or fragments that make up the integrity of a world. The tension between those beliefs gives his criticism a tragic note and yet a carnivalesque note. As George Steiner says, "He has a penchant for arcane tomfoolery." Arcane tomfoolery is a very good description for this carnivalesque quality, not only that Benjamin has but that he detects so often in everything that surrounds him: a touch of blague that was a recurring feature in the art of the time and which is another element of carnivalesque appropriate to the fragmented city. It's worth remembering, by the way, that histories of the Dada movement are quite often divided into phases, and these phases are all given the names of cities. It begins in Zurich and moves to Paris, and then it moves to New York, each successive stage associated with a more fragmented and more difficult city than the one before. In Conrad's novel, London is the world metropolis, and the bomb plot against Greenwich Observatory, which is the centre of it, is an attempt not just on a building but on the heart of the whole world and on the wholeness of the whole world, because it is quite arbitrarily chosen to be the centre of the world: zero longitude. In the closing pages of the book the anarchist professor walks the streets with a lethal bomb in his pocket, prepared to blow up any challenger along with himself -- and to blow him, of course, into fragments. That is how he would deal, if he could -- a sort of booby-trapped Lyotard -- with the man-made order or the master narrative or the meta-discourse of the world or of London, its chosen centre.

For London, though it may be perceived as fragments, is essential to the idea of the wholeness of the world, not only because of zero longitude but also because, at the time of writing, it is as near to being the centre of world power as can be imagined. The circles drawn by

the half-witted boy Stevie are like the lines of longitude, in a way. They're crazy human fictions, but they're required for the commerce and the communications of a world centred on London. It doesn't mean that the totality of London or of the world is a beautiful or admirable totality: the heart of the world is dark. Whitehall is just a ditch running through the darkness, but it is a totality, the kind of totality that we understand. It's also full of fragments, and fragmentariness is part of its essence. It's made up of a million randomnesses, sometimes horrible, like the scattered parts of the boy Stevie when he is blown up, but sometimes just eerily facetious: the story of the collapsing old cab horse slowly crossing London, or of the beer cellar with its absurd murals and its mechanical piano and also its absurd revolutionaries, all these fat revolutionaries. (The book is full of obese people, "pregnant with death," as indeed Bakhtin would have said.)

These combinations of revolutionary politics and fatness, the encounter between Verloc and the policeman (Verloc, after all, is an agent provocateur, and yet he's in close association with the police), the collocation of the policeman with the lamp-post, of the cat which feels guilt as the human beings don't feel guilt: these combinations, as Bakhtin would say, of top and bottom, thin and fat, face and backside, stupidity and wisdom, are very characteristic of carnival thinking. Verloc's London is uproarious and quiet at the same time, trotting and flowing, wide and narrow. Mr. Verloc's fatness is that of a "soft rock": it's an oxymoron. Inorganic nature gives birth to a cat. Knockers gleam brightly, and windows gleam darkly. All these deliberate contrasts, rather like the baiting of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* or like Beelzebub in the mummings' plays, are an ancient tradition of carnival now assimilated to the genre of the novel. It's a development of that strain of facetiousness which has always been present in the English novel and which is very strong, of course, in Dickens, but which Conrad has somehow made into a genuine philosophical factor in the construction of his fiction.

I need say no more about these images of ruin, destruction, fragmentation, chaos, except to say that they belong to a book which is in its way a totality and, we would say, a beautiful whole. It could be blown to pieces. It's rather like a bomb in a way, this book: it is the professor's bomb (because it doesn't go off on the last page) that holds the plot together in the form of a book. There's a good example in that novel of Conrad's of the understanding on the part of an artist of the complementary quality of the antithetical ideas of wholeness and the fragment. A much finer, imaginative and intellectual grasp, we would say in our conventional way, than anything that you find in the Dada carnival only a decade or so after that book.

Dada is interested only in fragments. It is programmatically anarchic and fragmentary. It is meant to be the equivalent in art of the professor's bomb, a bomb which will go off in a street full of men. It disowns the past and in doing so disowns totality, disowns what Benjamin called "aura" (he hated Dada, of course) and disowns anything like a Proustian or Conradian recovery of it. It is all about dispersion, babble, unrelated happenings, shock, arcane tomfoolery, carnival, nothing else.

The point really is first that you can't do that: that is the program of Dada, not its achievement, because historically it owes a good deal to other movements such as Cubism and Futurism. It professes to have no interest in the past. And the other thing is that simply by claiming incessantly to be independent of the totality represented by history, you constantly suggest that there is some other dynamic pattern to which you do belong: interpenetrating aspects of reality, for example. So the fragment in the end apparently is difficult to achieve without suggesting some kind of wholeness. That's the contradiction that haunts the philosophy of the fragment that is so important to post- modernism.



Proust spoke in a letter of a kind of blending into a transparent unity in which all things, losing their first appearance as things, come together and arrange themselves in a sort of order, bathed in the same light, seen in terms of each other without a single word that resists this assimilation and stays outside the pattern. That's a good modernist view of the relationship of parts and the whole. I will now quote a very well known modern commentator on Proust (and, I might say, post-modern commentator), Gilles Deleuze, commenting uneasily on this question of totalization in Proust:

"We have given up seeing a unity which would unify the parts, a whole which would totalize the fragments, for it is the character and nature of the parts or fragments to exclude the logos both as logical unity or as organic totality. But there is, there must be, a unity which is the unity of this very multiplicity, a whole, which is the whole of just these fragments, a one and a whole which would function as effect -- effect of machines, instead of principles; a communication, which would not be posited as a principle but which would result from the operation of the machines and their detached parts, their non-communicating fragments."

You see how he's struggling to keep the idea of the fragmentary and yet to acknowledge that they will form some kind of new whole, perhaps in the way in which a motor car forms a whole because it's made up from bits of mechanical fragments. The point is simply that over the philosophy and propaganda of fragment there broods this shadow of totality, and therefore I want even at this late stage to introduce you to something really tough on this subject, the most abstract and philosophical modern meditation on fragments that I know of and certainly the most abstract and difficult that I wish to know of, which is in Maurice Blanchot's book *L'Écriture du désastre: The Writing of the Disaster*.

It's no doubt possible to think about fragments in an unfragmented way. You shall shortly see that it is, but Blanchot likes to meditate fragmentarily on such subjects as fragments. In the course of this very difficult work the fragments about fragments tend to come up at irregular intervals, so what I'm giving you is a kind of falsified version by putting the fragments together.

What he says is that "fragments are not necessarily related to the fragmentary. Fragments related to the fragmentary would indicate the end at last." The trouble with fragments is that if you repeat a fragment, it ceases to be a fragment, because it sets up a relationship with itself in the repeated form of it. Repetition destroys the fragmentariness of the fragment by relating it to something else and so beginning a pattern and so suggesting a whole. On the other hand, it is possible to conceive of a fragment which belongs outside the space in which the repetition occurs, in so far as it enters that space; it doesn't submit to the system. It remains an independent form of knowledge even if it is repeated.

Thus it seems that the fragment has two modes of existence: in the system and out of the system; independent of the system and yet a part of it. This is simply another long roundabout way of saying that you can't really have the concept of a fragment without having the concept of something that precedes a fragment or that makes fragments possible by being rather more than a fragment. So the fragmentary imperative signals to the system which it dismisses but also ceaselessly invokes. Fragmentation is the mark of a coherence all the firmer in that it has to come undone in order to be reached. The pulling to pieces of that which has never pre-existed as a whole, it can never be reassembled in any future presence. A presupposed totality is dissolved, but the abolition of totality is simultaneously regarded as an impossibility.

Well, you can see how this goes on (or perhaps you can't), but that's enough of it for the time. Blanchot does help us out by quoting us a brilliant epigrammatic conclusion from, of all

people, Friedrich Schlegel, the inventor of the abstruse fragment. This epigram expresses the whole antimony perfectly. This is what Schlegel says: "To have a system, that is what is fatal to the mind. Not to have a system, this too is fatal, whence the necessity to observe, while abandoning the two requirements at once." I don't think that any post-modernist has put it as well as that. There are more robust ways of tackling this business of the fragment. I'm harping on it because it is generally thought to be the absolute determining factor. In fact, since I wrote the notes for this lecture, I have come across an absolutely fire-new essay by the great public-relations post-modernist, Ihab Hassan, in which he says that the most important thing is fragmentation: "The post-modernist only disconnects; fragments are all he trusts." So that's why I'm going on about fragments, even before Ihab Hassan said it was all right to do so.

Roger Shattuck, who is a more robust commentator on fragments than Blanchot, distinguishes between three sorts of fragments, and I'll just mention what they are and then shut up about fragments, because at least you can tell what Shattuck is talking about. He says that the pebble in Sartre's *La Nausee* is an example of what he calls an "absolute" fragment. By definition it cannot belong to any larger order of things: it is a "nauseating fissure or vortex in the real through which the universe will leak out." It has a purely negative relationship to any kind of universe. I don't think that example really works. If you have such a pebble, and if the universe can leak out through it, it obviously has a relationship with the universe. Still, it's hard to imagine an absolute fragment, and that's a way of putting it.

The next kind of fragment is called the "implicate" fragment, and that's a fragment that has a positive relationship to a system. For example, the piece of pottery that an archeologist finds, which he knows can be related to a larger system, namely a pot or a whole era of pots, the single bone from which Baron Cuvier could deduce the form of an animal, or a piece of the true

cross are other examples. These fragments testify to an order, to a universe which is potentially full of correspondences, the sort of universe Blake imagined; the sort of universe that we imagine the Bible represents; the sort of universe that certain novels deliberately try to represent.

Then there's the third kind of fragment, which is neither absolute or implicate but both. It is sort of within the system and also without it, and the example that Shattuck would give for this kind of fragment is the objects you would see in a Cubist painting, in which the lines and planes both isolate and connect the everyday motifs that they manipulate.

Here again, we are at that stage of the philosophy of the fragment where we want to somehow retain the idea of fragmentariness without giving up the idea of totality. The truth of the matter probably is that you can. If you value wholeness, as the modernists - - the pre-post-modernists -- certainly did, you will either produce some sense of things as wholes or you will induce people to regard them as wholes, and the classic example of this is *The Waste Land*, which can be said and still is said by some people just to be a sequence of poems without any particularly close interrelations, but we have all been persuaded for two or three generations to see it as some kind of extremely radiant totality.

On the other hand you can say that of the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound (or you might not want to say it of the *Cantos* of Pound), which are often taken to be the first works of post-modernism. It really depends on the kind of attention that you give it, whether you think that it has qualities that you want. If you like wholeness, you can always find it, even in apparently disparate and fragmented works; and if you don't, if you like fragments, you can value works like the *Pisan Cantos*, for example, for being fragmentary.

People get into a tremendous muddle about this, and there is, for example, the recent book by the New Zealand critic C.K. Stead, who wrote a good book some years ago about the

modern movement and now has written a very odd one indeed as second thoughts, in which he says, for example, that the fragments in Eliot's works are what he calls "off-cuts," and you're bothered about this because you can't make any kind of whole out of them. When you read Pound and you find a lot of apparently disconnected things, it doesn't worry you at all, and these are in some way satisfyingly ambiguous and pleasing to the sympathetic reader. Then he goes on to explain why it is that Eliot fails to make these "off-cuts" into valuable fragments: it's really because he has a strong tinge of anti-semitism. All this without a word about Pound, who was a much more virulent anti-semitic and much more dedicated to the political causes that Stead dislikes.

It's simply a question as to what you choose to prefer and how you use these terms of value. If you think fragmentariness is a term of value, you apply it, if you happen to like the person you're applying it to. If you don't, you say these are not fragments, they're only off-cuts, or something of the kind. Stead's is a particularly absurd way of talking about it, but it's rather like a crude version of many other ways of talking about it.

In other words, the whole business of post-modernism is tied up with the question of value. There's an attempt to put aside certain notions of value which are firmly associated with what is called modernism. To get beyond that and to get beyond it into an anarchistic notion of fragmentariness is a good in itself, and that, I've been trying to suggest, is not really possible. What it has to do with is, as I say, ways of describing what you like and what you find particularly sympathetic to your view, a view that your party or, on a large scale, your generation may hold.

It's been suggested that the cult of post-modernism really grew up in the academy and is nourished by the need or wish of people who teach in the academies to find something new to

say. It's true that we've become very conscious of the built-in obsolescence of our procedures. It is very extraordinary in the field of literature how many waves of new creeds have come in, even in my lifetime, from the old historicism to the new criticism and on from the new criticism to the phenomenology of structuralism and the post-structuralism, the new historicism and goodness knows what next. It's true that the academy is conscious of that, and we may find ourselves in need of something to follow post-modernism quite soon. When we've got it, we'll continue to use it as we use every other period description, as a way of giving value to that which we, for one reason or another, wish to preserve, some interest that we wish to perpetuate, rather than to save ourselves trouble or because we genuinely hold that X is worth teaching people about and Y isn't.

It all comes down in fact, not to the academy, but to the general way in which we've always handled history. That does raise the point that it is dangerous to have a philosophy of period which ignores history altogether. As Dr. Johnson observed in his Preface to Shakespeare, "You can't call a building high if there are no other buildings. Of the first building that was raised it might with certainty be determined whether it was round or square, but whether it was spacious or lofty must have been referred to time." That is to say that unless you have some reference to history you can't even tell whether a building is tall or not, and some sort of memory of other works is presumably necessary to all determinations of value in literature.

I don't mean that all these valuations will be God's-eye valuations, that they'll be wholly just. If it's a good thing, it's only a humanly good thing. Just as there's a permanent tension between our perceptions of totality and our perceptions of dispersity, there's a tension between our habit of forgetting (which we're very good at, and which is very necessary: we should certainly go mad if we tried to remember the whole of literature, for example) and our

preservation of archives, which will facilitate remembering and which will even facilitate the recovery or revival of what has been lost in certain cases, not by any kind of general law.

The notion that good writing must always by its own virtue be preserved and valued is of course a totally false one. It's luck, partly, but this tension between forgetfulness and the archival habit is very characteristic of us. On the whole we accept the necessity of neglect, fashions in neglect, as the price of assuring that there may be some values which are reasonably proof against them -- not absolutely proof. I don't mean that values are dictated entirely by academic choices. You can say of a work what Hector says in *Troilus and Cressida*: " It holds its estimate and dignity / As well wherein 'tis precious of itself / As in the prizer." If you can use that argument, all parties can use it.

So whether one thinks of art as offering a significant presence or a significant absence, whether its value is immanent, or whether it depends upon transactions between an academy and an institution and the books, there is no magic by which things survive. What there is is a lot of human fictions which enable us to deal with what would otherwise be an archive of hopelessly diverse documents. Among these fictions are period descriptions, and the most fashionable recent period description is that of post-modernism.

It has the same function as all the others. It may be used more foolishly perhaps, in my view, than some of the others have been (that's a moot point), but the great thing is not to fall into the error of supposing that it does describe some kind of quite definite and terminal condition of the human history of man or the history of civilization, or that it can in fact be judged independently of history.

This address is substantially the last chapter of a book by Dr. Kermode, *History And Value*, to be published next spring by Oxford University Press.