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Barth, Barthes, and Bergson: Postmodern Aesthetics and the Imperative of the New

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Now, if some bold novelist, tearing aside the cleverly woven curtain of our conventional ego, shows us under this appearance of logic a fundamental absurdity. . . we commend him for having known us better than we knew ourselves. This is not the case, however. . . [for] he in his turn is only offering us its shadow: but he has arranged this shadow in such a way as to make us suspect the extraordinary and illogical nature of the object which projects it.

—Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* (133-34)

The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system. . . [and] the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*.

—Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (5-6)

Literary Modernism exhibits a drive toward theory that precedes its appearance. Indeed, serious literary endeavor after the emergence of French Naturalism seems burdened by the responsibility to comment on—ideally, to add to—the theory of literary art. The emergence of Symbolism, Imagism, Dadaism, Futurism, Vorticism, Surrealism, and their prolific and rambunctious descendants attests to the truth of Barth’s observation that “[O]ne characteristic preoccupation, among others, of modernists and protomodernists was the problematics, not only of language, but of the medium and processes of literature: a manifestation of their heightened authorial self-consciousness” (*Friday Book* 209; italics are Barth’s). For the self-consciously modern writer, novelty and experimentation became obligatory elements of a theory-into-practice pattern codified in the modernist period. Bergsonian aesthetics have furnished a useful key to the way twentieth-century writers posited and resolved aesthetic problems,¹ and the continuities and disruptions implicit in the term “postmodern” can also be teased out and better perceived through a Bergsonian lens.² That is due to a much-noted peculiarity of the movement called “Modernism.” It has passed into history, and yet the “modern era” has not ended, and perhaps cannot end until humanity ceases to believe it is living in a constantly modernizing present.

Bergsonian aesthetics dictate that art must constantly reinvent itself, and modernist writers undertook this strenuous work, which is predicated upon the theory of a reader reading (Barthes’s *writerly text*)—of text in action—enacted, acting out. Bergson brought together and consolidated ideas about art

and literature that focused upon the experience of the reader and the illusions of art. In Bergson's thinking, the need to disrupt familiar pleasures coincides with a de-emphasis of, or more accurately, a lessening of interest in the authorial role—stated another way, the merging of authorship with readership in a “plural” text that evades definition and categorization—a text that evokes the flow of consciousness itself, protean and radically “open”—nothing less than the immediacy of existence, the present, which Bergson defines as perpetual novelty, or “simply what is being made” (*Matter and Memory* 193). Bergson's thought proves a useful key to postmodern literary practice³ and not coincidentally a precursor of poststructuralist thought.

Bergson and Modernist Aesthetics: A Brief Introduction

It is often good to begin with irony, when available, and there is no lack here. First, there is the fact that the “heightened authorial self-consciousness” of which Barth speaks has led to the disintegration of conventional ideas of authorship. Another irony, where Bergson is concerned, lies in the swing of modern artists toward “theory-into-practice,” an inversion he deplored. “What is common today,” he commented in 1911, “is that theory precedes creation. . . . yes, in everything: in the arts as in the sciences. . . . For the arts I would prefer genius, and you?” Pragmatically, he admits, “we have lost simplicity, it is necessary to replace it with something” (Maurice-Verne; trans. by and qtd. in Antliff 3). Bergson disliked art produced according to “a school or theory” (Antliff 185, n. 2). Yet he was charged with inaugurating “wild experimentalism,” as Jacques Maritain wrote disapprovingly in *Bergsonian Philosophy* (66), which led to the proliferation of theoretical ideas about art.

Regardless of Bergson's own disapproval of such heavily theorized movements as Cubism or Surrealism, his philosophy exercised a crucial influence upon the international upheaval in the arts occurring in the first decades of the twentieth century. Bergsonism celebrates artistic insight, and Bergsonian aesthetics assert that art can restore contact with an inner life from which “modern” populations are increasingly alienated. As William James wrote, reading Bergson was “like the breath of the morning and the song of the birds” (*Pluralistic Universe* 270), not only because Bergson's prose was exhilarating, but because he opened doors to new vistas of artistic creation and enlightenment—a possible path back from the abyss of ennui in modern urban life.

A great deal of work has now been done to expose the legacy of Bergsonian thought in the consciously modern literature of the early twentieth century, including *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, *Remembrance of Things Past*, *To the*

Lighthouse and *The Waves*, *Tropic of Capricorn*, *Of Time and the River*, the novels of Cather, the poetry of Stevens and Frost, and the fiction of Kazantzakis. A survey of that work is not possible in the space afforded here.⁴ Suffice to say that Bergsonism is readily apparent in such prototypical modernist caveats as Pound's 1934 demand to "Make It New," and in Stevens's instructions for a "Supreme Fiction"—it must be *abstract*, must *change*, and must *give pleasure* (*Collected Poems* 380ff.), or in Stevens' later assertion that, "The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real" (*Necessary Angel* 6). Bergson's ideas about time, consciousness, memory, experience, and the universe were exciting to writers as diverse as Henry Miller and Wassily Kandinsky. His philosophical thought was synthetic, comprehensive, challenging, and controversial. For example, Bergson was regularly attacked as an anti-intellectual. He apparently made many people uncomfortable because he wrote in a non-philosophical, literary style and achieved a remarkable popularity that at times embarrassed him.⁵

That popularity was partly due to the visionary aspect of his thought. Bergson's philosophy begins with a sort of cosmic revolt. He subscribed to the Big Bang model that is now the prevailing theory for the origin of the universe, and his poetics stem from his general view of the universe as a tumultuous creative action, and of human beings as creators: "For a conscious being, to exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly" (*Creative Evolution* 7). Bergson's conception of life as a process of rebirth animated writers, musicians, painters, and sculptors. Kandinsky, Picasso, Brancusi, Metzinger, Gleizes, Matisse, and Fergusson were affected by Bergsonian thought, as Mark Antliff has established in *Inventing Bergson*. So were photographers like Alfred Stieglitz, and architects like Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright. Similarly, composers Erik Satie, Arnold Schoenberg and Paul Hindemith created works that embody a Bergsonian spirit of revolution and renewal. For example, we know that Schoenberg was reading Bergson as he worked on the beginnings of what became his dodecaphonic (twelve-tone) system of composition (Simms 71).

Bergson's universe may be self-creative, but it is also self-antagonistic. The energy of the "bang" (the *élan vital*, or vital impulse, in Bergson's nomenclature), decays into static shapes. He likened the universe to the earth: solid on the surface, but molten inside, and subject to "sudden [volcanic] explosions whereby it suddenly resumes possession of its innermost nature" (*Laughter* 159). Bergson drew upon Spencer and Darwin to argue for a modest view of the intellect's ability to grapple with the world's plurality and chaos. In Bergson's theory, the intellect evolved so the mind could cope with the "absolute originality and unforeseeability" of the *élan vital* (*Creative Evolution* 29). To apprehend the world intellectually (rather than intuitively) means to

“immobilize” it (*Matter and Memory* 275), and if we accept the intellect’s version of “life,” then we enter a realm of “the discontinuous. . . the immobile. . . the dead” (*Creative Evolution* 165, *Time and Free Will* 237). To live only by the intellect means to become walking shadows of ourselves, “[h]arnessed, like yoked oxen, to a heavy task” (*Creative Evolution* 191).

For Bergson, the appearance of a shadow self—called *dédoublement*, or doubling—is natural, inevitable. Most of the time we live “outside ourselves,” aware of our selfhood as “a colourless shadow which pure duration projects into homogeneous space.” Such a diminished life seems to unfold “in space rather than in time, [and] we live for the external world rather than for ourselves, we speak rather than think, we ‘are acted’ rather than act ourselves” (*Time and Free Will* 231). The function of art is to overcome the “parasitic self which continually encroaches” (*Time and Free Will* 172) and renew the intuition of inner life. Bergson believed intellect must be balanced by philosophical intuition (*intuition philosophique*), which is epitomized in the arts, particularly in literature (see *Creative Evolution* 191). So, for Bergson, alienation characterizes human life. The “living and concrete self” is constantly being “covered with an outer crust of clean-cut psychic states” (*Time and Free Will* 167). The writer cannot change this fact, but by “dissolving or corroding the outer crust” of our lives, literature can “bring us back to the inner core,” restore the awareness of “real time,” and take us “back into our own presence” (*Laughter* 160; *Time and Free Will* 133-4).

The daunting nature of this effort immediately becomes apparent, however, for language “can express the new only as a rearrangement of the old” (*Creative Mind* 94, 96): “Language, made for things, converts experiences into things” (*Time and Free Will* 130). Artistic intuition can renew language’s “signals,” making them “into instruments of art” only through subjecting them to extraordinary pressure (*Time and Free Will* 96). Poetry, for example, can rejuvenate dead and dying language by dislocating the reader’s consciousness: “[B]y rhythmical arrangement of words, which thus become organized and animated with a life of their own, [poets] tell us—or rather suggest—things that speech was not calculated to express” (*Laughter* 156). Bergson’s path for art is thus, above all, strenuous: “I repudiate facility,” he said. “I recommend a certain manner of thinking which courts difficulty. I value effort above everything” (*CM* 87). *Introduction to Metaphysics* described *intuition philosophique* as a method characterized by struggle: “The mind has to do violence to itself, has to reverse the direction of the operation by which it habitually thinks, has perpetually to revise, or rather to recast, all its categories” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 51).

In fact, Bergson theorizes literature as essentially paradoxical and subversive. One image cannot evoke the flow of inner life (the *durée réelle*), but numerous images, taken “from very diverse orders of things, may, by the convergence of their action, direct consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to be seized” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 16-17). The writer “insinuates” into the reader’s mind a perception of truth by “baffling” the reader’s thought processes (*Laughter* 155). Bergson’s aesthetics posit literary art as seducing the reader into a temporary self-realization, as dissonant images compete for one’s concentration, requiring “from the mind the same kind of attention, and in some sort the same degree of tension,” so that consciousness is drawn almost hypnotically “to appear to itself as it really is” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 16-17). But does art actually break through to “reality”? Bergson acknowledges that this too is only an illusion—but so powerfully evoked that it stirs a memory in us of that inner life which is constantly being covered over by utilitarian forms. The “bold novelist” who tears aside our “conventional” selves and represents to us the “fundamental absurdity” of intellectual representations of life has also only shown us a “shadow.” But by arranging this shadow so that we “suspect the extraordinary and illogical nature of the object which projects it”—in other words, the unstoppable flow of inner life—he has “put aside for an instant the veil which we interposed between our consciousness and ourselves” (*Time and Free Will* 133-4). By such a subversion, writers go deep, and “delve yet deeper still,” groping after “the strains of our inner life’s unbroken melody” (*Laughter* 156, 150).

So, despite language’s limitations, Bergson thought literature was the epitome of the arts, which are a reflection of the original cosmic force that created the universe. Making literature is “toilsome,” but the process is actually “more precious even than the work which it produces,” because it means drawing “out from the self more than it had already” (*Mind Energy* 29). The *jouissance* of creation (Barthes’s *bliss*) echoes the Big Bang: “[J]oy always announces that life has succeeded, gained ground, conquered. . . . the richer the creation, the deeper the joy” (*ibid.*). Human beings’ first line of defense against the deadness of habituation is finally “language, which furnishes consciousness with an immaterial body in which to incarnate itself” (*Creative Evolution* 264-65). Reversing the metaphor, Bergson also compares “our whole psychical existence” to “a single sentence, continued since the first awakening of consciousness, interspersed with commas, but never broken by full stops” (*Mind Energy* 70).⁶

Modernism and Postmodernism: The Bergsonian Legacy

The Bergsonian aesthetic legacy consists first in dynamic oppositions: the *élan vital* (the vital impulse) *versus* matter, *durée réelle* (the flow of real duration) *versus* clock time, habitual memory *versus* pure memory, *dédoublement* (the parasitic) *versus* the inner self. Bergson was a dualistic thinker in the Derridean mode, for whom concepts "generally go together in couples and represent two contraries" which cannot be resolved (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 39). From such irresolvable contradictions an art emerges based on metalepsis—broken chains of images or literary gestures that achieve strange and powerful compression. Above all, Bergson subscribed to the imperatives of constant re-invention and authorial stealth and subversion. These principles and practices, so evident in modernist practice, are continued in the work of postmodern writers and thinkers. For example, Barthes's and Foucault's assertion of the author's disappearance echoes Eliot's idea of the impersonality of art, presented in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," or Stephen Dedalus's suggestion in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that "The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (Joyce 215). Modernist writers also wrote texts designed (like those of Barth and Pynchon in the 1960s and 1970s) to short-circuit conventional aesthetic transactions (nominally, "pleasures") generated by narratives and poetic imagery in order to evoke a deeper pleasure (Barthes's *jouissance*)—for example, *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, the first chapter of *The Sound and the Fury*. The postmodern concern with undecidability is also already at play in modernist works like *The Waves*, *Finnegans Wake*, and the first chapter of *The Sound and the Fury*. In these latter works, particularly, the writer subjects language to stresses that are metaleptic—almost metamorphic—demanding a different way of reading, a readerly openness to creativity that Bergson elucidated in his idea of the "vital impulse" and the joy of creation.

To take one example from the list of oppositions just mentioned, in modernist works one finds numerous illustrations of the *élan vital* locked in endless war with material form. *The Waves* concludes with a vision of swelling force and sagging energy: "'And in me too the wave rises. . . . I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death! The waves broke on the shore'" (Woolf 297). In that passage Woolf echoes *Creative Evolution*, which describes "the whole of humanity, in space and time" as "one immense army galloping beside and before and behind each of us in an overwhelming charge" (*Creative Evolution* 271). Frost also described the *élan vital* in conflict with matter in "West-running Brook" (1928), with its

“backward motion toward the source” (Frost 260). Tom Quirk argues that Willa Cather found her path as a novelist after reading *Creative Evolution* and taking up a belief in “the life impetus coursing through the living world” in constant conflict with its own materializing forms (126, 179). Similarly, Wallace Stevens made a major advance after a hiatus in his poetic efforts after reading *Creative Evolution* (Quirk 186). Stevens became more and more dedicated to the idea that poetry is the “spirit of visible and invisible change” (*Opus Posthumous* 242), and that “[t]he mobile and the immobile” flicker “in the area between is and was,” and even that “the theory / Of poetry is the theory of life” (*Collected Poems* 474,486).⁷

The image of life-energy (the “mobile”) as it endures an inevitable slump into sentience also appears in postmodern fiction. Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, for example, is filled with scenes and jokes based on mechanical or habituated responses drawn from a Bergsonian theory of life—a comedic technique based on the contrast between the fluidity of the living *élan* and the stubbornness of material forms. As Michael Glynn argues, Humbert Humbert “apprehends *Lolita*, Charlotte, and Valeria not as vital changing entities but as his creatures, as static objects who will act in conformity with his own preconceived notions” (111). In the crisis of the final pages, as Humbert finishes off Clare Quilty, he struggles with the reality of the gun, the room, the rug, the blood—everything, seems alien and diminished: “I may have lost contact with reality for a second or two,” admits Humbert. The novel is one long delusional escapade haunted by the image of “Hourglass Lake,” in which Time has had its neck wrung by a mind as desperate to stop the relentless flow of *durée* as Quentin Compson’s in *The Sound and the Fury*. Humbert is intent on “fixing” things, refusing to grow or change, dwelling constantly in the past, so that his perceptions of the present are constantly warped and inaccurate.

Late in life, Nabokov spoke in an interview included in *Strong Opinions* about the nature of *durée réelle* (the flow of real duration) *versus* clock time. His vocabulary is expressly Bergsonian:

We can imagine all kinds of time, such as for example “applied time”—time applied to events, which we measure by means of clocks and calendars; but those types of time are inevitably tainted by our notion of space, spatial succession, stretches and sections of space. When we speak of the “passage of time,” we visualize an abstract river flowing through a generalized landscape. Applied time, measurable illusions of time, are useful for the purposes of historians or physicists, they do not interest me, and they did not interest my creature Van Veen in Part Four of my *Ada*. He and I in that book attempt to examine the *essence of Time*, not its lapse. Van mentions the possibility of being “an amateur of Time, an epicure of duration,” of being able to delight sensually in the texture of time, “in its stuff and spread, in the

fall of its folds, in the very impalpability of its grayish gauze, in the coolness of its continuum" (*Strong Opinions* 185).

Nabokov was keenly aware that Time is all-too-human, known not through clocks, but in "the dim hollow between two rhythmic beats, the narrow and bottomless silence *between* the beats, not the beats themselves, which only embar Time. In this sense human life is not a pulsating heart but the missed heartbeat" (*ibid.*). Time outruns perception, giving rise to limitless tricks of illusion and delusion, as Nabokov's narrators, from Humbert to Prnin and Kinbote, testify.

Nabokov's narrators, like Faulkner's (Vardaman, Darl, Quentin, Jason) are mirrored in the azure produced by Barth's and Pynchon's protean tale-tellers, each of whom lives *dédoublement*—simultaneously true and parasitic. Pynchon's narrators in *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* quest for their own pasts and personalities, driven by the imperative of constant, exhausting self-re-invention in the face of devolution and disintegration. Pynchon's paranoia was part of a contagious outbreak following World War II, which was both the product and the cause of a continued feverish dismantling of literary form—in this case, the novel—in which I believe one can detect the continuing power of Bergson's aesthetic challenge to art that it must perpetually reinvent itself. As Joseph Heller says:

A general disintegration of belief took place [after WW II], and it affected *Catch-22* in that the form of the novel became almost disintegrated. *Catch-22* was a collage; if not in structure, then in the ideology of the novel itself Without being aware of it, I was part of a near-movement in fiction. While I was writing *Catch-22*, J. P. Donleavy was writing *The Ginger Man*, Jack Kerouac was writing *On the Road*, Ken Kesey was writing *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Thomas Pynchon was writing *V.*, and Kurt Vonnegut was writing *Cat's Cradle*. I don't think any one of us even knew any of the others. Certainly I didn't know them. Whatever forces were at work shaping a trend in art were affecting not just me, but all of us. The feelings of helplessness and persecution in *Catch-22* are very strong in Pynchon and in *Cat's Cradle*. ("Reeling in *Catch-22*" ix-x)

Whether it stemmed from an existentialist desperation in the post-WW II era, or is the product of a previously existing desperation that emerged in the aftermath of WW I, and simply never stopped occurring, may be debated—but the idea of "experimental literature" rests solidly on a Bergsonian foundation, and resonates in the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Edmund White, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, John Fowles, Italo Calvino, and (more recently) Anne Carson.

Novelty and Its Discontents: John Barth

This burden of unending novelty created, as Umberto Eco saw it in the 1980s, the predicament of modern authorship:

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her "I love you madly," because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still there is a solution. He can say "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly." At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly it is no longer possible to talk innocently, he will nevertheless say what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence. (*Postscript* 67-68)

These themes of lost innocence, belatedness, and the recycling of language are found in abundance in John Barth's works. For example, "Life-Story" – first published in *Lost in the Funhouse* (1963) – constructs a narrator unable to breathe life into his story, unable to capture a sense of "real life," because the forms in which he is forced to cast this living material are themselves already dead, or begin to die as soon as he has employed them. In the first sentence he begins his story "afresh" (though without discarding what he has already written), and the story thereafter goes through a number of re-starts as he fails to satisfy himself: "Another story about a writer writing a story! Another regressus infinitum! Who doesn't prefer art that at least overtly imitates something other than its own processes? That doesn't continually proclaim 'Don't forget I'm an artifice!'" (117). "Life-Story," like so many pieces in *Funhouse*, is haunted by the modernist charge to make fiction new despite an exhausted field of possibilities, to invent an artistic gesture that is not so disappointingly familiar to the reader that it is essentially "dead." Ironically, this very struggle for freshness leads to clichéd, circular writing: "Why could he not begin his story afresh X wondered, for example with the words why could he not begin his story afresh et cetera? Y's wife came into the study as he was about to throw out the baby with the bathwater" (119-20). All the drama here, as in other stories in Barth's collection, like "Night Sea Journey," "Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction," and "Anonymiad," is derived from the struggle of life-writing, the endeavor to push words into life, dislocate their reality into something living and fluid, because "life is so sweet and painful and full of such a variety of people" (120). But though the narrator of "Life-Story" had thought his narrative would be "very long, longer than Proust's. . . longer than *The Thousand Nights and a Night*," he recognizes that it is a "short story" and that he (the narrator) is a fiction of his own making – a conundrum built on fantasies (having multiple mistresses, for example) that become identical with a "fictional" truth he projects almost as an emanation of

a true self he cannot effectively reach. In a concluding sequence that powerfully challenges the reader—"You, dogged, unisultable, print-oriented bastard" (127)—Barth concludes by forcing us to confront what Bergson called "the extraordinary and illogical nature of the object" which has projected that life, leading us, strangely, "back into our own presence" (*Time and Free Will* 133-4). As Barth writes, "What sort of a story is it whose drama lies always in the next frame out?" (*Funhouse* 121). The balancing and vanishing acts always flirt with the slump of life-embodied-in-literature toward death-embodied-in-literature.

Many further examples of Barth's evocation of the illogical nature of the literary representation of time and identity may be culled from *Funhouse*. In "Anonymiad" the reader peers with Helen (a cow) into a pit to verify "that [the narrator] was trapped or dead," only to be shocked by the narrator's vigorous self-destructiveness (*Funhouse* 199). The comedy here is dark, mechanistic, based on the struggle of the living to surmount the vortex of dead habits and patterns of artistic creation. In "Title" the masquerade of literary process begins "Beginning." In attempting to tell the "story of our life. . . [and] fill the blank," the writer apparently achieves only a mediocre effect. "Conventional startling opener, comments the female character who has just been introduced: "'Sorry if I'm interrupting the Progress of Literature,' she said, in a tone that adjective clause suggesting good-humored irony but in fact defensively and imperfectly masking a taunt" (105). The text (and through it our pleasure) is disrupted by insertion of general markers in place of their artistic expression ("Title," "Beginning," "Plot and theme," "adjective clause," "gerundive," "long participial phrase," etc.), but always just at the limit of the reader's tolerance for teasing: "I can't finish anything; that is my final work. Yet it's these interruptions that make it a story. Escalate the conflict further. Please let me start over" (107). It is all a mockery of "[h]ow sophisticated we are today," allowing us to lament the fact that "[h]istoricity and self-awareness. . . are always fatal to innocence and spontaneity" (110).

The historicity that Barth suggests is always fatal to spontaneity is presented multiple times in *Funhouse*, particularly in "Anonymiad" and "Menelaid." The latter story carries the concept of the frame-tale to absurd lengths. In the sixth section the narration has buried itself six levels, represented by quotations within quotations:

'''''''' "How now!" Menelaus cried. ' I ditto," et cetera. '' "Espouse?
Espouse her? As lover? Advocate? Husband? Can't you speak more plainly?
Who am I?"
''''''''''''''''

Working with buried cultural material—employing the “mythic method” that T.S. Eliot advocated after he read Joyce’s *Ulysses*—has its limits, and leads in this case to confusions about identity that aren’t just jokes. The emptiness between the punctuation marks constitutes both taunt and an invitation to fill in the blank. He cannot “speak more plainly,” given the cultural moment of the modern writer.

Barth is perhaps like his narrator, “surfeited with clever irony,” so that the only *invention* possible is that of parody, the only *novelty* left a gesture of hopelessness, a caricature of failure, an “allegedly ultimate story” offered as “a form of artistic fill in the blank” (111). In Barth’s fiction, a metafictional confrontation is taking place. The writer confronts the limits of novelty and experimentation. As he expresses the narrator’s frustration, Barth never lets us forget the modern storyteller’s inescapable dilemma:

Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness. I despise what we have come to;
I loathe our loathsome loathing, our place our time our situation, our
loathsome art, this ditto necessary story. The blank of our lives. It’s about
over. Let the *dénouement* be soon and unexpected, painless if possible, quick
at least, above all soon. Now now! How in the world will it ever (113)

The ending is broken off (open-ended?), the abhorrence endless, the invitation to the reader to fill in the “blank[s] of our lives” still open. But a primary lament remains the story’s burden: the impossibility of fresh narrative in an age of sophistication, the hopelessness of invention in a world where everything has already been invented, and the claustrophobia produced by the shrinking literary universe.

These themes and this situation are only worth writing about if one has taken a Bergsonian perspective on literary aesthetics. The closer one looks at the practices of postmodern writers, the more explanatory become Bergsonian concepts in reading their works.

Bergson and Poststructuralism: Deleuze, Derrida, Barthes

That last claim cannot be satisfactorily shown here, I am aware. I have sought to expose some convincing presence of Bergsonian concepts in works of Barth and Nabokov, and allude to such concepts in the work of a few other writers. Let me conclude with some remarks on philosophical and aesthetic writings related to the literary moment of postmodernism, especially those of Gilles Deleuze, Frederic Jameson, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes.

Deleuze’s adaptation of Bergsonian concepts in his short study *Bergsonism* and his longer and highly detailed texts *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*, extend Bergson’s project to represent the historical consciousness—the mind at work

connecting the present with the past in ever-changing, always-evolving patterns. For Deleuze, cinema is the medium in which the philosophy of a postmodern consciousness is both theorized and made real: "We must no longer ask ourselves, 'What is cinema?' but 'What is philosophy?'" (*Cinema* 280). Deleuze conceives the body as without "organs" – merely a part of a system of "cutting" and rationalization. That system is a Bergsonian one of tensions between closure and containment, quality and quantity. Film, as we have it from Deleuze, reveals the ultimately disembodied nature of experience. Film, despite Bergson's critique of the early film-camera, embodies Bergson's notion of the *durée* and re-orders our questions regarding the meaning of body-representations, both in the individual human consciousness, and in society at large; it makes time and subjectivity central to cultural activity. Deleuze thus highlights the Bergsonian oppositions between the *élan vital* and materiality, and between the *durée réelle* and intellectual representation. His notion of infinitely circulating desire is akin to Barthes's *writerly text*, in that it constitutes an attempt to escape spatialized representations of life and enter into experienced, real time.

Such a Bergsonian conflict seems to be central to writers of poststructural philosophy. As Berndt Clavier has argued, postmodernism "has been theorized primarily as a spatial and spatializing phenomenon, or more properly as that 'spatialization of time' which [William V.] Spanos already in 1971 suggested defined postmodernism in the arts" (68).⁸ Frederic Jameson reinforces Clavier's claim that postmodernity is essentially the product of spatialization, and that "space is what represses temporality and temporal figurality absolutely" (Jameson 62ff.). What seems to have been forgotten here is that in literature of the modernist era a confrontation between experienced time and spatialization had already occurred, and that modernism had already established that the self-conscious use of spatializing techniques can valorize and evoke time-as-experience through its *absence*. The idea of a presence evoking an absence is illustrated in the ways artists render dynamism through appallingly static characters and situations. To state this principle differently, experienced time is powerfully evoked through images of space. For example, Faulkner repeatedly offers imagery of stasis and resistance, intended to make the flow of time appear in our imaginations – as when he describes the birds in *Light in August* as hanging in "still-winged and tremulous suspension" (85-6). Sartre misapprehended Faulkner and complained that he had "decapitated time" because he had removed the possibility for "free choice and act" (230). But as I am arguing, the portrayal of "volitionless" characters, like Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden, leads the reader back to what is absent: time, flux, and freedom. A similar effect is achieved with excruciating discipline by Alain Robbe-Grillet in *La jalousie*, in which time is "stopped" by an emotionless

commentary, with the effect for the reader being quite the opposite—an enhanced awareness of emotionality and the unstoppable of time.⁹

The literary technique of employing a stultifying stasis to evoke flux evolved in response to the problem of language's origins and limits, and on this subject there are few philosophers whose ideas seem to anticipate poststructural thought as closely as Bergson. As Suzanne Guerlac says, Derrida took a perspective on language "very close to Bergson's," and she asserts the "proximity of Derrida's notion of deconstruction as writing practice and Bergson's keen analysis of the limits of language in the face of time" (185, 186). Daniel Alipaz has recently followed on this research path with an incisive essay on Bergson and Derrida. As Alipaz argues, Derrida "pushes language to the brink" in order to bring it into the sphere of the spiritual (*l'esprit*) (117). Alipaz further argues that Derrida's concept of the future "is a constantly unfolding one, a movement that defies understanding at its very root, but simultaneously, like Bergsonian *durée*, is creative" (111-12). There is "an unquestionable overlap between their two discourses" (99), and Alipaz hopes that the "confluence between Bergson and Derrida will continue to revitalize Bergson's often misunderstood dualisms in light of their development by key poststructural figures" (117).

An example of this "confluence" can be found in Bergson's critique of the idea of nothingness, which anticipates foundational concepts of deconstruction and poststructuralist literary theory, especially the "presence in absence" principle to which we have already alluded. Bergson wrote in *Creative Evolution*: "[T]here is more, and not less in the idea of an object conceived as "not existing" than in the idea of this same object conceived as "existing"; for the idea of the object "not existing" is necessarily the idea of the object "existing" with, in addition, the representation of an exclusion of this object by the actual reality taken in block" (*Creative Evolution* 286; Bergson's italics). Bergson asserts that language escapes and then reorients the paths of philosophical inquiry, and in doing so, he seems to anticipate Derrida's analysis of presence and absence, epitomized in his claim (to be echoed by Barthes) that "there is nothing outside the text" [*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*] (Derrida 143, 158). Derrida's clever use of negation here echoes *Creative Evolution's* fourth chapter.

And just as there is a harmony between Derrida and Bergson, so there is a parallel between Bergson and Barthes. Barthes's idea of the "writerly text" is bound up in the flow of time, "a perpetual present": The writerly text is "ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized." Barthes imagines a text that has transcended stasis, maintaining its allegiance to the mobile, the flux of time, and to "plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of

languages" (S/Z 5). He opposes such texts to "readerly texts" that are merely conventional productions of a culture, familiar patterns, and part of a closed system. In the perpetual present that is the *writerly text*, interpretation changes its nature and follows another path. As Barthes says, "To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it." Such a text forms not a single world, but "a galaxy of signifiers. . . [that] has no beginning" (ibid.). Barthes admits that no text is invulnerable to being oversimplified by critical discourse, so "systems of meaning" can always assault and "take over this absolutely plural text," but something in the plural (writerly) text always remains open, inviting the creative act. In claiming that the writerly text constitutes a "perpetual present" that remains perpetually "open" (in defiance of the language's pragmatic tendencies), Barthes seems to state a Bergsonian view of literature, in which a writer *must* choose to be difficult, selecting disparate images, disparate expressions, which collide and coalesce, making a text that defies the intellect's totalizing force and paternalistic control:

The interpretation demanded by a specific text, in its plurality, is in no way liberal: it is not a question of conceding some meanings, of magnanimously acknowledging that each one has its share of truth; it is a question, against all in-difference, of asserting the very existence of plurality, which is not that of the true, the probable, or even the possible. This necessary assertion is difficult, however, for as nothing exists outside the text, there is never a *whole* of the text (which would by reversion form an internal order, a reconciliation of the complementary parts, under the paternal eye of the representative Model): the text must simultaneously be distinguished from its exterior and from its totality. All of which comes down to saying that for the plural text, there cannot be a narrative structure, a grammar, or a logic; thus, if one or another of these are sometimes permitted to come forward, it is in *proportion* (giving this expression its full quantitative value) as we are dealing with incompletely plural texts, texts whose plural is more or less parsimonious. (S/Z 6)

To leave "structure" behind engenders a poststructuralist angst; for what will substitute for "structure"? For Barthes, something like Bergsonian "becoming" has become a textual "center." The text is defined as our experience, and it tries to merge us into the fundamental flow of life, transcending language, defying grammar and logic and narrative structures, and distancing itself ironically from its own seriousness in order to sneak under readers' defenses. In stating this principle—if I am correct—Barthes seems to validate Bergson's continuing significance for the world of literary theory and for the modern artist, who must theorize, must incessantly forge writing anew, and must endure the modern era's demand for ceaseless novelty and experimentation.

Notes

1. The list of modernist writers who have already been deeply connected by scholarship to Bergsonian thought is long: Jacques Maritain, Nikos Kazantzakis, T. E. Hulme, John Middleton Murry, Julien Benda, Wyndham Lewis, T. S. Eliot, Willa Cather, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Joseph Conrad, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Robert Frost, Eugène Ionesco, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Marianne Moore, Vladimir Nabokov, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust, John Crowe Ransom, Dorothy Richardson, Gertrude Stein, John Steinbeck, Wallace Stevens, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, William Carlos Williams, Thomas Wolfe, Virginia Woolf.

2. It is worth noting how intertwined the terms “modern” and “postmodern” have always been, that even in what Barth dubs the “proto-modern” period (the latter part of the nineteenth century), the term “postmodern” was already at play, as Ihab Hassan has shown. 12-14.

3. I am here defining “postmodern” as “resistance postmodernism,” in Hal Foster’s apt phrase from *The Return of the Real*, or in other words, a neo-avant garde movement as opposed to that postmodernism which Lyotard and Jameson define as complicit with capitalism.

4. Some essential book-length studies include Mark Antliff’s *Inventing Bergson* (1992), Paul Douglass and Fred Burwick’s *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy* (1992), Douglass’s *Bergson, Eliot, and American Literature* (1986), Tom Quirk’s *Bergson and American Culture* (1990), Rosa Slegers’ *Courageous Vulnerability: Ethics and Knowledge in Proust, Bergson, Marcel, and James* (2010), Mary Ann Gillies’ *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (1996), and Michael Glynn’s *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in his Novels* (2007).

5. Bergson was forced to reserve seats at lectures for his students, since journalists, tourists, clergy, foreign students, and even ladies of fashion came to the hall at the Sorbonne. The philosopher faced a bewildering logjam of admirers bearing bouquets and gifts, through which he would have to push his way to the podium, on one occasion protesting, “But . . . I am not a dancer!” [“Mais. . . je ne suis pas une danseuse!”] The newspapers suggested he move his “performances” to the Paris Opera. See Mosse-Bastide 34.

6. William James has aptly expressed this idea in the phrase, “stream of consciousness” (employed by him in 1890 in *Principles of Psychology*) which has been preferred by many critics of the past over Bergson’s complex of concepts (memory, *élan vital*, *durée réelle*). Bergson’s, however, are more productive for an understanding of modern and postmodern aesthetics. James was a proponent of Bergsonism, and agreed with the diminished role assigned by Bergson to the analytic powers of the intellect when used to understand the deep inner experience of time: “The attempt at introspective analysis in these cases is in fact like seizing a spinning top to catch its motion, or trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks.” 236-37.

7. See also Douglass, “The Theory of Poetry.” 245-60.

8. Clavier alludes to Spanos 147-68.

9. *La jalousie* begins: “Now the shadow of the column—the column which supports the southwest corner of the roof—divides the corresponding corner of the veranda into two equal parts.” 33.

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