

The Trouble with the West—Two Views

Fretting about the health of the *civitas* has long been a characteristic of the West, or at least of its more thoughtful denizens. It may even be the reason for our survival. We worry, therefore we endure.

Our time, though one of relative peace and prosperity, is no exception. Today, indeed, a growing sense of too much “ease in Zion” is the greatest single cause of anxiety—and not only among the professional worrier caste, the intellectuals. The success of Allan Bloom’s best-selling jeremiad, *The Closing of the American Mind*, suggests that concern about the collective destiny is widespread.

One word that is often invoked to describe our current predicament—a word that has caused more than its share of head-scratching—is postmodernism. First appearing around 25 years ago, mostly in reference to art and architecture, it has since been put to wider use. Not only are we said to work in postmodern buildings with “ironic” architectural flourishes or to read postmodern fiction by Latin American “magical realists,” we also view postmodern television shows (David Letterman for the late-night crowd), eat postmodern food (“gourmet” macaroni-and-cheese served on microwavable Fiestaware), sport postmodern clothes, and even think postmodern thoughts.

For all that, few of us know what the term really means, while others suspect, along with a *Spy* magazine writer, that it has “evolved into a sort of buzzword that people tack onto sentences when they’re trying to sound more educated than they fear they really are.” Sociologist Todd Gitlin here argues that the concept touches on something more important than the fads and fashions of our time. It also goes to the heart of our ethical commitments and our social and political behavior. During the past two decades, Gitlin says, people in the advanced industrial world have enjoyed a peculiar luxury: They have been able to play with the surfaces of their cultural heritage while paying little serious attention to its underlying values.

Pursuing a very different tack, novelist and philosopher Walker Percy argues that the problem dogging our age is far more radical than the latest turn of the *Zeitgeist*. He sees a basic flaw in the foundations of our scientific world-view, traceable to its earliest formulations in the 16th and 17th centuries. The result is an incoherence within the sciences, particularly the social and human sciences, which in turn subtly inform our public policies as well as our arts and letters.

This incoherence stems, says Percy, from a fatal misunderstanding of man and his unique endowment—language. Much is at stake in correcting this misapprehension, Percy believes: Man will either survive as free subject and maker of his world, or decline into an object of impersonal forces and technocratic schemes.



THE POSTMODERN PREDICAMENT

by Todd Gitlin

Something must be at stake in the edgy debates circulating around and about something called postmodernism. What, then? Commentators pro, con, serious, fey, academic, and accessible seem to agree that something postmodern has happened, even if we are all—or virtually all—Mr. Jones who doesn't know what it is. (At times the critical world seems to divide between those who speak with assurance about what it is and those who are struggling to keep up.)

The volume and pitch of the commentary and controversy seem to imply that something about this postmodern something *matters*. In the pages of art journals, popular and obscure, abundant passion flows on about passionlessness. It would be cute but glib and shortsighted to dismiss the talk as so much time-serving or

space-filling. There is *anxiety* at work, and at play, here. I think it is reasonable, or at least interesting, to assume that the anxiety that surfaces in the course of the discussion—and I confess I share in it—is called for. A certain anxiety is entirely commensurate with what is at stake.

"Postmodernism" usually refers to a certain constellation of styles and tones in cultural works: pastiche; blankness; a sense of exhaustion; a mixture of levels, forms, styles; a relish for copies and repetition; a knowingness that dissolves commitment into irony; acute self-consciousness about the formal, constructed nature of the work; pleasure in the play of surfaces; a rejection of history. It is Michael Graves's Portland Building and Philip Johnson and John Burgee's AT&T, Rauschenberg's silkscreens and Warhol's

Brillo boxes; it is shopping malls, mirror glass façades, Robert Venturi, William Burroughs, Donald Barthelme, Monty Python, Don DeLillo, *Star Wars*, Spalding Gray, David Byrne, Twyla Tharp, the Flying Karamazov Brothers, George Coates, Frederick Barthelme, Laurie Anderson, the Hyatt Regency, the *Centre Pompidou*, *The White Hotel*, *Less Than Zero*, Foucault, and Derrida; it is bricolage fashion, and remote-control-equipped viewers "zapping" around the television dial.

To join the conversation I am also going to use the term to refer to art located somewhere in this constellation. But I am also going to argue that what is at stake in the debate—and thus the root of the general anxiety—goes beyond art: It extends to the question of what sort of disposition toward the contemporary world is going to prevail throughout Western culture. The entire elusive phenomenon which has been categorized as postmodernism is best understood not just as a style but as a general orientation, as what English critic Raymond Williams calls a "structure of feeling," as a way of apprehending and experiencing the world and our place, or placelessness, in it.

Not for the first time, debates over cultural politics intersect with larger intellectual and political currents, prefiguring or tracing conflicts that have emerged, or ought to emerge, in the sphere of politics strictly understood. When the *Partisan Review* embraced modernism in the 1930s, for example, they were taking a position on more than style: They were taking a position on reason, the State, the (ir)rationality of history; finally, they were driving a revisionary wedge into left-wing politics in the large. American versions of modernism that emerged after World War II, both as artistic practice and critical exegesis, can also be understood as a way to inhabit a drastically changed political realm.

I am going to take the position that the discussion of postmodernism is, among other things, a deflected and displaced dis-

cussion of the contours of political thought—in the largest sense—during the 1970s and 1980s. The aesthetics of postmodernism are situated, historical. The question is, what is postmodernism's relation to this historical moment, to its political possibilities and torments?

I want to broach some intersecting questions: What do we mean by postmodernism, both as a style and a "structure of feeling"? Why has it come to pass? What is so troubling about postmodernism? Finally, postmodern is pre-what? What is the relation between postmodern aesthetics and a possible politics?

What is postmodernism? A sortie at definition is necessary. Things must be made to look crystalline for a moment, before complications set in. Here, then, is one person's grid, hopelessly crude, in the manner of first approximations for distinguishing among premodernism (realism), modernism, and postmodernism. These are ideal types, mind you, not adequate descriptions. And they are not necessarily ideal types of the work "itself"; rather, of the work as it is understood and judged by some consensus (albeit shifting) of artists, critics, and audiences.

The premodernist work, whether a painting by Leonardo da Vinci or a novel by Balzac, aspires to a unity of vision. It cherishes continuity, speaking with a single narrative voice or addressing a single visual center. It honors sequence and causality in time or space. Through the consecutive, the linear, it claims to represent a reality which is something else, though to render it more acutely than happens in ordinary experience. It may contain a critique of the established order, in the name of the obstructed ambitions of individuals; or it may uphold individuals as the embodiments of society at its best. In either event, individuals matter. The work observes, highlights, renders judgments, and exudes passions in their names. Standing apart from reality, the premodernist work

Todd Gitlin is professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Born in New York, N.Y., he received a B.A. from Harvard University (1963), and a Ph.D. from Berkeley (1977). He is the author of *The Whole World is Watching* (1980), *Inside Prime Time* (1983), and *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (1987). A longer version of this essay appeared in *Cultural Politics in America* (1989), edited by Ian Angus and Sut Jhally. Copyright © 1989 Todd Gitlin.

aspires to an order of beauty which, in a sense, judges reality; lyrical forms, heightened speech, rhythm and rhyme, Renaissance perspective and compositional "laws" are deployed in the interest of beauty. Finally, the work may borrow stories or tunes from popular materials, but it holds itself (and is held by its audience) above its origins; high culture holds the line against the popular.

The modernist work—T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Picasso's *Guernica* to take three examples—still aspires to unity, but this unity, if that is what it is, has been (is still being?) constructed, assembled from fragments, or shocks, or juxtapositions of difference. It shifts abruptly among a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, materials. Continuity is disrupted, and with enthusiasm: It is as if the work were punctuated with exclamation marks. The orders of conventional reality—inside versus outside, subject versus object, self versus other—are called into question. So are the hitherto self-enclosed orders of art: poetry versus prose, painting versus sculpture, representation versus reality. There is often a critique of the established order; the work is apocalyptic, fused with a longing for some long-gone organic whole sometimes identified with a fascist present or future. The subject is not so much wholeheartedly opposed as estranged. Instead of passion, or alongside it, there is ambivalence toward the prevailing authorities. The work composes beauty out of discord. Aiming to bring into sharp relief the line between art and life, modernism appropriates selected shards of popular culture, quotes from them.

In the postmodernist sensibility, the search for unity has apparently been abandoned altogether. Instead, we have textuality, a cultivation of surfaces endlessly referring to, ricocheting from, reverberating onto other surfaces. The work calls attention to its arbitrariness, constructedness; it interrupts itself. Instead of a single center, there is pastiche, cultural



AT&T headquarters in New York City. Architects John Burgee and Philip Johnson abandoned "form-is-function" modernism for decorative postmodern flourishes.

recombination. Anything can be juxtaposed to anything else. Everything takes place in the present, "here," that is, nowhere in particular. Not only has the master voice dissolved, but any sense of loss is rendered deadpan. The work labors under no illusions: We are all deliberately playing, pretending here—get the point? There is a premium on copies; everything has been done. Shock, now routine, is greeted with the glazed stare of the total ironist. The implied subject is fragmented, unstable, even decomposed; it is finally nothing more than a crosshatch of discourses. Where there was passion, or ambivalence, there is now a collapse of feeling, a blankness. Beauty, deprived of its power of criticism in an age of packaging, has been reduced to the decoration of reality, and so is crossed off the postmodernist agenda. Genres are spliced; so are cultural gradations. Dance can be built on Beach Boys songs (Twyla Tharp, "Deuce Coup"); cir-

THE LESSONS OF LAS VEGAS

Almost two decades ago, Robert Venturi and some fellow architects decided to take a close look at the American commercial "strip." They liked what they saw. Their book, Learning from Las Vegas (1972), endures as a classic statement of the postmodern aesthetic:

The commercial strip, the Las Vegas Strip in particular—the example par excellence—challenges the architect to take a positive, non-chip-on-the-shoulder view. Architects are out of the habit of looking nonjudgmentally at the environment, because orthodox Modern architecture is progressive, if not revolutionary, utopian, and puristic; it is dissatisfied with existing conditions. Modern architecture has been anything but permissive: Architects have preferred to exchange the existing environment rather than enhance what is there.

For the architect or the urban designer, comparison of Las Vegas with others of the world's "pleasure zones"—with Marienbad, the Alhambra, Xanadu, and Disneyland, for instance—suggest that essential to the imagery of pleasure-zone architecture are lightness, the quality of being an oasis in perhaps a hostile context, heightened symbolism, and the ability to engulf the visitor in a new role—for three days he may imagine himself a centurion at Caesar's Palace, a ranger at the Frontier, or a jet-set playboy at the Riviera rather than a salesman from Des Moines, Iowa, or an architect from Haddonfield, New Jersey.

However, there are didactic images more important than the images of recreation for us to take home to New Jersey and Iowa: one is the Avis with the Venus; another, Jack Benny under a classical pediment with Shell Oil beside him, or the gasoline station beside the multimillion-dollar casino. These show the vitality that may be achieved by an architecture of inclusion or, by contrast, the deadness that results from too great a preoccupation with tastefulness and total design. The Strip shows the value of symbolism and allusion in an architecture of vast space and speed and proves that people, even architects, have fun with architecture that reminds them of something else, perhaps the harems or the Wild West in Las Vegas, perhaps of the nation's New England forbearers in New Jersey. Allusion and comment, on the past or present or on our great commonplaces or old clichés, and inclusion of the everyday in the environment, sacred and profane—these are what are lacking in present-day Modern architecture. We can learn about them from Las Vegas as have other artists from their own profane and stylistic sources.

From Learning from Las Vegas, by Robert Venturi et al. (MIT).



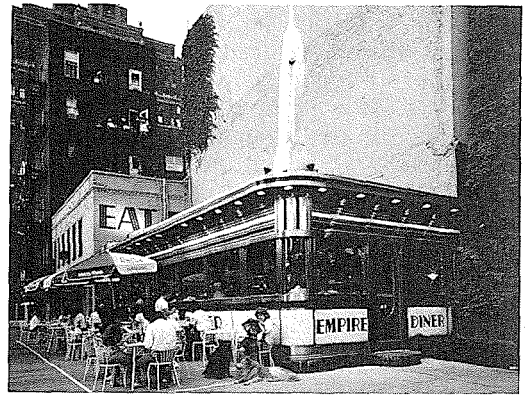
cus can include cabaret jokes (Circus Oz); avant-garde music can include radio gospel (David Byrne and Brian Eno, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*). "High culture" doesn't so much quote from popular culture as blur into it.

All master styles aim to remake the history that precedes them, just as T. S. Eliot said individual talents reorder tradition. In one sense, then, postmodernism remakes the relation between premodernism and modernism: In the light of postmodern disdain for representational conventions, the continuity between the preceding stages comes to seem more striking than the chasm dividing them. Yet it is worth noticing that "postmodernist"—in the spirit of its recombinant enterprise—is a compound term. It is as if the very term had trouble establishing the originality of the concept. If the phenomenon were more clearly demarcated from its predecessor, it might have been able to stand, semantically, on its own feet. Instead, *postmodernism* defines the present cultural moment as a sequel, as what it is not. Postmodernism is known by the company it succeeds. It differs from modernism by nothing more than a prefix. It shadows modernism.

So what's new? It has been argued, with considerable force, that the lineaments of postmodernism are already present in one or another version of modernism; that postmodernism is simply the current incarnation, or phase, in a still unfolding modernism. Literary historian Roger Shattuck, for example, has recently made the point that Cubism, Futurism, and artistic spiritualists like Kandinsky "shared one compositional principle: the juxtaposition of states of mind, of 'different times and places, of different points of view.'" Collage, montage, these are of the essence of modernism high and low. Then what is so special about (1) Philip Johnson and John Burgee's AT&T building, with its Chippendale pediment on high and quasi-classical columns below; (2) the Australian Circus Oz, which combines jugglers commenting on their juggling and cracking political jokes with (their list) "Aboriginal influences, vaudeville, Chinese acrobatics, Japanese martial arts, fireman's balances, In-

donesian instruments and rhythms, video, Middle Eastern tunes, B-grade detective movies, modern dance, Irish jigs, and the ubiquitous present of corporate marketing"; (3) the student who walks into my office dressed in green jersey, orange skirt, and black tights?

Put it this way: Modernism tore up unity and postmodernism has been enjoying the shreds. Surely nothing is without precedent; surely modernism had to set asunder what postmodernism is mixing in and about. Modernism's multiplication of perspectives led to postmodernism's utter dispersion of voices; modernist collage made possible postmodernist genre-splicing. The point is not only juxtaposition but



Postmodern food in a postmodern setting: At New York's retro-chic Empire Diner, one reviewer notes, patrons "ooh and aah over piggy platters laden with turkey croquettes and pigs-in-blankets and the brownies."

its attitude. Postmodern juxtaposition is distinct: There is a deliberate self-consciousness, a skating on the edge dividing irony from dismay or endorsement, which make up a distinct cultural mood. Picasso, Boccioni, Tatlin, Pound, Joyce, Woolf in their various ways thundered and hungered. Their work was radiant with passion for a new world/work. Today's postmodernists are blasé; they've seen it all. They are bemused (though not necessarily by bemusement). The quality of deliberateness and the sense of exhaustion in the postmodern are what set it apart.

It might be objected that we are talking about nothing more than a fad. We read in a "Design Notebook" column in *The New*

York Times of March 12, 1987, that "Post-Modernism Appears to Retreat." Apparently *Progressive Architecture* is no longer giving its awards to pastiches of columns, capitals, and cornices; the writer suggests that the popularization of the premium architectural style of the last ten years signals its uniformity, mediocrity, and impending end. Actually, postmodernism, as a stylistic avant-garde movement in architecture had probably already reached a plateau (but does this mean it ended?) at the moment when photographs of Michael Graves's buildings were featured in *The New York Times Magazine* (1982). But what is interesting about postmodernism goes beyond the fashion in architecture—for the recombinatory thrust, the blankness, the self-regarding irony, the play of surfaces, the self-referentiality and self-bemusement which characterize postmodernism are still very much with us. What is interesting is not a single set of architectural tropes but postmodern as what Raymond Williams calls a "structure of feeling"—an interlocking cultural complex, or what he calls "a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones"—that forecasts the common future as it colors the common experience of a society just at or beneath the threshold of awareness. In this flickering half-light, postmodernism is significant because its amalgam of spirits has penetrated architecture, fiction, painting, poetry, urban planning, performance, music, television, and many other domains. It is one wing, at least, of the *Zeitgeist*.

Why has postmodernism happened, why here, and why now? We can distinguish more or less four approaches to an answer. These are not at all necessarily incompatible. To the contrary: Several forces are converging to produce the postmodernist moment.

The first is the bleak Marxist account sketched with flair in a series of essays by Fredric Jameson. The postmodernist spirit, with its superseding of the problem of authenticity, belongs to, is coupled to, corresponds to, expresses—the relation is not altogether clear—the culture of multinational capitalism, in which capital, that infinitely transferable abstraction, has abolished particularity as such along with

UTOPIA ACHIEVED—OR, IS AMERICA WHAT "PoMo" IS ALL ABOUT?

French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, in his brilliant, quirky book, America (1988), suggests why the United States may be not only the locus but the meaning of postmodernism:

America ducks the question of origins; it cultivates no origin or mythical authenticity; it has no past and no founding truth. . . . But this is of no importance—America has no identity problem. In the future, power will belong to those peoples with no origins and no authenticity who know how to exploit that situation to the full.

The U.S. is utopia achieved.

We should not judge their crisis as we would judge our own, the crisis of the old European countries. Ours is a crisis of historical ideals facing up to the impossibility of their realization. Theirs is the crisis of achieved utopia, confronted with the problem of its duration and permanence. The Americans are not wrong in their idyllic conviction that they are at the center of the world, the supreme power, the absolute model for everyone. And this conviction is not so much founded on natural resources,

the coherent self in whom history, depth, and subjectivity unite. Authentic use value has been overcome by the universality of exchange value. The characteristic machine of this period is the computer, which enthrones (or fetishizes) the fragment, the "bit," and in the process places a premium on process and reproduction which is aped in postmodernist art. Surfaces meet surfaces in these postmodern forms because a new human nature—a human second nature—has formed to feel at home in a homeless world political economy. Postmodernists ransack history for shards because there is no "here" here; because historical continuity is shattered by the permanent revolution that is capitalism. Uprooted juxtaposition is how people live: not only displaced peasants cast into the megalopolis, where decontextualized images proliferate, but also TV viewers confronted with the *interruptus* of American television as well as financial honchos shifting bits of information and blips of capital around the world at will and high

technologies, and arms, as on the miraculous premise of a utopia made reality, of a society which, with a directness we might judge unbearable, is built on the idea that it is the realization of everything the others have dreamt of—justice, plenty, rule of law, wealth, freedom: it knows this, it believes in it, and in the end, the others have come to believe it too.

In the present crisis of values, everyone ends up turning towards the culture which dared to forge right ahead and, by a theatrical masterstroke, turn those values into reality, towards that society which, thanks to the geographical and mental break effected by emigration, allowed itself to imagine it could create an ideal world from nothing. We should also not forget the fantasy consecration of this process in the cinema. Whatever happens, and whatever one thinks of the arrogance of the dollar or the multinationals, it is this culture which, the world over, fascinates those very people who suffers most at its hands, and it does so through the deep, insane conviction that it has made all their dreams come true.

From *America*, by Jean Baudrillard (Verso/Routledge, Chapman & Hall).

speed. Art expresses this abstract unity and vast, weightless indifference through its blank repetitions (think of Warhol or Philip Glass), its exhausted anti-romance, its I've-seen-it-all, striving at best for a kind of all-embracing surface which radiates from the world temple of the postmodern, the glorious *Centre Pompidou* in Paris.

A second stab at explanation calls attention to our political rather than our strictly economic moment. In this light, the crucial location of the postmodern is *after the '60s*. The postmodern is an aftermath, or a waiting game, because that is what we are living in: a prolonged cultural moment that is oddly weightless, shadowed by incomplete revolts, haunted by absences—a Counterreformation beating against an unfinished, indeed barely begun, Reformation. From this point of view, postmodernism rejects historical continuity and takes up residence somewhere beyond it because history *was* ruptured: by the Bomb-fueled vision of a possible material end of history, by Vietnam, by drugs,

by youth revolts, by women's and gay rights movements—in general, by the erosion of that false and devastating universality embodied in the rule of the pyramidal trinity of Father, Science, and State. It was faith in a rule of progress under the sway of that trinity that had underlain our assumptions that the world displays linear order, historical sequence, and moral clarities. But cultural contradiction burst open the premises of the old cultural complex. The cultural upwellings and wildness of the '60s kicked out the props of a teetering moral structure, but the new house has not yet been built. The culture has not yet found a language for articulating the new understandings we are trying, haltingly, to live with.

Postmodernism dispenses with moorings, then, because old certitudes have actually crumbled. It is straining to make the most of seriality, endless recirculation and repetition in the collective image warehouse, because so much of reality *is* serial. As Donald Barthelme's fiction knows, we live in a forest of images mass-produced and endlessly, alluringly empty. Individuality has become a parody of itself: another world for a fashion choice, a lifestyle compound, a talk-show self-advertisement logo. It might even be argued that postmodernism plays in and with surfaces because that is what it must do to carry on with its evasions: because there are large cultural terrors that broke into common consciousness during the 1960s and there is no clear way to live out their implications in a conservative, contracting period.

From this point of view, postmodern-



ism is blank because it wants to have its commodification and eat it, too. That is, it knows that the culture industry will tailor virtually any cultural goods for the sake of sales; it also wants to display its knowingness, thereby demonstrating how superior it is to the trash market. Choose one: The resulting ironic spiral either mocks the game by playing it or plays it by mocking it. A knowing blankness results; how to decode it is a difficult matter. Take, for instance, the "Joe Isuzu" commercials of 1987, in which the spokesman, a transparently slick version of the archetypal TV huckster, grossly lies about what the car will do, how much it costs, and so on, while the subtitles tell us he's lying, and by how much. The company takes for granted a culture of lies, then aims to ingratiate itself by mocking the conventions of the hard sell.

Consider the early episodes of *Max Headroom* during the spring of 1987, which in nine weeks sped from a blunt critique of television itself to a mishmash of adorability. "20 Minutes into the Future"—so the pilot film shows us—the computer-generated Max fights the tyranny of the ratings-crazed Network 23, whose decidedly sinister (shot from below with wide-angle lens) boardroom tycoons will stop at no crime in their pursuit of profits. (*Cherchez la japonaise*: The venal Zik-Zak corporation which brings on the ratings panic is conveniently Japanese.) Is Max a revolutionary guerrilla or a sales gimmick? In the British prototype, he throws in with a revolution against Network 23; in the American version, the self-proclaimed revolutionaries are thuggish terrorists, as

despicable as the Network bosses. In any event, Max in his early American weeks reaches out of the fictional frame to yawn in the face of ABC's impending commercials. As the weeks pass, however, Max loses his computerized bite and becomes regressively cuter. The same Max is deployed to promote Coca-Cola over Pepsi, as if Coke were both subversive and mandatory (the "wave" to be "caught")—to an audience encouraged to laugh at the distinction and still, as consumers, act on it. Commerce incorporates popular cynicism

and political unease while flattering the audience that it has now, at least, seen through all the sham: Cynicism, Inc. Andy Warhol would have grasped the point in a second, or fifteen.

A third approach to explaining postmodernism is a refinement of the second: an argument not about history in general but about a specific generation and class. Postmodernism appears as an outlook for (though not necessarily *by*) Yuppies—urban, professional products of the late baby boom, born during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Theirs is an

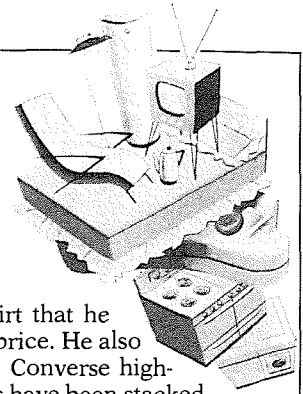
experience of aftermath, privatization, weightlessness: They can remember political commitment but were not animated by it—more, they suspect it; it leads to trouble. They cannot remember a time before television, suburbs, shopping malls: They are accustomed, therefore, to rapid cuts, discontinuities, breaches of attention, culture to be indulged and disdained at the same time. They grew up taking drugs, taking them for granted, but do not associate them with spirituality or the hunger for transcendence. Knowing indifference is



Man-Child in Toyland. TV's Pee-wee Herman, with friend Globey, epitomizes "PoMo" camp.

THE POSTMODERN COUPLE

A slick, gossipy chronicle of New York City trends and personalities (and itself something of a postmodern artifact), *Spy* magazine recently featured an article by Paul Rudnick and Kurt Andersen called "The Irony Epidemic." It included what may become the definitive portrait of the postmodern couple:



Meet Bob and Betty. Bob is wearing a hibiscus Hawaiian shirt that he purchased for approximately six times the garment's original 1952 price. He also carries his lunch in a tackle box and wears a Gummy wristwatch, Converse high-tops and baggy khakis from Banana Republic; at the store, the pants have been stacked in an artfully ruined Indiana Jones-style jeep. Bob describes his looks as "Harry Truman mixed with early Jerry Mathers." Bob assumes that you know that Mathers played the title role on *Leave it to Beaver*.

Betty wears Capri pants, ballet flats and a man's oversized white shirt, along with a multizippered black-leather motorcycle jacket imprinted with Cyrillic letters. She's "Audrey Hepburn by way of Patty Duke as James Dean's girlfriend waiting on the drag strip." Betty refers to herself as Bob's "old lady." Bob calls himself "Dad." When Bob and Betty describe themselves in these ways, they raise the middle and forefingers of both hands, momentarily forming twitching bunny ears—*air quotes*, the quintessential contemporary gesture that says, *We're not serious*.

Betty and Bob have a child, a two-year-old whom they call "Kitten." This child is probably too young to catch the reference to *Father Knows Best*, even though she sits with her parents when they watch *Nick at Nite*, the cable TV service devoted almost entirely to the quasi-ironic recapitulation of shows from the early 1960s. The invitation to Betty and Bob's wedding were printed with sketches of jitterbugging couples; for their honeymoon, they rented a station wagon and drove south, visiting Graceland, Cypress Gardens and the Texas School Book Depository. Betty and Bob buy Fiestaware and Bakelite jewelry and beaded "Injun" belts, as well as souvenirs from the 1964 World's Fair and "atomic" furniture from the fifties—"real Jetsons stuff." Bob has taught the family mutt, Spot, to do the twist. Bob dreams that his animal will one day appear on the "Stupid Pet Tricks" segment of *Late Night with David Letterman*. Bob works in advertising, "like Darrin on *Bewitched*." Betty is a corporate attorney—"a lawyer from hell," she says. Bob and Betty are fictional, but Bob and Betty are everywhere.

From *Spy* (March 1989). Copyright © 1989 *Spy* Publishing Partners, L.P. Distributed by UFS, Inc.

their "structure of feeling"—thus a taste for cultural bricolage. They are, though, disabused of authority. The association of passion and politics rubs them the wrong way. Their idea of government is shadowed by Vietnam and Watergate. Their television runs through *Saturday Night Live* and *MTV*. Their mores lean toward the libertarian and, at least until the AIDS terror, the libertine. They like the idea of the free market as long as it promises them an endless accumulation of crafted goods, as suggested by the (half-joking?) bumper sticker. "THE ONE WITH THE MOST TOYS WINS."

The idea of public life—whether party participation or military intervention—fills them with weariness; the adventures

that matter to them are the adventures of private life. The characters of *The Big Chill* spoke to them: The "Sixties" stand for a cornucopia of sex and drugs; they can easily gather for a weekend in The "Eighties" without bringing up the subject of Ronald Reagan and Reaganism. But they are not in any conventional sense "right-wing": They float beyond belief. The important thing is that their assemblage of "values" corresponds to their class biographies.

A fourth approach starts from the fact that postmodernism is specifically, though not exclusively, *American*. Literary critic Andreas Huyssen makes an interesting argument which carries us part way but needs to be extended. Postmodernism couldn't have developed in Germany, be-

cause postwar Germans were too busy trying to reappropriate a suppressed modernism. Where it developed in France at all, it did so without antagonism to or rupture from modernism. But in America, the artistic avant-garde, in order to break from Cold War orthodoxy and corporate-sponsored smugness, had to revolt against the officially enshrined modernism of the postwar period; had to smash the Modern Art idol.

I would add the obvious: that postmodernism is born in the U.S.A. because juxtaposition is one of the things we do best. It is one of the defining currents of American culture, especially with Emancipation and the rise of immigration in the latter part of the 19th century. (The other principal current is the opposite: assimilation into standard American styles and myths.) Juxtaposition is the Strip, the shopping mall, the Galleria, Las Vegas; it is the marketplace jamboree, the divinely grotesque disorder, amazing diversity striving for reconciliation, the ethereal and ungrounded radiance of signs, the shimmer of the evanescent, the good times beat of the tall tale meant to be simultaneously disbelieved and appreciated; it is vulgarized pluralism; it is the cultural logic of laissez-faire but perhaps, the suspicion arises, even more—of an elbows-out, noisy, jostling, bottom-up version of something that can pass as democracy. We are, central myths and homogenizations and oligopolies notwithstanding, an immigrant culture, less melting pot than grab bag, perennially replenished by aliens and their singular points of view.

As long ago as 1916, Randolph Bourne wrote that "there is no distinctively American culture. It is apparently our lot rather to be a federation of cultures." Hollywood and the radio and TV networks flattened the culture, but there is still life in Bourne's vision. The postmodernist, from this point of view, is hitching high art to the raucous, disrespectful quality that ac-

companies American popular culture from its beginnings. And indeed, the essential contribution of postmodernist art is that it obliterates the line—or the brow—separating the high from the low.

The postmodernist arts, then, express a spirit that comports well with American culture in the 1980s—and with American politics. The standard ideological configurations of "liberal" and "conservative" belief are decomposing, although the decomposition is masked by the fact that the old political language is still in force. The patriotic words are mouthed while the performers signal, in the manner of *Moonlighting* (and Reagan at his self-deprecating best), that they don't really mean them (quite). There is laissez-faire in economics, as long as you can find an apartment you can afford and as long as you have not thought too long about near-collisions between passenger planes. In the film *Stranger Than Paradise* and David Letterman as well as in the Republican Party, there is a love for the common people and their kitsch tastes that is indistinguishable from contempt. In politics as in the arts, distrust runs rampant while beneath the surface, as David Byrne and Brian Eno have put it, "America is waiting for a message of some sort or another."

Postmodernism is an art of erosion. Make the most of stagnation, it says, and give up gracefully. That is perhaps its defining break from modernism, which was, whatever its subversive practices, a series of declarations of faith—Suprematism's future, Joyce's present, Eliot's unsurpassable past. What is not clear is whether postmodernism, living off borrowed materials, has the resources for continuing self-renewal. A car without a generator can run off its battery only so long. Postmodernism seems doomed to be an intermission. But historical time is treacherous to assess. Intermissions can last a very long time, and who is counting?

THE DIVIDED CREATURE

by Walker Percy

I would like to begin with two large but I hope digestible propositions.

The first is that our view of the world, which we get consciously or unconsciously from modern science, is radically incoherent.

A corollary of this proposition is that modern science is itself radically incoherent not when it seeks to understand things and subhuman organisms and the cosmos itself but when it seeks to understand man, not man's physiology or neurology or his blood stream, but man *qua* man, man when he is peculiarly human. In short, the science of man is incoherent.

The second proposition is that the source of the incoherence lies within science itself, as it is practiced in the world today, and that the solution of the difficulty is not to be found in something extra-scientific, such as New-Age religion, but within science itself. When I say science, I mean science in the root sense of the word, as the discovery and knowledge of something which can be demonstrated and verified within a community.

What I am raising here is not the standard humanistic objection to science, that it is too impersonal, detached, abstracted, and that accordingly it does not meet human needs, does not take into account such human experiences as emotions, art, faith, and so on. Scientists are used to and understandably unimpressed by such challenges. No, my

purpose is rather to challenge science, as it is currently practiced by some scientists, in the name of science.

Surely there is nothing wrong with a humanist, even a novelist, taking a look at his colleagues across the fence in the sciences and saying to them in the friendliest way: "Look, fellows, it's none of my business, but hasn't something gone awry over there that you might want to fix?"

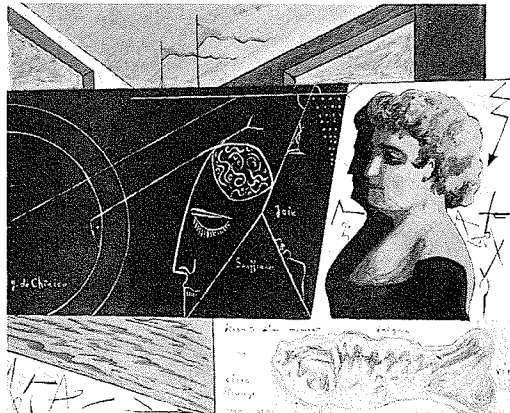
We novelists would surely be grateful if scientists demonstrated that the reason novels are increasingly incoherent these days is because novelists are suffering from a rare encephalitis, and even offered to cure them.

My proposal to scientists is far more modest. That is to say, I am not setting up either as physician or as the small boy noticing the naked emperor. What I am doing is more like whispering to a friend at a party that he'd do well to fix his fly.

For it can be shown, I think, that in certain areas, science, as it is currently practiced, fails on its own terms, not in ruling out traditional humanistic concerns as "unscientific" or "metaphysical" or "non-

factual," but in certain areas fails rather in the confusion and incoherence of its own theories and models. This occurs, I think it can be shown, in the present-day sciences of man.

The puzzling thing is that the incoherence is both known and unknown, as familiar on the one hand as a



member of one's own family and as little remarked. It is like a long-standing family embarrassment, like Uncle Louie who, it is true, is a little strange but has been that way so long that one has finally grown used to him.

The embarrassment occurs, as I say, when the sciences, so spectacularly successful in addressing the rest of the cosmos, address man himself. I am speaking of such sciences as psychology, psychiatry, linguistics, anthropology, and sociology.

Something odd happens. It is not merely, as the excuse sometimes runs, that the subject matter, man, is complex and difficult. So is the cosmos. But in the case of the cosmos there is a presumption that the areas of ignorance are being steadily eroded by the advance of science. In the case of the sciences of man, however, the incoherence is chronic and seems to be intractable.

Take a familiar example, psychology, Psych 101, the college survey course. Here's what one studies or at least hears about, and I mention only those items most familiar to sophomores: neurons, signals, synapses, transmitter substance, central nervous system, brain, mind, personality, self, consciousness, and, later perhaps, ego, superego, archetypes.

What is remarkable to a Martian visitor or a college freshman who doesn't know any better is that there seem to be two sorts of things, very dissimilar things, named in the list. The words early in the list refer to things and events which can be seen or measured, such as neurons, which are cells one can see through a microscope. The words that come later, such as self, ego, consciousness, cannot be seen as things or measured as energy exchanges. They can only be described by some such word as mental or mind.

Here again, I'm not telling you anything you don't already know, and here

again you may ask: "So what?"

For is it not a commonplace, and in fact the very nature of the beast, that in psychology we deal with "mental" and "physical" entities, with mind and matter, and I will not quarrel with however you wish to define matter, as stuff or things or electrons and protons in motion?

But in fact, in speaking of the "mental" and the "physical," of the psyche and the brain, and with however much hope and sophistication we wish to phrase it, are we not admitting that we are still hung up on the horns of the ancient dualism of Descartes, however much we wish to believe we had gotten past it? Descartes, if you recall, divided all reality between the *res cogitans*, the mind, and the *res extensa*, matter. God alone, literally, knew what one had to do with the other.

But in natural science we do not like to admit that we are still split by a 300-year-old dualism. Nor should we.

Might we not in fact reasonably expect that the appropriate scientists, psychologists in this case, tell us what one has to do with the other, or how to get from one to the other, from "matter" to "mind"? If they are not going full steam ahead on bridging this peculiar gap, they must at least have some inkling.

As far as I can tell, they are not and do not. In Psych 101, the problem of the ancient dualism is usually dismissed in a sentence or two, like Reagan dismissing the national debt. Or the solution is not sought but declared found.

Here are some samples:

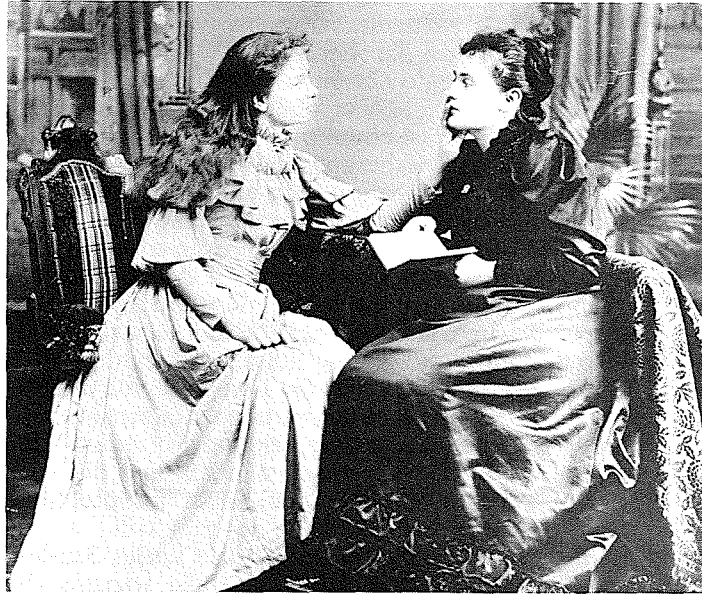
Mind is a property of the organization of neurons, their circuitry and the neurotransmitters between them.

Or: The relation of brain to mind is directly analogous to that of computer to its software.

Or: The only difference between us and the Apple computer is complexity.

But here's the best statement I've come

Walker Percy, novelist and philosopher, lives and works in Covington, Louisiana. Born in Birmingham, Alabama, he received a B.S. from the University of North Carolina (1937) and an M.D. from the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University (1941). During a long bout with tuberculosis, Percy turned from medicine to writing. In addition to six novels, the first of which, The Moviegoer (1961), won the National Book Award, he has published numerous essays and two books of nonfiction. This essay is adapted from the 18th Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, delivered on May 3, 1989 in Washington, D.C. Copyright © 1989 by Walker Percy.



Helen Keller, c. 1893, "listens" to Anne Sullivan by feeling the vibrations of her teacher's larynx. Keller's discovery of language, Percy writes, "was the beginning of her life as a person."

across of such awkward things as mind and consciousness. It is from a textbook, *Physiology of Behavior*, by Neal R. Carlson. "What can a physiological psychologist say about human self-awareness? We know that it is altered by changes in the structure or chemistry of the brain. We conclude that consciousness is a physiological function, just like behavior."

These statements are something less useful than truisms. To say that mind is a property or function of the organization of the brain is almost the same as saying that Raphael's *Orleans Madonna* is a property of paint and color.

I refer to this gap in scientific knowledge as an incoherence, from the Latin *incohaerere*, a not-sticking-together. This gap is incoherent and intractable, at least from the present posture of natural science. That is to say, no amount of effort by "brain" scientists and "mind" scientists can even narrow the gap.

Can anyone imagine how a psychology of the psyche, like that of Freud or Jung, however advanced, can ever make contact with a Skinnerian psychology of neurons, however modified and elaborated it is, for example, by some such refinement as Ge-

stalt and "cognitive" psychology?

There are similar incoherences in other sciences of man.

Sociology and cultural anthropology have to do with groups and cultures, with people: that is to say, human organisms. But sociology deals with such things as self, roles; anthropology with such things as sorcery, rites. But how do you get from organism to roles and rites?

Linguistics is about the sounds people make. Many organisms make sounds, to attract attention in courtship, to scare off predators, to signal to other creatures the finding of food, to call their young, and so on. So do human organisms. But they, human organisms,

also make sounds which form sentences to tell the truth about things, lie, or don't make any sense at all. How did this come to pass?

Even the great scientist Darwin, who connected everything else, had trouble when he came to this peculiar activity.

Here's how Darwin went about it. The mental act, Darwin claimed, is essentially of the same nature in an animal as it is in man. How does he know this? He writes: "When I say to my terrier, in an eager voice (and I have made the trial many times), 'Hi, hi, where is it?' she at once takes it as a sign that something is to be hunted, and generally first looks quickly all around, and then rushes into the nearest thicket, to scent for any game, but finding nothing, she looks up into any neighboring tree for a squirrel. Now do these actions not clearly show that she had in her mind a general idea or concept that some animal is to be discovered and hunted?"

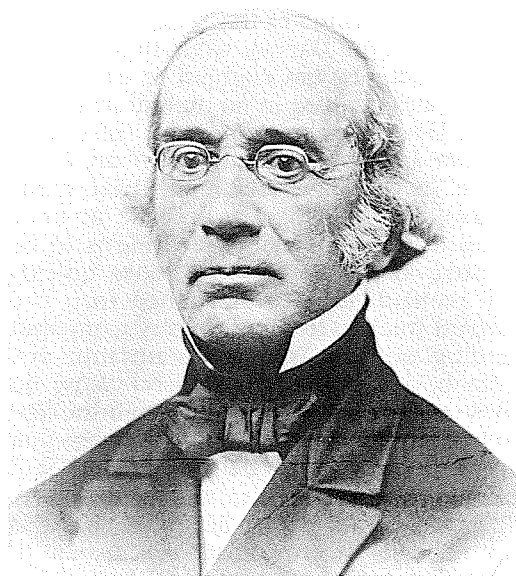
This is a charming account, and it is not necessary to comment on it except to note that later scientists would probably smile and shrug, but some of them might

add: Well, maybe not dogs, but what about dolphins or chimps?

Both Darwin and Freud were great men, maestros of the organism and the psyche, made huge contributions, but nowadays no one would claim that either had bridged the gap. Darwin addressed himself to one side of it in his study of the origin of species. Freud treated a very different though hardly less savage struggle, the warfare between the id and superego. Darwin and Freud were true revolutionaries and were accordingly accused by their enemies of being too radical. When in truth, as it now appears, they were not radical enough. For neither can account for his own activity by his own theory. For how does Darwin account for the "variation" which is his own species and its peculiar behavior, in his case, sitting in his study in Kent and writing the truth as he saw it about evolution? And if Freud's psyche is like ours, a dynamism of contending forces, how did it ever arrive at the truth about psyches, including his own?

Perhaps the oddest thing about these incoherences is the fact that we do not find them odd.

We do not find it odd to jump from the natural science of the biology of creatures to a formal science of the utterances of



Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914)

this particular creature without knowing how we got there.

We do not find it odd that there is only one science of chemistry and neurology but at last count over 600 different schools of psychotherapy, and growing. We accept the explanation that, after all, the brain is vastly more complicated than a molecule of sodium chloride or even a nerve cell. That may be true, but it doesn't explain why the physical sciences are converging whereas the psychic "sciences" are diverging—and getting nuttier as they do.

In what follows, I wish to call your attention to the work of an American scientist who, I believe, laid the groundwork for a coherent science of man, and did so a hundred years ago. Most people have never heard of him, but they will.

The man I speak of is Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), scientist, logician (he gave us symbolic logic), philosopher, and founding father of semiotics, the science of signs, a discipline in high fashion these days. He was a difficult, eccentric man. One of his peculiar accomplishments was that he could write down a question which was bothering him with one hand and with the other simultaneously write the answer.

Although I speak here of Charles Peirce's "discovery," it was not altogether original with him, stemming as it did from the realism of the medieval scholastics. By realism he and his predecessors meant that there is a real world and that it is possible to a degree to know it and to talk about it and be understood. Not only are material things and events real. So are the ideas and words with which we use to think and talk about them. As Peirce put it, "there are real things out there whose characters are independent of our opinion of them."

Although this may seem a commonplace to us, just ordinary common sense, this connection among things and words and knowledge has been under attack for 300 years, by Descartes, who split off mind from matter, and by the English nominalists who even now split off words and ideas from things. One made knowledge unexplainable; the other made it impossible. And this is to say nothing of the European materialism and idealism of

Peirce's time, the first of which set out to explain everything by the doctrine of matter in motion, the other by that of subjectivity, such as Hegel's idealism. One put everything in one box, the box of things; the other put everything in the mind box. But neither told how to get from one box to the other.

Fortunately, modern scientists have taken none of these still regnant philosophies seriously—whether nominalism, materialism, or idealism. If they had, there would have been no Newton or Einstein or Darwin. For if the world is not real or could not be known, why bother with it?

Despite inadequate philosophies, science has advanced spectacularly, particularly physics and biology. Yet, as we have seen, they, the scientists, are still trapped in the ancient dualism and still cannot explain what the mind box has to do with the thing box—much to the detriment and confusion of the social sciences.

The great contribution of Charles Peirce, a rigorous scientific realist, was that he preserved the truth, as he saw it, of philosophical realism from Aristotle to the 17th century, salvaged it from the medieval language of the scholastics which is now all but incomprehensible to us, recast it in terms familiar to scientists, to the most simple-minded empiricist, and even to us laymen. It, Peirce's realism, cannot now be escaped or fobbed off as scholastic mumbo-jumbo.

Peirce saw that the one way to get at it, the great modern rift between mind and matter, was the only place where they intersect, language. Language is words and meanings. It is impossible to imagine language without both.

In brief, he said that there are two kinds of natural events in the world. These two kinds of events have different parameters and variables. Trying to pretend there is only one kind of event leads to all the present misery which afflicts the social sciences, and even more important, at least for us laymen, it brings to pass a certain cast of mind, "scientism," which misplaces reality and creates vast mischief and confusion when we try to understand ourselves.

Peirce said it indirectly and I make bold to say it directly, and I repeat the

statement because it could not be more revolutionary: *There is not one but two kinds of natural events in the world.* One he called dyadic, the other triadic.

Dyadic events are the familiar subject matter of the physical and biological sciences: A interacting with B; A, B, C, D interacting with each other. Peirce called it "a mutual action between two things." It can apply to molecules interacting with other molecules, a billiard ball hitting another billiard ball, one galaxy colliding with another galaxy, an organism responding to a stimulus. Even an event as complex as Pavlov's conditioned dog salivating at the sound of a bell can be understood as a "complexus of dyads." The sound waves from the bell, the stimulation of the dog's auditory receptors, the electrical impulses in the efferent nerves, the firing of the altered synapses in the brain, the electrical impulses in the efferent nerves to the salivary glands, and so on—the whole process is understandable as a sequence of dyadic events.

Such events indeed are the familiar subject matter of the natural sciences, from physics and chemistry to biology and to Psych 101.

But there is another kind of event, quite as "real," quite as natural a phenomenon, quite as observable, which cannot be so understood, that is, cannot be construed by the dyadic model. It is language. The simplest example I can think of, and it is anything but simple, is the child's early acquisition of language, an 18-month-old suddenly learning that things have names. What happens here is the same sort of thing that happens when a lecturer utters a complex sentence about the poetics of T. S. Eliot.

What happens when the child suddenly grasps that the strange little sound *cat*, an explosion of air between tongue and palate followed by a bleat of the larynx followed by a stop of tongue against teeth, means this cat, not only this cat but all cats? And means it in a very special way: not *look over there for cat, watch out for cat, want cat, go get cat*, but *that is a cat*. Naming is the new event, and of course soon after the appearance of this naming "sentence" appear other primitive sen-

tences: *there cat, cat all gone, where cat?*

As Peirce put it, this event cannot be explained by a dyadic model, however complex. Words like *cat* he called symbols, from the Greek *symballein*, to throw together. Because the child puts the two together, the word and the thing, a triadic model is required. For even though many of the familiar dyadic events are implicated, the heart of the matter is a throwing together, one entity throwing together two others, in this case *cat* the creature and *cat* the sound image.

This event is a piece of behavior, true enough, but any behavioristic reading of it as a sequence of dyads will miss the essence of it.

He, Peirce, was particularly interested in using the dyadic-triadic distinction to understand communication by a discipline which he called semiotics, the science of signs. He distinguished between an index and a symbol. A low barometer is, for a human, a sign, an index, of rain. The word *ball* is for my dog an index to go fetch the ball, but, if I say the word *ball* to you, you will receive it as a symbol, that is, look at me with puzzlement and the suspicion that maybe I've gone over the hill, and perhaps say, "Ball? What about it?"

The difference between the two, variously and confusedly called index and symbol, sign and symbol, signal and sign, was perhaps most dramatically illustrated by Helen Keller's famous account: her first understanding of words spelled in her hand, like *cup*, *door*, *water*, to mean go fetch *cup*, open *door*, I want *water*, and then the memorable moment in the pump house when it dawned on her that the word *water* spelled in one hand meant the water running over the other. It was nothing less than the beginning of her life as a person.

The triadic event, as Peirce would say, always involves meaning, and meaning of a special sort. The copula "is," spoken or implied, is nothing less than the tiny triadic lever that moves the entire world into the reach of our peculiar species.

This strange capacity seems to be unique in *Homo sapiens*, and even though there is nothing unscientific about assigning a "species-specific" trait to this

or that species, if the evidence warrants, many scientists, including Darwin, find this uniqueness offensive. We are all familiar with the heroic attempts in recent years by psychologists and primatologists to teach language to primates other than *Homo sapiens*, particularly chimpanzees, using ASL, the sign language of the deaf. The premise behind such research is that chimps don't speak because their vocal apparatus does not permit speech. The most famous chimp was Washoe, whom Alan and Beatrix Gardner claimed to have taught language, that is, the ability not only to understand and signal "words," the common nouns of language, but also to form these words into sentences.

But we are also familiar with the discrediting of these claims, mainly as a result of the work of Herbert Terrace. Terrace adopted a chimp, which he named Nim Chimpsky, with every expectation of teaching Nim language as one would a human infant. What he learned was that Nim, though undoubtedly as smart as Washoe, was not really using language. What he and Washoe were really doing was responding to small cues by the trainer to do this or that, the appropriate behavior rewarded by a banana or whatever. The trainers were doubtlessly not acting in bad faith. What Washoe and Nim Chimpsky were exhibiting, however, was not the language behavior of the human two-year-old but the classical reinforced response of the behaviorists. As Peirce would say, both Washoe's and Nim's "language" can be understood as a "complexus of dyads."

One can draw a picture with things (matter) and arrows (energy) connecting them setting forth the behavior both of the chimp Washoe and the pre-language human infant with its responses to sights and sounds, its crying for mama and milk.

But one cannot draw such a picture of an 18-month-old human who looks at mama, points to cat, and says *da cat*.

One would naturally suppose that the appropriate scientist, the developmental psychologist, the psycholinguist, whoever, would zero in on this, the transformation of the responding organism into the languaged human.

Unfortunately, such is not the case. What one finds in the scientific literature



"Nim Chimpsky" uses American Sign Language to communicate with his trainers. But is this analogous to human language? Psychologist Herbert Terrace concluded that it is not.

is something like this: a huge amount of information about the infant as organism, its needs and drives, its behavior and physiology. But when it begins to speak, what? What is thought to happen? What one finds are very careful studies of the structure of the earliest utterances and their development, the rules by which an 18-month-old will say *that a my coat* but not *a that my coat*. Rules, grammar, linguistic structure is what we find, the same formal approach which issues later in the splendid disciplines of structural linguistics and even in "deconstruction."

We go from biology (dyadic science) to grammar (triadic science) without anybody seeming to notice anything strange. Such *belle indifférence* can only have come to pass either because the scientist has not noticed that he has jumped the chasm or because he has noticed but is at a loss for words.

It is as if we lived in a California house straddling the San Andreas Fault, a crack very narrow but deep, which has however become as familiar as an old shoe. You

can get used to anything. We can hop back and forth, feed ourselves and the dyadic dog on one side, or sit on the other, read Joseph Campbell or write a triadic paper and never give it a second thought. Once in a while we might look down into the chasm, become alarmed, and take up a New-Age religion like Gaia.

On one side are the dyadic sciences, from atomic physics to academic psychology, the latter with its behaviorism and the various refinements and elaborations thereof; on the other are the "mental" psychologies with such entities as consciousness, the unconscious, dreams, egos, ids, archetypes and such.

I trust, incidentally, that when I speak of dyadic phenomena as descriptive of "matter" in motion, it will be understood that I am using the word matter to mean whatever you please as long as it is also understood that such phenomena, at least at the biological level, are not challenged by so-called chaos science or the indeterminacy of particle physics, however

vagarious and mystical the behavior of some particles and however chaotic some turbulences. Which is to say: Even though it has been tried, it is surely a silly business to extrapolate from the indeterminacy of subatomic particles to such things as the freedom of the will. At the statistical level, large numbers of atoms behave lawfully. Boyle's law still obtains. If the will is free, it is no thanks to Heisenberg. As for chaos theory, it has been well described not as a repudiation of Newtonian determinism but as its enrichment. Accordingly, like Charles Peirce, I insist on the qualitative and irreducible difference between dyadic and triadic phenomena.

But if scientists, both "physical" scientists and "mental" scientists, can operate comfortably on both sides of the Cartesian split, what happens when the serious scientist is obliged to look straight down at the dysjuncture? That is to say, what is one to make of language, that apparently unique property of man, considered not as a formal structure but as a natural phenomenon? Where did it come from? What to make of it in anatomical, physiological, and evolutionary terms? The chasm must make one dizzy.

Not many psychologists or neuro-anatomists want to look down. Norman Gesswind is one who has. He points out that there are recently evolved structures in the human brain which have to do with speech and understanding speech, such as the inferior parietal lobule, which receives information from the "primary sensory projection systems," that is, the cerebral cortex which registers seeing and feeling water and hearing the word water. These are described as "association areas." But Charles Peirce would call such associations dyadic events, as he would "information processing systems" such as the computer. A computer, in fact, is the perfect dyadic machine.

What do biologists and anthropologists make of the emergence of language in the evolutionary scheme? The advantages of language in the process of natural selection are obvious. The psychologist Julian Jaynes would go further and say that "the language of men was involved with only one hemisphere in order to leave the other free for the language of gods." Maybe, but

setting aside for the moment "the language of gods," what goes on with the language of men? Jaynes doesn't say.

This is what Richard Leakey, the anthropologist, says, describing what happens in a human (not a chimp) when a human uses a word as a symbol, in naming or in a sentence: "Speech is controlled by a certain structure of the brain, located in the outer cerebral cortex. Wernicke's area of the brain pulls out appropriate words from the brain's filing system. The angular gyrus . . . selects the appropriate word."

Pulls out? Selects? These are transitive verbs with subjects and objects. The words are the objects. What is the subject? Draw me a picture of Wernicke's area pulling out a word or the angular gyrus selecting a word. Is there any way to understand this, other than supposing a tiny homunculus doing the pulling and selecting?

Then there is what is called speech-act theory of John Austin, John Searle, and others, promising because it studies the actual utterance of sentences. Thus Austin distinguishes between sentences which say something and sentences which do something. The sentence "I married her" is one kind of speech act, an assertion about an event. "I do," uttered during the wedding ceremony, is another kind, part of the performance of the ceremony itself. The classes of speech-act behavior have multiplied amid ongoing debate, but once again the emperor's little boy becomes curious. "Speech acts?" he asks. "What do you mean by acts? You never use the word acts in describing the behavior of other creatures." An act entails an actor, an agent who initiates the act. Draw me a picture of a speech act. Where, what, is this creature, the actor?

But how does Charles Sanders Peirce help us here? Are we any better off with Peirce's thirdness, his triadic theory, than we were with Descartes' *res cogitans* and *res extensa*?

Let me first say that I do not have the competence to speculate on the brain structures which may be implicated in triadic behavior. Nor would I wish to if I had the competence. Such a project is too uncomfortably close to Descartes's search for the seat of the soul, which I believe he lo-

THE WORLD OF THE SELF

THE STRANGE WORLD OF THE TRIADIC CREATURE

Note some odd things about the self's world. One is that it is not the same as the Cosmos-environment. The planet Venus may be a sign in the self's world as the evening star or the morning star, but the galaxy M31 may not be present at all. Another oddity is that the self's world contains things which have no counterpart in the Cosmos, such as centaurs, Big Foot, détente, World War I (which is past), World War III (which may not occur). Yet another odd thing is that the word *apple* which you utter is part of my world but is not a singular thing like an individual apple. It is in fact understandable only insofar as it conforms to a rule for uttering *apples*. But the oddest thing of all is your status in my world. You—Betty, Dick—are like other items in my world—cats, dogs, and apples. But you have a unique property. You are also co-namer, co-discoverer, co-sustainer of my world—whether you are Kafka whom I read or Betty who reads this. Without you—Franz, Betty—I would have no world.

From *Lost in the Cosmos*, by Walker Percy (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983).

cated in the pineal gland.

No, what is important to note about the triadic event is that it is there for all to see, that in fact it occurs hundreds of times daily—whenever we talk or listen to somebody talking—that its elements are open to inspection to everyone, including natural scientists, and that it cannot be reduced to a complexus of dyadic events. The chattering of an entire population of rhesus monkeys is so reducible, but the single utterance of a two-year-old child who points and says *that a flower* cannot be so understood, even though millions of

dyadic events also occur, light waves, excitation of nerve endings, electrical impulses in neurons, muscle contractions and so on.

Admitting that there is such a thing as an irreducible triadic event in language behavior, are there any considerable consequences for our anthropology, that is, for the view of man which comes as second nature to the educated denizen of modern society?

There are indeed. And they, the consequences, are startling indeed.

For once one concedes the reality of

the triadic event, one is brought face to face with the nature of its elements. A child points to a flower and says flower. One element of the event is the flower as perceived by sight and registered by the brain: blue, five-petaled, of a certain shape. Another is the spoken word flower, a gestalt of a peculiar little sequence of sounds of larynx vibrations, escape of air between lips and teeth and so on. But what is the entity at the apex of the triangle, that which links the other two? Peirce, a difficult, often obscure writer, called it by various names, interpretant, interpreter, judge. I have used the term coupler as a minimal designation of that which couples name and thing, subject and predicate, links them by the relation which we mean by the peculiar little word "is." It, the linking entity, was also called by Peirce "mind" and even "soul."

Here is the embarrassment and it cannot be gotten round, so it might as well be said right out: By whatever name one chooses to call it—interpretant, interpreter, coupler, whatever—it, the third element, is not material.

It is as real as a cabbage or a king or a neuron, but it is not material. No material structure of neurons, however complex, and however intimately it may be related to the triadic event, can itself assert anything. If you think it can, please draw me a picture of an assertion.

A material substance cannot name or assert a proposition.

The initiator of a speech act is an act-or, that is, an agent. The agent is not material.

Peirce's insistence on both the reality and nonmateriality of the third element is of critical importance to natural science because its claim to reality is grounded not in this or that theology or metaphysics but in empirical observation and the necessities of scientific logic.

Compare the rigor and clarity of Peirce's semiotic approach to the ancient mind/body problem to current conventional thinking about such matters. We know the sort of answer the psychologist or neurologist gives when we ask him what the mind is: that it is a property of brain circuitry and so on.

We now know, at least an increasing

number of people are beginning to know, that a different sort of reality lies at the heart of all uniquely human activity—speaking, listening, understanding, thinking, looking at a work of art—namely, Charles Peirce's triadacity. It cannot be gotten round and must sooner or later be confronted by natural science, for it is indeed a natural phenomenon. Indeed it may well turn out that consciousness itself is not a "thing," an entity, but an act, the triadic act by which we recognize reality through its symbolic vehicle.

But, finally, what can one say about this entity and event, the reality of which Charles Peirce demonstrated 100 years ago and which we ourselves encounter a hundred times a day?

To begin with, what to call it, this entity which *sympalleins*, throws together word and thing? As we have seen, Peirce used a number of words: interpreter, interpretant, asserter, mind, "I," ego, even soul. They may or may not be semantically accurate, but for the educated denizen of this age they suffer certain semantic impairments. "Interpretant" is too ambiguous, even for Peirce scholars. "Soul" carries too much furniture from the religious attic. "Ego" has a different malodor, smelling as it does of the old Cartesian split.

Then don't name it, for the present, but talk about it, like Lowell Thomas coming upon a strange creature in his travels, in this case a sure enough beast in the jungle.

There are certain minimal things one can say about it, this coupler, this apex of Peirce's triangle.

For one thing, it is there. It is located in time and space, but not as an organism. It has different parameters and variables.

For another, it is peculiarly and intimately involved with others of its kind so that, unlike the solitary biological organism, it is impossible to imagine its functioning without the other, another. All solitary organisms have instinctive responses, but Helen Keller had to receive the symbol water from Miss Sullivan before she became aware of the water. Peirce's triad is social by its very nature. As he put it, "Every assertion requires a speaker and a listener." The triadic creature is nothing if not social. Indeed he can be understood as a construct of his relations with others.

Here's another trait. It, this strange new creature, not only has an environment, as do all creatures. It has a world. Its world is the totality of that which is named. This is different from its environment. An environment has gaps. There are no gaps in a world. Nectar is part of the environment of a bee, cabbages and kings and Buicks are not. There are no gaps in the world of this new creature, because the gaps are called that, *gaps*, or *the unknown* or *out there*, or *don't know*.

For this creature, moreover, words, symbols and the things symbolized are subject to norms, something new in the world. They can be fresh and grow stale. They can be dull and everyday, then sharp as a diamond in the poet's usage.

It is possible here to do no more than call attention to the intriguing and, I think, quite felicitous way in which the properties of this strange triadic creature as arrived at by a scientist and logician 100 years ago, flow directly into the rather spectacular portrait of man by some well-known 20th-century philosophers who came at the same subject, *Homo symbolificus*, from the wholly different direction of European phenomenology.

I will mention only a couple.

There is Martin Heidegger who uses the word *Dasein* to describe him, the human creature, a being there. The *Dasein*, moreover, inhabits not only an *Umwelt*, an environment, but a *Welt*, a world.

Most important, this *Dasein*, unlike an organism, exists on an ethical axis. It can live "authentically" or "inauthentically." It is capable of *Verstehen*, true understanding, and *Rede*, authentic speech, which can deteriorate into *Neugier*, idle curiosity, and *Gerede*, gossip.

Gabriel Marcel and Martin Buber speak of the human being as radically dependent upon others, as an I-thou which can deteriorate into an I-it. Marcel de-

scribes the being of a human as a being-in-a-situation.

Sartre is less optimistic. His human being is a solitary consciousness existing in a dead world of things. As for the "other," Marcel's person, Buber's thou, Peirce's listener, Sartre says only that *L'Enfer, c'est les autres*. Hell is other people.

Finally, the *Dasein*, which has undergone a "fall," a *Verfallen* into an unauthentic existence, can recover itself, live authentically, become a seeker and wayfarer, what Marcel calls *Homo viator*.

The modern psychologist and social scientist cannot, of course, make heads or tails of such existentialist traits as "a falling into unauthenticity" or a sentence of Marcel's such as this: "It may be of my essence to be able to be not what I am." He, the scientist, generally regards such notions as fanciful or novelistic or "existentialist." But perhaps he, the scientist, lacks an appropriate scientific model. At any rate, it is possible that he, the modern scientist of man, will be obliged to take account of these fanciful notions, not by the existentialists but by their cold, hard-headed compatriot, Charles Peirce.

Here is a prophecy. All humanists, even novelists, are entitled to make prophecies. Here is mine. The behavioral scientist of the future will be able to make sense of the following sort of sentence which at present makes no sense to him whatever: There is a difference between the being-in-the-world of the scientist and the being-in-the-world of the layman.

And lastly, with this new anthropology in hand, Peirce's triadic creature with its named world, Heidegger's *Dasein* suffering a *Verfallen*, a fall, Gabriel Marcel's *Homo viator*, man as pilgrim, one might even explore its openness to such traditional Judeo-Christian notions as man falling prey to the worldliness of the world, and man as pilgrim seeking his salvation.

But that's a different story.