

Keith Jenkins
*Living in Time But Outside History, Living in Morality
But Outside Ethics*
Postmodernism and Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth

In those Sophist days before the 'start' of the Western Tradition, the suspicion that the finite and the contingent was all that there was; the idea that the phenomenal world was the only actual world; the understanding that the basis for living finite lives was the aleatory and the ludic, led to attitudes and theorisations expressed in varieties of ontological, epistemological and ethical relativisms *vis a vis* the significances and meanings conferred on the 'metaphysics of existence'. And why not? If from the 'facts' of the 'evidence' no non-contingent, absolute 'ought' unequivocally emerged, if individual and political life – past, present and future – seemed interpretable interminably (you can talk about politics forever...); if there seemed no rhyme nor reason to anything or anybody in themselves (indeed, if it was realised that the 'secret' of the essence of the 'thing in itself' was that there was no such essence) then no other viable conclusion seemed available other than a relativistic 'anything goes' coupled with the ultimate acceptance of the idea that 'might is right'. Consequently it is here, against these conclusions, that the Western Tradition begins; in the refusal, by Plato, to see sophist scepticism and relativism not as *solutions* to the problem of the finite, the contingent and the aleatory (a way to live with these actualities, to put your feet up and be relaxed about them) but rather as continuing *problems* (seen now precisely as 'the problems of scepticism and relativism') still to be solved. Accordingly, because sophists and, later and differently, pyrrhonists and other sceptical solutions for living life 'here and now' were not deemed to be solutions at all, so the finite world – whose anti-logic articulations Plato well recognised as providing no basis for anything other than various relativisms – had to be supplemented/supplanted by something 'beyond the reach of time and chance', an 'infinite fix' to bring temporary/temporal chaos into permanent and absolute order. Living in the shadows of Plato, the history of the Western Tradition has thus overwhelmingly been the history of various articulations of this apparently necessary, stabilising fantasy – this infinite fix – in the guise of eternal verities expressed either in the anglicised upper case (Forms, God, Essence, Nature, Human Nature, The Categorical Imperative, Spirit, Class Struggle, Dialectic, Market Forces, Reason, History...) and/or in older linguistic expressions all suggesting

immanence and centerings that had an invariable presence: *eidos, arche, telos, energeia ousia* etc., imaginaries all bearing down upon us wearing the insignia of Truth.¹

It is a curious fact, but a fact nevertheless, that such a variety of infinite fixes was not immediately regarded with widespread incredulity (as opposed to local, marginalised and shadowy scepticisms and relativisms – critiques overwhelmingly recuperated by the dominant tradition to be construed as its ever-threatening ‘other’). One might have thought that the very fact that, ‘historically speaking’, there have been so many expressions of such upper case demands, would have made people immediately consider such eternal imperatives as mere reified projections of their own interpretive (relative) desires and that to obey such chimeras was to chase themselves back into their own logically tautological and solipsistic lairs. But again, historically speaking, this fact – of one thing to be expressed but so many narrative/metanarrative expressions – seems only to have convinced adherents of them that, strange though it may seem, their own preferred interpretations were not really interpretations at all but *the* Truth. Thus we have witnessed – restricting ourselves now to fairly recent historical articulations of this ‘existential metaphysic’ though one very obviously based on much ‘older frames of mind’ – various foundational progressivisms, positivisms, Marxisms, Whiggism, Fascisms, etc., metanarrative fixes ultimately of the ‘ends justify the means’ type. To banish the finite and contingent and to turn such phenomena into some kind of demanding necessity, these formulations we have died for.

Contemporary postmodernism is a phase – however hesitatingly and qualifyingly specified as non-teleological, non-stagist, and as merely a ‘different’ moment/condition from and/or after modernity – postmodernism has finally, I think, ended the plausibility of such metanarratives. Today there seems to be everywhere that incredulity towards them which Lyotard famously essayed: few if any of us believe in such fantasies any more. Through the efforts of various linguistic, narrative, deconstructive and discursive turns, we now realise that there never has been, and there never will be, any ‘knowable’ forms, essences, natural natures, histories, etc., beyond contingency. That we will never have access to a founding originary, and hence to no inevitable destinations, teleological trajectories or dialectics of closure; that we have no conduit to any kind of extra-discursive transcendental signifier, full-presence or omniscient narrator/narrative. In fact, we postmodernists have now just about unpacked the imaginaries of the non-

1 J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Routledge, London 1978, p. 289.

relativist Western Tradition so that we are effectively 'back at the beginning': rhetorical neo-sophists. For we *post*-modernists are, in an interesting reversal, also *pre* Western Traditionalists, *pre* modernists. In a very precise way we are now *pre*-platonian, *pre*-christian, *pre*-kantian, *pre*-hegelian, *pre*-marxist, *pre*-market, *pre*-fascist, in the sense that these attempts to put us in touch with various foundations having failed, then we now have to face – at the end of the Western Tradition – the same existential/metaphysical problems the sophists faced before it began. Accordingly, we now have the chance to consider contemporary takes on sophist-type sceptical and relativistic *solutions* to the metaphysics of existence precisely as solutions and not at all as problems 'still to be solved' Such solutions to finiteness and the endless equivalences of anti-logic may not be the same type of solutions as Plato's or Kant's or Marx's or contemporary 'certaintists', but they are solutions nevertheless - and ones which the actuality of living in postmodernity is forcing upon us whether we like it or not.² These solutions suggest – at least to me – that we can now live *pre/post* modern lives in ways which have no need for any infinite fix to stabilise contingency and chance; no need for any upper case, metanarrative history (or lower case professional/academic histories – but that is another story)³ to stabilise time in a particular temporality, and no need for a capitalised Ethics – an Ethical System – to stabilise 'disinterestedly' the 'interested' tastes and styles of our own personal and public morality: that we can forget these sorts of history and ethics altogether.

To any remaining non-sophists, this may seem to be a rash move to make, but my thinking on the non-rashness of it might seem less reckless if I briefly reformulate some of what I have just said and so further prepare the ground for what all these preliminary remarks are actually leading up to; namely, an examination (expository much more than critical) of a text by Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth – *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time*⁴ – wherein she essays, in what I will argue is one of the most important considerations of postmodernism, history and ethics/morality available, what I construe as ways of living *in* time but *outside* history;

2 I am indebted to Peter Brickley for convincing me that relativism was the solution to, and not the problem of, existence and morality; also to Philip Jenkins whose various arguments on Baudrillard I have drawn on in passing.

3 See the Introduction to my *The Postmodernism History Reader*, Routledge, London 1997.

4 E. D. Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and The Crisis of Representational Time*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992. Rather than footnoting my references to Ermarth, I have inserted them paranthetically in the paper.

in morality but *outside* ethics. My reformulation of our current condition – my further stage setting for Ermarth – can be put as follows.

It still seems rather obvious and commonsensical to say that perhaps the main reason why historians study the past is because they think that what this work may produce – a historical consciousness – is a good thing. Yet beyond this minimalist intention common endeavour and agreement tend to collapse. For given that it is the idea of the good which defines the desired type of consciousness; that is to say, if a good historical consciousness is anything the definer so stipulates – which it is – then because ‘we’ live amongst so many competing notions of the good with no universally acceptable/neutral criteria for adjudication between them, so not only does any ultimate closure become endlessly deferred, but the very idea of a good historical consciousness is similarly affected: we now have no clear sense of what a good history/historical consciousness is. There are various contemporary reactions to this ‘relativist’ conclusion, but perhaps the most popular is not to try – and keep on trying – to find a ‘real’ history/historical consciousness beyond constitutive interests, but to admit one’s position (one’s interests) so to be as reflexive, ironic (apres, say, Richard Rorty) and as ‘open about one’s closures’ as one can be. Thus we witness increasingly historians quite openly flagging their positions – feminists and post-feminists, post-marxists, post-colonialists, neo-phenomenologists, neo-pragmatists, etc. – and, at the level of the lower case, umpteen ‘revisionists’. But my argument is that this positional explicitness is still ‘too historical’. For I think that we are now at a moment when we might forget history altogether and live our lives without reference back to a past tense articulated in ways which we are historically familiar with. Maybe we can forget the historicised past and – because we do still have to (temporarily) live together – just talk about that : ethics talk. And yet, this alternative may also be, in turn, too ethical. Why can’t we forget ethics too?

Here, in distinguishing ethics from morality, a little bit of arbitrary defining (there is no other) may be useful. For the problem with ethics is that normally we link up that notion with the idea of a system : an ethical system. Such an idea of an ethical system – say Kant’s – has, at its centre, the further notion of universalism; that is, an ethical system is one which, if universalised, would allow ethical judgements to be made about all and every contingent situation when one has to make a choice – when one has to decide what one *ought* to do. But such a total, transcendental system is an impossibility and, in the event that this should be held not to be so, actually not ethical anyway. For if there was such a thing as a total ethic so that in every situation one only had to apply it, then one would not be making a

choice at all but merely applying a rule – in which case the implementation of such a rule absolves the subject from actually making a decision. Consequently, there is no morality (choice) involved here, but just the application of a necessity. But if, as I am assuming, morality involves choice in such a way that a system of ‘ethical necessities’ would not be moral at all, then free choice, untrammelled by reference back to any ‘system’, would just have to be subjective, contingent, situationist, pragmatic, aleatory, and thus always ultimately unsystematizable and ungroundable, i.e., sophist-like. It is this situation, the situation where every moral choice is ultimately undecidable (the *aporia*) but where decisions always have to be made, which makes Derrida talk about the ‘madness of the decision’, Baudrillard the ‘radical illusion of morality’, Levinas the ontological violence inflicted on the other to make it the same, and Laclau talk about the ‘philosophy of the undecidability of the decision’.⁵ The upshot of all this – to cut a long story very short – is that we are now all left within an unbounded space-time, with nothing certainist to fall back on to underwrite our public/private self-styling, and with no fixed horizons (common skies) to guide us...with no ultimate ethical stabilisers...least of all any stabilisers we may have thought issued from a past constructed historiographically by us but in such a way so to render forth the illusion that that past/history was self-constituting so to help us live better lives, the (historicised) past as the great pedagogue, always teaching us ‘its’ lessons *as if* they were not always only our own projections. Consequently, that illusion now transparently obvious, so the suggestion that we ‘forget history and ethics’ for ‘temporality and morality’, postist/sophist-style, now forces itself upon us – or rather – we now force it upon ourselves.

As already suggested, Ermarth addresses both facets of the postmodern condition I have been discussing; to recall, the question of what would it be like to live *out* of history but *in* time; *out* of ethics but *in* morality. As I read her, I think that she is much more successful arguing for the former rather than the latter, where she seems to perhaps not fully recognise the problems or, if she does, to be insufficiently relativist about them, needlessly drawing back from where I take the logic of her argument to be driving her. But I return to this criticism after my reading of Ermarth’s text which, it must be reiterated, has a richness and suggestiveness which defies easy summary and which I urge readers to go to and appropriate for their own purposes, as I have done here. Relative to the above stage setting, then, my own take own on (just aspects of) Ermarth runs as follows.

5 See the various arguments of Rorty, Derrida, Lyotard, Laclau, et al, in C. Mouffe (ed.), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, Routledge, London 1996.

Let us stipulate, as *metaphysics*, the givenness of existence (the *gift* of the world, being) as something which just existentially *is* (I mean, we don't have a choice about unconditionally accepting these gifts). And let us say that this given, this thing-in-itself, is actually eternally unfathomable. Then let us stipulate *ontology* as the effort to bring this given within the closure of meaning, to very precisely try to make it fathomable and known (epistemological). Let us go on to say that this restriction, once on-going, then performs that constant (violent) appropriation by which we seek to enlarge our meanings until the metaphysical is exhausted and 'its' meaning reduced to 'ours'; its 'otherness' now 'corresponding' to the 'same': to us. Then let us say that, of course, this attempted closure can never fully occur; that what Bataille calls the 'general economy' of existence resists our most persistent cultural drives towards the production of meaning and the grounding of such meaning (the attempt to eliminate the *excess*) within our 'restrictive' productionist economy. And then let us recognise this struggle between the metaphysical and the ontological/epistemological – between the unrestricted (infinite) general economy and the restrictivist productive one – constitutes at one and the same time both the possibility of meaning and the guarantee that a full meaning (total presence, self-identity, etc.) is unachievable; that the gap between the thing-in-itself (the other, radical alterity etc.) and our theoretical appropriations of it remain, no matter how apparently close (d), infinitely and eternally apart...but that 'the rhetorical beat must go on, endlessly repeating the sequence by which the lure of solid ground is succeeded by the ensuing demystification.'⁶

Now, all this can be read as simply saying that, in a culture, 'nothing is of a natural kind.' Everything to be meaningful and productive has to be within the 'productivist economy', its excess cordoned off and kept on the outside (from there to haunt it...haunt it with the thought of its always imperfect closures), an economy which, to be communicable, is necessarily coded. Accordingly, to be in a culture is to live in and through a code, a language, to be within the (theoretical) imaginaries (metaphysical, ontological, epistemological) which constitute reality (the 'effects of the real') so that 'residence in a language' *is* residence in reality (the real *is* imaginary, the imaginary *is* real), this including, of course, that metaphysical imagining of what, theoretically outside of the productivist economy, the excess may be like (ie, the excess isn't any more 'really real' than the cultural inside, it's just a regulative idea, a potentially productive silence; another simulacra).

6 S. Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989, p. 493.

The imaginary which Ermarth is most interested in is the discursive production of Western time. We don't know what the stuff we call time actually is; time, to be 'time', always has to be timed (given temporality). And it is the peculiar way in which Western time has been timed in what Ermarth calls its modern, linear, historical form (which she traces back to at least as far as the Renaissance), the capsizal of that (arbitrary) form in 'postmodern times', and its replacement by a timing of time that is precisely not 'historical' but is rather conceived in feminist friendly, chaos friendly, hopscotch, figural, *rhythmic* timings, that is the concern of her text.

Ermarth is of the opinion that postmodernism has just about got all the imaginary formulations needed to end modern linear history and begin rhythmic time, and she's glad. For whereas modernist discourse has got used to its imagining of time so to regard it as 'real time' – has forgotten its inventedness (its temporal fix) so regarding it as a neutral, objective phenomenon – postmodernism urges us to recall that such a reality is always the 'mediated construct of a founding subject'; that time is a function of position. (p. 18) For Ermarth, 'objects', including phenomenal timings, are best seen not as 'objectively' there but rather as the 'subject objectified' or, better still, as the 'subject performatively objectifying' from specific enunciative locations (the '*locutions* of culture'), this latter construal giving impetus to the move away from a fixed Cartesian ego/subject in favour of a subject-in-process, performatively and playfully constituting then living within such constitutiveness whilst interminably unsettling such temporary shelters/residences seen now as old metaphors congealed into the appearances of literal truths and awaiting dissolution by new, more pragmatically useful ones ('the beat goes on...'), ones opening up – as Ermarth construes postmodern potentiality – erotic possibilities. These possibilities, not being within the restricted economy of linear history, thus effectively draw on the (metaphorical) resources of the general economy, the metaphysical excess, it being the (counter) penetration of that excess, imagined by Ermarth as feminist friendly, rhythmic time, into the male (phallogocentric) productivist historical economy, that potentially destabilises it, this explaining, not least, the opposition, fear and indeed intense hatred postmodernism often engenders amongst modernists/'historians'. For Ermarth, postmodern rhythmic critiques of modernist linear histories involve a critique of everything within the moribund productivist, modernist economy:

What postmodernism supplants, then, is the discourse of representation characteristic of the long and productive era that produced historical thinking... Across a broad range of cultural manifestations a massive re-examination of Western discourse is underway: its obsession

with power and knowledge, its constraint of language to primarily symbolic function, its ethic of winning, its categorical and dualistic modes of definition; its belief in the quantitative and objective, its linear time and individual subject, and above all its common media of exchange (time, space, money) which guarantee certain political and social systems... There are some who fear that postmodernism, by depreciating traditional causalities, portends an end to morality itself [Ethics] and the fear is not unfounded so far as traditional morality [Ethics] is concerned. (pp. 5-9).

Unlike so many postmodern historians, then, who, as I have noted already, see postmodernism as the beginning of new kinds of history (post-feminist, post-colonial, etc.) Ermarth isn't interested in interpreting the past 'rhythmically', rather she sees it as offering a present and a future without history 'as we know it' but with a new type of existential temporality. At times she is guarded about this, 'my intention', she writes, 'is not to lobby for postmodernism at the expense of history', but to locate 'a major discursive shift in our understanding of temporality and to explore some of its implications'. (p. 10) Again she writes: 'Whether or not it is meaningful to speak of a "new" history remains an open question, although the term "history" has become so saturated with dialectical value that it may no longer be very buoyant... I attend mainly to how postmodern narrative time works, what it offers, and what its implicit requirements, gains, and losses may be. The work that undermines history also opens new questions and provides new opportunities in practice.' (pp. 14-15). But these (unnecessary) qualifications noted – these bits of modernist nostalgia which will resurface in her hesitation over accepting the relativising logic of her position – on the whole Ermarth is up-beat:

My thesis in brief is this: postmodern narrative language undermines historical time and substitutes for it a new construction of temporality that I call rhythmic time. This rhythmic time either radically modifies or abandons altogether the dialectics, the teleology, the transcendence [the infinite fix] and the putative neutrality of historical time; and it replaces the Cartesian *cogito* with a different subjectivity whose manifesto might be Cortazar's "I swing, therefore I am." (p. 14).

Against this general thesis, then, Ermarth's text is composed of a series of densely elaborated arguments which, ironically, have the overall form of an old binary opposition. Ermarth's text is basically structured around the attempt to show (a) what is wrong with modern(ist) linear, phallogocentric *history* and (b) what is right with *rhythmic time* and what are its possibilities.

Ermarth's accusations against 'history' add up to a catalogue of faults that is heavy indeed. Modernist historical sequencing, patterning, rationalising and 'accounting for', converts chance into causality and, often,

into demanding necessities that justify sometime ends-mean scenarios of a totalising, totalitarian kind. Tamers of the contingent and the ludic, their (generally) narrative encased accounts function to make us feel at home in the existential givenness in the way that 'legends always have, as collective myths that confirm various primary "truths" about "the way things are"'. Belief in a temporal medium that is 'disinterestedly natural' and homogeneous consequently makes possible those mutually informative measurements between one historical moment and another that support most forms of knowledge so that 'History has become a commanding metanarrative, perhaps *the* metanarrative in Western discourse.' (p. 20) It is here, in narrative/metanarrative that the mythical figures of 'historical objectivity' and 'true meaning' appear, articulated typically through the disinterested narrator/omniscient narrator, 'the Narrator as Nobody', issuing forth the illusion of 'History Speaking'. This achievement – of naturalising the imaginaries of realistic time and space and of a commonly recognised set of continuities and of neutrality – enable 'us' to 'arrive at' our hypotheses, formulate our laws, produce our experiments, 'our capital and our knowledge', so producing 'an invariant world'. Here, any dissenting voices, any excessive interpretive play, are marginalised as pathological: it is only the 'accidents' of language, nationality, gender and ideology, that obscure 'objective truth' and a potentially 'cosmic vision'. These conditions notwithstanding, 'if each individual could see all the world...all would see the *same* world...in this, perhaps, temporal realism or history betrays its religious origin.' (p. 30). And this tendency to go cosmic, to universalise, is political:

Considered historically the present requires a future to complete or at least improve it, and consequently a dialectical method for getting there just as this same present has been produced dialectically by the past. By emphasising what is linear, developmental, and mediate, historical thinking by definition involves transcendence of a kind that trivialises the specific detail and finite moment. In the mobile culture of historicism every moment *has* to be partial so that we can pursue development, so we can seek a completion that, by definition and paradoxically, we can never actually find but that has emblems along the way: more information, more clarity, more money, more prestige, more of the constituents of heaven (p. 31).

And, of course, such destinations, heavily Western and heavily male orientated, have just about excluded nine-tenths of the world, a fraction which includes most women. Consequently it is this 'fact', the exclusion of this fraction from history, that makes Ermarth's discarding of history not only

one to be at ease with but a necessary one : 'Is it possible to exist *outside* history? [Yes] Women know; they have existed there'. (p. 17).

For those precisely excluded by the Western myth of history, postmodernism thus ushers in, in its potentially new timings, potentially new emancipations. Unlike historical emancipations – always then not now, always there not here – postmodern emancipatory imaginaries are 'presentist'. Thus postmodernism,

calls our attention *not* to fictions of origins and ends but to the process of consciousness itself as it constructs and deconstructs such fictions and, most importantly, as it enables readers to perform those new acts of attention required by a writing [and a practice...for to be in language is to be in 'reality'] that is going nowhere because it has already arrived. (p. 86).

As opposed to the heavy seriousness of history, then postmodern timings are altogether lighter and more bearable by comparison. Accordingly the bulk of Ermarth's text is taken up with the general possibilities of residing in a postmodern language/practice and, more particularly, of the possibilities for women: the benefits seem enormous.

As I read her, Ermarth's positive arguments start from the same sort of assumptions that I briefly alluded to in my preparatory remarks; namely, that the world (and the world gone by) is neither significant or absurd: it just *is*. We kid ourselves if we think that through our 'scripture, literature, picture, sculpture, agriculture, pisciculture, all the tures in this world', we've ever really got it taped. (p. 98). The world, the past, existence, remain utterly problematic, and exhilaratingly so : 'All our literature has not succeeded in eroding their smallest corner, in flattening their slightest curve.' (p. 97). For it is this sublime otherness which 'springs up before us' in those 'exciting moments of danger' when the covers are blown. The point here is not simply that this destroys habitual practices, the point is now to make 'a deliberate action of what has heretofore been automatic, a political agenda'. (p. 99). Such an agenda will retain its metaphorical status upfront; if we can never know literally what the world is 'in itself', then our appropriations of it are always metaphorical, rhetorical: the past *as if* it was history. Yet – and I return to Ermarth's failure to happily accept any metaphors – not any old imaginary will do for her. After clearing the decks, a specific agenda which on occasion *seems* to suggest that it is itself a necessity (given the way the world actually is) is outlined. Here is a bit more of the deck clearing:

The most subversive theory is the one that resists the habit of Western knowledge to totalise, to go for first and final cause. In Western epistemology, for example, the structure of induction and deduction... implies that theory must somehow be adequate to practice, or that

practice must conform to theory. The postmodern idea of theory as a guerrilla tactic - if you haven't got one make one up - flies in the face of this...centuries-old discursive habit. The practice of postmodern theory...requires a fine sense of play and a total willingness to live without discursive sleep... (p. 99).

So, what does playing guerilla with Ermarth theoretically entail; how does she carve out of an indifferent time a feminist friendly temporality? Put skeletally, I would portray Ermarth's near two-hundred page celebration in the following two or three page way.

Rhythmic time is her favourite trope. As opposed to modernist history/'tellable' time, rhythmic time has no time for transcendence : it has no essences, no universals, no immanence; no point. Rather rhythmic time – parataxis on the move – depends on local arrangements whose 'amplifications' are unpredictable. Rhythmic sequences fork and re-fork, ex-foliating, proliferating thematic threads which come to arbitrary ends, a chaotic coming together of 'details patterned paratactically, which is to say, asyntactically, which is to say meaninglessly'; details are unexpectedly complex and rich without becoming 'information'. This way of reading the world is essential equipment for a postmodern at ease with herself. Ermarth elaborates:

The...paratactic moves forward by moving sideways. Emphasising what is parallel and synchronically patterned rather than what is linear and progressive...Paratactic narrative [and lives] move...in several directions at once. (p. 85).

Such stylistic self-fashioning (to reside in a language is to reside in 'reality') offers new discursive practices, multi-level thinking which makes available multiple beginnings and endings; which pluralises perspectives, mixes and remixes, dubs and redubs those interpretive frames that subjects-in-process live through so as to make the past – including those causal powers which have blindly impressed thus far her behavings, bear her impress: to be free of the 'burden of history' is the aim: to be in control of her own discourse, to be a happy *cronopios* (p. 35) (Ermarth's text is dedicated 'to cronopios everywhere'), who, refusing histories of infinity and dialectics, face with joy finite lives. Postmodern time is thus cronopios time : it's performative, it's improvisation, it's individual and collective, it's bricolage, it's jazz. Forget the 'conditionings' of history; make the event.

Drawing on the semiotic dispositions of language (after Kristeva) and coupling it with Derrida's notion of the endlessly ludic character of language (and thus life...), Ermarth extols the possibilities of that play which, in its endless deferments, prevents systems ever becoming closed. It is this sort of

play that ruptures modernist history, dependent as it was/is on ontological axioms to keep the system secure and safe from the (feminine) excess:

Derrida's argument has the implications that *structure itself is referential* in the sense that it always depends for its stability on reference elsewhere to some justifying absolute that exists 'beyond' the structure and exceeds it. It is *this referentiality* to an Elsewhere - to a 'full presence'...that validates the structure and justifies its effort to achieve maximum rigidity or... completeness. By reference to something outside it... 'truth' or 'natural law' or 'reality' or ...'history' - structure depends on something...that limits absolutely its play of differentiation. However, to the extent that a structure limits play...it becomes 'ruined'...no new formulations, no new experiments or adventures are possible. By contrast, the incompleteness of living systems guarantees... play remains open...systems that seek to exclude play are also seeking death. (p. 148).

Ermarth is seeking life. Utilising the concept of the figure (*figura*) Ermarth hints at a future of play where meanings remain open. Events may be congruent but they don't necessarily connect, may be adjacent but not related, may be sequenced but are not synthesisable. Things just don't add up, they are not aggregatable; no dialectical closure is possible. Postmodern figures – temporary meanings in a chaos that makes such meanings self-referentially meaningful, makes unequivocal truths, meanings and purposes, non-permanent:

This disorientation for its own sake is very unlike the effect of medieval *figura*, which makes truth only temporarily inaccessible...Postmodern *figure* makes univocal truth permanently inaccessible. On the 'other side' of a medieval figure is a clarifiable structure and a stable, cosmic meaning. On the 'other side' of postmodern figures is the marvellous mystery consisting of the fact that these figures *are* the tangible world, and that the tangible word is discourse, is language, is figure...There are no messages...only messengers. (p. 184).

It is this endless play of a 'meaningful meaninglessness' – being on the edge of the abyss but not regarding this as abysmal - that arouses eroticism. Not, Ermarth hastens to add, eroticism in the 'narrow, shabby sense', but in the sense of having the capacity to surprise – forever. This is subversive. In a productive culture which lives in the linear, the purposeful, then play conjures up notions of waste : of wasting time, squandering, of time mispent. Digressive, paratactic play defying dialectics, however, confers for Ermarth 'an exquisite pleasure by relieving the mind of its already recognisable...meanings...To restore to language its electricity...its power to shock, to derail it from the track of conventional formulas', is to be postmodern. This isn't easy. It involves a capability for the kinds of play 'not currently

primary values of the cultural formation in which we presently operate our universities, watch our markets, and pursue our careers.’ But it can be done: ‘Once we have given up antidotes to finitude – Kantian categories and vodka – we face finitude and its opportunities.’ (p. 193).

This challenge to history, to the closure of systems, to live a life that is alive rather than a living death, this is what makes rhythmic, ludic time, the future Ermarth wants : for this you can forget history and (I think) systems *per se* - including Ethical ones:

This maneuver of imagination in play in language [in a life] is one that does without history, without a millenary kingdom, without Kantian categories or vodka, without Marx, Freud, or ‘all the religions dreamt up by man’...In their place this postmodern writing [living] offers its precision, its erotic (chance) conjunctions, its rhythmic series : the coloured bits or elements of kaleidoscopic arrangements, and whatever patterns emerge. These are the materials for the anthematic figure, a mandala, a polychromous rose design, a rhythmic, momentary, fleeting, life-affirming arrangement. Trying to give these arrangement fixity, or to control this rhythm in advance, would be like trying to redirect the arrow after it has left the bow. (p. 210).

This essaying of existential-type, postmodern possibilities *after the end of history* seems exhilarating; if nothing else Ermarth’s optimism displaces those more common, mournful musings on the loss of one of the West’s most potent, organising mythologisations – history – articulated not least by those who have most to lose. It may therefore appear churlish to now level against Ermarth’s ‘visions’ some concluding criticisms, thereby remaining trapped within the ritualistic (modernist) convention of the expositor turning critic as he or she – having lived parasitically off the text – has the ‘correcting’ last word. But I ‘intend’ my criticisms to be constructive. It seems to me that Ermarth succeeds in her critique of modernity’s way of organising temporality – linear history – such that it is indeed possible to conceive of a life without it; to live *outside* that history and *within* a new rhymic temporality where ‘history as we have known it’ has no more relevance; is *passé*. This signals the end of history as modernists have conceptualised the past and thought they had ‘known it’. But - and this is my ‘but’ – I think that it is also possible to live *outside* of Ethics (Ethical systems) and *in* the type of morality suggested by Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Rorty, Fish *et al*; namely, that of the ‘undecidability of the decision’, the force of which suggests the acceptance of a pragmatic, sophist-type relativism. For I think that Ermarth, despite the drift of her argument, draws back from this; in the end her notion of rhythmic time has the ring of truth about it.

At various points throughout her text, then, Ermarth draws back from embracing the relativism which I think her arguments propel her towards. Thus, for example, whilst insisting that there is nothing outside of language (the text, simulacra) such that 'nothing exceeds its practices or its play, nothing escapes its limitations, nothing acts as a cosmic or natural "ground" and justification' including, obviously, the linguistically constructed concept of time (including, obviously, rhythmic temporality) this fact, she adds, this recognition, 'is quite far removed from any relativist catastrophe'. (p. 140) Again, in relation to the historicised past, whilst the idea that the past is invented 'threatens the moral universe with total solipsism', the reader/writer of the past, no more than the reader/writer of any text, cannot do what he/she likes with it; in fact, its existence demands a 'disciplined' reading/writing because it – texts and the past as a text – 'requires new acts of attention.' (pp. 71-2) Postmodernism, whatever else it is, she warns, is not some sort of cultural and moral bonfire.

Now, one of the reasons why Ermarth seems to be saying these things is something which suggest that she is still within the grip of the Western Tradition where relativism is seen – and this goes back to my comments at the start of this paper – not as the sophist-like solution to the problems of living in an indifferent world, but as a problem still to be solved (hence her comment, above, wherein relativism is seen not as a happy solution but rather as a 'catastrophe'). What Ermarth seems to be seeking is a nice consensus around the erotic possibilities of postmodernism (basically one where everyone imagines reality as she does) for without 'consensus available as a basis for conducting affairs, what is there but force?' (p. 61). This is a fear which has standing behind it that typical 'modernist' objection to postmodern relativism; namely, that such a relativism leaves us helpless before another holocaust:

Practically speaking, the debates about postmodernism come down to discussion about what, if anything, provides a reality principle for any construct. Postmodern writers and theorists do not deny the existence of the material world...nor, so far as I know, does anyone familiar with the issue seriously deny the exclusiveness of discursive languages to which we necessarily resort in order to say anything 'about' either the material or the discursive worlds - statements that inevitably are interpretations and, consequently, a pre-interpretation of an apriori formulation. But if discursive rules provide untranscendable constraints, what constrains the discursive rules? The question is haunted by the specters of holocausts which, in various national forms, have already demonstrated what appears to be no restraint. If anything can be justified in some Name, is there no way to choose between justifications? If every interpretation, every system, every set of laws is

a closed, inertial system and if there is no longer validity for any privileged position...how can a person or polis choose between....this or that course except by chance? (p. 59).

Well, chance may, Ermarth allows, have much to do with it, and she will go on to consider surrealist pronouncements in favour of 'objective chance' (basically choosing between things once such things have been put 'under a description'), but, leaving that aside in this paper (as Ermarth herself does at this point in her text) I want to concentrate, as she does, as to whether there are any general grounds for constraint. Here, Ermarth reviews and rejects 'answers' given by, variously, Rorty, Jameson, Lyotard, Katherine Hayes and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, the reason for their failure seeming to lie in the fact that they don't comprehend the way postmodernism has changed our understanding of 'reality'; like the concept of history, 'reality' doesn't mean what it used to. Classically, explains Ermarth, reality implied something stable and self-identical, but 'physical reality' (which non-idealist postmodernists do not doubt) has been redescribed in postmodern idioms by people like Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, whose treatment of reality as 'chaos as a phase of order' means 'reality' is in a 'constant process of fundamental redefinition, so that the term "fundamental" does not even really apply.' (p. 62) Consequently, to give up on 'classical' reality does not mean we give up on postmodern 'chaotic' notions of reality as things which *actually* constrain us :

The fears of moral catastrophe that postmodernism raises in some are usually posited on classical assumptions...[But] nobody denies the presence of conditions external to our descriptive and linguistic systems, nobody hopes for complete solipsism of the kind that some ascribe, completely wrongheadedly, to postmodernism and that would in any case only be possible in a classical system...To give up the 'reality' or 'realities' that constrain behaviour and inscribe value does not mean anarchic [sic] relativism in which 'everything is permitted' and brute power rules...The failure of a totalising absolute like historical time may raise the fear [sic] that 'everything is permitted' but...there is no such thing [as that]. (p. 62).

Rather, the chaos theory and the 'dissipative structures' described by Prigogine and Stengers introduce us to a 'new concept of matter' that suggest a 'new conception of order that is independent of the closures and finalities of classical dynamics and that permit us to see how "*nonequilibrium brings order out of chaos*".' (p. 63) Thus, for example, the element of chance in a stochastic (probabilistic) process – where an 'end' becomes the possibility of a new 'beginning' which is not controlled in the classical sense by that 'end' – opens up new sources of life, new rhythms of continuance in ever-

new states and modes: 'The more determinist laws appear limited, the more open the universe is to fluctuation and innovation.' (p. 63). Without wanting, as Ermarth puts it, to draw 'facile political analogies' from Prigogine and Stenger, this is what she does indeed go on to draw. In a probabalistic process, she argues, things must be considered in the context of the moment when individual behaviour can be decisive or ineffectual but not predictable:

Even small fluctuations may grow and change the overall structure. As a result individual activity is not doomed to insignificance. On the other hand, this is also a threat [sic] since in our universe the security of stable, permanent rules seems gone forever. What social (that is, moral) implications this may have remains to be seen, but it is not clear that there is any greater threat of moral catastrophe [sic] in probabalistic social descriptions than has already been shown in logocentric ones. (p. 65).

Postmodernism thus acknowledges not single but multiple constraints; postmodern time and space are warped and finite by 'the play of chance and necessity in the processes of life themselves...' "Reality" ...never stays "the same"; it is not inert but interactive... This awareness of finitude, of limit, is the basis of an entirely new aesthetic and provides the main restraint on construction that postmodernism respects'. (pp. 65-6).

Now, this seems to me to be a most peculiar argument. One can see why Ermarth is running it, of course, probabalistic/chaos theory seems to be another way of talking about rhythmic time. But whilst this certainly undercuts 'classical' moral foundations (ie the 'chance' to draw a stable *ought* from a stable *is*) we Rorties and Lyotards have given up on trying to draw any entailed ought from any is, stable or unstable. I mean, let us say the 'actual' physical world is like Ermarth's (moral) rhythmic description of it apres Prigogine and Stenger. And say everyone accepts this : liberals, marxists, feminists, neo-nazis; everyone. What difference would it make? Is a political, constrained consensus between Ermarth and neo-nazis going to be arrived at because the way an (indifferent) world is in terms of physics? This seems unlikely, not least because, irrespective of physics, their moral differences remain incommensurable simply because they're 'moral' all the way down. Whilst views on the physical world may by chance affect politics it is difficult to see how they can determine them in any sort of is - ought way that involves entailment : Prigogine and Stengers are red herrings in this respect.

There is another point here too with regard to closure. For it looks as if Ermarth, in following Prigogine and Stengers, is saying that chaos theory/ rhythmic time are somehow closer to the way 'reality' actually is than other metaphoric 'correspondences' are. But surely she can't be saying that.

Because if she is, her notion of rhythmic time as being nearer to actuality and therefore the best (true) basis for a life better than old modernist, historical life, is just as much a closure, albeit of a different substantive 'content', as the historical was. I mean, what if we don't want to embrace rhythmic time even if it can be shown to be nearer to actuality, to 'nature'; what if we don't want to embrace a 'naturalistic fallacy' but want to retain our freedom to choose; to choose, say, a newly constructed, emancipatory linearity? If Ermarth is being faithful to her own creative theorising, then presumably she ought not to *care* if anybody chooses to live non-rhythmically in non feminist-friendly ways. Or is she saying that we ought to be rhythmic because linear time is somehow *intrinsically* repressive, *intrinsically* masculine; that rhythmic time is *intrinsically* feminist friendly, and that these connections cannot be reversed; that rhythmic time just cannot be repressive in its experimentations, as if from the activity of postmodern 'play' we couldn't all end up temporarily playing neo-nazi? But what could stop this? Something *intrinsic* to 'play'? It would seem that here Ermarth is simply substituting one closure (linear history) with another (rhythmic time) which we ought to follow because it is nearer actuality and thus, presumably, nearer to actualising emancipation.

To be sure, Ermarth says she isn't doing this. As she writes at the end of her text (repeating earlier, similar disclaimers), the 'multilevel play described in this book belongs to an effort to renew social codes by restoring powers that have been repressed...not... to enforce another repression'. (p. 212). But I think that she can only say this because she *knows* what is best for us and knows we won't necessarily feel it as repression. Thus, for instance, seeing human beings as subjects-in-process just is a better way of seeing them as opposed to seeing them in terms of the Cartesian *cogito*; thus, postmodernism and feminism have an affinity because of their joint insistence that the chief political problems (of language...to have residence in a language is to have residence in 'reality') can 'only [sic] be solved by writing a new language, one uncontaminated by the old, radioactive terms, so that one thing 'seems *certain*: no effort to come to terms with social agendas will succeed without the recognition that history itself is a representational construction of the first order, and that new social construction cannot [sic] take place until history is denaturalised'. (p. 56). These seem fairly certainist, non-relativistic remarks to me, thus raising the question of how reflexive Ermarth has been about the status of the closures she is suggesting for others; I mean, for a linearist to be trapped in rhythmic time could be a nightmare. But maybe Ermarth has thought of that; she admits a revision of existing hegemonic arrangements of the type she is suggesting may hurt.

So alright. But arguably what isn't alright is where she seems to forget that such new arrangements are nothing more than her own personal preferences, ungroundable in either chaos theory or ethics in any way whatsoever.

The reason for me saying this is because I think that this sort of personal relativism is the only position postmodernism makes available. This way of putting things may make it look as if I'm committing a 'performative contradiction' (of saying that you must absolutely believe me when I say that the only truth is relativism which then appears to be an absolute truth, etc.) but I think this old 'contradiction' is not a contradiction at all but a paradox and paradoxes, unlike contradictions, can be resolved. This particular one as of follows.

In the restricted, modernist economy, it seemed that symbolic value was based on use value, that there really were real intrinsic needs, capacities, meanings and so on, and these stabilized symbolic exchange mechanisms. In the postmodern (restricted) economy, however, having shed every last notion of intrinsic value (*use* value) exchange takes place at the symbolic level only - at the level of the simulacra. Thus, unrestricted by use/intrinsic value, any symbolic value can be exchanged with any other, in effect, 'anything goes'. Any-thing can be exchanged with any-thing else because things themselves (and certainly 'things - in - themselves') quite 'literally' don't enter into it; any equivalence will do. So, for example, you can, if you like, exchange love and justice for Ermarthian feminism (make them equivalent) or, staying with her allusion to the holocaust, exchange love and justice for it (make them equivalent). Again, rhythmic time is equivalent to a type of liberation for Ermarth which for a non-Ermarthian might be equivalent to, as she puts it, a catastrophe. So which is it? Well, 'it' isn't either; 'it' isn't anything until it is given a value, and any value can be given to anything. We may wish that this was not the case, but it seems to me that it is.

From my point of view, then, I think it could be said that the transcendent has taken its revenge on Ermarth. On the one hand it has allowed her to have her way with history - who knows or cares what it means any more - letting her concentrate on organising the future in desirable, rhythmic forms. But, on the other hand, Ermarth seems to have been seduced into thinking that there could be something in rhythmic time that isn't just convenient for her own political desires but is actually closer to the way the world actually is, thus heading off relativism. But the idea 'behind' the notion of simulacra that we can know the gift of the world, etc., beyond endlessly interpretable mediations, is a radical illusion. A simulacra is not something which conceals the truth, it is the most plausible truth we have. Indeed, it is this 'truth'

which hides the fact that there is no truth, so that in that sense we can say, paradoxically, that the simulacra is 'true'. In *The Perfect Crime*⁷, Baudrillard argues that whereas the old philosophical question used to be, 'why is there something rather than nothing?', the postmodern question is, 'why is there nothing rather than something?' The acceptance of the latter formulation suggests to Baudrillard (and to me) that if we are bound only to the interminably unstable equivalencies of signs and appearances self-reverentially spinning around themselves (Baudrillard's 'orbital culture') then relative value runs - forever. Yet, this is not a problem. For maybe we can relax about this and agree, with Wittgenstein, that the fact that there has never been the sorts of foundations we once thought there were (but that we humans have still created moral discourses) means that we never needed such foundations in the first place, nor will we, so that the very idea of foundationalism is 'one well lost'. Besides, that absolutist conceit has caused too many problems – not least those of the certainist holocaust, that supreme *modernist* event.⁸ For as Richard Rorty has pointed out:

Anti-pragmatists [and anti-postmodernists and anti-relativists] fool themselves when they think that by insisting...that moral truths are 'objective' - are true independent of human needs, interests, history - they have provided us with weapons against the bad guys. For the fascists can, and often do, reply that they entirely agree that moral truth is objective, eternal and universal... and fascist...Dewey made much of a fact that traditional notions of 'objectivity' and 'universality' were useful to the bad guys, and he had a point.⁹

This is not to say, Rorty adds, that this inability to answer 'the bad guys', is the result of pragmatism or relativism being wicked or inadequate theories, but that philosophy is just not the right weapon to reach for when trying to resolve, when all discursive attempts have failed, such moral and political differences. Thus, the inevitability of moral 'philosophy of the decision' relativism needn't be any more of a problem for us that it was for the sophists, and it shouldn't be one for Ermarth. But I think it is. Yet, though arguably 'still in the grip of the tradition', Ermarth's text is nevertheless one which enables us to imagine the possibility of living our lives not only *outside* history and *in* time, but *outside* ethics and *in* morality in quite self-conscious ways. *For in fact, if only we had known it, this is the way we have always had to live our*

7 J. Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, Verso, London 1996, p. 2.

8 On the holocaust as a modernist event, and the problem of its representation see, for example, Hayden White's, 'The Modernist Event', in V. Sobchack (ed.), *The Persistence of History*, Routledge, London 1996, pp. 17-38.

9 R. Rorty, 'Just One More Species Doing Its Best', *London Review of Books*, vol. 13, no. 14, 25, July, 1991, pp. 3-7, p. 6.

lives. In this respect - and it is in this respect that postmodern reflexivity is so useful - we might just as well relax and say, with Baudrillard: “Nothing” hasn’t changed.’