

# “Even Better than the Real Thing”? Postmodernity, the Triumph of the Simulacra, and U2

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Bono famously declared that U2 entered its “postmodern” phase with their 1991 album *Achtung Baby*. *Achtung*, of course, standardly translates as a command for “Attention!”—but it also literally connotes “respect” or “care” (for that to which one should have been moved to “attend” in the first place)—and in what follows I shall suggest how attending to and thinking carefully about some of the philosophical ideas and themes underlying U2’s work from the “postmodern” period that begins with *Achtung Baby* can cast a mutually illuminating light on both U2 and “postmodernity.”

## In Search of Postmodernity

What, then, does it mean to be *postmodern*? That’s not intended to be a trick question, but it may sound like one (at least to those “already in the know”), because the very idea that we should be able to specify *the* meaning of a philosophical concept is a characteristically *modern* assumption, that is, just the sort of assumption *postmodernists* seek to get *beyond*. The modern pursuit of *unambiguous* precision proved to be stunningly successful for the mathematical sciences, which extended and so reinforced modernity’s defining project of gaining control over the objective world through knowledge, *via* the Copernican revolution in which, rather than observe the way nature behaves independently of us, we “strap nature to the rack and force her to yield up her secrets”—and Bacon’s

notoriously misogynistic formulations of the modern project look, in retrospect, rather revealing.

For this “phallogocentric” modern project of “Tryin’ to throw your arms around the world” (and so also “trying to throw his arms around a girl,” a variation U2 nicely employs in the ninth song on *Achtung Baby*) continues to generate undeniable technological and medical advances, along with equally undeniable and unwanted side-effects (such as environmental devastation and the innumerable other inhumanities generated by the rapacious struggle to control and profit from this knowledge over nature) and real dangers (from the slow erosion of our sense of the meaningfulness of life to more dramatic threats of looming global catastrophe, whether nuclear, environmental, biogenetic, or even nanotechnological).

Our increasingly exact calculations allowed us to extend our technical mastery of the natural world so far that, to mention just two (not unrelated) examples, we have been able to construct buildings and planes that do not fall from the sky (without sufficient provocation) as well as an unmatched military-industrial arsenal capable of enforcing our supposed geopolitical dominance (which, in turn, provides our newest *others* with the “sufficient provocation” mentioned earlier . . .).<sup>1</sup> What such connections suggest is that even the best efforts of our modern mathematical sciences have not been able to master the natural world without generating *rebound effects*, in which the very world we seek to master at least partly escapes and then returns with a vengeance. We see these rebound (or “blowback”) effects all around us, in our political headlines as well as in the mounting environment crisis more or less systematically excluded from these same headlines.

Seeking to draw our heads outside the lines that usually corral our thinking, postmodern theorists sometimes describe these effects as *the revenge of the real*, a scenario in which (as with those symptoms Freud called *the return of the repressed*) we are revisited by destructive effects ultimately attributable to our very

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<sup>1</sup> This arsenal also reminds us of the other sense of U2’s “Tryin’ to throw your *arms* [my emphasis] around the world.” Moreover, the fact that this supposed geopolitical dominance did not actually protect our planes and buildings (or the people within them!) raises the question of what, if anything, such dominance does protect, other than the most avaricious and destructive economic interests.

efforts to control, suppress, deny, or exclude in the first place. In response, postmodernists generally seek to isolate and overturn those usually unnoticed modern assumptions that function both to devastate our world and to pre-emptively neutralize our critiques of this destruction (rendering these critiques as ineffectual as protestors confined to pre-designated “protest sites”).

### Fantasies of Control

Surprisingly, however, some avowedly “postmodern” scientists (of which there are more than a few) seem to believe that the best way to eliminate such devastating rebound effects is to *master nature still more precisely*, for example, by employing non-monotonic logics that do not presume bivalence, using fractal models capable of predicting the behavior of extremely complex systems, and so on—in short, by giving us *more* precise mechanisms of control, *more* finely-grained conceptual mappings of the real, *better* predictive hypotheses, calibrated with such complex precision that, finally, nothing will exceed our grasp, our “arms” (conceptual and military—a fortuitous ambiguity nicely suggested by U2) thrown entirely “around the world.” This sounds like a prescription for a more intense dosage of the very radiation that made us sick in the first place, but it is not immediately clear what other rational alternatives remain open to us, since our modern obsession with prediction and control seems to have painted us into a conceptual corner in which all we can think of that might help involves more prediction and control—as if we could get our *addiction to control* under control if we just had a bit *more* self-control.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> And yet is it so obvious that we cannot do so? What is meditation, for example, if not a proven path whereby one may control one’s way beyond control? The paradox, in Heideggerian terms, is that the subject must *decide* to learn *Gelassenheit*, the “release-ment” or “letting be” that helps us transcend the “subjectivism” of modernity’s subject-centered worldview by recognizing that the great sophist Protagoras was wrong: Humanity is not the measure of all things, and then helping us realize that we can be healed by experiencing our connection to a greater whole, a reality that transcends us and to which we belong, part to whole, organisms in an holistically interconnected environment. The holy, Heidegger suggests (and I shall develop this suggestion below), is whatever allows us to experience this connection to the whole that heals us and restores our health. For the crucial Heideggerian background to the ongoing renaissance of post-modern religious thinking, see my *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

The very persistence of such fantasies of control, moreover, suggests that, however disastrous some of the consequences of modernity's drive toward total control are proving to be, the source of this drive is to be found in the intrinsically limited nature of our own cognitive capacities and, indeed, in the generally laudable resistance to all such limits—a resistance sometimes called *freedom*, or even *life*, forces it makes little sense to stand *against* (especially because the struggle whereby we finite beings seek to achieve the impossible has also helped generate our most cherished scientific, medical, and technological advances, many of which we do not want to forfeit). So, if modernity has painted us into this conceptual corner historically, how might we go about getting out of it? That is one way of asking the *question* of *postmodernity*.

In a brilliant analysis of September 11th, Derrida describes the way “repression in both its psychoanalytic sense and in its political sense—whether it be through the police, the military, or the economy—ends up producing, reproducing, and regenerating the very thing it seeks to disarm.” (Does not U2, whose own work emerged internationally as a reflection on terrorism—remember “Sunday, Bloody Sunday”—draw our attention to the same problem in “Peace on Earth,” for example, when Bono warns that “Where I grew up there weren't many trees / Where there was we'd tear them down / And use them on our enemies / They say that what you mock / Will surely overtake you / And you become a monster / So the monster will not break you / And it's already gone too far”?).

Theorizing such effects in terms of the logic of *autoimmunity*, in which the forces in us that seek to *keep out the other* grow so excessive that they begin to destroy the health of the system they are supposed to protect, Derrida calls for an “immuno-depressant” response by which we would seek to “limit the mechanisms of rejection and to facilitate toleration.”<sup>3</sup> Derrida articulated an earlier version of this strategic response in terms of what he rather cleverly called “hauntology” (the logic of *being* haunted), suggesting that we must accept the fact that

every concept “is in advance contaminated, that is, pre-occupied, inhabited, haunted by its other” and so stop attempting the various exorcisms that in fact animate these specters and give them a stage on which to appear. Instead, Derrida liked to say, we should transform such *ghosts* into *guests* by offering our others our hospitality.<sup>4</sup> (U2 evokes the rebound effect in a particularly haunting way in “Until the End of the World” when Bono sings: “In my dream I was drowning my sorrows / But my sorrows they learned to swim,” and here Bono even seems to recommend the same response as Derrida, describing the peace-making gesture in which: “I reached out for the one I tried to destroy.”)

Following Derrida (and so Heidegger, who Derrida himself mostly follows), many postmodernists call for us to resist extending the demand for unambiguous precision typical of modern mathematical science into the domain of ordinary human life. (The ironic lines of “Zooropa” similarly caution against the unthinking techno-capitalist extension of modern fantasies of control: “Zooropa . . . better by design / . . . / Through appliance of science / We've got that ring of confidence,” and U2 seems to offer comparable advice in “Zoo Station,” advocating being “Ready for the shuffle / Ready for the deal / Ready to let go of the steering wheel.”) Hence, instead of embracing the modern drive toward control through unambiguous mathematical precision, most postmodernists echo the neo-Heideggerian call for us to learn to develop, in our own lives, a sensitivity to poetic *polysemy*, that is, an attunement to the experience of *multiple simultaneous meanings* known to all careful readers of poetry (and probably experienced by aficionados of all the other *poetic* arts, all the divine arts of “making” which, like God, bring new things into existence).

If our modern bridges are going to stay up, a steel girder must *either* be capable of bearing a certain weight *or* not. For a poem to really work, however, it need not mean *either* one thing *or* another, indeed, quite the opposite. (I shall show in the

<sup>3</sup> See Giovanna Borradori, ed., *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 99, 188 note 7.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida seems to thus articulate what is in effect an unreachable regulative ideal, although that is a conclusion he himself resisted (believing that only the concrete realization of such unconditional “hospitality” is genuinely deserving of the name). See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 160.

conclusion that this is the case with U2's "Even Better than the Real Thing," but let us begin with a more traditional example of poetry.) The real, true, or genuine meaning of E.E. Cummings's "if you are glad / whatever's living will yourself become" is not that when we feel "glad" (that is, happy, willing, bright, *and* cheerful), *either* (A) we find ourselves identifying with whatever is most alive, *or* (B) we become attuned to the inner vitality of life, *or* (C) we identify our own wills with what enlivens rather than with what enervates in all that is, and so become willing agents actualizing the vitality of all that lives, *or* (D) we attune ourselves to the vital force within all things, including ourselves, and so actualize that life within us that allows us to grow along with all other living things.<sup>5</sup> An attunement to poetic polysemy suggests that, where poetry or the subtle density of everyday life are concerned, the question, *What does it really mean?* will not be answered with *either* A, B, C, *or* D but, rather, with *All of the above (and more)*.

### Postmodern Polysemy

If this is true of a single line within a poem, how much more true will it be of the poem itself as a whole, let alone of the poet's entire poetic *oeuvre*? (Or of the relation of that *oeuvre* to its world, and ours?) And if it is also true of my experience of a single leaf falling through the sunlit morning onto the path before me, or a remark you utter that changes me in some indefinable yet irrevocable way, or the look on the face of a stranger I have not quite forgotten, each a single moment of a single day, how much more true will it be of the life in which those moments resonate together? (And of all the other lives that I, in turn, impact and subtly realign?) This exuberant insight, that mere existence is unspeakably deep, that meaning is inexhaustible, that "every atom of sunlight is a chance of blossoming fruit" (as Baudelaire wrote), seems to me to be one of the postmodern insights *par excellence*, and an insight in which we can recognize the postmodernists' neo-romantic refusal of the modern scientific rejection of romanticism, and so discern the pre-modern roots of postmodernism. The exuberance that

<sup>5</sup> See e.e. cummings, *Collected Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923), "New Poems," #315.

accompanies this insight is perhaps also the source of the postmodern movement's visionary fervor and hence its occasional, undeniable, evangelical excesses.

And yet, the minute we begin to imagine that we have placed our fingers on the living pulse of *the* postmodern, do we not risk betraying the polysemy of the very concept of *postmodernity*, as if mistakenly believing that the postmodern impulse could itself be defined and measured more or less precisely and unambiguously along a single axis of meaning? Or, to make the same point in another way (and so also note the first of several apparent *paradoxes of reflexivity* haunting the postmodern project): If postmodernity should be defined by its call for a sensitivity to polysemy, then presumably we should also understand postmodernity itself polysemically, as possessing *multiple meanings*, which would mean that postmodernity should mean *more* than just the call for polysemy—and, in fact, it does. Ironically, the postmodern is even in danger of meaning too much.

For we now use the adjective "postmodern" to describe not just philosophical ideas but the vast array of cultural "texts" embodying these ideas, texts found all along that increasingly obsolete continuum spanning "high" and "low" art, a distinction postmodernity nicely undermines by lavishing its theoretical attentions on objects previous generations rarely stooped to examine. As evidenced by this book and others like it, a new generation of "highbrow lowbrows" mobilize postmodern insights and theories to analyze everything from television ("Lost is the postmodern *Gilligan's Island*"), to comic books ("Alan Moore's *Watchmen* is a masterpiece of postmodern literature"), to Hollywood movies ("Quentin Tarantino's combination of non-linear narrative and pulp sensibility gives his films their postmodern texture"), to pop music ("U2 entered its postmodern phase with *Achtung Baby* and celebrated it with the *Zooropa* tour"—a claim to which we will soon return), to conceptual art ("There seems to be a mutual affinity between U2 and the postmodern artists Jeff Koons and Cindy Sherman"), to philosophy ("Baudrillard may be the greatest of the avowedly postmodern philosophers, but Lyotard is probably the most influential"), and even to religion ("Postmodern theologians heatedly debate whether God is humanity, non-appearance, or absence, but postmodern Christians could simply insist that *God is love*").

Thus, if one tries to infer the meaning of postmodernism by induction from the disparate uses of term one overhears (even in the circles of the learned), one may begin to fear that the concept of the "postmodern" has become so saturated with different meanings that it risks collapsing under the weight of their competing pulls and so fracturing into a disordered multiplicity, the various facets of which only arbitrarily bear the same name. *Postmodern* begins to look like one of those words used so frequently, and in such a bewildering variety of ways, that it has lost all purchase and specificity. Overloaded with meanings, it loses all meaning; for, *if everything is postmodern, postmodernity means nothing*. This is the reflexive paradox mentioned above: Approached in its own terms, postmodernity risks suffering a kind of *death by polysemy*, its meaning drawn and quartered, again and again, until nothing remains.

### Three More Meanings of Postmodernity

It seems to me, then, that in order to understand postmodernity, we need to navigate carefully between the twin excesses of *modern singularity* and *postmodern multiplicity*, the Scylla of the only One and the Charybdis of the infinitely Many. I shall thus risk a more schematic approach, setting out what, to my ear at least, seem to be three more ways in which it makes good sense to describe something as *postmodern*. Of course, *postmodern polysemy* suggests that it is a bit arbitrary to discuss only three more senses of postmodernity. (Why stop at three?) Indeed, a great poem always means more than one thing at once and yet does not mean *everything*, for that latter would drown out all the poem's particular meanings in a dissonant cacophony (or, perhaps, a mystical harmony or fusion).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> At least in the form of *song*, we may experience a poem that seems to mean *everything* (if only by presenting some aspect of experience so powerfully that we can sense everything else reflected in and so connected by it), a song that thus transports us beyond the mundane realm of differentiated human meaning in an ecstatic feeling of transpersonal, mystical union with the All. As Schopenhauer and, following him, the early Nietzsche realized, the medium of music more easily facilitates such a mystical experience than any of the other arts (hence the full title of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*); indeed, music may be more likely to facilitate such an experience of mystical union than any natural experience, with the possible exception

At the same time, however, a truly great poem always holds itself open to meaning more than I currently realize. (Thus, on explaining my sense of a poem as fully and carefully as I can, I will nevertheless be aware that I am far from exhausting its meaning; and hence someone else can say to me, "I think it means something else than what you've said, namely, the following...", and I will often be able to see just what she means.) Accordingly, in my view, the postmodern call for us to attend to *polysemy* is best taken as a hopeful request for a poetic sensitivity to the *inexhaustibility* of meaning rather than an insistence on the static *infinity* of meaning, an *always more* rather than an *everything at once*. (In such a postmodern attunement, as Bono suggests in "Zooropa," "I don't know the limit / The limit of what we got.")

This is to take postmodernity to be saying, in other words, that *the future is not here yet*, or it arrives only in the moment of moving (however incrementally) beyond where we were. The future is not simply implicit in the past but rather requires the creative efforts of those who would yet *invent* it (that is, literally, enter into it) in order to remain genuinely *futural*, open or yet to come. (And was not U2's attempt to remind us of this very *futurity* of the future one of the driving impulses of their avowedly *postmodern* "Zooropa" tour? Slogans like "It's your world, you can change it" flashed across the screens during performances, while songs like "Acrobat," "Zooropa," and "Always" exhorted the audience to "dream out loud." Perhaps this was even partly anticipated on *Rattle and Hum*, the album prior to *Achtung Baby*, where "Love Rescue Me" already celebrated that utopian, revolutionary moment when "I've conquered my past / The future is here at last / I stand at the entrance to a new world I can see. / The ruins to the right of me / Will soon have lost sight of me.") Without further apology, then, here are the three other main senses of postmodernity I hear when I direct the postmodern sensitivity to polysemy back upon the concept of *postmodernity* itself.

of sex itself, at least if it is understood in the transpersonal sense suggested by Plato's *Symposium*.

prohibition  
of music

## Beyond Modernity

First, to be *postmodern* means to seek passage beyond modernity. In other words, "postmodernity" does not name a new historical epoch, a new age that is already here and that came after modernity, as one trend might follow another, but, rather, the act of getting free of those modern assumptions that have been most disastrous for our world and in the grip of which we remain so stubbornly caught. To be postmodern, then, is to be *on the way* or in transition *toward another way of existing*, one which not only (1) *transcends* (in the Hegelian sense of negating while preserving at a higher level, but without Hegel's modern assumption that this dialectical *Aufhebung* ultimately serves the teleological aim of generating an all-encompassing conceptual system) our continuing *modern* obsession with extending the human subject's dominance and control of an objective world, but which also (2) "twists free" (in what Heidegger called a *Verwindung*) of our distinctive *late-modern self-objectification*, which increasingly reduces all entities, modernity's celebrated human subject now included, to the ontological status of an intrinsically meaningless "resource" (*Bestand*) standing by merely to be optimized and ordered with maximal efficiency for flexible use.

This sense of the *postmodern* also resonates nicely with the work of such post-Heideggerian thinkers as Levinas, who insists that "infinity" is only in the *act of infinition* (that is, the ethico-poetic act of bringing something new into this finite world), an act which must speak to the finite world in order to be understood and so cannot radically break with the past once and for all, and also, albeit in a more complicated way, with Lyotard's thinking of our postmodern condition (as we will see shortly).<sup>7</sup>

What is so misleading here, however, is that many self-described postmodernists do use the term *postmodernity* not simply as a handy label for the latest developments in their field but, apparently hypostatizing and generalizing these developments, instead treat *postmodernity* as if it referred to a *new age*, an historical epoch into which these postmodernists have already entered, as if all that needs to happen now is for

the rest of us to catch up to where they already are. Such vanguardism, despite its occasional nuggets of truth (for who could deny the great poetic visionaries their defining experiences of a genuinely postmodern revelation?), nevertheless risks degenerating into a naive and dangerously Pollyannish optimism. For its rose-colored spectacles can blind us to the uncomfortable yet undeniable fact that the modern assumptions we need to twist free of remain deeply and pervasively entrenched in the fundamental but unnoticed ontotheological principles of vision and division by which we go about making sense of our worlds. None of us lives permanently unaffected by the *modern* subject-object divide or by the *late-modern* reduction of everything to intrinsically-meaningless resources standing by for optimization.

None of us are postmodern saints, in this modern world and yet not of it. Still, all of us remain capable of at least temporarily achieving experiences in which the subject/object divide dissolves into a unified being-in-the-world (especially with the aid of music, meditation, sport, or religion), and many of us do at least occasionally have an experience of belonging to something that genuinely matters independently of our own goals and desires. (Whether we describe such experiences with names drawn from poetry or religion might be irrelevant, were it not for the way theologians too often reinterpret such experiences so as falsely to suggest that they remain beyond the reach of us mere mortals—an important matter to which I shall return in the conclusion.)

Otherwise put, none of us is a postmodern island, but we do have postmodern experiences, some subtle and some profound, which means that there exist, here and there, postmodern archipelagoes jutting out from our modern past into a territory that has yet to take the firm shape of a new land, a genuine "new age" or widespread and relatively coherent historical *postmodernity*. Indeed, to many it is not even clear that such a promised land ever could rise from the various mists now darkening our future horizons.

Those who doubt that any such new postmodern world is even in the offing find it most suggestive to emphasize the frequent identification of postmodernity with wandering and nomadism, with deterritorialization and the sojourn (without permanent homecoming), with Moses and all those who point toward a utopia they know themselves unable to take up any

<sup>7</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

final residence within. Others of us welcome such fellow-travelers but wonder if they will be able to keep their good cheer indefinitely while underway toward a promised land they believe they can never reach. (If such worries get raised by the bleak portrait of “wandering” or “drifting” painted by U2’s postmodern appropriation of Johnny Cash on *Zooropa*’s “The Wanderer,” they may be partly assuaged by listening to “Kite” on *All That You Can’t Leave Behind*.) We thus think it important, if only to keep hope alive long enough for it to become more than hope, not simply to elevate means above ends, not to permanentize a holding-pattern, not to substitute Nietzsche’s “constant overcoming” for the possible arrival of Heidegger’s “last God” (this being one of the names Heidegger used, mostly in his private notebooks, to try to help us envision our collective entrance into a *genuine* historical postmodernity, which for him meant an historical age in which we—or our descendents—transcend our late-modern reduction of reality to resource by, to take only the most likely example, coming together to recognize and celebrate our belonging to the *earth*).<sup>8</sup>

### Incredulity

Let us turn to the second sense. Postmodernism is usually taken to mean an “incredulity toward metanarratives,” as Lyotard famously put it in *The Postmodern Condition*, the most influential book explicitly written about postmodernity.<sup>9</sup> If *narratives* are the stories we tell ourselves and each other in order to make sense of our lives (by bestowing meaning on the historical trajectory of existence), then a *metanarrative* would be a perspective from which to adjudicate between the different and competing narratives that struggle with one another (tacitly or actively) to tell us our story the most authoritatively. This, moreover, is why one so often hears that *postmodernists are relativists*: If we cannot believe in any standpoint from which we

might reasonably adjudicate between competing interpretations of our historical situation, then we are indeed consigned to relativism (and its ethico-political bedfellows, cynicism and interest-driven *Realpolitik*). Fortunately, so the received view goes, postmodernism thus understood immediately undermines itself (in a second paradox of reflexivity). For what is Lyotard’s historical claim that we no longer believe in metanarratives but itself another metanarrative? If Lyotard offers us a metanarrative about the end of metanarratives, then, as on the liar’s paradox (the most straightforward example of which is “This sentence is false,” a statement which, if true, must be false, but then, if false, must be true, and so on, in an endless circle or Möbius strip), *if Lyotard were right, then we would not believe him*.<sup>10</sup> This is how Lyotard is commonly understood, and so quickly dismissed. Yet, this dismissal of Lyotard as self-undermining is much too quick; it commits what philosophers call the straw-man fallacy, rejecting a simplified caricature so as not to have to grapple with an idea in all its complexity and force. In fact, Lyotard’s considered view is much more specific than his early definition of postmodernism, taken out of context and treated as a perfectly general thesis, leads readers to conclude.<sup>11</sup>

As the subtitle of *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* suggests, Lyotard’s focus is on *knowledge* as it is embodied and transmitted by contemporary institutions of higher education. The important question he asks is, *What justifies knowledge and the institutions responsible for embodying and transmitting it?* Lyotard argues that we can no longer answer this question the way the original founders of the modern university did. On Lyotard’s reading of the German idealists who were largely responsible for founding the University of Berlin at the dawn of the nineteenth century, the point of the modern *University* was either (1) to *unify* the disparate domains of knowledge or (2) to progressively *emancipate* humanity. In the two intervening centuries, however, we have witnessed both

<sup>8</sup> I develop these ideas in “Ontology and Ethics at the Intersection of Phenomenology and Environmental Philosophy,” *Inquiry* 47:4 (2004), pp. 380–412; and “The Philosophical Fugue: Understanding the Structure and Goal of Heidegger’s Beiträge,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 34:1 (2003), pp. 57–73.

<sup>9</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

<sup>10</sup> “The [Cretan] liar’s paradox” takes its name from the story of a man from Crete who asserts that “All Cretans are liars.” U2 provided audiences with a provocative example of the liar’s paradox on the *Zooropa* tour by flashing across their screens the message that: “Everything you know is wrong.”

<sup>11</sup> See for instance Gianni Vattimo, *Nilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 5–6.

(1) the increasing specialization and consequent fragmentation of the various fields of knowledge (undermining our modern faith that knowledge would justify itself by eventually giving rise to a *unified* understanding of all reality) as well as (2) the uncoupling of scientific progress from the advance of human freedom (which has led us to lose the optimistic modern enlightenment belief that knowledge inherently serves human freedom).

Lyotard's thesis concerning our "incredulity toward metanarratives" is in fact limited to these two specific examples. We can no longer believe in the metanarratives of *unity* and *emancipation* by which modernity sought to justify knowledge, and it is in precisely this sense that we are in a *postmodern* condition. There is thus nothing self-undermining in saying so, nor even in Lyotard's further argument that these two modern metanarratives have now been supplanted historically by the "postmodern" *metanarrative of optimization*, in which all "legitimation . . . is based on its optimizing the system's performance"—although I do think it would be less confusing to refer here to our "late-modern" condition because these developments emerged from the way we turned the techniques and procedures devised for controlling the objective world back upon the modern subject, leading, as we will see, to a dissolution of this modern subject and its historical self-understanding without yet putting any new, substantive historical self-understanding in its place—and thereby yielding the historical situation U2 aptly describes in *Zooropa's* "Numb," in which "Too much is not enough" (see *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv).

Nor does Lyotard simply accept (what he calls) "the postmodern condition" *cynically*, as critics often allege. Rather, he advocates a Trojan horse strategy according to which we should recognize—and *provisionally* appeal to—this dominant logic of optimization in order to transcend it from within. (This Trojan horse strategy, I would suggest, also nicely characterizes the "postmodern" spirit of "Zooropa," which seeks to move through the banality of corporate slogans into the "guiding light" of "uncertainty" in order to encourage us to "dream out loud" and so "dream up the world [we want] to live in.") Lyotard's crucial claims here are that knowledge domains are finite and so will eventually become exhausted unless we encourage "paralogy," that is, paradigm-altering transformations of the fundamental

assumptions (or "metaprescriptives") underlying and guiding the various domains of knowledge, and that such transformations are the most likely source for the emergence of any new historical logic other than the empty optimization imperative (*The Postmodern Condition*, p. 65).

The hegemonic knowledge system will accept paralogy precisely because paralogy promises to optimize knowledge (by allowing us to transcend the finite resources of any fixed knowledge domain). Yet, Lyotard suggests, paralogy will also work from within the optimization economy to encourage paradigm-shifting developments that may emerge like some metastatic growth from a particularly fecund region of knowledge (ecology, let us hope, rather than cybernetics). In this way, Lyotard believes we might successfully generate a new justification for knowledge in general (and for institutions responsible for embodying and transmitting such knowledge), a justification that would eventually supplant the empty optimization imperative that itself displaced the modern metanarratives of unity and emancipation (and only then, *pace* Lyotard, would we enter into a genuine *postmodernity*). Thus, although many details of Lyotard's analysis remain questionable (and certainly call for much further thought), he is basically offering a neo-Heideggerian vision for how we might actually go about transcending our current historical self-understanding, the nihilistic reduction of all knowledge and meaning to "optimal input/output matrices" that Lyotard calls (in a somewhat misleading overgeneralization) *the postmodern condition*.<sup>12</sup> Lyotard is at most only a *strategic postmodernist*, then, one who suggests that we must face up to our historical predicament clearly and so provisionally accept its terms if we are ever to discover a path leading through and beyond it.

### Fragmentation

Third, and finally, postmodernism is often taken to connote *the fragmentation of the subject*. The "unholy trinity" of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud developed their *hermeneutics of suspicion*

<sup>12</sup> See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv. For an explanation and defense of Heidegger's remarkably similar views, see Chapters 3 and 4 of my *Heidegger on Ontotheology*.



suggesting, each in a different way, that the heroic modern conception of an autonomous subject firmly in control of an objective world was an illusion, a surface appearance or projected fantasy concealing the deeper truth that subjectivity is a battleground for forces of which we often remain unaware. These great critics of modern subjectivity focused on experiences we normally overlook in order to argue that the subject is a product of more or less unconscious drives for respect (Marx, following Hegel), power (Nietzsche, generalizing Darwin), and erotic fulfillment (Freud, developing Plato). Compared to these critical analyses, which broke down the modern subject into its component forces, the positive visions of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud were notoriously underdeveloped, but each did at least try to imagine how a *postmodern* epoch might be built up from the fragments of modern subjectivity.

Marx envisioned a socialist utopia of mutual respect, in which advances in technology would eliminate the need for the alienating labor that estranges us from ourselves (and so prevents the formation of any satisfying self-understanding), thereby allowing each of us to cultivate (and be *recognized* by others for) his or her unique contributions (hence Marx's famous formula for socialism: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs"). Nietzsche, playing his part in the postmodern drama, not only announced the death of the God who had guaranteed the privilege of human subjectivity but also predicted the emergence of a "higher type" of human being who would face up to the death of God, embrace the dangerous truth that life is will-to-power, and so set out to reshape human beings the way artists sculpt clay (hence *Thus Spoke Zarathustra's* notorious doctrine of "the *superman*: Humanity is something that should be *superceded*").<sup>13</sup>

Finally, and with comparative modesty, Freud called for the achievement of a new and more austere autonomy, in which the widespread practice of psychoanalysis would enable us to transmute our neurotic misery into ordinary unhappiness by helping us relinquish our (paradigmatically modern) subject-centered

<sup>13</sup> I develop these points in "Deconstructing the Hero," in Jeff McLaughlin, ed., *Comics as Philosophy* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2005), pp. 100–129. See also Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 71.

fantasies, reconcile ourselves to the unfulfillable desires that drive us (by acknowledging and then finding socially acceptable ways to sublimate and express these drives), and thereby reclaim and reintegrate the self (hence Freud's well-known slogan, "Where *id* was, *ego* shall be"). One would thus need at least two axes to measure the influence of these positive visions, because the considerable influence each exerted historically seems to have been met by an at least equal and opposite reaction (due in no small measure to the way the Nazi and Communist appropriations of Nietzsche and Marx distorted their teachings).

Even if the postmodern visions of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud worked like powerful magnets, repelling as much as they attracted, the influence of their different ways of analyzing subjectivity into its component forces has been immense, leaving an indelible imprint on the self-understanding of our current historical epoch. For what emerged historically from this three-fronted dissolution of modern subjectivity was that even broader fragmentation and fracturing of *identity* we now see expressed in the common claim that postmodernity is an age without an integral style, one which—lacking any robust sense of its own positive identity—borrows freely from all other styles in its *postmodern pastiche*, famously employing such hospitable techniques as bricolage, *détournement*, and sampling. Not surprisingly, the initial resistance to this underlying fragmentation of the robust modern self was considerable, perhaps most prominently visible in Kierkegaard's appropriation of the idea that "purity of heart is to will one thing" (hence Kierkegaard's own passionate belief that he could not be *both* a writer *and* a husband, and his famous call for the decisiveness of an *either/or*) as well as in Heidegger's neo-Kierkegaardian appeal in *Being and Time* for each of us to resolutely choose a defining life project (or "ultimate for the sake of which") that will allow us to integrate our various senses of self in the achievement of an *authentic* identity (a vision not so different from Freud's, as the existential psychoanalytic movement noted enthusiastically).

Yet, more contemporary post-Heideggerian thinkers—many of whom came of age in post-War France during a time when the influence of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud were powerfully reinforced by (what Gutting nicely describes as) "the structuralist decentering of the subject"—almost unanimously advise us to abandon this quest for a unified identity as, at best, an illusory

nostalgia for something we never really possessed and, at worst, a neurotic reaction to the vertiginous anxiety of freedom that leads us (as some might suggest it led Heidegger himself) to rush into the arms of an awaiting authoritarian regime, one promising us the final reassurance of its one true answer.<sup>14</sup> These French neo-Heideggerians thus led the call for us to transcend modern subjectivity (and even its echo in the early Heidegger's valorization of the robust, *authentic* self), for example, in Foucault's prediction of the passing of the era of modern subjectivity ("the end of man"), Derrida's tireless deconstructions of the myths of full "self-presence," Lacan's neo-Freudian analysis of subjectivity as an ultimately hollow construction, Deleuze and Guattari's "schizoanalysis" celebrating the divided self, and even in Baudrillard's post-Marxist diagnosis of our late capitalist "triumph of the simulacra," the victory of an age in which our strange and estranging preference for artificiality comes to eclipse our relation to *anything* real, including ourselves. This last phenomenon especially, I shall now suggest, brings us directly into the sphere of U2's own distinctive postmodern experiment, and so requires us to recognize and confront the real dangers of their postmodern venture ("I'm ready," *Achtung Baby* begins by resolutely repeating), asking whether U2 has shown these risks to be worth taking—and, if so, how?

### U2 and Postmodernity: *Et tu, Bono?*

U2 has been blessed with a long and influential musical career, the various stages of which other philosophers in this volume chronicle and address. The task I have been charged with here is to facilitate further thinking about U2's famous experiment with postmodernity, the "postmodern phase" they self-consciously entered into with *Achtung Baby* and celebrated in the complex and almost overwhelming pop-cultural pastiche of the

<sup>14</sup> For a suggestive development of the latter critique, see *Nihilism and Emancipation*, p. 20. On the former point, see Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 261. Bono too recognizes fascism as a reaction to the anxiety-provoking truth of uncertainty; as he put it: "The fascists at least recognize the void, their pseudo-strong leadership a reaction to what feels like no leadership . . . Fascism is about control. They know what we won't admit: that things are out of control." Bill Flanagan, *U2 at the End of the World* (New York: Delta, 1995), p. 172.

*Zooropa* tour. The obvious question, then, is: Which of the senses of postmodernity we have explored best allows us to understand the meaning and significance of U2's own distinctive *postmodernity*? As you may not be surprised to hear, I think the answer is, *All of the above*.

It's very tempting to understand U2's exemplary postmodern song (on which, in good postmodern fashion, I shall isolate and focus on here), "Even Better than the Real Thing," as a celebration of the very postmodern condition Baudrillard characterizes as *the triumph of the simulacra*. How else are we to understand this song's oft-repeated, eponymous chorus—"Even better than the real thing"—than as an embrace (whether ironic or not) of a world in which *we come to prefer surfaces to depths, images to reality, sex to love, the fake to the genuine*? Worse, insofar as U2's famous song does celebrate this postmodern triumph of the simulacra, then must we not suspect that its great popularity worked to reify that terrible triumph, thereby making U2 into agents, willing or (if the song is meant ironically and that is lost on most listeners) unwilling, of the most nihilistic aspects of postmodernity? Whatever their intentions (and many other good deeds), would we not then feel moved to castigate U2 for spreading this triumphant postmodernity around the world, like a virus embedded in a catchy hook?

There is no way around it: That is precisely the uncircumventable risk U2 took with "Even Better than the Real Thing," and some superficial listeners may have taken the song in exactly this way and never gone any further, a fact with which U2 and their fans will have to come to terms in order to take responsibility for this postmodern venture. At the same time, however, I think we can see that this gamble was a worthy one. For, if we think about what has been said thus far, we can begin to recognize that there is something else going on in "Even Better than the Real Thing" than a simple capitulation to superficiality and the allure of the artificial. Indeed, I know of no sophisticated proponents of such an allegedly "postmodern" celebration of glittering surfaces over mute depths. (Some thinkers, following Nietzsche, deny the very existence of such depths, but in so doing they banish the contrast between surface and depth on which this portrait of postmodernism depends.)

This common picture of “postmodernity” thus appears to be a caricature advanced by superficial critics seeking to portray themselves, by contrast, as sober defenders of tradition and common sense, who thereby fail to notice that the very “common sense” we inherit from the tradition is shaped by the prejudices of modernity, and so functions indiscriminately to reinforce our internalization of even the most nihilistic and destructive aspects of the modern worldview. To move beyond such brutal simplifications, then, let us remember where we began: The postmodern call for a sensitivity to *polysemy* suggests that, if U2’s “Even Better than the Real Thing” is genuinely postmodern, then its meaning cannot be reduced to any straightforward embrace of a single axis of postmodernity, including the nihilistic phenomena Baudrillard describes as the triumph of the simulacra. If what else I said was right, moreover, this song should also suggest an attempt to forge a path *through* and beyond the problematic aspects of our historical age by attuning us to a more genuinely redemptive experience, and to do so even while it resists being reduced to any single meaning or simple self-identity. So, does it? The Devil—or God—is in the details.

### **Sex, Love, and God: The Spiritual Politics of the Postmodern U2**

The lyrics of “Even Better than the Real Thing” are clearly written to a lover, perhaps originating as a poetic appeal to a specific lover for another chance (or two, suggesting a certain recidivist repetition of the pattern). If that was its inspiration, however, its meaning quickly changes. For, as a song, it is also clearly addressed to a *broader* audience, and thereby seeks to transform this entire audience into the beloved. In so doing, however, it loses its force as an appeal to a particular lost love for a second (or third) chance and becomes an affirmation of the very powerful communal experience that, we can easily imagine, would repeatedly pull Bono (or any member of U2) away from the arms of any particular lover.

If one insists on hearing the song as addressed to a specific lover, then it seems to celebrate sex above love: With its singer promising an ecstatic experience of sliding “down the surface of things” (and the like), “Even better than the real thing” implies that sexual ecstasy is better than the experience of genuine love.

Notice, however, that when these same lyrics are heard as addressed to an audience, especially a live audience, the meaning of these words is subtly but radically realigned: Now the implication is that U2’s relation to this audience is “Even better than the real thing” not in the simulacra-triumphant sense that mainstream Western culture does in fact seem to prefer sex to love; instead, the song seeks to evoke and celebrate the experience of a profound feeling of communal love that is “even better” than genuine personal love, an experience in which we can all be taken “higher” and “higher” and “higher” without ever reaching that fatal point (what the French call *la petit mort*) where, like Icarus, our wings “melt” and we fall back down to earth.

Heard in this communal register, the erotic meaning that “I’m gonna make you sing” has when addressed to a particular lover becomes transformed, elevated into a celebration of communal singing as an ecstatic experience that transcends even the feeling of real love between two individuals. (This universalization of love—by which U2 seeks to transmute the entire audience into a beloved—works, as Plato observed in the *Symposium*, by generalizing from the particular; it is thus striking that Bono sometimes performs the same gesture in reverse, bringing a particular audience member onto stage in order to sing to her personally, as a particularization of the general audience he seeks to reach *through* her.)

With the very idea of an ecstatic experience transcending personal love, we tread, I would suggest, into the territory of the *holy*, that which heals us by making us feel whole, raising us up by allowing us to feel ourselves a part of a greater whole to which we genuinely belong. “Even Better than the Real Thing,” then, would be less a celebration of the real pleasures of erotic sexuality than of the communal experience of universal love, a love transcending the bounds even of the community in which it is experienced, and so working (ethically, spiritually, erotically, politically) to both reinforce and expand the bounds of those communal bonds by extending the feelings of unity, sympathy, and belonging beyond the contingent limits of a group—toward that universe experienced in love which both inspires and beckons for such an unlimited embrace.

Does the embrace and demand (*Achtung, Baby!*) at the heart of that experience of universal love include and call upon me as

well? Yes, and *you, too*. That is perhaps the deepest message of the *postmodern* U2, which is, at the same time, the *Christ-ian* U2, where by “Christ-ian” I mean Christ-emulating rather than “Christian theology” following, in other words, striving to live—and live up to—Christ’s own teachings of universal love rather than the more narrowly circumscribed doctrines of some particular church.

What is more, if I am right that Christianity itself was born out of such a fundamental attunement of universal love, born, that is, in Christ’s own powerful experience of and subsequent call for us too to experience what it is like genuinely *to love everyone and everything*, without imposing borders or distinctions (and in this way Christianity represents a significant ethical modification of Judaism, which seems to me to have emerged from an importantly different fundamental attunement, namely, that awesome experience of wonder before the mere fact that reality exists, that *there is something* rather than nothing at all, an experience Christ transforms simply by seeing this reality through the eyes of unlimited love), then understanding U2’s postmodernity in these terms allows us to recognize that their postmodern experiment is in fact continuous with, and so not some bizarre deviation from, the consistent artistic trajectory U2 has followed all along.

For U2’s postmodern swerve can be seen as another switch-back on the mountainous path they follow as they continue seeking a way to express effectively (and so let be felt in our late- or post-modern world) their enduring commitment to the immeasurable and uncontainable ethical, aesthetic, spiritual, and political implications of that genuinely polysemic experience postmodernists and Christians (or at least Christ-ians) might yet agree to call *love*, *charity*, or *peace* (no single element of which can long exist without the others—the words and actions of many prominent, self-described “Christians” notwithstanding).

If I express a certain caution here by predicting that postmodernists and Christ-ians “*might* yet agree,” even as Rorty and Vattimo seem to be leading the way toward just such a post-modern-Christian alliance, this is not only because *postmodernity* (as a movement seeking *transition beyond*) reminds us not to foreclose the *futurity* of the future (the unpredictability in virtue of which the future remains yet *to come*)—a reminder reinforced by U2’s Christ-ian teaching, *apropos* of “love,” that:

“She moves in mysterious ways.”<sup>15</sup> My caution also stems from respect for another “postmodern” strand of anti-theological religious thinking, that heritage running from Kierkegaard through Derrida (and beyond), which valorizes social *alienation* and the radical *individuation* it facilitates as an alternative and at least equally genuine and important dimension of religious experience. It thus seems appropriate, by way of conclusion, to suggest that U2’s own postmodern Christ-ianity helps us see how we might fruitfully combine postmodernity’s competing spiritual pulls toward both the universal and the particular. In this spirit, I end with the inspired and, I hope, inspiring words from U2’s “One”: “One life / But we’re not the same / We’ve got to carry each other / Carry each other . . .”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See the essays by Rorty and Vattimo in Mark Wrathall, ed., *Religion After Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and their subsequent interview in Santiago Zabala, ed., *The Future of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Mark Wrathall for the enthusiastic invitation to write this essay and many valuable suggestions, and to Francisco Gallegos, Christian Wood, and especially Sara Amber Rawls for very helpful insights.