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Post-Modern Vanguard

Edward Mendelson

After the Wake: An Essay on the Contemporary Avant-Garde by Christopher Butler
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Christopher Butler's survey of post-war literature, music and painting maintains a judicious critical distance from its subject. Readers who wish a more direct report from the front lines of the avant-garde should consult a new anthology, *Collective Consciousness: Art Performances in the Seventies*, edited by Jean Dupuy.^[*] This documents the work of almost two hundred avant-gardists from Europe and America who displayed their most advanced work at a gallery in New York and wrote explanatory statements for inclusion in the book. Despite the large number of participants, the level of inspiration and accomplishment is remarkably uniform. One artist, no better and no worse than the rest, supplied a colour film of a naked man scrabbling about in a forest. Another showed a videotape of himself bowing solemnly to the camera. A third tacked up a scrap of paper that read, 'Look in the mirror as I fuck you up the ass, the pain on your face is my freedom, your tears are the drops of my manhood,' and waited for angry women to tear it down. The established justification for this sort of thing is the thought it supposedly provokes in the audience. But the most thought-provoking sentence in the book was not written by any of the participating artists. It is the matter-of-fact statement printed in large type on the copyright page: 'Publication of this book was made possible in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC, a federal agency.'

Government support for the avant-garde has started only recently, and with little public comment. By now it is a commonplace that bourgeois culture has learned to tolerate, even cherish, a tame avant-garde in its midst, but it is a different matter when tolerance is written into the national budget. Public funds that were awarded once for the preservation of acknowledged masterpieces are provided now for the encouragement of acknowledged trash. Cultural Endowments, Ministries and Councils of the Arts, and sometimes their counterparts in multinational corporations, eagerly subsidise random-noise concerts and

exhibitions of stacked bricks. None of this is a sign of aesthetic enlightenment or bad conscience on the part of executives and officials. The reason behind their generosity is simple: a flourishing subsidised avant-garde serves as cheap propaganda for the West. Artists and intellectuals in Russia and Eastern Europe are shown that artists on this side of the wall are not only free to ignore official policy, but are actually paid to do anything they like. Triviality is no impediment, ineptitude no hindrance. The West presents itself as the artists' paradise. So long as the Soviets maintain Socialist Realism as their one approved style, the West will continue to give its official blessing to minimalism, conceptualism, and any other diminution of art that its artists can devise.

The official arts policy of the West is not to have a policy at all, but to support a little of everything. This is preferable to the alternatives followed elsewhere. But it is also the explanation for the otherwise baffling persistence of certain cultural bureaucrats in jobs for which, by any ordinary standards, they are manifestly unqualified. Year after year, the press reports in wonderment that Mr X and Mr Y, like most of their official colleagues, have not yet learned to distinguish genius from junk. But X continues to hold down the post of Ceramics Director, while Y is rooted still to the office of Embroidery Administrator. What the press does not realise is that it is X and Y's incompetence that guarantees their employment. Were they to supply funds only to artists whose work deserved it, the number of foreign artists who envy life in the West would be drastically reduced. X and Y have never guessed that they are being paid to support bad art. Unlike the bureaucrats who run the Soviet Writers', Artists' and Musicians' Unions, they are not called upon to be time-servers and hypocrites. Incompetent as they are, they sincerely do their best. The dimwittedness that makes them ideal for their jobs is also what keeps them from understanding why, as far as their employers are concerned, their best is good enough.

The West's avant-garde needs no cultural commissars to keep it in line. Leave the avant-garde entirely on its own, and it gives the corporate state exactly the propaganda the state requires. The managers of such a state prefer their subjects to believe that public policy is too complex or too boring a matter for ordinary self-respecting citizens to bother with: better to leave it in the benevolent, efficient hands of the technocrats. The avant-garde encourages this belief when it holds the mirror up to nature and reveals all the standard items in the avant-garde catalogue: gratuitous gestures, celebrations of chance, empty 'concepts', visions of anomie and helplessness without external cause. The state doesn't mind if subsidised artists issue manifestos claiming revolutionary virtue for their work, provided the work itself has none. Bohemia never notices who makes the trains run on time, or if they run at all. An alliance, unconscious on the part of the artists involved, unites avant-garde minimalism and technocratic bureaucracy. It is an alliance against the rights

and obligations of citizenship. Normally invisible, traces of it surface in the work of a critic like Hugh Kenner, pillar of the reactionary *National Review*, who gives equal praise to the joking despair of Beckett and the regimented utopianism of Buckminster Fuller. The alliance, in one form or another, is of long standing. Baudelaire understood its nature more than a century ago. 'This use of military metaphor,' he wrote of the literary application of the word 'avant-garde', 'signifies minds, not militant, but formed for discipline, that is, for conformity; minds born subservient, Belgian minds, who can only think collectively.'

Christopher Butler doesn't mention Baudelaire, nor does he explore the issues Baudelaire raised. Instead, he offers *After the Wake* as a critical essay – 'truly an essay' – in which he has 'preferred to concentrate upon a limited number of essentially technical and aesthetic changes' that produced, around 1950, a new 'postmodern' art. His book is the first of its kind in English; it has the merits of wide range and small bulk; and its prose, unlike that of the avant-garde's uncritical defenders, is neither bombast nor slush. Butler makes no claim to offer a General Theory of the Avant-Garde, but, within the limits of his approach, his Special Theory of the post-war period succeeds in finding manageable patterns in 'an artistic scene whose structure seems to owe far more to the "happening" than to any easily discernible historical or logical order'.

Butler recognises the avant-garde for what, in this century, it has normally been: a playground of aesthetes. He quickly disposes of the argument that changes in the language of art will bring about changes in the order of society. But having rejected the occasional avant-garde fantasy of social effect, he chooses to ignore the social causes by which the avant-garde was shaped. He is tolerant enough to take the movement seriously on aesthetic grounds. If the movement had produced greater art, this would not especially matter. But Butler himself knows that there is more to the avant-garde than its aesthetics. He alludes to 'sociological questions which I do not wish to pursue', questions about 'the nature of avant-garde groupings ... the methods by which they propagate their ideas, their relationship to the state of society, and so on'. Since the avant-garde provides the only art we have got, he argues, we had best learn to like it, or at least some of it. And this will be easiest if we refrain from embarrassing questions.

The basic claim made by every avant-garde movement – that its artists offer real innovations, that they surpass the limits accepted by their predecessors – is central to Butler's advocacy. 'My plan,' he writes, 'has been to argue that in the 1950s radically new conventions for the language of art were developed by writers, musicians and painters who wished to break away from modernism.' This argument faces difficulties at the start, since the avant-garde has been proclaiming its radical newness longer than anyone can remember. The most time-honoured convention of the manifesto-writers is innovation: the

formula for newness is handed down unchanged from generation to generation. Butler quotes an artist who wants nothing to do with 'all the structures, values, feelings, of the whole European tradition. It suits me fine if that's all down the drain.' This happens to be Frank Judd speaking in the late 1960s, but all that distinguishes it from Futurist manifestos of fifty years before is its tone of lumpen disgruntlement. Allen Ginsberg, quoted in one of Butler's epigraphs, says: 'there is nothing to be learned from history any more. We're in science fiction now.' This remark, differing only in vocabulary from claims made early in this century for the new machine age, is proof in itself that Ginsberg's ignorance of history does not exempt him from repeating it.

A more vivid proof, not mentioned by Butler, may be found in Ginsberg's recent echoes of the totalitarian apologetics offered by some of the Modernists of the 1920s and 1930s. Ginsberg has placed his spiritual life in the care of a Tibetan guru (one consciously avoided by the Dalai Lama), the autocrat of a spiritual retreat and poetry workshop near Boulder, Colorado. Among the guru's activities are punching recalcitrant visiting faculty in the face and having them stripped naked by his goon squad. Ginsberg defends the guru's methods as an 'experiment in monarchy', and insists that he must not be judged by the standards of lesser mortals. The whole story, with its air of tragedy repeated as farce, is told by Tom Clark in *The Great Naropa Poetry Wars*.^[†]

When Butler turns from his opening chapter on 'History' to his longer sections of 'Exposition' and 'Polemic', his argument grows stronger. He defines two aesthetic conventions as basic to the art of the 'postmodern' (the term is used in the minimalist sense current a few years ago, not in the sense architects now use in referring to their new historical eclecticism). One is the method by which an artist chooses a set of formal rules, or a 'concept', and allows this to generate a work almost automatically, without the need for any further decisions; in extreme cases the mere statement of the concept is regarded as sufficient. The other convention is the use of chance juxtapositions, the cultivation of randomness and irrationality, the acceptance of accident as the source of content and form. In one well-swept room of the Post-Modern gallery, the staff are laying down cement blocks according to instructions sent in by Carl André, while Samuel Beckett endlessly redistributes 16 stones among four pockets, and John Cage copies a star-atlas onto music paper. In the messier room across the hall, Karlheinz Stockhausen untunes a synthesiser, while William Burroughs randomly folds and cuts up his prose, and Robert Rauschenberg pushes a stuffed goat through an old tyre.

That all these are denatured versions of Modernist practice is something Christopher Butler recognises. But, at least at the start of the book, he has a hard time saying so. His prose sounds at one point as if he had filled his mouth with marbles in order to be obscure:

'Indeed, the dialectic between the huge over-organisation of *Finnegans Wake* and the deliberate lack of it in the *Cantos* conditions the whole of the postmodern period; and what mediates between these at all points is the phenomenological concentration upon the mental processes of the artist, as prefigured in *La Nausée*.' This makes Butler's own contrast between post-war and pre-war art sound like a radical distinction without a radical difference. Later in the book, when he stops writing like a philosopher of history, he makes the distinction clearer but less radical. In Modernism, he writes, 'formal procedures seemed to stand in need of some *mimetic* justifications.' Now, 'in postmodern literature these procedures are retained with all their virtuosity, but they are there for their own sakes' – meaning that Post-Modernism keeps the bathwater. This is true enough, but the extreme aestheticism Butler is describing has been around for quite a long time. The special poverty of the recent avant-garde needs a more specific explanation.

Post-Modernism is best understood, not as a new vanguard, but as the tired end of a tradition that dates back to the Romantics. There is a direct line of descent between Romantic vitality and Post-Modern inertia, between Coleridge's writings on the organic imagination, or Goethe's on the growth of plants, and the cement blocks and concrete poems of recent decades. The Romantics held that a work of art took shape, not through the imposition of form from without, but by an inner process of growth in the work itself or the mind of its maker. A Romantic work of art, like a Romantic artist, was proudly independent – eventually, in late phases of Romanticism, independent of any purpose other than its own existence. 'Nothing is really beautiful unless it is useless,' Gautier wrote in 1834. More than a century later, the avant-garde had so absorbed the cult of artistic autonomy that it could restate that motto in terms like these: 'Anything is beautiful – or at least is art – *provided* it is useless.' Criticism, on the whole, no longer discussed art in terms of what it *does*, but of what it *is*. And once this became the major question in aesthetics, the answer, increasingly, seemed to be that art is anything done by an artist. Thus emerged the art of the absolutely gratuitous event. In New York a few years ago, an artist arranged to have himself shot in the arm by an assistant while photographs were taken to be sold by his gallery. Another artist, cited by Butler, sent daily postcards to a friendly critic, each day's card stating the hour he awoke that morning. As the organicist doctrine led to the conviction that art was what had no use beyond itself, it led also to the belief that the best way to understand a work of art was to concentrate on its structure. Tone, texture, content, truth-value – all these come to matter less and less. Modernism still maintained a dialectic between structure and mimesis – the tension, for example, in *Ulysses* between the book's musclebound organisation and its infinitely supple powers of description. But in Post-Modernism the dialectic collapsed, leaving nothing but empty structures. Butler warns against nostalgia for the great achievements of the Modernists, yet everything in his book

confirms the apothegm: Post-Modernism, *homo tristis est*.

Critics have tended to compensate for the poverty of avant-garde art by the extravagance of their praises for it. The more minimal the gesture, the more rapturous the explanation offered. Barnett Newman painted a vertical stripe on a canvas, and Thomas Hess saw it as a version of divine creation – ‘as God separated light from darkness, with a line drawn in the void’. (The metaphor does not even correspond to the painting, since Newman’s line divides one darkness from another.) Coleridge wrote in similar terms of the imagination representing the eternal act of creation, but had something more elaborate in mind. The avant-garde has taken the original Romantic impulse toward creation and freedom, and reduced it to a passive amorality. In the same way, the Post-Structuralist movement in European philosophy, following the artists’ example, explicitly proclaims the world to be a place of purposeless systems, arbitrary structures and random events, a place where conscious choice is illusory, since what we imagine to be our personal existence is in fact ‘thought’ for us by the systems themselves. Whatever enthusiastic critics may imagine, the avant-garde’s concept-driven art is a direct expression of this new passivity. It marks 6255 parallel lines and calls it drawing (Sol LeWitt); it tunes 12 radios according to the chance operations of the *I Ching* and calls it music (John Cage); it makes endless anagrams of a single word and calls it poetry (any of a dozen concrete poets). It repeatedly combines a limited set of elements – words, notes, spaces – in a way that demonstrates human limits. It calls this artistic freedom, and the governors quietly approve. For the artists who work in this fashion, who accept an arbitrary rule or canon and follow it regardless of consequences, the effect on their art is predictably fatal – canon to the right of them, canon to the left of them, theirs not to reason why.

Christopher Butler, after setting out as an advocate, tends to lose patience with the works he is called upon to describe. Of one much-displayed avant-garde sculpture, a board leaning against a wall, he observes that whatever its theoretical justification ‘it is still very silly.’ Other works he aptly describes as ‘no more than surrealist objects with the shock removed’, or, in cases of special merit, ‘disturbingly incongruous in a mild sort of way’. In certain performance pieces ‘the actions themselves are often of no particular significance in themselves, and are wholly parasitic upon their audience’s willingness to maintain conventional expectations even when they know they will be defeated yet again.’ For much avant-garde music, ‘stoicism is indeed the key response.’ No more than one or two artists in each medium – Pollock, Boulez, Messiaen, Beckett, Claude Simon – are exempt from the disapproval Butler visits on almost everyone else.

It is only when he returns from individual works to the avant-garde as a movement that he becomes more forgiving. The shift in tone is so great that the book reads at times like a

collaboration between two authors who never found an area of agreement. One author, call him Butler A, makes assertions like 'There is now no going back.' The other, Butler B, mutters sceptically about 'the frequent left-wing delusion that "after this" then "only that" is "possible".' Butler A finds in the avant-garde 'the greatest of challenges to those concerned for the arts: that of inhabiting the present rather than taking refuge in the past'. Butler B notices that too many avant-garde works 'present an artful disorder far beyond anything we could tolerate in "real life" for more than a few hours'. All these examples are widely separated in the book, but there are places where the two authors try to elbow each other out of a single paragraph. 'Major' and 'definitive', says Butler A of certain products of Post-Modernism; 'wholly trivial,' counters Butler B in the next sentence, referring to some of the very same works: 'We already know that we have a number of major works of painting, music and literature that are definitive of our age – exactly how, we are uncertain. These works, once we have overcome some of the obstacles to understanding that I have tried to indicate above, are, some of them, still extremely frustrating and wholly trivial.' The two authors explicate the same works in very different ways. Finding radical newness everywhere, Butler A reports that Boulez's *Le Marteau sans Maître* 'creates an absolutely distinctive sound picture, cut loose from all previously accepted associative links'. His co-author, with a richer sense of history, reports that this absolutely new music is also 'an immensely evocative work whose percussive rhythms recall Stravinsky, and whose athematicism and balancing of sound and silence recall Webern', which means that the traditional associative links of musical history have not been cut at all.

The avant-garde portrayed in *After the Wake* makes an embarrassingly poor showing for a movement that enjoyed more than thirty years of European peace and prosperity. Christopher Butler acknowledges that the post-war landscape seems difficult to map. It lacks order, he writes, because it lacks monuments: no *Ulysses*, no 'Demoiselles d'Avignon', no *Sacre du Printemps*. But he sees trackless wastes partly because he is looking in the wrong direction. There is far more to the arts of the past thirty years than conventional Post-Modernism. Butler ranges with exemplary courage over an impressive range of artists and writers, but only in music does he attempt to cover all of Europe. (American music is represented solely by John Cage: there is no mention of Elliott Carter, and the chapter on serialism omits Milton Babbitt even from the list of composers not discussed.) Literature is limited to French and English authors (Borges slips in via translations) from the school of novelists who prefer to say as little as repetitiously as possible. Butler says nothing about Günter Grass, nothing about the younger Latin American writers whom Gabriel Garcia Marquez plausibly described as the best alternative to the sterility of the *nouveau roman*. Thomas Pynchon appears only in lists of names, and *Gravity's Rainbow*, arguably the most important work of fiction in English since the war, never appears at all. Butler's painters are

English or American only: Warhol is in, Beuys out. The book scarcely notices architecture or film. And in the field he does cover, Butler tends to govern his interpretations by the avant-garde's own narrow aesthetic, so he is slightly unfair to works that escape its limits. Beckett, for example, is not quite so programmatic, Rauschenberg not quite so random, as this book suggests.

Too many of the book's small mistakes seem out of place in a product of the Clarendon Press. The text refers repeatedly to an American poet, otherwise unknown to literary history, named Carlos Williams (he is listed in the index as Carlos Williams, W.). The account of Borges's story 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' packs three mistakes into as many sentences. Discussing Berio's *Nones*, an orchestral work 'related to a poem by Auden concerning Good Friday', Butler wonders how the instrumental textures of the work are supposed to convey the stated meaning: in fact, the first version of the piece included a choral setting of Auden's words. Butler's title and text pay homage to *Finnegans Wake* as Post-Modernism's central influence and source, but he omits the one work that would best demonstrate this, John Cage's *Writing Through Finnegans Wake*. This volume consists of phrases copied out from Joyce and arranged on separate lines in such a way that the letters JAMES JOYCE, repeated four times per page, may be read vertically down the centre; miscellaneous semi-colons and parentheses are scattered ad lib around the margins. Readers left unsatisfied by one such book may obtain, for 260 dollars, Cage's double volume, *Writing Through Finnegans Wake and Writing for the Second Time Through Finnegans Wake*. Both books are perfect specimens of the Post-Modern avant-garde: self-conscious acts of *écriture*, concept-dominated and aleatoric at once, nightmares for the compositor, and relentlessly dull.

After the Wake is not entirely fortunate in its timing. Butler's contrast between inhabiting the present and taking refuge in the past is one that endorses avant-garde claims, but it no longer seems applicable to the arts. Ten years ago the historical amnesia of Post-Modernism could almost be accepted as the dominant art of the present and future. As far as the arts were concerned, the past seemed to be receding into dusty extinction and the bloodless care of antiquarians and academics. The avant-garde may have copied its predecessors unconsciously in almost everything it did, but its conscious memory extended no further than about half a year. Today matters look very different. Artists tend to have longer memories, and recognise that one of the more effective ways of inhabiting the present is to learn how the past made it what it is. Historical eclecticism is becoming the dominant style, as it has often been before. Recent architecture embraces the past in ways that avant-garde dogma insisted was no longer possible. Art-school applicants, delighted to paint subjects that interest them, submit portfolios containing representational work, where

a few years ago there was only abstraction. The most exciting new music in Europe is the newly recovered work of the 17th and 18th centuries, played by young performers on instruments of the period. The most profound and audacious new writing is found in the historical novels of Grass, Pynchon, Garcia Marquez, and their followers, writers who explore the present through detailed excavations of the past. Together, these artists have restored much of the energy and importance that the arts abandoned during the minimalist dispensation. But they can expect little in the way of official subsidy or support. They remember and say too much that the state prefers its citizens to forget.

A few defenders of the avant-garde still make forays into critical journals, hawking their shopworn goods as the image of the future. But it was this very claim of prophetic status that finally brought the avant-garde to ruin. Events rendered its predictions absurd. The future announced in its manifestos never happened. The arts took an entirely different course, leaving the avant-garde to take its place as a minor period-style, one of the lesser resources of history. In the arts nothing goes out of date so quickly as the future.

[*] New York: *Performing Arts Journal*, 1980.

[†] Cadmus Editions (Santa Monica), 1980.

[Vol. 3 No. 16 · 3 September 1981](#) » Edward Mendelson » Post-Modern Vanguard (print version)

Pages 9-10 | 4317 words