

# ON THE SUBJECT OF AND IN POST-MODERNISM

Stefan Morawski

## I

TO SAY in the introductory remarks how differently interpreted artistic post-modernism is seems to be a good beginning. Why? Because it unmasks at the outset how much the concept under examination is obfuscated and how troublesome it is to delineate its distinctive features. We can discern, at least, the five following interpretations of how post-modernism is, or should be, understood: (a) as strictly anti-rationalistic, anti-functional, anti-constructivist (the case of architecture, *pace* Ch. Jencks); (b) as based on the rejection of any metaphysical proclivities interconnected with *Lebensphilosophie* (the case of overcoming what in central Europe was named Modernismus and spread also to Scandinavia and to Spanish art); (c) as identified with the many, opposed one to another, symptoms of the new avant-garde from the late fifties to the late seventies (the case of early I. Hassan and Dick Higgins); (d) as the new trend bound primarily with post-structuralist tendencies, radically opposed to any avant-garde 'tradition of the new' (the eighties, the appearance of Neue Wilde, the return to the canvas, narration, melody and harmony etc.); (e) as the coming back to the sacred which should be the prime source of art's revival. This standpoint could be ascribed to Daniel Bell when we deduce from his *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1978), that industrial societies are characterized by an inner schism which is revealed in anarcho-nihilist modernism while the post-industrial era brings again the cult of tradition. But Bell's approach seems to be confused, as he also states in the essay entitled 'Beyond Modernism, Beyond Self' (in *The Winding Passage*, 1980) that post-modernism basically presents the apex of the industrial social system. It is easy to see that (a) and (b) are contradictory and both too restrictive. It goes without saying that (e) is something other than post-modernism because the anti-modernistic trend takes various shapes and springs from different motivations and endeavours. The solutions (c) and (d) hold strongly but one finds difficulties in combining them, although this can be overcome. I am prone to espouse (d) while looking for some possible and rather strange continuities between (c) and (d) (e.g., hyperrealism as the anti-art current which quickly turns into a conformist attitude or, another instance, the anti-literature of Barth, Federman, Sukenick, etc., which at the same time is perversely eclectic, parodistic, pastiche-like, thus revealing post-modernist traits).

The former line of continuities—which, I contend, is crucial—finds its vent in the cultural post-modernism based on the consumerist society. The latter line—via the post-structuralist vogue—has its opening in philosophical post-modernism. There is also no way to come to grips with the new artistic fashion if it is being extricated from the extra-artistic cultural pattern. None the less, these continuities should not blind us to more salient discontinuities. And the first are not to be tackled, as some authors do it, by arguing that the avant-garde, commencing with dadaism and surrealism, is the very hotbed of post-modernism because its programme assumed that blurring the boundaries between art and life was what was finally achieved by the artists of the fifties and sixties. A seminal example of such a mistaken approach are some specimens in the anthology of Peter and Christa Bürger, entitled *Postmoderne: Alltag, Allegorie und Avantgarde* (1987) where the theatrical piece of Peter Weiss on Marat/Sade and Joseph Beuys's creation are instanced as the representatives of modernist post-modernism or vice versa. I think that such a stand—over-faithful to the Weberian premisses of modernist autonomy of art—fails to hit the mark, i.e., to uncover the closest possible commingling of post-modernism and the mass-culture which more and more courts and fools us. On the other side, it endorses post-modernism by endowing its adherents and bearers with the values which they do not deserve and really do not cherish. Summing up, such an approach undermines the efforts to grasp appropriately the subject of, and in, post-modernism. I opt for dealing with it by concentrating on the discontinuities. It is not a personal bent. It is a sane verified methodological exigency because starting with this tenet sheds a distinctive and selective light on what was budding in the works of some neighbouring predecessors.

## II

There are at least three variants of post-modernism, namely socio-cultural, artistic and philosophical. They are intrinsically interlaced, which can be seen in attempts to clarify this concept undertaken by critics and art theoreticians. The attempts so far have failed, yet they are symptomatic since they have to refer to the characteristics of the whole present-day era based on socio-economic and political transformations, and moreover to the specific frame of mind embodied in post-structuralism as the means to understanding the transmutation that was to have been accomplished by the end of the 1970s. The concept of post-modernism is undeniably fashionable, yet on the other hand, it naturally suffers from obfuscation, as is often the case in the humanities. This, however, does not diminish the significance of all the phenomena it covers. It is symptomatic of all cultural tensions and intellectual confusion. It is intuitively perceived that what has so far dominated in our culture is now giving way to new processes and their results. It is not certain whether these processes are really new or whether the name we apply to fix them in clumsy, contradictory definitions has got any sense at all. As the socio-cultural one is of

crucial importance, a few words on how it can be approached: it seems to me that the most adequate oppositional set for socio-cultural post-modernism can be found in the modernism as presented and analysed in M. Weber's famous dissertation from the year 1905 on the protestant ethic and *Geist des Kapitalismus*. This is what J. Habermas referred to in his study *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (1985). It also gave rise to R. Kosseleck's considerations about *Neuzeit*, namely the modern cultural formation that resulted from the two eighteenth-century revolutions: the industrial revolution and the French revolution (see his *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, 1979). Weber's work also inspired two other contemporary scholars, sharing similar assumptions about post-modernism. I mean here Jean Baudrillard and Zygmunt Bauman.

When compared with Weber's conception, modernism, I think must be viewed in a yet broader perspective. It goes beyond any doubt that its assumptions originated and remained, first of all, within the sphere of Enlightenment-liberal attitudes, but it was also connected with Romantic-revolutionary tendencies. Thus some counter-impulses to the Enlightenment tradition had to emerge from its very soil. Exaggerated rationalism required complementary imagination, emotions, and intuition. Myth-creating tendencies expelled from the Promethean kingdom of mere Logos returned as a boomerang. Instrumentalized science made scholars turn to the archaic sources of culture. Philosophy, transformed gradually into a patent science-like discourse, was to be opposed by philosophy carried out with artistic means. Privatized religion, starting with Luther, and particularly with Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard, opened itself to existential issues. Dreadfully crushed nature was regaining its authenticity not only in poetry and art, not only by being a refuge from the town life but, first and foremost, in the defence of spontaneous eros and ventures to understand a 'different' man—outsider, stranger, deviant. To recapitulate, all that Habermas describes as a discourse about modernism (from the Jena circle, through Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Adorno, to Bataille) should be viewed as an inter-modernist discourse whose aim was to restore the lost spiritual balance in humanity, to deabsolutize rationality and to liberate what Adorno called reality '*des Anderen*' and Bataille referred to as a therapeutic knowledge (heterology). In such understanding modernism would *inter alia* include as well *Lebensphilosophie* and all the artistic trends starting from symbolism to surrealism, as also neo-positivist philosophy and all the creative tendencies stressing the material values of a work of art, its construction and function in direct relation with everyday needs.

There is moreover another aspect of the Weberian conception which needs revision. Modernism according to him meant primarily increasing and radical autonomy of all spheres of spiritual activities. Science became freed from philosophy whereas philosophy was freed from religion, which was pushed to the margins; politics grew independent of any ethos, generating its own

administrative-bureaucratic networks; finally, art had no longer to pay homage to extra-aesthetic values. This was evidenced in the bohemian revolt, and later on, in the avant-garde trend as well as in the emergence of aesthetics as a special branch of knowledge. It does not seem, however, that this view can be approved of as the proper one. Modernism embraces too alternative positions and chiefly in its phase after World War II. Already before the year 1939 the Weberian characteristics could be accepted only with respect to the dominant tendencies, which boils down to saying that the counter-phenomena were all the time present in the then-cultural context. With the appearance of the so-called counter-culture and alternative culture in the fifties and sixties, demands to philosophize over science's status, to return to the religious sources of philosophy, to fight back the Leviathans and confirm the ethical foundations of politics, last but not least (what was proved by the new avant-garde movements) to transgress the autonomy of art by abandoning its semi-sacred aesthetic realm, became spectacular. Thus post-modernism, while being grounded on contrary assumptions, must be opposed both to the modernist Logos and Mythos, to its autonomization of spiritual practices and transcending the borderlines outlined by this process of autonomization. In one word, post-modernism has to counterweight the antinomian traits of the modernistic worldview, which was primarily bound to the prevalence of (a) production as the very basis of social fabric; (b) élites which were to play the role of the 'gardeners of culture' educating the masses; (c) a given hierarchy of values determining what is true, just and beautiful (not necessarily one, on the contrary—many of them, competing one with another but still pertaining to reveal the sense of human existence, the meaning of history, our bonds with the cosmos, etc.). The social culture-orientated post-modernism—it will do here to draw on Jean Baudrillard's *La société de consommation* (1970) and *Les stratégies fatales* (1983) or Zygmunt Bauman's *Legislators and Interpreters* (1987)—emphasizes the primacy of consumption, sets forth the fully legitimized thesis that it is the masses which are the genuine subject of cultural processes and launches the conviction that quarrelling about any axiological hierarchy is sheer anachronism.

The philosophical variant of post-modernism was influenced by sociological analyses of mass culture. However, the boom occurred only at the turn of the 1970s when the contestation trend among the neo-avant-garde began to wane. The boom was directly inspired by a fierce discussion between Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard whose subject overlapped with the problems of socio-cultural post-modernism. *Kleine politische Schriften* (1981) by the former and *Tombeau de l'intellectuel et autres papiers* (1984) by the latter bear manifest witness to those intertwined questions. Their philosophical arguments concerned the universal claims of reason, the possibility to establish and accept a certain principle of the universe, the presumed totalitarian consequences of any historio-philosophic reasoning and, last but far from least, the

organic relation between the post-modern *Zeitgeist* and the revival of neo-conservative ideologies in the US and Western Europe. Philosophical post-modernism is generally derived from J.-F. Lyotard's study *La condition post-moderne* (1979) in which, when writing about the contemporary globally taken cultural situation, he attacked the modernist heritage, particularly that of the Hegelian-Marxist provenance. However, it is Jacques Derrida who is the main protagonist of this trend and he should be the first to be discussed. A similar vein of thinking had been yet earlier presented by Michel Foucault who claimed the 'death of man', namely the unsubstantial character of the idea that a subject, individual or collective, has any particular role and mission in history. Another most typical representative of this trend is Gilles Deleuze. As a matter of fact, the Paris school dominated in reflections concerning 'the end of philosophy', seen either in the strong sense of the term as the exhaustion of the resources and benefits of the way of thinking that resulted from the 'love of wisdom' or in the weak one as radically directed against the so-far reigning ways of reasoning. The latter form of post-modernism found followers also in the US, particularly with Richard Rorty's works. I have to leave aside here my analysis of this aspect of post-modernism and my four fundamental objections to such meta-philosophy or else beyond-philosophy, which reaches the point of rhetoric. My objections concern the following theses: (a) that philosophy can do at all without any universal principles and totalizing the vision of world and man (as it is a substitute of religion); (b) that philosophical 'imperialism' necessarily, as specially Deleuze argues, implies practical socio-political imperialism; (c) that the élitism of intellectuals and artists, etc., is dangerous and as if the managerial one does not entail a kind of coercion from above and below; (d) that modernism rests as if on sheer uniformity whereas post-modernism rests on beneficial pluralism. All these theses are fallacious and need a thorough criticism which I have given elsewhere.

### III

If we could reach agreement that the post-modernist socio-cultural mutation which crystalized nowadays amounts to: the mature stage of consumerist societies with their over-abundance, vertiginous plenty of constantly changing impulses, commodification of the whole social fabric because the rule of obsolescence became preponderant; also—in consequence—with their neo-conservative drives, accepted (manifestly or unawares) hedonism, rejection of any firm philosophical, religious, artistic or political foundations, deprived deliberately of any major projects or stratagems, finding joy in existence immersed in oblique fluidity and easily taken carnivalistic void, and further—without any sense of the tragic or the utopian, suffering (if at all) from hypertrophy of various, heterogeneous information, and treating sciences as a useful medium to preserve the maximum of efficiency in all domains of life, etc.—then we are permitted to say that such thematic grasping of the

phenomenon leads to the negative conclusion with respect to the endurance of the subject in post-modernism.

At least, five chief versions (kinds) of subject can be distinguished within the framework of the modernist heritage. Let me list them in an order which is chronological rather than theoretical. The modernist approach originated the cognitive 'I' which took different shapes—from the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* through the Kantian transcendental powers constitutive of the human mind to the Husserlian transcendental cognitive Ego guaranteeing insight into the essence of things. Another subject emerged in the romantic era, i.e., the priestly 'I' of the artist or philosopher, or both intermingled which, partly ironically, partly tragically, struggles with the Absolute. Its legacy was among others the anarchist confession of Max Stirner. In the middle of the nineteenth century we come across the revival of the third subject namely the religion-minded 'I'—in Kierkegaard on one side and Dostoevsky on another. This subject is proclaimed to reveal the divine truth but at the same time it faces the abyss between our human lot and the Providential Realm. Cosmos-minded attitudes were never silenced in our European thought. They went through ups and downs, rising again with striking strength in the last decades, drawing *inter alia* on Far Eastern mysticism or mystical pragmatism of the Buddhist sort. The fourth subject launched almost in the same epoch could be called the collective one, bearing on definite master-designs aiming at the fullest possible emancipation of humankind. The marxist vision as well as the Bakunin-Kropotkin line of thinking should be cited as the very paragons of this standpoint. Finally the 'I' which was torn by inner doubts, split and dramatically orientated towards any Anchors which could save its existential journey through the quicksands. This subject in quest of itself started from Baudelaire through Gide and Kafka to Beckett and Robbe-Grillet and also from Freud to the J.-P. Sartrean 'pour-soi', the Heideggerian *Jemeinigkeit* or Emil Cioran's self-reflexive diagnosis. The names brought here are nothing but a few exemplary instances out of a larger artistic and intellectual family. No doubt that the European intellectual story was a scene of dramatic clashes between the five distinguished above 'I's as well as it is true that in particular cases and periods they were somewhat confluent. The drama of conflicts created, however, the dominant tone. As I have already mentioned, around 1750 theodicy yields place to history-dicy, thus the religious-minded 'I' was removed by the collective, promethean 'I'. The most important shift occurred when with Descartes the divine absolute subject became the question to be unwound in the light of the epistemological 'I' which ultimately (despite a malicious demon) provides us with the category of existence. In other words, since this break the idea of subjectivity versus the Absolute or Nothingness, embodied in any form, haunted European thought permanently. The conflict-ridden instances can be easily multiplied—all are entangled in the search for our Home (or Harbour), all ask about the alibi justifying our shaky human condition. What matters

with regard to our deliberations here is the fact that the notion of the subject in all five versions implied always some metaphysics, i.e., the painful, recurrent reflection whether the longing for any arché and telos is simply a wanton hunting after chimera, or it is ineradicable because there is something more than common-sense realities. Let us underline: not the answers are decisive (as they were diverse) but the questions about the sense of Being and our existence. In an apt articulation of Leszek Kołakowski's recent book from 1988: modern thought enriched our spiritual heritage which is founded on the horror metaphysicus never to be exiled.

Now, if the above panorama and my observations will be approved of (I realize that it could be perhaps enlarged and re-stated in a subtler way), there it is rather clear that the post-modern trend downgraded all these five subjects and hence the exile of the horror metaphysicus happened to be factual. The different 'I's are dismissed as deceptive and dangerous hypostases or else as myths which groundlessly identify the human Ego in this or another disguise and form, as the primary dynamic force of the world and man's existence.

Yet it could be rejoined that the given situation now is to a great extent bizarre and ambiguous because post-modernist artists pretend, maybe with good reasons, that finally they are genuinely free, being no more servants of any mission or Great Dedication. It is moreover held that the Lyotardian idea of culture, freed of any steering and of any a priori settled goals (which must be, coercion included, achieved), precisely makes all individuals happy subjects deciding about their own choices whereas all attempts to impose upon them the demanded from the top (i.e., by the educators—'gardeners'—lawgivers of what culture should be) Ultimate Therapy proves futile and results in Luciferic disasters. Moreover, the arguments run that philosophical post-modernism—see e.g., Rorty, Lyotard, Marquard—is closely linked to the defence of liberal-democratic ideas. Thus the particular subject is confirmed by their premisses and conclusions. I find such a rejoinder unconvincing. I have already ventured to signal my counter-arguments against the reasoning of its exponents.

Take the regular artist of post-modern ideas and attachment. He is pushed by the ubiquitous mass-media, he surrenders to the all-over consumerism, advertizing and fetishes of the latest brand. Let us gently forget the actionists, happeners and performers who still fought for something that means for some political, religious or social ideals. Let us try to confront instead present-day artists, e.g., J. Schnabel or J. Dokoupil with, say, B. Vautrier, A. Cavellini, V. Acconci and P. Manzoni—the scandalists who continued Duchampian blasphemies and his outright challenge against sacred art. R. Schwarzkogler—the renowned case—was even ready to cut himself to death accomplishing a rebellious frenzy in the name of myth (the artist's body as his workshop and anti-craft) which could not be realized. Today, their antagonists mocking at the avant-garde eschatology, at all kinds of worship and nostalgia for any *ordo*

*mundi*, turn into puppets or robots or, at most, clowns. Some of them, i.e., the incidental 'mentalists' who go on into self-analysis, remain on the borderlines of modernism and post-modernism. When Sandro Chia presents his colossus with abstract painting in the stretched down hands, it could mean the derision of the noble predecessors but also mere bottomless melancholy. The artist-colossus seems to be a strawman longing for the sacred tablets which were handed over from Kandinsky and Delauney up till de Kooning and the early Rauschenberg. When Rob Scholte shocks us with the artist as clown or ape, elegantly dressed, parodying the classical scenery of the Sovereign Creator in his atelier, his viewpoint is by no means affirmative. On the contrary, his sadness is more than obvious despite his splendid virtuoso capacities. The perfidious play with the glorious art of the past is the very witness of the collapse of culture. It is thus inadmissible (and highly regrettable) to pronounce the opinion that the post-modern artist is entirely liberated. He is enslaved by his total disengagement and domestication in the consumerist fairy-land. What I state sounds like sophistry but the fact is that while we follow the post-modern frivolous or senseless pastiches (by the way, it boils down to obvious eclecticism) we are left with the feeling of sheer emptiness. What a subject is such an artist then? Isn't it self-defeating to embrace the now predominating insubstantiality?

The same has to be held with regard to, e.g., Lyotard's paradigm of the apparently beneficial cultural pluralism resting on manifold likings, preferences, options. For goodness' sake what kind of pluralism is it? Of responsible, self-conscious subjects? I deny it. We have to do solely with numerical individuals but certainly not with individualities. No one asks about the status of his(her) 'I', no one searches for the inner truth which might be a permanent phantom but we cannot and should not abide without it. If intellectuals and artists (and priests too) give up their vocation of lawgiver, this entails in consequence only the creed—the colloquial one, passive self-annihilating—in *carpe diem* or the aggressive rivalry simulating tolerance. The Weberian disenchantment of the magical world is thus extended into the third disenchantment which absorbs also the élite afraid of the mass-idols and conceding to the verdict that any authority (also the charismatic) is monstrous. No codes and no norms deserve any serious attention as they cancel each other. The spectacles of excitement, pleasant confusion and the mind-messages effectively exerted take over. The subject is buried in circumstantial occurrences which govern our existence that is primarily, if not exclusively, mass culture-bound. The post-modern philosophers mentioned before are, I would agree, genuine advocates of the anti-totalitarian societies. None the less, I contend that their chief fault rests upon their inconsistency of which they seem not to be aware. Once they advance the view that some socio-political ideals are advisable, or, in stronger meaning of, should be prior to others, they become principled. In other words, they have to choose: either to fight for the subject's sovereignty

and elementary dignity, or leave him in ashes as useless stuff. When they voice their conviction that hermeneutics mainly attracts them because of its praise of prejudices, tradition, constant conversation which does not need any integral personality, they willy-nilly tend towards denigration of the subject. But by the indispensable force of their own authorship, by their discourse personally imprinted they bring again the 'I' through the back door. The paradox is that the more they speak of chance, hazard, or *Schicksal* which appears in unexpected events, or the efforts to establish an intelligible communication despite different habits of mind and language, or else of the *petites histoires* which join people together, the more evident becomes the fact that the modernist Ego is irrevocable. When you preach a truth, even the sceptical or radically relativistic one, you get entrapped in some kind of metaphysics which implies the subject in one of our five versions or few of them in the same context.

That is why the perspectives of omnipotent victorious post-modernism (as the concept was sketchily outlined) are either weak because it works against the grain of our best cultural heritage and awakens it to counter-fight, or they are promising but, no doubt, suicidal. Most probable, we are passing at the moment through a transitory era—I would call it referring to the hidden hinted concept, coined by Kosselleck and Blumenberg in relation to the historical watershed of 1750, *unsere kleine Sattelzeit*. It is, most probably, the outcome of the too many and sharpened antinomies and dilemmas of late modernism. In this respect Wolfgang Iser, the German thinker, perhaps justly epitomizes our contemporary civilizational plus cultural pattern in the formula: *unsere postmoderne Moderne*. What we are expected to do in these crumbling cultural conditions is the presentation of the most lucid and self-conscious position. We cannot escape the obligation of asking the fundamental questions about sense-making and the axiological order. The answers (more or less fallacious) are our human discomfort and worry which will be never appeased. But what keeps our cultural energy alive is exactly the persistent, I would add, perennial striving for some (let them be, alas, volatile) ultimate grounds. The subject in all five versions is, among others, one of such answers to the fragility of our existence and uncertainty which is our twin. Hence, I dare be pathetic in this coda and state that there is no excuse for the emphatic adherence to post-modernism unless someone will tell us sardonically that we should not bother about the cultural ethos and let it simply wither away.

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## CHINESE PUZZLES: THE PRACTICAL AESTHETICS OF TRANSLATION

Chunshen Zhu

### I

ANY TRANSLATOR is faced with the problem of conveying the sense, the whole sense, and—especially in poetry—something more than the sense, from the Source Language (SL) to the Target Language (TL). When he is dealing with two languages as radically different as Chinese and English, the problem can be especially puzzling. There is this advantage, however: that this very difficulty may throw into clearer relief those aesthetic qualities that distinguish creative texts from informative ones. Such qualities, it might seem, must inhere in that 'something more than the sense'; but since, in a good poem, that 'something' is to be found emerging from, or merging with, the sense and the form at almost every point, it may best be examined by critical comparison of several translators' attempts to solve the problems of one Chinese poem. For problems of practical aesthetics turn out to be necessarily involved with problems of sense and form. In this connection, *Qilü: Denggao*, written by Du Fu (Tu Fu, AD 712-770) in AD 767, may serve as an example of how the problems of translation bring into conscious focus both the existence of aesthetic qualities and their symbiotic relationship with all the other qualities of sense, imposed form, and organic form.

*Qilü*, a form of Chinese classical Tang poetry, has a regular structural pattern of eight lines, each containing seven characters in a syntactic sequence with a strict sound scheme. *Denggao*, literally translated as *Climbing a Height*, has been regarded by critics as the best example of the genre. One of the outstanding qualities that have earned the poem such an honour is the omnipresence of antithesis (*duizhang*), at cognitive as well as structural levels. This is a fact that calls for meticulous attention from the translator—especially when images are thrown into sharp contrast to bear out the poet's view of life in his late period, for while theoretically the structural might *sometimes* merely reinforce the cognitive, an image must always extend it into another realm.

Here is the original with a word-for-word translation of mine:

Denggao  
(Climbing Height)

Fengji tiangao yuan xiao ai,  
(Wind rapid sky high gibbons cry sadly,)

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