

MY INCREASING TROUBLES WITH POSTMODERNISM

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The more I study the literature concerning postmodernism, the less contented I am with the solutions provided and the less certain of the force of my own countersolution. The first difficulty is to understand modernism and modernity (modernization). There are, as is well known, different approaches to this problem. The Weberian interpretation, accepted as the starting point of almost all discussions, is not quite satisfactory. Already Habermas, who drew on it, transcended the analysis given by his great forerunner in the dissertation on the "*Geist des Kapitalismus*." Taking into account the intricacies and antinomies of modernism in its mature stage, one may wonder whether they do not already cover many of the ideas made topical in the postmodern discussion. In other words, one must realize that understanding the possibly new cultural mutation depends on what is considered to be genuinely contrastive with the modern structure, which also includes lifestyle and average consciousness (*die Moderne*).

In any case, even if we solve this initial difficulty, there remain four main problems. When we attempt to capture the sense and the distinctive characteristics of postmodernism as the peculiar logic of culture (in such domains as art, philosophy, science, religion) and of postmodernity (understood as the civilizational infrastructure with definite institutions, human interrelations, morality, everyday ways of thinking, feeling and behaving), we come across these four problems. I call them motifs which complicate the examination of the phenomenon we are interested in. These motifs regard: a) the blurred identity of postmodernism, b) the dissonances within its cultural formation comprising the interconnections of postmodern logic and the structure of postmodernity, c) the unclear center of the postmodern spectrum in particular domains, say, art and philosophy, d) the deliberate refusal of self-determination by postmodernists and its consequences. Motifs *b* and *c* are obviously the derivatives of *a* and reaffirm the latter, whereas motif *d* intensifies the other three.

Let me briefly present the troubles bearing on the above motifs in a more

concrete manner. By the blurred identity I mean the muddle which results from various descriptions and interpretations of postmodernity as well as—to a much greater degree—of postmodernism. The muddle becomes more evident when one confronts the two descriptive procedures which should correspond one to the other and correlate smoothly. But they do not meet such a condition. Indeed, the sociologists of culture tell us that postmodernity rests on such specific features as: postindustrialism involving the primacy of scientific experts, the pervasiveness of technical know-how and technology etc., or consumerism accompanied by permissivism, or the emergence of a new social stratum (class) of so-called cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu) and their educated audiences (i.e. yuppies and their progeny), or the informational revolution privileging the multifarious mass media and the *simulacra* which they convey, or the special rhythm of social reality, rooted in the ephemerality and the frenetic changeability of everything around us which generates a kind of frantic experiencing of the world, or the flexible accumulation of capital with emphasis on financial capital and, in particular, on financial operations. These are probably the most significant factors. They can all be at work simultaneously, certainly, but we may still wonder which of them is primary, which the most characteristic constituent of postmodernity. Perhaps all of them operate in a complex combinatorial pattern. None of the many books on this topic provides a satisfactory solution.

The same can be said with respect to postmodernism. We hear about contingency, chaos, heterogeneity, pluralism, eclecticism, anti-intellectualism and unthinking, obedience to the rule of "anything goes," anti-foundationism, resignation from any emancipatory and utopian designs, abandonment of the ideals of the French Revolution, hedonism, loss of the tragic alienation indifferent-existence—all of these traits apparently epitomizing a new mutation. Well, such traits can constitute a coherent whole even if not all passages and bridges between them are obvious. However, in many accounts, contradictory to the above are added as equally encapsulating the postmodern consciousness. For instance: the allegedly beneficial abandonment of tyrannical Logos and the adoption instead of the many kinds of rationality capable of fathoming reality and our own minds (Welsch); the access to an always problematic but incessantly tempting transcendental dimension thanks to sound pyrrhonism (Marquard); the realization that any consensus is sheer mythology (Lyotard); the final sovereignty of the individual (Bauman); the ethos of full responsibility when no grand ideology or ruling worldview oppresses people's consciousness and discourse; the fulfilled access to real democracy without elitist pundits who always know better dictating how all ought to think and act (Rorty and Lyotard). Thus, there is some uncertainty how to grasp the peculiar logic of postmodern culture. Moreover these uncertainties are multiplied when one tries to seize the new structure as a whole, in all its possible dimensions—from economics and politics up to philosophy. It

is by no means obvious how and why e.g. the flexible accumulation of capital, or postindustrialism, or a new social stratum should fit together with, or at least be functionally intertwined with, either the dominant heterogeneous plurality and eclecticism or the prevailing feeling of existence beyond any possible alienation. The blurred identity of postmodernism is aggravated by the tendency to employ the concept to cover everything that differs from previously sanctioned canons. Some thinkers, for example W. Welsch, call it "feuilleton postmodernism" and ridicule it. However, it cannot be so easily dismissed because, as D. Lehman justly notes, the sign of our times is its cultural mess and confusion.

The next topic follows from the initial difficulties. If we decide to define the postmodernity-postmodernism syndrome in any one way, we will find that there are various kinds of postmodern strategies *within* the given set of characteristics assented to. What I label "the dissonances" is then nothing but the quite striking and illuminating difference between the mentality of the mass culture in which postmodernism is nurtured and the artistic or philosophical consciousness associated with it. It suffices here to state that the artists called postmodernist, despite their indubitable gravitation towards a low-level culture accessible to all, i.e. evoking immediate satisfaction, and which is easily digested and forgotten, distance themselves at the same time from this model. For they belong to the high-level culture which perfidiously plays the intertextual games of pastiche and parody while juxtaposing manifold styles, conventions as I see the problem, and discourses. And they do not surrender to any mythology which is incessantly reproduced by the mass culture. A much stronger dissonance occurs between the mentality shaped by the mass media glorifying the end of "grand narratives" (which is tied to the eruption of unprincipled tolerance in every dimension) on the one hand and philosophical postmodernism on the other. By the very nature of the latter it has to ask about the meaningfulness of human existence. Dealing with the inherited claim to truth and with such categories as arch, telos, substance, etc., it cannot escape from being involved in weighing arguments pro and con, establishing some rules of legitimate thinking, dwelling on *ought*, which, even if not verifiable, justifies the differentiation between good and evil. There is also a dissonance (distance) between postmodern art (literature) and postmodern philosophy. For the former can be, and often remains, anti-intellectual, abhorring any self-commentaries. Yet philosophizing must be engaged in intellectually refined controversies and self-reflections. It tries to transgress itself in the direction of a "beyond-philosophy" which means "a kind of writing" (Rorty) or "*l'autre pensée*" (Lyotard). But, in so doing, it tends toward validating unprincipled thought (Marquard's apt formula of "*Prinzip des Nichtprinzipiellen*"). The best proof of the inner dissonance within the pm-syndrome, specifically the distance between adhering to belles lettres or to philosophy are specimens of art which are both philosophically relevant and question-begging,

for example, Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*. No one would deny that this work is to a spectacular degree much more philosophical than literary. In consequence, when received appropriately by sophisticated readers rather than by a popular audience, this novel or "para-novel" (arrestingly self-reflexive) cannot provide a pastime enjoying funny or riddle-like narration. The less competent receiver can, of course, pick out the story-telling pages and ignore the encyclopedic erudition.

The third motif is linked to the two others delineated so far. When we begin the descriptive and interpretive analysis of particular fields of postmodernism we become aware at the outset that we have to do with a spectrum the center of which is unclear. My instances will be drawn from art and philosophy. What should be regarded in the art of film as the paradigm of postmodernism? Warren Beattie's "Dick Tracy" as it openly flirts with mass culture and shares the worship of the same mythology although it is done with obvious irony and perversion, or rather R. Zemecki's "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" where mass-culture symbols and fetishes are only a means for carrying out the game of pastiche and parody? I would vote for the second, but the demarcation lines between the two works are very thin, indeed obscure. Should one take as post-modern paragon an artwork by the painter (or sculptor) who ostentatiously gives up thinking about creative process and focuses his attention on canvas, on stone, or one who behaves as a sheer commercialist? Are these sufficiently differentiating qualities? Would it not be better to take as a typical postmodernist M. Kostabi, M. Lersch, M. Bidlo, J. Koons and E. Cucchi who provokingly turn their creation into a cynical business, but use a characteristic inventory of means, i.e. either impudently signing the old masterpieces as their property, or displaying the most trivial skibbolets without resentment and reservation, or patently mixing up various styles and conventions? With regard to philosophy, the continuum extends from an excellent metaphilosophical scrutiny of the texts of great masters like Descartes, Kant, Husserl, Heidegger through philosophizing—against its status and endeavors—on the beneficial death of philosophy as "the love of wisdom" which always entails the appeal to mandatory foundations and on to the very different domain of plural rhetorics, private worldviews, and writing just as anyone might to express a view. Most probably, the focus should be placed on the fascinating oscillation and tension between the aim of killing philosophy altogether and protecting it in the very enactment of this intellectual "ritual." Neither of the two extremes of the philosophical spectrum is deprived of this dramatic ambiguity. The cases of Derrida, Lyotard and Rorty clearly confirm it.

The last motif confirms the nexus of blurred identity, dissonances, and shifting continua. Postmodernists, resisting any metalanguage and metatheory, avoid any fixed self-description. Derrida renders deconstructivism and his chief concepts

like *differance*, *archi-trace*, *archi-écriture* by sticking to no clear-cut definition. Other thinkers from the same family also offer radical criticism of the whole philosophical tradition but are not willing to present any positive principles. (They are deliberately not articulated and generate the aura of a labyrinth without exits.) By resigning from any self-reflexion (meta-art is their *beta noire*), the artists reject any "labeling," any "pigeon holing," which is associated with modernism. This approach is rather standard although there are exceptions such as Lyotard or Eco who comment with refinement on their postmodernism. In general, the trouble triggered by postmodern restraints and total abstinence from detailing counter-fundamentalist assumptions and methods is rather devastating. Of course, one can attempt to unearth them—but it is rather like fighting with fog. When only the *pars destruens* matters, perhaps the postmodernity-postmodernism-syndrome should be considered exclusively as the offshoot of modernism in its utmost self-critical phase. If this hypothesis is well-received by the representatives of the pm-syndrome, why do they claim that their assets are exceedingly original or specific and demand that in grasping them one should not apply modern intellectual weaponry but rather new "keys" of analysis responding to their assumptions? What are they when nothing is stated positively and postmodernism in this respect remains mysteriously foggy? Does not this fog-giness at once disarm postmodern argumentation? Why should one lose time and energy in debating something so misty? Moreover, when we take seriously the rule of intellectual permissiveness (anything goes), why should we not insist on our legitimate rights to launch the modern paradigms, especially when our opponents' argumentation is to such an extent invalid, i.e. deprived of *pars construens*?

Notwithstanding the initial difficulty and the four motifs causing continued trouble understanding the very character and sense of pm-syndrome, I opt for conceiving it as a new cultural mutation opposite to the m-formation. Although it is true that a number of features pertinent to the latter slowly evolved in the preceding epoch, they were before situated on the margins whereas now they are shifted to the center of cultural space. They were thereby transformed qualitatively. For example, techno- and science-alatry as well as "eco-spasm" and "the third wave" (Toffler) which de-industrialized the social fabric and made flexible the accumulation of capital, already appeared in the late 50s. Nonetheless, only when consumerism accompanied by permissiveness which speeded up the frenetic changeability of merchandise (while information, or signs in general, became one of the basic commodities) and enhanced the dynamics of what Virillo called *le processus dromologique* (acceleration of everything and resulting ephemerality) coalesce with the above listed features is an unprecedented cultural attitude upset. To these selected traits (intertwining continuity with discontinuity) correspond the anti-foundationalism, the patchwork of heteroge-

nous elements, eclecticism, history robbed of its sense and adopted in a pastiche or parody manner, the rule "anything goes," limitless pluralism, surrender to the apparent charms of mass culture, etc.

I leave open the question of genetic interrelations between postmodernity conceived as prime mover and postmodernism as the new cultural logic. The studies of specialists did not provide persuasive explanations of this matter, neither positive nor negative. What we know for sure amounts to the emergence of postmodernism in literature and architecture as early as the mid-60s. Was the consumerist society budding still earlier but surreptitiously and without our consciousness?

Against the background of what was succinctly laid down in the preceding section, allow me to look at one concrete question. How does poststructuralism relate to the postmodernism with which it temporally overlaps? Poststructuralism diminishes the dissonance between philosophy and literature called "postmodern" and, in a contrary direction, increases the distance between the postmodern writer and the average postmodern mentality which hardly welcomes the subtle games of intertextuality. That is why, on the literary spectrum, the poststructuralist orientation would be located along the wing which comprises the explosive alloys of postmodern tendencies and avant-garde attitudes (close to Eco, Barth, Calvino). Such alloys occur in all domains of art, but poststructuralism emerges as a problem mainly in belles-lettres (a minor echo of dissonance, in this case between the different art domains).

There is no doubt that postmodernism took over from poststructuralism the belief in the basic role of language in culture, ascribing particular importance to texts as well as abandoning their relation to the external world and to the creative subject in favor of intertextual relations. At the same time it cut itself off from aspirations to be scientific, that is, to construct a methatheoretic language which would define objectively the given order of meanings. It did not accept binary oppositions as the necessary context of truth, and generally called in question necessary relationships which are to reveal the essence of things, valuing creative ideas that play with meanings that are specific to essays and texts. In short, it blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction. Any text is a pretext for free meaning-forming interpretations, and the authorship of texts is distributed in various degrees between the producers of texts and their receivers. However, when we pass from the difference that constitutes all signs (in accordance with Saussure's premise) to differentiation as the necessary condition of thinking (Derrida and Deleuze), poststructuralism assumes the form of deconstructivism. The latter to a great extent repeats in a literary version what has already been said by antiphilosophers, namely, that there is no linguistic *universum* that could be organized in accordance with definite principles in a manner limiting its sense. There are no constant "signifieds" because that which is given is a free play of

signifying elements that produces meaning without any restriction whatever. One should not establish any relation between the text and any entity which could be "seen through" the former. Writing more clearly than speech (which makes present both its subject and that which he indicates) shows us that texts are permanently interpreted anew because the senses of words and sentences incessantly shift and darken. It is the linguistic utterance in a network of other similar utterances, and not the author, which is the ultimate instance. Textualism determines the horizon of our world and our constantly modified communication with others. Hence a deconstructivist—if this formulation does not seem too brief and peremptory—is a poststructuralist with an output (sometimes excessive) of philosophical arguments borrowed from Derrida and Deleuze or Rorty. As has on many occasions been stressed by Paul de Man and J. Hillis-Miller, as soon as we find that, instead of the world, we have to do with words, that each reading of the text is really its un-reading, that the indeterminacy of the text reveals the vertiginous possibilities of its comprehension—incomprehension, and that all hierarchy and order of meanings is delusory, we remain in the area of literary theory which does not want to be theoretical. But—attention!—when, in order to substantiate these assumptions, one calls in question such principles as *arche*, *telos*, center, and when history is treated as an illusion, we have to do with philosophizing, which is never completely bidden farewell by the adherents of Derrida. In that respect they draw the correct consequences of the assumptions of deconstructivism which makes the reflection on literature philosophical in the same degree in which it makes philosophy related to literature which is specifically, that is conceptually, written. That feature was brought out in works which are considered most authoritative in the matter now under consideration, for instance, in the positive exposition of the subject by J. Culler and the critically analytical approach of C. Norris (both of 1982) as well as in the books by V. B. Leitch (1983) and E. Goodheart (1984). The literature concerned with poststructuralism is enormous. Experts sometimes stress the fact that it has developed from the same rebellion which brought the events of May 1968. As in the socio-political sphere, it was necessary to generate and activate a radical transformation in the study of language, literature, and culture in general. The circle Tel Quel, the works of P. Sollers and C. Simon, the reflections of J. Kristeva, and especially the theoretically critical discourse of the late Barthes—behind which we see the stimulating thought of Foucault—gave rise to poststructuralist views. They referred to *Book* by Mallarmé and to *Finnegans Wake* by Joyce. We should remember at this point that, because of their strongly rebellious counter-cultural tendencies, the above mentioned authors were strongly linked to the new avant-garde but—what must also be emphasized—they reached beyond the latter. Postmodern-minded philosophers have been through that school of thought. It is symptomatic that Derrida and Deleuze, who later influenced it spectacularly,

were at first subject to its stimulations and personally close to Tel Quel. The echoes of that genealogy can be heard in their elucidations of their attitude towards the contemporary world. When they are blamed for favoring neoconservatives, they justly argue that they never abandoned the idea of a civil self-managing society although they do not think that the democratic ideals can be legitimized by any absolute principles.

On the other side, the novels linked to the poststructuralist attitude cannot be treated as an obvious exemplification of postmodernism. Sollers, Simon, the late Robbe-Grillet and other authors from this intellectual circle certainly refute tentative annexations in that respect. They are marked rather by recent avant-garde experimentation with semantics and syntax intended to bring the novel to the end of its substantiality. That means they played with clashing *topoi* and motifs, the mixture of discourses, and the polyphonic multiperspectival character of language. Through the broken substance of language, they aimed, not to support cultural chaos, but rather to oppose it and as well to denounce empty ideological slogans. Poststructuralist-biased prose is extremely difficult for ordinary readers to assimilate; its lucid and ironically self-critical character make it accessible only to the initiated. Its point consists in raising the cardinal question about the sense of the survival of novelistic art. One might disagree with me, and explain the distance between the poststructuralist and the postmodernist *episteme* (in the latter it is intermixed with *doxa*) by referring the phenomenon only to the difference between philosophizing and writing a novel despite their parallelism. Such argument does not override the question on which I reflect here. Postmodernism rejects the aspiration of theory to perform the role of metalanguage, that is, that of a *sui generis* guardian of impartially established truth that determines definite constraints on the interpretation of texts. It assigns itself the role of one possible discourse among other equally valid ones (such as a critical statement or literary praxis itself), a discourse which does not pretend to settle any elementary order of meanings and values. That is so, it is claimed, because meanings are inevitably indefinite, contextually conditioned, and mock cognitive fundamentalism. Poststructuralism, burdened with the self-knowledge of its own cultural and historical relativity, paved the way for the Derridean breakthrough. However, although it shared with postmodernism skeptical attitudes with regard to objective and universal artistic senses and cultural texts in general, it realized that mere disbelief will not do.

Poststructuralism is by no means identical with postmodernism since, I would argue, it entails convictions concerning semantic instability which undermine theorizing in another way. Namely, poststructuralists use these findings to destroy literature as art and the aesthetic theory as its superior frame of reference. Postmodernism wants to reinstate literary art and possibly (Jencks) to save the aesthetic canons.

The passage from one trend to another can be best seized in the domain of literary theory—the very bridge between the two. Consider Derrida's speech at the Baltimore conference on literary studies in 1966, and the fact that the next year witnessed the appearance of his two books which outline a new counter-philosophical philosophy. We are allowed to conclude that it was just in these years (for it was a gradual process and not the effect of a sudden insight into the nature of discourses in dehumanities) that we note the *transformation* of post-structuralism into deconstructivism. That the latter is one of the main components of postmodernism in its philosophical version no one denies. However, transformation implies continuity and discontinuity alike. The former consists in attaching importance to all varieties of intellectual games, calling in question the autonomous status of a given work (its autotelic artistic nature), undermining its structural invariance, maintaining that there is nothing objectively founded, nothing as if pre-given for interpretation since interpreting just means irremovable and constitutive putting-together and constructing of the work. It also means predilection for quotations and allusions, a mixture of genres, tropes, and motifs which disintegrate the work. At this juncture, we must note again that both the recent avant-garde and postmodernism could adopt this strategy. But they did it in different ways. The first aimed to annihilate the artistic message, get rid of narration, symbolics, and metaphors, emphasize the artist's dramatic lot as his (her) status is threatened. At the opposite pole, the effort to regain art, refresh narration, cancel the artist's drama as ungrounded. This juxtaposition bears on discontinuity and reinforces it. Discontinuity consists in shifting the stress from a possible polyvalence of the text (which does not preclude a hierarchical ordering of its various dimensions and levels) or from a combination of rival primary senses (two or more), among which choice should and could be made, toward that which Derrida has termed the undecidability of sense. A lack of transparency resulting from semantic "disturbances" is supposed to mark every text in a greater or lesser degree. Yet in an interview given to J. Kearns and K. Newton (see A. Easthope, *British Poststructuralism Since 1965*, London, 1980) Derrida made the qualification that indefiniteness occurs in special situations and that not all interpretations are of equal strength because some of them may explain more than others do. In any case, that statement itself cancels the possibility of grasping the entire meaning. It is just this threshold in thinking which is decisive for the deconstructive strategy. The point is not only that such an interpretation, which cancels theory in its strict sense, cannot meet the condition of truth or faithfulness; it is also impossible for it to be coherent, and that because of the dissemination and supplementation of meaning and their resulting incessant mobility. The continuity between poststructuralism and postmodernism should thus be based on their common conviction about the semantic shakiness of literature and art as well as their theories, as a kind of metalanguage, because

both are conditioned by cultural pragmatics. On the other hand, discontinuity between them immediately makes itself felt when one examines their divergent understandings of this shakiness and their counterparts in the praxis of creative work. There is no use in this connection to cite the declarations of Derrida on ecomimesis (that is, indeed, on *natura naturans*), which is an attribute of every work to some extent, as it never imitates but always represents the products of art—demiurges, functionally analogous to the products of natural forces. The point is—and it is confirmed by the argumentation of J. Klinkowitz in *The Self-Apparent World* (1984) and *Literary Subversions* (1985) and also by the French theorists of the *nouveau-nouveau roman*—that the formation which I have termed neoavant-garde is marked by its inherent and relentless fight against the autotelic status of art and by the painful experience of the decomposition of the latter. Hence its question about the legitimation of sense (not of art only) that is always close to nonsense too. That is intended to test our resistance to the vagueness of rules of cognition as well as to reflect the broken existential foundations of the world, the changing of reality into fiction (and vice versa), and the intercrossing of real time with imaginary or mythico-cyclical time. Cortázar, Fuentes and Garcia Marquez, Robbe-Grillet and Handke, Butor and Pynchon should be mentioned as the representatives of this approach. But they should not be equated with e.g. Calvino, Barth, and Barthelme, because the former are not postmodernists. For them the issue of the hierarchy of values, the stubborn groping in the dark in search of truth, the legibility of texts, be they ever so polysemic, their specific ideas (even if the structure of a given work is labyrinthal and even if that which is shown is ridden with contradictions) are still of basic importance. For the latter, following S. Fish, the burden is transmitted to the receiver. Consensus, if achieved at all, is possible on the ground of commonly shared beliefs, (*doxa*), likings, and interests. The rhetoric of the researcher is added to that of the writer (artist); both of them demystify the chase for the chimera of binding transcendental truth.

Perhaps the above controversy over poststructuralism should have been transferred to the domain of literary theory and its metatheoretical adventures, but this would require discussing literary blending with philosophical postmodernism. Hence it seemed more sensible, as well as more accurate, to take into account the visible overlapping of poststructuralism with the literary production which is linked to avant-garde practice. Some scholars annex these works to postmodernism, which I regard as a serious mistake. Poststructuralism seen from the two sides sketched here, i.e. with its equivocity intact, allows us to grasp both its affinities with postmodernism as well as their distinctions. When the utopian and emancipatory aspirations of the newest avant-garde suffered a defeat, the entire set of means and tricks—used for the purpose of transgressing art, which was regarded as no longer equal to the challenges and expectations of the world

around it—was used, in modified form, mainly in a radical turn towards low culture, to possibly restore the shaken autonomy of literary works. Postmodernity took the upper hand, manifestly alien to poststructuralist thinking and constitutive for the postmodern breakthrough. The issue is nevertheless not simple. I would not be particularly astonished if my reflections were treated as hair splitting. Why make a distinction between poststructuralism and deconstructivism if the distance between the two is as small as that between a boy and the youth he becomes? I may be wrong, but I would like to see arguments stronger than those I have seen, which have not convinced me.

In any case, two reasons support my approach. My working assumption is that, in the pm-syndrome, the mass culture plays an important role. This is reflected in literary writing which is rather at odds with the poststructuralist doctrine and the practice inspired by it. The ideal postmodernist should be shocked by the rhythm of fashion and delight in the pursuit of what sells best today. Nothing is more alien to the attitude of poststructuralists. Secondly, there is symptomatic and instructive evidence that poststructuralist thought on literature belongs to the m cultural formation. It seems that there are more points of contact between e.g. *L'Art du roman* (1986) by Milan Kundera and the well-known programmatic text of Ronald Sukenick *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories* (1969) than between the latter and Barth's views on literature in a state of exhaustion. Kundera realizes perfectly well that the survival of the novel is threatened because our culture is subject to the pressures of totalitarianism and the temptations of a flattened and trivial civilization. But the novel holds its own—except for its serially multiplied imitations intended for a market that demands products of questionable value—because its genuine mission is the study of human existence and the disclosure of its ambiguity, which means the continuation of the legacy of Cervantes, Sterne, Kafka, Musil, and Broch. Kundera rejects a one-truth-view in favor of a polyphonic dialogue of the various religions, philosophies, and ideologies intertwined with everyday experience and with the individual fate shown against the background of the intricacies of history. But his attitude does not preclude truth in general because it means in fact a journey intended to reveal the sense of existence in our times. Now Sukenick, even though he speaks about writing and reading which remain in the ruins of narratives with a plot, with a realistic vision of the literary work, the irreducible subject in the person of the author, and even though he stresses the absolute problematality of everything (art itself included), in fact he longs for truth, for something authoritative which rises above and beyond the making of novels. One might object that Kundera is a bad example because he disregards philosophers pretending to be priests and is Rorty's favorite model of what to think about reality and ourselves. But it is precisely Kundera's private worldview, his free philosophizing, that is impregnated by the modern spirit. At stake

in all his novels is the weight of being, our choices, and responsibilities. He firmly defends that loss Sukenick dramatically deplores; but it is true that their writing is different in kind. Kundera is much more "traditional" than Sukenick. But their worldviews are not so dissimilar. It is otherwise in the case of Barth; even when he comments on the paralysis that accompanies the state of being an artist, he is in favor of experimenting with conventions, old and new, and of flirting with his readers, sophisticated and average alike. For instance, in his novel *Sabbatical*, although it is based on the theme of the self-consciousness of the hero, who is a writer who tries to grasp the sense of life (both his own and that of his wife) and seems to declare himself in favor of Wilde's perverse formula that it is art which shapes reality and not vice versa (we learn that living, sailing, and telling endless stories consisting of many stories are indeed the same), he in fact constructs a witty text. It is concerned with the adventures and distress of a married couple, enriched with sex, crime, and espionage. The novel is loaded with footnotes, newspaper material, geographical data, sailors' knowledge. It is pointless, without any solutions of intriguing complications, and with a lot of literary allusions ranging from Shaherezadi's fables, through Shakespeare and Cervantes to Byron and Edgar Allan Poe. I do not claim that such a mixture of relics of avant-garde self-knowledge with programmatic eclecticism is valueless. On the contrary. One can single out in it that which is postmodernist in character and most probably prevails over the poststructuralist attitude. One can, and should, ask whether the two tendencies go together or rather, as I contend, asunder. Let us verify the possibility of such an operation by taking into consideration *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie. Since that novel is concerned with the consciousness of an immigrant, subject to alien (colonial) pressure, since its two heroes represent opposing tendencies (assimilation to the British model versus its rejection), and since the cross-cultural pattern covers reflections on manners, art, politics, beliefs, etc., the author's message is based on heterogeneity and eclecticism. If we moreover take into consideration the key motif of *The Satanic Verses*, that is, the teachings of Mohammed, intermixed elements of a prophecy and devilish tricks, the ambiguity of the words transmitted in the divine book, if we ponder the story whose discourse is constantly constructed anew, then the postmodernist aspects of the novel seem even more unquestionable. But one cannot rest with such a classification. The fact that *The Satanic Verses* is ambivalent, that it discloses the abyss of the allegedly reliable historical reality, brings *ad oculos* uncertainty as to the sense of existence, and finally the fact that heterogeneous projects organize individual and collective experience and the truth assigned to it, is not in the least at variance with confession and the novelistic practice of Kundera. Rushdie's novel can, and perhaps should, be interpreted so that behind the turmoil of many motifs which are eclectically squeezed together, we find a serious endeavor to regain identity

(both in the person of Saladin and that of Gabriel). It is here to be attained by fantastic episodes and paranoid visions bordering on dreams and magic. It was not by coincidence that *The Satanic Verses* has been compared with the myth-making novels of Garcia Marquez and Fuentes as well as with *The Master and Margaret* by Bulkhakov. If the interpretation presented above is convincing, then instead of a postmodernist continuum, which allegedly absorbs *The Satanic Verses*, we should speak only about a partial coincidence of that novel with the strategy of postmodernism. Rushdie occupies a separate position. Such a separation may look glaringly artificial, but it is not.

One must be sensitive to the ambiguities on the axis of coordinates which are for the most part hastily as fully characteristic of literary postmodernism. If we emphasize the explosively avant-garde elements, then poststructuralism goes with them only to the boundary lines where it turns into mere deconstructivism. Of course, it is only half of the complicated problem we are analyzing here. The second half is theorizing on literature against the theory of literature. Paul de Man's reflections would be at this point a paradigm. In this respect, poststructuralism and postmodernism are blended almost perfectly. We enter the territory of philosophy which tries to destroy itself. But even de Man (see his 1988 *The Resistance to Theory*) returns in a roundabout way to modernism when he confesses that there is no refuge from "totalizing reading" of the texts. One attempts to suspend the relation between rhetoric on the one hand, and logic plus grammar on the other. Without success. One is entrapped in theory when doing the most to escape from it. The ultimate result is "the universal theory of the impossibility of theory." I find in this statement the splinters parallel to the poststructuralist practice in writing belles lettres, i.e. the splintering of the avant-garde consciousness and the postmodernist temptations which finally take over.

To close these deliberations on postmodernism, a very short epilogue. I tried to argue that some specific corresponding features of postmodernity and postmodernism constitute the main tenets of the new cultural mutation. However, there is the opposite view according to which pm is only a special kind of m mode. The problem is *what* kind it is—whether self-correcting, purifying m of its previous drawbacks and deficiencies, or rather a demise bequeathed by the modernist crisis of culture. I am convinced that the second interpretation does justice to the historical data. In any case, whether one thinks as I do, or takes the opposite position, one cannot miss the fact that all of us are entangled in a mass society animated by the idea of disenchanting the intellectual elites. This results in throwing off the weight of history, treating the search for any relatively stable sense as an irritating distraction, dismissing challenges to the status quo as mere anachronisms, renouncing universality as a phantom, etc. My rendering of the current mentality may be wrong but *if* I hit the mark, then my conclusion is adequate. It runs as follows: after the initial stage of mass society (when Ortega

y Gasset and Mannheim, Jaspers and Huizinga could still wage a well-entrenched crusade against it) and the second, when Adorno and Horkheimer had begun (as before them Witkiewicz) to fight heroically against the prevailing *Kulturindustrie*, we now enter the third mature phase with its predominating consumerist permissiveness. Is this not the collapse of culture rather than its salutary renaissance? Is it apostasy when I warn against bewilderment by instantaneous experience deprived of any guidelines? Some speak of posthistory (Gehlen, Baudrillard, Fukuyama); I see in it a speculative coquetry. The real issue is that we seem to bid farewell to a culture which we cherished since the time of ancient Greeks. The new mutation which emerges at the present time continues the bad side of m developed under the victorious pressure of modern civilization. I judge the assumption of its self-improvement to be typical wishful thinking.