

The Blind Generation and the Space of Ideological and Cultural Dialogue (or Autism)

Associated Professor Steluța Stan,
“Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați

Abstract: *The obnubilation of individual subjectivity, psychoanalysis and language theories as well as the hyper-technologization of society, the transformation of the human being in a screen that registers everything and anything but believes in nothing, all these are only some of the main coordinates for the post-modernization process of the conception about the human being. Is it enough to simply re-describe/re-contextualize the play of narrations and languages in opposition, to modelate the story we want to tell about us or about our culture? Or, considering the postmodern anthropological relativism, it takes more to change the world than just redescribing it?*

Key words: *culture, ideology, relativism, postmodernity, subjectivity*

In *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture* (1991), Gianni Vattimo tries to build some correspondence between the present discussions round the concepts of *modernity* and *postmodernity*, and the two great philosophers of late modernity, Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Having as a source of inspiration the rationalism of the 18th century's Enlightenment and as a climax the Romantic movement of the 19th century, the Utopian vision of an idealism centered on humanism and progress (which modernity had at its very heart) has been placed under question by a large number of thinkers pointing at the fact that hazard and the unconscious have always played a major role in the structuring of history. Man was displaced from the center of the universe and traditional humanism demolished mainly by Nietzsche, the philosopher whose influence can be felt today more than ever. Both for him and the phenomenologist Heidegger, “the being is no longer a fixed, unchangeable plan, a reference point for the real world phenomena, but a fluctuating, contextual, contingent entity” (Cărtărescu, 1999: 19).

In the study *Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art*, Wylie Sypher demonstrates that Western literature and art have been forced, since the 19th century to gradually change the ideas about the nature of the self and individual identity. Starting from the Romantic notion of identity according to which the individual is considered supreme value and substance, one arrived to the existentialist search for identity, in hope of discovering *minimul ireductibil al experienței noastre, care poate fi identificat în mod onest ca aparținându-ne* (the irreducible minimum of our experience, the one that can be honestly identified as our own) (Sypher in Pütz, 1995: 37).

If in modernity (the realist-psychological literature) the focus was on the relationship *self – world*, proof of the interior exile of the writer and/or the characters, in Lyotard's and Foucault's democratic and pluralist postmodernity, with its true explosion of nuances, groups and differences, the author's attention is not only on individual identity but also the group's or the minority's in its relationship with the majority. The syntagm *identity crisis*, recurrent in discussions about postmodernity, can be used in both ways; and some more. Consequently, postmodern thinking completely assumes nihilism as the last chance and works with nihilistic ideas such as the ‘weak’ character of the being and thinking system and the ‘end of history’, both seen as man's endless evolution in quest for his own self. Furthermore, it reevaluates the notion of ‘truth’ which for postmodernity ceases to be a gnoseological concept turning into an aesthetical. To this, Hassan adds his optimistic

conclusion expressing his confidence in an imminent revival of the real people, different and complicated, once the *ideal man* is dead and leaves the stage open.

Vattimo endorses all of the above claiming that the philosophical front set up for defending the humanistic values and authenticity (former existentialism, phenomenology, marxism, contemporary hermeneutics) seems to have failed and that “total nihilism proved to be much more benign and constructive than all ideologies that brought about wars and dictatorship” (Vattimo qtd in Cărtărescu, *op. cit.*: 22). On an aesthetic plan, the theme of the *death of the art*, of central interest in modernity, gets an altogether new meaning with postmodernity.

The debates/discussions focus on the end of the high/elitist/exclusivist art of modernism and its dissolution into the social through the mass-media (and not only) distributing information, culture and entertainment on a unique aesthetic criterion, *pleasure* (otherwise central in many postmodern artistic manifestations): “the pleasure and the advantage rather than the meaning and the truth... the ludic, the playfulness of life...” (Greenblatt in Anghelescu Irimia, 1999: 182)

F. Jameson, a representative of the New Marxist literary criticism in the United States, suggests in *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* that “postmodernism distinguishes itself from modernism by its ‘populism’, by its incorporating elements of popular or mass-culture, ... which makes that everything that used to be stigmatized as mass or commercial culture have free access between the boundaries of a larger cultural territory...” (Jameson in Foster, 1983: 124)

Once on the territory of literature and literary criticism, we cannot ignore the voice of professor Valentine Cunningham, who identifies nuances in the discussion of the legitimization of truth:

once discredited the idea of statements having a truth - value, or of the validity of truth leading to discussion on reality, imagination, fiction, etc., we obviously stumble... Once discredited the idea of the writer's duty to render truth the best he can, we come to an inevitable deadlock. Consequently, I think it is dangerous to mock at the idea that truth is a goal, be it in literature or criticism. Fortunately, most people guide their lives by other precepts and values than these... sceptics... (in Anghelescu Irimia, *op. cit.*: 120)

In *Cinci fețe ale modernității* (1995) (Five Faces of Modernity), Matei Călinescu also deals with the subject of the *postmodern ontology*, pointing out “within the most common postmodernist repertoire of strategies... a new existential or ‘ontological’ use of narrative perspectivism, different from that, rather psychological, of modernism” (252). He enumerates here the double or even multiple beginnings, endings and narrated events, taking as an example the alternative endings in Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, the parodic theme of the author (a manipulative author, with a typically postmodernist self-ironical disposition) and of the *reader* (as character or characters in the text - Italo Calvino, *If One Winter Evening a Traveller*).

Other such typical postmodernist devices are, according to Călinescu: the treatment on an equal footing of both action and fiction, reality and myth, truth and lie, original and imitation, so as to emphasize the lack of precision (the ontological instability or Hassan’s ‘indeterminacy’); self-referentiality and metafiction and other structural and stylistic conventions characteristic for postmodernist writing. The one who first coined the syntagm *change of dominant* is Brian McHale, attracted by the multifarious aspects of postmodernism. Roman Jakobson defined the dominant as “the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It... guarantees the integrity of the structure...” (in Matejka and Poworska, 1971: 203). McHale changes

the terms of the distinction and, instead of opposing the modernist *epistemological doubt* to the postmodernist *epistemological impossibility*, he prefers to talk about an *epistemological dominant* of the modernist fiction and an *ontological dominant* of the postmodernist one (in Fokkema and Bartens, 1984: 75). He formulates two general theses: the first is about modernist fiction, the dominant of which is epistemological and which

deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as: How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it? ... What is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty? How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability? (op. cit.: 58)

The second one concerns postmodernist fiction and states that

the dominant of postmodernist literature is ontological. That is, postmodernist fiction... foregrounds such questions...: What is a world? What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? ... What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? (op. cit.: 60)

In McHale's opinion, the shift from epistemological to ontological questions is circular and reversible. In support of his two theses, McHale places under discussion W. Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!*, S. Beckett's *Malone Dies*, *Molloy*, *The Unnamable*, A. Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*, *Dans le Labyrinthe*, C. Fuentes' *Artemio Cruz*, *Cambio de Piel*, V. Nabokov's *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, R. Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists*, *The Social Construction of Reality* and T. Pynchon's *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*. In the same time, he points out that the distinction *MODERNISM/ POSTMODERNISM* can be made when analyzing one writer, but also sometimes one single piece of writing. As to the world, or rather 'possible worlds', he identifies in the above-mentioned novels (representative for literary postmodernism), he joins the club of the literary critics who characterize postmodernism through its *ontological instability and indeterminacy*, through the loss of a world that might be accepted willy-nilly, as an already given of experience.

In the chapter "Possible Worlds", McHale brings forward the issue of the existence of impossible worlds even, asking (in the same manner as the vast majority of postmodernist writers experimenting new narrative techniques) for "the willing suspension of belief as well as of disbelief", as Thomas Pavel puts it, unlike Umberto Eco who excludes logical impossibility from the statements one can make about the worlds: any statement must be either true or false, it cannot be both, obeying "the law of the excluded middle".

We were taught that in postmodernity everything is problematized, placed under question, mocked at, parodied, left open for multiple ending scenarios, presented and/or represented, (con)textualized, (re)visited, deconstructed to be reconstructed, marginalized to be centered, decentered to be marginalized and centered again, etc. Nevertheless, if we 'stop and think' (how could the postmoderns that we are avoid logos?!), it becomes obvious that in these (im)possible worlds, within the postmodernist frame of mind, there is only relative truth, *i.e.* no definite, final, transcendental truth, so ideas do not matter; in our postmodern world, issues are not the issue and no one takes almost anything seriously anymore. But this might be the very definition of *non-problematization*, a comfortable and yet deeply uncomfortable in the same time conclusion (however temporary).

And yet, enter postmodernism and one thing becomes crystal clear: a major ideological revolution is on its way and a *no man's land* is created for oppositions unsolved but dissolved in mutual tolerance. A liminal space, not inside, but neither outside, or simultaneously inside and outside, becomes possible, and everyone is invited to contribute.

Beginning with the postmodern cultural turn and, why not, the postmodern ideology, claims to objective and universal truth are regarded as intolerant, uninformed, even dangerous, and we are witnessing a broad based backlash against the authority of reason. Starting Derrida and deconstruction, any *text* is open to any number of meanings, none of which is better than any other, as all texts are full of contradictions and ambiguities, hidden assumptions and rhetorical tricks and therefore not capable of demonstrating anything. All of these undermine the very possibility of all objective reasoning, including philosophy and science (although the voice of commonsense may pertinently claim that this must include post-structuralism itself). Thus, objectivity, or truth in the conventional sense, becomes an illusion. There is no universal, absolute truth, only local and relative truth. Since Western thought builds on ideas of universal truth, post-structuralists see Western rationality as in crisis.

On the other hand, the global mutations in the architecture of the contemporary world and the mentality of the (post)modern being determine the cultural approach that today, more than ever, takes part in the social and communicational weaving of the world, models it and becomes one of its most significant epiphenomena. Entering postmodernity involved a long and painful process for the intellectual (and not only), trained in the spirit of humanist culture, and witnessing the destruction of most fundamental premises of their placement in the world. Restlessness and disorientation experienced when facing an apparently indeterminated, chaotic and unstable world, become more and more intense for the individual attached to some ideals and values that he thought eternal.

Postmodernists are mainly relativists: what is rational or true for one group at one time may not be rational or true for another group at another time or even for the same group at another time (as anyone could witness in the context of the international financial/economic/social crisis over the past few months). There are not truths that apply to everyone everywhere, or so-called *metanarratives*, our world being one of shifting truths and multiple points of view, with no means of determining who is right and who is wrong, all being relativism and subjectivity. It is all about interpretation, not about what is real or true.

Every time somebody claims to be in possession of *the* truth, it ends up repressing people. What is wrong with modern ideologies, postmodernists believe, is one part of humanity imposing its ideas and values and control over other parts, one nation imposing on another, or one group in society imposing its values on other groups.

The price to be paid for all the generous principles of postmodern ideology is that a growing number of people, especially among the emerging generations, believe that reason and truth are inherently political and subversive. That may be why they are often so cynical: advised by voices in contemporary culture (including many academics willing to make themselves visible as up-dated scholars) to consider claims to truth as being clever disguises for the pernicious *will to power* (which, unfortunately too often, are exactly that), they conclude that rather than dominating others with our *version of reality*, we should accept all beliefs as equally valid. Openness without the restraint of reason, and tolerance without moral appraisal seem, again unfortunately, sometimes to be the new postmodern mandates. For too many people, the postmodern outlook seems more absorbed rather than thought out. A vast majority came to believe (and many of us even teach it, in good will, of course) that truth is relative. But only few know *why* we think that way. Still fewer have any clue about how our beliefs practically relate to our own lives, that often they are

hopelessly contradictory or that we often live inconsistently with them. In general, we tend to be ideologically confused rather than deeply committed to our convictions. So while we hear the rhetoric of openness to everything and tolerance for everyone, it is rare to find someone who really understands what this means. It has become the socially appropriate attitude to display. Thus, postmodern ideologues have been successful in transforming ideology into *popular zeitgeist*.

Postmodernism, beyond its disturbing, confusing, maddening characteristics, may be a blessing. It offers, with praiseworthy generosity a *smorgasbord*; the only question seems to be “what are you hungry for?” Plus, it does not force anyone to come up with answers. It claims it is not the task of the philosopher, writer or academic to act as the Big Other who tells us about the world, but rather to challenge our own ideological presuppositions.

The picture is that of a puzzle painting our postmodern condition: a mixture between *slaughter-house* and *fun-house*, so characteristic of postmodernity and so demanding for a ‘blind generation’ who has to face the obnubilation of individual subjectivity as well as the hyper-technologization of society, both (and others) transforming the human being in a screen that registers everything and anything but believes in nothing.

Hassan warns us:

It may be that some rough beast will slouch again toward Bethlehem, its haunches bloody, its name echoing in our ears with the din of history. It may be that some natural cataclysm, world calamity, or extraterrestrial intelligence will shock the earth into some sane planetary awareness of its destiny...I have no prophecy in me, only some slight foreboding, which I express now to remind myself that all the evasions of our knowledge and actions thrive on the absence of consensual beliefs, an absence that also energizes our tempers, our wills. This is our postmodern condition. (Hassan qtd in Cărtărescu, *op. cit.*: 106)

References

- Anghelescu Irimia, Mihaela (1999) **Dialoguri postmoderne**, București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române
- Barth, John, “Literatura Reînnoririi, Ficțiunea postmodernistă”, in *Caiete Critice*, nr. 1 – 2 / 1986
- Călinescu, Matei (1995) “Despre postmodernism”, in **Cinci fețe ale modernității**, București: Univers
- Cărtărescu, Mircea (1999) **Postmodernismul românesc**, București: Humanitas
- Eco, Umberto “Lector in Fabula: Pragmatic Strategy in a Metanarrative Text”, in **The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts**, Bloomington and London, 1979, pp. 200 - 266
- Fukuyama, Francis (1994) **Sfârșitul istoriei și ultimul om**, București: Paideia
- Hassan, Ihab (1987) “Postmodernism” and “The Literature of silence”, in **The Postmodern Turn. Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture**, Ohio: Ohio State University Press
- Jameson, Frederic (1983) “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, in Hal Foster (ed.), **The Anti – Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture**, Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press
- Matejka, Ladislav and Krystyna Poworska (eds.) (1971) **Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views**, London: MIT Press
- McHale, Brian (1987) “From Modernist to Postmodernist Fiction: Change of Dominant. Some Ontologies of Fiction”, in **Postmodernist Fiction**, London and New York: Routledge
- Error! Bookmark not defined.**Pütz, Manfred (1995) **Fabula identității. Romanul american din anii șaizeci**, Iași: Institutul European
- Pütz, Manfred (1997) **Essays on American Literature and Ideas**, Iași: Institutul European
- Vattimo, Giani (1995) **Societatea transparentă**, Constanța: Pontica

