

POSTMODERN LITERATURE DOES NOT EXIST

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Abstract. *Saying, in effect, that postmodern drama does not exist, that it is a contradiction in terms, is one way of protesting against the kind of fashionable theorizing which prescribes what can only be called various forms of cogito interruptus as a criterion of what constitutes postmodern art, and implies moreover that, thus defined, postmodern art is a welcome democratic development. My own response to these definitions is to claim that what is currently promoted as postmodern art is either not art or it is not postmodern. The literary techniques and devices usually singled out to distinguish the specifically postmodernist outlook are not decisive. For such deliberate interruptions of the processes of knowing, and of feeling, such a dispersal of experience and understanding into a meaningless kinetics of intellectual and aesthetic games at which formal literary devices like, say, heteroglossia, or heterotopia, or any device with this prefix - allegedly aim, are, in fact, contrary to the purpose of art, which still is what it was for Conrad: 'to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions...and ... make you feel,... above all, make you see ...that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask'. There is no postmodern literature, there are only postmodern interpretations of literature.*

I would much sooner subject Derrida to the criteria of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, than Dostoevski and Tolstoy to Derrida's criteria

J. M. Coetzee

The title of this paper is a deliberate echo of a similarly radical claim, made by a contemporary artist, and concerning another false category invented by the academia. After an astute and highly entertaining argument against the existence of such a 'rough beast' as 'Commonwealth literature,' Salman Rushdie concludes his essay 'Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist' with the following ironic qualification of his position:

It strikes me that my title may not really be accurate. There is clearly such a thing as 'Commonwealth literature', because even ghosts can be made to exist

if you set up enough faculties, if you write enough books and appoint enough research students. It does not exist in the sense that writers do not write it, but that it is of minor importance. So perhaps I should re-phrase myself: 'Commonwealth literature' should not exist.¹

Another comment, by a contemporary playwright, is equally, if not more, relevant to the thesis of this paper. Asked for his opinion about what might constitute the truly postmodern drama and theater, Heiner Muller replied: 'The only postmodernist I know of was August Stram, who was a modernist and worked in a post-office'². Now I have always been more willing to dwell on what artists have to say about theory than what theory has to say about art. Thus I find Muller's brief reply - besides Coetzee's laconic comment, probably the most summary treatment postmodernism has received so far - more rewarding on close examination than many pages of postmodern discourse on literature. Underlying his joking dismissal is a number of implied convictions about the meaning not only of modernism and postmodernism, but of art in general. Had Miller bothered to theorize these assumptions, they would amount, I believe, to a contemporary re-statement of the kind of endemic romanticism which is defined by a belief in the type of genuine individual and the highly independent, imaginative, questing mind, through which romanticism persists and is perpetuated in modernism. Postmodernism, in so far as it means an obliteration of this kind of the creative self, its dispersal, to use the current idiom, into a plurality of subject positions inscribed within language, is the negation of art.

False and misleading in the literary debate, the term 'postmodern' has its legitimate uses elsewhere, of course. It is employed meaningfully to describe the massive material and political changes that have led to the post-industrial, consumer, or mass media society, and to the re-colonization by that society of the rest of the not yet so postmodern world. It is valid, too, when applied to a mood or a state of mind accompanying or generated by these changes - ranging from resigned acceptance to euphoric celebration - which pervade popular media culture and is endorsed and promoted, whether intentionally or not, by major postmodern theorists. The effectiveness of their theories, as some of them cheerfully testify, depends on the kind of discourse that tries to persuade without the notion of traditional argument³. This, in fact, involves what Eco, speaking of McLuhan's ecstatic welcome of the media culture, called a *cogito interruptus*: the imposition upon the reader, carried out in the most insidiously illegitimate way imaginable, of the technique of non-definition of terms. The ultimate goal of McLuhan's 'equivocations of a *cogito* that is denied' is the reader's loss of the ability to differentiate phenomena, and thus the loss of moral discrimination, too.⁴ But it is perhaps not necessary to subject these theories to a logical deconstruction, such as Eco so brilliantly and wittily performs on McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message*, in order to examine their validity. For much of what is confusing in contemporary theorizing can be understood if one approaches it

¹ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981 - 1991*, Granta Books, 1992, 70.

² Heiner Muller, 'Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage', *Performing Arts Journal Publication*, New York, 1984, 137/

³ See Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, Second edition, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, 154. Sarup writes: "Lyotard supported Marxism but he now sees it as one of the grand narratives he is against. He writes about the force of language beyond truth and wants to develop a theory of philosophical fiction - a discourse that tries to persuade without the traditional notion of 'argument'".

⁴ See Umberto Eco, 'Cogito Interruptus,' *Travels in Hyperreality*, Picador, 1987, 231.

from a pragmatic angle: if one asks not how postmodern thinkers arrived at their anti-humanist propositions but why these views became so rapidly and so immensely popular. Asking the Grail question - "Whom do you serve with this?" - may in fact show the term 'postmodern' to be hardly more than an accurate description of the intellectual and moral compromise by which the postmodernism's leading proponents have hyper-adjusted themselves to postmodernity; and of their theories, which prove to be a sophisticated example of hypocritically correct political thinking. The perspective was first suggested to me by Nietzsche, and once again proved fruitful as I read '*Chomsky on MisEducation*'. The Introduction, by Donaldo Macedo, and Chapter 2: 'Democracy and Education' deserve special attention.

In the Introduction Macedo describes the strategies employed by the dominant sector in the US since the sixties in order to contain the general democratic participation of masses of people in questioning their government's criminal involvement in the Vietnam war. One of them was the Trilateral Commission, which dropped all pretensions about schools as democratic sites charged with the teaching of democratic values, and declared them instead as institutions responsible for the indoctrination of the young. The colonial model of education perfected for this purpose aims to prevent the development of the kind of thinking that enables one to read the world critically and to understand reasons and linkages between the facts: the priorities of education are reduced to the pragmatic requirements of the market, whereby students are trained to become 'compliant workers, spectorial consumers, and passive citizens'⁵.

Whereas the ruling class makes no apologies for the undemocratic role of schools, Macedo continues, to maintain capitalism's cultural hegemony it has been necessary to create a cultural middle management composed of teachers, professionals and experts, who are expected, through a reward system, to propagate the myth that schools are democratic sites where democratic values are learned. Among various means these cultural commissars resorted to in order to achieve their mission one of the most insidious was to place the responsibility for 'the social catastrophe of the sixties' precisely on those who sought to avoid it by a democratization of institutions, and a change in relations of power: 'Thus it became necessary to frontally attack the experiments in democracy that questioned the unethical and sometimes criminal behavior of the governments and squarely put the blame on the great society programs not only for financial losses but also for the drop in high school test scores, drug problems and a generation of children and youth with no fathers, no faith and no dreams other than the lure of the streets.'⁶

Macado's comments are confined mostly to the situation in grade schools in the US, but can also clarify the point I want to make about the postmodern theories currently promoted in leading American and European universities. It is not an irrelevant coincidence, for example, that in the late sixties and seventies the major teaching posts in the US universities, hitherto held by the teachers and philosophers of German origin and some of them deriving from the Frankfurt School, people like Marcuse, Adorno or Fromm, whose common standpoint in criticizing the consumer society was that of traditional humanist values, began to be taken over by a new set of postmodern thinkers, mostly French, whose anti-humanist orientation soon became the order of the day. This

⁵ Noam Chomsky, *Chomsky on MisEducation*, ed. Donaldo Macedo, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

replacement, I believe, was part of the campaign Macedo speaks of: the newly installed teachers were promptly assimilated into the 'bought priesthood', their ideas, whether they intended it or not, utilized in a common endeavor, namely, to prevent independent critical thought while appearing to defend it. Thus, for instance, Fukuyama's jubilant proclamation of Good News - the end of history, which has reached its supreme goal in the globally achieved liberal democracy and the capitalist free market - depends on a cynical distortion of the meaning of democracy and a consequent falsification of historical facts, as Derrida pointed out in his reply to Fukuyama. But there is a group of post-modern thinkers, including, besides Lyotard, Baudrillard and Foucault, Derrida himself, whose views are less accessible to critical analysis than Fukuyama's rather obvious hypocrisy. For one thing, they are highly ambiguous, combining quite incongruously their radical critique of ideology with the acquiescence in, or even fascination with, various manifestations of its ubiquitous power. This hardly gives us reason to be optimistic about the possibility of resistance and transformation, for, as a recent critic of postmodernism reasonably asks, 'if ...individuals are wholly constituted by the power/knowledge regime Foucault describes, how can discipline be resisted in the first place?'⁷ (How, one might add, could the sixties' happen in the first place?) The difficulty of finding a revolutionary vocabulary is not a problem that haunts only Foucault, the comment goes on, but also many other proponents of post-structural politics. Yet - and this is *cogito interruptus* at its most insidious - their target seems to be precisely those traditional thinkers who did possess the kind of revolutionary vocabulary that they themselves lack. The strategy Macado unmasks - that of blaming the cultural catastrophe of the sixties on what only could have prevented it - is also employed by postmodern cultural critics: they justify their anti-humanism by seeking not only to instill the view that the liberal humanist tradition has proved definitely wrong in its emancipatory hopes but, in fact, to blame it for the failure of these hopes.

Quite a different picture emerges in Chomsky's essay 'Democracy and Education': it is not the conventional one, the author warns, 'but it does have one merit, at least - namely, the merit of accuracy.'⁸ Chomsky identifies the humanist tradition with the independent Left, which grew out of the Enlightenment and included progressive thinkers, from the grossly misunderstood Adam Smith, and his contemporary J. S. Mill to Dewey and Russell, together with the leading elements of the Marxist mainstream, mostly anti-Bolshevik, and, of course, the popular libertarian and labor movements long preceding

⁷ Honi Fern Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics: Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault*, Routledge, 1994, 101. This, by the way, is one of the very few valid insights the book provides. Haber's critique of postmodernism soon turns into a demand for a kind of ultra-postmodernism. Thus Lyotard's attempt to transcend the relativism of his position by an appeal to Kant's categorical imperative as a ground for 'the justice of multiplicity' is, according to her, a betrayal of his initial, more desirable, 'pagan', 'Nietzschean' (!) concept of 'multiplicity of justices', paganism, according to her, being a correct name for 'a situation in which one judges without criteria.' (32 -33). This should be compared with the contrary, and much more cogent argument to be found in *Culture First! Promoting Standards in the New Media Age*, eds., K. Dyson and W. Homolka, Canell, London, 1996. In the Preface postmodernism is criticized precisely from the standpoint of Kant's criteria, without which the 'development and exercise of moral intelligence', and 'reflective judgments that intellectual inquiry should enable us to make' are impossible. It is through the abandonment of these criteria and the "fascination with and celebration of free-floating media images, the openness and lack of objective content of 'texts' and power of the 'reader' to define and create textual meanings" that postmodernism has provided professional groups, from advertisers and marketing specialists to media studies lecturers, with an ideology that justifies their roles and serves their interests.

⁸ Chomsky on *MisEducation*, 38.

Marx. He reminds us that the values common to them all were formulated in reaction against what Adam Smith called 'the inherent vile maxim of masters of mankind: all for ourselves, and nothing for other people', the guiding principle of capitalism which 'nowadays we are taught to admire and revere'. In contrast to this vile maxim Smith stressed sympathy and the goal of perfect equality and the basic human right to creative work. Chomsky recalls that the founders of classical liberalism, people like Wilhelm von Humboldt, also 'regarded creative work freely undertaken in association with others as the core value of a human life.'⁹ In support of humanist conception of education, he quotes Russell and Dewey, in whose views we readily recognize the orientation shared by teachers and critics such as Leavis and Trilling, Fromm and Marcuse. Russell claimed that the goal of education is 'to give a sense of value of things other than domination, to encourage a combination of citizenship with liberty and individual creativeness, which means that we regard a child as a gardener regards a young tree, as something with a certain intrinsic nature, which will develop into an admirable form, given proper soil and air and light'¹⁰. Together with Russell, Dewey considered these ideas revolutionary: if implemented, they would bring about a more just and free society in which 'the ultimate aim of production is not production of goods, but the production of free human beings associated with one another in terms of equality'¹¹.

To the tradition delineated by Chomsky one should add Isaiah Berlin and the names of nineteenth century thinkers Bernard Bosanquet and T. H. Green, evoked by Quentin Skinner, Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge, in the Isaiah Berlin Memorial Lecture delivered to The British Academy in December, 2001¹². Professor Skinner used the occasion to raise serious doubts about the validity of contemporary political theory and its power to define a program for liberation. He spoke about two traditional concepts of liberty. The first, negative liberty, is identified with absence of interference: it is freedom from external constraint. This negative definition must also include, but it no longer does, a concept of freedom as independence, the knowledge, that is, that the exercise of our rights will not depend on the goodwill of others. This is significant. But what is of even greater interest in the present context is that in contrast to this juristic concept of negative liberty as freedom *from* interference or *from* dependence, there has traditionally been recognized a fuller or positive understanding of the term as freedom *for* self-realization. Professor Skinner quotes Isaiah Berlin who suggested that for all those who wished to give a positive content to the idea of liberty, 'the freedom of human agents consists in their having managed most fully to become themselves'. One of them was the nineteenth century thinker T. H. Green, who wrote that 'real freedom consists in the whole man having found his object'; it is 'the end state in which man has realized his ideal of himself'. This argument can be carried a step further, says Quentin Skinner, if we recognize that what underlies theories of positive liberty is the belief that human nature has an essence, and that we are free if and only if we succeed in realizing that essence in our lives. In support of this insight he might have quoted Nietzsche, too, whom postmodern anti-humanists have adopted as their patron saint, but whose passionate adherence to creative freedom is evident in the very titles of his works: *Ecce Homo* or *How to Become What One Is*; or D. H. Lawrence, who foresaw that the flight of

⁹ Ibid., 42.

¹⁰ Ibid., 38.

¹¹ Ibid., 37.

¹² Published under the title 'A Third Concept of Liberty' in *London Review of Books*, 4 April 2002.

the first American immigrants from the authoritarian old world would not flower into new freedom as long as they refused to be mastered from within, by their deepest, most creative self. Yet while remaining strictly within the domain of political theory, Professor Skinner says exactly the same thing. He deplores the fact that contemporary political theory, especially in Britain and the USA, has quite neglected the positive view of liberty. Only the first definition of freedom as absence of interference has been preserved as orthodox. But detached from the sense of freedom as being identical with whatever is the true inherent goal of man, liberty, Professor Skinner insists, may and has become a name for what is actually servitude. To talk of liberty then, as our politicians and engineers of the new world order do, is to speak the language of tyranny¹³.

This hypocrisy is observable in practically all aspects of postmodern thought. As I have already hinted, one of the ways postmodern cultural analysts help ensure a counter-revolution, while appearing to serve progressive goals, is to employ all sorts of confusing and highly illegitimate argumentative procedures to persuade us that the views upheld by thinkers quoted and praised by Chomsky or Quentin Skinner are essentially reactionary, in unacknowledged yet deep agreement with coercive regimes. For example, the humanist idea of the free, creative individual is deliberately conflated with the economic notion of acquisitive, aggressive ego or with bourgeois private man, and then accused of contributing to the triumph of the capitalist principle of 'mastery over a world of slaves' (incidentally, the very same principle that the Noble-prize winning economist James Buchanan frankly endorsed as the 'genuine aspiration of every person in an ideal situation'¹⁴). It is when postmodern thinkers proceed to suggest ways of resistance to cultural enslavement that ironies increase and become quite mind bogging. Thus the remedy does not lie, as people like Macedo or Chomsky, who still believe in humanist education, claim, in the 'teaching of the truth' i.e. in the development of the kind of knowledge that would ensure a 'global comprehension of the facts and their *raison d'être*'¹⁵; nor in the 'pedagogy of hope' demanding from educators 'to discover what historically is possible in the sense of contributing to the transformation of the world.'¹⁶ For have not Lyotard and Comp. taught us that truth is epistemologically and morally indistinguishable from falsehood? That to read, whether words or the world, with a view of arriving at a coherent moral interpretation is to perpetuate the sin of teleological thinking which is a form of mastery? That all total explanations are totalitarian, all global projects coercive, and that the history made intelligible by the great systems of narrative knowledge is, fortunately, a thing of the past, its end coinciding, again fortunately, with the death of man as knower. That homogeneity, unity or universality can be politically coercive and do accompany the regimes of terror is true - there is no better evidence than the eradication of differences by the current capitalist re-colonization of the world. But when, as a counter-strategy to the terror of the political logic of the same, the postmodern theorists prescribe a universal

¹³ Another way of putting this is to say that it is not merely by neglecting the concept of positive freedom that postmodern cultural theorists have compromised their proclaimed adherence to the notion of freedom as absence of constraint. Worse: they have insisted on so many 'Thou Shalt Nots' being *internalized* - besides human nature, there is a taboo on teleology, and another on the wholeness of being, still another on nostalgia, etc. - that one immediately thinks of Roland Barthes' - but the early, critical, Barthes' - definition of bourgeois mythology as postmodern theories' proper description: they are 'a *prohibition* for man against inventing himself.'

¹⁴ Chomsky *On MisEducation*, 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

multiplicity - of language games, of free interpretations, of subject positions, none of which can claim to superior truth or justice - they end up as champions of a compulsory epistemological and ethical relativism that is fatal to political clarity and thus to one of the strategies of self-defense against the power of dominant culture.¹⁷

Another is art. Here, as elsewhere, what in reality is a terrorist action is disguised as a rescue operation: postmodernism has invaded literary debate carrying the banner of democracy and promising to free us from the hegemony of cultural elite. But far from being democratically inspired, the demolition of difference between 'high' culture and pop is, in fact, calculated to insure that whatever was potentially revolutionary in the canon is reduced to a clever ideological manipulation and repudiated¹⁸. Combined with the universally accepted axiom about the destruction of the self, the assault on the canon is aimed ultimately against that high authority of the artist in his quarrel with culture on which, according to critics like Trilling, or Marcuse, the culture's accurate knowledge of the self, and hence the possibility of effective transformation, depend.¹⁹

If in postmodern critique of the Enlightenment the targets have been rational coherence and intellectual comprehensiveness, in the current campaign against romanticism and modernism it has been necessary to discredit the aspiration both to formal unity and spiritual wholeness: the belief, crucial to artists from Shakespeare and Blake to Conrad and Lawrence, that emotions participate in cognitive processes and ethical decisions; that valid perceptions and responses to the world are those that involve our sensibilities, and that truth is accessible only when we 'see feelingly'. It seems that the degree of the vilifi-

¹⁷ That postmodern theory is politically suspect, representing a threat to the transformation it claims to seek, has been recognized within the context of postcolonial studies, too. Nancy Hartsock writes: 'Somehow it seems highly suspicious that it is at the precise moment when so many groups have been engaged in 'nationalisms' which involve redefinitions of the marginalized Others that suspicions emerge about the nature of the subject, about possibilities for a general theory which can describe the world, about historical 'progress'. Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?' (Nancy Hartsock, 'Foucault On Power: A Theory For Women?', quoted in Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics*, 107.)

¹⁸ Another of Heiner Müller's pithy remarks is worth quoting at this point. It comes as an answer to the question about the function of history and/or mythology in the contemporary theater, but is also an apt response to the fashionable rejection of the canon - the notorious 'dead-male-authors' argument - in the name of the democratization of art: 'The dead', he replied, 'are in the overwhelming majority compared to the living. And Europe has a wealth of dead stored up on that side of the ledger. The United States, not satisfied just with dead Indians, is fighting to close the gap. *Literature, as an instrument of democracy, while not submitting to, should nevertheless be respectful of majorities as well as of minorities.*' Müller, op. cit., 39. (My italics.)

¹⁹ See Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning*, Penguin Books, 1967, 90-91. Only briefly touched upon by Trilling, this problem is discussed at length in the chapter 'Art and Revolution' of Marcuse's *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, (Beacon Press, 1972). Marcuse's criticism of what in the seventies' was called cultural revolution and what we have since learnt to call postmodernism begins by questioning whether the efforts to break with bourgeois art are 'really steps on the road to liberation', or whether, in view of the strong anti-bourgeois elements in the literature since the XIX century, they may not be 'falling in line with the capitalist redefinition of culture', with the adjustment of culture to the requirements of contemporary capitalism. If, to the proponents of cultural revolution, "it is precisely this 'inner truth' [of 'bourgeois' literature], this depth, and harmony of the aesthetic imagery, which ...appears as mentally and physically intolerable, false, as part of the commodity culture, as an obstacle to liberation", then we may assume that the cultural revolution aims 'far beyond bourgeois culture, that it is directed against...art as such, literature as literature.' Against its contradictory, and essentially counterrevolutionary, tendencies - on the one hand, to give word, image and tone to the feelings of 'the masses' (which are no longer revolutionary) and, on the other, to elaborate anti-art, or anti-forms which are constituted by the mere atomization and fragmentation of traditional form - stand those, Marcuse claims, which, while radically revamping the bourgeois tradition, preserve its progressive qualities.

cation of this principle is what makes the contemporary author publishable. We read, again and again, that the romantic ambition to recover the repressed emotions is their greatest blunder, or fraud, since authentic feelings or desires are a pre-Freudian illusion and/or a bourgeois lie.²⁰ Or, if they do exist, as another line of attack concedes, then poetry evokes them only to arm us for 'the battle with that enormity'.²¹ 'Poetry', says Camille Paglia, currently one of the brightest academic stars in the US, 'is a connecting link between body and mind. Every idea in poetry is grounded in emotion. Every word is a palpitation of the body'²². But if 'poetry mirrors the stormy uncontrollability of emotion, where nature works its will', it does so - when it has not succumbed to romantic and modernist decadence - only to inspire 'horror and disgust', which are 'the reason's proper response to nature' and enclose us more firmly within the glorious world of technological artifacts. 'Art is shutting in order to shut out.'²³

In one way or another, we are being persuaded that art's proper function is not to include and coordinate but to exclude and disconnect. It is no wonder then if 'that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism' should be recommended, by a postmodern Marxist,²⁴ as the best anti-dote to the modernist aesthetics of formal unity or expressive totality. Frye's suggestion that 'the arts, including literature, might just conceivably be ...possible techniques for meditation, ways of cultivating, focusing, and ordering one's mental processes, on a basis of a symbol rather than concept'²⁵ is just one among the junk heap of discarded notions. The desirable effect is that of TV and video, forms *par excellence* of postmodern art: 'a sign flow which *resists meaning*, whose fundamental logic is the exclusion of the emergence of themes'²⁶ and which, therefore, will be bad or flawed whenever an interpretation proves possible.

It is here that the significance of Muller's joke emerges most clearly: saying, in effect, that postmodern drama does not exist, that it is a contradiction in terms, is one way of protesting against the kind of fashionable theorizing which prescribes what can only be called various forms of *cogito interruptus* as a criterion of what constitutes postmodern art, and implies moreover that, thus defined, postmodern art is a welcome democratic development. My own response to these definitions is to claim that what is currently promoted as postmodern art is either not art or it is not postmodern. The literary tech-

²⁰ Thus Raman Selden explains his preference for contemporary anti-humanist, anti-romantic theories by implying that in privileging the emotion and ascribing to them the power to heal the split subject, the romantics somehow supported the Imperialist view of culture! (See his *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989, 3-6.) This, and similar pronouncements, derive from the uncritical acceptance, and additional reduction *ad absurdum*, of the Lacanian unconscious: no longer a repository of the other, i.e., of the real, the biological, it is thoroughly invaded by the Other, i.e. by the symbolic, the cultural Law of the Father; desire, far from being a spontaneous urge *for* the other, is the desire *of* the Other; and the effect of psychoanalysis is to reconcile the subject to the fact that his identity is a matter of accepting his radical self-expropriation, of realizing that he does not belong to himself: 'Life does not want to heal... What, moreover is the significance of healing if not the realization, by the subject, of a speech which comes from elsewhere, and by which he is traversed?' (Quoted in Shoshana Felman, 'Beyond Oedipus: The Specimen Story of Psychoanalysis', *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*, ed. Maud Ellmann, Longman, 1994, 89.)

²¹ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, Penguin Books, 1993, 19.

²² *Ibid.*, 18.

²³ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, 1991, 96.

²⁵ Northrop Frye, 'The Expanding Eyes', *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth and Society*, Indiana University Press, 1976, 117.

²⁶ Jameson, *op. cit.*

niques and devices usually singled out to distinguish the specifically postmodernist outlook are not decisive. For such deliberate interruptions of the processes of knowing, and of feeling, such a dispersal of experience and understanding into a meaningless kinetics of intellectual and aesthetic games at which formal literary devices like, say, heteroglossia, or heterotopia, or any device with this prefix - except, of course, heterosexuality - allegedly aim, are, in fact, contrary to the purpose of art, which still is what it was for Conrad: 'to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions...and ... make you feel,... above all, make you *see* ...that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask'.²⁷ There is no postmodern literature, there are only postmodern interpretations of literature.

If this should still seem an overstatement, or a simplification, I can only reply that sometimes it is justified or even necessary to overstate or simplify in order to point to the obvious, especially at a time like this, when it is so systematically and deliberately obscured. A child psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim accused his colleagues of being incapable of interpreting symptoms of emotional disturbance in children because they have forgotten 'the art of the obvious'.²⁸ The degree to which the formidable obfuscation of postmodern literary debate may interfere with the reader's, especially the literature student's, perception of the obvious is equally alarming. An experience of one of my own students attending a seminar on the modern novel at the Summer School of English in Edinburgh in 2001 may serve as an apt illustration, particularly so since it ties back to my quotation from Conrad. He read a paper on *The Heart of Darkness* and scandalized practically all the participants by saying that the story was, among other things, about western imperialism. What he had assumed everybody would agree about, what was obvious to him, became unexpectedly a matter of fierce contention. They denounced his reading as a misreading; or rather, as so simplistic, so naïve, so unsophisticated as to be no reading at all. It took him considerable time and effort to compel his listeners to remember the relevant parts of the story and concede, though reluctantly, that, yes, there may be some such theme, but now that, imperialism belongs safely to the past, it is no longer part of the work's (post)modern meaning. The novel's meaning, presumably, consists in its being a sum of formal devices, whose purpose is to subvert referentiality, forestall closure and precipitate the reader into abysmal indeterminacy of unresolvable aporias.

Now I cannot help remembering that for Kenneth Burke the purpose of any literary formal device was to serve as a strategy for survival. Similarly in the works of Ihab Hassan, a widely recognized and often quoted (but also misquoted or misunderstood) authority on contemporary American and British literature, one does not find any indication that the author assumed a radical discontinuity between modernism and so called postmodern fiction in this respect: survival, Ihab Hassan insists repeatedly, is the secret and paramount obsession of the post-war writers, and of those, too, that succeeded them: 'Whatever illusion they retain after the war, these seem necessary to survival; whatever techniques of literary evasion or assault they invent, further the same aim.'²⁹ If in the forties the novelists' war torn experiences demanded complex, mythic forms in order to be understood, the more recent strange paradox of a world 'extensively homogenized, yet intensely fragmented' has given rise to new modes (or sometimes the re-invention of the old picaresque or gothic forms) whose purpose is to create a new consciousness, equal to

²⁷ J. Conrad, Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, OUP, 1984, xii-xiii.

²⁸ In Bruno Bettelheim and Alvin Rosenfeld, *The Art of the Obvious*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1993

²⁹ Ihab Hassan, *Contemporary American Literature 1945-1972: An Introduction*, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co. NY, 1973, 2.

the perplexities of the day. The hero of the postmodern novel is still the Opposing Self. He 'incarnates the eternal dialectic of the *primary* Yes and the everlasting No: and his function is to create those values whose absence in culture is the cause of his predicament and ours.' Finally he uses Philip Roth's words to summarize the challenge confronting the American novel: '...the American writer in the middle of the XX century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates. And finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination.'³⁰

This also sounds as a very good account of Conrad's task in *Heart of Darkness*. Whatever devices Conrad used (polyphony and heterotopia among them, which, incidentally, shows that they are not exclusive to 'postmodern' fiction), their ultimate purpose was not to induce ontological or epistemological uncertainty, but to render the hidden and sickening truth visible and credible: the revelation, of a world driven by greed to its apocalyptic end, which, in its turn, would initiate an urgent examination of the possibilities and conditions of survival. Francis Copola understood that much, at least. The students in Edinburgh did not. One should stop and think of it: a hundred years after Conrad wrote his story, his exposure of the hidden motives and devastating effect of the colonial mission, as we are entering the new millennium and history continues in the same direction, the power states of civilized west showing no intention of renouncing their imperialist tradition except for wrapping it up in new excuses, at the moment, therefore, when it is more urgent than ever to see clearly through these deceptions and establish connections, students of literature and of culture are being trained in what I can only call interpretative blindness. They have assimilated the postmodern techniques of *cogito interruptus* successfully enough to confuse a thorough, comprehensive, responsible reading of what in itself was a problematization of a closure (how many people at the time doubted that the colonization of the Congo was anything but a noble project?) with the sin of interpretative closure - and then to confuse this confusion, this intellectual and moral frivolity, with sophistication.

This blindness to the obvious that postmodern interpretation fosters may well be one of the reasons why Edward Bond does not, as Muller or Coetzee do, stop at casual jokes at postmodernism's expense or simply let his drama speak for itself, but finds it necessary to write in addition books of essays, where he re-states the purpose of art in the contemporary conditions. He, too, is obsessed with survival. In *The Hidden Plot*, he calls postmodernism a state every species must enter before it becomes extinct. 'Western democracy', he writes, 'has become a secret Culture of Death', and postmodernism is its final phase:

Postmodernism is a turning point not yet an end. It is as if human life were a last dream flickering in the minds of the dead. Soon they will fall asleep for ever. For a while we can still hear the echo of human language; it is not spoken in our courts, legislatures, factories, and seldom in our schools and theaters. But we still hear its echo on the walls of prisons, madhouses, children's playgrounds, the derelict ghettos of our cities...Our task is to teach the dead to listen³¹

³⁰ Ibid., 20-26.

³¹ Edward Bond, *The Hidden Plot: Notes on the Theatre and the State*, Methuen, 2000, 8-9.

To survive, without being corrupted by our survival, we must be radical, he insists, we must not compromise. It is not the creator's, the writer's, job to compromise: that is the job of manufacturers. When manufacturers compromise they change our dreams; when creators do not compromise they change reality. Bond's refusal to compromise is evident in the very manner he says what he says. He does not make the concession even of entering any frontal theoretical polemic with postmodern thinkers, because it would involve speaking their language, which corrupts our imagination. But the utterly personal, and highly resonant words and images that he uses to evoke the problems and difficulties of being human build up a philosophy that is an indirect refutation of the whole of postmodern anti-humanist orthodoxy: of its axioms about the death of man; about the totalitarian nature of comprehensive explanations; about teleological thinking as a delusion of the past. He takes it for granted, for example, that there is such a thing as human nature and that demand for justice is its imaginative birthright, part of its radical innocence; that human nature does not feel at home in this world and that a child's cry is a rebellion against its injustice; that the purpose of schools is to stifle the child's anger and its imagination, and adjust it to social madness; and that drama -art - is a struggle to regain our sanity and recreate our humanity: that is, to re-imagine the world in terms of values that the alchemy of the capitalist economy turns into dross. Drama, unless it is corrupted, which most contemporary drama is, reminds us that being human involves asking questions - questions that cannot be answered yet that must be answered. Not 'what' questions the answers to which are mechanistic and fragmentary and warranted by the objective order of things; but 'why' questions, which are holistic: asking about one thing, one has to ask about all things; the answers must be total and they emerge from imagination or utopian dreams. 'There could be no stories of human beings without Utopia,'³² he says, no drama whose theme is not justice.

There have been signs lately, coming from within the academic establishment which itself helped create the phenomenon of 'postmodern art', that postmodernism has reached an impasse and that it is time we looked for a way beyond it. They are welcome, but should be approached cautiously, rather than with unqualified enthusiasm. One such hint, surprisingly - and perhaps dubiously - enough, comes from Francis Fukuyama³³. Another,

³² Ibid, 4.

³³ Francis Fukuyama, who in 1992 has announced the End of History, has been worried recently about what the future of human nature. Human nature, he warns in his latest book *The Posthuman Future* (reviewed by Bryan Appleyard in 'The Threat to Factor X', TLS, May 17, 2002) is threatened with extinction by experiments in biotechnology. At present millions of schoolchildren in America are 'cured' from 'attention deficiency disorder' by Ritalin, while cases of depression are treated with Prozac. The former, Fukuyama observes correctly, medicalizes an invented illness - schoolboys are not programmed to sit still in classrooms; the latter promotes the most prized of contemporary attributes, self-esteem, without one having to do anything worthwhile. He points to a disconcerting sexual symmetry between Prozac and Ritalin: women with low self esteem take prozac to give them a serotonin high - the alpha male feeling; Young boys are given Ritalin to make them more passive and compliant, more feminine. One can anticipate a future, says Fukuyama, when the two sexes will merge into that androgynous median personality, self-satisfied and socially compliant, which is the current politically correct outcome in American society. Prozac and Ritalin are only one of the ways in which biotechnology may flatten our conception of humanity. This must not happen, says Fukuyama - and here he sounds very much like Professor Skinner - or else all talk about liberation, equality, freedom, will be merely a politically correct form of words. To be meaningful equality requires a substructure of the metaphysic of human nature, what he calls 'the essential factor X': it cannot be reduced to the possession of moral choice or reason, or language, or emotions, or consciousness, or any other quality, that has been forth as a ground for human dignity. It is all those qualities coming together in a human whole'. To protect its sanctity, Fukuyama calls for the immediate establishment of institutions with real enforcement powers (*sic!*) to regulate biotechnology.

earlier and more serious than Fukuyama's, is to be found at the end of *Postmodernism for Beginners*, where the authors remind us that shortly before his death, Foucault called for a re-thinking of the Enlightenment, observe that Europe is haunted by two spectres, those of Marx and of romanticism, and conclude, in the last paradoxical sentence, that 'the only cure for postmodernism is the incurable illness of romanticism.' On the whole, however, I tend to regard the increasingly excited talk about 'going beyond postmodernism' with suspicion. The difference of my own position remains radical: while the contemporary artist is, indeed cannot help being, implicated in postmodern condition, his art is 'always already' on its way beyond it. I propose finally to test this view by reading Mark Ravenhill's play *Faust (Faust is Dead)* in the light of Coetzee's comment quoted above: to see, that is, what the result may be when some of major postmodern ideas are re-interpreted by art.

* * *

Gay, HIV positive, but fending off the fatal end by combo therapy, still on anti-epilepsy pills, and on his own admission 'just as confused by advertising as anyone', Ravenhill must have personally experienced the effects of what is now glibly called the destruction of the subject, multiple sexualities, or the implosion of the real. His art is an attempt to understand that experience. An explorer of hyperreality, he begins by checking whether the directions inscribed on its entrance really lead to the promised land or rather deeper into hell. The answer suggested by his plays, particularly *Faust*, is quite unequivocal. Its hero, Alain, is a composite character, reminiscent of Fukuyama, Foucault, Baudrillard: we glimpse him first in a TV chat show - Madonna's presence and comments contributing to the postmodern mixing of styles - being introduced to the American public as a famous French philosopher, and the author of two widely acclaimed books, one on sexuality, the other entitled *The End of History and the Death of Man*. In the next scene we find out that he is gay, too. To Pete, a seemingly cool, but disoriented and deeply troubled adolescent whom he meets by chance and eventually rapes, he confides the reason why he has left his university teaching post in France and come to 'to live a little' in the West Coast of America. In Europe, where obsolete humanist traditions still persist, 'we are ghosts, trapped in a museum, with the lights out and the last visitor long gone.' For him and for so many children of the twentieth century, he goes on as Pete videos him, America is the only true home: it is in America, where the 'death of man' can most authentically be experienced, that, paradoxically, 'we really believe that we are alive, that we are living in our own century'. If, at this point, Alain may sound like one of Eco's Parusiacs, Ravenhill certainly does not belong in this category: the end of history, if

At the beginning of my paper I referred to Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* as an example of *cogito interruptus*. This new publication is not quite free from it either. Fukuyama still displays that superb capacity to overlook the obvious: that children should not feel at home in America and must be controlled by chemicals does not at all undermine his thesis that western liberal democracy is Paradise regained where history may safely abolish itself; nor does he wonder what the inherent logic of this best of all worlds might be if it is capable of generating such a monstrous future. But despite the inconsistencies, the book *is* good news. For one thing, it is gratifying to hear a man who did so much to make postmodernism the doctrine of the capitalists suddenly speak up against the chief premises of both: against anti-humanism and technocracy. And even if the doors of perception are only partially cleansed, it may be the first step towards a complete clarity of vision. But this still remains to be seen.

it has come to an end, is no Good News. The Faustian situation established by the double title - *Faust (Faust is Dead)* - indicates clearly that if America is the proper symbolic realm of postmodern man's posthumous life, then he is condemned to live it in hell. The story of Faust, at least Marlowe's version, which Ravenhill knew, is about the signing of a contract with demonic forces for the sake of a kind of knowledge that is divorced from and destructive of the soul. It is the soulless world that Mephistopheles has in mind when he says: 'This is hell, nor am I out of it.' Similarly, as Ravenhill's play unfolds - as Pete accompanies Alain across America on an educational journey involving forced sex, drugs, a suicide of another boy, the Internet obsessed Donny, and Alain's own decision to end his life - his version of hell becomes synonymous with the world drained of feelings.

There are no new feelings, Eliot said once speaking of the poet's task. The business of the poet is not to find new feelings, but to combine the existing ones into new wholes, within which the truly significant emotion might emerge. Slightly modified, this notion would serve to describe Ravenhill's (and other contemporary playwrights') strategy in the face of postmodern indifference, which is to search, from play to play, for new images, new, ever more disturbing ways of juxtaposing them, in order to demonstrate the *absence* or perversion of feelings and locate the responsibility. Reading Ravenhill's plays in this key, rather than as sums of formal devices, enables us to resist the *cogito interruptus* imposed by current interpretations of the 'anti-social' behavior of the young. By a neo-conservative thinker, such as Daniel Bell, for example, the unnerving mixture of brutality and hedonistic escapism that constitute the lives of Ravenhill's characters would be attributed to the unwholesome effect of modernism. According to Bell, Madan Sarup informs us,

modernist culture has infected the values of everyday life. Because of the forces of modernism, the principle of unlimited self-realization, the demand for authentic self-experience and the subjectivism of hyperstimulated sensitivity have come to be dominant. This unleashes hedonistic motives irreconcilable with the discipline of professional life in society. In his view, hedonism, the lack of social identification, the lack of obedience, narcissism, the withdrawal from status and achievement competition is the result not of successful capitalist modernization of economy but of cultural modernism.³⁴

Quite contrary to this hopelessly muddled interpretation, Ravenhill's plays trace modern sickness not to a desire for self-realization, but to its prevention and place the responsibility on the capitalist ideal of 'the mastery over the world of slaves'. Thus in *Shopping and Fucking* he relates the crippled lives of a group of young drifters, reduced to drugs, masochistic fantasies and prostitution, to the inversion which according to the early Marx precipitated the fall of western man - the one demanding that the exchange of love for love should be substituted by the exchange of money for money. Not quite completed yet, the process requires a joint enterprise of all ideological state apparatuses, from television, school, church, to those responsible for the mental health and protection of the young. Thus, on leaving a mental hospital where he was treated for drug addiction, Mark is warned that emotional dependencies are just as, or even more, addictive, that craving personal attachment is his greatest weakness, and that he should avoid it at all costs. He tries at first to follow this advice and carefully confines his relationship with the

³⁴ Sarup, op. cit., 144.

fourteen-year-old Gary to a strictly financial transaction. Gary has been raped, ever since he was nine, by his stepfather, but his single appeal for help was met by the social worker's matter-of-fact question: 'Does he use a condom?'. Mark's final attempt to save him comes too late: his explanation that 'the world has offered us no practical definition of love' and that Gary yearns to be owned because he has never been loved, cannot prevent the fatal climax of Gary's masochistic fantasies in a morbid ritual of enslavement and rape.

Gary's voluntary death is also part of a bargain whereby the process of his reluctant killers' conversion from the faith (however residual) in feelings (however perverted) to money-worship is finally accomplished. The sum Gary paid them for his murder had been meant to ransom their own lives from Brian, a maker of TV commercials for soap opera videos (his favorite a grossly distorted version of *Hamlet*), a sadistic drug pusher and an authoritarian father masquerading as his son's savior. He allows them, however, to keep the three thousand pounds they owe him as a reward for having learnt the crucial lesson: that money is civilization and civilization money. The change of faith is sealed as Brian forces upon them the veneration of the new, the only authentic, Bible, the one whose first words are 'Get. The money. First.' The getting may be cruel, he explains - it may necessitate the suffering of numberless children such as Gary - but their deaths will be redeemed by the happiness of the generations to come, particularly of his own boy. To drive this point home he has already shown them a video of his son playing the cello - a poignant image of prelapsarian purity and beauty, at which he wept uncontrollably but then abruptly switched off to show them another tape, of two of his men with a Black and Decker drilling out an eye of a wretch who had proved unteachable. This gruesome exercise was undertaken and recorded as an admonition to all those who fail to understand that the flow of cash, kept up by any means including drug dealing, is the only way to a future paradise - a world where impure chemicals will finally be replaced by a more innocent anesthetic of television and shopping. He concludes his tragicomic capitalist gospel with a horribly sentimental conflation of his own criminal enterprise with the kind of work Irena embraces at the end of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*: "We must work. What we've got to do is make the money. For them... We won't see it, of course - that purity. But they will. Just as long as we keep on making the money... For that is the future, isn't it? Shopping. Television'.

The use of Chorus, at crucial points in *Faust*, serves a similar purpose. It is the disembodied collective voice narrating the process of systematic emotional starvation to which the American youth are exposed from the moment they enter school, until they are taught to repress their natural needs and feed on surrogates. The earliest memory Chorus conjures up is of a seven-year-old insomniac, who whimpers night after night at the world being such a bad place, but eventually learns to cry so mother, worried crazy that teachers are doing evil things to him, won't hear him ever again. At a later stage the voice is of a teenage delinquent, who smashes the window of a store and gets himself a VCR, the latest model, and to the mother's exasperated cry that had he listened to God, he would have gone to the food store, replies that there is no point of food in the house when you have nothing to watch while eating it. Next it tells of the Minister of a local church deciding to install a terminal and modem right there in the church so the young people can spread the word way into the future. When the mothers protest, seeing that they are losing their kids to the Net, he reminds them of the Lord's mysterious ways, which may seem to take their children away, but are in fact working for a brighter world, and appeals

to them to raise the funds for more terminals. For a moment, preceding the critical episode of Donny's suicide, Chorus speaks in his voice, recalling his childhood attachment to a slushie-machine in a store where his mother worked night shifts and he consoled himself gulping cherry slush until his mouth, and teeth and tongue were red. The machine was suddenly removed, and deprived of that compensation, Donny developed symptoms of 'pathological' aggression, first against the teachers at school, (the doctors typically overlooking the obvious and blaming his anger on some toxic substance in cherry slush³⁵), and then against the only object still in his control: his body, on whose surface he now cuts red patterns of bloody razor marks, hoping that one day Jesus will explain why he does that to himself. Finally Chorus modulates into the voice of an adult, who is still looking about for the signs that the world is getting better, as mother promised it would, but finding none, discovers that he does not feel a thing about it. And like Donny, who remembers the facts but has been conditioned to forget their meaning, he too wonders who made him that way.

It is this lack of comprehension that dooms the desperate attempts of Pete and Donny to reverse the process described by Chorus and recover the reality of experience. The reference to the legendary Faust supplies additional irony: Faust is in hell because he has sold his soul. Pete is ready to sell his in order to buy his way out of the postmodern simulacrum. He hates his father, a software magnate, and a self-appointed Messiah, who

³⁵ Bettelheim's argument in *The Art of the Obvious* is highly relevant to this episode. In the chapter entitled 'The Laziness of the Heart', Bettelheim speaks of the failures of modern child psychiatry research projects, which assume that the emotional disturbance of children under observation is due to all sorts of biological factors and chemical disbalance, and disregard the obvious contribution of the unnatural and inhuman social environment, including the research environment itself, which would elicit abnormal reactions in even perfectly healthy persons. Instead of enabling empathy, which is the obvious first step in the treatment of autism, the conditions of the research are deliberately designed to reproduce and re-enforce the autistic situation. The refusal to relate to the disturbed child, according to Bettelheim, is not justified by the ideals of scientific objectivity, as it is usually claimed, but is due to the laziness of the heart. (pp. 104-145).

Another illuminating comment is to be found, once again, in *Chomsky on MisEducation*. Among the sources of information used to document his devastating report on the life conditions of children in America are the results of a UNICEF study called *Child Neglect in Rich Societies*. The author, Sylvia Ann Hewlett, points out that in European and other less developed countries, where the standards of child-rearing, initially higher than in America, have further risen in the last fifteen years. By contrast, and despite much talk of traditional and family values, 'the anti-child spirit is loose in the US and Great Britain'. The effect on children of the economic, emotional and moral deterioration of family background in these countries, due to what is euphemistically called 'the ideological preference for free market' (which in reality affects only the wages of the poor, while the rich still enjoy a high level of public subsidy and state protection) and 'flexibility in the labor markets' (which simply 'means you better work extra hours, without knowing whether you have a job tomorrow, or else') is that of 'silent genocide': A sharply increased reliance on television for the supervision of what are called 'latchkey children', 'kids who are alone, is a factor in rising child alcoholism and drug use and in criminal violence against children by children and other obvious effects in health, education, ability to participate in democratic society, even survival'. Hewlett's book, published in 1999, has not been reviewed yet; instead, in book review sections devoted to this topics, eminent magazines feature publications whose authors, full of somber forebodings about the fall of IQ's, the decline of SAT scores and so on, attribute these alarming symptoms to bad genes. (Well, if not the art of modernism, what else could have caused this decadence, but nature!) 'Somehow', Chomsky's bitterly ironic comment runs, 'people are getting bad genes, and then there are various speculations about why this is. For example, maybe it's because black mothers don't nurture their children, and the reason is maybe they evolved in Africa, where the climate was hostile. So those are maybe the reasons, and this is really serious, hardheaded science, and a democratic society will ignore all this at its peril, the reviewers say. Well disciplined commissars know well enough to steer away from the obvious factors, the ones rooted in very plain and clear social policy'. An eloquent illustration of this policy is that when Hewlett wrote her book, 146 countries had ratified the international Convention on the Rights of the Child, and one had not: the US. (See *Chomsky on MisEducation*, pp. 48-52)

has just worked out an answer to the millennium. His solution, quite in line with the postmodern recommendation of disconnected multiplicity as a cure against overdetermination, is chaos. Like one of Jim Morrison's Lords, who use art to confuse us³⁶, he has put on a disc a hundred of the word's most famous masterpieces, which, instead of purging and focusing perception - in Pete's already muddled understanding it would mean 'mooding out the wrong mood down on you' - have been programmed to keep perceptions as blurred and chaotic as possible. Pete is on the run from his father, but has taken the trouble to steal the disc first and is now going to offer it back for a sum so vast, it will buy him 'so many totally real experiences.' Again, when he first makes a pass at Alain, mistaking him for the Artists and Repertoire agent, he intends it is a bargain on behalf of his rock idol, Stevie, whose lyrics ('Got a killer in my VCR/ Killer in my Rom/ Killer on the cable news/Killer in the floss I use...') and the way he sings them, 'like he really totally means it, which is like, totally marketable', 'bring back the memory of the sixties', of 'Kurt's spirit ... yeah...teen spirit' - and of the anger which no longer seems possible. The moment the misunderstanding is cleared up, Pete withdraws, with an apology, as it were, for not quite fitting into the theory of multiple sexualities: he is 'cool' about the 'whole guys thing', but it just happens that he himself is not that way. Yet, seduced by the aura of authority in Alain's voice, Pete agrees to his conditions, hoping through this transaction to earn the spiritual illumination that, beneath his coolness, he secretly yearns for. Just like his father, however, and like the God-on-line Minister, the postmodern philosopher turns out to be a false prophet too. Far from helping Pete learn what his real desires are, the teacher violates what natural integrity his disciple has still left. The act is carried out under the aegis of Foucault, Baudrillard, and all those philosophers who claim to be Nietzsche's spiritual heirs.

As Raymond Tallis reminds us in his article 'Truth About Lies', the denial of objective truth brought Foucault much fame and uncritical admiration. He did not, however, always behave as if he actually believed it - nobody could - but when he did, the consequences, for his disciples and lovers, were brutal. Dismissing the talk of a strange new disease as a mere effusion of words coming from anti-sexual forces of authority, he went on searching for 'new truths' in sadomasochistic sexual adventures at Berkley, where he was a visiting professor. Even later, when he must have known that he was infected, he did not 'communicate the death-or-life-dealing truth to his partners', and the resulting death toll, given that Foucault was wealthy enough to buy anything he wanted, can only be surmised.³⁷ Alain does not infect Pete with quite the same disease, but the analogy,

³⁶ In Morrison's 1969 collection of poetry *The Lords: Notes on Vision*, we read:

The Lords appease us with images. They give us
books, concerts, galleries, shows, cinemas.
Specially the cinemas. Through art they confuse us
and blind us to our environment. Art adorns
our prison walls, keeps us silent and diverted, and indifferent.

³⁷ See Raymond Tallis, 'The Truth About Lies: Foucault, Nietzsche and the Cretan Paradox', TLS, December 21, 2001, 3. Tallis's text is valuable for more than one reason. A witty and mercilessly dismissive review of Jeremy Campbell's *The Liar's Tale*, it invites incredulous laughter at the preposterous lengths one is prepared to go to defend postmodernism. To do so Jeremy Campbell first confuses human failure with success, which is typical, but then resorts to evolutionary biology for an alibi, which in view of postmodern hostility to nature is very untypical. *The Liar's Tale* rests on the argument that truth has been overrated and falsehood has had an unfair press. The author welcomes postmodern skepticism, notably Foucault's denial of the truth of objective truths, and then invents a whole tradition of thinkers who allegedly attacked the privileging of truth over falsehood. But he does not stop there: after Nietzsche, Ockham, Plato and Parmenides, even orchids which look

though not complete, is nevertheless striking. The reference to Baudrillard is also unmistakable. Baudrillard suggested that the only form of self-defense against the flood of media images is to regard them as detached from any reality, as mere signifiers without signifieds, surfaces emptied of meaning³⁸. But, of course, if a deliberate refusal of meaning can give any protection, it is the protection of blindness or indifference. The strategy Baudrillard recommends is precisely the one used to create what Robert Brustein called 'dumbocracy in America', and thus 'manufacture consent' to what would outrage a person unprotected in this way. It is also used by Alain to gain Pete's consent to his own abuse. As he masturbates Pete, Alain instructs him to conquer his spontaneous revulsion by viewing the whole affair through his camcorder, as an unreal TV spectacle. And it works - Pete doesn't feel a thing. As a practical introduction to the nihilistic sermon of hedonism and cruelty that he later preaches to Pete, the episode also reveals the degree to which Nietzsche's philosophy had to be falsified before it could be enlisted for postmodern cause³⁹. To Nietzsche, nihilism was an *intermediary* period, 'before there is yet strength to reverse values' and 'create the world as it ought to be'⁴⁰; his will to power was the will to spontaneously productive life, experienced as joy rather than any hedon-

like insects have their fifteen minutes. Thus nature is enlisted in the cause of lying. Since survival is all, lying is not an artificial, deviant or dispensable feature of life. On the contrary, 'deceitfulness is a kind of ethics, small lies serving nature's larger truth.' He instances orchids, that mimic the look of female insects and so invite pollination by males, cuckoos and butterflies and concludes: 'Where simpler species disguise themselves with borrowed plumage, we obfuscate with words, plant doubt in minds we are able to read.' The consequences of the denial of truth, Raymond Tallis writes, are rarely so immediate, attributable and brutal as they were in Foucault's case. This may explain, in his opinion, why those who attacked truth were treated with such respect and rewarded so handsomely in the twentieth century, when a 2, 500-year tradition of (often insincere) denial or relativizing of truth climaxed in an orgy of tenured skepticism.' If this is so, all the more reason to persist in giving art a chance to reveal the less visible connections and attribute the crimes of the twentieth century to those truly responsible for them.

³⁸ See J. Fiske, *Reading the Popular*, Unwin Hyman, 1989, 180.

³⁹ Despite his occasional overstatements, which his anti-humanist interpreters like to read out of context, the core of Nietzsche's philosophy and ethics, as Fromm's non-selective and far more intelligent reading demonstrates, was fundamentally humanistic. As his dictum - Good is what makes me grow - testifies, Nietzsche sought for criteria that would rescue morality from Christian ascetic authoritarianism and bourgeois respectability. (See E. Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into Psychology of Ethics*, Rautledge and Kegan Paul, 1949, esp. pp. 123-126.) The true significance of Nietzsche's philosophy in the context of the nineteenth-century seismic intellectual and moral shifts emerges with exceptional clarity in what I believe is the most comprehensive, intelligent and inspired interpretation of romanticism and modernism. In the section on Emerson and Nietzsche in Ljiljana Bogoeva-Sedlar's *Options of the Modern: Emerson, Melville, Stevens* (Tibet, Nis, 1993) we read: " 'Henceforth be masterless' could not have remained the only slogan guiding man toward a more satisfactory future. Rejection of old masters, the negative definition of the self, had to be re-worked into a positive credo, into an affirmation of those values for the sake of which the radical transformation of the past was undertaken. The old masters were gone, but man could not survive without a source of moral authority, a system of values with which to master into meaning both himself and the world. ...And even Nietzsche, the most violent destroyer of old tablets, sings his invocation of the Unknown God...The Satanic 'Non serviam' was thus often merely a proclamation of the readiness to serve someone else, namely the power that moved the New self discovered within the confines of the Old"(p. 60) Afterword ends with a reminder that postmodern appropriation of Nietzsche involves a reversal of the values he most passionately held to: 'A confusion must be avoided and a distinction made: saying yes to the whole creative output of nature is not the same thing as saying yes to everything being produced in culture. Especially the culture of postmodernism. Ultimately, it is a question of responsibility. Nietzsche, whom Paglia quotes repeatedly, was the fiercest and most uncompromising critic of *culture*. Yet we find 'Even the love of *life* is still possible...' recorded in his last published documents."(247).

⁴⁰ 'The Will to Power', *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds., J. Rivkin and M. Ryan, Blackwell Publishers, 1988, 366-367.

istic pleasure; and the unequivocal purpose of cruelty was to overthrow whatever inhibits, from within or without, this joyful self-overcoming and self-creation. This *creative* cruelty mutated into Derrida's unspecified 'monstrosity',⁴¹ to become, in Alain's 'free interpretation', a pretext for an act of ultimate destruction: rape.

Alain's sermon of cruelty leads to another tragedy. His prescription that 'we must be cruel to others *and* to ourselves' is translated by Pete and Donny into a final attempt to revive their numbed sensations by self-inflicted wounds. The pain they feel as they cut themselves is the one remaining proof that they are still alive and the images of their lacerated bodies on their home page are transmuted into codes through which they communicate this message to the world. Yet seeing that the medium is obstructing his message, enclosing him in the spectral world of the virtual, Donny decides to prove that it is all 'for the real': he accepts Pete's challenge to meet him in the flesh, posts a message on his home page that 'he has had enough of it all just being pictures', and that he is on his way to a motel room where he intends to 'go for his jugular'. The reality of this last act of rebellion soon, however, dissolves into another spectacle. Donny's suicide, committed in Pete's and Alain's presence, but also viewed on the net by hundreds of subscribers, is immediately turned into the subject of every talk show and into a song Stevie performed unplugged and is now showing three times an hour on MTV. This epilogue is one of the most shocking among the play's demonstrations of how 'the potentially libertarian sub-cultures of the young are co-opted and their revolt transmuted into marketable commodity'.⁴²

Yet Donny's defiant gesture is not quite emptied of reality, at least not for Pete and Alain, and death as liberation, as an exit out of the virtual, remains one of the two options defined at the end of *Faust*. Pete rejects it. Horrified at the brutal immediacy of Donny's blood-smearing dead body and blaming it solely on Alain's doctrine of cruelty, he shoots him and returns to his father and the hopeless prospect of electronically controlled chaos. Alain, however, follows Donny's example: seriously wounded, he refuses medical help, and dies. Weariness, disappointment, desire for escape, guilt - whatever brought him to this decision, it is the final, decisive indication of his moral ascent beyond his real life

⁴¹ Derrida's allegedly Nietzschean affirmation of free play in his 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences' is defined in purely negative terms and thus exemplifies the negative concept of freedom that may become, as Quentin Skinner warns, a disguised tyranny: it is 'an affirmation of a world of signs, *without* fault, *without* truth, and *without* origin'; it is a *repudiation* of the 'humanist ethic' of 'self-presence', a *rejection* of the romantic 'saddened, nostalgic, guilty' interpretation of man and history; it is a liberation *from* 'remorse'. What this freedom is *for* is not specified; instead its imminent coming is merely welcomed in the rhapsodic anticipation, at the end the essay, 'of the birth ... of some as yet unnamable ...formless, mute, infant and terrifying form of monstrosity'. In his essay 'The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,' Derrida is more explicit: here cruelty is identified with life - the non-verbal instinctual energy released when the author, text and aesthetic illusion of theatrical representation have all been smashed up. Yet, it is highly instructive to return once again to Marcuse and compare his repudiation with Derrida's celebration of Artaud (incidentally, the only artist that he has singled out for praise). In abolishing the distancing aesthetic form, or 'the secondary alienation' of art, Marcuse claims, and moving into the streets instead, the theater of cruelty appeals to the masses as masses, and not individuals; there, a 'constant sonorization' insisted on by Artaud - and praised by Derrida - is addressed to the audience 'long since become familiar with the violent noises and cries, which are the daily equipment of the mass media, sports, highways, places of recreation'. There, violent physical images fail to shock 'minds and bodies which live in peaceful coexistence (and even profiting from) genocide, torture and poison... They do not break the oppressive familiarity with destruction: they reproduce it.' (See Marcuse, op. cit., 111-112.) Unlike Artaud's, Ravenhill's cruel images, surrounded by what I would call the controlling cognitive context, the critical perspective of the author's text, do shock.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 84.

prototypes. The first hint is the despair audible in whatever he says and shadowing both his hedonism and his cruelty. Another lurks in the two elusive parables that seem to obsess him. While they seem to add deeper, more disquieting resonance to the theme of the loss of feeling and the fragmentation of the self, they also may be read as evidence of his capacity for self-searching and remorse.

One tells of a Japanese businessman and a Dutch woman having lunch at a restaurant. The woman admits to being a poet and reads the businessman a love poem that he has inspired her to write; he shoots her, chops her up, and eats her, declaring all the while his undying love for her. Even in this minimalist form, the story is reminiscent of the great modernists', Ibsen's, for example, exposure of the west's inadequate knowledge of the self and the disorienting teleology deriving from it. Peer Gynt discovers at the end of his life-long pursuit of worldly success that he is 'defective goods', and that the only place he has ever been complete and whole is in Solveg's love. The successful Japanese businessman encounters his own estranged soul embodied in a love poem about himself - his cannibalism being an accurate measure of his hunger to re-possess it. The other - about a man who makes love to a beautiful woman, tells her that the part of her he finds most attractive are her eyes, and a few days later receives a gift from her, a shoe-box containing her two eyeballs - makes shockingly explicit the symbolic dismemberment implied in the fetishism of body parts. But these examples are also disguised confessions on Alain's part. The important questions he insists they give rise to: 'Who was cruel, the Dutch woman or the Japanese man?' and 'Who was the seducer and who was the seduced?'; the subdued hostility in Pete's response: 'I'm not so good at the whole metaphor thing'; and finally Alain's own answer that it was the woman who was cruel, because she understood the use of metaphor, and the man understood nothing - all combine to project Alain's sense of responsibility for the effect his own metaphors have produced.

That the absence of any ascertainable metaphysical truth or transcendental absolute makes all knowledge metaphorical is not any original, postmodern discovery, nor does it matter much. What does matter is the awareness that a choice of a metaphor is a moral commitment: for metaphors are interpretations and interpretations have power to shape conduct and thus generate their own confirmation. Speaking of the conflict of interpretations concerning human nature, Zygmunt Bauman observed that we 'would never know for sure whether people as such are good or evil...But it does matter whether we believe them to be basically good or evil, and consequently how we treat them', for 'the image we hold of each other and of all of us together has the uncanny ability to self-corroborate.'⁴³ To paraphrase Bauman, we may not ultimately know what the self is and what it may become, but to speak of the postmodern crisis of identity as 'the death of man' and 'the end of history' is to immobilize the creative energies that might take us beyond it.

These energies, according to Ravenhill, are love and anger. Blocked or perverted in *Shopping and Fucking* and *Faust*, they are, if only tentatively and partially, released in *Some Explicit Polaroids*, Ravenhill's version of *Look Back in Anger*. A socialist and an anarchist just out of prison, Nick agrees to subdue his still unflagging desire to smash up things only to satisfy the even more urgent need to take care of somebody: it is under this condition that he is allowed to win back his wife, who has renounced her youthful belief in great narratives of liberation, and convinced herself that playing the small game, according to the rules of that greater prison-house, the Thatcherite England, is a sign of

⁴³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*, Blackwell, 1995, 257.

adulthood. Yet she soon discovers that what binds her to Nick is the memory of his anger, and promises to turn him into what he used to be.

If Ravenhill's hope of a breakthrough involves a return to the romantic individualism, it is because any genuine alternative to postmodernism must begin with a breach of its prohibition against nostalgia. To search for absolute novelty is to perpetuate the discontinuity and fragmentation on which postmodern, or any other theories whose concealed purpose is mind control, thrive. Looking back in anger may in fact reveal that postmodernism is not as new as it is made to appear: that beneath its permissiveness and hedonism it belongs to a tradition of repressive ethics whose proponents, from the great medieval defenders of the Church to ideologues of state power, imposed a concept of 'salvation' that required the destruction of the soul. Between this authoritarian ethics and the humanist upholding of the productive self, crucial to romantic tradition in art from Blake to the great modernists, there is, as Fromm repeatedly warned, not much else to choose. Ravenhill has rediscovered and attached himself to the latter, at the most inauspicious of historical moments, when postmodernism, seemingly on the wane, in fact, persists in the way we crave novelty: new excitement, new distraction, new language games. But if we desire a true alternative to postmodernism, and not merely the old Faustian bargain in a new guise, we'd better listen to the voice of the artist.

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POSTMODERNA KNJIŽEVNOST NE POSTOJI

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U ovom radu ispituje se i osporava validnost kategorije 'postmoderna književnost'. Fraza 'postmoderna književnost', ili 'postmoderna umetnost', u smislu u kome je teoretičari obično koriste, unela je u tekuću akademsku debatu isuviše zabune da bi bila upotrebljiva. Postmodernizam je legitimni termin kada se odnosi na političke i ekonomske promene koje su uslovice globalnu prevlast post-industrijskog, potrošačkog ili medijskog društva. On je takođe adekvatna oznaka za stanje duha - bili da se radi o ciničnoj rezignaciji ili euforičnom prihvatanju - koje prati ove promene a koje u velikoj meri proizvode i podstiču trenutno prestižne teorije kulture i umetnosti. Uprkos proklamovanim revolucionarnim ciljevima, postmoderna teorija i kritika, podvrgnute pažljivoj analizi, ukazuju se kao sofisticirani oblici politički korektnog mišljenja. Ključne ideje postmodernizma- na primer, opšte prihvaćeni aksiom da su 'kraj istorije' i smrt čoveka' dobrodošli demokratski napredak - mogu biti prihvatljive samo onome ko podlegne krajnje nelegitimnom metodu ubeđivanja kojim se postmoderni kritičari i teoretičari kulture služe, i koji je Umberto Eko, govoreći o Mekluanovoj ekstatičnoj odbrani medijske kulture, nazvao cogito interruptus: to je ubeđivanje zasnovano na namerno nedefinisanim terminima, tako da se čitalac navede na izvođenja lažnih zaključaka. Međutim, ovakvi i slični programirani prekidi misaonog procesa, i konsekventno relativizovanje kognitivne i etičke percepcije, svojstveni i neophodni teoretičarima koji žele da prikriju kompromis sa režimom koji navodno kritikuju, strani su kritičkom i stvaralačkom duhu umetnika, čija je svrha još uvek ono što je bila za Konrada, naime da omogući čitaocu da vidi istinu. Postmoderni teorijski diskurs ima, na protiv, za cilj da, stvarajući lažnu kategoriju postmoderne književnosti i umetnosti uopšte, otvori prostor za ono što je za sistem bezopasno ili poželjno, a učini nevidljivim i nedostupnim ono što je u savremenom stvaralaštvu potencijalno revolucionarno. U tom smislu može se reći da ne postoji postmoderna književnost, postoje samo postmoderna tumačenja književnosti. U prilog ove teze u radu se navode stavovi savremenih književnih stvaralaca, čiji jezgroviti komentari o teoriji i kritici, po mišljenju autora, najčešće sadrže mnogo više mudrosti nego tomovi postmodernog diskursa o umetnosti. Konačno, analiza drame Faust (Faust je mrtav) Marka Ravenhila sprovedena je kao praktična provera iste teze: naime da pokaže šta se zbiva kada neke od navodno progresivnih postmodernih ideja i fenomena - kao što su kolaps velikih priča, nepostojanje objektivne istine, simulakrum ili virtualna stvarnost, polimorfna seksualnost - postanu predmet umetničkog promišljanja jednog od autora koje bi po trenutno važećim kriterijumima bili bez oklevanja svrstani u kategoriju postmodernih pisaca.