

THE FADING OF THE POSTMODERN: JEAN FRANÇOIS LYOTARD'S MORALITES POSTMODERNES

At the beginning of *Moralités postmodernes* Lyotard inserts, modestly towards the foot of the page, in small type, a sort of abstract or auto-epigraph, which begins by referring to something that might have been found at the end of the book but isn't: the moralité, the moral, that is used conventionally to close a certain kind of narrative, to round out the fable. In the course of the book there is a text in the form of a fable, "Une fable postmoderne," about which I will be talking later on; it doesn't have a moral either, though there is a concluding sentence which could almost serve as one: "Mais, après tout, cette fable ne demande pas à être crue, seulement réfléchie" (1993:94). Of course the whole book is a set of morals, postmodern morals; but the moral of the book is in fact to be found in this small pretext:

La vie va vite, aujourd'hui. Elle volatilise les moralités. La futilité convient au postmoderne, à la chose comme au mot. Elle n'empêche pas qu'on se pose des questions, comment vivre, pourquoi? Réponses différées. Comme toujours, bien sûr, mais cette fois, on a l'air de le savoir, que la vie va dans tous les sens. ¶ Mais le sait-on? On se le représente, plutôt... (1993:11).

One could spend a long time unpacking these few lines; I will content myself with a very brief gloss. The futility I will save for later; at all events it does not prevent us from asking how to live, and why. A relief, this - to find, after the conversational relativity of postmodern discourse, that such very basic questions, such very old questions, are alive and well. The answers will be various - but they always were. We'll still have to wait for them - but we always did. Meanwhile life goes on after the manner of the horseman who rode off rapidly in all directions - or just goes, with all the meanings we can give to that expression. It's not that we really know any of this, but that's the way we choose to put it to ourselves.

This sounds like a familiar condition, one which people have regularly found themselves, from time to time at least, throughout the history of human thought. And yet "cette fois" suggests that it is supposed to be different this time around, as though something had happened to change the state of affairs. That it was witness to such a change was the original conceit of postmodernism. And of course some things have changed: there are nuclear weapons and computers, and also AIDS and the collapse of communism, though these last happened too late to influence the emergence of the postmodern. But then some things always have. What comes to mind is that most banal of French clichés, plus ça change... I have the impression that in *Moralités postmodernes* Lyotard is being driven, reluctantly, to the conclusion that it all amounts, after all, to la même chose.

What postmodernism, at least of Lyotard's variety, really did change, temporarily at least, was the meaning of the modern - and in just such a way as to make postmodernism seem portentous. Post- always takes its meaning from its appropriate pre-, in Lyotard's case a story about metanarratives. It isn't that Lyotard invented metanarratives, but he cast them in a role that will not bear close examination. Everyone knows the post- side of his position: "En simplifiant à l'extrême, on tient pour 'postmoderne' l'incredulité à l'égard des métarécits" (1979:7); a plausible reaction to it is to ask whether that isn't just what skepticism always was? It turns out that this incredulity operated under special pre-conditions, which are less emphasized in the literature, though they're on the same page:

La Science est d'origine en conflit avec les récits. A l'aune de ses propres critères, la plupart de ceux-ci se révèlent des fables. Mais, pour autant qu'elle ne se réduit pas à énoncer des régularités utiles et qu'elle cherche le vrai, elle se doit de légitimer ses règles de jeu. C'est alors qu'elle tient sur son propre statut un discours de légitimation, qui s'est appelé philosophie. Quand ce métadiscours recourt explicitement à tel ou tel grand récit, comme la dialectique de l'Esprit, l'herméneutique du sens, l'émancipation du sujet raisonnable ou travailleur, le développement de la richesse, on décide d'appeler "moderne" la science qui s'y réfère pour se légitimer (*ibid.*).

"On décide": this is the historically dubious element on which the debate turns. The "on" is semantically dubious too; it was encountered before, in the epigraph from *Moralités postmodernes* ("le sait-on?"), and in spite of its disarming impersonality it seems to stand for a rather select and wholly unrepresentative subculture of the microculture to which, alas, all

of us in this room belong and which has about as much influence on modern science as rain dances on world climate.

Who decided, and when, that the term "modern" as applied to science should be reserved to disciplines legitimated by the great narratives listed by Lyotard? Most of the people who have taken themselves to be practicing or expounding modern science in the last century or so - even if we construe "science" in the broad sense licensed by French usage - would have been rightly astonished to be told that that description of their activities implied that their discourse was, or needed to be, legitimated by the dialectics of mind, or the hermeneutics of meaning, or the liberation of the subject, or the development of wealth. Might they all have been dependent on one or another of these metanarratives in spite of themselves, without knowing it? It would be hard to make this out - on the contrary, the dependence seems to go the other way, since it was the posing of certain questions in the wake of scientific developments that engendered these metanarratives in the first place.

Leaving aside some ideologically motivated human scientists, whose work would not have been considered, even by themselves, paradigmatic of modern science, the exceptions among scientists - the ones who might have acknowledged that they were working under the aegis of a metanarrative - would have been the Christians and the Marxists, striving on the one hand for the glory of God and on the other for the future of the revolution, but even for them the metanarrative would have had nothing directly to do with the science - it might have been seen as inspiring but would not have been called on as legitimating. The exceptions to that would have been on the whole, bad scientists - a few anti-evolutionists on the Christian side in the nineteenth century, the glaring (and as far as I know isolated) example of Lysenko on the communist side in the twentieth.

It is worth hanging on to Lysenko for a moment, though, because he suggests something about Lyotard's own relation to the modern. There are hints in *Moralités postmodernes* that postmodern incredulity - read disillusionment - with modernist metanarratives in general may actually be a displacement of Lyotard's own disillusionment with a couple of metanarratives in particular, those of collectivism and historicism, in short of Marxism. In "Mur, golfe, système" he speaks nostalgically of "les années cinquante et soixante, alors que nous militions dans cette sorte

d'Institut' de théorie et de pratique qui s'appelait 'Socialisme ou barbarie'" (1993:65), and in reflecting on the fate of the Soviet bloc speaks of Marx as "the old hero":

Les régimes qui se sont posés aux représentants du vieux héros n'ont pu jouer, en son nom, que des bouffonneries sanglantes. Ils succombent les uns après les autres, laissant, à l'exception de leurs propres cadavres, la place vacante pour la reconstruction des communautés sur le modèle occidental. Opération qui prendra des années et n'ira pas sans de violentes convulsions, on peut le craindre. Mais à laquelle on ne voit rien qui puisse résister (1993:70).

French philosophy has always been obliged, as Anglo-American philosophy has not, to put Marxism somewhere near center stage, as a presence to be reckoned with. The specifically American story that consigned it for so long to the wings is a shameful one, but this transatlantic difference has sometimes produced amusing or even poignant moments for philosophers in America who follow and have affection for things French.

In the middle seventies many of us, myself included, were finally succeeding in getting American students to read Marx seriously as the great philosopher he is. This was just the moment at which the nouveaux philosophes came on a cultural mission to America with their new evangelism, the burden of which was: it is no longer necessary to read Marx. This alarmed the French Marxists, who sent over a one-man damage control team in the person of the great Henri Lefebvre at a private meeting in New York, and it was hard to keep a straight face: he rehearsed all the old Party clichés as if we were an audience from the HLM's at some maison de culture in the Paris suburbs.

The apparent triumph of Western democratic capitalism since 1989 has not seemed to some of us here as extraordinary as it seems to intellectuals like Lyotard - or, let us say, it has not seemed extraordinary in the same way. We have lived under what Lyotard calls simply "le système" for years without (except for a few heady moments in the late sixties) the ever-present lure, or even hope, represented by Marxism. Having known something about the alternative, and now discredited, system we were not surprised at its collapse, though we may have been surprised that it happened so soon and so fast; never having bought its metanarrative, having indeed been living all along in a culture that had no consistent metanarrative, we did not have to learn incredulity.

I come, then, but by a somewhat different route from his, to a conclusion similar to Bruno Latour's: we never were modern, at least not in the special sense against which Lyotard's version of postmodernism defines itself. Perhaps this puts it too strongly: the historicizing and collectivizing tendency has not been absent on this side of the Atlantic, in one form or another. It sometimes seems to me that Western philosophy went off on a two-hundred year detour - say from 1789 to 1989 - during which it was seduced by universal history and by the notion of the socially-constructed individual to the point of a general softening of the brain. It is surely not accidental that these two centuries also saw the rise and fall of imperialism. Since 1989 it has been understandable for everyone to think, as Lyotard puts it, that "le grand récit des Lumières l'a finalement emporté sur les représentations de l'Homme de l'histoire qui ont brigué, contre lui, la direction théorique et pratique des affaires humaines" (1993:68). We cannot, perhaps, simply resume the eighteenth-century program, but it is my personal view that the single figure whose example and inspiration we most need at the moment is Voltaire.

I might mention in passing - though it would lead off in quite a different direction - how already two hundred years ago Voltaire was undertaking something that few of us seem to feel like tackling, though it badly needs to be tackled, namely the philosophical critique of Islam; that he did it, as was habitual with him, in the mode of satire, does not detract from its seriousness. We have the opportunity now to do things in a more hard-brained manner, coming to terms with the absolute idiosyncrasy of the embodied human subject, which enables and has always enabled the individual to stand apart from the dominant metanarratives of his or her time. That it seems to me is a good way for postmodernism to coexist with its relative modern, as the critical wing of the avant-garde. But this works only if we admit that it was around long enough before modernism was thought of. On this showing, for example, Socrates in the *Phaedrus* is an exemplary postmodern.

Lyotard seems to agree about the current significance of Islam, and about Voltaire, whom he says he would like to be imitating - "au talent près" - in the postmodern fable that follows "Mur, golfe, système" in *Moralités postmodernes*. This juxtaposition of texts is one of the most interesting in the whole book. The former is a brilliant summary of the way the contemporary world looked in the light of the impending Gulf war (was written in late 1990); the latter is an elegant evocation of the situation of the human race on a small planet in the solar system halfway

through the life cycle of the Sun, and its eventual prospects of escape from the impending destruction of the system when, billions of years hence, the Sun finally becomes a nova. About this fable Lyotard says that it is not at all critical, that it is frankly "representative," that it is referential rather than reflexive, hence naive, even puerile. Why then, given that it fails postmodern inspiration at so many points, would a good postmodernist bother to tell it at all? Here is Lyotard's reply:

J'aurais pour excuse que mon histoire est passablement accréditée dans des milieux fort sérieux, physiciens, biologistes, économistes. De façon certes informelle, voire craintive, comme si cette fable était le rêve inavouable que le monde postmoderne rêve à propos de lui-même. Un conte qui serait, en somme, le grand récit que ce monde s'obstine à raconter sur lui-même après que les grands récits ont évidemment fait faillite (1993:77).

And what is this fable after all? straight modern science - modern in the old sense and not subordinate to any of Lyotard's meta-narratives - plus a bit of science fiction. (The appeal to "des milieux fort sérieux" would seem in this case to be using the modern to legitimate the postmodern.) We have some billions of years before the crunch, and who knows what Man and his Brain (or Brain and its Man) will have become by then, and whether He or It will escape in time to other parts of the cosmos? The main outlines of this story have been available, and repeated time and again, ever since astrophysics began to be a developed science, and thinking about it has always required a sense of proportion. The span of life on earth, from macromolecules to incineration, can be estimated at roughly ten billion years, of which five may be still to go; human beings like us have been around for a million years (a generous estimate in fact), civilization for perhaps ten or twenty thousand, science in its modern form for three or four hundred. Consider what informed futurologists thought, only fifty years ago, the world would be like today, and how wildly off they were; consider in that light what conjectures on our part about very much longer timespans can possibly amount to. A story used to circulate of a member of the audience who came up to the lecturer after a talk on cosmology and asked in a trembling voice: "Did you say the earth would go up in flames in five million years' time?" "No," replied the lecturer, "I said five billion." "Thank God!" said the questioner.

So Lyotard's fable seems to represent his rather delayed discovery of what the rest of us have always thought of as modern

science. True, its quasi-moral, as I remarked earlier, is that it is not to be believed, only reflected upon. And he does acknowledge that it is neither recent nor original:

Mais je la prétends postmoderne. Postmoderne ne signifie pas récent. Il signifie comment l'écriture, au sens plus large de la pensée et de l'action, se situe après qu'elle a subi la contagion de la modernité et qu'elle a tenté de s'en guérir (1993:89).

But now it turns out that modernity isn't recent either, it goes back to St. Paul and St. Augustine, which according to the metanarrative theory it probably does, though there wasn't much science, even in the broadest sense, to be legitimated by their metanarrative at the time.

It is hard at this point to resist the feeling that the whole modern/postmodern contrast is being somewhat stretched, and that of the two senses of "modern," the one that lends itself to the by now conventional definition of the postmodern and the one that doesn't, the latter is beginning to take over. This feeling is reinforced elsewhere in Lyotard's book, for example in the very interesting essay on Malraux. Consider the following passage:

Le musée imaginaire ne peut être que "moderne". Il faut en effet que la civilisation dans laquelle il apparaît ait perdu toute croyance pour qu'elle puisse accueillir les objets de toutes les croyances sans les juger stupides, barabares, inaccessibles...(1993:154).

What is the loss of all belief if not that very incredulity which is supposed to be the mark of the postmodern? and what is the museum in the imagination if not the realization of the multicultural convergence which is one of its more welcome concomitants? Yet they appear here under the guise of the modern.

Once again, though, it is the old modern, not the new one against which the postmodern was originally set off. And once again the opposition which Lyotard then produces, as postmodern to this modern, is itself an old opposition that did not have to wait for postmodernity in order to manifest itself. For he fears that the monumentality of the museum, real or imaginary, will lead to an "establishment" which, by seducing artists into doing what will get themselves accepted by it rather than what their freedom impels them to do, "exercerait une menace mortelle sur l'art" (1993:157). But surely this menace and its antidote

have been in play ever since the Academy was first challenged by the salon des refusés.

There might be much more along these lines. Lyotard in this book is Protean, sometimes brilliant, nearly always interesting, often infuriating. Some of the unreality that reigns in the postmodernist chapel, and not only among literary or philosophical figures - sociologists and economists often fall for it too - is to be found in the early pieces about cultural capital and the metaphor of the city, or rather of its "zone," its dehumanized inner suburbs. In "Zone" we find, for example, that "le corps producteur est déjà un archaïsme" (1993:28). Lyotard is fond of sweeping aphorisms like this, but they rarely hold up. The idea that there can be an economy of information without physical work has become a popular delusion, but while the replacement of labor power by machinery in large-scale production is a reality, the dream of machines that run machines, leaving humans to deal in pure information, is cut from the same cloth as teleportation or the warp drive. There is a lot of information about, and it does produce interesting anomalies, but we aren't that postmodern yet and won't be for a long time.

The cultural capital chapter, "Marie au Japon," is a wonderful and very witty evocation of globetrotting academic fashion, almost in the style of David Lodge. But it also has an unmistakable echo of Andy Warhol: Marie, in her microcosm, is having her fifteen minutes of fame, but the futility with which I began and to which I promised to return permeates the essay - the very one Lyotard has chosen to lead this collection. What, as the postmodern fable unfolds - not on the scale of billions of years, not even on the scale of thousands or of hundreds, but let's say decades: the year 2018 perhaps, a quarter of a century from now - will remain of postmodern? Perhaps the futility of the postmodern lies in its having become a metanarrative in its own right, ready in its turn to be deconstructed by the incredulity of its successors. We can't keep having these little historicist dramas, in which fashion follows fashion, and expect to be remembered by the enthusiasts of the fashion after next.

Not that I would wish to take the totalitarian view of someone like Pierre Nora, whose proposal for ending intellectual squabbles Lyotard describes in "Intime est la terreur," one of the best pieces in the book and one with which I am in complete sympathy. But here postmodernism is so far forgotten that Lyotard evokes the lonely creator as the unassimilable exception to every movement of ideas; "devant la

toile ou la page, le consensus est nul et non avénu" (1993:184). And one says to oneself: that's it! that's been it all along: incredulity about metanarratives doesn't belong to an epoch or a movement, it belongs and has always belonged to the free individual, outside of history, who will continue to pose the questions How to live? and why? and for whom therefore, and thanks to whom, life will continue to be interesting as long as the fable lasts. If only Lyotard could have begun there.

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