

## MODERNISM, POSTMODERNISM, AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY

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We tend to define human identity in much the same way that we try to approximate – unsuccessfully, though – the divine essence, namely in negative terms, “apophatically”, in relation to what it is not. And, ironically, it is this demonised Other that enables us to circumscribe, even consolidate, our own identities.

Identity had been a major – sometimes explicit, sometimes subtextual, ultimately unresolved – issue in the discourses of both modernity and postmodernity.

It is through an incomplete, inadequate approach to the Other that modernism, otherwise so obsessive about subjectivity in all its forms, has failed to give a satisfactory answer to the question “what is the ‘I’, and what exactly makes it what it is?” Such a failure is easy to understand if we take a broader perspective and consider the ideological, social framework (*modernity*), not just its strictly aesthetic correlate (*modernism*).

From its totalising perspective, modernity has only managed to superficially name, or formulate, the Other without actually addressing its full specificity, thus missing the epistemological chance of ever being able to comprehend the “I”. The very paradigm of modernity relies heavily on the idea of universal reason and of social progress achievable through advances in knowledge, as illustrated by the “grand narratives” (or “*grands récits*”, to use Jean-François Lyotard’s terms) of the Western world. However, as Lyotard himself points out in *The Postmodern Condition*, the two types of “*grands récits*” (the “narratives of emancipation” and the “speculative narratives”) cannot be used to justify scientific research since there is no direct causal relationship between knowledge and social progress. Such a position is in keeping with both Lyotard’s own doubts about the idea of progress and the characteristic postmodern skepticism about the possibility of social engineering. In other words, the metanarratives of modernity have one major flaw: they aim – along the lines of the Enlightenment and of Western philosophical traditions – to define a generic human

nature and destiny without taking into account the individual, the particular, the local, the different, the Other.

Regardless of its commendable emancipatory aims, such a discourse can only “read” the reality of the Other against a transcendental, rational (and some would add white, male, Eurocentric) subject which is, paradoxically, the very centre or source (of power, of meaning) and at the same time outside time and space – an abstraction or essence transcending any physical boundaries. This is a reduction that leaves out some of the basic components of human identity (such as race, ethnicity, and gender) and makes possible a notion of the human subject as a unified, immutable, coherent entity.

From such a limited, self-sufficient, parochial (despite its claims to centrality) perspective, alterity consequently appears as an inferior, not-up-to-the-standard Other that has no traditions, no stature, and perhaps most importantly, no individual “voice”. According to a distinguished critic of modernism, Henry Giroux, this type of discourse has only reinforced the barriers of race and ethnicity and given prominence to the dominant Eurocentric model.

It is the merit of postmodernism to have redefined the key terms of the identity discourse (the “I” versus the “Other”) and to have purged them of any globalising connotations. Considered from this point of view, the postmodern approach seems to acquire an *almost* (a) “revolutionary” dimension (in the sense Th. Kuhn uses the term): all claims to universal reason are rejected in favour of specificity. The globalising metanarratives or “grand narratives” are replaced by a plurality of narratives that emphasize difference and, quite remarkably, acknowledge their own partiality. In this connection, the postmodern critique of universalism takes the form of a revaluation of Otherness under its numberless manifestations.

Following this line of thought, it is only logical that postmodernism should question the normative status of

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the European tradition by setting it critically against previously ignored non-European cultures understood as forms of “countermemory” (Henry Giroux), essential for the retrieval of less “central”, more “eccentric” identities.

The postmodern notion of identity is one that decentres the individual, causing a shift from sheer subjectivity to an almost total loss of subjectivity. (According to Gerhard Hoffmann, those are the two opposite *épistémès* that define the gap between modernism and postmodernism.). The decentred subject is perceived as multifaceted and contradictory, hence identity is no longer viewed as singular and stable, but rather as plural and mutable, and ultimately impossible to grasp through the usual exercise of reason. As a matter of fact, it is the general postmodern indeterminacy and uncertainty that renders every single component of its value system (identity included) unstable. In its turn, postmodernism’s “ontological uncertainty” (Hans Bertens’ term) is the obvious consequence of an acute sense of loss or absence of a centre. In Bertens’ opinion, this deep-rooted uncertainty is one of the two “core” notions of postmodernism (the other being the unstable, decentred “postmodern self”).

In the absence of any stable authoritative points of reference (universal truths, essences, centres) the arbitrary and the irrational gain unprecedented prominence. The language of fiction is emptied of its symbolic power and the free linguistic play takes precedence over discursive coherence and unity of form. The so-called self-reflective or metafictional novels of such authors as the Americans William Burroughs, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon and William Gass, to name but a few, are based on the view of language as being explicitly and totally self-absorbed. Its self-referentiality is a subversive (rather than an aesthetic) reaction against a civilisation that has turned out to be a failure and a fraud, and against its legitimating discourse that has likewise proved to be an enormous mystification.

The only reality is the text itself made up of words that bear no relation whatsoever to the world of

objects (a tenet that is both structuralist and poststructuralist!). Unreadability and irrationality are pursued deliberately not for aesthetic reasons (as is the case of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*) but for subversive ones. The human subject becomes a mere verbal construct, as illusory and lacking in substance as the world around him – an oblique way of laying bare the disturbing “unreality of reality”, to use Raymond Federman’s inspired definition of one of the most unsettling problems of our times. Perhaps we should add here that it is not only the postmodern literary discourse that partakes of these characteristics to a lesser or greater extent, but also the critical discourses of poststructuralism. Suffice it to mention the systematically pursued “unreadability” of the deconstructionists (especially Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, and the less radical Hillis Miller, Barbara Johnson and Geoffrey Hartman).

Perhaps we should finally come to terms with the textual universe we live in and accept the evidence that every single approach to defining identity is doomed to failure. For despite the new, more critical light it sheds on the subject, postmodernism itself has been accused of “aestheticism” and incapacity to analyse difference, marginality and otherness in even more aggressive terms. Cornel West, for instance, argues against the postmodern defence of difference and plurality which, he claims, further marginalises certain ethnic and social groups, though he salutes the postmodern denial of the homogeneous and the universal. Linda Hutcheon, the authoritative Canadian theorist of postmodernism, makes a subtle distinction between “difference” and “otherness”. She admits that postmodernism does focus on difference at the expense of uniformity but adds that the very concept of difference involves a typically postmodernist contradiction since, unlike “otherness”, it has no exact opposite term to define itself against. It is always multiple, shifting, provisional. To Hutcheon, this is just one more example of postmodernism’s duplicity: it both asserts and subverts every concept that comes under its scrutiny, a point that she illustrates by commenting on Thomas Pynchon’s allegory of otherness (the “we-system” as opposed to the “They-system”) in his novel *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

To paraphrase an American deconstructionist particularly fond of contradictions and paradoxes, any approach to identity is bound to have its share of “blindness” through which its most valuable “insights” may eventually come to light.

## NOTES

a. On this point there is hardly any consensus among critics. To Leslie Fiedler, postmodernism appears as a total break with modernism, to Susan Sontag it means the affirmation of a “new sensibility”, and to Andreas Huyssen it brings about a “paradigm shift”. Gerald Graff however identifies elements of continuity between

modernism and postmodernism, as does Ihab Hassan between the former and the Avant-garde. We believe that a more relevant emphasis could be laid on postmodernism’s ambivalent attitude (at once complicit and subversive) towards modernism, as we shall try to demonstrate further on.

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