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The Place of Postmodernism in Postmodernity

Mikhail Epstein
(Emory University, Atlanta)

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1. Removing the Quotation Marks

Post-postmodernism witnesses the re-birth of utopia after its own death, after its subjection to postmodernism's severe scepticism, relativism and its anti-utopian consciousness. Here is what several Moscow artists and art scholars of the post-Conceptual wave have said about the subject: "It is crucial that the problem of the universal be raised as a contemporary issue. I understand that it is a utopia. It is done completely consciously, yes, utopia is dead, so long live utopia. Utopia endows the individual with a more significant and a wider horizon" (Viktor Miziano). "The future of contemporary art is in the will to utopia, in the break-through into reality through a membrane of quotations, it is in sincerity and pathos" (Anatolii Osmolovsky). The subject here is the resurrection of utopia after the death of utopia, no longer as a social project with claims to transforming the world, but as a new intensity of life experience and a broader horizon for the individual. Trans-utopianism, trans-pathos are projections of the same "lyrical" need, which transcended its own negation in postmodernism.

In considering the names that might possibly be used to designate the new era following "postmodernism," one finds that the prefix "trans" stands out in a special way. The last third of the 20th century developed under the sign of "post," which signalled the demise of such concepts of modernity as "truth" and "objectivity," "soul" and "subjectivity," "utopia" and "ideality," "primary origin" and "originality," "sincerity" and "sentimentality." All of these concepts are now being reborn in the form of "trans-subjectivity," "trans-idealism," "trans-utopianism," "trans-originality," "trans-lyricism," "trans-sentimentality" etc. This new lyricism, however, is not the kind that surges forth spontaneously from the soul; this idealism does not proudly soar above the world; this utopianism is not like the one at the beginning of the 20th century, which aggressively sought to reconstruct the world. It is an "as if" lyricism, an "as if" idealism, an "as if" utopianism, aware of its own failures, insubstantiality, and secondariness. Nevertheless, these "trans" phenomena want to come to self-expression in the form of repetition. Paradoxically as it may sound, it is precisely through repetition that they reclaim their primacy and authenticity. Tired gestures, which are no longer automatized, as in the poetics of postmodernism, are replete with their own lyricism. In repetition, in quotation, there is a naturalness, a simplicity, an inevitability which is lacking in a primary act, born of effort and with claims to revelation.

As a rule, the destiny of originality is to be turned into imitation and cliché, allowing the cliché itself to be perceived as a simple and unforced movement of the soul, a new sincerity. Over time, postmodernism itself may be perceived as an initial and inadequate reaction to this aesthetics of repetition, whose surprising

emergence seemed to demand a full anaesthetisation and automatising of feelings. Gradually, as repetition and citationality turn into habit, they will become the foundation for a new lyric poetry, whose journey has its beginning and not its end in ironic estrangement.

If in postmodernism even the language of feelings was subjected to the use of quotation marks, then at present quotation marks have penetrated the word so deeply that each one of them, even without quotation marks, bears the imprint of all its former usages; it contains secondariness within itself, which is an imperative condition for the freshness of its repetition to be felt against the background of these former usages. When the word "I love" is uttered under these conditions, it means: yes, this is how Dante or Maupassant might have expressed it, but in the present case it is I who am saying it, and I have no other word with which to utter what is designated by it. Thus the trans-quotational word contains the presumption of guilt and an implicit act of apology - confessing its own citationality, the trans-quotational word at the same time underlines its absoluteness, its non-substitutability, its singularity. It is an affirmation of "I love," although the same "I love" might have been uttered by Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Mayakovsky. The postmodern utterance of "I love" was masked by citationality as a loophole for meaning, in which the subject of language could shield himself from its literal meaning and its responsible consequences. At the present time, citationality, by contrast, serves as a trigger of meaning: the repetition is underlined in order to cross out banality. The word consists of a double layer - the quoted and the trans-quotational, which is uttered for the first time, here and now, thus opening the way for a new polysemy.

While the polysemy of postmodernism consisted of a multiplicity of levels of reflection, play, and representation, of quotation marks being superimposed on quotation marks, the polysemy of the era of "trans-" is of a higher order. It represents the movement of meaning in two directions at once: both the application and removal of quotation marks. The same word may sound like """"""""I love"""""""" and I Love!!! Like """"""""Kingdom of Heaven"""""""" and Kingdom of Heaven! The two dimensions of the text are inseparable: the removal of quotation issues from the depths of the application of quotation marks, just as resurrection issues from the depths of death.

2. Postmodernism as the Beginning of Postmodernity

How can we define the place of postmodernism in the linear progression of world history? In the first place, we must distinguish between two heterogeneous terms that have been used to designate the "modern":

1. Modernity (or, in Russian terminology, *Novoe vremia*, New Times) denotes a relatively long period of world history, beginning with the end of the Middle Ages and lasting approximately half a millennium, that is, beginning with the Renaissance and continuing until the middle of the 20th century.

2. Modernism is a relatively short cultural period, coming at the end of the era of Modernity and lasting approximately half a century (from the end of the 19th

century, or from World War I till the 1950s and 1960s, depending on the version one follows).

Modernism does not merely end the era of Modernity, it accentuates all its contradictions. In the first instance, it deepens the gulf between European individualism at its extreme limit of self-reflexivity and particularisation and the alienating, impersonal tendencies in culture and society (the development of mass society, totalitarian government, atomic and electronic technologies, the theoretical discovery of the unconscious and so on). Hence the theme of alienation, the unprecedented pessimism and the neo-mythologies of Modernist art, in which individuality at its extreme limit is revealed as but a manifestation of the impersonal principles that are its antithesis. The explosion of these contradictions, accentuated by Modernism, has taken humanity out of the domain of modernity as such, into the era commonly named postmodern.

Just as the "modern" can be subdivided into two periods, a long one of Modernity and a shorter one of Modernism, so too may an analogous division be appropriate for the "postmodern." If not, it seems impossible to understand what the postmodern follows in the wake of - modernity or modernism? We are dealing here with two differently charged meanings of the prefix "post." The "post" in "postmodernity," correlated with Modernity, refers to a protracted period, at the beginning of which we find ourselves living today. The "post" in "postmodernism," correlated with Modernism, is the initial period of entry into that larger epoch of postmodernity. If the two large epochs-modernity and postmodernity-mirror each other, then it is logical that the end of the one and the beginning of the other will also mirror each other. In other words, Modernism is the concluding period of the epoch of Modernity, while postmodernism is the first period of the epoch of postmodernity.

This epoch of postmodernity, which had its inception in the very recent past, in the middle of the 20th century, could last for several centuries. In this sense, it would mirror the epoch of Modernity, which it has succeeded. Postmodernism, on the other hand, has lasted for but a short time, spanning only one or two generations. It may even be the case that postmodernism, like most such cultural complexes, will have an even shorter lifespan than the primary phenomenon against which it reacted, in this case Modernism. Postmodernism, in fact, found things 'ready-made': it arose after the problems and contradictions posed by Modernism had been fully expressed. Its job was to solve them.

The fundamental thrust of Postmodernism's solution was toward a new impersonalism, the use of the unconscious and superconscious, a reflection of medievalism. This was accompanied by fragmentariness, dispersion, eclecticism, irony with respect to the absolute (which appears under various names: "totality," "canon," "center," "logocentrism," "metaphysics," etc.) In other words, postmodernism works against two major postulates, that of the individual and the absolute, whose tortuous dividedness gave rise to the inexorably tragic sense of Modernism, combining extreme optimism and extreme pessimism. The man of Modernity is Goethe's Faust, Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov and Nietzsche's Zarathustra. He aims for the absolute and tries to encompass it with his own

personality. The collapse of this aspiration marked the end of the entire epoch of Modernity. Modernism, with all its diverse philosophical and artistic schools- Symbolism, Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism, Dada, Suprematism, Constructivism, Surrealism, psychoanalysis-enacted the inability of the individual to encompass and subjugate the trans-individual, which assails it from all sides, including from within itself. Diagnosing this condition could be expressed pessimistically, as in Kafka, or optimistically, as in Mayakovsky; as the terror of alienation or the ecstasy of collectivism. But in either case, it marked the end of Modernity. Beyond it loomed the epoch of postmodernity, which Nikolai Berdyaev called a "new middle ages," by analogy with the pre-modern age. For Berdyaev, this signalled "the end of humanism, individualism, the formal liberalism of the culture of modernity."

In its critique of Modernity and all its accompanying categories, such as "subject" and "object," "individuality" and "reality," "author" and "history," postmodernism does indeed begin with a quasi-medieval, trans-personal and anonymous perception of the world, even if it not centered on God or the absolute but instead projected onto "alterity" as a measure of independently interactive factors. From this perspective, the principle of individuality is merely an illusory effect of impersonal mechanisms, which act in and on us: language, the unconscious, molecular, genetic, social and economic structures. The absolute is but an illusion of semiotic practices, a stylistic ploy, a projection of strivings for power that emanate from any discursive act and which begin with the inarticulate mumbblings of the child demanding its mother's breast. The postmodern critique dethrones the absolute and the individual as two Western myths, formulated in the Middle Ages and Modernity respectively. In keeping with this, there is a debunking both of the masks of individuality (authorship, originality, innovativeness) and of the absolute (the transcendental, truth, reality).

At this stage it is easy to suspend the contradictions and traumas that defined the Modernist consciousness. A kind of medieval anonymity begins to dominate, but without the medieval faith in the absolute: instead there is some sort of game, but one in which the will of the players is unclear; all that is clear is the infinity of the toys of the game - signs, quotations, informational codes. According to Michel Foucault, postmodern writing "has merely transposed the empirical characteristics of an author to a transcendental anonymity. The extremely visible signs of the author's empirical activity are effaced to allow the play, in parallel or opposition, of religious and critical modes of characterization ...[T]he author has disappeared; God and man died a common death." If Modernism is a mixture of the agony of dying and the euphoria of hope, then postmodernism is the poetics of a successfully completed death and the play of posthumous masks (necropoetics). The tragedy of the division between the individual and the absolute, between the individual and society, and between consciousness and reality, becomes as impossible as the avant-garde utopia and ecstasy of overcoming that division. What kind of alienation is possible for a theory (postmodern) that does not accept anything as one's "own" and "originary"? There is nothing left to become alienated from. The cause of tragedy has thus disappeared, just as has the possibility of utopia. Quotationality instead of self-expression, simulation instead of truth, the

play with signs instead of the reflection of reality, difference instead of contradiction: such is the post-individual, post-tragic, post-utopian world, fascinated by its own secondariness, its propensity to bring everything to completion, to use everything as material for the ultimate and infinite game.

Now is the time to remind ourselves of the radical finitude of even this ultimate of utopias. It is time to temporalize it, that is, to place it within the context of a history which ironically continues to advance. What will come after this "post" and what kind of regenerative meaning lies in the very gesture of inevitable repetition and general completion? What is the constructive meaning of deconstruction? What will be born from this feast of death and what will be resurrected from that which dies? It is these "proto-" and "trans-" phenomena-as signs of birth and resurrection-that will mark the the long period of postmodernity, which is ahead and which comes after postmodernism.

Our current challenge is to demarcate two related historical concepts, postmodernism and postmodernity, whose complex borders are being defined in our own time. Postmodernism, as we have seen, is part of a much larger and more extensive whole, which we have called postmodernity. We have been able to account for only two or three decades of postmodernity (beginning with the 1960s or 1970s). We have taken stock not of postmodernity as a whole, but only of its initial, most declarative and critically minded stage: that of postmodernism. The concepts we have associated with it-such as "shimmering aesthetics", "new sentimentality", "new utopianism", "subjunctive modality"-will, we trust, be helpful in understanding the long, many-century era that lies before us. What does all this mean: to live at the close of postmodernism but only on the threshold of postmodernity? What is postmodernity as far as it is irreducible to postmodernism? Living precisely in this smallest of intervals between postmodernism and some next stage of postmodernity we bear the responsibility for the meaning of this moment.

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