

Postmodern Undoings

INTRODUCTION

The conceptual understanding of empirical reality is equivalent to a murder.
(Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (in Borch-Jacobsen 1991, 192))

Apart from the shock value of Kojève's phrasing, the view of concepts he was propounding in the 1930s reflected what would become conventional wisdom among creators of French theory—a legacy of Heidegger's teaching for which they would eventually credit (justifiably) Nietzsche, a more welcome ancestry for thinkers determined to rid themselves of all things phenomenological. That transfer of credit for so essential a claim encapsulates the most proximate intellectual-historical move that shaped the postmodern moment in France. But really understanding the significance of that move means understanding the historical context that prompted Nietzsche to pursue his deconstructive mission in the first place. Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 described that context. Chapter 7, dealing with essentials of critical theory by way of Adorno, bears directly on how postmodernism was received in the anglophone academy, but French theory, in spite of striking convergences, apparently developed without Frankfurt School influence. We can hope that this is more evidence of an underlying logic at work—some logic that might be brought to light and evaluated so that we can do a bit better than blunder and grope toward whatever comes next.

So Part IV, the heart of this book, has been historically situated. It will succeed in proportion to the validity of these claims: French theory's seminal texts are so difficult because (1) they strive for an appearance of continuity with Marx when radical moves in very different directions were actually being made, and/or (2) they reject the abstractions of Structuralism and return to temporality, to performance, and to history—but *without the subject*, without allowing significant reference to the intentions and feelings of actual human beings. That profoundly counterintuitive constraint forced the framers of theory into elaborate syntactic and lexical contortions in their effort to return to the *functioning* of language without resorting to subject talk.¹ The transcendental ego of Husserl's phenomenology, like the brain-code grammar (*langue*) in Saussure and Levi-Strauss, could never be mistaken for the living, speaking person. Modernist self-splitting in creator/authors reflected that fact (see above, Chap. 3). So when those abstractions were rejected in the name of temporality—history, events—the place of the subject had to be taken by something equal to the explanatory task those abstractions had performed. That something would be described in terms like “field of the mark” (Derrida), “process of signification” (Kristeva), “event of utterance” (Deleuze), and so on. The result, as we shall see, was a strange Hegelian knock-off that, in effect, put language (or, in Deleuze's case, “expression”) in place of Absolute Mind. But before that could happen the mind of Man—the existential-phenomenological mind—would stake a claim to the position once held by Hegel's Absolute, a claim that was bound to be rejected.

Among the Parisian luminaries who attended Alexandre Kojève's groundbreaking lectures on Hegel at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in the 1930s were Louis Althusser, Raymond Queneau, Georges Bataille, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, André Breton, Jacques Lacan, Raymond Aron, and, according to some reports, Jean-Paul Sartre himself. Those lectures consolidated a turn to Hegel in France before WWII and inspired the Marxist-existential phenomenology that would dominate the scene until the rise of Structuralism and the revival of Nietzsche in the late 1950s and 1960s. In Vincent Descombes' opinion, only the Russian Revolution can

¹Derrida gave the game away when he casually remarked that he used the phrase “functioning of the mark” rather than “understanding the written utterance” merely to accommodate the possibility of *mis*understanding (1988: 61).

compare with Kojève's lectures as an influence on French social thought in the twentieth century (1980, 9–10).²

When Kojève indicted “conceptual understanding” for murder he was thinking of moments in the dialectical development of consciousness in which an abstract concept negates the reality it purports to define. But that same dialectic was bound in turn to negate the abstract negation and, in a determinate way, fulfill itself eventually as *realized* concept,³ embodied in the world at the end of history. For Hegel, that moment would come when Absolute Mind recognized itself in and as (the forms of) that world. Kojève, deeply influenced by Heidegger, was having none of that. The Hegelian Absolute was replaced by Man and History—and the end of History would come when “negating” actions of labor and political struggle achieved their aims and fulfilled the designs of Man (compare Chap. 2, above, and Chap. 11, below).

Kojève's existential-phenomenological dialectic—this Marxist humanism, this new version of the “philosophy of the subject”—was the most comprehensive of the “master narratives” Jean-Francois Lyotard would one day repudiate in the name of postmodernism ([1979] 1984). It would be accused of crimes far more serious than murder by concept. The dialectical resolution uniting identity and difference on a new plane—the “return of the same”⁴—was a more radical violation of empirical reality than a mere moment of abstraction. Concepts constituting this dialectic would be exposed as falsifications of a reality that was truly “other”—uncontainable, inconceivable, unrepresentable (*vorstellung*), a Nietzschean reality. Practices employing such concepts were impositions of power, violations, violence.

Heidegger and Sartre, like Hegel before them, thought they were moving beyond the Cartesian/Kantian subject in daring to think The Nothing. But they would look like collaborators compared to Lacan in

²Gary Gutting (2013) shows that Kojève's influence has actually been exaggerated in hindsight at the expense of the influence of Jean Hyppolite and Jean Wahl. But it is the founding myth that concerns us here. See also Alan Schrift in Bourg 2004 for an American tendency to overlook the influence of philosophy of science during this period.

³The overarching example, from Hegel's *Logic*: think pure “Being” (not the being of any particular) and you will find you are thinking “Nothing.” Negate the negating relation, but preserve both terms, and a synthesis emerges: “Becoming.”

⁴Said Hegel: “For Spirit, there is nothing whatever that is entirely other” (in Macdonald and Ziarek (eds), *Adorno and Heidegger* (2008, 88)).

pursuit of *objet petit a* or Deleuze and Guattari cavorting across their *Thousand Plateaus* or Kristeva writing on the “margin” between her body and the symbolic order. For among the concepts charged with false clarity one stood out as central: the modern subject, the *cogito* in its various forms, the protagonist of this story. That subject was at the very top of postmodernism’s hit list and existential phenomenology was its latest avatar. Partisans of Structuralism had also turned away from that subject—as posited by Sartre especially—but they did so as modernists, abstracting semiotic structures from lived experience. Structuralism excluded the subject for essentially methodological reasons (see Saussure’s *langue/parole* distinction for the prototype, above Chap. 5; compare Chomsky on competence/performance). It was to be a *science* of signification, not a hermeneutical humanistic discipline. But “poststructuralists” saw Structuralism’s formal codes as the creation of abstract modern subjects and detected as well a parallel relation in totalizing political regimes, capitalist or communist. Formal theories became a political issue⁵ and “theory” became poststructural as it undermined not only those imperial codes but also the agent responsible for the formalisms that turned living reality into a timeless realm of “signs.” Levi-Strauss renounced the universal subject of phenomenology in his anthropology, but *Levi-Strauss the author* presided over his abstract works as serenely removed from history as they were. The cadence of his majestic prose, the scope and depth of his all-encompassing charts and diagrams—his *style*, in the Nietzschean sense—gave unmistakable evidence of an imperial subjectivity at work behind the curtain.

The upshot: in excluding the subject for methodological reasons, Structuralism had actually been sheltering it *incognito*, disguising its humanism in an abstract *science de l’homme* that protected it from heterogeneous historical forces no theory could contain. When “poststructuralists” rejected the abstractions of Structuralism and returned to temporality and performance, they doubled down on the issue of the subject. They were not content with simply excluding it. They wanted the modern subject, the soul of traditional humanism, to actually unravel in “writing” and

⁵Yet another, apparently historically unrelated, convergence between poststructuralist and Frankfurt School critique. For discussion of this theme in France in the wake of the 1968, see Peter Starr *The Logics of Failed Revolt* (1995).

actually disperse across the reaches of a multifarious never-to-be-fulfilled desire. They wanted theory to *be* action.

Postmodern texts deserve their reputation for obscurity. Many Anglo-American intellectuals with broadly positivist notions of what serious thought looks like recoiled from what they sampled and were left suspecting the authors of posturing and obfuscation. But a fair reading depends upon accepting the fact that these writers *intended* to test the limits of conceptuality in service of that unraveling and dispersal (see especially, Gary Gutting's *Thinking the Impossible* (2013)). And they didn't just wake up one morning and decide it might be fun to think the impossible—they inherited that intention from a pantheon of *avant-garde* artists that self-respecting French intellectuals (defining themselves, as they were required to do, in opposition to all things bourgeois) learned to idolize in their earliest years of rebellion. It was Nietzsche, after all, who urged philosophers to look to the arts rather than science and math for inspiration—and Lawrence Cahoon was surely right to call him the “godfather of postmodernism.” And it was Andre Breton who first set out, programmatically, to release the word from “its duty to signify” ([1924] 1996, 101). The influence of surrealism on French theory was not incidental; it was formative.

Introducing the role surrealism played in Lacan's development, in particular, Sherry Turkle reports that psychoanalysis in France was always understood as a kind of “action-surrealism,” which was why “French physicians were as reticent towards psychoanalysis as French poets had been enthusiastic” (1981, 100–102). Foucault's first publications dealt with *avant-garde* writers Raymond Roussel and George Bataille. Derrida and Barthes were engaged with radical literary figures throughout their careers. Deleuze published studies of Proust, Kafka, Sacher-Masoch, Beckett, and Jarry, and spent most of the 1980s writing about the visual arts, all the while insisting he was doing philosophy. Kristeva summed it up when she described her early work on Mallarme, Lautremont, Joyce, and Artaud as representative of the whole *Tel Quel* enterprise, inspired as it had been by those writers (Kristeva 2002, 7–12).

Perhaps more than any other single factor, this affiliation accounts for how theory was perceived and misperceived in the anglophone academy, where a convergence between the humanistic disciplines and radical experiments in the arts was barely on the agenda.

Of course, one can always conclude that trying to think the impossible was a wrongheaded way to spend time, whatever (or because of) the motives. But first the works deserve consideration on their own terms. So, in keeping with the spirit of the enterprise, this formula—meant to evoke Lacan’s mysterious algebras:

$$((\text{PH} + \text{STR} \times \text{N}/\text{F}) - \text{M} = \text{PoMo})$$

Which says that phenomenology plus Structuralism times a mash-up of Nietzsche and Freud minus Marx equals Postmodernism.

Where “–Marx” suggests the presence of his absence, of course.

The chapters in this part will discuss some of the most representative postmodern thinkers and some of their most influential texts. But in order to clarify what the texts were *doing* the ban on subject talk (see above) will frequently be violated so as to bring out what they would have been *saying* had that ban not existed in the first place. Chapter 8 begins with a brief account of Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser, elders presiding over the nativity scene—encouraging, scolding, anointing. It then attempts to evoke something of atmosphere, the mood of the moment when French theory was born—a moment-of-multiple-moments captured and released in real time through the pages of the journal *Tel Quel* and in the deeds and words of the power couple who were its guiding spirits, Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva. A principal aim of this chapter is to show how closely conditioned the whole process was by politics, especially by the “events” of 1968.⁶ Chapter 9 focuses on individual thinkers and shows that, in spite of passionate and sometimes painful differences, they were all pursuing basic aims they took for granted even as they competed ferociously to produce the most effective strategies. Chapter 10 will turn to the reception of French theory in anglophone contexts, and Chap. 11 will offer a post-postmodern theory of “theory” that expands on the narrative outlined in Chap. 2 and brings the story to the present moment. Chapter 12 will

⁶“Event” was the term of choice. Labels like “revolution,” “rebellion,” and “revolt,” so embedded in French historical experience, looked almost quaint when applied to what transpired in May of 1968. Whatever this outpouring was—it was something *else*. It is no coincidence that the idea of “event” carried such heft in subsequent theorizing, especially in the work of Deleuze, Lyotard, and Baidou (who taught together at the radical experimental university at Vincennes in 1969).

argue in conclusion that, in this moment, a new humanism that aspires to genuine universality is becoming possible and, with it, a new kind of unity for progressive theory and political action appears on the horizon.

An excerpt from an early essay by Nietzsche, which anticipates Kojève's indictment of concepts for murder by 50 years, stands as a reference point for all that follows:

a word becomes a concept insofar as it simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases—which means, purely and simply, cases which are never equal and thus altogether unequal. Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things. Just as it is certain that one leaf is never totally the same as another, so it is certain that the concept “leaf” is formed by arbitrarily discarding these individual differences. ... This awakens the idea that, in addition to the leaves, there exists in nature the “leaf”: the original model. (“On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense” 1873)

For the French thinkers whom anglophone practitioners of theory came to think of as “poststructuralists,” the conceptual apparatus built into ordinary language and traditional disciplinary vocabularies was a veil of misrepresentation because it took for granted that the chief business of language was precisely to *represent*—to represent reality and so enable orderly communication between psychologically independent speakers lodged in various social roles, conducting the system's business (see Saussure's diagram). Plenty of room, of course, for poetry and play—everyone enjoyed the antics of Lewis Carroll and, though not to everyone's taste, if you fancied yourself “modern” in the new anti-Victorian, anti-Bourgeois sense of the word, you could find value in the word-play of Mallarmé, the later Joyce, the Surrealists, and so on. But it was precisely the representational and communicative function of language that made such play possible—because, at the most basic level, it was obvious: literal language made figures of speech possible.

But Nietzsche, in that 1873 essay, went on to say: “What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and; anthropomorphisms ... illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.” Which was to level against ordinary representational and communicative

language, literal language, a profoundly disruptive charge once expressed by Gayatri Spivak, in a moment of frustration with critics of postmodern jargon, in a clear (hence paradoxical) way: “clear language is a lie.” That conviction, in a nutshell, was what creators of French theory held responsible for “the problem of language,” for a naïve commonsensical conviction that shaped Western philosophy until Nietzsche’s seismic intervention—the conviction that language (like thought) was, as it were, naturally adapted to represent reality. Even unrepresentable Kantian *noumena* served to delineate, by contrast, a realm of *phenomena* that language was equipped to represent linguistically just as the a priori categories were equipped to constitute the phenomena in the first place. No, it was Nietzsche (followed by a generation of radical artists) who brought his hammer down on the illusion of representational adequacy. And what emerged over subsequent decades was a linguistic self-consciousness that knew no bounds, that called into question the validity of every question and left answers to fend for themselves in accordance with pragmatic criteria improvised on the fly in an undefinable field of contending discourses.⁷

the problem of language has never been simply one problem among others. But never as much as at present has it invaded, as such, the global horizon of the most diverse researches. ... This inflation of the sign “language” is the inflation of the sign itself, absolute inflation ... language itself is menaced in its very life, helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness. (Jacques Derrida [1967] 1974, 92)

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⁷The American pragmatists—John Dewey in particular—shared Nietzsche’s view of language’s representational inadequacy but, being American (hopeful, practical), they did not locate the fault in language itself but in the philosophies that made the mistake of thinking language was representationally adequate in the first place. Like everything else in Darwinian nature, language was its best self when it worked, however the face of reality might appear to God’s eyes.

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