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Postmodernism and the humanities¹

In een persoonlijk betoog beschrijft Frank Ankersmit hoe de geschiedschrijving onder invloed van het postmodernisme veranderde en hoe dat zijn effect heeft gehad op de houding van hedendaagse geschiedbeoefenaars.

‘Das Langweilige ist interessant geworden, weil das Interessante angefangen hat langweilig zu werden.’²

Introduction

One of the many interesting things about postmodernism is its relationship to science. In order to see this, we need only consider the term postmodernism itself – being a composition of ‘modernism’ and of the suggestion to transcend it (for what could ‘post-modernism’ be but a going beyond ‘modernism’?). Now, whatever associations resonate in the term ‘modernism’, science is sure to figure most prominently amongst them. For if we entered somewhere since the end of the eighteenth century the world of ‘modernity’, the amazing successes of science have undoubtedly been decisive in this. If our world so dramatically differs from that of the Egyptians, of the Greek, of the Middle Ages, what single factor has more contributed to this than the emergence of modern science?

Consider, in the first place, the unequalled success-story of science itself. Who would wish to disagree with Pope’s well-known lines: ‘nature and nature’s laws lay hid by night/God said, let Newton be and all was light’? Indeed, there had been three-thousand years of abortive attempts to uncover the secrets of nature – then Newton came along, and with him

1 The present text is an abridged and adapted version of an essay that will be published next year in *Rethinking History*.

2 T. Mann, *Doktor Faustus. Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde* (Frankfurt am Main 1990 (1947)) 320.

Leibniz, the Bernoulli's, Lagrange, Lavoisier, Maxwell, Einstein etc. and in less than three hundred years the depths and the age of our universe were measured, the secrets of subatomic particles were fathomed, the six forces governing their behavior unravelled and the place of life between these two extremes of the physical world was defined. The universe and its mysteries were mirrored in the human mind – and everybody impressed by these mysteries cannot fail to be deeply impressed by one still greater mystery, namely that human intelligence succeeded in doing all this in so incredibly short a time. Who would contest that this has been the greatest miracle in all of human history?

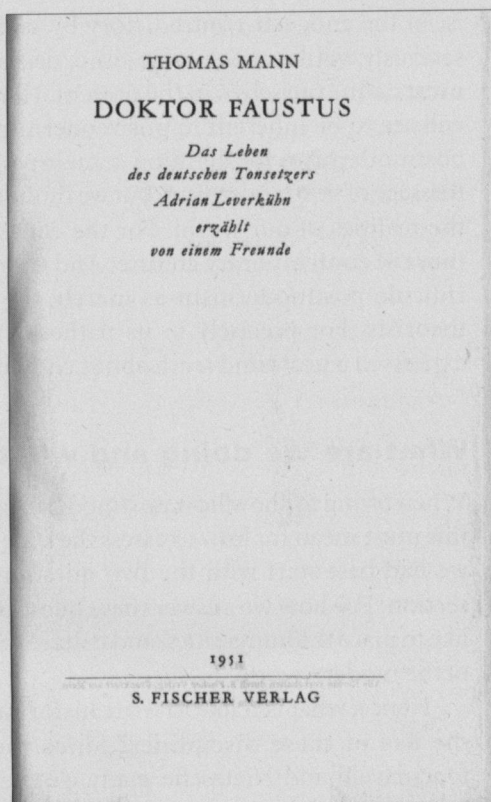
But modern science was not content with being a mere reflection on how our universe came into being and on its most elementary components. Science also changed the 'Umwelt' of the human species in a way that no religion, no philosophical system, no political or moral science, however lofty and subtle their speculations, had ever succeeded in doing. Science gave us modern communication techniques, TV, it gave us the telephone, autocars, aeroplanes, anti-biotics, the map of the human genome etc. Even more so, science gave us the means to transform ourselves and, thus, enabled us to assume the place of evolution itself. Science not only changed the world, but the very conditions of evolutionary change themselves.

Now, if modernity and science are so closely related, and if their collaboration seems more fruitful than ever before, what meaning could we possibly give to the term 'postmodernism'? Is the term meant to suggest that we have by now moved, in one way or another, beyond science and what science must mean to our highly sophisticated modern societies? Is the suggestion that we have become indifferent to science, and to the realities of modernity produced by science? And if *this* would be what postmodernism is all about, is postmodernism then not merely the reactionary drivel of the *laudatores temporis acti*, who still cannot summon the courage to face the realities of the modern world we are all living in?

That this must be at least part of the truth is suggested by the fact that postmodernism has been the product of the humanities – hence, of those fields of intellectual endeavor that have been so conspicuously less successful than science. No scientist ever expressed any interest or sympathy for postmodernism; and postmodernism is no theme in the philosophy of science. Science has no place for postmodernism. And we may surmise therefore, that postmodernism is at least partly an expression of the asymmetries between science and the humanities. For there certainly is

progress in the humanities – who could possibly doubt this? We have probed further into the secrets of language, literature and the arts than ever before; and it is true that historians sometimes know more about the past than even the people in the past themselves. Nevertheless, there has never been such a quantum-leap in the humanities as we know from the sciences; and nobody will defend the claim that the contribution of the humanities to the modern world is on a par with that of technology. Indeed, the great questions, such as what is the meaning of the French Revolution, how the Holocaust has been possible, what is the nature of historical consciousness etc. – these questions are still just as much in need of an answer as when they were asked for the first time. Even more so, what is important in the humanities is almost by definition never finally settled. And who still cares about 'Bildung' in our global society? It seems to have become a handicap rather than the social asset that it used to be until quite recently.

This will be the background of my story here about postmodernism. I shall present postmodernism as the reaction of philosophers, theorists of culture, literary theorists etc. to a world dominated by science and that threatens to marginalize them more than ever before. So I would propose to discern in postmodernism a *double* move: (1) in reaction to a world marginalizing the humanities postmodernism attempts to marginalize its main enemy, science, by (2) suggesting that we have now moved to a world in which we can take the sciences for granted. But this double movement



Titelblad van Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus*. *Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn erzählt von einem Freunde* (Frankfurt am Main 1951).

is, in the end, self-contradictory by taking science and modernity quite seriously, while, at the same time, declaring them irrelevant for how we must define ourselves in the present. Hence, the nihilism inherent that we will see to be inherent in postmodernism. Hence also the importance of postmodernism for defining contemporary culture. We may not like the message of postmodernism, but we cannot ignore it if we wish to understand the realities of our world. For the contradictions of postmodernism are those of contemporary culture. And it would be naive and shortsighted to ridicule postmodernism as merely the extravagance of some deluded theorists. For precisely in its pathetic helplessness postmodernism has expressed a profound truth about contemporary culture.

What are we doing and what are we doing it for?

When trying to show how postmodernism got entangled in itself and what this must mean for how to assess the state of contemporary culture, I think we had best start with the two questions mentioned in the title of this section. For how we answer these questions will determine how we would like to place the humanities, and culture in general, within the larger context of the modern world.

Hence, what is it like to write history and historical theory, and what is the use of these disciplines? Since the days of Thucydides, Cicero, Machiavelli and Nietzsche many eloquent and perceptive answers have been given to these questions. Nevertheless, these questions never quite ceased to be slightly embarrassing to historians: they have always been most painfully aware that you cannot build bridges or cure diseases with historical knowledge. So, what is the use of disciplines such as the writing of history and of historical theory – why should they be more than simply some atavistic excrescence of the dismal reign of the priest and the monk in the no-nonsense world of the beginning of the twenty-first century? And right now there is even more reason for embarrassment than ever before. For until some two to three decades ago, when the ideological battle still raged between West and East, when politics still mattered, when ambitious plans were still developed for achieving what one saw as the assignment of history, nobody could doubt the relevance of history. History gave us our collective fate – and who could be indifferent to this?

But this is quite different now. Recall the paradox of Saint Simon (not the diarist, but the utopian socialist) according to which it would make not

the slightest difference to the well-being of France if the King and all the pairs of the Kingdom would be killed overnight, whereas chaos would immediately result if all the engineers and businessmen would die. Now, think of what the sudden death of all the Thierry's, Michelet's, Ranke's, Droysen's, Treitschke's would have meant to nineteenth century France and Germany – these nations would truly have felt politically and culturally decapitated. But what would happen if next year some virus emerged which, for some strange reason, attacked historians only but was fatal in all recorded cases? Surely, the newspapers would not fail to mention this on their frontpages, one would deplore the loss of cultural capital and lament the personal tragedy of these historians and of their families. But nobody would think the fate of the historical trade and of its practitioners particularly serious and society would quietly go on with its business as it had always done. A repetition of September 11th, though probably killing far less people, would unanimously be considered incomparably worse. Which leaves us with the question why history has become so much of an irrelevancy in our contemporary society.

There are many obvious answers to this question. For example, one might argue that the forces of globalization, the triumph of communication technology, of economic rationality etc. have effected an unparalleled break with the legacies of the past. As a result, the past's grasp on the present will then become ever and ever more tenuous to the point of actually disappearing. With the inevitable result that the past will, in the end, wholly lose its meaning for the present. So, this is how and why history came to be reduced to the lowly status of a colourful curiosity without any real significance for the present and the future.

But whatever variants of this apparently so plausible argument one might devise, they will all fail for the same reason. For far from reducing history to irrelevance, these new social and technological forces should be expected to do exactly the reverse and to extoll history to the status of the most meaningful, or rather supremely 'meaning giving' discipline. For observe that these forces create a distance between ourselves and what the world used to be like, and hence give birth to the past as a potential object of investigation. Without these forces there simply could be no past at all and the stronger they are, the more history do we have. Only in the completely static society, a society without any social, technological and political change, would history cease to be of any relevance. But whatever claim one might wish to make about the contemporary world – one could

impossibly maintain that it should be static. So, in fact, never have circumstances been more favorable to the historian than now.

Moreover, the argument is squarely at odds with the facts about the history of historical consciousness. For the great periods in the history of our discipline have, indeed, been precisely those periods where history went faster than ever before. Think of how in the hands of historians such as Machiavelli and Guicciardini modern Western historical consciousness emerged and of how it was born from the awareness of a radical break with the medieval past. Or think of how the French revolutionaries actually attempted to abolish the past in the most literal sense of the word. But the net effect of their effort was, instead, an unprecedented explosion of history, the birth of historicism and the coming into being of the intellectual matrix within which we still experience the past. So, as these two examples suggest, it is precisely the reverse: history loses its cultural relevance when the pace of history slows down and its cultural role and value is greatly enhanced in periods in which the present emancipates itself from a now obsolete past.

But precisely considerations like these must make our problem all the more urgent: how is it possible that there is, on the one hand, more history than ever before in the sense that our society simply secretes history through all its pores thanks to its unparalleled changeableness, whereas, on the other, history as a discipline has almost completely marginalized itself?

When attempting to deal with this question, one conspicuous difference between the Machiavelli's, the Guicciardini's, those great nineteenth century German and French historians, on the one hand, and their present descendants, on the other, cannot fail to strike us. For the historians I mentioned just now shared an acute sense of urgency, they were deeply aware of the challenges of the present, challenges provoked by the loss of the past and of all that used to be natural, obvious and selfevident. They were all convinced that the map they would draw up of the labyrinthine course of history from the past to the present would show their contemporaries how to orient themselves in the present and that from the resonance of the past in their minds the future would be born. Like their contemporaries they felt displaced into a new, unknown, strange and often even hostile world - and history was to them the only instrument at their disposal to make sense of the threatening complexities of the present. They had internalized the great conflicts and tragedies of their time in their own mind, they had wrestled with them and had experienced them as if they were their own, most personal problems.

The discontents of contemporary culture

Now, this sense of urgency is wholly absent from the writings of contemporary historians. I would not know of any contemporary historian who still has the pretension to provide us with such a map for our collective future; the attempt to do so would be considered a ridiculous over-estimation of the historian's cultural assignment and, even worse, as an abnegation of the historian's duties towards the cause of objectivity and of scientific truth. Contemporary historians no longer recognize that relevance and truth (as they understand it) cannot live in the presence of the other. They have thus allowed to come into being a deep and gaping abyss between the present and a past about which they most eagerly and assiduously collect a mass of data all having in common that they have little or no bearing on the most urgent question of how we came to where we presently are. The present is an incomprehensible miracle against the background of what historians have said up till now about its antecedents, reminding us of how the Goddess Athena spontaneously arose from the head of Zeus.³ In this way, their whole effort seems to aim not at the overcoming of the immense distance between past and present but rather at collaborating with all those forces increasing it as much as possible. No contemporary historian experiences any longer any urgency about this paramountly 'urgent' problem of how our past and our boisterous and so dangerously

- 3 I admit that I am unable to substantiate this claim and that it is a gut-feeling rather than that I could say: 'we need a book on topic a or b'. It is as if somebody would have had a vague, though strong feeling that something like a socio-economic explanation of the French Revolution is what was needed, before such explanations came *en vogue* with Thierry, Marx, Matthiez, Aulard etc. It is as if there is some deeper layer in our relationship to the past and that has not yet been identified by historians – which lends to the emergence of our present from the past this unpleasant aura of the miraculous. You feel that something more is needed than what historians presently give you, but you do not know *what* this is, paradoxically because what you miss is something so very fundamental. In history it is far easier to see 'small' things than 'large' and fundamental things.

I add that questions like these are, in my view, the really 'urgent' questions of historical theory. I mean, the familiar question of 'how do historians explain the past?' is infinitely less urgent than the question 'do historians actually succeed in explaining the past, c.q. the present at all?', that is, 'do they really strike the layer where we can see how the present evolved out of the past?'. With regard to historical explanation these 'what'-questions are far more interesting than the time-worn 'how'-question.

improvident present are related. The contrast with the historians I just mentioned, or for that matter, the Bodin's, the Hobbes's, the Kant's, the Hegel's and the Marx's of the past, could not be greater. Perhaps the last historian to recognize this responsibility of the historian towards the present and the future has been Foucault – which might make us forgive him his sometimes outrageous blunders.

And the obvious question is: how could this happen? I may be forgiven when recounting a recent experience of mine. A few months ago I spoke at a conference in Berlin dealing with the theme of 'Aesthetics and politics'. My own paper was, essentially, a plea for the rehabilitation of the notion of (aesthetic) unity in politics: I expressed in it my worries about the fragmentation of the contemporary political domain and argued that we nowadays can no longer distinguish between the important and the unimportant and that we will remain unable to bring any order in our list of (political) priorities as long as we have no conception of this unity. For only against the background of such a unity can we compare and order our social and political desiderata. We have all heard about the death of politics, about the incapacity of politics to address the big issues of the present and of our collective future, and my argument was that we can only breathe new life into politics again if we abandon our distrust of the notion of (aesthetic) unity. Now, this surely is a big theme for a paper and I shall be the first to recognize its many weaknesses. So I was prepared for the Flak I expected from the audience. However, much to my bewilderment and even disgust, I discovered that nobody really cared about the main aim of my paper and that discussion of it immediately turned into a debate of the more abstruse aspects of Derridian deconstruction. I must confess that I could not quite hide my irritation and anger about what I could only see as a sad abortion of a for me absolutely crucial and most 'urgent' issue.

For me the experience was paradigmatic of much of that I resent in contemporary culture. To put it into one sentence, it is this lack of a sense of urgency that I so deeply deplore in contemporary culture and that primarily manifests itself in our habit to move almost automatically from a discussion of problem x to what has been written on problem x, or, worse still, to the problem of the writing about the problem x, or, even worse, to the problem what others have written about the problem of writing about the problem x. This is what I find so absolutely suffocating about contemporary culture: it has become utterly incapable of any authentic and immediate contact with the world, it finds its center of gravity exclusively

in itself, and no longer in the realities that it should consider, it feels no other urge than to exclusively contemplate its own navel and to act on the narcissistic belief that one's navel is the center of the world. It is as if a cabinet-maker would think that the secret of his craft lies in lofty speculations about the metaphysical status of his instruments, his hammer, his saw and his chisels. Now, if this has become the state of affairs in our discipline, who would not feel asphyxiated, who would not feel a desperate urge to throw open the windows of this narrow and stuffy room we are living in and to breathe the fresh air of the outside-world itself?

Undoubtedly many readers will now exclaim that this is an odd kind of lamentation for a historical theorist. For is not the Wittgensteinian preoccupation with the instruments we use for understanding the world instead of with the world itself, precisely what we have theory for? Is theory not necessarily and essentially a second-order activity? In order to deal with this I would like to turn to a marvelous passage in Thomas Mann's novel *Doktor Faustus*. As the reader will recall, Mann offers his readers here the biography of the fictitious Adrian Leverkühn, living from 1885 to 1940 and arguably the greatest composer of his time (in all likelihood Mann had Schönberg in mind when writing the novel). The book's title is meant to suggest that Leverkühn could only achieve artistic genius after having signed, like Faust, a contract with the devil: for such was the state of music at the time that now new and revolutionary discoveries could only be made in music with the help of the devil. Music has moved outside the reach of ordinary human beings; it had made its pact with the devil, its fate was to become inhuman, in a way. It is here that the book is partly intended to be a parable of Germany's fate in the first half of the previous century. In what probably is the most interesting passage in the book, Leverkühn's Mephistopheles⁴ comments on the desperate stage in which music and literature (for the book is partly also Mann's autobiography) find themselves now that all that is naïve, natural and selfevident has been tried – and found wanting. Listen to Mephistopheles' bleak account about music in the age of Arnold Schönberg – for doing so truly is as if looking into a mirror:

4 Giving himself here the name of Sammael (the angel of poison). T. Mann, *Doktor Faustus. Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde* (Frankfurt am Main 1990 (1947)) 306.

‘Was an Ernstzunehmendes noch zu Papier kommt, zeugt von Mühsal und Unlust. (...) Das Komponieren selbst ist schwer geworden, verzweifelt schwer. Wo Werk sich nicht mehr mit Echtheit verträgt, wie will einer arbeiten? Aber so steht es, mein Freund, das Meisterwerk, das in sich ruhende Gebilde, gehört der traditionellen Kunst an, die emanzipierte verneint es. (...) Jeder Bessere trägt in sich einen Kanon des Verbotenen, des sich verbietenden, der nachgerade die Mittel der Tonalität, also aller traditioneller Musik umfasst. Was falsch, was verbrauchtes Cliché geworden, der Kanon bestimmt es. (...) Jeden Augenblick verlangt die Technik, als ganze von ihm, dass er ihr gerecht werde und die allein richtige Antwort, die sie ihm in jedem Augenblicke zulässt. Es kommt dahin dass seine Kompositionen nichts mehr als solche Antworten sind, nur noch die Auflösung technischer Vexierbilder. Kunst wird Kritik – etwas seht Ehrenhaftes, wer leugnet’s! Viel Ungehorsam im strengen Gehorchen, viel Selbständigkeit, viel Mut gehört dazu. Aber die Gefahr des Unschöpferischen, – was meinst du? Ist sie wohl Gefahr noch, oder schon fix und fertiges Faktum? (...) Die historische Bewegung des musikalischen Materials hat sich gegen das geschlossene Werk gekehrt. Es schrumpft in der Zeit, es verschmäht die Ausdehnung in der Zeit, die der Raum des musikalischen Werkes ist, und lässt ihn leer stehen. Nicht aus Ohnmacht, nicht aus Unfähigkeit zur Formbildung. Sondern ein unerbittlicher Imperativ der Dichtigkeit, der das Überflüssige verpönt, die Phrase negiert, das Ornament zerschlägt, richtet sich gegen die zeitliche Ausbreitung, die Lebensform des Werdens. Werk, Zeit und Schein, sie sind eins, zusammen verfallen sie der Kritik.’⁵

I apologize for this excessively long quote. But is this not an uncannily correct picture of our contemporary predicament? Is this not an apt summary of the glories, and, especially of the miseries of contemporary ‘theory’. In short, is this not ... us? Is it not true of contemporary theory that it bears the marks of its difficult and painful birth – and that it came into being without pleasure, without joy, without hope for the future, without the triumph of having opened up new vistas? Does it not bear all over its surface the indelible marks of its own helplessness and ultimate futility? Does it not seem as if we have now completely exhausted the treasure-house of cultural meaning we have inherited from Antiquity, from the Christian Middle Ages and the Enlightenment? Has not all authenticity gone from the fruits of our effort – and isn’t this precisely the price we have to pay for our unparalleled sophistication, for our continuous awareness of the presence

5 Mann, *Doktor Faustus*; 320 – 323.

of our intellectual ancestors, of the canon? The canon that we feel continuously compelled to escape from, that we must overcome and transcend, is precisely because of this so overwhelmingly present that even the most revolutionary effort invariably becomes one more sacrifice to the Gods of the reaction. 'Viel Ungehorsam im strengen Gehorchen', indeed!, we obey when seeming, or hoping and trying to disobey, we are caught in the magic circle of our illustrious ancestors, and the more we try to break loose from them, the more we ultimately prove to be their docile predial slaves. Who has succeeded in saying anything really new and interesting in our field since, let's say, Habermas, Foucault, Pocock, Rorty or White; who still writes a large, coherent and ambitious oeuvre, inspired by a compelling master idea, in the way these authors still succeeded in doing? We are a generation of epigoni



Thomas Mann in 1946. Uit: *Die musikalische Welt des Adrian Leverkühn. Ein projekt zum >Faustus<-Roman von Thomas Mann* (Berlijn 1996) 6.

condemned to repeat and to vary the work of our great predecessors, not because we do not work hard enough, not because we are less intelligent and less daring than them – maybe we even work too hard and have become too intelligent – no, it is simply because for some perverse reason truly original work has become impossible. One desperately tries to discover some still untrodden path – only to find that somebody has been there already before us. Perhaps there are just too many of us, so that we all push each other out of business. So, maybe, the bug killing historians only would not be such a bad idea, after all.

At this stage no present theorist⁶ is of more interest than Derrida and whose name is most often associated with postmodernism. What reader of

6 Needless to say, I am talking here only of philosophers and theorists dealing with the problems occasioned by the humanities.

his immense oeuvre will not be deeply impressed by the profundity of his insights, by his truly perplexing erudition, by his capacity to give a decisive twist to all previous discussions of the many authors he deals with? Indeed, after Derrida has read the work of an author, a poet or a philosopher, nothing remains to be said anymore. We are then literally left speechless, without words. Derrida truly brings us to a farthest point beyond which we cannot go. This is where his work is truly revolutionary and why he rightly earned his name in the history of philosophy.

In a brilliant essay on Derrida Richard Rorty argued that we should see Derrida 'as the latest development in the non-Kantian, dialectical tradition – the latest attempt of the dialecticians to shatter the Kantians' ingenuous image of themselves as accurately representing how things really are'⁷. Though I agree with the statement as it stands, I would wish to add that it perhaps does not yet go far enough. I mean, in Rorty's picture Derrida is still just one more *phase* in the two thousand year's history of philosophical thought; within this picture he can be seen as inviting a new, and still more sophisticated variant of 'Kantian' philosophy that we may expect for the future, suggesting in this way a position 'beyond Derrida'. But I believe Derrida to be more revolutionary than this, that his position is not a mere *phase* in that history, that, in this way, there is *no* 'beyond Derrida', and that no new variant of 'Kantianism' can be born from his stance. Here everything truly comes to a grinding halt. So his true achievement is to continuously get philosophy in an impasse, into a position where it gets irreparably stuck and can no longer move on to a new phase. The whole dialectical impetus of the history of philosophy is then inadequate for moving beyond the impasse – and having found out about how to win this victory over the history of philosophy has been Derrida's immense and unprecedented achievement and why he has done something that was never done before. And that could also never be done *again*. In this way Derrida is like the French revolutionaries of 1789: the only real revolution is the first, the 'naïve' revolution, i.e. the French Revolution; all later revolutions could never be more than mere imitations of this revolution and therefore no longer be a revolution in the true sense of the word (recall Trotsky always asking himself what 'chapter' of the French Revolution he now was in with his own, Russian Revolution). So, people imitating Derrida (including Derrida himself insofar as he continuously imitates himself) have, in my

7 R. Rorty, 'Philosophy as a kind of writing', in idem, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Brighton 1982) 93.

view, not understood what Derridas philosophy is all about. You cannot transform a revolution into a tradition and a tradition is never revolutionary.

This is where Derrida is the Adrian Leverkühn of contemporary culture, and where the impasse of Leverkühn, of Schönberg and of modern music, so strikingly resembles the impasse of Derridian deconstruction. In both cases, in that of Leverkühn and in that of Derrida, the whole weight of the tradition unleashes, on the one hand, a tremendous force, a force just as irresistible as the inertia of huge satellite circling the earth, whereas, on the other, the satellite is also subject to an equally strong gravitational pull from which no escape is possible. And, in both these cases, these two tremendous forces seem to cancel each other out and the result is stasis, a fixed orbit, an invincible impasse. We must continue, though we know that the journey leads nowhere – or, rather, to the confirmation over and over again *that* it leads nowhere, and that we got stuck forever in the same cultural orbit. 'Das Langweilige ist interessant geworden, weil das Interessante angefangen hat langweilig zu werden,' as Mephistopheles most acutely and perceptively comments on the melancholic predicament of modern music. We became bored by what was done in traditional music, of philosophy and precisely this made boredom (i.e. the impasse of the Leverkühn's, the Schönberg's and of the Derrida's) so supremely interesting to us.

The triumphs of science have caused in us *hybris* and hyper-activity, whereas the triumphs of the humanities cause boredom – and between these two moods contemporary culture moves to and fro. To which I should add that from the philosopher's perspective no human mood is so interesting as boredom, since in boredom and ennui the world may show itself to us in its naked, quasi-noumenal quality⁸. This is where boredom and trauma come quite close to each other – though from entirely different directions and where both have the sublime as their shared basis. I shall return to this issue of trauma in a moment.

(Sublime) experience

So it may well be that some inexorable dialectical logic of Western culture since the Enlightenment has made us end up with the Leverkühn's, the

8 See for this the last chapter of my *History and Tropology* (Berkeley 1994).

Schönberg's and the Derrida's of the present - but from whatever angle I look at it, this is a position giving me neither pleasure nor satisfaction. Let me put it in the following, rather simplistic way. Why do we read at all the books written by our eminent colleagues, why do we listen to music and do we visit picture galleries? For me this is in order to get a message that is 'new' to me and that might somehow change my intellectual constitution (for the better, as I would hope). For only such corrective changes can give me the conviction to be in touch with the world in some way or other. But the endlessly repeated message of the Leverkühn's and of the Derrida's is that 'newness' is an illusion; and the truly unprecedented intellectual effort of the whole of our culture has shrunk into making this point over and over again (as Mann so eloquently put it in the passage I quoted in the previous section). The message always is that we are caught up in some ultimate catch 22 that history has prepared for us and that we will be out of touch with things forever. But if this is the case, why should we listen to modern music anymore, why should we read philosophy, literature, history, why should we be interested in the fruits of modern culture if all that we can expect from the (strenuous) effort of digesting them is having this bleak message repeated to us again and again? What could we possibly gain from this overlaborious nihilist masquerade? I cannot help feeling that somehow, something must have gone terribly wrong.

Now, if there is some truth in this sketch of our predicament, it will not be difficult to see how we might get out of this postmodern labyrinth. Two things need to be taken into consideration at this stage. In the first place, recall the 'Langeweile', the feeling of boredom provoked by the impasses of contemporary culture that was mentioned at the end of the previous section. In the second place, recall that these impasses often have the character of our being incarcerated in what Nietzsche already described as the 'prisonhouse of language'. The impasses that so much fascinate Derrida come into being thanks to language's alleged incapacity to reach anything outside itself; a claim codified in Derrida's notorious 'il n'y a pas dehors texte' and with which Derrida wished to emphasize that contemporary culture mainly is and endless proliferation of comments on comments on comments etc. without ever getting into touch with anything outside the text, or that is outside language. The writing of history is a good example. Disciplinary, professionalized historical writing has acquired an autonomy of its own with regard to the past; and consequently historians write about each other rather than about the past itself. As, once again, Nietzsche had

already argued in his *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*, so-called 'scientific' historical writing is no longer the bridge to the past that it was meant to be, but rather a screen hiding the past from view. You want to know about the past, and what you get, instead, are the internecine fights of historians with which they earn their living. In sum, our boredom is the boredom to be expected when an authentic contact with the past has become impossible; a boredom awakening in us a nostalgic longing for 'the referent' of language, i.e. for the past in its pre-textual virginity. We feel a yearning for a past not yet contaminated by language, by historical discussion and that still possesses the quasi-noumenal nakedness of what has not yet been appropriated, and is not yet mediated by the text. This is the fresh air that we so desperately are longing for.

This will require us to have a look at the so-called 'micro-storie' that were written some twenty years ago by people like Ginzburg, Le Roy Ladurie, Zemon-Davis or Medick (but that seem to have lost much of their popularity by now again). The micro-storie are for two reasons of interest within the context of a discussion of postmodernism and historical writing. In the first place they were a perfect exemplification of the fragmentation thesis that Lyotard had proposed in his *La Condition Postmoderne* of 1978. As the reader will recall, Lyotard had argued in this postmodernist manifesto against so-called meta-narratives giving an overall cohesion to the story of history. For him the past had disintegrated into an archipelago of 'petits récits', of isolated stories of isolated parts of the past that effectively resisted subsumption within some larger whole. And, obviously, this is precisely what the micro-storie were all about.

But in the second place, what these micro-storie seemed to do, is to momentarily break down the barriers between the past and the present and to make us feel what it must have been like to live in thirteenth century Montaigne or in the Friuli of the end of the sixteenth century. In this way the micro-storie could be said to give us an 'experience' of the past. In sum, the micro-storie are in a peculiar way Janus-faced: on the one hand they seem to be the translation of postmodernism to historical writing. But, on the other hand, by suggesting a return to the *experience* of the past, to what the past must have been prior to what historians have written on it, they also seem to be a key for opening the doors of the prisonhouse of (historical) language.

But perhaps this is too generous an assessment of the micro-storie. For it might be argued that all of the provocation of the micro-storie should be

located in their crass denial of the aims and purpose of existing historical writing. Existing historical writing had always striven for unity and integration; this aim was abandoned in the micro-storie – and this is what so much hurt the sensitivities of the historians at the time. But precisely because of this the micro-storie presupposed traditional historical writing and were just as much dependent on it as a parasite is on its host. So, in the end, the micro-storie were no less a comment on what had been said and written by historians already than ordinarily is the case in historical writing. No disciplinary historical writing, then no micro-storie as well. So, after all, the micro-storie have been less of an interesting phenomenon in the history of historical writing than many believed at the time. And this may explain why the micro-storie soon lost their appeal and are now rightly seen as having been little more than a temporary eccentricity in the recent history of historical writing.

We may conclude that we must praise the micro-storie for having rehabilitated the notion of the experience of the past, but, at the same time, distrust them for having introduced too shallow and too weak a conception of experience. If, then, we ask ourselves where to find a stronger and more substantial notion of experience, an answer immediately suggesting itself can be found in the cognate notions of trauma and of the sublime. For in both cases we have to do with an experience of the world that will not fit in the epistemological and psychological categories we have for making sense of the world. This endows the sublime and the traumatic experience with its unparalleled authenticity; for here do we experience the world 'as it is' and not as adapted to the categories normally guiding our understanding of the world. This may explain why we may expect to find in trauma and the sublime the kind of experience of the past that the micro-storie failed to provide.

But this cannot be the end of the story yet. For we shall now have to consider the question of how to operationalize this insight in experience and of how to relate trauma and the sublime to historical writing. At this stage recall a hypothesis suggested by Koselleck in a recent book. The hypothesis is 'dass von dem Besiegten die weiterreichenden Einsichten in der Vergangenheit stammen'⁹. The idea is, roughly, that the representatives of a social and political elite that is about to be superseded by a new one are

9 R. Koselleck, 'Erfahrungswandel und Methodenwechsel', in idem, *Zeitschichten. Studien Zur Historik* (Frankfurt am Main 2000) 68.

in the best position to know and to grasp what we stand to lose by our entry into a new world. They used to rule the world as a matter of course – and believed to possess the knowledge required for doing so – and now they are forced to recognize that this knowledge and understanding is of no use anymore. So when they give an account of the world that *they* have lost with the emergence of a new social and political dispensation, they are in the best position to measure the distance between past and present. As Koselleck puts it:

‘anders die Besiegten. Deren Primärerfahrung ist zunächst, dass alles anders gekommen ist als geplant und gehofft. Sie geraten wenn sie überhaupt methodisch reflektieren in einere grössere Beweisnot, um zu erklären, warum etwas anders und nicht so gekommen ist wie gedacht. Dadurch mag eine Suche nach mittelbarer oder längerfristiger Gründen in Gang gesetzt werden, die den Zufall der einmaligen Überraschung einfasst und vielleicht erklärt’¹⁰.

The elites vanquished by the inexorable course of history will be most open to, and most fascinated by historical fate as manifesting itself in the guise of long term developments. And this to such an extent that one may well surmise that the very notion of long term development is itself the indelible sign of the historical consciousness of a superseded elite. To put it provocatively, the best historian is naturally is the *conservative* historian – which does not mean, of course that all conservatives should be good historians. Far from it. Moreover, it goes without saying that Koselleck’s thesis exclusively applies to the ‘interesting historians’ and in whose writings the drama of history truly resonates and not to the practitioners of a more modestly antiquarian approach to the past (which is, for that matter, by no means a belittling of the latter’s work). One may think here of a Thucydides, a Tacitus, or Clarendon. And, especially, as Koselleck points out himself, of Tocqueville¹¹. For the aristocrat Tocqueville the new, post-revolutionary democratic order was something of a sublime reality¹² that he spontaneously rejected but nevertheless was willing to accept because he understood better than any of his contemporaries that it was our ineluctable future. Indeed, no bourgeois could ever have been capable of the supreme historical insight

10 Koselleck, *ibidem*.

11 Koselleck, *op. cit.*, 75 ff.

12 For an exposition of the role of paradox and of the sublime in Tocqueville’s political and historical writings, see F.R. Ankersmit, *Aesthetic politics: political philosophy beyond fact and value* (Stanford 1997) chapter 6.

as expressed in Tocqueville's historical and political writings. But the historian who fits the bill best undoubtedly is Jakob Burckhardt (as I hope to demonstrate in my forthcoming book on historical experience). And what is true of all these historians is that they experienced the loss of the past with the intensity of trauma and that precisely this gave them a profounder insight into the past than their less tormented colleagues.

In sum, if we wish to study trauma and the sublime in history we should focus on periods in the history of the West of cataclysmic change and in which the awareness of the loss of the past has taken on the characteristics of the sublime. Two comments are in point here. In the first place, trauma (and the sublime) are seen here in a context that is quite different from the one we will find in Dominick LaCapra's recent work on trauma¹³. For LaCapra the subject of trauma are still individual people, though these people may experience trauma collectively, as was the case in the Holocaust. In my approach, however, Western civilisation is the subject of trauma; my question is how Western civilization, *as such*, dealt with its greatest crises. We may think here of the dissolution of the Medieval order (as recorded in the writings of Machiavelli and Guicciardini¹⁴) or of the tragedy of the French Revolution and its aftermath¹⁵. And there is no evidence, as yet, that the Holocaust has been such a traumatic experience in *this* sense – perhaps because the perpetrators of this unprecedented crime were vanquished in World War II and because their actions did and could not become part of our collective future. This is where the Holocaust most conspicuously differs from the Renaissance's rupture with the Medieval past or from what Eric Hobsbawm has so famously dubbed 'the Dual Revolution'. For the drama of these crises was the fact that the traumatic event could *not* be discarded, could *not* be neutralized by refusing it to become part of the traumatized subject's present and future identity (in the way that our present civilization could not possibly conceive of the Holocaust as a part of our post-war identity). What Hitler and his hench-men left to posterity is something only to be avoided and that could under no circumstances be a

13 See, for example D. LaCapra, *History and memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca and London 1998).

14 See my 'Trauma und Leiden. Eine vergessene Quelle des westlichen historischen Bewusstseins', in J. Rüsen ed., *Westliches Geschichtsdenken. Eine interkulturelle Debatte* (Göttingen 1998) 127 – 146.

15 See my 'The sublime dissociation of the past', *History and Theory* 40 (2001) 295 – 324.



René Magritte, *La condition humaine I* (1933). Een schilderij dat de werkelijkheid probeert vast te leggen. Maar, net als het geschiedverhaal, is het schilderij niet een kopie van de werkelijkheid; ze is autonoom. De waarde van het schilderij/ geschiedverhaal bepaal je derhalve door naar de representatie te kijken en niet naar het gerepresenteerde. Uit: Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* (z.p. 1985) 85.

legitimate part of our future. Put provocatively, it would be a moral infamy if the Holocaust would have unleashed a historical trauma, as I understand this notion. For then we would have accepted Hitler's legacy somehow.

In the second place, the approach proposed here squarely places us into the field of the history of historical writing. For it will need no clarification that traumatic experiences such as these must belong to the most powerful and decisive determinants of historical writing. Indeed, the Renaissance's trauma occasioned by the awareness that our collective Fate is in our own hands (and not in those of God) and that we therefore must assume full responsibility for the disasters of history gave us, with Machiavelli and Guicciardini, an entirely new kind of historical consciousness and a new variant of historical writing. And, as everybody knows, the collective trauma of the French Revolution and of the Napoleonic Wars gave us historicism – hence the historiographical paradigm within which we are still writing history¹⁶.

Conclusion

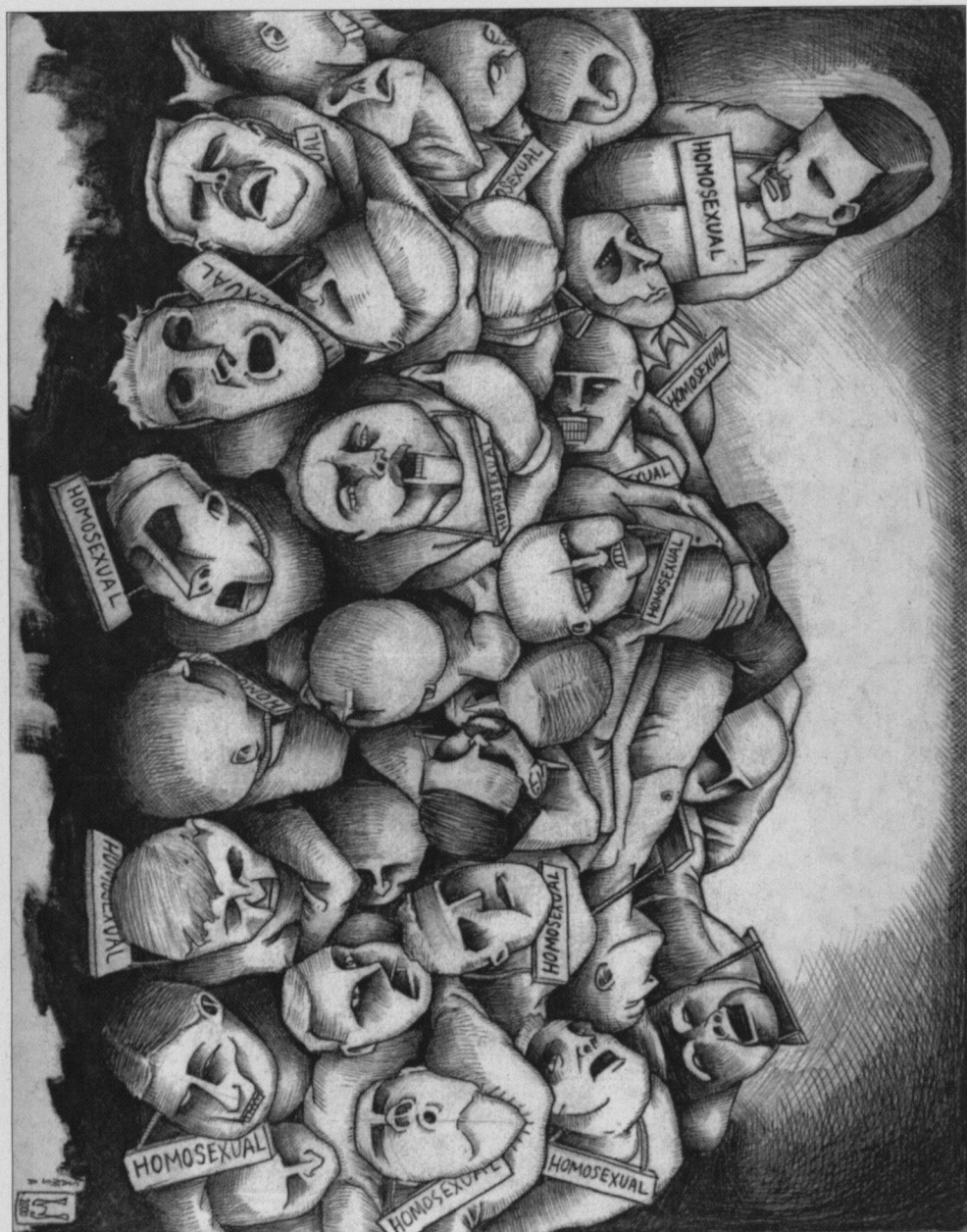
This essay has been an attempt to make out the bill of postmodernism, to see what we can learn from it and what is to be done after postmodernism. And when doing so, it was history that I mainly had in mind.

We must praise postmodernism for having made us aware of both the grandeur and the miseries of our cultural present. On the one hand we have achieved in the humanities a degree of sophistication and of cultural understanding unparalleled in all of its two-thousand years long history. Our knowledge of the past, of the world of literature and the arts, is far more profound and far more comprehensive than ever before. The triumphs of modern science do certainly have their counterpart in the world of the humanities; progress has been impressive and all the conditions for its continuation are amply satisfied. Nevertheless, at the same time we lost something of the greatest importance: a certain naive openness to our cultural past, a willingness to temporarily lay aside the spectacles of disciplinary tradition and of how tradition forces us to conceive of our cultural past. This paradoxical combination of the greatest triumphs of the humanities, on the one hand, with an awareness of the loss of an authentic

16 For a brilliant exposition of how the trauma of the French Revolution resulted into a new historical consciousness, see E. Runia, *Waterloo, Verdun, Auschwitz* (New York 2003).

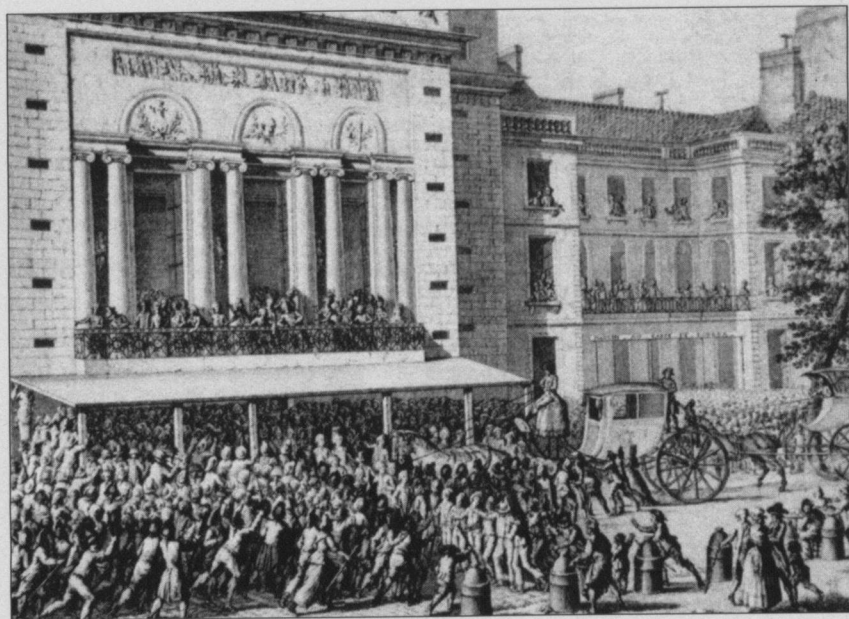
contact with their subject-matter, on the other, was shown to have its parallel in Thomas Mann's profound diagnosis of the predicament of contemporary music and literature.

So, on the one hand, the message of postmodernism is a sad one. But on the other, postmodernism also suggests how we might free ourselves from the impasses of postmodernism itself and from the prisonhouse of language in which it had enclosed us. The notion of experience, and, more specifically of sublime experience is our best guide here. And at the end of this essay I have tried to indicate what this might mean for the writing of history. And the good news is that we need not necessarily stay in the sphere of thin theoretical abstraction with this. On the contrary, if we start to investigate the history of historical consciousness and the deep traumas that so much contributed to its formation in the course of time, we shall have succeeded in translating the aporias of postmodernism into a feasible historical research program that may deepen our insight into the past itself and into how we relate to it. And has this not always been the aim of historical writing?



William Schaff, '30 years 30 people dead' (2000).

Supplement



Het volk zorgt voor de sluiting van de Opéra op 12 juli 1789. Uit: Emmet Kennedy, *A cultural history of the French Revolution* (New Haven en Londen 1989) 178.