

Review of Peter Carravetta, *Del Postmoderno. Critica e cultura in America all'alba del duemila* (Milano, Bompiani 2009)*

The title of this book may as well have been *On the Postmodern: A Guide for the Faint of Heart, A Handbook for the Lost*. Peter Carravetta, who holds the D'Amato Chair of Italian and Italian-American Studies at Stony Brook University, has given us well over five-hundred pages of at once sympathetic and critical, always insightful and encyclopedically well-informed text. Readers in the throws of deconstructionist despair can rest assured that yes, there is a text in this book, and it is an actual and successful conveyor of meaning—as 'clear and distinct' as our ever imperfect human condition allows.

When it comes to postmodernisms, this reviewer has always counted herself among the faint of heart and the lost. She may still be a bit faint, but after reading this volume she is lost no more. For someone trained in the history of Western philosophy, *Del Postmoderno* is a balsam on the wounds of bewilderment or, as Habermas has called it, of the *neue Unübersichtlichkeit*—the new obscurity. Upon reading the book one grasps that perplexity in the face of much postmodern theorizing is not entirely due to one's sclerotic attachment to the so-called 'canon.' It is actually a legitimate puzzlement due to at least two objective reasons: first because, in a gesture reminiscent of nineteenth-century's *épater le bourgeois*, confounding the reader (especially if less familiar with the history of philosophy) is part and parcel of the theoretical practice of many postmodern authors. Second, because the field covered by the category of 'the Postmodern' is meanwhile about as broad as that covered by the category of Being from Parmenides to Heidegger. It is then not entirely the fault of classically trained philosophers if until recently they could not find the light at the end of certain labyrinthine texts, works and conferences. After the publication of Carravetta's book, however, there are no more excuses: the thread of Ariadne has been given to us, all we have to do is grab it and hold onto it firmly through its engagingly written, masterly structured five-hundred pages.

Carravetta's study is about much more than just academic postmodernisms. It is, as the title says, about the postmodern condition itself. And yet one of this study's greatest virtues is its function as eye-opener on some striking aspects of the North American (also European and Japanese) academic condition. This book may well become the most powerful tool for humanities scholars at large to understand the unflattering, often unfair image that their profession has acquired in the eyes of a public not versed in the humanities and their complex history— applied-science academics, funding agencies, university administrators or (alas) the omnipresent and eternally whining American taxpayer. More importantly, perhaps, Carravetta's research is poised to become essential reference for non-postmodernists like this reviewer to finally engage, in a historically and textually informed manner, postmodern discourses within our disciplines—discourses that may be lodged in the office next door and yet seem to hover in a parallel universe.

Only some of the many themes so richly treated in this book can be dealt with in the brief space of this review. I will look at those most relevant to professional philosophers because they are more directly challenging of non-postmodernist philosophical research. In doing so, let us keep in mind that, despite widespread

- Published in *Forum Italicum*, Vol. 45, no. 2 (Fall 2011):515-518.

perceptions, ‘post-modernism’ need not be a synonym of ‘continental (European) philosophy,’ and thus ‘non-postmodernist theory’ need not be co-terminus with ‘analytic (Anglo-American) philosophy.’ Contemporary, non-postmodernist philosophy is thriving on both sides of the Atlantic in form of philosophical research that is grounded in the really existing, hard fought-for, mind-numbingly sophisticated and well-documented tradition known as the history of Western philosophy—a bi-millenarian body of work whose authors have been by turns poisoned, divinized, hanged, praised, maligned, rewarded, burned, hired or exiled by the powers that be. A tradition, in other words, as relevant today as it ever was, and whose utter lack of triviality makes it, when popularized, all too subject to trivializing representations.

In the following are a few succinct reformulations, followed by epigrammatic rejoinders, of just seven of the many postmodern theses whose origin, meaning and impact in twentieth- and twenty-first century debates Carravetta has reconstructed in crystal-clear, detailed but never redundant prose.

Thesis 1: the metaphysical foundations that support or guarantee the internal cogency of world-explanations have today exhausted their intelligibility and plausibility—if they ever possessed them alongside their obvious ideological, power-sustaining, abuse-justifying functions.

This, of course, sounds to practitioners in the philosophy profession like a somewhat crude version of Immanuel Kant’s famous answer to the eighteenth-century question ‘Is metaphysics as science possible?’ Kant’s answer, just like the postmodernists, is ‘no.’ Yet the Königsberg sage spent considerable energy in explaining that from the impossibility of metaphysics as science does not follow that all metaphysics is meaningless, nefarious or even avoidable.

Thesis 2: as a consequence of Thesis 1, all systematic attempts to account for reality—from what Lyotard calls *les grands récits* (Enlightenment, German Idealism, Marxism) to physical and philosophic systems *à la* Newton or Hegel—are colossal cases of failure, moribund dinosaurs inadaptable to the postmodern environment.

This may be so—except there is no reason to fault the systems rather than the postmodern environment for the situation. By analogy, if an existentialist philosopher has reason to lose confidence in truth and rationality in the midst of two world wars, untold war crimes and sundry genocides, the fault may lie with the world wars, the war crimes and the genocides rather than with the concepts of truth and rationality.

Thesis 3: as a consequence of Theses 1 and 2, accurate representation and truth-seeking argumentation are dangerous undertakings because they are inherently systematic—and that means, totalitarian.

This thesis, as well as the conflation of systematicity with dogmatism, would deserve a longer treatment than can be given here. Yet one can at least mention that minimal acquaintance with the ancient disputes between Pyrronian and Academic skeptics will compel critics to ask: are all categorical statements like Thesis 3 equally dangerous because inherently totalitarian?

Thesis 4: rationality and knowledge are forms of rhetoric, rhetoric is a game, all games are arbitrary conventions, thus rationality and knowledge are arbitrary conventions.

As above, one feels compelled to point out that this is syllogistic reasoning at its best (or worst), thus a form of rhetoric, thus a game, thus arbitrary and...the reader can see where this is going.

Thesis 5: in a peculiar version of Dantesque *malebolge*, every text is said not just to harbor insurmountable contradictions, but to be damned by necessity, or in virtue of its ‘textuality,’ to perpetually contradict its own assertions—whatever they may be.

This thesis may only hold on an interpretation of ‘contradiction’ that would require lengthy specifications. Philosophers who have dealt in some detail with the logical concept of contradiction and its ontological counterparts find that this feature of texts is no cause for despair, let alone for epistemic or ethical nihilism. The first Western document to exemplify in unforgettable vividness this postmodern insight is Plato’s very much pre-modern dialogue *Parmenides*—a radical performance of self-destructing conundrums to which Plato himself and a host of philosophers after him have offered remarkably clever, complex and creative solutions.

Thesis 6: ethical principles are wolves in sheep’s pelt. The postmodern discourse is uniquely positioned to disperse reason’s illusions and to expose juridical and moral principles’ inherently ideological nature. The alternative offered by more recent postmodernisms, as Carravetta indicates, is a new brand of pragmatism which (just like the old one) makes do without absolutes.

Whatever the epistemological status of the ‘new pragmatism,’ one must ask: why is it at all necessary, from a postmodern viewpoint, to seek to compensate for the obliteration of ethical principles? Whatever happened to full-throated, uncompromising, heroic nihilism? And, more importantly: what does the ultimate recourse to pragmatism—the champion representative of Western techno-culture—say about the deeper ideological allegiances of post-modern theory?

Thesis 7: for years, postmodernists have assured anyone who would listen that ‘the subject’ was dead. Considering the immensely nuanced, prodigiously rich history of the *hypokeimenon-subjectum*, the substance-subject, in Eastern and Western philosophy, one feels compelled to object at a minimum that, like the concepts of ‘life’ or ‘thought,’ also ‘the subject’ cannot be dead because it has never been a live organism to begin with. It simply denotes the complementary category to objectivity: subjectivity. And it does not really matter if, exercising our postmodern powers of reflection, we find the individual abyss of introspection to be psychologically empty, because the philosophical concept of ‘subjectivity’ was never about anyone’s psychological affections. Indeed, one learns from *Del Postmoderno* that some notion of indelible subjectivity is slowly rising again from its own post-structuralist, self-incurred ashes.

These sketchy critical remarks on the subject-matter of Carravetta’s comprehensive study hardly do justice to the vast amount of work embodied in this volume or to its scholarly quality. It is to be hoped that it will be translated into English as soon as possible. Perhaps it will become the Rosetta Stone around which philosophers, literary critics, sociologists and other wordsmiths can finally gather to communicate with one another in a productive and mind-opening manner.

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