

## BOOK REVIEW

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Peter Carravetta, *Del Postmoderno. Critica e cultura in America all'alba del duemila* (Milano, Bompiani 2009)<sup>1</sup>

The subtitle of this book may well have been '*A Guide for the Faint of Heart, A Handbook for the Lost.*' Carravetta has given us well over five-hundred pages of both sympathetic and critical, always insightful text. This is a meaningful, unencumbered text comprehensible to even the least initiated reader.

When it comes to postmodernism, this reviewer has been indeed among the faint of heart and the lost. With Carravetta's volume in hand I am still a skeptic, but lost no more. For someone trained in the canon of western philosophy, *Del Postmoderno* throws a shaft of light into what some have called, borrowing a Habermasian expression, *die neue Unübersichtlichkeit*—the new obscurity. The book shows that perplexity in the face of much postmodern theorizing is not just due to sclerotic attachment to the 'canon.' It is actually a legitimate puzzlement on two accounts. First, because in a playful mood of *épater le bourgeois*, confounding the reader (especially one unfamiliar with the history of philosophy) is integral to the intellectual practice of some postmodernism. Second, because the field covered by the category of 'the Postmodern' is meanwhile about as broad as that covered by 'Being' from Parmenides to Heidegger. It is, then, not entirely the fault of classically trained philosophers if many do not even bother searching for the proverbial light at postmodernist tunnel's end. After the publication of Carravetta's book, however, there are no more excuses: he has given us the thread of Ariadne, to which we can now firmly hold.

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

In the brief space of this review I cannot mention all the themes Carravetta treats so richly. I choose to only engage themes most relevant to—because more directly challenging of—classical philosophical scholarship. First, though, a *caveat*: as 'post-modernism' is not simply coextensive with 'continental (European) philosophy,' neither is 'non-postmodernist thought' co-terminous with 'analytic (Anglo-American) philosophy.' Contemporary philosophy that is not beholden to the 'analytic-continental' dichotomy may not reach magazine pages but is thriving on both sides of the Atlantic. It

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<sup>1</sup> Published in *FORUM ITALICUM*,

consists of historically and epistemologically informed research grounded in the really existing, hard fought-for, 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 and un-trivial today as it ever was—its vulgarizations notwithstanding.

Here are, then, succinct reformulations and epigrammatic rejoinders to a subset of postmodern theses among the many Carravetta has brilliantly reconstructed and explicated.

*Postmodernist Thesis 1:* the metaphysical systems that are traditionally alleged to ground the cogency of world-explanations have been definitively exposed for their essentially ideological, power-sustaining, abuse-justifying contents, or, alternatively, for their philosophical irrelevance or semantic vacuity.

But to scholars of modern philosophy this resembles a vulgarization of Marx' superstructure-theory or a somewhat crude version of Kant's answer to the question: 'Is metaphysics as science possible?' Kant's answer, like our postmodernists', is 'no.' Yet Kant provides successfully arguments that show that from the impossibility of metaphysics-as-science does *not* follow that metaphysics is meaningless, nefarious or even avoidable.

*Thesis 2:* as a consequence of 1, all systematic attempts to account for reality—from Newtonian, Fichtean or Hegelian systematics to what Lyotard calls *les grands récits* of Enlightenment, German Idealism, or Marxism—are colossal failures, sclerotic or moribund organisms inadaptable to postmodern free-spiritedness.

This may be so—except there is no reason to fault, for the *grand récits'* failure, rational systematicity rather than irrational disarray. By analogy, if an existentialist has reason to lose confidence in truth and reason in the face of two world wars, untold war crimes and sundry genocides, the fault may lie with the world wars, crimes and genocides rather than with the principles of truth and reason.

*Thesis 3:* as a consequence of 1 and 2, logical reconstruction and truth-seeking argument are untrustworthy because inherently systematic—i.e. totalitarian.

The conflation of systematicity with dogmatism, or of holism with totalitarianism, aside, one feels moved to inject a cautionary lesson from the famous dispute between Pyrronian and Academic skeptics: the argument structure of thesis 3 itself suggest its inherently 'totalitarian' character.

*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, let us point out that thesis 4 is syllogistic reasoning at its best (or worst), thus a form of rhetoric, a game, a purely arbitrary convention.

*Thesis 5:* in a peculiar version of Dantesque *malebolge*, this thesis states that every text harbors insurmountable contradictions to which it is damned by the nature of 'textuality' itself.

Yet from the perspective of the history of philosophy, this textual characteristic need cause neither existential despair nor cognitive or ethical relativism. The first text to exemplify it in unforgettable vividness is Plato's decidedly pre-modern *Parmenides*—a

radical performance of self-destructing conundrums to which two thousand years of philosophy have offered remarkably clever and creative responses.

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

Yet why is it necessary, from a postmodern viewpoint, to seek replacements for defunct principles? Whatever happened to full-throated, heroic nihilism? More importantly: what does the recourse to pragmatism—champion representative of Western (British-American) political techno-culture—say about the deep allegiances of post-modern theorizing?

*Thesis 7:* for years now, postmodernists have assured anyone who would listen that 'the subject' is dead.

But in light of the diverse, prodigiously rich history of the *hypokeimenon-subjectum* (the substance-subject) in Eastern and Western philosophy, this famous metaphor looks strangely anemic. 'The subject', like any other metaphysical concepts, cannot be 'dead' because it simply denotes the category of subjectivity—the counterpart of 'objectivity'. And it is rather irrelevant that postmodernist philosophers find the abyss of individual's introspection frighteningly empty, because the philosophical concept of 'subjectivity' is not coterminous with 'individuality'. Indeed, as we learn from Carravetta, notions of an ineradicable subjectivity are slowly rising again from their self-incurred, poststructuralist ashes.

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