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Ethiology and Critique of the Postmodern Matrix

Cvjetko Milanja: *The Blind Spots of Postmodernism. Ethiology and Critique of the Postmodern Matrix (Slijepe pjege postmoderne. Etiologija i kritika postmoderne matrice). Studio grafičkih ideja, Zagreb 1996*

After so many collections and texts dealing with postmodernism, translated or written in Croatia, special numbers of literary reviews, the critical articles, along with occasional applications of postmodernist strategies in Croatian literature and criticism, this book by Cvjetko Milanja is a comprehensive survey as well as a kind of "ethiology and critique of the postmodern matrix". Milanja's subtitle for his metaphorical title (borrowed by the author of this review article), indicates the author's intention to give more serious and systematic attention to the causes underlying various legitimate applications of the postmodern matrix. In the attempt to help elucidate this complex search for the modernist matrix and the application of postmodern concepts in approaching contemporary problems previously "processed" by modernism (according to Milanja these are the revaluation of the enlightenment, idealism, and the relation of the technical and metaphysical) one

should be aware of the specific history of the term "postmodern". As early as the 1930s Federico de Onis declared that the period after 1905 was "postmodern" because 1905 marks the point when Spanish modernism was spent and what followed was a period of decline and exhaustion. However, the original Anglo-American interpretation of the term seems to be most relevant for Croatian literary history. The term "postmodern" has been authorized by the English historian Arnold J. Toynbee in the ninth volume of his *A Study of History* published in the early Nineteen-fifties. Toynbee places the beginnings of postmodernism at the end of the nineteenth century — the beginning of a period of unrest, world wars and revolutions, industrial modernization, and the development of the working class which constituted the basis of mass progress. Of course this period was also marked by the development of mass society, and the globalization of education and health care, as well as the growing split between elitist and "mass" culture". This globalization of modernisms began to breed fear rather than euphoric hope and social progress was seen increasingly as pervaded by anarchist and daemonic powers, and a number of interesting quests for the mythic sources of knowledge or the artistic actualization of myth (e.g. in Joyce, T. S. Eliot, G. Benn) could thus be recognized in Wolfgang Kaiser's idea of the grotesque as Id, the inhuman force ruling the world its people and their

lives, even madness itself as the rule of the "inhuman" over the human spirit. Let us now see how this notion of the postmodern was approached in American theory while also spreading into German and French philosophical and literary-theoretical thinking. In the Fifties and Sixties of this century the term took firm root in the United States. Leslie Fiedler, Irving Howe, Ihab Hassan promoted a postmodern interpretation of literary developments. In England it was discussed by David Lodge who in a series of his lectures used the terms "modernism, antimodernism and postmodernism". David Lodge's book *Modes of Modern Writing. Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature* was translated into Croatian in 1988. The same year also saw the publication of a Croatian translation of the master key for the study of postmodernism, Jurgen Habermas's *Philosophical Discourse on the Modern* composed of twelve lectures offered by the German philosopher. A large number of very valuable collections of essays and special issues of Croatian reviews (e.g. of *Republika*) can only be mentioned in passing in this review article of Milanja's *Blind Spots of Postmodernism* where all relevant sources are extensively quoted. It should also be mentioned that the terminological debate concerning postmodernism which led to a repeated attempt to reserve the term *avantgarde* for the artistic and literary production from the beginning of this century until 1930 and to exclude

the term "postavantgarde" from definitions of artistic activity between the Forties and Seventies, was also repeated by those who saw postmodernism as a more widespread artistic period replacing that of historical modernism. This "sin" is in part attributed to those American critics who simply placed all their fictional production from J. D. Salinger and Gore Vidal to Philip Roth and Ken Kesey under the term postmodernism, with Hassan also "appropriating" a number of European writers (Sartre, Beckett, the writers of the French *nouveau roman*) and the Latin American Borges. As a reaction, some European critics take the radical view denying any essential differences between the literature before the Fifties and after the Fifties, seeing the latter as a radicalization of modernism branching out into three clearly modernist directions: the *nouveau roman*, the drama of the absurd and concrete poetry. Among the English critics Frank Kermode proposed the distinction between *palaeomodernism* and *neomodernism* in order to preserve the continuity of the period. Some go even further and see the art and literature from the Fifties to the present not as a period of discontinuity and conflict between modernism and postmodernism, speaking of "hypermodernism" rather than "postmodernism". Milanja does not stop at these narrower literary discussions, but stresses that his interest is a more "comprehensive discussion of the postmodern/postmodernist watershed". He does not

wish to write another book "about postmodernism", but rather to propose the premises leading to the "modern-posmodern controversy" and present the situation today called the "postmodern paradigm". This is why he carefully draws the lines of demarcation to be followed in his analysis: he sees the notion of the "postmodern" as a kind of *Zeitgeist* or "auratization", using "postmodernist" when approaching individual mediations in the various arts. In this way Milanja has dispensed with possible criticism regarding periodization and overall characterization, choosing instead to recognize them "in passing" in the course of developing his general theses. In 1991, in the final stage of writing his book Milanja points out that the term postmodern has been around for about ten years, so we can talk today of two decades of fruitful discussions of this topic. Accepting Lyotard's theory of the "postmodern age", Milanja did not indulge in analyses of the individual particularities of the "postmodern condition" because this would bring up too many epiphenomenal contaminations. Instead he tried to locate certain literary practices within the limits of the paradigm, in the context of his basic philosophical and linguistic tendencies. The difference between the two paradigms, says Milanja, began when it was determined that the "modernist paradigm had exhausted itself", a conclusion drawn from the study of artistic practices, which however became most evident in the

controversy concerning "the history (historical paradigm) of the modernist and postmodernist mind and rationality, based on the explicit and implicit thesis-presupposition that the modernist mind posited rationality along a "vertical" axiological hierarchic system (where mind is the transcendental enlightening principle) while in postmodernism its structure is "horizontal", linked like a chain, with each entity having equal value — showing an affinity for the Other — in spite of the fact that evaluation has not entirely disappeared." Milanja considers the problem created by the extension of the three "basic" myths of modernism — related to history, the subject and rationality — into postmodernism, an extension which "contaminated" the purity of the postmodern project. Thus the aesthetic problem and artistic practice are constantly recognized either as identical with modernism or as the mirror image of the postmodern break. However, this great struggle, which did not stop at abstract theory but also participated in the modelling of worlds in the course of the twentieth century has been transferred by poststructuralists like Baudrillard into a realm of functions producing a "new reality" or simulacrum. Milanja gives a competent presentation of such tendencies (and their metamorphoses) denying literature its role of "central narrator of the truth presented by one world view". Milanja also demystifies a large number of micro-paradigmatic dividing lines between modernism and postmo-

dermism. Like Habermas and many others Milanja sees the germs of the dualism of modernism and its inherent conflicts in Nietzsche's effort to shed the illusions of "modernization", identifying them with the contemporary effort to establish the philosophical and artistic origins of the twentieth century, a problem which received the concentrated profound attention of the French poststructuralists. Milanja makes a significant contribution to Croatian critical theory with his expert interpretation of the sources of postmodernism, including Nietzsche, the German critical school (with new authors such as A. Wellmer, P. Sloterdijk and P. Koslowski), Anglo-American pragmatic, deconstructionist theory (Jameson, Hassan, Rorty, Man, Bell), the Italian contribution of G. Vattimo in directions inspired by Heidegger and the Tartu school (Lotman, Uspensky, Ivanov). On various occasions, especially in the introductory chapters, he detects temporal and paradigmatic "discontinuities" between modernism and postmodernism: he pays special attention to the critique of objectivization, therefore the defeat of the logic of the "rational intellect", and postmodernism's rejection of paradigmatic personalization or normative individuality, in short of every authoritarian norm. In one of his footnotes Milanja writes: "The postmodern artist's rejection of authoritarianism implies his rejection of definite ideological concepts, among other things also because programmes and par-

ties have all been discredited. In this sense the European post-WWII "cultural revolutions", being anti-authoritarian showed their postmodernist character. This is why the findings and results of A. Illich, D. Cooper and especially M. Foucault are invaluable; they all share the demand to destroy authority." (Milanja, p. 15)

This deconstructive role played by postmodernism developed in at least two directions. It is primarily aimed at deconstructing the aims of modernism which as Barthes points out fell apart in the middle of the nineteenth century with the defeat of the revolution of 1848. That was the final breakdown of liberal illusions about possible modernization, as well as the beginning of a language crisis which "fell out of step with the march of History; its reality was Reality no more". This led to those postmodern strategies also implied by modernism, which now become aggressively explicit: the instance of discourse replaces the instance of reality, and artistic practice at the end of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century insists on being the "authentic reality" rejecting its status as "artifact".

Milanja concludes this exceptionally fine discussion of the analytic etiology of the "postmodern matrix" with a discussion of the "deconstruction of the political". The efforts of postmodernism were concentrated "on the simulation of total reality as a reality of discourse"; rather than the modernist "simulation" of reality itself