

For God's Sake

The Spirit of Postmodernism

Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 27 February 1993

It seemed that Marx had forgotten to add that not only world-historical events but also academic conferences occur twice, the second time as farce. This conference was timed to coincide with the publication of the papers collected from an earlier one, 'Shadow of Spirit'. Curiously, the publication to which allusions were made was nowhere in evidence; not in the foyer, not in the bookshop, nor even at the launch party. Was this a sophisticated new advertising gimmick; a book present only in its absence?

Give my animus against what is often advanced in the name of post-modernism I came to the conference with low expectations. The introductory session easily failed to meet them. By the time Andrew Wernick had set out the aims of the conference and paid homage to the 'incommensurable diversity' of the speakers, it was already well behind schedule. Phillipa Berry and Charles Jencks were left each with ten minutes in which to adumbrate the new agenda of postmodern theology. This was never going to be an easy task but was rendered more difficult still by Berry's need to adduce Kant, Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Lacan, Kierkegaard, Rimbaud, Foucault, Cornell, Derrida, Hegel, Plato and Irigaray in the course of her talk. Armed with this panoply of thinkers she pointed to the centrality of deconstruction to the postmodern tradition. The best way out of the impasse of modernity was to run headlong into it, thus 'opening up a new cognitive space of postmodern knowing', which might (raising the stakes a notch or two) prevent a repeat of the holocaust.

Charles Jencks with uncharacteristic insight spotted the irony in deconstruction's being at the centre of any tradition, and described this, with characteristic lucidity, as a 'double-flip headstand'. Unlike Berry he declined to talk philosophy. Instead, for reasons known only to himself, he read out a ten minute lecture on cosmo-genesis, quantum physics, and chaos theory, subjects in which he was manifestly no expert and which he failed to render in the least bit intelligible. The four horsemen of the apocalypse were reductionism, mechanism, determinism and materialism (as materialists Karl Marx, John Major, and Madonna received special admonishment). With its quadrumvirate of 'isms' modernity had set about decimating the environment. Luckily post-modern science would put an end to all that. Jencks was not clear about how the world would be saved, but it had something to do, believe it or not, with a new religion, modelled on the avant-garde and presided over (at the margins) by a figurehead named G-O-D-D. Hitherto modernity had only destroyed other life-forms, in various ways; the point however was to change the spelling.

If the introduction was at once the most embarrassing and most memorable session, it was not the most interesting. The ensuing exchange lined up John Milbank with Phillip Blond and Toby Foshay, in what the chair announced as a 'knockabout and interactive format'. Foshay, speaking briefly without notes, did not succeed in making the points of convergence and difference between negative theology and deconstruction at all perspicuous. He did succeed in irritating Milbank with his summary pronouncements on the Christian tradition, and in provoking a barrage of high-volume sound-bytes of unreconstructed Levinas from Blond. After the chair intervened at the behest of a member of the audience, to prevent all three panelists speaking at once, three significant points emerged: (1) In its most extreme form negative theology risks setting up another idol – an incomplete

and uncompletable task of negation, whence no form of politics or ethics can emerge; (2) Following the death of God, the death of man seems merely to complete the process of secularisation. At this zero point however the secular world no longer understands itself, since that against which it had defined itself no longer exists. Here the relevance of theology becomes palpable; (3) The God that is now supposed to be dead has since the seventeenth century been widely misunderstood as a first (efficient) cause. This theistic construction (which itself leads to atheism) is by no means representative of the whole Christian tradition.

The third panel discussed 'French Feminism and the Divine'. Eve Tavor Bennet held that French Feminism amounted to the reinstatement of mythopoesis against the tradition. Alison Ainley and Mornie Joy attempted to explicate the work of Kristeva and Irigaray. Ainley, like Bennet, stressed the significance of the somatic moment and defended French Feminism against the accusation, levelled by nobody, that it was derived from or homologous with Derridean and Lacanian theory. Ainley and Joy emphasised the discontinuity of feminist discourse with the logocentricity of philosophy and psychoanalytic theory. But how does this strategy of mocking philosophy and embracing the radical particularity of the feminine weld onto the political struggle for recognition as legal persons?

Finally, on the subject of 'Ethics and the Other' Gillian Rose agonised with the political effeteness of postmodernism. With a condensed and impassioned performance she 'nailed four theses to the door' of the ICA: If modernity is the death of God, post-modernity is the death of the Godhead; Postmodernism does not overcome nihilism, it intensifies nihilism; Postmodernism only gestures towards an other, and is not waving but drowning; the perfection of the sublimity of postmodernism is the perfection of the materialism of the market-place. For Rose too Marx was the God that failed, but this does not entail that we can celebrate the death of all politics. To shun power and knowledge is to capitulate to it. On the contrary the subject must position itself with respect to power and reason, in order to be a political animal. Joanna Hodge then read out a carefully-worded reply to Rose's article in the absent volume, which she subtitled 'the ten-minute Heidegger'. She maintained that the space of politics was foreclosed, due to its unsustainable metaphysical commitments. It remained only to salvage ethics from the *Zwischenraum* between politics and metaphysics. John Peacocke spoke on Buddhism, postmodernism and Asian philosophy, subject matter enough for another whole conference. How were we supposed to 'develop an ear' for what I suspect was merely a token 'other' philosophy, whose representative had only ten minutes in which to make himself heard?

I left this conference with two convictions. Firstly, the postmodern appropriation of theological discourse tends to mystify 'otherness' as an ideology-free zone. Here Jacques Lacan's injunction is apposite: '... to begin with, you have to know what an other is. The other – do not use this term as a mouthwash.' Secondly, insofar as philosophy thinks to have severed all links with theology it misunderstands itself. Radical philosophers above all, if they do not want to lose their philosophy of history to a developmental social-psychology, have to rethink its roots in the theological tradition of Christian eschatology.

Gordon Finlayson

Going Beyond Habermas

Rethinking Critical Theory

University of Essex, 27 February 1993

This was a rare occasion in Britain, a conference on 'Contemporary Issues in the Frankfurt School Tradition'. Opening the conference, its organiser Peter Dews expressed the hope that this would go some way towards encouraging more debate between British and Continental intellectuals in the tradition, increasing our prominence in a debate which has hitherto largely been conducted between Continental and American intellectuals.

Dews suggested that an alternative title for the conference could have been 'How to get beyond Habermas'. Two of the five speakers attempted to develop Habermas's version of Critical Theory in order to address recent criticisms of it. Maeve Cooke (University College, Dublin) sought to address reservations which she shared about the way in which Habermas's discourse ethic seemed to assume the possibility of transparent self-knowledge. Unless we can have an undistorted knowledge of what we are individually aiming at and what our needs are we cannot have an undistorted dialogue with others.

To avoid this, Cooke suggested that we hold onto the distinctions between moral questions, questions of ethics, and questions of our individual life choices. The discourse ethic, or the moral theory of communicative action, applies only to the first of these categories, although it is given an absolute privilege. Only when we are discussing the most basic background principles of our practices can we argue without referring back to our substantive self-knowledge. This reduces Critical Theory to a defence of a very thin moral framework circumscribing what Hegel called a system of needs.

Dews's paper began with the observation that Habermas's theory, unlike the early Critical Theory of Horkheimer, Adorno et al, did not use psychoanalytic theory substantively. This was seen to be bound up with an absence of questions about gender and sexual politics in his work. To begin to make good this lack Dews proposed to look again at Horkheimer's 1936 essay 'Authority and the Family', and across to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. He also drew upon the work of Jessica Benjamin to address problems with Lacanian theory.

The discussion focused upon the dubious psychological assumptions of Habermas's notion of an ideal speech situation. What happens to the unconscious? Doesn't Habermas's ideal of a situation of undistorted communication imply the withering away of the unconscious? By contrast, for Lacan, there is an irreducible gap between consciousness and the unconscious. Although, methodologically, Habermas represents a radical break with early Critical Theory, he is continuous with its early prioritisation of discursive reason and its ethic of the will. Yet the ideal of a fully constitutive subject is undermined if we take the constitutive function of the unconscious seriously.

Peter Osborne (Middlesex University) presented a paper entitled 'Criticism as Avant-Garde'. This dealt directly with the issue of where critical theory should go from here. One possibility, said to be taken by Peter Dews and Axel Honneth, involves taking up Habermas's categories to develop them in ways that Habermas has not envisaged. A second option involves returning to Adorno. Osborne envisaged problems with both options. The first involves a regression behind Critical Theory to a traditional theoretical form; the second comes up against Adorno's relentless negativity. Through that negativity Adorno empties Critical Theory

of all substantive theory. There is only critique.

Osborne's aim seemed to be to hold on to the importance of theory without losing the connection with historical experience. For Osborne, what is required for this renewed concern with history is a philosophy of historical time. Amongst other things, this would question the simple opposition between modernity and tradition which structures Habermas's work.

As the first snows of spring descended gracefully past the common room window, Scott Lash (Lancaster University) gave us a heated reminder of how the modern world had become even more utilitarian and alienating with the emergence of the 'information society'. Lash sought to distinguish between an idea of modern reflexivity which affirmed the way in which the media constitutes us as utilitarian preference-maximisers, and one which goes beyond this to grasp the importance of a life-world threatened by such instrumentalism and the structures which promote it. To develop the latter he drew upon the work of Pierre Bordieu. The aim here was to underline the claim that the threat to the life-world was *the* problem to which Critical Theory needs to address itself. Critical theorists like Habermas have tended to look for principles as grounds for criticism, overlooking and taking for granted the non-rule-bound *Sitten*, or customs, which constitute our lifeworld, our *Sittlichkeit*. These *Sitten* rely upon, not the recognition of rules, but the recognition of exemplars, and so they involve a 'logic' which goes unthought if we assume an identification of reason with discursive reason.

The last paper, 'Decentred Autonomy: The Subject After the Fall', by Axel Honneth (Freie Universität, Berlin) set itself the task of defending the idea of autonomy against the post-structuralist claim that it is redundant. The assumption here is that the traditional notion of autonomy presupposes the subject's transparency to itself, and a self-identity which is prior to its relation to others. Once we recognise that the self is an other to itself, that the identity of the self is socially constituted, and that the unconscious has a constitutive function, does the notion of autonomy not become completely redundant? Once we recognise that the subject is decentred in these ways can we any longer speak of the subject as autonomous?

Honneth argued that rather than assume that decentring completely undermines autonomy, the idea can be developed to give us a deeper understanding of the conditions for our autonomy. However, to reconstrue the idea of autonomy as something made possible by other factors – by relationships of mutual recognition, for instance – we have to weaken the traditional notion.

Looking back over the conference, its sober consideration of the substantive issues was refreshing. There was no devotional incantation of sacred words, nor any fetishism of the obscure and the gnomic. The variety of perspectives was also an asset. The question of our response to Habermas is above all the question of whether we need a quasi-transcendental grounding for Critical Theory. Does this enable us to make sense of what is at stake in our critical practice? Or do we need to rethink the relationship between discourse and experience, recovering the idea of an emphatic notion of truth – an ethically significant truth – which Adorno took to be disclosed in what he called our metaphysical experience?

Michael Reid

Thinking with Blanchot

Was there really more than one Blanchot presented at 'Maurice Blanchot' the international conference staged in London, 6-8 January 1993? For my part at least, only one was discernible. I would call this the philosophical Blanchot, with a very strong phenomenological leaning. This Blanchot would confront us with questions that open up the terrain of thought that concerned Heidegger: What is the being of language, for example? (This question was addressed by Christopher Fynsk.) What is the relationship between death and subjectivity? How can there be a subject of death? What is an event? How can one ever grasp an event if to do so is to destroy the very meaning of the event itself? Or again, from a more socio-historical perspective, but with the same logic in train: What sort of historical phenomenon is Blanchot's writing? Is it a desperate attempt (as Gillian Rose suggested) to avoid ever giving any real insight into the nature of death and politics, at both an individual and social level? Might it not be that Blanchot's silence (according to a certain historicist view of his *oeuvre* that was also prevalent at the conference) about the politics engaged in the 1930s is the key to understanding his writing as an historical phenomenon? If we really look carefully enough, in Jeffery Mehlman's view, we can see that the 'silence' is really symptomatic of a political engagement that, from the first version of *Thomas l'Obscure* onward, is haunted by the myth of the sacrifice of Iphigenia for political reasons, and is not really haunted (because of the problem for writing that it poses) by the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

Blanchot was presented as a writer (perhaps *the* writer) whose view of human experience remains to be interpreted, understood, rendered coherent at the immanent level of his thought. Not that the responses were uninteresting. Far from it. A number of speakers – particularly Ann-Marie Smock in a brilliant paper on *L'Attente l'oubli* – showed that it is not simply at the level of meaning where Blanchot's difficulty resides, but rather in the fact that he confronts the very impossibility of meaning in his writing. He is profoundly interested in the experience of the loss of meaning as such. Similarly, it is not a matter of attempting to ascertain what kind of *récit* is in question, but of trying to conceptualise the nature of a *récit* which is 'about' the

impossibility of the *récit* (*La Folie du jour*, for example). A number of speakers drew attention to the fact that Blanchot's writing is littered with oxymorons – living death, the light of an obscurity, black sun, the event of the non-event, the invisibility in visibility – and with paradoxes: the step beyond as an affirmation of the present, the day as the loss of the day, life as the impossibility of dying, the work (*oeuvre*) the absence of work (*désœuvrement*). Looked at from the perspective of a particular kind of phenomenological logic, the rigour and imaginative insight which was brought to the reading of Blanchot could only be marvelled at. But is this really the best way to read him?

Broadly speaking, I would like to introduce a more Surrealist Blanchot – a Blanchot who not only focuses, like Breton in *Nadja*, on chance (*hasard*), but who has absorbed a non-phenomenological logic of chance. This line of thinking is present in Blanchot's own critical writing. Indeed, some of the most penetrating articles written on Breton and Surrealism have been written by Blanchot. According to Blanchot, the key aspect of Breton's *Nadja* is that it exemplifies the impossibility of ever knowing whether or not the encounter described really took place. What Breton is writing 'about', says Blanchot, is 'chance as a sign', the sign of the unknown, the sign of the non-happening (*inarrivée*) of the encounter.

Any writing worthy of the name, Surrealism shows, is a writing of surprise. Blanchot takes this to be the density of all writing, which occurs at all times, and yet at an indeterminate time. Once all this has been absorbed, it is no longer possible to read Blanchot's crucial text, *Le Pas au-delà*, in the same way. *La chance* (luck) and *le hasard* (chance) suddenly leap out at the reader – not to mention the notions of 'irreversibility' and 'indetermination' – and, to be sure, the 'unpredictability' of death.

Blanchot writes against 'necessity' and 'for' the game – one of sober humour, perhaps, but the game is what gives chance its very momentum. The game is thus the game of chance. What this international conference succeeded in doing, such as few before it have, was to open up another way in which Blanchot could be read – that is to say, in which we could think (with) Blanchot.

John Lechte

LETTER

Dear *Radical Philosophy*,

In his description of the Cambridge/Derrida affair ('Massacre of the Innocents', *Radical Philosophy* 62, Autumn 1992), Mr Jonathan Rée alleges that 'the Cambridge philosophers' organised a campaign to oppose the award of an honorary degree to Professor Derrida for which he had been nominated by members of the English Faculty. This is a very one-sided account of the affair. For although Derrida was originally nominated by a Professor of English, once the debate started, the award was strongly supported by some of 'Cambridge's official philosophers' – for example, Dr Susan James and I wrote one of the fly-sheets in support of the award. Furthermore, although Professor Hugh Mellor was one of the four members of the University whose '*Non place!*' shout called the award of the degree into question, the other three were members of the English Faculty. The fact is that both the English Faculty and the Philosophy Faculty were divided on this issue: the debate was not, as Mr Rée implies, between an enlightened English department and a thoroughly reactionary Philosophy department. Furthermore, although I share Mr Rée's opinion concerning the poisonous letter to the *Times* from some nineteen philosophers, I would at least excuse my colleagues here

from the charge he makes that they organised it. It was independently organised by the three expatriate Britons who signed it, who are professors of philosophy at Liechtenstein, Geneva and Salzburg (Smith, Simons, Mulligan).

Mr Rée may find it hard to believe, but I (a Cambridge philosopher) have lectured here on Derrida's work, which has figured prominently in the undergraduate philosophy syllabus. Indeed, during the autumn term I ran a major course of lectures on Derrida, which attracted large audiences, and culminated in a successful visit by Derrida to the Philosophy Faculty itself. Cambridge philosophers are not the narrow-minded positivist bigots of Rée's demonology, which is nearly as silly as the abuse of Derrida's detractors. If, instead of confining himself to French and German newspapers, he had been able to bring himself to look at the British press he would have easily found the information his article lacks – unless, that is, he just chose to suppress it for the sake of a rather cheap jibe at the expense of people like myself who worked hard for the award of the degree to Derrida.

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