

## Modernism / Postmodernism: A Hypothetical Model

IOANA EM. PETRESCU

The revolutionizing of the postromantic poetic language, that results from a radical change of the concept of poeticalness, corresponds to a fundamental mutation in the general model of thinking that took place more than a hundred years ago. Nietzsche and Mallarmé knew intuitively of this change, which started with the discovery of noneuclidean geometries, was carried out by the theory of relativity and by quantum physics, and was assumed as a new cultural attitude by writers such as James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Thomas Mann or Ion Barbu. What does the change consist in? To put it in a nutshell, it consists in abandoning the anthropocentric and individualistic cultural model which had been set up back in the Renaissance, as well as the classical concept of “science”. I will map out the main directions followed by the process through which the Renaissance model (*i.e.* the paradigm of our whole European culture) visibly came to a crisis. In defining the “new, non-Cartesian epistemology”, I will make use of certain ideas taken from Bachelard’s and Heisenberg’s works dealing with the philosophy of science, or Anton Dumitriu’s *Essays*.<sup>1</sup> The first revolutionary component of the new concept of scientificity is due to noneuclidean geometries. Bolyai-Lobachevsky’s and Riemann’s constructions are based on a proposition which opposes not only the fifth postulate in Euclid’s *Elements*, but our own empirical spatial perception or – to put it in Bachelard’s words – “our geometric unconscious” structured in a euclidean way as well. Still, they are perfectly coherent since each of them can be modelled on a different type of areas: on a plane – Euclid’s geometry; on a pseudosphere – Bolyai-Lobachevsky’s; on a real sphere – Riemann’s. But the perfectly rational character of noneuclidean geometries calls in question the value of empirical data and, generally speaking, throws doubt over how adequate intuition would be as a foundation of rational knowledge. For it is obvious that we have to abandon our empirical spatial intuition and to accept another type of space as being quite rational, for instance one in which Euclid’s famous line has no parallels at all. Thus – as Bachelard states in *Le nouvel esprit scientifique* – “scientific reality” is not to be defined as a generalization of data provided by an empirically perceived “reality”, but as a “verification” or “realization” of a mathematically conceived rational project (Just in passing, let me point to the fact that the rather late connection of literary theory to this new approach of “reality” takes place within contemporary realism, by going from the traditional mimetic theories all the way to conceiving the work as a “model”, and art as a “modelling system”; this point of view, imposed by Lotman’s works, had been clearly stated by Ion Barbu earlier in the twentieth century, in his poetics of “infrarealism”).<sup>2</sup> Actually, the dissociation between “scientific reality” and the empirically defined reality does not seem to be a discovery of our century (as Bachelard put it), but the most important consequence of

the Copernican revolution. Really new in the “new scientific spirit” is not the methodological orientation, but the “plural” content of this new scientific reality. The main fact is that, thanks to noneuclidian geometries, mathematics urges us to accept the idea of opposed spatial models which can still be unified within a “pangeometry” connected – according to Bachelard – to a “complemental thinking” capable to lay the bases of an “ontology of complementarity”. Mathematical thinking identifies different geometries in algebraical form, thus establishing their reality “not by reference to an object, experience or intuitive image”, but by the relationships that make them equivalent. The basis of mathematical psychology is given by the idea of *group*, since “each geometry and – without doubt –, in a general way, each mathematical organization of experience is characterized by a special group of transformations”. The new “geometrical philosophy” finally sets up a universe in which qualities are “strictly relational, not at all substantial”. I wish to stress this last conclusion drawn by Bachelard because I think it points out the basic characteristic of this new model of thinking (or “episteme”, in Foucault’s terms): *the preference of relationship over entity*, equivalent in reexamining the ontological status of the individual. This problem recurs in all domains of our century’s thinking, starting with mathematics and physics and ending with psychology (were associationism is replaced by *Gestalt* psychology), psycho-analysis (in which the self – the *ego* – is just a game space of two transindividual instances – the *id* and the *ego*), or aesthetics (what else is reader-response criticism but a dynamic view of the literary work which becomes an “aesthetic object” only after having been perceived?). The crisis of the category of individual – *i.e.* of the main category of the Renaissance episteme – means a crisis of the anthropocentric cultural model too. I will define *modernism* as the cultural expression of the crisis of the category of individual, and further point out the dynamite-like process against that category which has taken place within the main mutations of our century’s scientific thinking. The mutations produced by the theory of relativity (which redefines the notion of mass in a relational way), and especially by the quantum theory (which rethinks the matter-force and particle-wave relationship, defining the photon as “a type of thinking-movement”) converge in building a new image of the universe. This new universe is no longer a whole containing discrete objects or substantial entities, but a web of interrelated events. Within it, the elements are defined as “mathematical harmony”; the concept of objective individuality vanishes, and “things are nothing but blocked phenomena”, Bachelard states in *La Philosophie du Hon*. It is the dynamic that Heisenberg builds in *Physics and Philosophy*: “The world thus appears as a complicated tissue of events, in which connections of different kinds alternate or overlap or combine and thereby determine the texture of the whole.”<sup>3</sup> Despite his acknowledged linguistic nostalgia, Heisenberg replaces Plato’s views on geometrical *figures* as elementary (components of the world by a dynamic variant of the same mathematical image of the universe: *the fundamental equation of matter*. According to Bachelard, within this universe, the function of entities takes precedence over their nature, and essence and relation are contemporary”, because “there are no simple phenomena in reality; a phenomenon is but a tissue of relationships”. Nowadays, when deconstruction and other forms of textualism (still) dominate literary criticism, such a frequent recurrence of terms like “web” or “tissue” used to define the structure of a purely relational universe may appear confusing. Heisenberg’s universe looks very much like a variant

of Derrida's "generalized text". Yet, from a gnoseological point of view that both deconstruction and *Tel-Quel-ism* choose to ignore, the theory of the text is just a local symptom of a new ontology – "the ontology of complementarity", imposed by the scientific research as well. In spite of theories about the text, the "metaphors of textuality" springing from the philosophy of physics do not indicate the "self-referentiality" of scientific texts; on the contrary, they prove a general orientation towards this new ontology. The same orientation is certified in the quantum theory by transcending the categories of time, space and substance, unified in the dynamic concept of "process"<sup>4</sup>.

Instead of being individualized and reified, "scientific reality" is purely dynamic, and proclaims "the pre-eminence of mere dynamics over ontology"; unlike "naive realism", it does not put "the object ahead of its phenomena" or "the subject before its predicates", and asks for a change in our basic concepts, that have to become dynamic – Bachelard states in *The Philosophical Dialectics of the Concepts of Relativity*. Still, we have to underline a most important fact: Bachelard, as well as Lupasco or, later, Derrida, considers the dialecticizing of our concepts in a non-Hegelian way, *i.e.* as a sort of pluralism within which contraries coexist in a complementary way, without reaching a logical solution through synthesis. In his philosophical works, Lucian Blaga called "dogmatic paradox" this coexistence of unsolved contraries, and opposed it to Hegel's "dialectic paradoxes". The new rationalism, Bachelard states, is to be defined and has to be educated through a "pedagogy of ambiguity" (*Le nouvel esprit scientifique*). The new rationalism proclaims a non-Aristotelian logic; Stéphane Lupasco – among others – suggested such a new logic, which he programmatically opposed to Hegel's, and called it "the dynamic logic of the contradictory". The new rationalism further claims to redefine philosophical concepts: Derrida's deconstruction fulfills this requirement by entering a polemic with "the European (post-Platonic) discourse", and by giving preeminence over it to the pre-Socratic or Oriental thinking, both unlimited by the restrictive logic of noncontradiction. Derrida deconstructs the Platonistic logocentrism and favours the terms "repressed" by the European philosophical discourse, such as "text" (repressed by "book"), "force" (repressed by "form"), "play" (repressed by "structure"), "mythical polycentrism" (repressed by "linearity") and so on; he thus provides the concepts with a dynamic meaning, constantly using pairs of opposed terms, and practises – like Bachelard – a "pedagogy of ambiguity". The fact that his contraries regain balance, this transformation of an irreducible antinomy into a structuring rule for the universe recall Niels Bohr's principle of the complementarity of concepts: "Atomic physics has to use different types of mutually exclusive descriptions in order to obtain an adequate description of the processes through the play of different images."<sup>5</sup> The quantum theory imposed the alternative use of contradictory concepts in order to found an ontology of coexistent contrary states that transcend the limits of our reason modelled according to a logic of noncontradiction: "We have to use alternatively different mutually contradictory intuitive images to describe the smallest matter particle" states Heisenberg. But if this new ontology poses difficult problems to European thinking (modelled as it is by Aristotelian logic), it seems perfectly intelligible to the mythical one in return, would it be Oriental or pre-Socratic. Niels Bohr acknowledged that parallel between the quantum theory and Oriental thought when he chose the Chinese symbols of the polar

archetypal opposites *yin* and *yang* (*t'ai-chi*) for its coat-of-arms together with the inscription *Contraria sunt complementa*<sup>6</sup>

Besides modifying the relationship between entity and process, the new concept of scientificity is based on a modified relationship between the observer and the observed object. Post-Einsteinian science cancels the opposition between the detached, objective observer and the observed object which was a constitutional opposition in classical physics. Heisenberg noticed that in atomic physics “one cannot speak of the behaviour of particles independently of the process of observation” any more, “so that the usual division of the world into subject and object is no longer suitable”. The quantum theory states the existence of an observer whose dialogue with nature is “carried out from within nature”, “to which we belong ourselves, since we take part in its building”.<sup>7</sup> John Archibald Wheeler suggested to replace the notion of “observer” by “participator”, considering our involvement in the universe we observe; Niels Bohr noticed, with regard to the observer’s position in the universe: “On the stage of the world we are not only spectators, but we are actors too.”<sup>8</sup> The same cancelling of the transcendental subject (a subject who contemplates the universe from the outside) took place in philosophy, starting with the coincidence between actor and spectator in Nietzsche’s view of the Greek mysteries, and ending with Derrida’s deconstruction of the concept of “subject”. Consequently, the same process occurred in literary criticism, which proclaimed “the disappearance of the author” absorbed into the play of textual self-production.

The author’s demiurgic status was celebrated from Renaissance to romanticism. Even naturalism acknowledged the author’s privileged position as an “experimenter”. Therefore, “the author’s disappearance” marks a climax in the crisis of the category of individual. *la disparition locutoire du poete*, proclaimed by Mallarmé opened a new age in European culture. The age I have generically named *modernism* has been defined by Thomas Mann, in his novels (see *Doktor Faustus*) and essays (see *Goethe as an Exponent of the Bourgeois Age*), as the time when “bourgeois culture” (meaning the cultural model of the Renaissance) comes to an end.

If we agree to define *modernism* as an expression of the crisis of Renaissance humanism (*i.e.* a crisis of the transcendental subject and, by and large, a crisis of the category of individual), a thinker like Bachelard, who guides us in understanding the new scientific spirit, will appear himself as an exponent of the modernist crisis since his entire work relies on breaking up the human being into two constitutive parts. To put it in other words, Bachelard’s thinking is based on the structural and functional opposition between scientific meditation (the subject of his works on the philosophy of science) and the poetic day dreaming studied in his famous works on material imagination; hence, it is based on the opposition between *reason* and *imagination* or between *spirit* (*Geist*) and *soul* (*Seele*), to use the terms Bachelard borrowed from Ludwig Klages. The existence of the spirit is rational, active, free of the fixity of the subconscious; the existence of the soul (expressed in poetry) is contemplative and conservative. The nonanthropocentric character of contemporary scientific thought does not therefore disturb the anthropocentricity specific to the soul-dominated space. In his wonderful *Poétique de l'espace*, Bachelard opposes existentialism openly, and builds an image of the human being as happily integrated into the void through poetic day dreaming. However, his works remain

symptomatic for the modernist crisis since the happy cosmic reintegration of the individual, that he promises, lies in fact on its former de-structuring, on the ultimate divorce between “spirit” and soul”. Bachelard’s “nocturnal man” is a palliative, not a solution for the crisis: he is totally unable to understand the revelations of the spirit, but perpetuates (by his day dreaming) the happy unconsciousness of the childhood of mankind expressed in poetry; yet poetry is only an atavism, even if a comforting one. In the new context brought about by the nonanthropocentric thinking, Bachelard’s attempt to rescue traditional humanistic values by means of splitting the human being into two irreconcilable psychic areas is thus the very expression of the crisis of the “transcendental subject”.

However, from the thirties on, European culture seems interested again in rebuilding the unity of the subject and rethinking the status of the individual. I will therefore call *postmodernism* the cultural model which aims at a new synthesis by integrating the modernist crisis and even going beyond it in an effort to rehabilitate (on a dynamic basis) the individual as a category. “Postmodernism” is a term borrowed from architecture, its meaning not having been clarified yet. It displays therefore all the shortcomings (and the advantages too) of such a conceptual irresolution. The attempt to include the divergent cultural trends specific to the latter half of the present century in the unique sphere of “postmodernism” has produced rather contradictory results. Ihab Hassan, one of the first and most interesting theorists of literary postmodernism, tries to define it as the crossing point of opposed trends which coexist within contemporary pluralism, and he thinks postmodern irony to be the point where “we begin to move from the deconstructive to the coexisting reconstructive tendency of postmodernism”. Hassan also holds pluralism to be unable to tell postmodernism from modernism; he finally suggests, as differentiating criteria, the coexistence of “critical pluralism” and “a limited critical pluralism (which) is in some measure a reaction against the radical relativism, the ironic indeterminacies of the postmodern condition”.

Recent theorists define postmodernism in terms of “aestheticism”, *i.e.* in terms of the prevalence of aesthetics over reason, even if the postmodern “aesthetic turn” rejects modernist elitism and absorbs “so many themes of mass culture and the dominant values of the consumer society”<sup>10</sup>. Shusterman considers the *modernism vs. postmodernism* opposition as the renewal of the *classic vs. romantic* dispute. Postmodernism becomes a sort of new romanticism; its historical consciousness opposes the “classic”, nonhistorical, thinking specific to modernism and expresses itself through the “genealogical narrative” which, according to Shusterman, “not only seems the best way to theorize the postmodern but may be the only valid form that any postmodern theory can take”.

“Postmodernism” is still, obviously, a term looking for its own meaning. Its ambiguous conceptual status has some advantages too, of course; for instance, the advantage of leaving us free to define it in terms correlated with those we used in defining modernism. In doing so, I have to begin with an important remark: I do not consider postmodernism to be a cultural stage following a closed modernist period, but a synthetic cultural model that arose (in response to the modernist one) during the thirties. I think both modernism and postmodernism are still active and do function as alternative cultural models. When I advance the hypothesis of a partial

temporal coexistence of modernism and postmodernism, I am far from the complete freedom Jean François Lyotard manifests in using the terms under discussion: in Lyotard's views, "a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in a nascent state, and this state is constant."<sup>11</sup>

The criterion I intend to use in order to differentiate the two cultural models under discussion is the destructuring and restructuring of the category of individual. I have to underline the fact that this restructuring implies a full consciousness of the modernist crisis of the subject and, consequently, the attempt to solve it by means of a new definition of the subject: the individual will not be conceived as an isolated entity any longer, but as a dynamic system, a structural knot of relationships through which the texture of the whole does exist. I will mention some arguments in this respect, all belonging to fields outside literature. Let me recall, for instance, the developments in psychology from the modernist *Gestalt* psychology to a dynamic perspective achieved by Jean Piaget's "genetic structuralism" which studies the *process* of *building the subject* in connection with the process of "building reality", *i.e.* of setting up the object. Constantin Noica's contribution to placing logic on a postmodern basis also seems most interesting. In his *Letters on Hermes's logic*, Noica aims at rehabilitating the individual within a traditionally nonindividual domain such as logic. Logic and ontology converge in Noica's perspective, and the place of concepts is taken by "holomers", *i.e.* by privileged individuals *in* and *through* which the general does exist, does come into being. Noica's "holomers" meet, within postmodern thought, the "holons" studied in biology by Arthur Koestler. "Dynamic wholes" opposing the atomistic view, the "holons" allow us to study organisms and their levels of dynamic structuring by isolating "components" that "derive meaning only from their place in the complete hierarchy".<sup>12</sup> In a dynamic-hierarchical perspective of life, man is a hierarchically structured being and a *part* of the hierarchical structure in which he is included, at the same time. Inspired by Koestler's "holons", Jeffrey S. Stamps creates "holonorny", a discipline that studies human systems.<sup>13</sup> But the most interesting arguments come from cosmology, which symptomatically turns towards an anthropocentric cosmological model materialized in the "anthropic principle", according to which the whole cosmic evolution aims at creating the self-consciousness of the universe, *i.e.* the human mind.<sup>14</sup> Thus defined in relational terms, the individual (a "holomer", or a dynamic "holon") looks for his place in the "tissue" or "texture" of the world. The starting point of this process is to be found in the thirties. A good example for such an early postmodern reconstructive tendency might be found in Lucian Blaga's philosophy centred on the concept of *metaphor*. Diametrically opposed to Bachelard's view on the splitting of the human being, Blaga's system unifies both cultural creation and post-Einsteinian thought in the realm of the "dogmatic eon". The Romanian philosopher aims at unifying modernist pluralism within a system that holds man's creative cultural destiny to be an "ontological mutation": "Our idea about the ontological mutation is meant to hierarchize and amend the phenomenological pluralism from a metaphysical point of view, and to pave the way back for a total, unitary vision.

The "cosmotic" subconscious in Blaga's philosophy, the archetypal structures Mircea Eliade discovers both in mythical thinking and in the mechanisms of the contemporary novel, Matilda

Ghyka's dynamic neo-Pythagoreanism, Noica's "holomers" are some of the solutions Romanians thought have found in their ("postmodern") attempt to re-unify the individual split by the modernist crisis. All these solutions take into account not the traditional concept of the isolated subject but the new, relational acceptance of the individual seen as a knot of relationships in the "tissue" of the world; a rather unstable knot, still a very important one, considering that only through it the whole comes into being and is invested with sense.

## NOTES

1. Gaston Bachelard, *Le nouvel esprit scientifique*, 1934 – 15<sup>th</sup> edition, Paris, 1983; *Id, Dialectica spiritului științific modern* ("The Dialectics of the Modern Scientific Mind"), vols. I-II, Bucharest, 1986; W. Heisenberg, *Pasi peste granițe* ("Steps Over the Borders"), Bucharest, 1977; Anton Dumitriu, ("Elssays"), Bucharest, 1986; *Id, Istoria logicii* ("A History of Logic"), Bucharest, 1975.
2. I. Lotman, *Lecții de poetică structurală* ("Lessons in structural poetics"), Bucharest, 1970; *Id.*, „Problema semnificațiilor în sistemele modelat seconde” ("The problem of Meaning in the Secondary Modelling Systems"), in Sorin Alexandrescu, Mihail Nasta (eds.), *Poetică și stilistică. Orientări moderne* ("Poetics and Stylistic s. Modern Ontitions"), Bucharest, 1972; Ion Barbu, *Pagini de proză* ("Prose Fragments"), Bucharest, New York, 1958, p. 107, New York, 1958, p. 107.
3. See I. Părvu's "Foreword" to Heisenberg, *op. cit.*, p. XXI.
4. *Apud* Heisenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 125.
5. A thoughtful study on the relationships between the mythical and the contemporary scientific thinking is Florin Felecan's „Fizică și filosofie. Spre un orizont categorial nou, neclasic” ("Physics and philosophy. Towards a new categorial, non-classical, horizon"), in *Filosofia fizicii* ("The Philosophy of Physics"), Bucharest, 1984.
6. I. Prigogine, I. Stengers, *Noua alianță* ("The New Alliance"), Bucharest, 1984, p. 315.
7. *Apud* Heisenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
9. Ihab Hassan, "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective", in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, n° 3, Spring 1986, pp. 503-520 (Hassan brings up here the concept defined in his *Dismemberment of Orpheus*).
10. Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory. Essays*, Minneapolis, 1988, reviewed by Richard Shusterman in "Postmodernism and the Aesthetic Turn", in *Poetics Today*, vol. 10, n° 3, Fall 1989.
11. J.-Fr. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis, 1984, p. 79.
12. On Koestler, see G. Steiner, *Extraterritorial. Papers on Literature and Language*, London, 1972, pp. 183 & fol.
13. Solomon Marcus, *Timpul* ("Time") Bucharest, 1985, p. 327.
14. Solomon Marcus, *Invenție și descoperire* ("Invention and Discovery"), Bucharest, 1989, p. 63.
15. Lucian Blaga, *Trilogia culturii* ("The Trilogy of Culture"), Bucharest, 1944, p. 476.