PHENOMENOLOGY, THE QUESTION OF RATIONALITY AND THE BASIC GRAMMAR OF INTERCULTURAL TEXTS

Only connect! . . . Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.

E. M. Forster

1. PROLOGUE: THE QUESTION OF RATIONALITY AND THE SPECTRE OF EUROCENTRISM

There is no possible point of view from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact.

William James

This essay is an adventure in, and a critical exploration of, the postmodern condition. As a “postparadigm”, postmodernism is a critical response to the disenchanted spectre of modernity – philosophical, scientific, cultural, and above all life-worldly. It is concerned particularly with the translation of Western rationality into the reading of the non-Western world, i.e., the modernist prejudices in the production of intercultural texts on the “politics of modernization”.

Postmodernity or postmodernism is a “penturbian” phenomenon – the term penturbia was reportedly coined by the academician Jack Lessinger in order to describe the unique configurations of the sprawling region in the United States of development, consisting of small cities and towns, new subdivisions, homesteads, etc., i.e., – shall we say – all the enclaves of modernity. Jean-François Lyotard sets the philosophic tone for postmodernism when he writes in The Postmodern Condition: “[p]ostmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert’s homology, but the inventor’s paralogy.”

For the purpose of this essay, postmodernity should be construed neither strictly as “the tradition of the new” (Harold Rosenberg) nor exclusively as “the novelty of the past” (Matei Calinescu). Both Rosenberg’s and Calinescu’s entitlements belittle, I submit, the real
meaning of postmodernity as a “postparadigm”. In them the ideas of “tradition” and the “past” tend to becloud the programmatic thrust of the “new” and “novel”. The “paradigmatic” use of postmodernity must be expressed, rather, as “the novelty of the new (future)”. To accent it, we can use the term post-postmodernity, however oxymoronic, prohibiting and even opprobrious it may sound. By the novelty of the new, I have in mind what Roland Barthes has said about the nature of interdisciplinary study which is not the putting together of several academic disciplines on one single subject or theme but rather “consists in creating a new object, which belongs to no one [discipline]”. The “Text” is, according to him, one such object. The postmodernist or post-postmodernist is thus a neophilist, but the neophilist is not a neophiliac who is constantly driven to and obsessed with creating “new objects”. For today emerges from yesterday, and tomorrow from today. The Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin wrote so ably about the endlessly discontinuous circle of repetition and renewal as the postmodernist principium of a true dialogue:

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be reviewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue’s subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival.6

Ethnocentrism, great or small, has permeated some of the finest minds in the modern intellectual history of the West from Montesquieu to Rousseau, Hegel and Marx to Karl Wittfogel (who is the author of a work with the foreboding title Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power). There are always, of course, exceptions: Leibniz, Humboldt and Herder who, as a judicious comparativist, refused to identify felicity with just being European or Western. From the very outset, it should be said that the hotly debated question of rationality in the production of intercultural texts is not so much the question of epistemological absolutism and relativism as of how transversal truth may indeed be formulated without the fallacy of ethnocentrism.

The European habit of mind called Eurocentrism is that hegemonic disposition or propensity of the modern West (Europe) which willy-