

From Humanism to Postmodernism: An Autobiographical Approach

*Abdel Wahab Elmessiri**

*Foreword by Amal Mazhar***

Abdel Wahab Elmessiri (1 October 1938 - 2 July 2008), a distinguished Egyptian scholar, specialized in English literature, could be rightly called 'the organic intellectual' whose interest went far beyond his specialization, by becoming a social and political activist. Narrating a purely personal journey as a young Egyptian scholar', he left his hometown Damanshah in the Egyptian Delta to study at Alexandria University, Columbia University, then Rutgers University, USA. Elmessiri embarks on a similar journey by surveying major critical and literary trends post New Criticism to the year 2000. Elmessiri continually asserts the importance of the 'human universal', hence his rejection of the New Critical tenet of 'the autonomy of literature' in favour of the openness between the constructed work and the rich diversity of human life. In a similar manner, he rejected structuralism as too limiting a perspective. Conversely, he critiques Susan Sontag's critical discourse which argues that the immediate sensual response to the work of art defies interpretation. He critiques 'the eroticization of interpretation' which was applied by major critics to landmark Romantic works: Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner", Wordsworth's "Lucy", and Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn".

Commenting on 'textual instability' as a sign of the postmodernist age, also the 'anxiety of influence', Elmessiri states that in a postmodernist age, the literary critic no longer looks for the human significance of the work he is studying, but rather is 'wrapped up in a narrow repertory of themes, instability of the text, texts about texts or about the act of writing or interpreting, the anxiety of influence and the eroticization of interpretation'. He queries whether there is any 'method in this madness of this new melange'. Elmessiri laments that 'the human universal', our common humanity and all human values and cognitive systems cannot serve as an ultimate point of reference for the nature- matter paradigm is not simply value-free; it is also cleansed of any human content. This resulted in a shift from the logo-centric solid universe of humanism to the 'non-logocentric liquid universe of anti-humanism'. Continually upholding the values of humanism against some literary and critical values and trends which counter humanism, Elmessiri calls for 'a purposeful, value -oriented humanistic literature'.

* Keynote speech delivered at the Sixth International Symposium on Comparative Literature (2000); published in the Symposium Proceedings: *Modernism and Postmodernism*, eds. Hoda Gindi and Galila-Ann Ragheb, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University (2001).

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Cairo Studies in English – 2025(1). <https://cse.journals.ekb.eg/>

This article does not only offer a stimulating overview of the major modern literary and critical trends, but exposes the drawbacks aligned to them. In so doing, it invites its readers to engage in this thought-provoking controversy.

**From Humanism to Postmodernism:
An Autobiographical Approach
Abdel Wahab Elmessiri (2001)**

To take an autobiographical approach to the subject at hand, is almost inevitable for someone who has just finished his autobiography, especially if the said subject is very difficult to pin down, let alone define. Let us state the subject in the form of a question: What happened to literary criticism? What happened to us?

My autobiographical-historical narrative begins in Damanhur, a small town in the Nile Delta 60 km. south of Alexandria. Half-village half-city, it was very well entrenched in its traditions and certainties, a real *Gemeinschaft* to use a term from German sociology. I was first exposed to Western literature in translation, there, in Damanhur, or in simplified English. Village/city school boys in Egypt, in my time, used to take literature and the world of ideas very seriously, too seriously. My classmates and I used to quarrel about differences in interpretation. But quarrels and squabbles aside, we felt the human relevance of what we read then and there.

Then, in 1955, the boy from Damanhur, by now a young man, was sent to Alexandria, a very cosmopolitan city (Laurence Durrell's Alexandria). Street vendors used to hawk their goods in Greek, Italian, French and at times in Arabic. If one did not know any of the said European languages, there were some places he could not frequent because of the absence of any means of communication. Alexandria, for the young man from Damanhur, was a veritable *Gesselleschaft*.

There, in Alexandria's Faculty of Arts, he embarked upon a more serious study of Occidental literature. In the first year, he read, among other things, poems from Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. Wordsworth's "To the Daffodils" stunned him, on account of its beauty and simplicity. He could penetrate through the language, reaching to something deeply human. He was not very discriminating for he also loved a short nostalgic poem about the memory of the house in which one was born. He was moved to tears. In the next few years, he read many other literary works — by Shakespeare, Dickens, Eliot, and Keats. He grew more critical, more discriminating, and less sentimental. Reading Donne, Pope and T. E. Hulme had a therapeutic effect on him. When he delved into the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Virgil, and Horace he still could reach to something that used to be called "the human universal." The

lecturers at Alexandria University used to dwell on the structure of a literary work, its cultural milieu, its moral, immoral or amoral content, its imagery, and so on, but the appeal was always to some implicit concept of human nature and to human universals. The great Egyptian thinker Abbas Al-Aqqad once said: "One finds one's human image in Western literature." Karl Marx jotted down the following phrase in his notebook: "*Homo sum, nihil humani a me alienum puto*," that is to say; "I am a man, anything human is not alien to me." The young man from Damanhur adopted this motto as a perfect description of his response to Occidental literature. Common humanity was something very real to him; he could use it as an ultimate point of reference, and he found it concretely manifested in the literary works he read.

Our narrative takes the young man from Damanhur to Columbia University to receive his M.A. (1964), then to Rutgers University, where he earned his doctoral degree (1969). At Columbia, he studied with the likes of Lionel Trilling, Basil Willey, Martin Dupee, Carl Wooding. Each had his critical discourse, critical idiom, and individual outlook. There was a lot of arguing going on, but there was an assumed shared point of reference, namely the human universal. At Rutgers, the picture was not very different. A battle was raging between the old guard, advocating a historical approach to literature, the new guard ("the Harvard boys" as they were called) advocating a more formal approach. William Philips and the *Partisan Review* joined the university and the battle, and tried to strike a balance between the two extremes. My advisor, Professor David Weimer, who hated fighting and could not stand back-biting, withdrew from it all, and in his lectures he adopted a complex, eclectic approach. But both right and left, however, both margin and centre, had the human universal and our common humanity as a silent point of reference. I used to brag about the discipline of literature, that literature was the only discipline that did not, could not, lose contact with human universals. Other disciplines could offer diagrams, curves, equations, all kinds of precise and not so precise abstractions, but the concrete image of man, enjoying and suffering, eludes them. Only literature stayed firmly rooted in its subject matter, the concretely human.

M.H. Abrams, author of *The Mirror and the Lamp*, divided critical orientations into mimetic, pragmatic, expressive, and autonomous, (objective). This taxonomy is rooted in some basic assumptions with which it would be very difficult to take issue. The mimetic critical orientation according to Abrams was an imitation of an external reality perceived, reconstructed and imitated (not copied) by a human being. The pragmatic orientation contained a message sent by a human being to another. The expressive orientation could result in the subjective outburst of an individual poet, but, judging from such touchstones of romantic critical theory such a

poet was always seeking social legitimation of some sort (as Shelley's "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the universe").

With the autonomous orientation, we begin to be introduced to a literature that claims to be self-sufficient and self-referential. New Criticism was seen as the best manifestation of this critical orientation. A typical "new critic" would try to suppress all historical, biographical and psychological considerations in order to deal with the work as a web of relations between different images and themes. Paradox and irony are central analytical tools for this hypothetical new critic. The meaning of a poem, *qua* poem, is found not in its paraphrase but in that web of relations.

But despite the New Critics' claim that the literary work is autonomous, the human universal asserted itself. The web of relations in the poem was supposed to correspond to some human relations. Irony and paradox were the irony and paradox of the human situation, a manifestation of the irreducible complexity of human nature. Cleanth Brooks and other new critics argue that literary paradox is rooted in the Christian paradox of the Incarnation, of God become man, of crucifixion and resurrection, and so on. It was not difficult for the Muslim Arab-Egyptian doctoral candidate from Damanhur to interact with such an outlook, seeing the human universal at the heart of the theological argument. *Nihil humani a me alienum puto*. In other words, the autonomy of the literary work was not complete; it was not a closed system: an openness between the constructed work and the rich diversity of human life was maintained, and critical theory had to accommodate the human universal. Let us call this autonomous critical orientation "early" or "open autonomous" theories.

So far, all the above-cited critical orientations are logocentric and teleological, for the *logos* (be it God, the mind of man or universal reason) bestows meaning, order and purpose (a *telos*) on man and nature. A centered universe is a meaningful purposeful hierarchical universe where there are boundaries between art and non-art, between a well-constructed artistic work and a chaotic sloppy one, between the central and the peripheral, between good and evil, justice and injustice, man and nature, between speech that signifies and mere babble, between a serious statement about life and mere verbal gimmickry, between the human universal and the non-human.

But the autonomous literary work as a system got more closed. As the free love movement was taking hold of American campuses, and as the flower generation was smoking pot and dreaming of an earthly, self-sufficient, highly eroticized paradise, I heard for the first time a lecture on structuralism. The lecturer unleashed the structuralist jargon on us: binary oppositions, schematization, over-arching relationships, *langue* and *parole*, the synchronic and the diachronic, and so on. Then he concluded that all literary works are about other literary works, which means that all texts are texts about other

texts about other texts. The lecture's discussion was underpinned by some kind of textual pantheism where all is one and one is all. He added that for him the ideal film is a film about other films.

But even though structuralism congratulates itself on its "scientific" anti-humanist orientation and on its closed system that lends itself to mathematical analytical rigour, even in structuralism the human universal managed to assert itself. Beside a linguistic version of structuralism, that tries to dissolve any literary work into grammatical forms, geometrical equations and diagrams and that takes language as an arch paradigm, there is also an anthropological version that aims at reaching the myth of all myths, the structure of all structures, something not radically different from Plato's realm of Ideas of which our world is but a shadow. The quest here is not a mere playful game, for it issues forth from the firm belief in the homology of all structures. The myth of all myths, and the structure of all structures was supposed to give us a clue to the understanding of the structure of the human mind. One may agree or disagree with this very French and very grand project, but what matters, in the present context, is the fact that the human universal is still there, acting as a centre, a *logos* that gives coherence and meaning to the work of art, to the critical endeavor, and to our world. The world, by the time structuralism came into being, was still logo-centric, even though the *logos* was getting fainter and fainter and the boundaries were vanishing.

Early open autonomous theories were replaced by later closed autonomous theories, and the literary work as a system became more closed, and instead of a centered universe, with the human universal as an ultimate point of reference, a liquid centerless, self enclosed, self-referential one was born.

I can claim that I was witness to the tidal wave of liquidity as it was forming because I was lucky enough to be invited to many of the parties held by the *Partisan Review* where I rubbed shoulders with many of the luminaries of the East coast liberal establishment. There I met Andy Warhol who was in the habit of signing Campbell soup cans thereby turning these worthless objects into *objets d'art*. His film "Sleep," that went on for so many hours, showed a man sleeping, just that. As some art critics said, under Andy Warhol aesthetics turned into anesthetics. Susan Sontag also was a regular guest at these parties. Her book *Against Interpretation* tries to present a completely new outlook on art. Art for her is not mimesis, but rather, a sort of magic. It does not try to reach any deeper transcendental truth, because our appearance, she claims, is our true existence, and our mask is nothing but our face. In the world of modernism (read: post modernism) man loses what distinguishes him as man, and becomes equal to things which liberate themselves from and eventually dominate him. Having completely subverted the category of man, Sontag goes on to assert that the immediate sensual response to the work of art defies interpretation (presumably because it is self-referential). *Eros*

becomes, in Sontag's critical discourse, the central theme. She speaks about the desire to arrive at the original innocence before the fall into history. Accordingly what is needed is not a hermeneutics of literature (where man uses his mind and intellectual traditions to interpret a work of art) but rather, an erotics of literature, that goes beyond any attempt at interpretation, and remains in the world of the self-referential body. This trend of rejecting interpretation and obliterating the boundaries between art and non-art reaches its *reductio ad absurdum* in the works of Piero Manzoni who canned his own shit and, labeling it 100% *Pure Artist's Shit*, sold it.

This trend that blurs the boundaries between art and non-art is not confined to what some call "decadent Western civilization" In this global village of ours, becoming much smaller through the internet and through electronic mail, things travel fast. Take for instance an exhibition in one of Cairo's downtown art galleries. The Swiss artist who constructed the installation on exhibition was fascinated, for some reason that completely escapes me, with the *objets trouves* (broken chairs, old water tanks, unclassifiable materials) on Cairo rooftops. We Cairenes never stop complaining about these *objets*, (a breeding ground for insects and rodents) but the Swiss artist elevated them to the status of *objet d'art*. The inauguration of the exhibition took the following form: Instead of cutting a ribbon, the Swiss ambassador held a sledge hammer and smashed a wooden door that was set up for the occasion. The art gallery owner could go along with the playful artist and his gimmicks; but when it came to his own property, the actual door of his own art gallery, he demurred, and a fake door, a *simulacra*, had to replace the real one. And to cover it all up, the smashed door and the sledgehammer were placed next to the installation, as being the result of a creative act à la Andy Warhol. Never mind the nationality, the cultural milieu of the artist, the admiring Egyptian crowd proved beyond any doubt that what happened appealed to, and even fascinated, them.

It all reminds me of an episode that took place in the Museum of Art in New York. I once went into one of the galleries only to find it completely empty, except for 26 vinyl gray tiles on the floor, neatly arranged in the form of a rectangle. It turned out to be a work of art titled "26 tiles". Frankly, I was not impressed. Nevertheless, when the guard very courteously asked me to walk on it, since I was supposed to, I gladly obliged, since I had never before experienced the wild sensation of walking on a work of art. In the corner of the same hall, I spotted a very lovely cone consisting of different tires, forming a lovely spiral. The material used by the artist was a carpet which created a vibrating tension between the very malleable down-to-earth material, and the ascending spiritual spiral. It somehow reminded me of Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium." I stood in front of it, rapt in my deep philosophical thoughts, admiring the geometrical harmony, the balanced tension of that *objet d'art*. So

did tens of others. But, alas, a non-artistic janitor put an end to our sophisticated postmodernist reverie, for, ignoring the admiring crowd, philosophical and otherwise, he proceeded to take the spiral cone apart and then spread it on the floor. Apparently, it was not an *objet d'art*, it was simply an *objet*, a carpet he had just dusted and it was time to spread it on the floor

All the previous examples (the smashed door, the signed soup cans, the erotics instead of hermeneutics), diverse as they are, have one thing in common: they fail to establish any boundaries between mere *objets* and *objets d'art*, or even between garbage and art. The over-all attitude is one of playfulness, gimmickry and indifference to the major themes of art and life. All the works cannot be deemed moral or immoral because they sidestep the whole issue. How can one judge the moral and human relevance of 26 or even 30 tiles, on which one is supposed to walk? It all means that the artist is a self-contained, self-referential entity, whose interest does not go beyond his own parameters, his own small narrative, and his own constricted vision and closed system. The social, the moral, and the human universal, are grand narratives and theories that do not concern him.

The constrictedness and indifference of the artistic self projects itself on the level of critical theory and practice. The literary critic no longer looks for the human significance of the work he is studying, but rather, he is wrapped up in a narrow repertory of themes: instability of the text, texts about texts or about the act of writing or interpreting, the anxiety of influence, and eroticization of interpretations.

For instance, take "The Ancient Mariner." It is a very complex verse narrative over the meaning of which many a critic puzzled, especially when it came to such major details as the throwing of the dice and the blessing of the water snakes. But, their differences notwithstanding, there was some consensus about the poem: that it had a meaning, that the shooting of the albatross is an evil act, that the poem as a whole is a fable of crime and punishment, and of sin and redemption.

Now all of this is thrown aside, for we learn from Frances Ferguson in her article "Coleridge and the Deluded Reader" that the poem is "filled with arbitrary events" which lead the reader nowhere (66). Many critics refer to the multiple versions of the poem as evidence of the textual instability of Coleridge's poems. Perhaps the poet wanted to suggest that "the perfect poem was a chimera and the authority itself was therefore a fiction" (146). The notion of the instability of the literary text is also stressed in Jack Stillinger's book *Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems*, where he argues that "for each of Coleridge's seven best-known poems, we have not just a single definitive text but numerous separate versions, with significant and sometimes radical differences among them" (v). None of these versions is given preference over other versions. This is the very

idea of textual instability. It is "the absence (or lack) of a single correct or best or most authoritative text" (vi). This idea applies to "The Ancient Mariner" as well as to other poems. Stillinger wonders:

What is Coleridge's *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner*, for example, when we have eighteen different versions of the work? How many Mariners should we say Coleridge wrote? How many should we say are in the Coleridge canon? If we think there is just one—of whatever nature—then which (or where) is it? How is it constituted? What is the status of all the (other) single versions titled *The Ancient Mariner*? And so on. (25)

Now if the text happens to be stable it could be destabilized. Shelley's sonnet "Ozymandias" is about human arrogance. The speaker of the sonnet meets a traveler who tells him about a trunk of a giant statue lying broken in the sand, with a grandiose statement inscribed on the pedestal: "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:/Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" (10-11). The discrepancy between the broken statue and the inscribed statement is deeply ironical. Irony here is not a fleeting irony that subverts all meaning and value, it is irony that has a deep moral grounding: the need for humility and acceptance of boundaries and the limits of mortality and of temporality. Such an interpretation leaves Zachary Sng quite unhappy, and therefore he decides to resist "this hermeneutic momentum" [read: this quite clear sensible reading], thus putting the semiotic model it seductively offers in suspension," exploring "the possibility of signification prior to the self-effacement of the speaker position" (221).

He then proceeds to give his own interpretation. It turns out that the poem is not about any of the human themes referred to earlier, it is rather a text about another text, which happens to be itself. Distinguishing between the writing "I" and the lyrical "I," Sng then concludes that it is Ozymandias who takes the position of the speaker and refers the reader to his works. And as a result of the shift of emphasis related to the function of different pronouns,

this T – the person who now write[s] and think[s] – remains standing at the edge of an abyss, suspended between the impossibility of immanence within textuality and the prospect of absorption into non-differentiation and silence. The moment of writing is inscribed within language itself, and present time thus becomes another indexical rather than an axis of temporality. (219)

Let us notice that in this 'new' interpretation the outside world disappears, and any code of moral or human rules vanishes. What we encounter is the closed system of the sonnet and the drama of conflict between the writing "I" and the written "I," and between the speaker and Ozymandias.

Central to the interest of postmodernist critics, as indicated earlier, is the issue of the anxiety of influence. Leslie Brisman is a good case in point. Brisman addresses himself to the issue by stating that in "The Ancient Mariner" Coleridge stresses the fact that "poets, like angelic spirits, have their hierarchies too, and a poet stands in relation to his precursor as a first to a second voice" (96). Drawing on the incident of Porlock's intrusion on Coleridge's privacy, Brisman claims that Porlock stands for the natural man or for the ephebe in the Bloomian sense of the word. Yet, in spite of the interruption and in spite of the inevitable war, "Coleridge the poet is already *there*, preceding and preparing the way for his interrupter and belated successor" (97).

Now we come to the last theme in the critical repertory, namely the eroticization of interpretation. James Holt McGavran in "Glossing Over 'The Ancient Mariner': Perversion, Panic, and Collage Texts," suggests that there is some kind of a homosexual relationship between Coleridge and Wordsworth. The homoerotic themes of perversion and panic appear in "The Ancient Mariner" on two levels: On one level we have the Mariner's relation with the albatross, the other sailors, and the Wedding Guest; and, on the other level, there is the relation of the ballad to the marginal glosses and, consequently, the relation of the text to the reader. The two levels are parallel, since they both reflect the homoerotic theme of the poem.

In her "The Daemon as Lesbian Vampire," Camille Paglia points out that "Wordsworth and Coleridge were locked in a sadomasochistic marriage of minds" (318). The Mariner is a "male heroine or hermaphroditic self who luxuriates in passive suffering" (323). The Wedding Guest is "an adolescent supplicant aspiring to sexual fulfillment and collective joy" (323).

A simple lyric as Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did my Spirit Seal" does not mean what it says, but rather, enacts an obscure sexual drama, according to J. Hillis Miller who asserts in his article "On Edge" that "nature for Wordsworth was strongly personified. It was, oddly, personified as both male and female, as both father and mother. The earth was the maternal face and body" (105). Moreover, Miller sees nature in the poem as

a frightening male spirit threatening to punish the poet for wrongdoing. The poem "Nutting," also written at Goslar and later incorporated into *The Prelude*, brings the two sexes of nature together in the astonishing scene of rape of female nature

which brings the terror of a reprisal from another aspect of nature, a fearsome male guardian capable of revenge. (106)

The sexual drama does not end there. J. Hillis Miller tells us that "Lucy was a virgin 'thing.' She seemed untouchable by earthly years, that is, untouchable by nature as time, as the bringer of death, as death" (106). He then tries to make things a bit more clear and explicit when he writes: "The touch of earthly years is both a form of sexual appropriation which leaves the one who is possessed still virgin if she dies young, and at the same time it is the ultimate dispossession which is death. To be touched by earthly years is a way to be sexually penetrated while still remaining virgin" (107). Miller goes on to investigate the sexual nature of the Lucy poems by stating that "the speaker of the poem rather than being the opposite of Lucy, male to her female, adult knowledge to her prepubertal innocence, is the displaced representative of both the penetrated and the penetrator, of both Lucy herself and of her unravishing ravisher, nature or death" (108). The sexual drama gets murkier." The speaker was 'sealed,' as she was. Now he knows. He is unsealed, as she is. To know, however, as the second stanza indicates, is to speak from the impersonal position of death. It is to speak as death. Death is the penetrator who leaves his victim intact, unpierced, but at the same time wholly open, as an unburied corpse is exposed, open to the sky, like rocks and stones and trees" (108).

Geraldine Friedman in an article entitled "The Erotics of Interpretation in Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn": Pursuing the Feminine," states that this lovely ode is actually "an eroticized drama of interpretation" (225). The "interpretative activity" for Friedman "is driven by an eros of questioning," and "the erotic scenes *on* the urn figure the charged relationships both *between* the speaker and the urn" on the one hand, and on the other, "*between* the reader and the text" (225). The poem's readers—like the lovers on the urn who are always near kissing but never kiss—are continuously trying to reach its meaning, yet they are never able to do so. The critic never bothers to tell us the basis for this dramatic leap from a text, supposed to be autonomous, to reader. Nevertheless, her assumptions serve as her starting point and then elaborates on them. "In our frustrated attempts to understand an attractive but elusive poem, we, as readers, re-enact the speaker's sexual urgency as he tries to penetrate the mysteries of the 'still unravish'd bride of quietness" (226). Then Friedman moves from the reader outside the poem to the speaker inside it, who in her eagerness read the leaf-fring'd legend' en-genders a story about gender, where interpretation is figured as a male subject's sexual pursuit of a female object of desire" (226). This notion of the engendered text is further asserted in the poem's last stanza. "When the ending 'tease[s]' readers 'out of thought', it does so in the flirtatiously and stereotypically feminine gesture of

refusing to make sense" (235). The interpretive attempts of various readers do not succeed in reducing the poem's indeterminacy. The text is a text about itself, or about the frustrated attempt to read it.

The well-known declaration "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' that is all/ye know on earth, and ye need to need to know" (49-50). It clearly suggests a moral interpretation of the poem, therefore Friedman speaks of it "the scandal of the last two lines" (231). In order to assimilate the moral into her over-arching theme of the erotic, and to relate the two 'moral' lines to the theme of the engendered meaning, Friedman argued that "the relation between these two values takes the form of a war between the sexes: gender difference, a difference *between* speaker and object, and *between* reader and text that reappears *within* both the urn and the text themselves" (235). The urn remains silent throughout the poem. And the fact that she does speak in the last two lines could be traced back to one of two reasons: 1) "Either the urn, according to Friedman, is raped when it is made to speak at the end of the poem, offering up the 'beauty/truth' motto as its meaning"; 2) "Alternatively, the baffling nature of the urn's 'answer' eludes phallic penetration by obscuring its own revelation" (238). In this way, any moral pretense is eroticized, and the poem instead of referring to something outside itself, is turned upon itself, and the text refers only to itself, or to its reader.

Is there some unity behind this new *mélange* ("instability of texts," "texts about texts," "anxiety of influence," "eroticized interpretation"). Is there a method in this madness?

When we look at all of these critical themes and the critical discourse used to give them expression, we will notice that there is a use of a highly specialized jargon, as if critics are a special caste or a closed priesthood. But this is simply a manifestation of a deeper issue: the critical discourse operates in terms of a highly reductive self-referential closed system that refers to nothing outside itself, and at times refers to nothing at all. Instead of a solid man-centered (or nature-centered) universe, we get a fluctuating centreless one.

To understand this shift, we have to place it in the wider context of value-free modernity. Let me start off by defining what I term the nature-matter paradigm. The concept of nature is a key concept in the Western philosophical tradition and its discourse regarding modernity. It is defined as the totality of objects, events and processes that exist in space and time, as a whole that subsumes everything. Therefore, it is the only level of reality with nothing beyond it. Nature is seen as self-activating, self-regulating, self-operating, self-directing and even self-transforming. It is also self-existent, self-contained and self-dependent. It arrogates for itself all the traits that traditional theology attributes to God. The system of nature is determined only by its own character and is reducible to a set of causal, immutable,

uniform laws. Those laws cannot be interfered with, violated, suspended, or intruded upon. They determine and explain everything and nothing determines or explains them. For all of the above reasons, natural processes are indifferent to the parts (including man). All parts, *qua* parts, from the standpoint of nature, are of equal value and significance because nature knows of no values, significance, purpose, hierarchies, specificities, or even totalities. Therefore natural laws apply indiscriminately to all phenomena, physical or human. But human nature, being an organic part of nature, subject to its laws, immanent in matter, keeps on changing like nature itself. But since the traits of nature outlined above are also the traits of matter, I coined the compound term "nature-matter."

There are many conclusions that follow from these initial premises. Let me single out the most important from the standpoint of this paper:

1. Man's knowledge is limited to natural events and the relations holding between them. Material reality is all there is; and man's mind has no causal efficacy, nor is it necessary for the functioning of nature.
2. Man's ethical values, compulsions, activities, and restraints can be justified only on natural grounds, his highest good pursued and attained under natural conditions and determined by natural law which man cannot change or challenge. People might be led to entertain the illusion that values are human and man-made but they actually evolve from natural material conditions. Any reference to a permanent human nature, or permanent human norms, values, criteria, fixed totalities, and so on, would be contrary to "reality."

All of this means that man, the human universal, our common humanity, and all human values and cognitive systems cannot serve as an ultimate point of reference. The nature-matter paradigm is not simply value-free; it is also cleansed of any human content, which is seen as mere metaphysics, mere illusion, a sign of man's arrogance. This paradigm is not a modern invention. The pre-Socratic philosophers believed that the basic stuff of nature is sufficiently active and refined to account for all its phenomena, including consciousness. The followers of Diogenes of Sinope, the Cynics, were believers in the nature-matter paradigm, which meant abandoning everything that human intelligence had invented or discovered. Nevertheless, this paradigm remained marginal, for all societies revolved around some kind of belief in *logos* and *telos* that have some existence beyond the flux of nature and the movement of atoms. Social and ethical norms were based on this belief.

Things changed with the rise of Western modernity. The nature-matter paradigm left the periphery and started gaining centrality. For the first time in

history, a cultural formation based on the nature-matter paradigm came into being; human society and man himself were perceived as operating exclusively in terms of the laws of nature, immanent in matter.

"Immanence" is from the Latin verb *in manare* which means "to remain." Immanent means "indwelling," "inherent," "operating from within." Immanence, as defined by the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, is the quality of any action which begins and ends in the agent. It is initiated and consummated in the interior of the same being, which may be considered as a closed system. Therefore anything (nature-matter, the superman in Nietzsche's philosophy, etc) that is said to be self-contained, self-operating, self-activating, and self-explanatory, could be described as "immanent."

Value-free modernity is based on a metaphysics of immanence, where the self-referential element, be it the mind of man, nature-matter, *eros*, the idea of progress or the economic factor, becomes the centre of immanence, an explanatory category that can reduce everything to itself, and cannot be reduced to anything external to itself. But the multiplicity of centers notwithstanding, the system is always closed, and the centre of immanence is self-referential. Given this situation, one cannot appeal to anything external to the system, such as the human universal or common humanity, since such a step would subvert the very basis of the metaphysics of immanence, and would reintroduce a man-centered universe, where man can achieve transcendence in the name of a *logos*, be it God or common humanity.

What caused this shift from the logo-centric solid universe of humanism to the non-logocentric liquid universe of anti-humanism? Let me here introduce the concept of an unfolding paradigmatic sequence. After all the triumph of the metaphysics of immanence and the rejection of the possibility of a humanistic transcendence did not happen overnight; it was a gradual unfolding in time and space.

The sequence begins in the 16th century in Europe by a polarity of man and nature, of subject and object, each claiming to be the *logos*, or the centre of immanence and of the universe. The polarity is maintained till the present time and that is why we still have humanist objections to the creeping anti-humanism and non-logocentricity. But whether the world is man-centered or nature-centered, it remained logo-centric. This implies the possibility of generating value systems, standards and criteria, hierarchies and purpose. The system is not completely closed.

But the process of immanentization gets deeper and more fundamental. Different spheres of man's public life begin to be immanentized separating themselves from all religious, moral or human values and purpose, and further from man's grasp, becoming self-referential, self-transforming and self-explanatory. Each sphere becomes an absolute ultimate category that cannot be transcended by or reduced to something more fundamental than itself.

Economics and politics were immanentized, becoming self-referential. To judge an economic or political phenomenon one has to use economic or political criteria, immanent in the respective spheres. In the same fashion, history was immanentized, becoming self-referential, self-explanatory, and value-free. Hence, we could talk of "historical inevitability," "historical necessity," "the cunning of history," "the laws of history, immanent in itself," and so on. History, in other words, became an absolute ultimate category that cannot be transcended by or reduced to anything more fundamental than itself. Science, too, was immanentized, freeing itself from human values and purpose, becoming value-free, and purpose-free. Based on natural laws, immanent in matter, science was supposed to explain everything and nothing can explain, determine, or transcend it, nor can it be reduced to more fundamental categories than itself. Science, in other words, became an absolute ultimate irreducible category.

Different aspects of man's inner being were also immanentized, thereby separating themselves from him. Sometime in the seventeenth century (in the late Renaissance) the mind of man got immanentized and was seen as the *logos* and the center of immanence. It was believed to be limitless, vested with certain powers of reasoning, abstraction and totalizing. Therefore, man without any divine mediation was believed to be able to reach objective and scientific truth. The knowledge that he reaches through his objective and detached observation of all phenomena, including himself, is all what he needs to know for a full understanding of himself and of nature. He can generate from it all the moral and cognitive systems he needs.

The human heart rebelled, claiming that it is the centre of immanence and that it is self-referential, unrelated to the tyrannical deterministic natural laws. This gave rise to the cult of feelings and limitless imagination, and led to the glorification of the will and the gradual erosion of the ideas of consciousness and responsibility, and eventually of the idea of the will itself. The human body and all its drives were immanentized, becoming self-referential, an irreducible ultimate category. Sexuality was divorced not only from moral, but also from social and human norms, for such norms are considered extrinsic to the strictly bodily and sexual.

But the irony inherent in this rising all-engulfing process of immanentization, of public and private life, is that once a sphere of man's life frees itself from man's norms, values and purpose, it escapes his grasp becoming self-referential and autonomous. All this meant the gradual erosion, subversion, and deconstruction of the category of man. The nature-matter paradigm, together with its many manifestations, dominates man's public and private life. Instead of human limits and norms, different phenomena take on non-human materialistic limits and norms, immanent in the phenomenon itself. Man gets encapsulated within his narrow self (small narrative),

becoming a helpless, denuded, though self-referential, agent, who cannot use common humanity as an ultimate point of reference or as a basis for judgment or evaluation. In this respect, rising levels of immanentization mean rising levels of dehumanization and depersonalization. Marx spoke of what he called "reification"—namely seeing everything as an object—as a main trend in modern society. Max Weber talked of an "iron cage," and of the atrophy of values. "The ultimate and most sublime [transcendental] values retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations. It is not accidental that our greatest art is intimate and not monumental" (154). Vachelav Havel, the Czech dramatist and president, refers to what he calls "the eschatology of the impersonal," which he characterizes as a trend toward the emergence of impersonal forces (faceless governments—big corporations) which represent a threat to our modern world. When asked about the reason for this phenomenon, Havel said that it has something to do with the fact that we live in the first atheistic culture (read: materialistic in the philosophical sense; non logo-centric in postmodernist parlance). People no longer respect higher metaphysical values, something permeated with mystery, not necessarily a personal deity, but something absolute and transcendent (beyond autonomy and self-referentiality); something that represents a wider horizon. All of this is lost now, he said; and man, we might add, is entrapped within the closed system of immanence and the nature-matter paradigm.

This is the first stage of the project of modernity that results in the deconstruction of man, his complete dissolution in nature-matter which became an absolute ultimate irreducible category; this is deconstruction in the stage of solid logo-centric materialistic monism.

But as man was being decentered by this process of immanantization, fragmented, atomized, relativized, something similar was happening to nature-matter. The laws of nature, immanent in matter, it was discovered, are neither fixed nor uniform, but rather, they are indeterminate, uncertain and contingent. In other words, after the relativization of man, nature, too, was relativized, losing its coherence and stability.

Moreover, man from the very beginning of modernization (and immanentization) suspected that nature could not serve as a source of norms and values. Hobbes asserted from the very beginning that in the state of nature, man is a wolf to his brother man. Darwin, ironically enough, proved that nature is a battlefield for higher apes and warring tribes. Freud discovered the ape within, with a raging war between nature and culture, between *eros* and *thanatos*, and between *superego* and *id*. Man may be conditioned by nature, but he is never guided by it, for how can a self-conscious complex creative creature like man be "guided" by an inanimate nature where all elements are

in a state of continuous flux and conflict? This is what is termed by some historians of ideas the "dark enlightenment."

Through the continuous shifting *loci* of immanence from one center to the other (economics, the state, history, race, *eros*, etc.) each claiming centrality, self-referentiality and even something bordering on divinity, there developed a multiplicity of centers not unlike the pantheon of primitive polytheistic religions or the sacred natural forces of animistic religions, with gods and natural forces, each vying for a position of centrality, claiming to be the one and only irreducible transcendent category, with none winning the battle. This led to an *absolute* relativism; for each centre by claiming validity for itself, invalidates the other; self-referentiality and self-validation turn into a universal invalidation, and the divinization of all aspects of man's life and surroundings results in total dedivinization of all aspects of man's life. Nature could no longer serve as a stable centre. Both the subject and the object have been relativized, decentred and leveled down. The centre could not hold.

All this means that a decisive shift from the solid logo-centric stage of modernity to its liquid non-logocentric monistic stage has taken place. This continuous state of change is called "flux," with all the liquid implications that the word's Latin origin implies. This idea of changing, fluctuating nature-matter goes back to the pre-Socratic philosophers. Heraclitus stated that "nothing remains the same;" "all things change" (flow, separate, dissolve). This is why "you cannot step into the same river twice", for reality is a flux, a river that never stops flowing.

But Heraclitus, not daring enough to accept the philosophical implications of a thorough materialism, postulated a *logos*, an immanent cause of pattern and identity that is evident in the constant flux of things. His is a solid logo-centric universe, characterized by a dualism of permanence and change, of fixity and flux; when the dualism resolves itself, it is still in the world of the solid, for naturalistic monism postulates nature-matter as a center.

But there were those who espoused the flux as the terminal point, the only immanence. Gorgias, the Sophist, summarized this philosophical attitude rather dramatically and succinctly when he said that there is nothing. That even if there was something, we could not know it; and that even if we could know it, we could not communicate our knowledge about it. We cannot express any knowledge we may have because no two people can think of the same thing, since the same thing cannot be in two places. Everything escapes man's grasp only to fall in the grip of the flux and absolute relativism: everything, including our common humanity, is deconstructed.

The modern secular project similarly takes its point of departure from an attitude of extreme immanence and materialism, leading to absolute relativism and eventually nihilism. This is Nietzsche's "discovery" which he ruthlessly

uncovered, articulated, and even celebrated; man cannot have a world that is both materialistic and logo-centric, temporal and meaningful, natural and human, immanent and transcendent. True temporality means freedom from values and purpose, from anything that goes beyond the given. In the world of nature-matter, there is no *ethos* or *telos*. Even the idea of totality, the very basis of a centered universe, cannot be sustained. This is the true meaning of the death of God: that man will live in the indeterminate and the contingent. To go on talking of such concepts as boundaries, causality, totality, and solidity, would imply that God is not truly dead, or that though He is dead, His shadow is still there. The metaphysics of immanence is thereby subverted. To complete the project of modernity, Nietzsche called for a total erasure of the shadow of God, because only in this way could we attain a truly modern world, a free centreless universe, where there is no essence, no totality, no right or wrong, no cause and effect, no human nature, no purpose or direction, no objective reality, no possibility of rational discourse, no subject or object, and no sacred or profane, a truly non-logocentric world.

Modernity has been rightly described as "the *desanctification* of the world, both man and nature." One can notice the preponderance of verbs with the prefix "*de*" used to describe some aspects of modernity: "*demystify*," "*debunk*," "*demythologize*," "*demetaphysicalize*," "*detextualize*" and "*dehumanize*," all of which are the precursors of our omni-present, omnivorous "*deconstruct*."

Richard Rorty, using as yet another verb with the ominous prefix "*de*," spoke of the modernity project as "the *dedivinization* project": man will not deify or worship anything, not even himself. He will not deem anything sacred for there are no absolute irreducible transcendent categories, not even man, who, like everything else, is finite and contingent. Therefore, man should not experience any urge to transcend the spatiotemporal *donnée*, nor should he ask any ultimate questions. His is a world of innocent signs that have no origin or truth, a world of complete process with no substance or any point of fixity. If anyone were to claim that such an idea has a metaphysical basis, namely the metaphysics of immanence, it could be answered that such metaphysics are immanentized and therefore carry no cognitive, moral, or aesthetic burden. It is metaphysics without ethics, something like believing sincerely and unquestioningly in the UFOs.

Modern critical theory is a fulfillment of the Nietzschean prophecy; it moves in a world in which the shadow of God has been completely erased and in which a concept of totality is non-existent; it is a world of iconized fragments or completely self-enclosed, self-referential *dedivinizing* small narratives containing within themselves their own criteria and standards, with no reference to human norms or universals.

Art, a public and private sphere of human life, was immanentized like all other spheres of human activity, becoming self-referential and autonomous, conforming to its own laws, immanent in the art work itself. The result is art for art's sake, the rise of aestheticism and early autonomous theory.

But in a logo-centric universe (even if nature-centered) the system cannot be completely closed. There is always something outside the text. The immanence and the autonomy, however, got deeper. Art became more self-referential and more of a closed system. The world became non-logocentric, made up of small narratives. It ceased to be interested in common humanity, or in man's sufferings and joys. It became value-free and purpose-free, placing itself in a position of antagonism to man and concrete humanity. The major themes of art and life (such as love and hate, death and resurrection) were more and more excluded, and critical theory reached some kind of complete self-referentiality and autonomy. Ortega Y. Gasset may have had this in mind when he referred to "the dehumanization of art" in the modern times.

If we apply the above mentioned paradigm of immanentization as *dehumanization*, and its anti-humanistic stance, to the repertory of critical themes we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we will find that it has a relatively high explanatory power. Take for instance the theme of the instability of all texts (*destabilization*). It means subverting all established meaning, authority and hierarchy, without coming up with a new alternative. This leads to a leveling down, and eventually relativization, and even trivialization, of all values and meaning. But once man is shorn of his ethical, cognitive and aesthetic systems, and of his historical and moral consciousness, he is reduced to the level of a natural man, with nothing to distinguish him from all other creatures. So to subvert all texts implies an anti-humanistic stance that results in the rejection of the whole corpus of criticism and of man's moral and historical consciousness. It lands us in a value-free world, devoid of the human.

The theme of texts about other texts, texts about themselves, or about the act of writing or interpreting functions, in the same way, for it negates the outside world and the realm of moral values and of human tragedy and comedy. Art is preoccupied only with itself, be it the act of creation or of interpretation. But ironically the theme of texts about texts also negates the human subject. For if a literary text is about itself, about other texts, or about the act of writing and interpreting, then the role of the human subject is nothing. "It is the text that speaks through the human individual, not the individual who writes the text." If "there is nothing outside the text," as Derrida claims, we can add "there is nothing inside it either." Needless to say, this approach implies complete indifference to the major themes of art and life,

and lands us as well in that lifeless value-free world, populated with abstractions, devoid of the human.

The theme of the anxiety of influence falls more or less in the same line of thought. It could be said that it assumes the presence of "an other," and of a past. But relations between past and present and between a poet and his literary traditions is one of conflict and at times antagonism. The concept of literary tradition here is diametrically opposed to the one put forward by T. S. Eliot in his "Tradition and Individual Talent" where the literary creator interacts with the tradition, in such a way as to develop his own idiom and his "individual talent," but in so doing he modifies the tradition itself. The anxiety of influence, moreover, is but a variation on the text about texts syndrome and the indifference to man's world, with all its moral and aesthetic complexities.

We come finally to the fourth and last theme in the repertory: the eroticization of interpretation. It could be claimed that there is something inside the text (the erotic drive) and outside it (the consequences) but to understand the role of *eros* here, we should recall Susan Sontag's demand that erotics should replace hermeneutics. As we know, hermeneutics tries to reach some meaning, a human and moral content, even as it recognizes the elusiveness of the said meaning, and the slipperiness (and even endlessness) of the path leading to it. In hermeneutics we have a starting point and a destination even if we never get there. Erotics is the exact opposite; it is an expression of a powerful force that goes beyond the human will, consciousness and psyche. It stands "against interpretation." Eros here is the smallest possible narrative; it is a highly self-referential *dehistoricized* (almost allegorized) one-dimensional force that is completely divorced from man's historical and moral universe. It negates history and all the cognitive and moral systems; it even negates the outside world and the world of objects. If it ever manifests itself on the level of the social, it takes the form of the battle of the sexes (like the battle of the poets in the theme of the anxiety of influence). It is a battle that takes place in a value-free world devoid of the human.

If the deepening process of immanentization has led to the rise of late autonomous theories and to the exclusion of the human, the way back to the human would be a reverse process. It would involve a reassertion of the idea of transcendence, of the idea that man is *not* only a part of nature, and that he can go beyond it. This means that the nature-matter paradigm cannot account for all his complexity; if there is anything that is autonomous, it is man in his complex totality, in his capacity to transcend both physical and social determinism, through his cognitive, ethical and aesthetic systems. He is the centre of the universe, either because he bestowed this centrality on himself, or because he is God's viceroy, who cannot be reduced to anything external to him. Instead of *deconstructing* (*debunking*, *demetaphysicalizing*, *depersonalizing*, etc.) man, let us assert his ability to reconstruct himself and

the world around him. Instead of a value-free non-teleological modernity oriented to endless consumption as the only *telos*, a modernity that has led to the death of God, man and nature, let us have a purposeful value-oriented humanistic modernity, one that aims at enriching our common humanity and at maintaining our balance with nature. In the same fashion, instead of an immanentized, self-referential, value-free, non-teleological literature and critical theory, oriented and doomed to some kind of endless self-repetition *ad nauseam*, let us have a purposeful, value-oriented humanistic literature that issues forth from our common humanity, our human universals, and that deepens our understanding of them.

And God knows best.

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