

INTRODUCTION: On Not Giving Interviews

The mixed feelings I have about these interviews has little enough to do with their quality. Sometimes, indeed, having not only forgotten what I said but even the occasion and the question that was asked in the first place, I am able to indulge myself in admiring my answers. Most often, however, it is the skill of the interviewer that is to be admired, in a subtle and demanding form that has its own strategy and tactics, so that its practitioners have a chance to shine as much as their subjects: a work in two voices, then, which at its best can offer a counterpoint of curiosity and avowal, the enthusiasm of occasional agreement, the peremptory taking of positions on both sides, along with tactful modulations, the reprise of second thoughts, the satisfaction of formulations, and in general a lively variation in the tempo of the exchange.

The gratification an interviewee can take from these situations is to find confirmation of the interrelationship of his work within itself, and of the connections of one kind of thought or interest with another, connections which are not often remembered or evident. To discover the kinship between earlier positions or interests and much later ones is, to be sure, not quite so satisfying: as though you never really moved from the spot after all, or kept returning to it. My initial formation in Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy, for example, is often today more insistent in the return of its habits; and it ought perhaps to be an embarrassment in a historical period in which, for all kinds of reasons—humanism, feminism, Marxism, elitism, totalization—this figure is still under a massive cloud. I can, to be sure, tell myself—and demonstrate for others—the degree to which much remains productive in existential philosophy, not least in emphases which contemporary thought has neglected or forgotten.

But I feel it is best to come at such matters from a different way, and to grasp one's relationship to such a system as one of learning a code or a language. Influence, to be sure, is one of the stupider ways of talking about it, which should rather be turned inside out and described in terms of need, and indeed, the need for a new language. A philosophy grips us

because it suddenly has answers for our questions and solutions to our problems: but that is the least of it, and the answers and solutions are what become most quickly dated. What electrifies us is not so much those, but rather the new language in which the need—the questions and problems—suddenly become visible in the first place. Now suddenly the syntax of this new language makes it possible to think new thoughts and to perceive the landscape of a whole new situation, as though the mist of older commonplaces had begun to burn away. My point is that the conceptual language we first learned with such a passion is not really to be replaced by the newer languages we add to it, any more than our exciting new German causes the primal French to disappear—at best, you end up speaking the former with a French accent, and even returning to English itself as though it were the idiom of an unfamiliar tribe.

It is a position which is probably not calculated to comfort the philosophers in their vocation: for it presupposes a situation in which some immense preverbal *In-der-Welt-sein* (being-in-the-world) exists, which can be modeled now this way, now that, by the philosophical terminology of what is essentially a representational rather than a conceptual system. Like those lenses the opticians alternate across the vision of the individual eye, these constellations of philosophical nomenclature bring into focus and then lose again whole zones of what lies out there to be seen, and which they can be said to construct; just as one language can say things which another cannot (however subtly it registers its own syntactical world).

Is this to say that all conceptuality is figurative, or that philosophy is just another form of literature? Only if you complete the seemingly trivializing and reductive thought by insisting on the conceptuality inherent in figuration itself, and on the way in which “literature” is itself an operation we perform on reality, which brings it into being just as surely as the terms and concepts of the philosophers, or as we might prefer to call them, the theoreticians. Yes, in that case, literature is just as surely theory as the philosophical text: but we have to work hard at each of these kinds of printed materials in order to grasp them as machines for constructing the world at the same time that they register it.

But this is a position of mine which leaves me fairly indifferent to the kinds of differences philosophers generally fight about. It is certainly always helpful to have some really sharp and tough thinker and writer make an inventory—with the polemical passion of the disciple or the withering coolness of the expert—of the incompatibilities, say, between the idealism of the one and the materialism of the other. But for me this inventory is

valuable above all in the way in which it allows us to measure the constructional and perceptual strengths and weaknesses of a given system. We're all idealists, all materialists; and the final judgment or label is simply a matter of ideology, or, if you prefer, of political commitment.

In my own case, the list of language conversions, after some initial Sartreanism (and no doubt Poundism), would be fairly long: structuralism, Greimassian semiotics, Frankfurt School dialectics and sentences (but also Proustian sentences), Heideggerianism, Deleuzianism, Lacanianism (cum Mallarmé). . . . It is clear that these are not all really styles as such: Algirdas Greimas's sentences did not form the mind (but perhaps you can say that he translated it into visual diagrams); Claude Lévi-Strauss is a fine writer, but of an old-fashioned belle-lettristic type which no one wants to imitate any more. Nor does the list really convey any unprincipled pluralism, despite the appearances: my tolerance for other conceptual languages is not inexhaustible, and it seems to be mainly Franco-German. I draw the line at most Anglo-American idioms, such as British empiricism or Wittgensteinianism: but an even more fundamental line has to do with Marxism and/or politics, and I would certainly be willing to subscribe to Alain Badiou's four truth conditions—four modes of access to the Absolute—politics, art, love (he means sexuality, gender, and psychoanalysis) and science (mathematics)—provided I was allowed to omit the science!

Still, the continuities between these things remain to be explored: why did so many Sartreans convert to Greimassian semiotics, for example? This mysterious affinity evidently has something to do with the way in which phenomenology offered some initial space for detecting the omnipresence of ideology, which Greimassian analysis (the semiotic square, for example) then offered to sort out into its component parts and its mechanisms. Alternately, it would be productive to follow the dialectic through these bewilderingly different languages and to see if their fascination and what is (for me) empowering, productive, and usable in them has anything to do with its secret workings.

The interviews, then, are mainly interesting for me to the degree to which they put me on the track of some inner unity between all these interests, whether they are intellectual or aesthetic flirtations or deeper passions and commitments. (Sometimes such relations are so deep you fail to notice them yourself: Doug Kellner once pointed out the omnipresence of Karl Korsch in my *Marxism and Form*. I must have thought it was so obvious I didn't have to mention it; and the same goes for Fernand Braudel in *The Political Unconscious*.)

But this can be a problem in itself: “perché vuol mettere I suoi idee in ordine?” (Why do you want to put your ideas in order?) as Mussolini once said to Pound. What does it mean to take this kind of satisfaction in the underlying unity of your interests if not as the sign and affirmation of precisely that personal identity and that unification of subjectivity that we are not supposed to harbor any longer in the age of Fourier’s butterfly temperament. Multiple subject positions, parcellization, schizophrenic fragmentation (of the ideal type)—all seem to shift the emphasis from Identity to Difference, and to cast doubt on the kind of thematic or conceptual unification we used to pursue. I guess I prefer to think of the matter in aesthetic terms, in terms of stylistic variety: “There should be something to eat and drink on every page,” Gustave Flaubert once said; it is an excellent rule for including as much dissonance and heterogeneity as you can take. Maybe Fourier was onto something when he said that people could not concentrate more than two hours on a single activity: something that explains the now canonical length of movies (since the sound era at least) and that has certainly been scaled back to fifty or sixty minutes when we come to lectures and maybe even interviews or conversations as such.

But now I had better come to what is for me the structural flaw (I’m not sure I want to call it a contradiction) in the interview as a form. It has to do with the transformation of concepts into opinions, the processing of episteme into doxa (to use Plato’s language), the way in which intellectual commitments are transformed into so many optional thoughts or “ideas” that can be compared or contrasted with others of the same type, which one can swap like stamps or baseball cards, or ferociously defend like your favorite clothing style or haircut. Indeed, in the old days, the most important qualification for a teacher or a news commentator or a cultural interpreter was to have strong opinions that could be trotted out on all occasions and put forcefully enough to intimidate the student, consumer, or public. It’s wrong to say that people like that knew everything or pretended to: no, but they had opinions on everything and were never at a loss. I think this fashion has passed in the academic world, and that that kind of journalism has also disappeared; but the mode is still alive on the talk shows, where opinions are still admired.

But what is the opposite of opinion? Plato thought it was the truth, but critics of sheer opinion today would probably not want to follow him in this in a postmodern age, in which “truth” so often seems to take the form of one more dogmatic opinion. I postponed the discussion by speaking of “intellectual commitments” a moment ago in order to avoid dealing with this question: now I must try to say what it is that has deeper roots than sheer

opinion (and perhaps even a wholly different soil or source). The pragmatists called it belief, but that also seems to postpone the problem in a different way; while the equally facile alternative of “ideology” does so by leading us back to something more on the order of error, if not of opinion itself, albeit opinion with its substructure in the unconscious (images of embedding and depth seem inescapable in this particular context). But I have also previously called such convictions “interests,” thinking of that key moment in *Dr. Faustus* when Zeitblom asks Adrian whether he knows anything stronger than love, and receives the answer, “Yes, interest.” The connotations of interest in that sense of attention and curiosity and the investment of time and vital energies (rather than their dividends) then perhaps leads us on to the more satisfactory existential accounts of the “originary project”: of my choice of being and of commitment which turn this matter of “truth” or Platonic “knowledge” in the direction of activity and the imagery of rootedness or the Unconscious into a relationship to Being itself. This may still be relativism, but it is a relativism of absolutes and of ontological commitments, and not of opinions or even of ideological symptoms.

At any rate, the interview as a form inevitably turns the former into the latter and flattens interests and commitments out into a stream of intermittently entertaining (or boring) thoughts. It is certainly a form in its own right, and when skillfully executed offers the pleasures peculiar to it (as the Aristotelians might put it), but they are pleasures more closely affiliated with curiosity and gossip than with practice and the project. I say this only to specify and differentiate, and not to moralize, as Martin Heidegger does about gossip, which I myself somewhere (talking about Marcel Proust) went so far as to characterize as Utopian. Well, it is certainly collective.

But these mild pleasures have to be paid for by a deterioration in the language itself, which is to my mind even more serious than anything that happens in the transubstantiation of episteme into doxa, although it can be said (by those in a hurry) to amount to the same thing. This is the immobilization of the very process of formulating into the final form of a slogan: the final crystallization of the opinion-commodity into a catchphrase that can be appealed to in any context, and reused over and over again without any tangible wear and tear. In the individual interview, this process is triumphant, a genuine discovery procedure from which something definitive emerges. Unfortunately, after several versions of this, the discovery is reduced to a tiresome repetition, which can at best send us back to the original moment of production and at worst stand as the symptom of some fatuous self-satisfaction.

For the interviewee, however, this formal requirement encourages bad habits indeed and turns the mind in the direction of concentrated formulations from which thinking only slowly recovers, if at all. The logic of the stylistic *trouvaille* is, to be sure, at one with commodification and fashion as such, whose relations with the modern and modernism have often been noted. Beyond that, however, it can be identified as a form of reification—or to use a more recent version, of thematization—in which a former idea has been turned into an idea-object, or indeed a word or theme: that final expression, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said of the truth, with which we agree to stop.

Unfortunately, the rhythms of intellectual reification are at one with the public sphere itself, which demands a constant traffic in such tokens, which it calls ideas. What would be the point, indeed, of holding an interview designed to avoid ideas? The named idea, like the various forms of money itself, is the indispensable unit of circulation of the public sphere, very much including the educational institutions, whose interminable debates about pedagogy turn over and over again on the problem of making students “think,” which is to say, on avoiding just such thematized opinions and stereotypes, just such interiorized prejudices and commonplaces, in the first place. If this is understood as a tension that can never be resolved, however—as an interminable alternation between the wandering mind and the stylistic or linguistic freeze frame—then the customary search for a resolution might be converted into a method for perpetuating the alternation itself and keeping the whole process going, as something we have to use cleverly since we cannot do away with it, at least in this society.

For to nonthematized ideas would correspond anonymous subjects, one would think: an intellectual Utopia achieved as much as the abolition of intellectual private property as by the eclipse of the public sphere as a separate realm altogether, reabsorbed back into sheer immanence. Whether this is a prospect intellectuals can fantasize with relish and gusto, I leave decently unexplored in a collection destined for them, where the anti-intellectual or populist note would certainly be ungrateful.

The fluctuations in the content of these interviews also tells me something about the ambiguities of my own work, or at least of the more current readings of it, which seem to alternate between an interest in its Marxism and a curiosity about the phenomenon of postmodernity it only later on began to describe. The first interview, by Jonathan Culler and his colleagues at *Diacritics*, was largely concerned with Marxism as such, with its literary critical possibilities, its contribution to methodology, and also to the kind

of politics my own version of Marxism seemed to imply. Later on, it is only in the non-Western interviews, by Paik Nak-chung and by Sabry Hafez and his colleagues Abbas Al-Tonsi and Mona Abousenna, that these preoccupations return with any direct force, as though possibilities were sensed in those situations that had become obsolete in the standard Western ones. As for China and Brazil, the two places in which my work has always aroused the greatest interest (something I have been very gratified by), I'm sorry to say that after the publication of *A Singular Modernity* (2002), in which the very concept of "alternate modernities" was dismissed, my Chinese and Brazilian readers seem to have parted company with me, accusing me of being yet another Western or first world theorist preaching to the rest of the world and seeking to impose Western theories on it. I must still feel, unfortunately, that the only possible "alternate modernity" open to us today is called socialism, and that merely cultural versions of these forms of difference are not very helpful. But perhaps what pained my critics more was less the attempt to impose my Western thinking on them than my expectation that they would develop alternatives that might reenergize us in the West or the first world: an expectation perhaps too hard to live up to.

As for the cultural alternatives, the basic positions on this seem to me wonderfully dramatized in the engagement with Stuart Hall, for whose intellectual generosity I am grateful, and whose insistence on resituating these issues within specific national situations I much appreciated. This fundamental engagement is then played out in a different way in the opposition between economics and politics I tried rather heavy-handedly to explain in the interview with Sabry Hafez: I hope to return to this "explanation" in another place and eventually to clarify it. The interview with Sara Danus and Stefan Jonsson also sets an agenda of unfinished business that is for me still, some ten years later, a work in progress: the ideas of cognitive mapping, of narrative, and of allegory.

As for postmodernism and postmodernity, unsurprisingly it is in the context of the arts that its questions are most extensively rehearsed: in the interview with Anders Stephanson (for an international journal of the visual arts, *Flash Art*) and in that with Michael Speaks (for the distinguished architectural journal *Assemblage*). Such questions, I believe, are very far from being exhausted, despite the rather facile consensus in some quarters that postmodernism is over (or ended with 9/11). But my theory always distinguished between the immediate stylistic features of postmodernism and the characteristics of the postmodern situation, in which a whole variety of social phenomena, such as the status of culture itself and the role of the

aesthetic, were modified beyond recognition. It is very hard to see how the latter could have come to an end without a different form of capitalism (or indeed some wholly different reorganization of the economic infrastructure) taking its place. As for postmodernism as an artistic movement or moment of some kind, I cannot particularly see that the features I enumerated twenty years ago have been superseded. What I refuse to admit in any case is the return of anything like an old-fashioned modernism, save in the form of its simulacrum; but on that *A Singular Modernity*, published later than most of these interviews, stakes out a position I would still strongly endorse.

With the comprehensive interview with Xudong Zhang we return to the question of Marxism and postmodernism, now encapsulated in the conception of “cultural studies” as an acknowledgment of the postmodern conflation of high and mass culture, as well as the Marxian commitment to the context and to history. I would now only want to correct the impression that I see myself as an authorized spokesperson for that form of cultural studies that has since been institutionalized as a university discipline in the United States. Perhaps I have as many second thoughts about disciplinary institutionalizations as I do about interviews: both smack a little too much of reification for my taste. And yet we can scarcely function without such institutions as a source of power and legitimation. This is, no doubt, yet another version of the standard complaint about what the academy does to everything it assimilates; yet the question about cultural studies also includes the unresolved concern for the future of critical thinking generally, as well as an anxiety about the immediate future of literature as such and its effectivity.

In the final interview with Srinivas Aravamudan and Ranjana Khanna—the one most nearly contemporaneous with the publication of this book itself—I have welcomed the chance to reformulate the older themes of these exchanges in terms of the new situation of globalization, which I now understand to be the same as postmodernity, or if you prefer, to be the latter’s other, infrastructural face. The fact of globalization—its release of explosive new forces, the appalling new clarity with which it reveals American power and American capitalism, its demand for a productive rethinking of all the old theories of “culture and society” and indeed of “Western civilization” itself—now inaugurates an exciting set of new intellectual tasks, and indeed for the reinvention of the vocation of the intellectual as such. It is good provisionally to end on such an exciting prospect.

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