

## WHAT IS POST-MODERNITY?

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One of the consequences of the quarrel of ancients and moderns during the course of the eighteenth century was to establish as sound doctrine the opinion that modernity is significantly distinct from other eras, notably that lived by the ancients. How that distinction is to be understood has occasioned great controversy. Very generally speaking, the antagonists may be divided into two camps not simply in terms of the position they take but in terms of the reasons they advance for taking it as well. The first reduces modernity to fragments of pre-modernity, which is held to be a more comprehensive experience that, approximately, may be called religious participation. The second reverses the procedure: religion is turned into an aspect or stage that has been surpassed and comprehended by modernity.

These two strategies illustrate the dialectical nature of interpretation as a whole. The moments or constituent elements of that dialectic are indicated in the title of Gadamer's famous book, *Truth and Method*. I have given an account elsewhere of what I take the task of interpretation to be and so will provide only a dogmatic summary here.<sup>1</sup>

The experience of wonder lies at the beginning of the task of interpretation. One asks: what is this? what does it mean? Characteristically, the answer takes the form either of clarification by the application of a systematic and self-justifying method or by an imaginative participation in the ambiguous presence of the reality experienced. The first approach, which, following Gadamer, we may conveniently call "science", understands its task to be demystification and disillusionment. If something is experienced as ambiguous, one's perspective must be changed and things will become clear. There are men of guile abroad in the world and it is necessary to suspect their works. Armed with a science that is immune to the deceptions to which ordinary human consciousness may fall victim, a purged scientific consciousness can reduce ambiguous, controversial appearances to their necessary basis. This is called scientific truth and, in principle, it appears as a clear and distinct discourse. Its great power is to unmask idols and expose false consciousness. A second approach, which Gadamer called hermeneutic,<sup>2</sup> calls for the unambiguous restoration of meaning by transforming what is given into a personal message. In this way misunderstanding gives way to disobedience. Through the act of interpretation, one experiences, because one is committed, a clear call or command. One knows the meaning of a question. Of course, the command may be disregarded but the meaning is not in doubt, because it is on the basis of an unambiguous experience of meaning that one obeys or not. If the analogy from sense experience in this instance is hearing, the analogy in the instance of science is sight.

Because interpretation is dialectical, if the scientific school of suspicion is followed far enough it turns out that science has already assumed a commitment for which its discourse cannot, in principle, account. Likewise, if one follows the school of obedience and trust far enough one is led to a re-articulation of the symbols of reality experienced in a discursive and non-meditative form. In other words, the scientific approach rests on a pre-scientific wager and vow that only hermeneutic experience can express. In a complementary way, the risk of deception and error, which is inherent in the experience of commitment and participation, can be guarded against only by having recourse to a discourse that is not committed in the same way to the reality experienced, which is to say, to science.

In the following essay, the dialectical nature of interpretation of the topic of modernity is illustrated by a consideration of selected themes from the work of two thinkers, Mircea Eliade and Alexandre Kojève. The first pursues a hermeneutic of reminiscence; the second one of reduction. Both involve both moments of the dialectic though, beginning in different places, they end up with different accounts of the present.

### Eliade and alchemy

Mircea Eliade has discussed the mythology of modernity in several places though perhaps nowhere as strikingly as in his study of alchemy.<sup>3</sup> "Alchemists", he wrote, "in their desire to supersede Time, anticipated what is in fact the essence of the ideology of the modern world." That ideology is expressed "everywhere where the eschatological significance of labour, technology and the scientific exploration of Nature reveals itself" (*FC*, 173). Eliade has here provided a useful approximation of what the term modernity may be taken to signify, but one would like to know what is meant by the notion of superseding Time. To do so one must look more closely at his argument.

Sheer matter, the rocks, mountains and valleys of the earth, were central realities of the stone age. Central, too, was the belief that the earth was the source of generation, a mother. Streams, caves, and the galleries of mines were compared to the vagina of the earth-mother, which meant that everything inside was in a state of gestation. "In other words, the ores extracted from the mines are in some way *embryos*: they grow slowly as though in obedience to some temporal rhythm other than that of vegetable and animal organisms" (*FC*, 42). Their extraction amounted to abortion or a forcing of their birth before due time. Had they been allowed to develop according to the natural rhythms of geological time, they would have reached a state of perfection. The intervention of the miner superseded the rhythm of nature; the geological tempo was replaced by a living, human one. This spiritually bold and aggressive act required that the actors be ritually protected, that hidden veins be revealed by angels and demi-gods, that the ore be treated with respect, and so on. When conveyed to the furnace and the artisan, the dread holiness of the ore was intensified since here the most difficult and spiritually hazardous operations took place. "The furnaces are, as it were, a new matrix, an artificial uterus where the ore completes its gestation" (*FC*, 57). Smelting amounted to a cosmogonic recapitulation: the formless, primary, embryonic, chaotic matter was given form and shape and obstetric significance.

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Ritual experience surrounding the practice of mining, metallurgical and agricultural techniques expressed the discovery "that man can intervene in the cosmic rhythm, that he can anticipate a natural outcome, precipitate a birth . . . man can take upon himself the work of Time" (*FC*, 75-8). This paleolithic or perhaps neolithic spiritual structure is preserved in pre-modern, western alchemy. If nothing impeded the gestation of embryological ores, they would eventually mature into gold, which was perfect, noble, immortal, supremely ripe and autonomous. On the other hand, alchemical intervention by means of the philosopher's egg or stone could transmute the embryo, eliminate the temporal interval between imperfect, immature, crude metal and gold. "The stone achieved transmutation almost instantaneously: it superseded Time" (*FC*, 78). What Eliade meant by the expression "superseding Time" then, was the replacement of what was believed to be a naturally teleological geological time with a time whose teleology was determined by the wilful acts of human beings.

More was involved than this. The alchemist, like the neolithic smith and his humble predecessor the paleolithic potter, was also a "master of fire"; like the shaman, yogi, and poet, he had attained a condition superior to ordinary humans and in consequence was dangerous and sacred. What made him so was technical prowess, his ability to imitate divine models and superhuman patrons. Alchemists were connoisseurs of secrets and their lore was transmitted by an occult tradition. The teaching of techniques and the granting of powers that were also mysteries expressed the sacredness of the cosmos.

Modern chemical science, of course, has nothing to do with this, for it operates in a desanctified cosmos. "Modern man is incapable of experiencing the sacred in his dealings with matter; at most he can achieve an aesthetic experience" (*FC*, 143). Pre-modern cosmological thinking was therefore richer or more complete than modern thinking. For the former, "the world is not only 'alive' but also 'open': an object is never simply itself (as is the case with modern consciousness), it is also a sign of, or a repository for, something else." But with the discovery of agriculture "all human culture, however strange and remote, was doomed to undergo the consequences of the historical events, which were taking place at the 'centre'." These consequences were part of "the historic fatality." The discovery of husbandry meant "that man was destined . . . to suffer the influences of all subsequent discoveries and innovations which agriculture made possible: domestication of animals, urban civilization, military organization, empire, imperialism, mass wars, etc. In other words, all mankind became involved in the activities of some of its members. Thus, from this time on — parallel with the rise of the first urban civilizations in the Near East — it is possible to speak of *history* in the full sense of the term, that is, of universal modifications effected by the creative will of certain societies (more precisely, of privileged elements in those societies)" (*FC*, 143-45). Accordingly, there exists a fundamental contrast between history and nature corresponding to the contrast between will and submission, between a sense of rebellion and of sacrality.

Eliade was deeply ambivalent about the consequences of the agricultural revolution. The new alchemists, unlike their pre-agricultural and nomadic predecessors, expressed their experience of matter not "in terms of 'vital' hierophanies as it was within the outlook of primitive man; it has acquired a spiritual dimension" (*FC*,

152). Their operations were both physical and spiritual, and the same words were used to describe both levels of activity: torture, death, and resurrection affected both the transmuted substance and the adept. Clearly there could be no resurrection, freedom, illumination or immortality without ascesis, torture, and death. "In modern terminology, initiatory death abolishes Creation and History and delivers us from all failures and 'sins'. It delivers us from the ravages inseparable from the human condition" (*FC*, 157). This is why the alchemist had to be virtuous, healthy, humble, patient, and chaste; his mind must be free and in harmony with his work; he must mediate, labour and pray; for, as one of them wrote, "our intention is not directed towards teaching anyone how to make gold but towards something much higher, namely how Nature may be seen and recognized as coming from God and God in Nature."<sup>4</sup> The acquisition of the philosopher's stone symbolized perfect knowledge of God.

Let us summarize Eliade's argument: as a result of the agricultural revolution, man assumed a responsibility towards nature that primitive man did not experience. Late pre-modern alchemy, which existed in spiritual continuity with agriculture, collaborated with God in a double perfection, of matter and of the alchemist. In taking on the responsibility for changing nature, man put himself in the place of natural cosmic Time: the furnace and crucible superseded the telluric matrix, and the retort rehearsed cosmogony. "The essential point is that their work, transmutation, involved, in one form or another, the elimination of Time" (*FC*, 171). Though they worked in conjunction with God, their work was tolerated rather than encouraged by Him since there was always an element of presumption in changing nature by human, even if liturgical, labour.

Precisely this reverential experience was what modern chemistry eliminated when it incorporated into its own discourse, and made use of, those empirically valid discoveries of the ancients. "We must not believe that the triumph of experimental science reduced to naught the dreams and ideals of the alchemist." On the contrary: the modern technological dogma that man's true mission is to transform and improve nature and become its master is "the authentic continuation of the alchemists dream. The visionary's myth of the perfection, or more accurately, of the redemption of Nature, survives, in camouflaged form, in the pathetic programme of the industrial societies whose aim is the total transmutation of Nature, its transformation into 'energy'" (*FC*, 172). What Eliade has done here is demystify "pathetic" modern technological activity by showing it to be the actualization of a fragmentary and incoherent alchemical dream. In contrast, the genuine alchemical experience was whole and sound because it expressed the reality of a sacred cosmos.

The premises of modern science and technology spelled the end to natural rituals and sacred revelations. "Scientific phenomena are only revealed at the cost of the disappearance of the hierophanies" (*FC*, 174). Unlike the ancient alchemist modern scientific technicians are unafraid of time. They do not protect themselves by regenerating or reenacting the cosmogony or by sanctifying it in liturgy. They face death without resurrection; there is no elixir of immortality, no post-mortem existence, and no indestructibility. These novel attitudes have been adopted because modern men do more than put themselves in the place of cosmic Time, as did the pre-modern alchemists; they take on the role of cosmic Time as well, not simply

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with respect to nature but also with respect to themselves. Herein lies "the tragic grandeur of modern man" who has "recognized himself to be essentially, and sometimes even uniquely, a temporal being, taking his existence from Time and bound by actuality" (*FC*, 175). Having for so long dreamed of improving on nature, when "the fabulous perspectives opened out to him by his own discoveries" became actualities, "the temptation was too great to resist. . . . It was inconceivable that he should hesitate. . . . But the price had to be paid. Man could not stand in the place of Time without condemning himself implicitly to be identified with it, to do its work even when he no longer wished to" (*FC*, 176). The work of cosmic Time was replaced by the temporality of labour, an activity devoid of any liturgical glow. By this act man has also condemned himself to exhaustion, irreversibility and emptiness, which is translated "on the philosophical plane into the tragic awareness of the vanity of all human existence. Happily, passions, images, myths, games, distractions, dreams — not to mention religion, which does not belong to the proper spiritual horizon of modern man — are there to prevent this tragic consciousness from imposing itself on planes other than the philosophic" (*FC*, 177).

In light of the foregoing, Eliade remarked somewhat surprisingly in conclusion that "these considerations are no more a criticism of the modern world than they are a eulogy of other primitive or exotic societies." Nevertheless, "these considerations" have argued that "the secularization of work is like an open wound in the body of modern society," which may or may not be closed in the future. "Even a reconciliation with temporality remains a possibility, given a more correct conception of Time" (*FC*, 177-8). But surely Eliade believed that, if the wound were to be closed, it would not be by means of man's clever technical surgery but by Nature's healing hand. Surely a restoration of the experiences of cosmic Time would mean an end to human, wilful time, to "temporality". Surely Eliade *has* criticized the modern world for its pathetic programmes, its lack of hesitation before giving in to temptation, its emptiness; surely too he believed that passions, images, myths, games, distractions, dreams, not to mention religion, would effect the reconciliation by placing temporality, that is, man, in its proper and subordinate place with respect to sacred cosmic Time.

And yet one must not cheapen Eliade's argument by reducing it to a version of Hegel's unhappy consciousness. Let us say instead that he was as ambivalent about the modern technological revolution as he was about the agricultural revolution. "It is right," he said in the closing words of his study, "that the historiographic consciousness of Western man should be at one with the deeds and ideals of his very remote ancestors — even though modern man, heir to all these myths and dreams, has succeeded in realizing them only by breaking loose from their original significance" (*FC*, 178). It is right, that is, that Eliade can practice the science of comparative religion and undertake a philosophical, coherent discourse rather than simply practice religion and participate in a non-discursive hierophany.

### Kojève and Wisdom

Eliade began by attempting to show that modernity could be understood best in light of the more comprehensive pre-modern experiences of cosmic reality, which

he called Time. That is, his initial approach was to employ a hermeneutic of reminiscence in order imaginatively to capture the pre-modern experience as a whole in light of which he could analyze modernity as a fragment. But he was led in the end to abandon this implicit practice of imaginative reconstitution in favour of his own scientific practice. In Kojève's interpretation of Hegel this procedure was reversed.<sup>5</sup> That is, he began with science or rather, with an account of wisdom, complete of systematic science, but also evoked a strenuous and prescriptive political practice.

Wisdom, the System of Science, is a discourse that accounts of everything, including itself and the one who speaks it. It is a comprehensive circle; in principle no experience is foreign to it, nothing cannot find an articulate place within its logical alphabet. If the System of Science is not, as Hegel said of Schelling, a dogmatic announcement "shot from a gun," it must have an introduction, as was indicated by the sub-title of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. There are, according to Kojève, four premises necessary to explain Hegel's System of Science that, when fully grasped, reveal reality, and reveal it without remainder. Thereby they are transformed into true introductory aspects of the Truth. The four premises are these: "First, the existence of the revelation of Given-Being [*Sein*; that is, Eliade's experience of Time or "eternal" Nature] by Speech; second, the existence of a Desire engendering an Action that *negates* and transforms Given-Being; third, the existence of *several* Desires, able to desire each other mutually; and fourth, the existence of *possibility* of difference between the Desires of (future) Masters and the desires of (future) Slaves" (*IH*, 171). The first premise accounts for the existence of "speaking animals" and the last three for the existence of properly human history.

The key to conceptual or true history is found in the pure concept of recognition, which is elaborated in the dialectic of Master and Slave. Once having grasped the implications of Chapter IV A of Hegel's *Phänomenologie*, Kojève argued, the entirety of the modern present can be comprehended. The most important aspect of the Master-Slave dialectic for our topic is that the proto-human Desire that makes itself into a Slave shows by that free and uncaused act (*IH*, 494-5) that it has a natural fear of death. This natural fear is the mode in which the Slave is in-formed of and by the negativity or nothingness that lies at the core of human existence. It is not a fear of this or that, but Terror, fear for the loss of one's entire natural or given being, which for this proto-human, proto-historical Desire is the loss of all. In Hegel's words, there occurs a "melting" or "absolute liquefaction of all stable support"<sup>6</sup> from which experience *all* action, *all* change, *all* history arises. Two kinds of change were significant: the Slave's forced labour changed the givenness of Nature by imposing human form upon it and second, the Slave created a series of discourses to make sense of what he is and does. By transforming Nature, the Slave came to recognize his own work there and to see that, with respect to Nature, he was autonomous.

This humanization of Nature, as Marx called it, which produced the agricultural and later technological revolutions so central to Eliade's understanding, was implicitly carried on under the threat of the Master's terror.<sup>7</sup> The Slave did not simply see his creation of a human, technically transformed world as "his" work;

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he also saw in the Master all that he, the Slave, was not, namely a human being free of the (natural) necessity of labour. And labour would remain a *natural* necessity so long as the slave retained his natural fear of death. However that may be, the Slave was, in his own way, aware of the contradiction between his being the creator of the human world from Nature and the Master being the gratuitous benefactor (*IH*, 174-80). He expressed this contradiction in a series of incomplete religious and philosophical discourses that, in one form or another, postulated a transcendent reconciliation or supersession of his experienced contradiction. Insofar as that transcendent reconciliation was believed to take place in the Beyond, human consciousness here and now would be quiet and unhappy; if that reconciliation was believed to take place in the future, human consciousness, even if unhappy, would know what is to be done, namely to actualize the "ideal" which is to say, to overcome the contradiction of Master and Slave.

The religious Beyond, as Nietzsche said, besmirched this world, the only world there is.<sup>8</sup> Kojève would not have disagreed though he also explained that Christianity, the highest form of religious experience, was true as a symbolic anthropology. That is, it was not an account of the reality of actual history (*IH*, 145-6). Accordingly, one can detect a certain similarity in the descriptions of Kojève and Eliade. Both would agree that a central feature of modernity is the overcoming of Nature, of what is given, especially man's basic biological nature. The first to be overcome is his infantile desire to live in the midst of mother nature. Later came the desire to overcome the "sublimated" naturalism of religious ideology, and lastly the desire to overcome the "alienated" naturalism of juridical capitalist production (*IH*, 180-190). No ritual protection, to use Eliade's language, or ideology, to use Kojève's, mediates the modern (atheist) appropriation of Nature. Pollution is a technical problem requiring the application of more technique to clean it up, not a stain to be washed away by liturgical intervention. Death is death. There is no resurrection, no immortality, no Beyond. Indeed, it is a return to the beginning, to the original liquefaction of consciousness that initiated the *via dolorosa* of servile action and the development of servile consciousness. Finally Kojève and Eliade would agree that modern man *is* temporality: he is temporary (death is death) and he is temporal (nothing is sacred).

The difference between Eliade and Kojève is that whereas Eliade argued that human temporality and cosmic Time could perhaps be reconciled in the future if man were to understand Time properly, according to Kojève that reconciliation has already taken place. Moreover it did not entail the abandonment of philosophic, coherent discourse in favour of myth, games, distractions and dreams, not to mention religion. Nor was it tragic, empty or vain. The reconciliation, according to Kojève, is nothing more than the execution of the intent, announced in the Preface to the *Phänomenologie*, that philosophy give up the name love of Wisdom that it might become actual Wisdom.<sup>9</sup> All philosophers, that is, all people who seek to be fully self-conscious and satisfied and so to be able to give a coherent account of themselves and the world, are agreed on the definition of the Wise Man. He is the person who actually is what the philosophers desire to be (*IH*, 281). Of course, not everyone desires to be wise, which restricts any dispute to a discussion among those who do, namely the philosophers. Moreover, it would seem that some

philosophers, while agreed upon the definition of a Wise Man, denied that any person actually could be wise.

These philosophers, however, were in error. They did not simply deny the reality of Wisdom, of course; rather, they denied that it could be realized by human beings who were born and died "in" time. But they immediately added that another sort of being, who neither lived nor died as human beings did, and who was, therefore, "outside" of time, might very well be wise. Indeed most of these philosophers insisted that this being, called "God", was wise. "Outside" of human time, of Eliade's temporality, God was what he was, without change, identical with himself. "In" time (or *as* time) the philosopher and the world changed. Now, if truth was unchanging, one could say that these theistic philosophers aimed at revealing God, the unchanging one, by their discourse. Accordingly, Wisdom would not be self-knowledge but knowledge of God. But this meant that the differences between Kojève and Eliade were not, properly speaking, within philosophy so much as between philosophy and theology (*IH*, 284-85). That is, the contents of Eliade's "religion" and Kojève's "philosophy" were identical; only the form was different. This is why, for example, they agreed on what modernity meant even though they did not agree on the means by which the "wounds" would be closed.

There is a further disagreement. According to Kojève, the Wise Man's discourse excluded nothing, not even the experiences indicated by the myths, rituals and liturgies of the theologian. This meant that the discourse, the discursive practice, of Wisdom was comparable to the religious practice that "articulated" the divine presence, or in Eliade's language, that re-presented Time within (human) temporality. Now Wisdom, "all philosophers" agreed, was absolute Truth, identical always with itself, unchanging or eternal, even though revealed or discovered upon particular occasions. Thus, raising the matter of Truth or Wisdom also raised the problem of temporality, "or more particularly, the problem of the relationship between time [Eliade's temporality] and the eternal [Eliade's Time] or between time and the in-temporal" (*IH*, 336). The discourse that revealed Wisdom (or claimed to) Kojève called the Concept, and he provided an ingenious and amusing "Note on Eternity, Time and the Concept" in order to account for this relationship.

Kojève quoted two texts of Hegel, nearly identical in phrasing and quite identical in meaning: The Concept is Time.<sup>10</sup> By identifying the Concept and Time it was clear that there was no other Time than what Eliade meant by temporality. Kojève's "Time" was human time, the time that man lived and spoke about. The reconciliation consisted in understanding that. Such an understanding cannot be forced. There is no transition possible between the commitments of a religious person and those of Kojève's atheist Hegelian. "To be within one [set of commitments] is to decide against the other; to reject the one is to establish oneself in the other. The decision is absolutely unique; and it is as simple as possible: what is involved is to decide for one's self (that is, against God) or for God (that is, against oneself). And there is no 'reason' for the decision other than the decision itself" (*IH*, 293). But there is nothing new here: this necessity of self-choosing had been present from the start. In the primordial paradigmatic fight there was no way to deduce beforehand whether any one, or which, of the subjectively self-certain

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proto-human animal Desires would chose to submit and become a Slave to the Desire of the other, who became Master.

The discourses of the theologians, and perhaps even the quasi-scientific discourse of comparative religion, aimed at revealing God. The discourses of the scientific and quasi-atheistic philosophers and eventually of the systematic and atheist Wise Man aimed at revealing the meaning of history. Paradigmatically this was expressed in the pure concept of recognition, the dialectic of Master and Slave, and the supersession of the contradiction of Master and Slave. Now, according to Kojève the pure concept of recognition has been actualized in the reality of history and superseded in the modern world, which is, accordingly, post-historical in the strict (Hegelian) sense of the term. The final historical act corresponded to the initial primordial fight, and consisted in Terror, the Terror of the French Revolution, which introduced into history the absolute plenitude of nothingness. "Terror," said Kojève, "renders particular consciousness disposed to admit of a State where they can be realized in a partial and limited way, but where they will be truly and really free" (IH, 143-44). The Terror of the Revolution was the complete revelation of nothingness without any ideological, religious or philosophical compensation promised in a Beyond for injustices suffered here below.

The State created from Terror was the Napoleonic Empire, a "total" and "definitive" reality. "For Hegel (1806) it is a *universal* and *homogeneous* State: it unites the whole of humanity together (at least that which counts historically) and 'suppresses' (*aufhebt*) in itself all 'specific differences' (*Besonderheit*): nations, social classes, families, (Christianity being itself also 'suppressed,' no further dualism between church and state). Thus wars and revolutions are henceforth impossible. That is, this State will no longer modify itself, will remain eternally identical with itself. Now Man is formed by the State where he lives. Man therefore will no longer change himself anymore. And Nature (without Negativity) is in every way 'completed' forever" (IH, 145). The universal and homogeneous State, and it alone, could satisfy all citizens. The last form of servile consciousness had been purged by the Terror, but it did not become a Master. Rather, it continued to labour, not out of fear of death at the hands of the Master, for it had surmounted that fear, and not for the Master either: it worked for itself and for the State. Moreover, there is no contradiction between its particularity and the universality of the State. "The human participating in this State understands himself and is understood completely; he lives in accord with himself. Thus he is completely satisfied (*befriedigt*), and he is so by the *mutual recognition of all*." The Napoleonic State did not just proclaim *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*, it *realized* the recognition of each by all. "The Napoleonic State has an essentially new characteristic; the synthetic man is realized in it, the veritable *Bürger*, the true citizen, — synthesis of Master and Slave: the *soldier* who *labours* and the *labourer* who makes *war*. Man attains complete Satisfaction (*Befriedigung*) by that; that is, he realizes his individuality, the synthesis of the particular and the universal, being recognized universally in his irreplaceable and 'unique in the world' *particularity*" (IH, 113-114). It is important that the post-Revolutionary State be both universal and homogeneous: "On the one hand, thanks to its universality, I am there 'recognized' by *all* men who are all my equals. On the other hand, thanks to its homogeneity it

is truly *I* who am 'recognized,' and not my family, my social class, my nation ('I' in so far as I am 'representative' of a rich or illustrious family, a possessing or governing class, a puissant or civilized nation, etc." (*IH*, 146).

In some respects one must admit that the image of a universal and homogeneous State is a plausible description of the contemporary modern world. It is inconceivable, for example, that a serious modern political organization (including a conspiratorial secret one) would or could support a public order that denied *liberté* as the supreme political good, that denied *égalité* in order to uphold a pretended aristocracy of blood, culture, gender, or even intellect, that denied that all humanity was one great *fraternité*. Of course, one could point to "backward," "underdeveloped" or "traditional" areas, so that, properly speaking, the Napoleonic Empire was but the "germ" of the universal and homogeneous State (*IH*, 290). So far as the discourse that accounts for modernity is concerned, the continued existence of pre-modern remnants or avatars presents no theoretical difficulties: their self-understanding can be incorporated into the System of Science as one of its constituent elements. In terms of non-discursive practice, matters are more complex.

Human being, according to Kojève is a dialectically expanding self-consciousness that seeks to account for itself in discourse and so can attain satisfaction only by articulating the complete discourse called Wisdom. The satisfied Wise Man, that is, not only knows himself to be wise but also shows himself to be wise by producing a complete and comprehensive speech. There is, however, another "ideal" of Wisdom expressed in certain Hindu and Buddhist notions of dreamless sleep, *turiya*, Nirvana, and so on.<sup>11</sup> In general this "ideal" identifies Wisdom and complete silence rather than complete speech, the complete extinction of consciousness rather than complete self-consciousness. Such "ideals" are not harmless but are objectives capable of actualization, so what is involved, Kojève said, is a question of fact. Either it is a fact that man is self-consciousness (and his perfection lies in achieving complete self-consciousness) or he is not (and his perfection lies in the opposite direction). "Well, these are *facts* that are opposed to Hegel. And evidently, he has nothing to reply. He can at most oppose the *fact* of the conscious Wise man to the *facts* of the unconscious 'Wise' men. And if that fact did not exist . . .?" The conditional question contained its own implicit answer: change the conditions. One can only "refute" the fact of the unconscious "Wise" man the way one "refutes" any "fact or thing or beast: by destroying it physically" (*IH*, 179; cf. *IH*, 296 fn. 1). One of the implications of dialectically expanding Hegelian consciousness, then, is that it cannot leave the silent mystical yogis alone: it must wake them up and demand that they speak.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it must terrorize them into speech so that they can be refuted or else kill them off in silence, with no more significance than slicing a head of cabbage or gulping a draught of water, as Hegel described the meaningless deaths of Robespierre's Terror.

Finally, Kojève has provided a glimpse of what post-historical politics are like. In principle, as was argued earlier, the universal and homogeneous State provided for the first time the conditions necessary and sufficient for the mutual recognition of each citizen by all the others. In actuality, however, only the first citizen realized the possibility held out to everyone: "only the Leader of the universal and

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homogeneous state (Napoleon) is *really* 'satisfied' (recognized by all in his reality and his personal value). He alone is therefore truly free (more than all the Leaders before him who were always 'limited' by 'specific differences' of families, classes, nations). But all the citizens are fully 'satisfied' here because *each* can *become* this Leader whose personal ('particular') action is at the same time universal ('state') action; that is, the action of all. . . . Since heredity has been abolished, each can actualize his Desire for recognition: on condition of accepting the risk of death (element of Mastery) that implies competition (political struggle; this risk guarantees the 'seriousness' of the candidates) within the state, and on condition also of having previously taken part in the constructive activity of the Society, in the collective Labour that maintains the State in its reality (element of Servitude, of Service, that guarantees the 'competence' of the candidates). The 'satisfaction' of the citizen is thus a result of the synthesis, in himself, of the Master-warrior and the Slave-labourer. In addition, what is new in this State is that *all* are (on occasion) *warriors* (conscription) and *all* also take part in social *labour*. As for the Wise man (Hegel), he is content to *understand*: the State and its Leader, the Warrior-and-Labourer-Citizen, and lastly himself' (*IH*, 146). Kojève, one hardly need add, has understood Hegel's teaching as the model for modern political existence.<sup>13</sup>

I would like now to summarize Kojève's argument in light of the question, what is post-modernity? The achievement of Wisdom, understood as complete scientific discourse, is the act that most perfectly accomplished the modern project even as that project was understood by Eliade. The political condition was the Napoleonic Empire, the "germ" of the universal and homogeneous State; the remaining tasks to be carried out in obedience to the message contained in the achievement of Wisdom, tasks that are in no way innovative or "historical" actions, because they are simply executions of an already completed and comprehensive programme, are all devoted to the extension of that State throughout the globe. Just as with Eliade, who wished both to practice the modern scientific discourse called comparative religion *and* to practice pre-modern religious experience, even though the former tended to undermine the latter, there is an equivalent problem contained within the implications of Kojève's discourse.

Kojève's version of the contradiction implied in the dialectics of interpretation may be brought to light by raising the somewhat impolite question: "What is Kojève's commitment?" Leo Strauss, whom I believe perfectly understood the meaning of Kojève's discourse, commented: "is this not a hideous prospect: a state in which the last refuge of man's humanity is political assassination in the particularly sordid form of the palace revolution?" Indeed, he said, "it does not seem to be sound that Kojève encourages others by his speech to a course of action to which he himself would never stoop in deed."<sup>14</sup> One must agree that the demand to participate in a regime of palace revolutions and domestic terror is not very appealing.

### What is post-modernity?

Both Kojève and Eliade agreed that modernity was a term adequate to describe most existing political regimes. Those which are not modern have been striving to

modernize or else; the political fate of the religious communities of Afghanistan and Iran, for example, which it is not yet fully sealed, has recently been to suffer the attention of the modern, modernizing empires of east and west. A, or perhaps the, crucial difference between modern and pre-modern political regimes is the attitude taken towards nature, that is, the cosmos, the divine, the gods, religion, God, and so on. Respective modern and pre-modern attitudes are expressed in discourses: the pious, evocative and participatory discourses of the religious orders, the scientific and demystifying discourses of the modern ones. The problem may be specified in its general form as follows: in the absence of scientific demystification, participatory discourse tends to dissolve into the imaginary evocation of subjectively certain experiences; in the absence of the evocations of reminiscence, scientific discourse tends to harden into the sterile technique of domination. In the particular form found in the exemplary texts considered here, it may be specified this way: Eliade wished to speak of sacred experiences that, when spoken of, had precisely their sacredness destroyed; Kojève wished to speak of a Wisdom that premodernity attributed only to gods, and by so doing implied the forcible silencing of everyone else.

What, then, is post-modernity? To be aware of what both Eliade and Kojève taught. To know where discourse leads. But if the reminiscence of religious experience inevitably leads to the destructive science of religion, and if the wilful mastery of religious experience leads to forced labour in the service of the universal and homogeneous State, what, then, is to be done? Is there a discursive practice that is neither a mindless, careless, celebration of uncontrolled fantasy nor the Wisdom of divine butchery? If there is, it would amount to an ironic discourse, a practice that undermined itself even while it was being spoken, that would require at the same time both the most careful attention, and thus the greatest suspicion, as well as utter trust, a surrender to the charmed flow of musical words, and an unwilling willingness to believe. This is what Nietzsche meant when, after describing our modern existence as consciousness of power, hubris, impiety, violation of nature and vivisection of the soul, he asked: "What do we care any longer for 'salvation' of the soul?" And he answered: "afterwards we cure ourselves."<sup>15</sup> If post-modernity is to mean anything, it is the practice of curing ourselves when we no longer have souls to be saved.

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#### Notes

1. "Reason and Interpretation in Contemporary Political Theory," *Polity* XI (1979), 387-99; "Hermeneutics and Political Science" in H.K. Betz, ed., *Recent Approaches to the Social Sciences*, vol. II, (Social Sciences Symposium Series, University of Calgary, 1979), 17-30; "Reduction, Reminiscence and the Search for Truth" in Peter J. Opitz and Gregor Sebba, eds., *The Philosophy of Order: Essays on History, Consciousness and Politics for Eric Voegelin on his 80th Birthday*, (Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1981), 79-90.
2. This usage is perhaps not the best, since the term hermeneutic is simply an English derivative of the Greek *hermeneuo*, I interpret, and "science" too is an interpretation.

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3. *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, tr. Stephen Corrin, (New York, Harper, 1962). Page references are given in parentheses in the text as *FC*.
4. George von Welling, quoted in R.D. Gray, *Goethe the Alchemist*, (Cambridge, C.U.P. 1952), 19.
5. Alexandre Kojève provided, as his English editor has said "one of the few important philosophical books of the twentieth century" based upon "six years devoted to nothing but reading a single book, line by line," Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Certainly Kojève's detractors (one could hardly call them critics) have produced nothing comparable. But then again they are mostly busy little intellectuals from whom thought should not be expected anyhow. I have given a more adequate presentation of what I understand Kojève's discourse to mean in *The End of History: An Essay on Modern Hegelianism*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1984). References to his *Introduction à la Lecture de Hegel*, 2nd ed., (Paris, Gallimard, 1947) are given in the text as *IH*. Consider also Tom Darby, "Nihilism, Politics and Technology," *CJPST*, V:3 (1981), 57-89, the comments of Susan Shell and Arthur Kroker, *ibid.*, 90-98, and Darby's own study, *The Feast: Meditations on Politics and Time*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982).
6. *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed., J. Hoffmeister, (Hamburg, Meiner Verlag, 1952), 148.
7. The fate of the Master in all this is not very interesting. His one and only act has been to overcome the natural fear of death. Henceforth he remained unchanged and unable to be educated: he would rather die than be a Slave, which appeared to be the only alternative. Yet, he was not a satisfied Desire since he did not get what he wanted from the primordial fight by which he and the Slave were created. He sought the mutual desire of another, which is to say, recognition; all he got was the servile activity of an "ensouled tool." Hence, the way of the Master is "tragic," an "existential impasse." He can serve only as an unchanging "catalyst" for the "chemical changes" effected by the Slave. In the end he must be negated non-dialectically, that is, simply killed (*IH*, 174 ff).
8. *Twilight of the Idols*, para. 34.
9. *Phänomenologie*, 12.
10. *Phänomenologie*, 27, 38.
11. For details of one aspect of this experience, see Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, tr. Willard R. Trask, (Princeton, P.U.P. 1969).
12. In a letter to his friend Georges Bataille, Kojève reported his reaction to *L'Expérience intérieure*. There he said that Bataille's book was mystical, an attempt to express silence verbally, "to speak without saying anything." But silence has no need to be explained and cannot be, since it would be transformed into speech. "Thus the circle is closed and you are unattackable: verbally. So, if you are not a bother, you will be left alone. If not — you will be suppressed, without encountering any resistance. For the internal experience [as Bataille had said] is the contrary to action. If you struggle — then the thing becomes serious (or could become so). But you would be acting, you would no longer be a 'contemplative.' The thing for which you struggle [i.e., the 'internal experience'] would, therefore, no longer exist. Too bad — for you." "Lettre à Georges Bataille" *Textures*, 6 (1961), 61-64.
13. See in particular his interview with Gilles Lapouge, *La Quinzaine littéraire*, 53 (I.VII.1968).
14. Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, revised ed., (Ithaca, Cornell U.P. 1963), 224, 205.
15. *Genealogy of Morals*, III:ix.