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Truth and Knowledge in Postmodernism

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Abstract

What is knowledge, according to postmodernism: re-cognition or creation? Does accepting all the existing synchronic and diachronic viewpoints weaken the need to undertake responsibility and become involved? Is putting things into perspective synonymous of no longer feeling responsible? What does the specificity of knowledge consist of in postmodernism? These are all questions to which our paper means to provide an answer by putting the relativist stance of postmodernism opposite the need of feeling it is incumbent upon oneself to play a part in creating the truth. In the author's opinion, while rejecting the idea of a preexisting truth and the solutions based on the existence of incompatible truths, knowledge means assuming an attitude denoting confidence in the truth of a committing skepticism. Situated somewhere between Rorty and Popper, this paper militates for the truth recovery.

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Introduction

Pertaining to the larger field of research ethics, the topic of this paper does not aim to address the wrong use of sources made with intent, be it ingenuously or scornfully. By way of consequence, it will dwell neither on plagiarism nor on the legion of electronic references, this carnival of the current electronic globalism. They are neither research nor knowledge-related themes. I prefer to ask myself the question if nowadays knowledge implies making an ethical commitment and, should this be the case, what it consists in. More precisely, how can knowledge be possible in postmodernism (assuming that we acknowledge living in an age called by some "postmodern"). Is responsibility being undertaken by today's scientist differently than it used to be one hundred years ago? Is the man of science still driven by the same deeply-held belief that knowing leads to progress and generates the good? In my view, these questions exceed the strict area of expertise of the critic, the literary historian or the literature professor, creating a context which first and foremost speaks to the scientist in the field of humanities.

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Postmodernism, Richard Rorty and Karl Popper

In order to delineate the meanings attached to my linguistic tools, I shall start by asking myself “Does postmodernism really exist?” and not “What is Postmodernism?”. A challenging question, since it enables us to actually show what happens the moment we want to interpret the world we live in. In 1986 Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu wrote: “Besides the blatant contradiction in the nature of the peculiarities attributed to postmodernism, there is one more striking aspect. (It is the Loch Ness monster of contemporary criticism, an increasing number of individuals swearing having seen it with their own eyes, whilst providing totally different descriptions of its fabulous appearance)” (Crohmălniceanu: 1986, 10). These words best express the distrust of an imported concept, seen as improper and deceptive. What is Postmodernism? A slightly nonconformist and rebellious master key if not “an academic business”, as it has been labeled. Highly fashionable for a few decades, it is said to have fed conferences, features in academic journals, symposiums and research directions. Nowadays there is a substantial bibliography on postmodernism, likely to exceed the Renaissance entries. Like a demon breathing in people’s souls, postmodernism is alleged to have emptied the reality of its own identity, converting it into fiction. The academic world is supposed to have obliged us to be or at least imagine we could be what we are not, bringing to the foreground a variable that triggered a strong state of instability and led to a crisis that affected even the generally-accepted values and truths.

In his famous book first published in 1933 Marcel Raymond wrote that the “Symbolist movement was compared to the dragon of Alca, from the second book of *Penguin Island*; no one who claimed to have seen it could say what it looked like” (Raymond: 1949, 101). In a more recent book, *The Enlightenment*, Dorinda Outram asserts that there was “a great range of variation in ways of interpreting the Enlightenment”. (Outram: 1995, 33) Therefore, it was highly possible for two people in the same room to give three different opinions if asked to define it. This may be the reason why, in 1784, a long time after most of the *Enlightenment* works had been written (the *Encyclopedia* was published in France between 1751-1772), the Berlin Science Academy organized a contest of essays meant to provide an answer to the question *Was ist Aufklärung?* The competition would be won by Kant, his essay on the *Enlightenment* becoming one of the fundamental works for understanding modern Europe. Kant overlooks whatever may be interpreted as peculiar and irrelevant, building up a solid concept, giving a new full meaning to the contradictory labyrinthine reality.

What is to be inferred from the fact that the postmodernism is said to exhibit almost the same characteristics as the *Enlightenment* or the *Symbolism*, two movements or periods in the history of Europe that nobody would even think of questioning nowadays? The answer comes naturally: the difficulty to *see* postmodernism, enhanced by the very fact that we belong to it, is not proof of its inexistence. We may not be able to make the monster of Loch Ness take shape out of our words; yet, we are definitely making history *with* and *out of* words, giving rise to particular phenomena, such as Symbolism and Enlightenment. These examples are to show that, without being hereby essentially betrayed (although it could undoubtedly be subject to betrayal), the past is our invention or, more precisely, our construct. Besides being a form of identifying something pre-established, the practice of drawing on the truth is also a matter of creativity. The world is a sum of widely-accepted conventions, specific to a particular cultural area; every now and then the essence of these conventions is put under scrutiny. At one point, the Dark Middle Ages became a bright story, just as the Renaissance is a story the Renaissance people were not aware of while living it. At one point the Earth became round or oval-shaped, started „pulsating” and was relegated to the position of a peripheral and (in certain respects) insignificant planet, just as the Union from 1601 of the Romanian Countries became the expression of the Romantic ideology. What we can infer from here is that, although drawing on the objective reality, the truth’s existence is confined within the limits of discourse. As matter of discourse, of discourse coherence more precisely, the act of knowing the truth cannot be conceived in terms of *true* or *false*. This topic is of course addressed in precise terms by linguists; nonetheless it exceeds the exact field of linguistics.

To sum up, being discourse-related, the truth is dependent upon convention, consensus and pre-requisite. We all accept an image (which can be restrictive) until a new scientific breakthrough, that is until the next descent into the mater that will reveal itself to the human mind. Knowledge is *putting together* the synchronic or diachronic viewpoints. One of the poems written by Nichita Stănescu, a neomodern Romanian poet, reads: “From the point of view of trees / the sun is a band of heat [...] // From the point of view of stones, / the sun is a falling stone [...] // From the point of view of air, / the sun is air full of birds, / wing beating on wing” (Stănescu: 2012, 23). The poem is appropriately entitled *In Praise of People* as the human being is capable of changing the viewpoints. While scientists such as Basarab Nicolescu or Constantin Virgil Necoș were advancing in science on non-Aristotelic

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