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“Tupi or not Tupi”: Eurocentric Modernity and Literature at the Margins

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Abstract

What is modernity? Product of the European Enlightenment, does it possess the universality it claims? Are developing nations far from the metropolitan centers bound to emulate the Eurocentric model of the individual struggle of liberation from the collective? This paper looks at figures of resistance to modernity in Latin American and Thai literature and relates their resistance to theories of “third world literature” proposed by Frederic Jameson.

Keywords: modernity, Latin American literature, Thai Islamic culture, allegory, Frederic Jameson

ユーロセントリック モダニティと第三世界の文学の行方

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I

The seemingly unrelenting confrontation between Islamic values and those of Western society has brought back to the fore a topic once trendy, then out-of-date, a topic capsulized in a much misunderstood word: modernity. Often assumed to be another word for modernization, modernity is also assumed to be an earlier stage of the postmodern. Modernity is neither; it is a philosophical construct, a state of “freedom” resulting from the Enlightenment, an acceptance of a secular world view concomitant with the ascendancy of science.

But modernity belongs to the West, particularly to the first world nations of the West. Buntrock, (1996) in an article showing how Japan managed its modernization without involving itself in modernity, claims that “modernity is a construct which has certain attributes that are associated with Western culture but that are not necessary for modernization” (1). She goes on to assert that

Japan’s industrialization, with its rapid shift from a politically isolated and feudal nation to the second largest economy in the world, demonstrates that neither Westernization nor modernity is necessary for modernization. It also suggests that modernization does not seem to foster the eventual development of modernity, even where the two are treated as complementary. (1)

The secularization which is part and parcel of modernity involved a major cultural shift away from the religious subjectivity that characterized pre-Enlightenment thought. It involved a gradual shedding of the enormous theological and philosophical baggage which was the legacy of the medieval world view. Japan’s modernization, as Buntrock points out, involved an adaption of European educational, financial, and legal institutions which could be carried out under a sky clear of such nefarious baggage.

Islamic countries, too, have carried out impressive waves of modernization without involving themselves in the secular constructs of modernity. Unlike Japan, these countries are possessed of theological systems of belief. While the modernization of many Islamic countries, in terms of physical facilities and the ongoing improvement of their quality of life rivals or surpasses that of the West, a clear line exists keeping out the secular ways of Western modernity, including its ironic consciousness, as Rushdie’s fortunes demonstrate.

The question that this paper is focused on has to do with the ways in which writers in countries on the periphery of Western modernity have dealt with the encroachment of that modernity. One case that will be taken up involves a story from the south of Thailand, from the ethnically Malay area of Songklah.

Some other examples are drawn from the research of Mariano Siskind (2006) into figures of resistance to modernity in Latin American literature. And set against these writers from the “third world” is the evolving thought of the American theorist Frederic Jameson, whose infamous essay (1986)

on the banality of third world literature serves as a starting point in his thought. Jameson’s assertion that third world literature can only repeat the first world’s already exhausted pattern of the struggle of the individual against group control—a struggle which no longer interests first world readers—is filled with an egoistic blindness which the famous critic himself came to recognize and lament.

This paper will start by defining modernity as a unique product of European intellectual history. It will then examine Siskind’s work on figures of resistance to modernity in Latin American literary history, showing how some writers eschewed the longing for Parisian modernity and focused their efforts instead upon the particularity of their own culture. The refusal of modernity by one Latin writer bears no small resemblance to an incident in the ethnically Malay Thai story referred to above, so we will take a look at that story before going on to do a bit of intellectual detective work on the theme of the Other in the critical work of Frederic Jameson. How does the critical establishment of the first world see the literary output of the third world? What choices have third world writers made about modernity? It is an engaging story that tells us much about the past while pointing at the future.

II

Siskind identifies the philosophical nature of modernity when he traces the construct back to Hegel:

It was Hegel who defined the nature of modernity, better than anyone before or after him, as the historical development of reason and freedom: modernity is the moment when the spirit of freedom becomes conscious of itself as reason, consciously certain “that in its particular individuality, it has being absolutely *in itself*, or is all reality” (7: emphasis in the original.)

Hegel’s definition of modernity ties the construct to the issue of subjectivity; with the Enlightenment the religious subjectivity of the great chain of being had ended and a brave new rational subjectivity had been established. The freedom of this new subjectivity, based upon reason rather than faith, is the chief characteristic of modernity, and the very characteristic that delineates the border between the West and the Islamic world. The Moslem world has never experienced modernity in this sense.

For the very reason that modernity finds its validity in its claim to be based on reason, it asserts a universal identity, as Siskind, invoking Winfield, shows:

On the one hand, “modernity distinguishes itself from prior forms of civilization by calling into question given tradition and demanding that practices and institutions command legitimacy only to the degree that they are justified by reason. Hence, the institutions that modernity erects putatively in accord with reason lay claim to a universality reflecting their independence of the

contingent particulars of given authority” (Suskind 7: Winfield, 92).

It is this claim to universality that proves troubling; while modernity appeared from a certain set of elements in European history and culture, it is projected upon a “universal world” because it is based upon reason, a universal faculty.

The same presumption of “universality” informs Jameson’s declamations about third world literature. He presumes that what Western literature has amply documented—the struggle of the individual protagonist against a collective that seeks to restrain him—will inevitably be repeated by third world writers whose cultures are evolving more slowly than those of the West. How could such a re-enactment possibly interest a Western audience? Such is his dissatisfaction with literature from the margins of the globe, as expressed in 1986.

But looking at the phenomenon of globalization from Siskind’s point of view, such blindness to the productions of the margins is hardly unusual:

The discourses of globalization conceive modernity always from the point of view of the universal, where the universalized particularity of the bourgeoisie is identical with the modern as such: the discourse of globalization is the historical narrative of the global expansion of modernity, understood as the cultural, political and economic practices and institutions of the bourgeoisie, a definition of modernity that relegates marginal subjectivities and regions of the world to a particularity that is irreconcilable with a universality that is constructed as completely foreign to them. (8-9)

And so the question becomes “How can the third world artist employ the particularity of his/her own culture which is, from the very start, “irreconcilable” with the self-proclaimed “universality” of Western culture? Is the developing world, the world at the margins of modernity, bound, as Jameson would have us believe, to carry out banal reproductions of first world literary works? Are so-called “first world readers” to be endlessly confronted with “outmoded stages of [their] own first-world cultural development,” with works which lead them to conclude that “they are still writing novels like Dreiser or Sherwood Anderson” (Jameson, 1968, 65).

III

Not so, says Siskind in his survey of Latin American writers who chose to weave the stuff of their own “cultural peculiarity” into their work. One of the first of these figures of resistance taken up in Siskind’s dissertation is the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade. For the thirty years of his poetic and critical output Oswald elaborated his idea of the Brazilian response to European modernity:

anthropophagy. *The Dictionary of Latin American Cultural Studies* (2012) tells us that

As a conceptual character, the *cannibal* evoked imaginary indigenous “origins” for Brazil, inverting the negative connotations of the colonial stereotype and rendering a very “Brazilian” consumer of the foreign. Anthropophagy appears as yet another modernist attempt to offer a symbolic answer to the questions and anxieties posed by both cultural influence and the asynchrony of Brazilian modernity. (24)

Oswald advertises and celebrates this original Brazilian response to the nuanced sophistication of a European modernity infused with claims to a universality based on reason. The historical incident at the heart of Oswald’s nativist optimism involves an early act of cannibalism by the Tupi tribes of northeast Brazil. Suskind describes the incident: “Piero Sarinha was the first Bishop of Brazil who is said to be eaten (sic) by a Tupinamba tribe when he suffered a shipwreck in the Coruripe river, in the Northeast, in 1556” (235). Suskind sees this response of the the consumption of European influence as having enormous significance for the validity of an authentic Brazilian voice.

The name of the devouring tribe leads to some unfortunate humor, as Siskind points out; unfortunate but eery in its echoes of a melancholy prince at the very heart of European civilization:

Sara Castro-Klaren reads the line “Tupi or not Tupi” as the symptom of what I have been calling the problem of modernity in the margins of the universal: “it expresses the anxieties posed by the break with European reason that the embrace of Tupi (subalternized) logic implied in the terrain of the cultural wars that Brazilian *modernismo* was fighting” (Castro-Klaren, 302; in Suskind, 241).

News of the European revolutions, based on the idea of the Rights of Man, trickles down to the margins, where a more astonishing right has surfaced. Oswald depicts the encounter between the enlightened European and a member of a native tribe: “I asked a man what was Right. He answered me that it was the assurance of the full exercise of possibilities. That man was called Galli Mathias. I ate him” (238).

IV

I have written in another place (2009) about the story “Rohim’s poem” by the Thai writer Makut Onrudee, better known as Nippan. In that article I showed how the protagonist in the story, a freshly graduated young man who volunteers to teach in Thailand’s rural South, is a kind of “flaneur”—“the trope of the itinerant observer made famous by Baudelaire and Benjamin on the boulevards of Paris” (12).

The flaneur is the ambassador of modernity; he walks not only on the boulevards of Baudelaire's Paris, but in the far reaches of Latin America and the ethnically Malay villages of Thailand's southern provinces. The teacher in the story in question has as his goal bringing a sense of modern Thai identity to his pupils.

But he is having trouble with one of his boys, who insists that his identity is purely Muslim, and that the designation "Thai" applies only to the Buddhist majority. The teacher does his best:

Let Teacher explain. People who believe in Islam call themselves Muslims, or Hadj, or use other names, but we live in Thailand, so we are Thai. There are Buddhist Thais, and Hill Tribe Thais as well. You and your parents are Islamic Thais. (36-37)

The boy refuses to accept this logic, and counters with: "My father says I'm a Muslim. And he is too, and he's been to Mecca." (37) He cannot accept the universalizing solution the teacher offers him; he sticks to his particularity.

Just how serious the boy is in his refusal of a modern Thai identity becomes apparent when he hands in his poem-writing assignment after lunch. At first the teacher cannot find anything in the boy's notebook that looks like a poem, but the boy points out four scrawled lines: "Teacher is kind to me, I am kind to teacher . . . If teacher hits me, I will stab him." (39) The teacher is shocked; his benevolent attempt to bring a sense of modernity to his classroom has backfired. There is to be no negotiation with the boy about acquiring a more universal identity. The story shows the triumph of the particular; the story delivers a Tupi moment.

V

Jameson is, of course, unaware of these Tupi moments at the margins, unaware that achieving an individual identity in a globalized world is not as inevitable as he imagined. And yet there is an evolution in Jameson's thinking on what writers at the margins might deliver; it is time to turn our attention to that evolution.

Jameson's earliest thoughts on the history of the emergence of the individual in Western civilization are curiously bound up with his preoccupation with the idea of allegory. "Allegory" seems a rarefied term, something too preciously literary to matter in any real sense to those of us forging on in the second decade of the twenty-first century, but Jameson's sense of allegory, far from the bookish understanding of "an extended series of metaphors," has more to do with a *cultural pathology* prevalent in first-world, overdetermined societies, something which prevents an accurate vision of the *real*. In order to understand Jameson's special use of the word, we must retrace his discussion of the term as he found it in the writing of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin.

Jameson saw in Benjamin’s writing on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* (1809) a portrait of the process of individualization:

But for Benjamin *Elective Affinities* may be considered a mythical work, on condition we understand myth as that element from which the work seeks to free itself; as some earlier chaos of instinctual forces, inchoate, natural, pre-individualistic, as that which is destructive of genuine individuality, that which consciousness must overcome if it is to attain any real autonomy of its own, if it is to accede to any properly human level of existence. (66)

We should pay attention here to the association of *myth* with *chaos*, and to the way these elements (“pre-individualistic”) are judged to be “destructive of genuine individuality”. These forces will be projected onto the literature of the third world in Jameson’s essay on the subject some fifteen years later. We should also pay attention to Jameson’s value-laden words describing life under Western modernity: “genuine individuality,” “real autonomy,” and a “properly human level of existence.” This is the bar by which third world literature will be judged and found lacking in the later essay.

But to return to the trope of allegory, which marks the evolution of Jameson’s thought as well as his interest in Benjamin. The German writer’s thoughts on allegory are largely contained in his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928). Jameson defines this genre and links it to allegory. He points out that Benjamin’s talent is for describing an age in which

beings find themselves given over to the power of things, and the familiar content of baroque tragedy (that melancholy which we recognize from Hamlet, those vices of melancholy—lust, treason, sadism—so predominant in the lesser Elizabethans, in Webster for instance) veers about slowly into a question of form, into the problem of objects, which is to say of allegory itself. *For allegory is precisely the dominant mode of expression of a world in which things have been for whatever reason utterly sundered from meanings, from spirit, from genuine human existence.* (70–71; emphasis added)

What Jameson sees in Benjamin’s writing about allegory is a metaphor for a world in which subjectivity has been severed from the collective. Once again we see Jameson employing the phrase “genuine human existence,” but here it is not the result of overcoming myth and the collective, but rather *the result* of having done just that. A new subjectivity has been achieved, but it is characterized by a predominance of *things* which have lost their meanings. Just how complex Jameson’s vision is becomes apparent as he ponders the meaning of allegory for Benjamin. Hamlet, he tells us, is the best representative for English readers to think of in trying to understand Benjamin’s melancholy world.

We are back in early modernity at the birth of a subjectivity that will soon be universalized and

exported as an enviable European achievement. And yet the landscape is dark with melancholy. The classical Tupi moment is drawing close.

VI

Jameson later claims, in his infamous piece on third world literature, that such texts can only be taken as national allegories by readers in the first world. There is some ambiguity here; he could mean that those texts are allegories in themselves and are therefore products of a world “in which things have been for whatever reason utterly sundered from meanings, from spirit, from genuine human existence.” There is also the possibility that he means that allegorical transformation, or what might be called *the hunger for allegory* resides in the first world.

Following Jameson’s line of reasoning, we find that it is, indeed, the latter possibility that animates his thoughts. In an attempt to explain Benjamin’s preoccupation with allegory Jameson turns confessional and shows us the figure of the “first world” intellectual in a different light:

Allegory is, on the contrary, the privileged mode of our own life in time, a clumsy deciphering of meaning from moment to moment, the painful attempt to restore a continuity to heterogeneous, disconnected instants” (72).

The passage shows a remarkable degree of self-awareness. The European flaneur, the messenger of Europe’s modernity in the byways of the third world admits that if there is a hunger present in the encounter between the two worlds, it is not the hunger of the marginal for the sophistication of the center. Rather, it is a hunger on the part of the center for cultural “continuity”: a force that can reconnect the “heterogeneous, disconnected instants” which fill the subjectivity formed under modernity.

The only way to maintain belief and create a momentum which keeps the disconnected instants from fragmenting is to play the role of missionary of the modern to the primitive cultures of the margin; only in the resale of the promise of individuality and autonomy can their junk status be disguised. The hunger that characterizes the encounter of the two worlds is the pathological need on the part of modernity to see its tattered gown transformed in the mirror of the primitive.

Looking back at the German baroque drama to which Benjamin devoted his energies, Jameson sees the pathology of subjectivity-in-modernity moving across center stage:

Script rather than language, the letter rather than the spirit; these are the fragments into which the baroque world shatters, strangely legible signs and emblems nagging at the curious mind, a procession moving slowly across a stage, laden with occult significance. In this sense,

“Tupi or not Tupi”

for the first time it seems to me that allegory is restored to us—not as a Gothic monstrosity of purely historical interest, or, as in C. S. Lewis, a sign of the medieval health of the essentially religious spirit, but rather *as a pathology with which in the modern world we are only too familiar*. (72; emphasis added)

VII

Suskind is aware of this pathology, of the dependence of the purveyors of modernity on the mirror of the native population. The very notion of the rights of man—a principal achievement of European modernity—depends, he tells us, on the existence of the cannibal, the irrational Other:

Oswald declares that the Carai'be indian is the condition of possibility for the notion of human rights, that there would not be a political modernity in Europe, that there would not have been a French Revolution, had it not been for the construction of the cannibal as an irreducible other, held outside of the limits of humanity. The notion of human rights at the heart of the project of modernity -says the manifesto- depends entirely on the exclusion of the indian, and its characterization as a totemic, pre-cultural figure. (41)

The baroque dramas which were the focus of Benjamin's research were full of death. At a time when Europe was beginning to follow new horizons, when the future itself was a predicate of motion and change, Benjamin looked back at history. Commenting on Benjamin's essays on the *Trauerspiel* plays, Martha Helfer (1988) quotes the philosopher as claiming, “the product of the corpse is life” (118: 218). Unlike those thinkers positing the universality of rights as the new horizon of the future, Benjamin, according to Beatrice Hanssen (2000) employs allegory as “a radically new antisystematic figure signifying [not only] the disruptive force of history but also [a dismantling of] the figures of self and interiority, symptomatic of the philosophy of consciousness” (4).

For all of Jameson's preoccupation with Benjamin and his understanding of allegory, the American critic seems to have missed this vital point: Benjamin's writing militates against that very subjectivity that was the result of the individual's struggle to free himself from collective, inchoate forces. Suskind's work on figures in Latin American literature who created metaphors of resistance to modernity gives us a precious chance to review the thinking of Jameson in relation to Benjamin. Far from espousing that Eurocentric vision of a marginal world bound to catch up with a universal modernity, Benjamin seems more likely to reveberate with the violent alternate: “Tupi or not Tupi.”

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