Rules and Paradoxes and Svelte Appendix

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I am not going to deliver a lecture. I just want to define some important terms. First, "postmodern" is probably a very bad term, because it conveys the idea of a historical "periodization." "Periodizing," however, is still a "classic" or "modern" ideal. "Postmodern" simply indicates a mood, or better, a state of mind. It could be said that it involves a change in people's relation to the problem of meaning: simplifying a great deal, I would say that the modern is the consciousness of the absence of value in many activities. If we are interested in what is new in modernity, it is not knowing how to respond to the problem of meaning. Romanticism, as the absence of meaning and the consciousness of that absence, is modern; so is something like dandyism, or what Nietzsche calls "active nihilism," which is not only the consciousness of the loss of meaning, but also the activation of that loss.

Secondly, modernity sought a philosophical and political response to romanticism and dandyism: in other words, it attempted to produce what might be called a "grand narrative," examples of which are the narrative of emancipation beginning with the French Revolution, and

the discourse on the realization of the Spirit in German thought. There
is also the narrative of wealth, that of the political economy of capital-
ism. All of these discourses were in some fashion reorganized and rein-
forced by the narrative of Marxism, which dominated the philosophical
and political stage of Europe and the world for an entire century.

My working hypothesis is that these narratives have lost their credi-
bility for the bulk of contemporary societies, and are no longer suffi-
cient to ensure a political, social, and cultural bond, as they had once
claimed to do. Our situation is that we have little confidence in them
anymore. We must confront the problem of meaning without any
possibility of responding with hopes for the emancipation of humanity
(as did the Enlightenment school) or for that of the Spirit (as did the
German Idealist school), or with the practice of the Proletariat to
achieve the constitution of a transparent society. Even capitalism, the
liberal or neo-liberal discourse, seems to me to have little credibility in
the contemporary situation: that does not mean that capitalism is
finished, quite the contrary. But it does mean that it no longer knows
how to legitimate itself. The old legitimation, “everyone will prosper,”
has lost its credibility.

What capitalism is doing today is to exploit a force it had neglected
up to now, namely language, thanks to the development not only of the
media but also of information technologies. The goal is the comput-
erization of all of society, which is to say all exchanges of phrases
important for society. That is today’s capitalist horizon; and it is clear
this will be what brings capitalism out of the crisis.

My experience of the media is quite limited. But I believe that only
phrases translatable into computer language will be taken into con-
sideration. When we try to speak with a different voice through the
media, we are faulted for our obscurity and complexity (the response
of a director of major French newspaper to an avant-garde publisher
who complained that the paper did not carry reviews of his books was:
“Send me communicable books”). We are already in a situation where
the phrase must satisfy the demands of computer logic.

That logic is relatively simple: one must be able to transcribe even a
complex phrase in such a way that information units can be enumer-
ated, in other words, according to the binary logic of Boolean algebra:
yes/no. That is the condition under which language can become a
commodity. That is the condition under which meaning can enter the
account books. If you want your phrases to circulate in the language
market (which is above all the media market), then they must be competitive. If you cannot say of a phrase, "here is the information communicated," then it is not susceptible to accounting and will therefore not be communicated.

I believe that a scientific, artistic, or philosophical phrase is not susceptible to simple informational transmission. Many people have tried to transcribe data, particularly philosophical date, into machine-language, but none have succeeded; what this means is that these kinds of language are judged inconsistent from the point of view of performativity.

The real problem, then, is to establish whether language is in fact a means, and if so whether it is a means of communication. The underlying hypothesis of the work of the artist, philosopher, or scientist is that it is not: their shared hypothesis is that language is in itself autonomous, and that the service they offer is to decodify it.

I will give a simple example. When Freud wrote The Interpretation of Dreams, he suggested that there was a kind of language of the unconscious, and he defined or sought to define the operators of that language, namely displacement and condensation. The effect of these operators is to produce unintelligible phrases, phrases that are not communicable in clear language. Conversely, certain linguists, and to some extent Lacan, have said that the unconscious speaks according to a language: they sought to demonstrate that its operators are the same as those of language.

I believe that this is an error, that there is a language of the unconscious precisely insofar as it uses operators which are not those of ordinary language, and that displacement and condensation must be understood on a different basis than the model of the operators of ordinary language. The operators of the dream are not mysterious. I think Freud had begun to elaborate them.

This brings us to a very old discussion on Western thought. As early as the debate between Aristotle and the Sophists the issue was whether language, by means of determinate operators, was capable of producing phrases that were absolutely strange: these phrases were called paradoxes, and the operators paralogisms. Every linguist and logician knows that language is capable of paradoxes and paralogisms.

If we look at the work done in the sciences or the arts, we see that the problem has remained the same. It still consists in the production of paradoxical phrases. Science employs written languages; in the arts, on
the other hand, the phrases may be chromatic, formal, sonorous, or voluminous, but can still be considered phrases, in other words, articulations of separate (discrete) elements. For all of these reasons, the work of the artist or scientist consists precisely in seeking operators capable of producing phrases that have never been heard before and are thus by definition — at least at first — noncommunicable. These phrases become communicable when the operators enabling their production become known to the addressee and the addressees are able to retranscribe them.

If we analyze the work of Duchamp, for example, it is clear that the problem is precisely this: to take plastic, and sometimes also linguistic, elements; to subject them to transformations using very precise operators; and to present the results of that operation without revealing the nature of the operator. The addressees are thus left surprised and disgruntled: they laugh or protest, because the messages are incomprehensible. The work of physicists at the end of the last century was no different: it was agreed that mass was one thing and velocity another, until someone said that mass was a function of velocity.

Work of this kind bears on the operators, in other words, the very rules a scientific or artistic work obeys. It therefore produces works that are necessarily strange, the function of which consist exclusively in experimenting with rules. Rules become the main problem.

The problem is the same for politicians. And we are all politicians — without even knowing what that means exactly. We all think that the exchange of phrases in everyday life should obey rules, that phrases have operators, that those operators are instituted, and that in the absence of operators and rules we have anarchy. The democratic tradition consists in maintaining that all addressees of phrases can reach agreement on a certain number of the phrases exchanged in society. Take the following phrase as an example: “For a certain quantity of labor, it is just that there be a certain wage.” This model, which is quite simply that of the social contract in its current form, is no longer credible for a reason that reveals an important difficulty and one not limited to this particular juncture: language comprises phrase games which obey different rules. If I say, for example, “The wall is white,” it is a descriptive phrase, and my listener can respond yes or no. This phrase therefore puts the addressee in a position where she either must agree, or if she does not, must justify his/her disagreement.

But if I say to someone, “Don’t work fifty hours a week,” the phrase
does not obey any truth rule. The addressee must not say yes or no as though it were a question of a description. His/her problem is not to find out whether what I have said is true or false, but whether to obey or not. If s/he obeys, it is because s/he judges my order to be just (and not true), and deems that I have the right to give that order. Justice and authority are not in play when it is a question of truth.

I will give a slightly more dramatic example: people of my generation in France were confronted with the problem of the Algerian War. After a simple enough analysis of the situation, it was easy to see that the development of the Algerian struggle and the gaining of independence would lead to the constitution of a bureaucratic-military regime that would not exactly be democratic. This was a description, and was subject to approval or disagreement. In the first case, the conclusion might be drawn not to facilitate the independence of Algeria in any way. That would be a confusion, an illusion: for one cannot deduce a prescription (even negative) from a description. In fact, it could also be said, and was said, “It is true that this movement will produce a bureaucratic-military apparatus, but it is just to support, if not the military apparatus, then at least the movement.” In other words, people were concretely experiencing the political, something we do every day: there are two families of phrases, one of which obeys the rule of truth and falsehood, another which has the just and the unjust as its rule. And these two families are independent; it is not possible to translate one into the other.

The entire Western tradition declares that what is just derives from what is true; but we now know that things are not that way. Even ordinary language contains families of phrases obeying mutually untranslatable operators and rules. Languages are translatable (for example, French can be translated into Italian); but a phrase that prescribes something is not directly translatable into a phrase that describes something. As a consequence, there is a certain opacity within language.

At the limit, I would say that language does not communicate with itself: it is capable of producing phrases which are not translatable into other phrases. That is precisely what obstructs the contract, because it is presupposed that we can achieve complete transparency in what we are saying. Therefore, faced with the attempt to reduce language to the commercial unit of information, which is supposed to be able to translate all phrases, I believe that — in the absence of narratives of legitimation — there is only one possibility left us: to fight for that work of incom-
municability, in other words, for the work of the articulation of the possibility of new phrases.

This struggle is principally led by artists. The important thing in art is the production of works which bring into question the rules constituting a work as such. There is no need for theory in order to do that; I would even say that it is necessary not to have theory.

In France and the United States — I don't know about Italy — a reactionary movement has recently developed which advocates a return to forms of works that are easily recognizable, easily communicable, and which respond to the demands of the market — not only the financial market, but also the media market, in other words, the communication market. This is certainly due to the fact that artists today find it difficult to protect themselves with theories (Marxist, semiotic, or of Freudian origin), which in the 1960s and 1970s functioned to justify the paradoxes exhibited in their works. These theories, derived from the human sciences, are currently losing their credibility. I think that this is just. It means that artists no longer want, are no longer able, to be protected by a theoretical argument; the relationship between the critic and the artist has been reversed, in that the critic no longer understands, and the argument of the work is no longer given; the critic says, "Give me something communicable." I believe that many artists today yield to this terrible demand, or, if not, are compelled to do what they do without the protection of theoretical argument, which in my opinion was ideological argument pure and simple; it was no more than a borrowing from the human sciences, in other words, a type of discourse that has an essential connection with the social system and is indispensable to it.

I would like to say in closing that the rule of the philosopher's discourse has always been to find the rule of his/her own discourse. The philosopher is thus someone who speaks in order to find the rule of what s/he wishes to say, and who by virtue of that fact speaks before knowing that rule, and without knowing it. I think that this situation is comparable to that of artistic avant-gardes, and in part to that of science. Since a certain point, artists (I am thinking of Cézanne, but it is even more the case today) have been looking for the rules by virtue of which their work can be considered, for example, a pictorial work. The further we advance, the more we come to understand that there are an extraordinary number of constraints in the tradition of what is called "painting." The artist is one who pinpoints in and by his/her work an
aspect of those rules that had remained unquestioned. In this sense, s/he works and has been working as a philosopher.

SVELTE APPENDIX

I would like to supplement these notes with some remarks without theoretical pretension or order.

We hear it on all sides that the State is the main problem in today's society. This is a mistake, and a serious one. The problem that overshadows all the others, including that of the contemporary State, is capital.

Capitalism is one of the names modernity goes by. It consisted in the retraction of the infinite into an instance that had already been designated by Descartes (and perhaps by Augustine, the first modern): the will. Literary romanticism believed it was struggling against this realist, bourgeois, shopkeeper interpretation of will as infinite enrichment. But capitalism was able to bring under its control the infinite desire to know which propels the sciences, and to submit its realization to capitalism's own criterion of technicity: the performativity rule that demands the endless optimization of the expense/return (input-output) relation. Romanticism was relegated, still kicking, to the culture of nostalgia (Baudelaire's "The end of the world is coming" and Benjamin's commentary), whereas capitalism was becoming, and has become, a figure that is not "economic" or "sociological" but metaphysical. Capitalism posits the infinite as that which is not yet determined, as that which the will must indefinitely master and appropriate. The infinite bears the names of cosmos, energy, and research and development. It must be conquered, made the means to an end, and the end is the glory of the will. A glory itself infinite. In this sense, the real romanticism is capital.

What is striking when one returns to Europe from the United States is the failure of will, or at least of this figure of the will. The "socialist" countries also suffer from this anemia. The will as an infinite power and as the infinity of "realization" cannot allow itself to be instantiated by the State, which expends it for its own self-maintenance, as if the State were an end in itself. The rise of the will needs only a minimal institution. Capitalism is not fond of order; the State is. The end of capitalism is not a technical, social, or political work produced according to the rules. Its aesthetic is not that of the beautiful, but of the sub-
lime. Its poetics is that of genius. Creation in capitalism does not bend to the rules; it invents them.

Everything that Benjamin describes as a “loss of aura,” as the aesthetic of “shock,” as the destruction of good taste and experience, is the effect of this willing which is disdainful of the rules. Traditions; statuses; objects and sites laden with the individual and collective past; hand-me-down legitimacies; images of the world and man deriving from classicism — even when these are retained it is as the means to an end, namely the glory of the will.

Marx saw all of this very clearly, particularly in the Communist Manifesto. He attempted to show where the figure of capitalism falls apart. He conceived of it not as a figure, but as a thermodynamic system. And he demonstrated that: 1) it did not control its hot reservoir, labor-power; 2) it did not control the space between that reservoir and the cold reservoir (fueling through production value); and, 3) it was going to exhaust its hot reservoir.

Capitalism, however, is a figure. As a system, its hot reservoir is not labor-power, but physical energy in general (the system is not closed). As a figure, its force derives from the idea of the infinite. That idea may present itself in people’s experience as the desire for money, for power, for the new. And we may find that very ugly and disturbing. But these desires are the anthropological translation of something that ontologically is the instantiation of the infinite in the will.

This instantiation is not carried out in social classes. Social classes are not the relevant ontological categories. There is no one class that incarnates and monopolizes the infinity of the will. When I say “capitalism,” it does not mean the owners and managers of capital investments. There are thousands of examples demonstrating their resistance to the will, even to the technological will. The same thing goes for the workers. It is a transcendental illusion to confuse what is in the realm of the concepts of understanding (sociology). It is this illusion that has produced all States, bureaucratic States in particular.

When contemporary German or American philosophers talk about the neo-irrationalism of French thought, when Habermas gives Derrida and Foucault lessons in progressiveness in the name of the modernist project, they are seriously misjudging the issue in modernity. It was not, and is not (for it is not over yet), simply the Enlightenment; it was, and is, the institution of will into reason. Kant spoke of an urge in thought to go beyond experience, and he understood philosophy
anthropologically as a Drang, as an impulse to fight and create differences of opinion (differends; Streiten).

We should think a little about the ambiguity of the aesthetics of someone like Diderot, who wavered between the neoclassicism of his theory of "relations" and the postmodernism of his writing in the Salons, Jacques le Fataliste and Le Neveu de Rameau. The Schlegels did not misjudge the issue. They knew that the problem was not consensus (Habermas's Diskurs), but the unpresentable, the unexpected power of the Idea, the event as the presentation of an unknown and unacceptable phrase which then gains acceptance by force of experience. The Enlightenment was in complicity with preromanticism.

The decisive factor in what is called the postindustrial (Touraine, Bell) is that the infinity of the will invests language itself. The major development of the last twenty years, expressed in the most vapid terms of political economy and historical periodization, has been the transformation of language into a productive commodity: phrases considered as messages to encode, decode, transmit, and order (by the bundle), to reproduce, conserve, and keep available (memories), to combine and conclude (calculations), and to oppose (games, conflicts, cybernetics); and the establishment of a unit of measure that is also a price unit, in other words, information. The effects of the penetration of capitalism into language are just beginning to be felt. Beneath the surface of market expansion and a new industrial strategy, the coming century will be characterized by the investment of the desire for the infinite in language transactions, following the criterion of maximum performativity.

Language is the social bond in its entirety (money is only one aspect of language, the aspect that can be entered in the account books, payment and credit; in any case, it is a play on differences, of place and time). It is thus the live works of the social itself that will be destabilized by this investment. It is an error to fear that an alienation will result. Alienation is a concept from Christian theology, and also from the philosophy of nature. But God and nature must succumb as figures of the infinite. We are not alienated by the telephone or television as means (media). And we will not be by language machines. The sole danger is that the will might abandon the language machines to the States, which are only concerned with their own survival, in other words, with compelling belief. But for the human to be replaced by a complex and aleatory assemblage of (nonenumerable) operators trans-
forming messages (Stroudzé) is not an alienation. Messages themselves are only metastable, catastrophe-prone states of information.

The idea of postmodernity places me in this context. And in this context, I say that our role as thinkers is to deepen our understanding of what goes on in language, to critique the vapid idea of information, to reveal an irremediable opacity at the very core of language. Language is not an "instrument of communication"; it is a highly complex archipelago composed of domains of phrases belonging to regimes so different from one another that a phrase from one regime (a descriptive phrase, for example) cannot be translated into a phrase from another regime (an evaluative or a prescriptive phrase). Thom wrote, in this connection, "an order contains no information." All of the research of the scientific, literary, and artistic avant-gardes of the last hundred years has moved in this direction, toward the discovery of the incommensurability of regimes of phrases.

From this point of view, the criterion of performativity appears as a serious invalidation of the possibilities of language. Freud, Duchamp, Bohr, Gertrude Stein, but also Rabelais and Sterne, are postmoderns in that they emphasize paradoxes, which always attest to the incommensurability I am talking about. And that puts them in the closest of contact with the capacity and practice of ordinary language.

If what you call recent French philosophy has been in any way postmodern, it is because its reflections on the deconstruction of writing (Derrida), the disorder of discourse (Foucault), epistemological paradox (Serres), alterity (Lévinas), and the meaning-effect as arising from nomadic encounter (Deleuze), have emphasized incommensurabilities in this fashion.

When we read Adorno now, especially texts like Aesthetic Theory, Negative Dialectics, and Minima Moralia, and with these proper names in mind, we notice the extent to which Adorno's thought anticipates postmodernity, even though that aspect more often than not remains hesitant or is refused.

What motivated this refusal is the political question. For if the rough and hasty description of the postmodern I have given here is accurate, what becomes of justice? Does what I say lead to an advocacy of the politics of neoliberalism? Not in the least. Neoliberalism is itself an illusion. The reality is concentration in industrial, social, and financial empires served by the States and the political classes. It is becoming apparent, on the one hand, that these monopolitical monsters do not
perform well in any case, and can cause blockages of the will (what we have called barbarism); and, on the other hand, that it is work in the nineteenth-century sense that must be done away with, and by other means than unemployment. Stendhal was already saying this at the beginning of the nineteenth century: the ideal is no longer physical strength as it was for the man of antiquity; it is suppleness, speed, the ability to metamorphose (go to a ball in the evening and fight a war at dawn). Svelteness, awakening, a Zen and Italian term. This is a quality of language par excellence, because language requires very little energy to create something new (Einstein in Zurich). Language machines are not expensive. This is already discouraging the economists: they say that these machines will not absorb the enormous overcapitalization from which we are currently suffering as growth comes to an end. This is probably correct. It is therefore necessary to watch the infinity of the will with svelteness: “work” much less; learn, know, invent and circulate much more. Justice in politics consists in pushing things in this direction. (It will be necessary eventually to achieve an international agreement for a concerted reduction of work time without a decrease in purchasing power.)

Brian Massumi, translator