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Potocki and the Spectre of the Postmodern

“A spectre is roaming through Europe: the Postmodern”¹. Readers of Jan Potocki’s 700-page novel *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* are accustomed to seeing spectres, ghosts and other forms of *revenants*. Such otherworldly creatures make up a remarkably high number among the dozens of characters presented in the novel, which was written in French by the Polish nobleman between 1797 and his suicide in 1815. Of course, the protagonist, Alphonse van Worden, never encounters Postmodernity as such — even though he seems to meet everybody else (and her sister) during the sixty-six days of his journey through the Sierra Morena, from enlightened encyclopedists to American-Indian princesses, from succubes to inkmakers, from a Wandering Jew who met with Christ to the devil himself, from hermits and sheiks to bankers and rats... And yet, as I would like to suggest in this paper, what we have come to identify today by the term “postmodern” is in fact little more than a *revenant*, returning to haunt us from the depth of Potocki’s historical and narrative imagination. Is it a pure coincidence that the *Manuscript*’s return from the dead in the 1990s, after two centuries of quasi-oblivion², corresponded with the multiplication of popular anthologies anatomizing the Postmodern debate, in a phase Charles Jencks characterized by the publication of “critical summaries of the Post-Modern paradigm”³?

¹ Paolo Portoghesi, “What is the Postmodern?” in Thomas Docherty, *Postmodernism. A Reader*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 208.

² Potocki’s novel appeared for the first time in its integrity in French in 1989, edited by René Radrizzani (and published by José Corti); the first complete English translation by Ian Maclean appeared in 1995. Apart from important but relatively rare and obscure studies published mostly in Poland throughout the 20th century, the three main books analyzing the novel have also appeared over the last decade (see next notes for references). The latest forcing of the *Manuscript* into mainstream media is due to the much publicized re-release of the 1964 film adaptation directed by Wojciech Has — restored thanks to the passion and financial support of such icons as Martin Scorsese and the late Jerry Garcia. Another avalanche of spectres, indeed, with this *revenant* of a film adapted from a *revenant*-novel which captured the imagination (and *revenu*) of none other than a Grateful Dead... (As for Postmodernity’s fascination with spectres, the obvious reference is, of course, Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, New York: Routledge, 1994.)

³ Charles Jencks, “The Post-Modern Agenda” in Charles Jencks, *The Post-Modern Reader*, London: Academy Editions, 1992, p. 17.

By now, this “bizarre novel”, as it presents itself on its first page, has received a considerable amount of critical attention shedding precious light on its textual history (Zoltowska⁴), its narrative stakes (Rosset⁵), or its thematic complexity (Fraise⁶). However, many of the *philosophical* implications of Potocki’s work still remain to be unfolded. Dominique Triaire’s essay⁷ gives a remarkably rich picture of the author’s worldview, particularly of his epistemology, his political attitude and his conception of history; Günter von Kirn⁸, for his part, investigates quite thoroughly the inscription of the *Manuscript* within the ideological and philosophical context of the Enlightenment and of early Romantic thought.⁹ Yet, to my knowledge, the precise relation between the *Manuscript* and what our postmodern age has defined (accurately or erroneously) as “modernity” has never received the full attention it deserves. My point of departure in this article will therefore be the following question (borrowing back from Richard Rorty¹⁰ a terminology he himself borrowed from literary criticism): *what would a “redescription” of the Manuscript through the “vocabulary” of postmodernism look like?* Beyond the rather pointless exercise of a merely “determining” judgment (*is Potocki postmodern?*), I hope that such an apparently meaningless question will in fact lead us to a more substantive exercise in “reflective” judgment, i.e., to a questioning of the very categories originally put in play. Redescribing the *Manuscript* as postmodern may tell us less about the novel itself than about some of the conceptual weaknesses and oversimplifications on which the Modernity/Postmodernity divide commonly relies.¹¹

⁴ Marie-Eveline Zoltowska, *Un précurseur de la littérature fantastique : Jean Potocki et son “Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse”*, Yale University, Dissertation, 1973.

⁵ François Rosset, *Le théâtre du romanesque : Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse entre construction et maçonnerie*, Lausanne: L’âge d’homme, 1991.

⁶ Luc Fraisse, *Potocki ou l’itinéraire d’un initié*, Nîmes: Lacour, 1992.

⁷ Dominique Triaire, *Potocki: Essai*, Arles: Actes Sud, 1991.

⁸ Günter von Kirn, *Jan Potockis “Die Abenteuer in der Sierra Morena”. Ein Roman zwischen Aufklärung und Romantik, zwischen Revolution und Restauration*, dissertation, Universität Hannover, 1982.

⁹ For a survey of the earlier discussions among Polish scholars on the philosophical background of the *Manuscript*, in particular the contributions by Tadeusz Sinko and L. Kukulski, see Stanislaw Frybes, “Les recherches polonaises sur le roman de Potocki” in *Jean Potocki et le Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse: Actes du colloque de Varsovie*, Varsovie, «Les Cahiers de Varsovie», Centre de Civilisation française de l’Université de Varsovie, 1972, pp. 125-134.

¹⁰ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

¹¹ For a comparable endeavour on a different author, see Philip Watts, «Postmodern Céline» in *Céline and the Politics of Difference*, R. Scullion et al. (eds), Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995. It is a pleasure for me to thank Jacques Berchtold, Janet Coccaro, Marina Kundu, and François Rosset, who have all brought crucial contributions to my reading of *the Manuscript*, and to the composition of this article.

To be sure, the question I just articulated does not really lead us into a *terra incognita*. Without explicitly referring to any of the major voices involved in the postmodern debate, a critic like François Rosset did in fact present the *Manuscript* as a very Baudrillardesque world of simulacra. As we will see in more detail below, Dominique Triaire offered striking echoes of Jean-François Lyotard's statements when he described Potocki's political attitude in terms of *souplesse*. On a deeper level, many scholars have discussed, albeit never in a very satisfactory manner, Potocki's problematic and complex relation to the *Philosophes*. Insofar as postmodern theory has defined itself, for better or for worse, in contrast with an "Enlightenment project" identified (somewhat loosely) with the Encyclopedists and their allies, this relation has a direct bearing on my question. A certain consensus emerges, which considers the novel as "a document of a skeptical attitude which aims not only at the fantastic and its secrets, but also at the rational methods of «explaining» such secrets"¹². "The *Manuscript* sets itself at a critical distance as much towards the orthodoxy of the Church as towards the intellectual systems of the Enlightenment which, in their false radicality, build new dogmatic forms of constraint" (von Kirn, 275). "A unique attempt at a synthesis of the Enlightenment, classicism and romanticism" (*ibid*; 3), the novel is commonly portrayed in the position of a *hinge*, deeply anchored in, and indebted to, the new spirit brought about by the *Philosophes*, but already opening the door to further critical horizons which will use the Enlightenment's tools to undermine the Enlightenment's house.

In order to explore such intuitions a little further, let's try and throw a few keywords which would describe the formal features of the novel, and the first impressions it produces on its readers. This should allow us to have a first, if superficial, glimpse at the postmodern dimension of the *Manuscript*, before moving on later to its broader and deeper ideological stakes.

1. *Indeterminacy*. Doesn't the *Manuscript*, at least in its first hundred pages which are paced by the maddening rhythm of multiple awakenings under the gallows, each making the reader doubt the reality of the previous one, offer one of the most radical experiences of ambiguity, rupture, and displacement known to world literature? After such a shock treatment, indeterminacies do in fact pervade all interpretations and constitute the reader's world.

2. *Fragmentation*. Even if the novel does eventually put all its threads together into one single consistent narrative structure, its mode of presentation — through the interruptions of the days, the jumps from one narrator to another, the parallel montage of multiple story lines — demonstrates a remarkable "openness to brokenness" and seems decided to resist tooth and nail any attempt by the reader to totalize the stories into one closed and self-contained meaning.

¹² Kazimierz Bartoszynski, "Structure et Signification du Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse" in *Jan Potocki & the Writers of Enlightenment*, «Literary Studies in Poland/Etudes Littéraires en Pologne» No XXIII, Wrocław, 1990, p. 61..

3. *Decanonisation*. Many scholars have stressed the “derision of authority” at work whenever a paternal figure is staged in the novel — van Worden, Soares, Avadoro seniors immediately come to mind¹³. Here again, what is the *Manuscript*, if not a constellation of *petites histoires* spread along the widest variety of heterogeneous language games (gothic novel, picaresque tales, history of religion, geometrical demonstration, pledge of secrecy, metaphysical speculation, erotic compulsion, moral prescription), which obstinately resist our best attempts at subsuming them under one single “metanarrative” or “mastercode”? The process of deligitimization at the heart of postmodernism is remarkably prefigured by the novel’s perverse *jouissance* in staging unbelievable and untrustworthy figures of authority.

4. *Self-less-ness. Depth-less-ness*. Problematically enough for those critics eager to place the novel on the side of Romanticism, Potocki’s characters are desperately devoid of any psychological depth. None of them demonstrates the type of pathos usually associated with the hypertrophied conception of interiority which was developing in the Europe of the time. Even when their sense of self is not openly “challenged” (in the PC sense of that word, as it is the case for Pèdre Velasquez), even when the narrative fails to multiply them into hardly distinguishable reduplications of the same (sister-sister, father-son, etc.), they all seem affected by a radical “fake flatness” which prevents any serious possibility of identification on the part of the reader.

5. *The Unpresentable, Unrepresentable*. Something in the *Manuscript* fundamentally repels mimesis: no less than the flatness mentioned under the previous heading, what prevents any immediate adherence to the fictional world is the very multiplication of such flat surfaces (characters, story lines, language games), endlessly reflecting each other in the absence of any solid and stable core reality. As François Rosset has brilliantly showed in his book, the representative process is always-only liminary, staging and contesting only the modes of its own representation. At the hollow center of this constellation of *petites histoires*, there is an intolerable, unthinkable, abject absence (the absence of ultimate truth). The horror of the gallows which haunts the first days of the narrative is in fact highly reassuring and comforting, compared with the radical negativity — an “intolerably free exchange between signs and death” — on which the novel turns its last page with inhumane indifference. It is precisely this remarkably pure and deadly beautiful form of negativity which Jean Fabre alludes to in his comments upon the ending of the narrative, which he compares to a “bulle de savon” or to the “cigarette

¹³ See Janet Coccaro, *Illusions and Disillusions: the Search for Truth in Jan Potocki’s Manuscript* found in Saragossa, dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1999, chapter three; also Marie-Eveline Zoltowska, «La démocratisation de l’idée de l’honneur dans le *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse* de Jean Potocki», *Etudes sur le XVIIIe siècle*, No 11, 1984, pp. 39-52.

de Mallarmé dont la fumée monte comme une pure néantisation, une rêverie du néant”¹⁴. (More on this later.)

6. *Irony*. That irony assumes a central function in the economy of the *Manuscript* has become a commonplace among critics. As early as 1847, Zygmunt Kasinski described the book as “a remarkable work, but hyper-ironic and reckless (*archi-ironique et effréné*)”¹⁵, while Günter von Kirm stressed more recently the “ambivalence” and the “distanciation through irony” displayed by the novel (206).

7. *Hybridization* & 8. *Carnivalisation*. Such a carnivalisation is openly thematised by the Bohemians’ lifestyle, where jesters cross-dress as Wandering Jews or demon-ridden lost souls. It reaches its high point in Avadoro’s endless metamorphoses across genders and social status, from Elvire, a “future vice-queen”, to a nameless beggar, to the Marquis Castelli, a courtier plotting among the highest spheres of wealth and power. More generally, the ludic and subversive nature of the polyphony staged in the *Manuscript* leaves the reader constantly wondering about the seriousness and the real meaning of every scene: from the gory depictions of demons and *revenants* to the extended dissertations on Egyptian religion, from the most outrageous claims of scientific arrogance to the most desperate scenes of suicide, one is never sure where the pathos starts and where the pastiche begins. In this wealth of textual thefts and intertextual *clins d’oeil*, clichés and plagiarism seem to be the only stable game in the Sierra. This travesty of a novel constantly borrows and multiplies contradictory voices, in a polyphonic process of hybridization pushed to the point where no genre, no opinion, no ideology, no point of view can any longer be identified as authoritative, or even simply authorial¹⁶.

9. *Performance, Participation*. Within the *Manuscript*’s fictional world, most sub-narratives “invite performance” in the sense that they are “performed” by various actors (playing a Wandering Jew, Pacheco, a hermit) rather than being simply told. Not only do the Bohemians function as a performing band, but the “gaps” and “indeterminacies” left in their stories also invite a constant involvement on the part of their narratee (van Worden): the Venta Quemada is uncannily close to these virtual universes generated in our postmodern age by interactive computer games where the viewer/player is swallowed into the diegetic world and finds himself in the double position of the audience (for whom the whole fiction is staged) and of a character (whose fate is being determined as the story develops). On a higher level, it is the real history of the book’s publication which illustrates, in

¹⁴ Jean Fabre in one of the discussions recorded in *Jean Potocki et le Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*, op. cit., p. 219.

¹⁵ Quoted in Z. Markiewicz, «L’aspect préromantique du *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*, sa réception par les romantiques français», *Revue de littérature comparée*, No 50 (1-2), janvier-juin 1976, p. 76.

¹⁶ Commenting on a paper by Jean Decottignes which focused on the “polyphonic” nature of the *Manuscript*, Jean Fabre stressed that “polyphony should be understood not only as a plurality of voices in discourse (in the ordinary sense), but as some sort of perpetual dissonance within each theme” (*Jean Potocki et le Manuscrit*, 204).

the most striking manner, “art’s vulnerability to time, to death, to audience, to the Other”: the manner in which this *found manuscript* was indeed quasi *lost* for two centuries, the polemics generated by its recent resurrection¹⁷ are no less *romanesque* than the *roman* itself. “Gaps must still be filled” in the text currently at the public’s disposal... The indeterminacies and decanonisations staged in the fiction have infiltrated the published book itself, for which we still lack a definitive and canonical edition. Here again, the limits between the inside and the outside, reality and fiction, the stage and the audience are uncannily blurred, in a manner reminiscent (or rather anticipatory) of the interactive and open-ended practices favored by postmodern artists in their games, installations and websites.

10. *Constructionism* & 11. *Immanence*. François Rosset has shed full light on the essential self-containment, self-referentiality (*immanence*) and self-denounced artificiality (*constructivism*) ruling the game played by the *Manuscript*: functioning as a “theater of the romanesque”, the “construction” of the novel displays “a gigantic narrative machine which refers only, in the last analysis, to its own movement”: “in this carnival of a novel, the play/game (*le jeu*) ends up proclaiming the vanity of discourses, the erosion of meaning, the tragic inanity of knowledge” (back cover).

The reader familiar with the “Postmodern debate” will have recognized by now the list of “The Eleven ‘Definiens’ of the term Postmodern” provided by one of its first “coiners”, Ihab Hassan¹⁸. Even if it is a well-recognized feature of the

¹⁷ See Daniel Beauvois, “Jean Potocki méritait mieux”, *Dix-huitième siècle*, No 22, 1990, pp. 441-447.

¹⁸ Ihab Hassan, “Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective” in Jencks, *The Postmodern Reader*, 196-199. Let’s quote the terms provided by Hassan to define his categories:

1. “*Indeterminacy*, or rather indeterminacies. These include all manner of ambiguities, ruptures and displacements affecting knowledge and society. [...] Indeterminacies pervade our actions, ideas, interpretations; they constitute our world” (196).

2. “*Fragmentation*. The postmodernist only disconnects; [...] his ultimate opprobrium is ‘totalisation’” (196).

3. “*Decanonisation* [...] We are witnessing [...] a massive ‘delegitimation’ of the mastercodes in society, a desuetude of the metanarratives, favoring instead ‘*les petites histoires*’ which preserve the heterogeneity of language games.” (196)

4. “*Self-less-ness*. *Depth-less-ness*. Postmodernism vacates the traditional self, stimulating self-effacement — a fake flatness, without inside/outside — or its opposite, self-multiplication, self-reflection” (196).

5. “*The Unpresentable, Unrepresentable*. Postmodern art is irrealist, aniconic [...] its hard, flat surfaces repel mimesis. [...] It becomes liminary, contesting the modes of its own representation. [...] ‘What is unrepresentability?’ Kristeva asks. [...] ‘That which, through meaning, is intolerable, unthinkable: the horrible, the abject’ [...] ‘the exchange between signs and death’.” (197)

6. “*Irony*. In the absence of a cardinal principle or paradigm, we turn to play, interplay, dialogue, polylogue, allegory, self-reflection — in short, to irony. [...] These express the ineluctable recreations of mind in search of a truth that continually eludes it, leaving it with only an ironic access or excess of self-consciousness” (197).

7. “*Hybridization*, or the mutant replication of genres, including parody, travesty, pastiche” (197).

Postmodern (and probably the only one universally agreed upon...) to elicit any attempt made to capture it in a non-ambiguous definition — hence its spectral nature: “this amorphous thing remains ghostly”¹⁹ —, the *Manuscript*’s rich response to the stimuli suggested by Hassan’s (deceptively) handy checklist should suffice to catch our attention. The main question, however, remains to be tackled: under the surface of its narrative presentation, is there anything in the *intellectual attitude* expressed by the *Manuscript* which resonates with the “postmodern condition”?

I will address this question from the point of view of four issues which play a central role in the postmodern debate as well as, I believe, in Potocki’s work: lack of self-confidence, the aporia of judgment, political *souplesse*, and the debunking of human pretensions to mastery.

Lack of self-confidence. According to Zygmunt Bauman, “the concept of postmodernity refers to a distinct quality of intellectual climate, to a distinct new meta-cultural stance, to a distinct self-awareness of the era [...] The most poignant of the postmodern experiences is the *lack* of self-confidence. [The postmodern period] tries to reconcile itself to a life under conditions of permanent and incurable uncertainty; a life in the presence of an unlimited quantity of competing forms of life, unable to prove their claims to be grounded in anything more solid and binding than their own historically shaped conventions”²⁰.

As we have already noted above, the world of “indeterminacies” into which the reader is thrown by the novel leads her, along with the protagonist, to being on the verge of “losing her reason” (MS 108/128)²¹. While the first hundred pages of

8. “*Carnivalisation* [which] further means ‘polyphony’ [...] in its ludic and subversive elements that promise renewal” (198).

9. “*Performance, Participation.* Indeterminacy elicits participation; gaps must be filled. The postmodern text, verbal or nonverbal, invites performance [...] As performance, art (or theory for that matter) declares its vulnerability to time, to death, to audience, to the Other” (198).

10. “*Constructionism.* Postmodernism [...] ‘constructs’ reality in post-Kantian, indeed post-Nietzschean, ‘fictions’” (198).

11. “*Immanence.* This refers, without religious echo, to the growing capacity of the mind to generalize itself through symbols. Everywhere we witness problematic diffusions, dispersal, dissemination [...] Languages, apt or mendacious, reconstitute the universe [...] into signs of their own making, turning nature into culture, and culture into an immanent semiotic system” (198).

¹⁹ Thomas Docherty, “Introduction” to Thomas Docherty, *Postmodernism. A Reader*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 1.

²⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, “The Fall of the Legislator” in Docherty, *Postmodernism*, pp. 135.

²¹ In the quotes from the *Manuscript*, the first page number will refer to the English translation (Jan Potocki, *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, London: Penguin, 1995); the second page number will refer to the French original in its most common current edition (Jean Potocki, *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*, Paris, Livre de Poche, 1992). All translations of articles originally published in French or German are mine.

the book certainly constitute a challenge to the rationalist attitude often associated with the (French) Enlightenment, it is important to notice how Potocki subtly but dramatically displaces the Cartesian framework with which he plays. As in the *Méditations métaphysiques*, van Worden and the reader are led to a position of radical doubt, where the distinction between being asleep and awake vanishes, where everything they perceive seems to be no different from the “playful mystifications of dreams” (*ludificationes somniorum*)²²: “all that I had seen over the last few days had so perplexed my mind that I no longer knew what I was doing, and if anyone had tried they could have made me doubt my own existence” (MS 93/113).

Behind the obvious and numerous similarities, however, one should note at least three significant displacements. First, the situation is not so much framed in terms of *identity* as in terms of *action* (“I no longer knew what I was *doing*”): the real question with which Alphonse finds himself faced is no longer “who/what am I?” (“*quisnam sim ego ille*”) (52), but rather “what should I do?” or, more precisely even, “what should I (not) say?”. Second, the “*genium aliquem malignum*” (*ibid.*) whose profile is sketched behind the hypothetical “if anyone had tried” is no longer, as in Descartes, an abstract and extreme theoretical possibility: in van Worden’s case, the “evil genius” is a reality, incarnated by the sheik and his accomplices. Moreover, the agency in which the hypothesis of the Cartesian *si me fallit* materializes no longer belongs to the supernatural realm of the divine (or demonic): in Potocki’s world, humans are manipulated, fooled, deceived and lured by other humans. Third, the rock of certainty on which Descartes could rebuild the modern skyscraper of human knowledge (*ego existo, certum est*) is itself contaminated by doubt in Potocki’s rewriting. Other humans can not only deceive me in what I perceive, they could also “make me doubt my own existence” (should they choose to do so). The foundation of confidence on which Descartes laid the groundwork of modern science is radically undermined, condemning us from now on to live and act “under conditions of permanent and incurable uncertainty”.

It is significant in this regard to find this lack of confidence stated by one of the characters most often described by the secondary literature as a representative of the *Philosophe* (of the deist persuasion), Pèdre Velasquez. After having expressed his hope to reduce human emotions as well as human history to geometrical equations, this caricature of a scientist can’t help but recognize the limits of scientific reason (and the correlative necessity of faith) in our making sense of our world: “we are blind men who can feel some walls and know the ends of several roads. But we mustn’t be expected to know the map of the whole city” (MS 417/447). In describing the physicist as “always striving to understand” but “always half-understanding” (MS 408/439), Velasquez and Potocki do more than express a typically postmodern feeling of “opprobrium on totalisation”. To go back to

²² René Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques*, éd. Beyssade, Paris: Livre de Poche, 1990, p. 44.

Bauman's quote, they put forth "a new distinct meta-cultural stance", where scientific knowledge and the Christian revelation, or even cabbalism and the Muslim prophecy, appear merely as competing (and incommensurable) forms of understanding, which are ultimately "unable to prove their claims to be grounded in anything more solid and binding than their own historically shaped conventions"²³.

The aporia of judgment. For Potocki as for his postmodern grandsons, such a relativist attitude bears its most problematic consequences when the human subject has to use her faculty of judgment. Velasquez feels compelled to limit the scope of reason because he cannot resort to "expose the faith of ethics to the mercy of sophistry" (MS 410/441). Faith, openly based on "prejudices" (the traditional enemy of the Enlightenment project), is necessary to "offer man a surer mainstay than reason" (ibid.) when time comes to move from the question "who am I?" to the question "what should I do?". And here again, this aporia of judgment is directly presented by the *Manuscript* through a character explicitly and precisely located in his relation to the Enlightenment: Blas Hervas is, literally, the son of an Encyclopedist, the son of this branch of the *Lumières* who fell into the double (and specifically modern) hubris of totalisation and atheism (see von Kirn, 262sqg). After having witnessed his father's demise and suicide, Blas sees his philosophical spectre return in the form of Don Béliar, who leaves little doubt about his own intellectual filiation: "I am one of the principal members of a powerful society whose aim is to make men happy by curing them of the vain prejudices which they suck in with the milk of their wet-nurse, and which afterwards get in the way of all their desires. We have published very good books in which we demonstrate admirably well that self-love is the mainspring of all human actions" (MS 521/560). Whether one recognizes La Mettrie, Helvetius, Sade, Voltaire, d'Holbach, Diderot and/or "toute la morale du XVIIIe siècle"²⁴, it is clearly the French Enlightenment gathered around the *Encyclopédie* which appears under the mask of the Devil. And the main point of this *Mal masqué* is to stress the moral relativism taught by the *Philosophes*:

"just and unjust [...] are relative qualities. I will make you see this with the help of a moral fable: Some tiny insects were crawling about on the tips of tall grasses. One said to the others: «Look at that tiger near us. It's the gentlest of animals. It never does us any harm. The sheep, on the other hand, is a ferocious beast. If one came along it would eat us with the grass

²³ Claiming a double (and incommensurable) standard of truth for "natural philosophy" and for the Christian religion was, obviously, in no way a "new stance" in 1815... The novelty resides in the fact that (1) religions are historicized (i.e., cut from any immediate anchorage in the divine) by the Wandering Jew's narrative, but that simultaneously (2) purely human accounts of our human reality are nevertheless perceived as radically untenable. But, as we will see later, this is an essential dimension of the modern (as much as of the postmodern) experience.

²⁴ See Marian Skrzypek, "Les sources françaises de la théorie de la religion chez Jean Potocki (Potocki et Volney)" et la discussion qui a suivi dans *Jean Potocki et le Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*, op. cit., pp. 69-74.

which is our refuge. But the tiger is just. He would avenge us.» You can deduce from this, Señor Hervas, that all ideas of the just and the unjust, or good and evil, are relative, and in no way absolute or general” (MS 521/560).

Even if the moral dilemma facing Blas Hervas is rather crude (save an innocent victim or satisfy his own selfish desires), the fact that he makes the “wrong” choice, and the fact that the novel ultimately fails to provide any convincing argument as to why this choice was wrong at all, contaminates the whole moral philosophy conveyed by the narrative with a feeling of uneasiness. To Don Béliar’s unfettered logic of personal interest, the only alternative is provided by Enrique Velasquez, Pèdre’s father, who describes himself as a “strangely (*bizarrement*) constituted” creature, “in whom selfishness is scarcely perceptible”; among the few members of this “proscribed race”, “some are passionate about the sciences, others about the public good” (MS 269/293). Here again, however, the son reveals the weaknesses of the father: Enrique’s selflessness and his feeling of being “part of a great unity” take a purely ridiculous turn in the *géomètre*’s “absent-mindedness”, as if losing one’s mind is the price to pay for endeavoring to cultivate a disinterested reason. Enrique’s *désintéressement* is not a solution, nor even a true alternative to the “morale du XVIIIe siècle”, but merely a “bizarrerie”, an “aberration of nature”, or simply another “idea of the just and the unjust”, no more absolute or general than any other.

At the end of all these ironic twists, the narrative leaves its reader with a feeling which anticipates the aporia described by many a postmodern thinker. Whether they emphasize the impossibility legitimately to deduct a prescriptive from a descriptive²⁵ or whether they evoke the “ghost of the undecidable” raised “in every event of decision”²⁶, they all describe a situation which fits perfectly with van Worden’s (and the reader’s) dilemma. One has to judge, one has to take sides (between the cousins and the hermit, between commitments made to different churches, between allegiance to conflicting parties, between various interpretive hypotheses) without being in a position to know for sure either the real nature of the choice nor its real consequences. On which basis should van Worden determine whether his cousins are demoniac temptresses or victims in need of protection? How could he decide to oppose or follow the Gomelez’ conspiracy, when every bit of information concerning them seems to be a product of their very conspiracy? Even more cruelly, how can he direct his actions when the main concept which used to guide his previous moral choices (*l’honneur*) was shattered during his first days in the Sierra Morena? In the absence of a satisfactory system grounding the “idea of the just” in a consensual description of reality (and giving it the strength of a

²⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, pp. 19-32.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The «Mystical Foundation of Authority»”, *Cardozo Law Review*, Vol. 11:5-6, July/August 1990, p. 965.

concept), the moral agent is condemned to a scattered and case-by-case approach, exposed to the vicissitudes of trial and error, under the constant pressure of an “urgency that obstructs the horizon of knowledge” (Derrida, 967). “Here lies the basis for an ethical demand in the postmodern [...] We must judge: there is no escape from the necessity of judging in any specific case. Yet we have no grounds upon which to base our judging. [...] We must behave justly towards the face of the Other; but we cannot do that accordingly to a predetermined system of justice, a predetermined political theory” (Docherty, 26)²⁷.

Political suppleness. For, of course, such aporias in the definition of the just bear considerable consequences on the conception of politics. Dominique Triaire’s description of Potocki’s political attitude resonates strongly with the positions taken by the Jean-François Lyotard of *Instructions païennes* or *Just Gaming*. Both seem to prefer to “stay as close as possible to the event” rather than “elaborating in the abstract grand theories” (Triaire, 77); both value “a great theoretical suppleness” (104); for both, “politics provides only a temporary fix (*un raccommodge*)” (105), and for both, “perfection is a dangerous *chimère*” (105). Both seem to share a common resistance to producing “a general representation of politics” (93) which would systematize their thought and provide a totalizing map for further action. Convinced that “there is no science of the political” (Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, 28), both refuse to play the role attributed in the modern period to the *Intellectual*. One could trace such political suppleness all the way to the personal choices made by both writers, from Potocki serving the Russian empire (which had just invaded his country) to Lyotard denouncing the dead ends of *technoscience* and of the *logique du capital* from the hometown of CNN and Coca Cola. No less than Avadoro, who provides an almost pathological example of “suppleness”, “tolerance” and “sveltness”²⁸ throughout his endless personal and political metamorphoses, the duke of Sidonia illustrates the posture of “disillusionment” (see Cocco) so central to postmodern politics. Having learned the hard way “that it was not enough to want (*vouloir*) to do good, one [also] had to know (*savoir*) how to do it” — even if, as we have just seen, one simultaneously and contradictorily realizes that politics cannot be the object of a true *savoir* — the duke hangs on to “prudence” as a safer substitute for the dangerous “chimères” of his youth (MS 315/341), anticipating Lyotard’s call “to distinguish intelligence from the paranoia that gave rise to «modernity»” (“Tomb”, 7).

The postmodern incredulity towards master-narratives implies a similar incredulity towards *la raison politique* as such. The various forms of Stalinism

²⁷ For an extremely suggestive reinscription of this (supposedly postmodern) aporia of judgement within the opposition between “Romantic Common Law” and “Enlightened Civil Law”, see Vivian Grosswald Curran, “Romantic Common Law, Enlightened Civil Law: Legal Uniformity and the Homogenization of the European Union”, *Columbia Journal of European Law*, vol. 7:1, Fall 2000.

²⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, “Tomb of the Intellectual” in *Political Writings*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 7.

which littered the 20th century with millions of corpses have scarred a whole generation's political sensitivity, and — legitimately or not — have led many to echo Velasquez' early warning: "reasoning [...] is a dangerous instrument which can easily harm the person using it. What virtue has not been attacked by reason? What crime have people not tried to justify by it?" (MS 410/441) While many tenors of the postmodern debate have carefully resisted all attempts to enlist them under openly reactionary banners, it would be hard to ignore the convergence between postmodernity's second thoughts about the dangers of the political reason in which the Enlightenment grounded its emancipatory efforts, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the direct filiation popularized by neo-conservative historians between Jacobinism and Stalinism, as if Robespierre's *terreur* and the Gulag were both necessary consequences of any attempt to force a human project of emancipation onto the spontaneous inertia of the existing state of things. Here again, it would be (too) easy to suggest parallels between the socio-historical positions of unjustifiable privilege enjoyed by Potocki (as a member of the highest Polish nobility) and by late 20th-century theorists of the postmodern (as members of wealthy Western societies) — who both would have much to lose in rocking their social boat too harshly.

What seems undeniable however is that, across two centuries, a similar political attitude of *suspension* appears to be shared by Potocki and his grandsons, an attitude he perfectly expressed in a comment on a Greek word which was to elicit abundant reflection in postmodern circles:

"The Ancient Greeks used to express with the verb *epochein* this attentive rest (*ce repos attentif*) after which one starts again to act in new erring endeavors (*nouveaux errements*). Carneades, in order to explain the value of this word, says that the *Epoché* is like the posture of an athlete who tries to estimate the strength of his enemy or the attitude of a charioteer who holds his horses ready to enter the field (*qui retient ses chevaux prêts à entrer dans la carrière*)" (quoted in Triaire; 86).

Lyotard's description of his own "paganism" is stated in the similar vocabulary of "a move in a context", on a field which is "a place of ceaseless negotiations and ruses", where "there is no reference by which to judge the opponent's strength; one does not know if s/he is a god or a human" (Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, 43). This moment of suspension wherein one stops to wonder whether the enemy is "a beggar" or "a god" (or an enemy at all) is linked to a sharp awareness of one's own fragility: the postmodern political subject always remembers that "there is no possible discourse of truth on the situation", that he "has to judge therefore by opinion alone, that is, without criteria" (43), that all his moves are "always tactical", and *only* tactical, mere "instructions" reduced to a local context, never to be understood as "slogans", for "a slogan belongs to a general strategy" which is

precisely what he can no longer pretend to devise (54-55). What many critics of the postmodern movement have condemned as a mere “withdrawal” from the political sphere is perhaps more accurately conceived, as Potocki helps us to do here, as a form of *epoché*, a *retenue* which in no way excludes the possibility of active interventions, as long as these are purely “defensive and local” (Lyotard, "Tomb", 7), but which remains always wary of getting carried away by its own horses into a career of thoughtless commitment.

The debunking of human mastery. This prudence leads to my last point of convergence, the status of human mastery. In the straw man standing for “the Enlightenment” in postmodern discourse, three interconnected features are usually taken as main targets for denunciation: universal reason, emancipation and autonomy. All three come together in the figure of “the modern subject” as master-of-his-destiny. The process of emancipation implied in the notion of *Enlightenment* or *Aufklärung* leads to a state where the subject can “de-subjectify” himself, gain access to “objective” knowledge and give himself the best possible laws which he will have devised thanks to his universally rational knowledge. At the horizon of this process lurks Laplace’s dream of a Central Intelligence Agency which could trace the current position of every object in the universe, understand the laws of physics, and therefore be in a position to determine all future movements of every single body. At the higher level of complexity represented by human societies, a similar enterprise of measurement, understanding and calculation, developed by the “social sciences”, will allow mankind to devise for itself laws capable of maximizing its common happiness. Condorcet’s *Esquisse* usually gives a historical (and historically highly pathetic) face to this emancipatory project (eloquently summarized by Lyotard in many letters of his *Postmodern Explained*).

How does the *Manuscript* stage such a project? The overarching structure of the narrative seems indeed articulated precisely along the lines of an (individual) process of emancipation. If, as Docherty puts it, “the Enlightenment aimed at human emancipation from myth, superstition and enthralled enchantment to mysterious powers and forces of nature through the progressive operations of critical reason” (5), van Worden does indeed ultimately free himself from his fanatical infatuation to honor, from his various religious prejudices, as well as from his episodic fear of the supernatural. Dominique Triaire goes as far as presenting the protagonist as an image of the Enlightenment’s triumph : “The *Manuscript* is [...] a metaphorical narrative of the Revolution: Alphonse appears in the first days as a child of the Ancien Régime, but he will manage to adopt the ideals of the young bourgeoisie, the daughter of the Enlightenment. Van Worden represents an anti-Potocki, the Revolution as successful; he will find his place in the new social order” (219).

Moreover, the novel also presents another striking image of truly impressive mastery in the Gomelez. Here is a Central Intelligence Agency capable of controlling every aspect of van Worden’s reality, of manipulating it (and him) in

exactly the direction they had planned for their own purpose. Nothing seems to escape their grip, to the point where the most inconceivable events of the first hundred pages eventually make perfect sense, once the organization's unlimited power of delusion is ultimately revealed. In a paradox remarkably suggestive of a central contradiction of modernity, it is by going through a phase of total alienation (during which he is completely subjected to the Gomelez' machination) that van Worden ultimately becomes free.

This gleaming illustration of human mastery is in fact much more "modern" than the caricatural master portrayed by postmodernity. Rather than focusing on an individual (Robespierre, Stalin, Pol Pot, etc.), the novel locates the Agency in an *organization*. Less than the person of the sheik, who never appears particularly powerful as a character, it is the power of the Gomelez as a collective agent which the novel conveys to us most forcefully. As we have already seen, Potocki brings down from heaven into a purely human world the figure of the all-powerful god (or evil genius) in the deceptive face of which Descartes constructed his self. It is now other humans, associated into a omnipotent organization, which can control my universe, manipulate me in the labyrinth of their inextricable deception, and even make me doubt of my very existence.

Is this to say that the *Manuscript* prefigures Orwell's *1984*? Obviously not: Potocki's tale is too interested in twin sisters to leave much room for any Big Brother. What the novel stages is rather a systematic debunking of any figure pretending to occupy a position of mastery. The "archi-ironique" tone of the novel is the first device which prevents any character, any institution, any system, any ideal from gathering enough credibility to appear as threatening. Seen through the eyes of his fool, no master is likely to command much respect. On another obvious (thematic) level, the novel multiplies the depictions of ridiculous attempts at mastery: Diègue Hervas (in his pretension to master the complete circle of human knowledge), van Worden senior (in his fanaticism to master the infinite subtleties of the *point d'honneur*), as well as, indistinctly, all the father figures (in their hopeless efforts to guide the behavior of their children, see Coccaro, ch. 3) illustrate the fatal failure of any would-be master, invariably condemned by the logic of the narrative to bite the dust in the end.

And yet, what about the two central examples we just encountered? Doesn't Alphonse become an enlightened master of his destiny? Aren't the Gomelez sufficiently skilled at manipulating illusions to become masters of the world? Precisely not! And since this may be the most strikingly postmodern feature of the whole narrative, we may need to pause and reflect for some time on the status of the novel's controversial ending. A good example of the controversy is provided by a discussion which took place during the Warsaw Conference dedicated to Potocki in 1972. Karel Krejci stressed the "superficiality and banality of the ending, which contrasts with the refinement of the exposition" and which could be explained, according to him, either by Potocki's depressed mental state during the last years of

his life, or even by the fact that the novel may have been left unfinished by its author, and completed hastily by its first translator, Chojecki²⁹. In holding this view, Krejci was in fact expressing a feeling that most readers of the *Manuscript* certainly experienced as they closed the book: after 700 pages of a masterful narrative build-up, the epilogue *does* indeed appear botched and leave the reader somewhat disappointed. True, we are given a final display of fireworks, but the explosion takes place underground, sounding very much like a narrative dud. As the sheik provides a rational explanation which dissolves all the disturbing illusions displayed during the previous sixty-five days, one can hardly help wondering what was the real point of such a virtuosic display.

It is precisely the absence of reality in the ending of the novel which has appealed to other interpreters. During the discussion following Krejci's remarks, Maciej Zurowski objected that, on the contrary, the "finale was a masterpiece", whose main achievement, according to Jean Fabre, consisted in its very nothingness (*une pure néantisation, une rêverie du néant*) (*Jean Potocki et le Manuscrit*, 218-219). In their rich and multidimensional analysis of the epilogue, both François Rosset and Luc Fraisse stressed the central void which the novel's ending designates at its very core: like a last curtain drawn on the *théâtre du romanesque*, the epilogue both covers up and denounces the emptiness of the stage as well as the irreality of the fiction which briefly filled it with illusions; in its very refusal to provide the comfort of a final message, the ending forces the reader to look at the narrative construction itself as the sole *raison d'être* of the literary enterprise (see Rosset, 198-205); the exhaustion of the (supposedly inexhaustible) goldmine on which the Gomelez had built their power is at the same time a metaphor of the author's exhausted inspiration and a send-off signal for the literary work; as the fictional world (*mine tarie*) passes the relay to the real book (*manuscrit conservé*), reality appears as what shuts off the production of meaning: "once the labyrinth has been destroyed, once the education has been completed, then starts true life, which is to say that there is nothing left to narrate" (Fraisse, 128-138).

All these interpretations are certainly correct in focusing on the way the epilogue stages the juncture between reality and fiction, since it is at this juncture that the question of *meaning* is raised most vividly³⁰. The end is *disappointing* because of its refusal to make a *point*, that is, a point which would go beyond the inner play of the fiction. In other words: after the sheik's rational explanation of all the spectres and mysteries which haunted van Worden's experience, everything *makes sense* but, simultaneously, everything appears as *devoid of any satisfactory meaning*. The virtuosic display of illusions falls flat — of a flatness, a depthlessness considered by some as "the supreme formal feature" of postmodern

²⁹ Karel Krejci, "Le roman du comte Jean Potocki: sa génologie et sa généalogie" in *Jean Potocki et le Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*, op. cit., pp. 215-216.

³⁰ For a symptomatic and stimulating rumination on the status of meaning in a postmodern world, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le sens du monde*, Paris: Galilée, 1993, especially pp. 11-30.

artifacts³¹. As we have already seen above, Potocki denies his reader any “depth of meaning” by preventing his characters from gaining any real psychological consistency. The “waning of the affect” (Jameson, 10) constantly illustrated in the *Manuscript* contributes to the anti-climactic nature of its epilogue: Alphonse mentions his father’s death with the same brevity and unaffected tone he will use to list his military promotions. The novel ends without any of the weight of pathos a narrator is expected (by us modern readers) to bring to his final words. The affective dimension implied in the experience of putting an end to an enterprise (producing a sense of loss, sadness, nostalgia, hope, etc.) is erased from the narrative — just like, according to Jameson, the depthlessness of Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes* prevents the affective interplay of expression and projection taking place in front of Van Gogh’s *Pair of Boots*. Such “waning of the affect” deprives us of the “human meaning” we have come to expect from (post-Romantic) novels.

But, more importantly in my view, if the last pages of the *Manuscript* have been perceived by many as lacking in depth of meaning, it is mostly because they do not attempt to anchor the *petites histoires* told by the novel in a superior master-narrative, which would provide a “message” transcending the fictional world to guide the reader in her real-life (ideological, existential, political, etc.) dilemmas. On this level, the *Manuscript* perfectly satisfies Lyotard’s requirement for a “postmodern fable” to be “in no way finalized towards the horizon of an emancipation”³².

To be sure, Alphonse is enlightened by his sixty-six days in the Sierra Morena. But what does this enlightenment lead to? A few successful financial investments, the title of general, a few meetings with his cousins and the children born from their unions, the position of governor bringing him “the charms of a quiet life” (MS 631/669) as well as the opportunity to copy and seal his manuscript for his family’s future records. Good for him, the reader might say, but what does that leave *us* with? He did indeed “find his place in the new social order”, as Triaire noted, but, as Fraisse also suggested, of such a flat and bourgeois definition of success, there seems to be nothing meaningful to say.

Similarly, the Gomelez are perfectly good at manipulating their victims in their world of delusions, but they ultimately appear to be *good for nothing*. Granted, they manage to enroll Alphonse among their ranks and get offsprings of his blood, which was the purpose of their three-month long machination. But this brilliant success can scarcely hide the extent of their overall collapse. The almost all-powerful organization built over generations of patient efforts in order to conquer the world and convert it to Islam finds itself, in the last pages, out of troops, out of

³¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Culture of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 9.

³² Jean-François Lyotard, “A Postmodern Fable” in *Postmodern Fables*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 92.

resources and, worst of all, out of project. As is the case for the novel itself, their success in enlisting van Worden has *no point*. It will make no difference for their doomed future. Nor, by the way, does the defeat of a Muslim conspiracy give anyone reason to salute a Christian victory. The religious, political, ideological framework which would give meaning to such words as “defeat” and “victory” has simply been pulled from under the feet of History’s agents. The Central Intelligence Agency may be all-powerful in manipulating Alphonse’s experience in the Sierra Morena, but what we witness in the book are the last sixty-six days of its existence, before its unglamorous self-destruction in the mine’s final implosion.

It is significant that this implosion apparently causes no human casualty. To paraphrase a famous postmodern anthem, it’s the end of the Gomelez’ world as they knew it, but everybody feels fine. As each conspirator walks away with his share of the common loot (from 50 000 to a million *sequins*), they all have reasons to cheer. The real victim is left unmourned: it is *the organization* itself. It looks as if, like Margaret Thatcher, nobody among the Gomelez believed in (secret) “societies” because all they ever encountered were only “individuals”. And along with the organization goes its project. Lyotard is certainly right in presenting the *project* as that which “gives modernity its characteristic mode”: during the modern period, legitimacy has come from “a future to be accomplished”, a “universal Idea”, or the “Idea of a universal subject” whose emancipation would justify (and provide meaning to) our actual practices. He also describes perfectly the *Manuscript*’s ending when he argues — against Habermas — that “the project of modernity (the realization of universality)” is not merely “incomplete”, but has been “destroyed, «liquidated»”³³. This is precisely what is at stake in the epilogue. As the Gomelez’ project of world mastery is eventually traded for a few *sequins*, it is very literally «liquidated», transformed into liquid assets — which the banker Moro suggests Alphonse should invest in an already global market: “you must buy property in Brabant, in Spain and even in America. Please allow me to see to this” (MS 627/665). The frustration felt by the readers of the epilogue (wondering what is the meaning of Alphonse’s success) echoes very closely the one experienced by the postmodern subject faced with the “victory” of capitalism: “Success is the only criterion of judgment technoscience will accept. Yet it is incapable of saying what success is, or why it is good, just, or true, since success is self-proclaiming, like a ratification of something heedless of any law. It therefore does not complete the project of realizing universality, but in fact accelerates the process of delegitimation” (Lyotard, *Postmodern Explained*, 18-19).

The novel’s ending is indeed a masterpiece, crowning the masterful build-up of the narrative construction with a radical debunking of mastery. Such is probably the most truly postmodern dimension of the *Manuscript*, if one follows Jameson in equating postmodernism with “the cultural logic of late capitalism”. It portrays the

³³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 18.

human subject as caught in a web of simulacra artificially generated by other humans to lure him under meaningless banners, emptied of any substantial allegiance, and ultimately resorbed into cash benefits. Unprecedented means of manipulating our human world coalesce into Decentered Unintelligent Agencies which have given up any socio-political project and strive mainly to maximize their short-term profit in a headless race towards the self-destruction of their source of wealth and power. The corpses, spectres and ghosts faced by Alphonse at the beginning of his journey prefigure the spiritual death and the *revenants* his postmodern grandsons will have to face after the exhaustion of their *revenus*.

“Modernity was lived in a haunted house.” (Bauman, 140) Look for spectres and you will probably see them everywhere. The same is certainly true of the “ghostly” postmodern. So — apart from the minor (but vital) profit a literary work makes by lending itself to such exercises — what is to be gained through a redescription of Potocki’s novel in the vocabulary of the postmodern?

First, it could invite us to exert more prudence in our characterization of modernity. The Enlightenment, in its French incarnation at least, was everything *but* “an era of certainty”: as Bauman himself acknowledges later, only a gross oversimplification can allow us to pretend that modernity “seems never to have entertained similar doubts [as raised in the postmodern age] as to the universal grounding of its status” (135). If an author like Diderot deserves to be counted among the tenors of the Enlightenment, the most superficial reading of his work should convince anyone of the profound uncertainty at work at the very core of modern thought. The fact that Potocki wrote at the very end of the Enlightenment (in particular after the trauma of the French Revolution) should not prevent us from seeing that he expressed doubts already voiced by many among the *Philosophes* themselves. As a consequence, his skeptical staging of the excesses of rationalism and his pessimism about the possibility of human mastery are less a *condemnation* than a *furthering* of the thought developed by the Enlightenment. Günter von Kirn had already clearly indicated that “Potocki pushes the critical thinking characteristic of Enlightenment philosophy against the Enlightenment itself, not in order to attack it, but in order to further its skeptical attitude by turning it against itself” (222).

Potocki, as well as Diderot, provides a concrete illustration of “the implication of the postmodern within the modern itself”³⁴. The point has already been made countless times that, in spite of its deceptive labeling, the “post”-modern is less to be conceived as what comes *after* modernity than as its ever-present darker side. Lyotard, among others, has been particularly clear on this issue:

³⁴ Nick Kaye, “Thinking postmodernisms. On T. Docherty After Theory, and F. Jameson Postmodernism”, *Critical Criticism*, 14, 1992, p. 217.

“Rather we have to say that the postmodern is always implied in the modern because of the fact that modernity, modern temporality, comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself into a state other than itself. [...] Modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity. [...] Postmodernity is not a new age but the rewriting of some features claimed by modernity, and first of all modernity’s claim to ground its legitimacy on the project of liberating humanity as a whole through science and technology. But as I have said, that rewriting has been at work, for a long time now, in modernity itself”³⁵.

It is this active and unceasing “rewriting” of modernity by itself which may legitimize the exercise in redescription carried out in this article. Beyond easy oversimplifications, (re)writers like Potocki or Lyotard are the ones who carry the furthest the unsettling questions seeded by the *Philosophes*.

A basic precaution in order to clarify our ideas could consist in questioning the equation established among most participants in the postmodern debate between Modernity and Enlightenment. The disturbing historical gap between the “ideological” breakthrough of modernity (reaching full speed around 1750) and its “aesthetic” counterpart (maturing really in the second half of the 19th century) should warn us of a possible major flaw in our periodization. One can only wonder what would have happened if the debate about the “project of modernity” had coalesced around the 1880s rather than around the 1780s, i.e., on the other side of the major trauma constituted by the Industrial Revolution.

In a reflection which attempts, precisely, to situate the postmodern in relation to transformations in the productive process (the “formal” vs the “real” subsumption of labour within capital, the latter corresponding roughly to the development of the IT revolution, “globalization” and Jameson’s “late capitalism”), Antonio Negri asks whether “the postmodern is a new form of romanticism” in its “negation of the revolution of the Enlightenment”³⁶. In other words: does one find anticipations of the postmodern in Potocki simply because our culture, for two centuries, has been oscillating between a brighter (1780s, 1960s) and a darker (1810s, 1980s) side of Modernity? Even though such a circular and disenchanted view seems to please many of our contemporaries, Negri suggests that, while both romanticism and the postmodern symptomatize a transformation in the relation between subjectivity and capitalist domination, they each react to a very different phase in the development of the productive process. The characteristic feature of

³⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, “Rewriting Modernity” in *The Inhuman*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, pp. 25 & 34.

³⁶ Antonio Negri, “Postmodern” (1986) in *The Politics of Subversion. A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989, p. 201.

our age, according to Negri, is to be found in the fact that most of the Western populations are now being transformed into intellectual workers, who carry their productive tools (fixed capital) within their brain. This evolution will have far-reaching, and still inconceivable, consequences: by identifying the main means of production with the intellectual potential of the workers themselves, by making it necessary for the reproduction of capital to invest in the education of the labour force, by relying always more heavily on the production and communication of information, by encouraging the flexibility (suppleness) of the work force, by having to take into consideration the body's affects in order to guarantee proper functioning of the workers' brain, a drastically new logic of production of subjectivity³⁷ is taking shape under our very (short-sighted) eyes.

Now, isn't it precisely such a process of production of subjectivity which is investigated and displayed throughout the *Manuscript*? It is difficult to imagine a more striking illustration of the emancipatory promise, as well as of the inherent dangers, of "productive biopolitics"³⁸ than the collective production of offsprings for the Gomelez family through the necessary (re)education of van Worden's brain and the manipulation of his body's affects. Drugs and fascinations, "sociétés du spectacle" and parodies of moral maxims, History lessons and geometrical demonstrations, all concur in a formative enterprise made successful by an artful mastery of an *in-formation technology*: while Alphonse is originally attractive as a mere source of semen (and of *proles*), it is clear from the beginning that the real stakes of the narrative concern his self-consciousness, with all its lures, delusions, lapses, aberrations, contradictions, incompleteness, and plasticity. At the end of the process, a re-born and re-tooled subject has learned to be flexible, to play his role and find his place in the collective network of power and communication which produced him, and which will in turn be reproduced through his ephemeral participation.

Such is the story that modernity keeps rewriting from Diderot and Potocki to Lyotard and Negri: the constant metamorphosis of a spectral subject. Like all lost souls, the subject is given no natural place in the world. Like all ghosts, it refuses to die. Like any old *revenant*, it is now coming back under a scary and unrecognizable guise: collective rather than individual, means of production instead of end in itself, object of manipulation as much as source of agency.

The role played by the spectre (of the subject) in this work of "rewriting" is perfectly illustrated by the story of Athenagoras, adapted from Pline and inserted

³⁷ "The real paradox is that the more mobile and flexible the human quality is, and the more abstract the productive capacity is, the more collective the world and the subject are. The 'primitive accumulation' of capital, as it is described by the classics, broke every natural and social tie and reduced the subject to a mere quantitative entity and a purely numerical existence in the market. On the contrary, the abstraction which is formed today is the one that permeates human intercommunicability and which, on this level, constructs the solidity of communitary relationships on the new reality of the subjects" (Negri, "Postmodern", op. cit., p. 207).

³⁸ See Toni Negri, *Exil*, Paris: Mille et une nuits, 1998, pp. 17-36, in particular 30.

into the 11th day of van Worden's travels — in a tale which provides a striking model for the *hauntology* which Derrida evokes as the *revenant* of classical ontology³⁹. After having acquired at a “reasonable” (i.e., bargain) price a haunted house, the philosopher Athenagoras, afraid of imagining “idle phantoms”, “concentrated his mind, his eyes and his hands on his writing”. As the spectre came around and loudly rattled his chains, the philosopher “went on writing as though nothing untoward had happened”. Invited by the ghost to follow him into the courtyard where the apparition soon vanished, he put some grass and “*feuilles*” [“leaves” but also “sheets of paper”, “pages”] on the ground to locate its place of disappearance. He had it dug out the following day, uncovering bones caught in chains — for which he provided a proper burial: “and ever since the corpse was paid its last respects, it no longer disturbed the peace of the house” (MS 126/147).

In the haunted house of modernity, nobody believes any longer in ghosts, not even the theorists of the postmodern, who flatly acknowledge their incapacity to define the idle phantom they pursue. Yet, no matter how much one writes, one cannot make oneself totally deaf to the calls for emancipation coming from long forgotten victims: no (ir)rationalization can let us ignore the obvious fact that someone (or something) is in chains, and in pain. Our senseless but not meaningless task consists therefore in heeding the call of this *spectre en souffrance* (in the existence of which nobody dares to believe), and in devoting a few of our pages to marking its point of vanishing, which may some day be its point of surprising resurgence... I know of no more suggestive depiction of the task of the literary critic in the postmodern age.

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 10.