

Karlis Racevskis, *Modernity's Pretenses: Making Reality Fit Reason from Candide to the Gulag*,

Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. 161 pages.

"Pretense", in its Latin root *praetendere*, refers to the action of drawing a curtain in front of a stage or a scene. In his new book *Modernity's Pretenses: Making Reality Fit Reason from Candide to the Gulag*, Karlis Racevskis explains that he takes pretense to "sum up a procedure that is characteristic of [modernist] attempts at capturing the meaning or the truth of "reality" (ix). The curtain, in other words, is an intentional veiling of processes essential to the functioning of Western society through the creation of images and discourses about itself. These images and discourses include a sovereign subject capable of understanding and transforming reality through the use of reason in a progressive model of history.

As the author had argued in his earlier book *Postmodernism and the Search for Enlightenment*, a major theme of structuralist and poststructuralist critique is the unveiling of such images and discourses. The purpose of this latest book (which the author well achieves) is to further the critique by providing several concrete, detailed instances of "pretense", and "to consider the production of abstract systems of rationalizing as a basic strategy marking the installation and maintenance of the historico-cultural period known as modernity" (ix). As the subtitle of the volume indicates, the gulag is an extreme case that tests these abstract systems to their limits; and by examining gulag writing, the Soviet system, and Latvian *dainas* in this context, Racevskis brings fresh insights to the well-trodden territory of critiques of Enlightenment.

Racevskis begins his book with an eloquent and solidly researched survey and analysis of critiques of the above-mentioned pretenses of modernity. At issue primarily is the position of the subject in relation to the world: since Bacon and Descartes the subject has been posited as autonomous; the world, a distinct object over which the subject is in control. The universal and immutable principle of reason is that subject's tool for making sense of the world and for controlling, or even dominating it. Even language has been complicit in maintaining the "myths of reason" - its syntactical patterns make subject-object relations appear inherently natural (9). Racevskis points out, relying on Antonio Damasio's recent work on neurobiology, that the distinction between subject/mind and object/body is much more complex: the mind encompasses the entire body; it is less an originatory of understanding as its recipient (61). Jean-Luc Nancy problematizes the relationship even further by dissolving any distinction between subject and object: "We no longer *have* meaning, because we *are* ourselves this meaning" (4).

The problem with modernity that these critiques highlight is its inability to recognize the hermeneutical nature of truth and interpretation. No longer is truth to be sought in an origin or a telos because the postmodernist recognizes and accepts that truth is a product of the same discursive regimes that also govern the subject's culture and traditions. As Jean Grondin explains, it is no longer understanding, but rather *misunderstanding*, that is to be taken to be the starting point of interpretation. Understanding after all necessarily requires the reduction or assimilation of the object's difference and specificity (48).

Racevskis's discussion of the Latvian *dainas* provides an original and persuasive debunking of the "universality" of the modernist Western conceptions of rationality, subjectivity, and history as progressive. (Vytautas Kavolis's *Moterys ir vyrų lietuvių literatūroje* similarly examined the worldview expressed by the Lithuanian folk tales and *dainos*, although his purpose was to examine gender). The value system expressed by the *dainas* shows none of the "universal" desire to dominate or to control nature or others, nor is there exhibited any notion of cultural or religious superiority. Community is the predominant ethical framework, understood as a series of concentric circles around the individual, family, county, country, and the worlds of human beings, nature, and gods.

Another value governing the Latvian worldview is work, which is the tie that harmoniously binds the individual to the community and to nature. The role of women as seen in the *dainas*, according to Racevskis is key: women composed, performed, and transmitted the *dainas*. Unlike the traditional Western privileging of a priestly caste or an intellectual or

artistic elite to give voice to a people's experience, here it was an egalitarian, communitarian undertaking - the people speaking for themselves.

Racevskis argues that since the cultural ethos as expressed in the *dainas* offers values and beliefs strikingly different from those espoused by the Western philosophical tradition, it thus obligates the Western ethos to recognize itself as simply one worldview among many. Indeed, the Western ethos is revealed to be "...limited in its monotheistic, patriarchal, colonizing, capitalistic, and militaristic guises" (122).

Throughout the text Racevskis offers illustrations of the Enlightenment project taken to the limit with examples from the Soviet Union. He cites the Soviet Constitution as "one of the most explicit and thorough statements of the hopes and confidence the Enlightenment bore for the emancipation of humankind" (17). This statement, however, was also "one of the most explicit and thorough" hoaxes in human history, since all the rights and freedoms it promised its citizens were available only on paper.

Two extremely evocative chapters at the end of *Modernity's Pretenses* examine what the twentieth-century phenomenon of gulag writing reveals about modernity. This new genre authored by the victims of State-sponsored terror can indeed be seen as a symptom of an era seeking to achieve the goals of progress and emancipation by repressive and genocidal means. Ironically as Racevskis points out, the gulag, in many ways the ultimate consequence of "modernity's pretenses", produced a form of writing which, as described by Eugenia Ginzburg is "not the *whole truth* (for that I could hardly have hoped to know), but *nothing but the truth*" (94). Sometimes called the "literature of witnessing", this genre can be seen as the sole site of reality (although never denying its subjective nature, as seen above in Ginzburg's refusal to totalize the truth) in a world governed by obfuscation of the truth in order to make reality fit Party dogma. Racevskis argues that the activity of writing in Stalin's camps "provided a tenuous but essential link to rationality and humanity; it was an occasion for reflecting on a world gone mad" (118).

As can be seen in these latter citations, gulag writing, a response to the violence caused by modernity taken to the extreme, oscillates between embracing its very tenets on the one hand (it still needs a link to rationality and humanity) while rejecting it on the other (Ginzburg's subjective truth). Racevskis himself is unavoidably ambivalent as well. For example, he cites Foucault's assertion that what is important is not what a subject claims or thinks it is saying, but rather what it says despite itself (80); yet later Racevskis speaks of Ginzburg's *motivation* in writing as being foremost (90). On one level, gulag writing can be seen as that which escapes Soviet attempts to control discourse; that which gets said/written despite itself. On another level, is it appropriate to disregard as unimportant the motivations of the gulag writer, as Foucault would advocate? Questions such as these raise the problem of the applicability -perhaps the ethicality - of poststructuralist theory to the reading of the literature of witnessing. Racevskis importantly raises these difficult questions by juxtaposing two very different bodies of texts; texts which despite themselves address the same problem of modernity's pretenses.

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