

HAROLD FROMM

Andrew Ross, Democritus Junior, and the Curse of Postmodernism

IN 1621, ROBERT BURTON, A RECLUSIVE CLERIC and polymath scholar who lived among the fellows at Oxford, published his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, a monumental compendium of Classical and Renaissance learning that went through many editions as one of the most popular books of its time. Adopting the persona of Democritus Junior, in honor of “the laughing philosopher” who took human follies in his stride, Burton—with bemused and often dotty wit—looked kindly on the sorry mess of human history in the West, trying to wrest some order from the chaos and madness of conflicting opinions and bizarre customs he found in the multiplicities of his heritage. Retelling or quoting practically everything written—from the Greek and Roman classics through the church fathers and Renaissance poets and playwrights—Burton developed a wildly allusive, madcap style that leaves one feeling slightly dizzy. Speaking about the misery of scholars, for example, he writes:

Leonartus Fuchsius, Felix Plater, Hercules de Saxonia, speak of a peculiar *fury*, which comes by overmuch study. Fernelius puts *study*, contemplation, and continual meditation, as an especial cause of madness: and in his 86th Consultation cites the same words. Jo. Arculanus, amongst other causes reckons up overmuch study: so doth Levinas Lemnius. *Many men* (saith he) *come to this malady by continual study, and night-waking* . . . : and such, Rhasis adds, *that have commonly the finest wits*. Marsilius Ficinus puts Melancholy amongst one of those five principal plagues of students. . . .¹

And so on for a thousand pages. For each subject discussed, endless sources are cited and quoted, providing evidence first for one position and then its opposite, until finally Burton decides, insofar as he is capable of deciding anything, that the truth lies somewhere in between.

It's not the case that Burton is totally without opinions of his own, but his head has been filled to self-cancelling overflow by the bibliography of his day, not to mention the conflicts and doubts generated about medieval truisms by the burgeoning New Science which, as his contem-

¹ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. by Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith (New York, 1938), p. 259.

porary, John Donne, had put it, "calls all in doubt." A good case could be made for Burton as an early warning system for postmodernism, a sweet learned wacko whose crumbling, overrich universe turned his brains into a maelstrom of intellectual fragments that no longer fit into any coherent system.

As I read Andrew Ross's latest collection of essays, *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature's Debt to Society*,² echoes of Burton's voice kept wafting through the static of this relentless overload of postmodern fragments, just as they did in his previous book, *Strange Weather*:

A chronology of twentieth-century channelers would run from pioneers like Eileen Garret, Alice Bailey, the channelers of the *Urantia Book*, Edgar Cayce, and Jane Roberts's "Seth," to the more recent international flood of trance technicians: the Findhorn circle, the Columbia University psychologists who channeled *A Course in Miracles*, Elizabeth Clare Prophet (recent architect of the great Montana bomb shelter), J.Z. Knight's "Ramtha," Kevin Ryerson's multiple entities, Jach Pursel's "Lazaris," Jessica Lansing's "Michael," Penny Torres's "Mafu," Thomas Jacobson's "Dr Peebles," Ruth Norman's "Tesla," Shawn Randall's "Torah," Ken Carey's Starseed Transmissions, Sanya Roman's "Orin" . . .³

and so on, a compulsive, compendious, recondite, intemperate enumeration of authorities, reeled off in a burst of half-demented virtuosity. Yet what has it finally produced but almost unreadable evidence of . . . of what?

If Burton, a cleric who gathered information mostly from books, interspersed his databank of authorities and examples with spurts of autobiography as an unworldly recluse, Ross as academic critic relieves his dense forays into popular culture with reminiscences of a boyhood in Scotland, of conversations heard and overheard in a shop in New York's SoHo or a swimming pool in Waikiki, and with recurring apologies for not being an ethnographer in the field but only a worldly/unworldly scholar—dependent (like Burton) on secondary sources such as books and magazines. If Ross has any claim to achievement, it's the sheer ability to get all this stuff into his head, to digest it with such obsessive gusto, to attempt, with however limited success, to turn it into some sense.

In a shrewd and ironic article in *New York* magazine (Nov. 14, 1994), Rebecca Mead gives us a profile of Ross (complete with several goofy photos) as a hip, iconoclastic rock star/professor in his popular classes at N.Y.U., whose positions, however strong in the lecture room, are hard to pin down in his writings. "Ross," she acutely observes, "wears his

² THE CHICAGO GANGSTER THEORY OF LIFE: *Nature's Debt to Society*, by Andrew Ross. Verso. \$24.95.

³ *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits* was published by Verso in 1991.

learning lightly but his knowingness heavily.” But despite this knowingness, one of the pervasive problems for his readers is the uncertainty as to where this overwhelming learning in popular culture is taking us, for it is a knowingness sprung from an epistemology that claims little or nothing can be known. His favorite locutionary device, “On the one hand . . . on the other hand,” is an oft-repeated testimony to the undecidability of things and the inconclusiveness of all conclusions in the postmodern data factory. Even when this knowingness takes on an air of Foucaultian paranoia (as in his highly critical accounts of the self-regarding power that underlies the institutions of capitalist society), the paranoia itself comes off as inauthentic, as a pose, as another one of his multiple personae, since, “on the other hand,” he routinely recants much of the critical unmasking he has just performed. Not even paranoia can be authentic in a socially constructed universe of equally plausible antinomies produced by informational overload.

Reading Ross’s last three books (beginning with *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* in 1989)⁴ confirms my depressing sense of recent postmodern critical writing: databank-style learning, a lack of persuasive opinions (apart from the automatic obeisances to race, gender, and class), and an inability to produce clear, graceful, engaging critical prose. The results are books at the margins of both credibility and readability.

As I struggle with Ross, Lawrence Buell (whom I discussed in Winter 1996), and Donna Haraway, for example, I find myself more engaged with their books’ formal properties than with their contents, because their narrative personae fail to convey authority, a failure that is not a question of insufficient learning but of insufficient belief in what they themselves are saying. (Can a postmodern author be an authority?) In the case of Ross, his books are collections of pieces, some previously published, for which he has written new general introductions to pull together what he claims to be saying in the hundreds of pages that follow. I say “claims” because in *Strange Weather* and *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life* he only *imagines* he has written books on the subjects he introduces. The mere resurfacing of a set of themes through loosely related essays is a far cry from coherent argument, a failing Ross himself defensively acknowledges in the introduction to *No Respect* when he remarks that to do justice to the variety of his contents it was necessary “to refuse any high theoretical ground . . . and to enter the fray.” After these impressive introductions, however, things rapidly begin to fall apart as the recalcitrance and overload of the material become only too apparent. In “The Ecology of Images,” for example, an essay in *Chicago Gangster*, he begins by discussing the Gulf War and its media representations, then billboards on highways, Susan Sontag on photography, Bill McKibben on information and ecology, TV’s treatments of the environ-

⁴ *No Respect* is from Routledge.

ment, science fiction, then launches into a long rambling excursus on military test bombing sites in Nevada. As each of these themes is indulged with little sense of its strategic role in the essay as a whole, the effect is more like a sequence of surreal music videos than a constructed argument. Although the ecology theme is recurrent, the whole loosely assembled edifice finally collapses under its own uncontrolled weight, the narrative energies scattered and diffused. And for Ross the problem seems to be getting worse. In the early *No Respect*, the essays *really are*, as he claims, about intellectuals and popular culture. At least two, "The Popularity of Pornography" and "Defenders of the Faith and the New Class," are first rate, perhaps the only ones in these collections with sufficient intellectual and rhetorical power to persuade. Otherwise, his later essays tend to be too long, rambling, self-indulgent, and inconclusive. There is a depletion of substance and a straining for effect.

Given postmodernism's repudiation of "humanism," its obsession with "information," its inability to "believe" much beyond today's political clichés about diversity, its fix on popular culture, and its distrust of representation, of narrative, and even of "clarity," it is hardly surprising that postmodern critical prose seems innocent of the high art required to produce authoritative writing. (Ross informs Richard Rorty: "Nor will it do to insist on the language of clarity and plainspeak. . . . The insistence on plain prose is all too often used as a means of excluding complex or radical insights . . ."⁵ but it seems a little absurd for Ross even to imply such inadequacies in Rorty's potently limp writing.) For a philosophic position that regards *everything* as mediated and nothing as directly accessible, everything as "socially constructed" and nothing as "natural," postmodernism's faith in its own communicativeness—no matter how disorganized, imprecisely expressed, obscure or professionally local, inattentive to the resources of its audience—is hard to explain. Writing is a socially constructed achievement par excellence, an artful contrivance based on intuited as well as learned "rules," not just an outburst of sincerity or self-proclaiming "presence." Yet Ross, for all his hipness and intellectual sophistication, has not fully grasped what a highly mediated contrivance it really is, or how much art is required to promote its readers' comprehension and engagement through skillful manipulation of figure, syntax, and structure. Although he can produce brilliant passages as well as sprinklings of vivacious pop-talk, much of the prose is unremittingly gray and woolly, numbingly abstract, emotionally limp, lacking in the persuasive power that only skilled rhetoric and real belief can achieve: "At the same time, the paradigm of cultural essentialism has also helped to reinforce primordialist views of native custom promoted in the postcolonial period by Westernized national elites seeking a socially cohesive identity for their newly independent states." Multiply *that* by a few hundred pages!

⁵ "On Intellectuals in Politics," *Dissent* (Spring, 1992), p. 264.

Ross describes himself as a leftist libertarian. He sees individual freedoms as inextricably intertwined with social institutions, so he is not a proponent of “government off our backs” but of government that furthers individual developments and pleasures without subjecting them to a domination by any particular overarching world-view. His objection to the “liberal imagination” of Trilling’s day is that it was the imagination of a particular elitist social class trying to enforce (by making them seem “natural”) its moralistic aesthetics upon the entire spectrum of American society, a spectrum various and submerged and thus hardly amenable to the preferences of a coterie of New York intellectuals. In its place he advocates a “liberatory imagination” that allows for irreconcilable diversities and pleasures, both cultural and sexual. Intellectuals need to “*learn from* the forms and discourses of popular pleasure, rather than adopting or supporting a legislative posture in the name of the popular.” He goes rather far, however, when he decides that “the exercise of cultural taste, wherever it is applied today, remains one of the most efficient guarantors of anti-democratic power relations,” and his optimism regarding technology, the pop arts, and cyberculture is hard to share. He doesn’t seem to realize that democratic “community” depends on public standards, both aesthetic and ethical. No community can exist in a free-for-all without hierarchy, so it is a question of which hierarchy will do the best for the most. Would Ross really prefer his life to be determined by the sleazy corporate forces of commercial television rather than by an updated version of Trilling and his cohorts? His own particular strengths, in any case, are those of an academic legatee of the Trilling era, while his weaknesses are the very product of what he extols.

Ross’s position on ecology, a pervasive theme in his books, is similar to Murray Bookchin’s, a “social ecology” that regards environmental problems as offshoots of social problems, though he is without Bookchin’s implausible utopianism (offering instead some nebulous exhortations toward “a radical reorganization of social life on the planet”). His announced theme in *Chicago Gangster* is to “warn against the tendency, surfacing again, and often in the name of environmentalism, to wield biological authority as a model for social well-being. In short, we may soon be engaged yet again [i.e., as in Malthusian/Darwinian politics and economics] in the struggle to prevent nature becoming the referee of our fate.” In particular, he is vociferously against the use of “scarcity” (of natural resources, due to population growth and environmental degradation) as a political weapon by the “haves” to exert control over the “have nots,” whether First World over Third or Gingrichian Republicans over the masses. He believes, along with Bookchin, that it is the inequity of social institutions that causes scarcity rather than simply a failure of natural resources, though it’s important to stress that he is a committed environmentalist who does not regard today’s ecological problems as imaginary. Although he calls his stance “utopian socialism,” unlike many leftist academics who constantly criticize capitalist exploitation and its destruction of people

and places, he is not really hostile to the market economy, which he sees (like Camille Paglia, with whom he has a lot in common) as a source of many of our freedoms. So, for example, the pornography industry has become both a vehicle of capitalist exploitation *and* a means of gratification of diverse sexualities that the liberal imagination would have found *infra dig*. Similarly he finds that popular music, however much disparaged by intellectuals as “commercial,” is made available by industry for *local* reappropriations that eventually do speak for its audiences. And again, parting company with many ecological types, he is not opposed to technology per se but rather to the uses to which it has been put by corporate and military hegemonies.

Like Paglia, Ross has favorable things to say about the Enlightenment, which so many leftist academics now pretend to despise: “However mechanistic, instrumental, and utilitarian, rationalism has also thrown up evolved institutions which are not necessarily linked to capitalism’s grow-or-die ethic. . . . This complex of circumstances and traditions cannot be wholly dismissed as male property, whether in the modern or the post-Neolithic period, without shutting out from history altogether the experience of too many people, especially women. . . .” Even his extensive bashing of science for its rationalist mantle and “single standard of truth” in *Strange Weather* is more than once recanted. Science may be just another socially constructed tale, but when push comes to shove, it’s a tale he is ready to believe.

The *Chicago Gangster* collection starts off badly with an interminable essay on eco-tourism in Polynesia that exhibits the kaleidoscopic side-tracking, mutual cancellations, self-indulgence, knowingness and all the other liabilities of Ross’s writings. Zeroing in on the Mormon-operated Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii, Ross suggests that the Center is an exhibit of Western romantic myths about native cultures that simultaneously attempts to preserve such a culture while turning it into a commercialized specimen of capitalist “high-tech primordialism.” Although an interesting essay on this subject could have been written, by going off into elaborate accounts of the Mormons, of IMAX movies, and whatnot in his characteristic artless way, Ross does a disservice to his remarkable talent for raking up potentially enlightening arcane pop material. Another essay, called “Bombing the Big Apple,” begins (for effect) with some remarks about the bombing of the World Trade Center, although in reality the discussions that follow are about the ways in which the poor and the middle class were displaced from Manhattan’s financial district in order to develop it for global corporate profits, as symbolized by the twin towers. For Ross, the real “bombing” is the treatment by the haves of the have-nots, with glances at environmental racism, social ecology, the shifting of wealth upwards, and the nature of cities. But at key moments that beg for carefully developed arguments, the essay prefers to fall back on politico-literary conceits.

Ross wraps things up with a look at the determinist tendencies of sociobiology, about which he reiterates “the need to resist and chal-

lenge the growing reliance upon the authority of 'nature' to deal with problems that are primarily social both in their origin and in their solution." His fear is that the notion of genes as destiny provides a foundation for totalitarian repression and encourages the ecology movement to constrict human freedoms, again in the interest of the haves. "Unlike the other new social movements, ecology is commonly perceived as the one that says no, the antipleasure voice that says you're never gonna get it, so get used to going without." At times, however, Ross's pro-pleasure optimism (recalling the Counterculture of the sixties) enables him to play down the very real liabilities of worldwide population growth and its degradation of land, air, and water.

Once again I have devoted much of my space to a book's formal qualities rather than its contents. However wild Ross's classroom manner may happen to be, his written thoughts are surprisingly moderate, albeit with periodic eruptions of the elitist anti-elitist's need to *épater le bourgeois* (particularly when he is trying on modish ideas or miming Foucaultian paranoia). His intelligence, his manic industriousness to work up one subject after another in order to speak as well-informed from a fresh perspective, and his failure to fit precisely into any of leftist academia's wearisome niches—all of this is appealing, even if he is not fully believable. That is to say, his frequently middle-of-the-road conclusions—after much glitzy *Sturm und Drang*—undercut his radical postures, his good-sense life-needs conflicting with his academic superstar's image-needs. But my summaries of his books (with all of the detritus left out) are more orderly, intelligible, and convincing than the books themselves and are apt to make them seem better than they really are. It is the curse of postmodernism, its influence on his sensibility and mentality, its generation of protean shallow-rooted personae, that hamstringing his writing, luring him into Burtonian self-cancellation, into artless, often glib and perverse, throwaway expositions, despite—or perhaps because of—the overrichness of his materials and the insights he has aplenty. As an anti-Polonius, he needs to be told, "Less matter, more art."

To glance at Wendell Berry's new collection of essays, *Another Turn of the Crank*,⁶ is to see more vividly the lost world that Ross leaves behind. If the curse of postmodernism on an urban academic like Ross is the plethora of fragments that has produced and nurtured him but is disposed to destroy him after his allotted three minutes of fame (fifteen is no longer possible), the curse on Berry is its destruction of the rich and enabling rural world out of which he has developed and matured, for all practical purposes, as an ecological mystic. With dirt under his fingernails, Berry has no uncertainties about his provenance, his identity, his literary persona, his aesthetics, his ethics, his politics, his goals for humanity. As a lifelong farmer, in 1996 he is a more radical thinker

⁶ ANOTHER TURN OF THE CRANK, by *Wendell Berry*. Counterpoint. \$18.00.