

T H O M A S V A R G I S H

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## Postmodern Authority

“Because you are more authentic the more you resemble what you’ve dreamed of being.”

—La Agrado in *All about My Mother*, Pedro Almodóvar, 1999

### **Introduction: War and Culture**

In the liberal arts the application of ideas to action always takes place in the mind of the individual acting. This alone makes it difficult to justify liberal knowledge, knowledge acquired and valued for its own sake, to those seeking instruction in real, practical situations. And the ultimate practical situation may be found in the state of war. The art and science that applies most importantly and directly to war is that of leadership. How can a knowledge of Homer or Shakespeare, of relativity theory or political philosophy, of advanced mathematics or the art of the fugue make an officer in the field more suited to that radically practical situation? Of course connections between these bodies of knowledge and the issuing of executive decisions can be contrived hypothetically but they are unconvincing because they premise a direct insight into the workings of an individual mind and such insight must always remain tentative at best. I may believe that an acquaintance with Homer will benefit a commander making command decisions but how and when it does so will remain beyond my reach.

The power of liberal knowledge is always latent, always potential. It can only be released through the minds of individuals. No expert, no professor can tell a soldier when and how these materials and methods of thought will prove their value. The liberal arts professor may believe that Homer and Shakespeare (themselves great students of the art of war) will help in the world of practical decisions but their concrete application by any individual officer is unknown and may remain so. Beyond this any ultimate action cannot be predicted in advance because the power and flexibility of liberal knowledge depends precisely on its widely diffusive and personal nature, its refusal to be tied to single practical ends or determined outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

The essay that follows falls into the category of current cultural history. Studies in culture deal with values and with changes in values. This essay analyzes a change in the values that support the exercise of authority in our culture, defining authority simply as why we often do what we are asked to do by someone we recognize as a leader and why we sometimes refuse. The relation of authority to leadership is in itself a complex matter but the existence of the relation is undeniable. How values support or abandon authority is the subject of this essay, most especially how changes in values require changes in the exercise of authority for authority to translate into leadership.

### **Part I: The Destabilizing of Identity**

In the first part of this essay I want to identify challenges to traditional bases of authority posed by recent developments in our general culture. By recent developments I mean certain changes in value that have become prominent since the middle of the twentieth century, that became controversial goals and practices in the social life of western democracies in the nineteen-sixties, and that received a theoretical rationalization in a cultural critique labeled “postmodernism” or “poststructuralism.” I use these two irreplaceable terms even though they seem in danger of becoming derogatory or unfashionable, but I am not attempting to justify or defend the broad course of our cultural and intellectual history over the preceding half century. To the extent that I understand my own values and prejudices I work against arguing “for” or “against” postmodernism and its theoretical expositions. In fact, the gesture of taking polemical positions on such a matter strikes me as weirdly self-indulgent. I wish instead to ask how certain changes in value have altered the nature and practice of *authority*—defined practically as why we often do what people ask us to do and why we sometimes refuse. Then in Part Two I examine certain adaptations that exploit the changes in values for the effective exercise of

authority. Among these are the powerful and expanding techniques of *persuasion* and *improvisation*.

The fact that the term postmodernism became derogatory among certain identifiable groups of European, British, and American academics and journalists—especially those of a nostalgic, traditionalist, old guard cast of mind and as predictably among those who wished to demonstrate a flash breakaway chic—in fact may provide indirect support for my premise: that something significant has happened to traditional values, and perhaps most notably to those values validating the exercise of authority in our culture. From my point of view these traditional values have not lost ground to postmodern theory or to theory of any kind, but to the deeper changes that such theory rationalizes, changes that we may welcome or detest. But whether we approve or scorn the theory, whether we blame it for the changes or not, the traditional values have lost some of their former privilege. They are no longer *the* values in our culture, no longer the acknowledged, dominant ethos. They have been forced to admit another system, a system of challenge, a critique, possibly an alternative. And once this admission is made a very large area of the cultural field has already been ceded. Values do not fluctuate like currencies or securities that can recover quantitatively and rise again to where they were before. Once a value is identified and challenged it has been irrevocably altered, and attempts to restore it to the privileged, unchallenged position it may seem to have occupied previously belong to the fulminations of those who can afford to be marginal.

Of course a value may mutate and remain fundamentally strong. Traditional values retain pervasive influence in contemporary culture and contemporary culture is not synonymous with postmodernism; contemporary culture deals with postmodern influences organically, incorporating them diffusely throughout its many manifestations, surrendering nothing but changing—however modestly—everything. The dynamic of values incorporates every change in the general culture, and our attitudes and commitments, both latent and explicit, respond continuously to every kind of pressure, every kind of depletion and augmentation.

### **Objectivity and Identification**

To remain willfully obtuse to changes in value can turn out to be not only silly but politically self-destructive. On February 4, 1992, in a major address to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Vaclav Havel, then President of Czechoslovakia, asserted both the advantages of knowing what is going on and the dangers of denying it. He used the “end of Communism” as his principle historical

diagnostic. To him this meant the end of a “major era in human history,” an era that began with the Renaissance and carried its ethos through the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, socialism, positivism, and what is sometimes called the “information revolution.” This era, said Havel, was “characterized by rapid advances in rational, cognitive thinking” but it led also to the terminal assumption that everything that exists can be described, analyzed, measured, and appraised by rational, cognitive thinking:

It was an era in which there was a cult of depersonalized objectivity, an era in which objective knowledge was amassed and technologically exploited, an era of belief in automatic progress brokered by the scientific method. It was an era of systems, institutions, mechanisms and statistical averages. It was an era of ideologies, doctrines, interpretations of reality, an era in which the goal was to find a universal theory of the world, and thus a universal key to unlock its prosperity.

Communism, he went on to say, was “the perverse extreme of this trend,” arrogant, simplistic, and ultimately antagonistic to actual human desire and aspiration: “The fall of Communism can be regarded as a sign that modern thought—based on the premise that the world is objectively knowable, and that the knowledge so obtained can be absolutely generalized—has come to a final crisis.”<sup>2</sup>

Havel does not limit his analysis to the fall of Communism, which he treats as an emblem or signature event, a death rattle of the “modern era.” He goes on to make it clear that nations whose dominant culture includes the assumption that all physical, social, and psychological phenomena are “objectively knowable” need to wake up from the dream of objectivity. Havel argues that “The world today is a world in which generality, objectivity, and universality are in crisis.” Instead of looking for general, objective, universal solutions, we “must see the pluralism of the world, and not bind it by seeking common denominators or reducing everything to a single common equation.” He thus attacks not only communism (which in Europe has come to an effective end) but all systems—including the one that rationalizes the free market—that depend exclusively on the values of generality, objectivity, and universality in order to function. And finally he asserts that the politician “of the future” must “above all trust in his own subjectivity as his principle link with the subjectivity of the world” (15).

Before I ask what “the subjectivity of the world” might mean, I want to link Havel’s very broad assertions to the general changes of value that currently affect

the perception and practice of authority. Very generally speaking, postmodernism as it works in philosophy, in social theory, and in aesthetics radicalizes and sometimes inverts traditional cultural values. In its critique of “rational, cognitive thinking” it attempts to show that such modes of thought are in fact not objective, not neutral descriptions of reality, but cultural productions limited by internal contradictions, inconsistencies, and self-justifying methodologies. Postmodernism (or poststructuralism) asserts that rational, scientific thought has arrogated to itself the privileges of antiquity (tradition, practice) formerly claimed by religious doctrine and with a similar lack of justification. It demonstrates that hierarchy and privilege prove to be determining in all forms of analysis and dialectic despite the claims of their practitioners (scientists, philosophers, historians) to unbiased neutrality and objectivity. The very exercise of systemic thinking typically employs methodology that determines the outcome of such thinking; the nature of structure and system may in fact require the effectual (though unrecognized) retraction of the objectivity that the system (rational, cognitive, scientific thinking) putatively serves.

We can take the postmodern critique further toward its effect on authority. We can observe that one of the great benefits of rational, cognitive thinking has been to provide systems of *identification* throughout the physical and social worlds. In such manifestations as positivism and empiricism the techniques of observation, of measurement, of categorization, of systematization seem to find a universal (in Havel’s sense) justification. We can weigh, measure, describe, analyze, replicate, recreate, verify any phenomenon until we abstract its *identity*, an identity that all subscribers to the methodology will be able to recognize, able to agree on. Such a consensus among the converted—those who subscribe to cognitive, rational thinking—appears to provide proof that “the world is objectively knowable.” But if, as poststructuralism asserts, this conclusion is inherent not in the phenomena identified but in the method of identification, then nothing has been “objectively” identified. Instead, the system has *merely* (that is, by an act of methodological imperialism) preserved itself as all privileged or absolute systems do.

And if nothing has been positively identified by empirical or by any other rational means, if no distinguishing general physical or functional characteristics or (to appeal to an earlier epistemology) if no essence, no *quidditas* can be determined, then what happens to the values that underpin authority? The foundational value of antiquity depends on prestige acquired over chronographic (“universal”) time, of what some postmodern theory labels the “diachronic” as opposed to the “synchronic.” But all conscious mental phenomena exist only in the present,

only in the synchronic, where in the words of one of Borges' narrators "all things [that] happen, happen to one, precisely *now*." Thus historical chronology is an irrelevance, even perhaps a subjective fiction itself. So much for antiquity. The value of hierarchy suffers a similar fate: if there can be no stable identification there can be no categorization; if no categorization then no hierarchical structure. Thus no particular hierarchy has any external justification, but serves only to preserve the illusions and the interests of those who sustain it. Hierarchy is at best a dream of order, at worst an arbitrary mechanism for repression. And if all systems contain logical and methodological contradictions, then the value of system itself will support authority only until these are widely recognized—and for an example of this liability we might return, as Havel suggests, to the demise of European communism.

### **Diversity and Self-identification**

The change in the stability of identity lies not in the identifications and identities arrived at but in the *way* things and persons are identified. We can begin by asking how *personal* identity is arrived at now and how that process differs from past acts of personal identification. And what we notice first is a turning away from externally prescribed categories of selfhood and toward the act of self-identification, away from social categorization and toward individual self-description, away from the large general determinations and toward an increasing particularity and pluralism.

I can use my own family background as an illustration. When I was a child my father, who was an immigrant, made a conscious decision not to teach me Hungarian and German because he and my mother, who was the daughter of immigrants, wanted me to become entirely "American," free from the identifying marks of a particular ethnicity. And this was the attitude of very many immigrants from Europe, Asia, and the Latin American nations toward "assimilation," toward "the melting pot." The idea was to bury the particular immigrant ethnicity in the general social identity vaguely called "American." Now this has gone into reverse. Ethnicity with all its variety and particularity has become interesting, desirable, a key and crucial aspect of identity, a means of self-expression, a means to personal freedom, even a means to power. We have street signs in local ethnic languages as well as English; we have ethnic street fairs attended by the general mixed public; we teach the diverse cultural histories of immigrants in our public schools, sometimes in their native language; we rediscover our roots and we even go abroad to find them; we identify people by the continent of their racial origins (Afro-American, Asian, European). We have put the idea of assimilation into reverse and are in

the business of cultural spectrography, rediscovering in the formerly desirable assimilation the currently desirable diversity. Is this diversity a good thing or a bad thing? And would a positive or negative judgment have a place in these pages? The celebration of diversity is a major cultural movement throughout the Western world and the exercise of authority in the practice of leadership—political, military, corporate—has now to take it into account.

The diversity, as we all know, can be ethnic, racial, or gendered. In order to accommodate it without prejudice we prune and refine our language, our manners, and—to the extent that we are willing to try—our social attitudes. The contemptuous, exploitive, condescending treatment of women and minorities that characterized so much of European and American life is now regarded as “unacceptable”—and not primarily because such treatment causes suffering but because it makes no sense in our current social ontology. We recognize that to be female, or black, or of some ethnic nationality is not to have a less fully developed existence. On the contrary, recognition of the particularities of gender, race, and origin now seems necessary to a full life, to full selfhood. Our act of self-identification demands this kind of particularization—and beyond that it demands that we express what we are. It may be that we cannot choose our sex, or our race, or our national origins. But we can choose our relation to these legacies and, in the developing ethos we are now examining, it is our *relation* to these characteristics that determines our identity and not the unchosen characteristics themselves. For this excellent reason we now begin to consider it at best bad manners and at worst an act of aggression to attribute identity to unchosen characteristics, especially if this attributed identity in some way “explains” someone’s actions: we can no longer say that you do that “because you’re a woman,” or “as a black you naturally believe,” or “gay people tend to,” or “that’s your Hungarian origins talking.” If people in a large measure choose their identities then they become self-identified and self-determining. Their difference, not their sameness, is now their freedom.

### **Destabilizing Identity**

From its beginnings, postmodernism has been occupied with the problematic of identification. As is usual in large cultural movements, the aesthetic expression preceded the theory, and postmodern fiction has dwelt with steady intensity over the half century of its development on acts of self-determination and self-identification, the extent to which we can choose our own identity and (with more sinister effect) the degree to which our assumptions about who we are can be denied or grotesquely confirmed. Jorge Luis Borges has a story called “The South”

in which a librarian, of mixed northern European and Argentine descent, Juan Dahlmann, undergoes a serious illness:

In the days and nights which followed the operation he came to realize that he had merely been, up until then, in a suburb of hell. Ice in his mouth did not leave the least trace of freshness. During these days Dahlmann hated himself in minute detail: he hated his identity, his bodily necessities, his humiliation . . .

When he has sufficiently recovered, Juan Dahlmann travels south to a ranch he has inherited from an iconic Argentine grandfather. Dahlmann has always considered himself “profoundly Argentinian,” despite his pedestrian, regular, European life in the city. Now in the South he senses an opportunity to confirm his choice:

*Tomorrow I’ll wake up at the ranch*, he thought, and it was as if he was two men at a time: the man who traveled through the autumn day and across the geography of the fatherland, and the other one, locked up in a sanatorium and subject to methodical servitude.

The train stops and lets him off “practically in the middle of the plain.” He decides to spend the night in the general store. While eating dinner he is ridiculed by a drunken country bully and challenged to a knife fight. An old gaucho throws him a dagger to defend himself. Nothing in his life has qualified Juan Dahlmann for such an encounter, and yet he walks out into the plain to fight (135-139). He has chosen his identity not from his determined social circumstances but from his desires and aspirations.

A disciple of Borges, Julio Cortázar, took up this theme of the mutability of identity in a number of striking postmodern stories. Many of these are in the mode of surrealism or magic realism in which persons, objects, and events undergo violent transformations that are nevertheless somehow appropriate to their natures or aspirations: a man becomes an axolotl, a reader becomes a character in the novel he is reading, a passionate lover becomes a fascist oppressor, an observer becomes a pursuer, a city becomes a rainforest, an artifact becomes a god, a photograph becomes a window on the animate world. The remarkable assertion in each case is that the identity of the object is no longer stable but always potentially volatile, always pressing toward its logical opposite, or its aesthetic double, or its latent psychological or political agenda. A comfortable, barren middle class house is

taken over by mysterious enemies, and the middle class occupants yield it up almost as if they expected to have to. A rich, happy Argentine bride is drawn mysteriously to an abused, Hungarian pauper, travels to her on her honeymoon, and exchanges identities with her in the middle of a bridge.

In Cortázar the transformations are largely unwilling, or at least consciously involuntary, and the effect tends to be shock and horror, even though—like most surrealist juxtapositions—they contain strong elements of aesthetic, political, and psychological decorum. But in postmodern fiction the mutability of identity often appears as desirable, triumphant, beautiful. Near the beginning of Marguerite Duras' *The Lover* the fifteen year old protagonist creates herself out of a number of props: gold lamé shoes, an old silk dress, a man's hat. These props appear inappropriate to the outside world but they work for the girl because they are her own choices, the media of her chosen identity:

If no woman, no girl wore a man's fedora in that colony then. No native woman, either. What must have happened is: I try it on just for fun, look at myself in the shopkeeper's glass, and see that there, beneath the man's hat the thin awkward shape, the inadequacy of childhood, has turned into something else. Has ceased to be a harsh, inescapable imposition of nature. Has become, on the contrary, a provoking choice of nature, a choice of the mind. Suddenly it's deliberate. Suddenly I see myself as another, as another would be seen, outside myself, available to all, available to all eyes, in circulation for cities, journeys, desire. I take the hat, and am never parted from it. Having got it, this hat that all by itself makes me whole, I wear it all the time. With the shoes it must have been much the same . . . <sup>4</sup>

Wishing to be desirable, available, the girl creates for herself a desirable, available identity in defiance of her childhood and the social proscriptions attached to it. She expresses her choice of identity by means of brilliant, original, artistic choice of ornament, of self-presentation. She makes herself into what she wants to be, rejecting the social definitions that would limit her, and in fact calling attention to her rejection of them—the decision to reject them which is the heart of her message to the world.

## “The Subjectivity of the World”

The destabilizing of identity is itself an aspect of a very large and persistent problem in the philosophy of knowledge, one that is key to current changes in the exercise of authority. The subjective/objective dichotomy we encountered in Vaclav Havel’s “End of the Modern Era” is traditionally the major problem of epistemology, the study of how we know what we know and how we determine the status of that knowledge. Can we really know anything objectively? Some philosophers have argued that objective knowledge is impossible: indeed, the premise that the knowing mind knows only its own thoughts is central to the philosophical school of Idealism. David Hume, George Berkeley, and certain other philosophical representatives of eighteenth-century thinking were attracted to the idea that since the mind can never escape from itself, can never actually take note of anything except its own thoughts and perceptions, then there can be no proof of an external world and thus no philosophical escape from subjectivity. The positive idea of objectivity could thus have no more status than any other mental phenomenon. But although Hume managed to show convincingly that there could be no proof of objective reality, he did not accept the proposition of inevitable total subjectivity: Nature, he observed, “has doubtless esteemed it an affair of too great importance, to be entrusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations.”<sup>3</sup>

Hume’s rejection of inescapable subjectivity, based on an urbane assertion of common sense or practical experience and uttered in the context of his full understanding of the idealist argument, serves as a keynote for the almost universal reign of empiricism, of positivism, of all schools of thought that validate above all the evidence of the senses as giving direct contact with the external or objective world. It was not that the scientific method, or in Havel’s words the doctrine that “the world is objectively knowable,” had received conclusive evidential or logical justification. Instead, it was the simple—perhaps too simple—fact that it worked well for us, that it was so apparently in accord with common sense, that it produced such dramatic results, above all that it was so materially profitable, which established it as the dominant practical ethos for the acquisition and demonstration of knowledge from John Locke in the late seventeenth century to the present day, despite the advent of poststructuralism in the second half of the twentieth-century.

In the world of art and fiction, as in the natural sciences, the line of thought that received its systematic rationalization in philosophical Idealism—proofs and arguments that the world is a mental creation—had to bide its time through the reign of late realism, positivism, and empiricism. Then from the late nineteenth century to the Second World War, modernism in its epistemological aspect

straddled uneasily the hiatus between subjective perceiver and perceived object.<sup>6</sup> Then, in the early fiction of postmodernism, the idea that the world can be, or must be, subjectively determined, revived with sudden and dramatic power. A number of the richest examples of this resurgence can again be found in the fiction of Borges, who recaptured and redefined so many of the ideas and techniques that were to become dominant in the second half of the twentieth century. In his fiction “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” the narrator, a man of traditional and methodical scholarly pursuits (a man committed to objective facts) begins, apparently at random, to uncover fragmentary evidence for a geographical region called Uqbar of which no one has ever heard. Strangely, the place receives an entry of several pages in some copies of a major reference work and not in other copies of the same edition. This discovery by the narrator raises the question of the *reality* of Uqbar, of whether it actually exists or is a fraudulent interpolation by some scholarly prankster. The narrator determines that it is a “false country,” a fraud, and dismisses it (9). But the discoveries pointing to Uqbar and another world continue, more substantial discoveries, culminating in an entire *First Encyclopedia of Tlön*. It turns out that this immense work, and the foreshadowing leading up to it, are the productions of a secret society aiming at the presumptuous and irreligious goal of the godlike creation of an entire planet.

The encyclopedia enables the narrator to present an account of the cosmology of *Tlön*, “its conception of the universe.” In order to do so, he refers back to British Idealism and Hume’s arbitrary rejection of Berkeley’s subjectivity. He tells us that Hume’s denial of total subjectivity is “emphatically true as it applies to our world; but it falls down completely in Tlön.” It turns out that “the nations of that planet are congenitally idealist.” This means that for them there exists no reality independent of mental reality. Their fundamental language contains no nouns, in the sense that nouns are supposed to refer to objects outside the linguistic system. The only academic discipline on Tlön is psychology and all others are sub-topics of it. “The men of that planet conceive of the universe as a series of mental processes.” This “extreme idealism” invalidates science, physical causality, and chronological or historical time: “It reasons that the present is undefined, that the future has no other reality than as present hope, and that the past is no more than present memory.” In other words, the mental creation which is called “Tlön” has as its world view the premise that all existence is mental action. This premise, brilliantly illustrated with concrete instances, leads to the ultimate implication of Borges’ brief masterpiece: that reality is (or was) itself a fiction, the passing and dreary illusion of a culture

fortunately awakened to the mature idea that an imagined, subjective life is all we have—and that we live it in an imagined world.

“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” illustrates the movement toward what Havel called the “subjectivity of the world.” It may, of course, be thought that Borges’ story has too little to do with our general everyday culture, that it is an ultra-elegant entertainment for the avant garde, a tour de force for the amusement of academic philosophers. Of course it is such an entertainment, but we have only to ask whether we now see these same themes at work in our popular culture and we find them everywhere.

Mainstream cinema is as usual a good place to look and here the preoccupation with mutable identities and “virtual reality” raises most of the same issues. In *House of Games* (David Mamet, 1987) the characters deal in a complex play of scripting and conning; in *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoven, 1990) the Schwarzenegger character can’t tell reality from his memory implants and for most of the film neither can the audience; in *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) a man’s life, his reality, is programmed for the entertainment of a television audience; in *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg 1999) a virtual reality game becomes indistinguishable from “real” life, pits “players” against “realists,” and raises the *Total Recall* question of how we distinguish between them; in *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) and its sequels a virtual world of everyday “reality” becomes the instrument of oppression; in *The Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) the distinctions we used to depend upon—like those between love and exploitation, pleasure and pain, friendship and enmity, slavery and freedom—are presented as mere temporary indulgences that can apply or not as we (or someone more persuasive) choose them to come and go. In *Seven Psychopaths* (Martin McDonagh, 2012) the temporary creation of subjective reality is represented still more reflexively in three versions of “the final shootout,” one a grotesque burlesque and the others witty travesties with a small dog rather than a desirable heroine as the hostage. And the theme of the subjectivity of the world and its corollary in the destabilizing of identity is exploited in many other and lesser recent movies. None of these films goes as far logically or philosophically as Borges went seventy years ago and most—after looking into the abyss of inescapable subjectivity—lose their nerve and tend to retreat by opting for one privileged reality. But they nevertheless show without a doubt that the problem raised among the philosophers of Idealism three centuries ago has made a decisive entry into our mass culture.

If the world is a vast complex of mental phenomena then the choice of identity must be entirely subjective as well. We can be what we choose to be, and the

constraints are only those that we ourselves recognize. It may be that we cannot transform ourselves beyond the human—into a bear, say, or a bird. And yet we know of cultures where such transformations, such doubling and pluralizing of identity, are not merely permitted but validated, an article of faith and even of experience. Such cultures are not just those native civilizations which Western or European imperialism has managed to subdue or annihilate. The cultures out of which we westerners emerged—Hellenic, Germanic, Middle-Eastern—believed in metamorphoses and transformations of identity, both arbitrary and chosen, for far longer periods than we have denied them. And they supported not only the transformation of human beings into something other but also the tendency of objects, of matter itself, to alter, to become unstable. The important point for our definition and practice of authority is not whether the scientific method validates particular transformations. The important point is that “scientific” (empirical, positivist) validation itself has been challenged, and that now identity can be valued as unstable. Given the postmodern resurrection of the conception of identity as plastic and mutable, what are the consequences for the exercise of authority? To what values can one appeal and what strategies of leadership will prove effective in such a context?

## **Part II: Persuasion, Improvisation, and Reflexivity**

Although still generally regarded as a critique or attack on established methods of reasoning and exploration, postmodernism has from its beginnings contained positive affirmations as well, an alternative ethos, an organic integration of values. And from its beginnings these affirmations have been more evident in postmodernism’s visual and narrative productions than in its theory. In the fiction we can see these values poised to replace those identified as depleted and discredited, those that support the belief in material progress “brokered by the scientific method,” those dependent on the assumption that the world is “objectively knowable” (Havel 15). Certain of these revisionary values, the methods associated with them, and their implications for the exercise of authority form the subject of this section.

The question raised at the end of Part I—what strategies of leadership can now prove effective?—requires a specific answer. I can identify two such strategies, each supported by its accompanying values. I will call these *persuasion* and *improvisation*. Such techniques are not new to the exercise of authority, nor am I the first to identify them as practices in postmodernism. What is new in what follows has to do with the vastly extended flexibility, range, and power of these practices in a

world where objectivity, scientific proof, and stability of identity have lost prestige. What enables the strategies of persuasion and improvisation to acquire such radical extension in our time is the decline in confidence, the loss of infallibility, of the primary traditional supports of authority. It is as if these revisionary practices, waiting modestly in the realm of peaceful social interaction—a realm of conversation, of seduction, of entertainment, of buying and selling—at some point suddenly rushed into the vacuum created by the waning of the preceding ethos and became vast, thrilling, powerful.

And with the emergence of these strategies as primary exercises of authority comes a battery of ethical questions. Given their vastly extended power, what constraints ought to be imposed? Who will impose them? Indeed, can they be controlled to any effective degree? What happens when a strategy traditionally regarded as acceptable in its limited realm suddenly transgresses, bursts free from its accepted sphere, and acquires authentic authority?

### **Persuasion**

In 1999 Douglas Rushkoff published a study of the ways in which our judgments and actions can be manipulated by media, by contemporary marketing, by political spin, by a culture of expertise devoted to specialization and the opinions of experts. Although what he analyzed were techniques of what we commonly call “persuasion,” he titled his book *Coercion*—in part no doubt to raise the interest of the buying public but also to mark the very great extension of the practices he analyzes and their vastly increased influence in much of daily life. He chose a word, “coercion,” long associated with physical force, to call attention to the pervasive manipulation of political opinion and economic choices. He pointed to four stages of manipulation currently in play: these are “tracking, disorientation, redirection, and capture.” Rushkoff wanted to alert his readers to the extent of this manipulation. He argued that by recognizing the techniques of manipulation we will restore “our instinctual capacity to sense what we want” rather than continue passively to accept the shaping influence of the “coercers.”<sup>7</sup>

Rushkoff’s book is widely applicable and his analysis can be extended well beyond the examples he cites. The manipulations he points to can be seen exercising their enlarged powers in various forms of postmodern fiction, film, and social theory for at least the last three generations of our cultural development. One of the earliest and most complete examples is in Alain Resnais’ film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). Here Resnais collaborated with Alain Robbe-Grillet, one of the most important “new novelists” and a foremost theoretical exponent of

postmodern fiction. In his introduction to the English translation of the text of *Last Year at Marienbad*, Robbe-Grillet called the film “the story of a persuasion.” It shows a serious young man attempting to convince a beautiful young woman that she made a commitment to him “last year” at the resort hotel of “Marienbad” (or was it Frederiksbad or Karlstadt or Baden-Salsa?—the uncertainties are part of the persuasion). He claims she promised that if he gave her time, a year, she would leave her companion (her guardian, her lover, her husband, her captor?) and go off with him. He claims that her conditional year is now expired. The young woman assumes at first that the stubborn, importunate young man must be playing a game like the other games the wealthy bored guests play in the ornate baroque hotel. When he remains persistently serious, she says that he must be thinking of another woman, another place. As he continues his persuasion, however, she begins to “remember” aspects of their last year’s contingent encounter—“memories” presented in the film by sudden cuts to brief and differing enactments of the same events, as if she were selecting a version that made sense to her, or excited her, or terrified her. The young man in Robbe-Grillet’s words “offers her a past, a future, and freedom.” This puts it in terms familiar to us from our discussion of Borges in the preceding chapter. Robbe-Grillet tells us in his Introduction to the screen play:

As for the past the hero introduces by force into this sealed, empty world, we sense he is making it up as he goes along. There is no last year and Marienbad is no longer to be found on any map. This past, too, has no reality beyond the moment it is evoked with sufficient force; and when it finally triumphs, it has merely become the present, as if it had never ceased to be so.<sup>8</sup>

The young man in this film follows the pattern that Rushkoff was to label “coercion” almost forty years later: “tracking, disorientation, redirection, and capture.” But the assertion made by Robbe-Grillet’s text is more extreme than anything in Rushkoff’s analysis. The film stubbornly—as stubbornly as the hero presses his narrative on the young woman—refuses to present or posit any privileged version of events, any positive “reality.” What “really” happened last year at Marienbad (or Frederiksbad or wherever)? The answer is that there is no *real* happening beyond the present image on the cinema screen (Robbe-Grillet 12). There is no historical reality that can be verified. The young woman cannot *recapture* last year; she can only create it in her own mind. Her suitor can *persuade* her only if he can make her desire his version of “last year,” which the film presents as making her desire him

in preference to the ominous sterility she knows well. In *Last Year at Marienbad* the story of the persuasion is also the story of a seduction, and in common with all other successful seductions it involves persuading the desired person to desire what the seducer desires. But what takes the story of this seduction far beyond the traditional, what makes it postmodern, arises from the fact that it is not only erotic but epistemological in implication. It shows what is hidden, latent, or ignored in almost all traditional representations of seduction: that full erotic commitment requires radical flexibility in one's view of the world, of the order of things, of assumptions about the future and the past.

And such a persuasion cannot accurately be called "coercion." If the young woman accepts the young man's assertions, makes them her own, they become *her* assertions. And she becomes what she desires to become. If she wills herself into erotic engagement with the young man, into becoming his lover, then that identity is not coerced but chosen. She can choose what she desires. Beyond her choice, she possesses no basic, inalterable identity that can be violated. As we saw in the preceding section on destabilizing identity, such stable and inalterable identity, rooted in a stable and inalterable past, has no validation in the postmodern ethos. The fact that like many of us Rushkoff believes in some kind of "instinctual capacity to sense what we want" independent of persuasion, seems, from a postmodern perspective, an unsupported nostalgic anachronism, an assumption no more "true" than the lover's account of the woman's promise.

Am I personally suggesting that there is no reality and therefore no stable identity? The truth is that I don't know whether the kind of reality supported by the "scientific method," the reality sustained by the "objectively knowable" world, exists or not. Nor does anyone else. What I do know is that those who meet the postmodern critique with snarls of dismissal—in the same way that Samuel Johnson claimed that he was refuting Berkeley by kicking a stone—are arguing not for some universal, stable, objective world but for their *preference* for that hypothetical world. In postmodernism the objectively knowable world is only one story about the world among many stories, one version among many versions. We used to think we could verify an event or an object by means of historical, empirical evidence and that such evidence could validate our version. And many of our practices and institutions still more or less successfully rely on this assumption. But postmodernism, perhaps as a kind of dissenting minority report gradually blending with the mainstream ethos, substitutes persuasion for verification. If I wish to share my past or any past with you, whether it is my story or the story of some historical event, I must persuade you of it—just as the young man in *Last Year at Marienbad* carefully, bravely, stubbornly

persuades the young woman that his version is hers, hers because she desires it. He constructs a reality that may or may not be validated by what we used to think of as historical evidence; she joins him in his reality because it is her chosen option, the option she desires. He persuades her of his reality not because he can prove it, not because it is true, but because she also wants it.

But is this so different from what has always been common experience? How much of our reality do we accept because we have verified it according to a scientific method? And how much of it do we accept because it is the story we have always been told, or the story we like to tell ourselves? Postmodernism suggests that all reality is humanly *created* reality, constructed in accordance with need and desire. It suggests that “objective” methods, scientific methods, are actually methods enlisted to construct and support one version of the world, and that the imperial power of the “objective” methodology lies in its derogation or exclusion of other methods and realities.

In García Márquez’s *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, a foundational representation of postmodern authority, the patriarch-dictator has a physical stand-in identity, a double. The public appearance of his double enables the patriarch to give the impression of being in two places at once—or, better, of a “simultaneous presence everywhere,” a divine ubiquity.<sup>9</sup> Such apparent omnipresence persuades his people of his superhuman powers, powers that meet their need for a miraculous leader and his need for absolute dominance. That is, he persuades by feeding their superstition, by constructing a reality persuasive to them because it is based on their preconceptions—a technique we will examine in the forthcoming section on improvisation. We can see how advanced the patriarch is in this practice by asking whether we can imagine Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar or his Henry V making use of a double. The idea is preposterous. And we can begin to trace the development of this technique by observing that Adolf Hitler was often imagined as possessing a double. We cannot imagine Caesar or Henry V using a double because their putatively inalterable personal identities lie at the heart of their leadership and for Henry at the heart of his charisma. In their stable, objective world you cannot share yourself if you are not yourself.

The great change in the nature of leadership as it appears in *Autumn of the Patriarch* is that leadership itself, and the power behind it, is a persuasion, an improvisation, a constructed illusion of reality. It makes use of the political discoveries of the first half of the twentieth century—discoveries made by Hitler and Stalin and their associates and analyzed by writers like Arthur Koestler and George Orwell—suggesting that if you construct the proper “reality” and feed it to

those willing to be persuaded you can do what you want with them. And it takes these discoveries one more fatal step. It compares these constructed realities with the old realities that were once thought to be objective and verifiable and finds no principle of distinction between them. It suggests that in any case all reality is constructed reality; and that, knowing this, leaders can devise a reality suitable to their particular ambitions. Politics will not only employ the techniques of theater: it will *be* theater. There will always be “another truth behind the truth” because that is the nature of our perception, of our subjectivity. And in practice I can harness this knowledge that there is no limit to truth and no stability to identity—provided I myself am willing to accept the implications:

as he discovered in the course of his uncountable years that a lie is more comfortable than doubt, more useful than love, more lasting than truth, he had arrived without surprise at the ignominious fiction of commanding without power, of being exalted without glory and of being obeyed without authority when he became convinced in the trail of yellow leaves of his autumn that he had never been master of all his power, that he was condemned not to know life except in reverse, condemned to decipher the seams and straighten the threads of the woof and the warp of the tapestry of illusions of reality without suspecting even too late that the only livable life was one of show. (*The Autumn of the Patriarch* 268)

### **Improvisation**

Persuasion in its radically expanded postmodern form is the construction of a reality for the purpose of enticing or enforcing compliance. It amounts to selling one’s version of the way things are to someone else, someone we wish to influence. Improvisation is a sophistication of persuasion in which the improviser adapts to or takes in aspects of other persons’ versions of the way things are in order to manipulate them. In an influential essay on “The Improvisation of Power,” Stephen Greenblatt illustrates the technique with an early sixteenth-century anecdote bearing on imperialism in the New World from Peter Martyr’s *De orbe novo*:

Faced with a serious labor shortage in the gold mines as a result of the decimation of the native population, the Spanish in Hispaniola began to raid neighboring islands. Two ships reached an outlying island in the Lucayas (now called the Bahamas) where they were received with awe and trust. The Spanish learned through their interpreters that the

natives believed that after death their souls were first purged of their sins in icy northern mountains, then borne to a paradisaal island in the south, whose beneficent, lame prince offered them innumerable pleasures: “the souls enjoy eternal delights, among the dancings and songs of the young maidens, and among the embracements of their children, and whatsoever they loved heretofore; they babble also there, that such as grow old, wax young again, so that all are of like years full of joy and mirth.” When the Spanish understood these imaginations, writes Martyr, they proceeded to persuade the natives “that they came from those places, where they should see their parents, and children, and all their kindred and friends that were dead: and should enjoy all kind of delights, together with the embracements and fruition of beloved things.” . . . Thus deceived, the entire population of the island passes “singing and rejoicing” . . . onto the ships and were taken to the gold mines of Hispaniola. . . . When they grasped what had happened to them, the Lucayans . . . undertook mass suicide: “becoming desperate, they either slew themselves, or choosing to famish, gave up their faint spirits, being persuaded by no reason, or violence, to take food.”

Greenblatt goes on to define improvisation as “the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one’s own scenario.” He argues that the improviser must play a role suited to the adaptation of the others’ “materials,” just as the Spanish slave hunters had to pretend to be the benevolent agents who would transport the Lucayans to their version of paradise. The Spanish had to be able to see the islanders’ religious beliefs as a story of the world that could be manipulated. Greenblatt contends—somewhat less persuasively—that a similar pattern can be seen in Shakespeare’s *Othello*: Iago’s hostile transformation of Othello from glorious husband to jealous wife-murderer can be understood as in large part an improvisation on Othello’s sexual anxieties derived from a tradition of Christian strictures concerning erotic love in marriage.<sup>10</sup> That is, Iago understands Othello’s inner dynamic and perverts it to suggest that Desdemona, as an object that eroticizes his world, is a lecherous enchantress. By playing on Othello’s fears, by understanding and transforming them, Iago rules.

The advantage that improvisation has over persuasion lies in its intuitive familiarity. At every instant we make sense of the world by accommodating what we experience to our pre-existent ethos—our assumptions, prejudices, “common sense”—our pre-existent story of the order of things. All experience, including the

experience of other people, must undergo this. In a comic film called *Being There* (Hal Ashby 1979), the central character, played by Peter Sellers, is an innocent mentally retarded gardener named Chance. Chance's patron and employer dies and Chance in middle age wanders like Candide out into a self-absorbed world, seeking only a garden to cultivate. In Jerzy Kosinski's screenplay, a highly varied collection of characters representing a spectrum of American culture meet Chance one at a time and form judgments about him. The attorneys who evict him from his dead patron's estate consider him a potential threat to their clients' inheritance. The gang leader who confronts him on the street treats him like a messenger from a rival gang. The billionaire at whose house he stays takes him for an embodiment of the small business man ruined by government regulation. The billionaire's wife wants him for a lover. So does the gay guest at a Washington reception. Finally the billionaire's powerful friends see him as a most suitable candidate for the next president of the United States. As each character fits Chance into his or her movie of the world, as each writes his or her own script on the tabula rasa of Chance, we understand that meaning comes from the subjective, from the observer and not the observed. The world of *Being There* is subjective in Václav Havel's sense of "the subjectivity of the world."

Chance has no agenda beyond a Candidean desire to cultivate a garden—but what if he did have a power agenda? What if he could play on the value structures, the "movies" of the world that the other characters possess? Then he could practice improvisation. The film suggests a universal susceptibility to this strategy of authority, a technique just now coming into its own. The technique itself, however, is not new but develops out of common forms of ingratiation, the most obvious of which is flattery. We have seen that Greenblatt found forms of it in Shakespeare, specifically in Iago's manipulation of Othello. We can see another form of it in Decius's stroking of Julius Caesar that leads Caesar to make his fatal excursion to the forum and which Decius specifically calls flattery:

But when I tell him he hates flatterers,  
He says he does, being then most flatterèd.  
Let me work . . . "

But flattery applies most directly to the personal qualities of the person being manipulated. Improvisation is much larger in its scope of application. Improvisation attacks the world-view, the ethos, the epistemological presuppositions of the

improvised. It takes up the mark's value structure and works the con by feeding it back in a presentation that advances the desires of the improviser.

We can find a lucid and appalling example of this technique in Herman Melville's radically advanced story "Benito Cereno" (1855), a work antedating the acknowledged arrival of postmodern fiction by over a century but powerfully illustrative of a key postmodern dynamic. Using his characteristic device of veiled writing, Melville has his narrator present the events in an evasive, allusive style that suggests the presence of disguise, parable, and subtext. In this tale, the captain of a trading vessel and seal hunter, a benevolent, optimistic man of conventional views, suddenly confronts what in his value structure is an instance of social and cosmic evil. A large Spanish merchant ship drifts into the isolated island harbor where he has anchored. Carrying a present of fresh fish and cider for the strange vessel's crew, he visits her in his whale boat. On board he finds evidence of acute suffering from lack of water and a Spanish captain who appears to be weak and ill. The cargo of black slaves and the white crewmen seem oddly disposed toward each other, with the slaves taking brutal and unaccustomed liberties. Nevertheless, Captain Delano explains it all cheerfully to himself—makes it fit his order of things—especially when he sees the devotion of the Captain's black servant Babo. Despite a perturbing impression of unreality, Delano admires the way Babo cares for his sick captain and sees confirmation of the natural disposition of "the negro," his native cheerfulness, for "making the most pleasing body-servant in the world," almost "as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune." Similarly, he feels pleasure in the sight of a black mother nursing her child: "There's naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love," he thinks. In fact Captain Delano is partial to blacks, "just as other men are to Newfoundland dogs."<sup>12</sup>

Still, the strangeness accumulates, forcing Delano to stretch the envelope of his faith in human goodness and in the providential construction of the cosmos. He begins to suspect that the Spanish captain, Don Benito, has directed the blacks to act a docile part while he and his white crew prepare some mischief to Delano and his ship: "could then Don Benito be in any way in complicity with the blacks? But they were too stupid" (201). The whites must be the evil ones because in Delano's racist paternalism the blacks are incapable of duplicity, incapable of moral evil precisely because they are not developed human beings.

And this white bias is fully understood by the black "servant" Babo. It is he who has arranged the charade and ordered the horrors required to stage it. The black slaves are actually victorious rebels forcing the white crew to act out a script on pain of death while the Spanish captain Don Benito has become a hostage to Babo's

hidden dagger and unhinged by the days of horror and death that have preceded Delano's visit. Babo is the brilliant ruthless captain and not a devoted body servant, a ruthless captain who fully understands how to *improvise* on the value structure that serves Delano. His script is written for precisely this audience; his enacted devotion and his direction of the other blacks is an accomplished political and military strategy. Not only does his perception include the knowledge of his own people but also knowledge of white complacency (he has spent some years among the Spanish). And beyond that he can use the white ethos, can improvise upon its values, for his own purposes—for the sake of his own authority. He is a master of improvisation.

As is customary in Melville's best writing, the whole matter extends further into a punishing, subversive subtext. When by a combination of luck and desperation the tables are turned, the Spanish ship retaken, and Babo has been bound, he refuses to speak. We are left to wonder how he would have defended himself at the criminal trial held in Lima. This forces us to imagine his point of view, the point of view of a brilliant and accomplished leader taken as cargo to be sold as property. We realize, if we can extract ourselves from the legal jargon of the deposition that forms most of the last part of the narrative, that we have read a *white* story. There is a black story, a story in which the outrages and terror must be seen as blows for freedom, for dignity. But this story will never be written as a primary text, will always remain a subtext, because history belongs to the winners: the winners write it. One version of victory, a kind of ultimate persuasion, is to render the defeated voiceless. But neither the black story nor the white story is the "true story." Everything depends on one's predisposition. As the examining magistrate remarks in García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, "Give me a prejudice and I will move the world."<sup>13</sup>

Babo bases his improvisation on his general knowledge of the white view of blacks; he doesn't know Captain Delano in particular. But an improvisation can as well be founded on what the improviser knows about the cultural and intellectual predispositions of an individual. Borges again provides an efficient example in his short story called "Death and the Compass." As is usual in Borges' *Ficciones* the deadpan narrative is a maze of indirection and puzzle, but we can straighten it out in order see the improvisation at work. Red Scharlach, a master criminal, has a long-standing grudge against the police detective Eric Lönröt. Scharlach knows that his adversary loves "interesting" hypotheses and sees himself as a "pure thinker," someone who would rather work out theoretical problems than reach practical goals (102, 103). So Scharlach creates a problem that he knows will interest the detective, a problem based on a clever contrast between the Christian Trinity

and the Jewish Tetragrammaton (the four letters that make up the name of God). Scharlach exploits the inadvertent murder of a Rabbi by following it with two other crimes so located in the city as to form an equilateral triangle when connected on a map. Then he plants various obscure hints alluding to Hebrew, especially Hasidic, theological tradition, knowing that Lönrot in his love for intellectual convolution will deduce a prospective fourth crime to make a Hebraic mystical pattern rather than a Christian one. When Lönrot turns up at the fourth point Scharlach kills him.

Before he shoots, Scharlach exposes his successful strategy in some detail. He explains that his final false lead was to have one of his men write on a pillar the words, "*The last letter of the Name has been spoken*":

"This sentence revealed that the series of crimes was *triple*. And the public thus understood it; nevertheless, I interspersed repeated signs that would allow you, Eric Lönrot, the reasoner, to understand that it is *quadruple*. A portent in the North, others in the East and West, demand a fourth portent in the South; the Tetragrammaton—the name of God, JHVH—is made up of *four* letters; the harlequins and the paint shop sign suggested four points. . . . I sensed that you would supply the missing point. The point which would form a perfect rhomb, the point which fixes where death, exactly, awaits you. In order to attract you I have premeditated everything." (112-113)

His improvisation on Lönrot's predispositions has been successful, and we should notice that it would not have worked on everyone. It would not have worked on Lönrot's entirely practical chief, who dismisses the involved Hasidic rigmarole. But for Lönrot himself, the one for whom Scharlach designed it, it proves fatal.

A number of serious films have investigated the technique of improvisation, both in its personal and its cultural applications. One of the most interesting of these, *Mephisto* (Itsván Szabó 1981), analyzes the ability of an actor to become whatever is required of him, and the political implications of this kind of mutability. It shows a man quite happily giving up his early leftist political associations and his convictions (if that is what they were) in the service of the Nazis. If, as he claims, the protagonist-actor has a duty to transform himself completely for the sake of his art, what can keep him ethical in practice? Indeed, if he becomes entirely malleable what is to keep him from becoming merely a useful performer in the interests of anyone who can pay him, or keep him safe, or well-fed, or erotically stimulated?

In himself he is nothing. But what does it mean when such a being says “I”? What does it mean when he says to the women he abandons and betrays, “I love you”? Survival lies in his ability to improvise, to please his masters, to become what they desire. And so he does. “Freedom?” he asks. “What for?”

In *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), Louis Buñuel tells the story of a self-centered middle aged man toyed with and improvised upon by a designing young woman. This is not a new story, though it is acted with particular brilliance by Fernando Rey who displays the bewildered masculine confusion and anger of thwarted desire as if he (like all men) were born for the part. The originality of this presentation lies in the fact that the object of desire, the designing minx, is played by two actresses, a duplicity acknowledged only in the film’s credits. Carole Bouquet represents the putatively virginal or at least cool French daytime object and Angela Molina the more sensuous Spanish object who is usually seen at night. The predatory man appears to take no notice of this doubling and many viewers uninformed of the trick accept without question his assumption that there is but one object of his obsessive desire. Who is being improvised upon here? Well, clearly the Fernando Rey character in his comic, panting, furious pursuit of his obsession. But the film also tacitly reflects upon an audience so willing to transform women into sexual objects that their individual particularities, everything that makes them individuals, can be ignored, pared off. Beyond being desirable the actresses don’t really look like each other and their personal styles of speech and movement can be distinguished by anyone who cares. But what this dual identity, this double designing minx, knows is that the monotonic masculine desire does not discriminate on the basis of personal identity. For this reason the object herself remains “obscure.” The would-be seducer will never see, find, possess her. And the film’s audience, the designing director seems to suggest, may not be much more acute.

### **Reflexivity**

We can see that the strategies of persuasion and improvisation suggest a very high potential for exploitation—of individuals, of institutions, and of whole cultures. The agents of these techniques have their particular agendas, and the newly enlarged strategies provide the most effective avenues for realizing them in the contemporary ethos. Their tendency to employ techniques that feed on these values raises, as we have seen, a number of ethical questions. I wish to conclude this essay by pointing to a habit of mind, a technique of presentation, a value that contributes to the destabilizing of identity and to the subjectivity of the world and

that helps to give persuasion and improvisation their vastly expanded influence. This habit of mind we call *reflexivity*.

Reflexivity refers to the tendency of a system to refer to itself, to develop a dynamic internal coherence based on self-referentiality. In postmodernism, systems develop power and meaning by talking to themselves. To those people (most people) still planted in the empirical positivist systems of objectivity and external reference this self-reference may at first appear trivial—until we begin to ask ourselves which systems actually employ this value for their influence and power. Then we become aware that it lies at the heart of the most important advances in most fields of intellectual endeavor since the beginning of the twentieth century. For example, reflexivity characterizes the two most important developments of post-classical physics, Relativity and Quantum Theory. Relativity begins as a theory about physical measurement, about doing physics; and quantum mechanical statements are also statements about acts of measurement, or, in other words, statements that refer back to the physics of the measurement. They are reflexive. Similarly, modernist painting and fiction very often concern themselves with statements about their own proper media, about the uses of space in painting and the uses of time in narrative and about the acts of representation possible in the use (or even the creation) of such media. It has been argued by modernist and postmodernist theorists that language itself is not referential, does not refer to objects in the world outside language, but develops from a rich dynamic of self-reference, develops by talking to itself. And not one of these major developments—not the reflexive physics, nor the reflexive mathematics, nor the painting, nor the literature, nor the psychology, nor the philosophy, nor the linguistics, nor the social theory, nor the anthropology—of the past century is merely self-serving or isolated (Vargish and Mook, 136-160). In fact, these systems represent some of the strongest and most empowering gestures of the human intellect. The achievements that develop from reflexivity have immense intellectual and practical authority. Our awareness that this is so has terminal consequences for habits of mind based on the unqualified assumption of a positive external reality.

When I cited Václav Havel's assertion of the subjectivity of the world, I implied that this is to view the world as the creation of the individual and of the collective human ethos, a creation accommodating structures of values, a narrative about the world that meets needs and predispositions. For postmodernists this is equally true of the idea of the objectivity of the world, the external world of empirical measurement, positive verification. That world as well—although it denied it and still denies it—is a cultural construction, a construction called “Realism,”

or “history,” or “science.” That “objective” world had the strength to deny other worlds and the values that supported this denial were very powerful. Now with the emergence of other values the denial of subjectivity looks more and more arbitrary. How is it possible for the kind of subjective pluralism—a world made up of a plurality of subjective worlds—to contest the field of knowing and acting with objectivity? The answer lies in the power that reflexivity has developed in all areas.

When in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” Borges showed the world of Tlön taking over the objective world of historical and scholarly verification he wrote an allegory prophetic of our times. The subjective, fictional creation is able to conquer the old realist world because people no longer care deeply about historical and scientific “truth.” They care about the world of Tlön because it is exciting, beautiful, growing—growing, that is, by composing its own encyclopedia, by a massive exercise in self-reference. In Robbe-Grillet’s *Last Year at Marienbad* the absence of any consensus about what “really happened” permits the suitor to create a history, a past in which the young woman has promised to be his, a story that develops through self-reference, reflexively, until it embraces her and she becomes his. And this is possible at least in part because of the destabilizing of identity discussed earlier: she, like the rest of us, can choose who she is. In García Márquez’s *The Autumn of the Patriarch* the reality of political events seems almost completely fluid, changing at the Patriarch’s will or as engineered by his handlers as the situation demands—changes always in secret response to its own requirements.

## Conclusion

The message to postmodern leadership in its exercise of authority can be summed up still more succinctly with a closing look at Melville’s “Benito Cereno.” The black leader Babo improvises on the white story of the world, the white subjectivity, by pretending to accept its assumption of a stable world of black subordination. But it is actually Babo’s narrative—running on its own internal agenda and with its own story of slavery and oppression—that actually contains the white story, that has incorporated the white narrative into the black story’s own reflexive world. White dominance in this case reasserts itself not through an act of improvisation (Babo’s black improvisation has already succeeded) but through a desperately grasped almost chance occurrence that ultimately but randomly permits the restoration of massive white judicial power. But now we know that a self-aware disparate narrative runs just beneath the established surface, biding its time, and this being so we can no longer appeal to a natural order of white supremacy. To know this in its full application is to know that our own narratives must become self-aware, must

incorporate the reflexive dynamic if they are to function, and that the modesty inseparable from this understanding is not a formal gesture of intellectual courtesy but a condition of our cultural continuance.

Finally, to return to the powerful relation of values to authority and of authority to leadership as identified in my Introduction, we can ask if leaders need to be able to think in this way, the way of the liberal arts and more specifically the way of the humanities and of cultural history. Haven't our disastrous errors in military and foreign policy something to do with the fact that we have failed to think in this way, to identify the values of other cultures and our own? Failed to act in the full understanding of ourselves and of the others, both friends and enemies? The protagonists of some of the works used in this essay—Borges' Lönnrot, García Márquez's patriarch, Melville's two captains—suffer from a provincialism of vision that destroys their opportunity to reach the desired goal, that undermines the very values they call upon for their justification. Their condition speaks to ours.

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