

## **New Middle Ages or new Renaissance? Rethinking the humanist legacy in the post-communist world**

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### **The 'Memorialist Turn'**

**DURING THE PANEL DEBATE** that concluded the International Historical Congress in Oslo in 2000, great scholarly oracles such as Eric Hobsbawm and Hayden White were invited to predict the course of the twenty-first century. Various epithets were proposed: 'The Age of Globalisation', 'The Epoch of the Internet', 'The Century of the Gene', even 'The New American Century'. For all their pertinence, none of these predictions has been as apt as that of Daniel Bell who, some thirty years prior to the Congress, declared that the twenty-first century would be the 'Age of Memory'—one in which culture would recover its paramount importance:

If there are to be new religions, they will, contrary to previous experience, return to the past, to seek for tradition and to search for those threads which can give a person a set of ties that place him in the continuity of the living, the dead and those yet to be born. Unlike romanticism it will not be a turn to nature, and unlike modernity it will not be the involuted self; it will be the resurrection of Memory.<sup>1</sup>

So far Bell's prognosis has been largely vindicated. Already the end of the twentieth century saw a great unblocking of memory everywhere, from the revival of the heritage industry, through the return to cultural roots and local traditions, the rebirth of national and religious sentiment, to a growing fascination with the workings of memory in evolutionary biology, genetics and computer science. This memorialist turn has been accompanied by a relentless intrusion of culture into traditionally 'cultureless' realms such as politics, economy or national defence. Today the study of culture is not only regarded as *prima inter pares* but, in an extravagant swing of the pendulum, has become a kind of fetish. For Samuel Huntington, the

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Bell, 1991, 'The Return of the Sacred? The Argument on the Future of Religion', in: idem, *The Winding Passage: Sociological Essays and Journeys*, New York, 349.

author of *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, the most salient distinctions among peoples in the post cold-war period are not ideological, economic or political—they are cultural. Francis Fukuyama, in touch as always with the shape of things to come, has taken to task the social sciences for failing to give full recognition to cultural concepts such as virtue, trust, morality and human nature.<sup>2</sup> And the proponents of secularisation theory, confronted with the realities of late-twentieth-century history, have been forced to recant their previous creed. Peter Berger, to mention but one, has declared that 'The world today is as furiously religious as ever' and that 'It is the mistaken professors who should be studied and not the religious fundamentalists.'<sup>3</sup>

This cultural, memorialist trend gives pause for thought. If, following Bell, culture is the realm ruled by the principle of *ricorso*, i.e. an endless return to the existential concerns and questions of humanity, then the present is always romancing the past in some way, though journeys down memory lane lead to different places. Two opposite destinations seem currently to be on offer: one, favoured by Umberto Eco, whisks us back to the Middle Ages, where we once again stroll, if we dare, through cities whose segmented neighbourhoods are held by minority clans. In the wider territories of nations, according to Eco's vision, new mendicant classes live off public charity while searching for happiness, and 'as in the Middle Ages the borderline between the mystic and the thief is often minimal'.<sup>4</sup> The other scenario, advocated by thinkers as various as Habermas, Giddens and Beck, is a new, improved Enlightenment, a reflexive modernity, resplendent with pluralist, tolerant liberalism. There is a hyper-rational vision where we will all be Eurocrats and cosmocrats, members of a global federation, and where multiculturalism will be our new-old religion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Fukuyama, 1995, *Trust: the Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, New York; idem, 1999, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order*, London; idem, 2002, *Our Posthumous Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, London.

<sup>3</sup> See Peter Berger, 1996/7, 'Secularism in retreat', *The National Interest* 46, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Umberto Eco, 1989, *Travels in Hyperreality*, New York, 80

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens & Scott Lash, 2000, *Reflexive Modernisation: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Cambridge; Anthony Giddens, 2000, *The Third Way and Its Critics*, Cambridge; idem & Will Hutton (eds), 2000, *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, London; Ulrich Beck, 2000, *World Risk Society*, Cambridge; Jürgen Habermas, 1990, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, transi F. Lawrence, Cambridge.

These extrapolations are as daring as they are problematic. Eco's evidence for a *ricorso* to a semi-medieval order is based on the presumption that a great peace is again breaking down, an international power that has unified the world in language, customs, art and technology seems to be in danger of imploding, and the ever more inventive, 'countercultural' barbarians are pressing at the gates. These processes, according to Eco, parallel the breakdown of the Roman empire, opening the world to 'a period of crisis, decadence, violent adjustments of peoples and clashes of cultures'.<sup>6</sup>

The Roman-American parallel seems alluring, but when inspected closely, it does not bear scrutiny. Firstly, the collapse of *the pax Americana* is—despite the recent traumas—far from certain. On the contrary, globalisation—in some respects a contemporary version of Hellenisation—continues to spread and redefine American influence, products, values and dreams. Secondly, contrary to Eco's argument, the barbarians at the gate are not so innovative these days: not only do they borrow Western technology, but they recycle the very worst, totalitarian aspects of the European ideological legacy. The dehumanisation of individuals and erasure of historical memory by Islamic fundamentalist regimes—witness the destruction of religious symbols by the Taliban—bear ugly parallels to the earlier experiments in former communist regimes. Finally, the present fascination with magic and sorcery are less a sign of a medieval turn and more an element of an intricate play of humanism, secularism and spiritualism that belong more properly to the post-medieval era.

If the parallels with the New Middle Ages are too thin to suggest a genuine *ricorso*, what of the Enlightenment project itself, that fundamental prop for modernism? On the one hand Melanchthon's *lumen naturale* continues to burn brightly, as attested by advances in the sciences, the new era of genetic manipulation, and the daily invocations of the ultra-rational *homo oeconomicus* by politicians, philosophers and economists. On the other hand, the end of the twentieth century, very much like the end of the nineteenth, witnessed a frantic dissection of, and assault on, Enlightenment narratives. An academic rampage to expose the lethal, genocidal side of the Enlightenment—made respectable by thinkers such as Adorno, Koselleck, Bauman and Gray—has contributed to a scepticism about the West's potential for self-renewal.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, moder-

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<sup>6</sup> Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 73.

<sup>7</sup> See Theodor Adorno, 1989 [1947], *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*, Leipzig, English version translated as *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London, 1972); Reinhardt Koselleck, 1988, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, Oxford; Zygmunt Bauman, 1989, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge; John Gray, 1995, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Enlightenment Age*, London. Gray, having energetically whipped the dead horse, goes as far as to speak of the implosion of the Western agenda unless new inspiration can be found in non-occidental cultures. There are, of course, dissenting voices in this debate. Ernest Gellner, for one, has written an apologia of his own moderate 'rationalist fundamentalism' (see Ernest Gellner, 1992, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, London, 82-101). Simon Schama, on the other hand, implies that it was the

nity has come to be associated with a programmatic occlusion of elusive variables such as culture and tradition, which owes much to the enduring Cartesian legacy in the sciences and the humanities. The father of modernity in philosophy spurned the company of others so that his reasoning would be uncontaminated by context:

Living here [*in Holland*] amidst this great mass of busy people who are more concerned with their own affairs than curious about those-of others, I have been able to lead a life as solitary and withdrawn as if I were in the most remote desert.<sup>8</sup>

Within the Cartesian system, the claims of reason, consistency and universality can provide the illusion of explanation and justification. The resulting subject—the modern subject—is a pure *res cogitans*, subsequently becoming saturated with beliefs and desires, but essentially deracinated and ahistorical, only to be moulded and created anew by social and political programmes devised under the aegis of reason—and doubt.

The crisis of modernity was, in a virtually clairvoyant fashion, prefigured by Hume, who stated that

[t]he Cartesian doubt, therefore, were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not), would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject.<sup>9</sup>

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departure from the ideas of the Enlightenment rather than their degeneration that led to fascism (see Simon Schama, 1989, *The Citizens*, London).

<sup>8</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, part 3 in: idem, 1988 [1637], *Selected Philosophical Writings*, transi J. Cottingham, R. Stoothof & D. Murdoch (Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> David Hume, 1993 [1748], *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed and intr Eric Steinberg, Indianapolis • Cambridge, Sect, xii, Pt 1.

This is precisely what has happened. Modern liberal societies are no longer sure of the basis on which their most fundamental values are to be founded, for economic reason leaves no space for humans and values, only a world of consumers and their market preferences. Uncertainty is mirrored in the academe where scholars are unable to make sense of, let alone respond to, a series of world events, starting with the rise of Solidarity in Poland and culminating with the 11 September attack on the New York World Trade Centre. The much flaunted 'postmodern' mindset is of little help, since it has celebrated the lack of assurance and conviction, and thus launched a quixotic project of founding social and cultural values on the lack of foundations themselves.

### **The dissident tradition of Eastern and Central Europe: a precursory new Renaissance?**

If postmodernity has been largely a tiresome rehearsal of the problematic leitmotifs of the Enlightenment legacy,<sup>10</sup> are there any other strains within the European tradition which may offer an exit from the modern predicament?

As we wish to argue, Eastern and Central Europe has been both behind and, paradoxically, ahead of the prevalent *Zeitgeist*. Squeezed between Eastern and Western totalitarianisms in the inter-war period and submitted to the Soviet experiment for a large part of the twentieth century, the populations east of the Elbe were never allowed to escape from historical experience. Worse, under Soviet hegemony they were forced to inhabit a world which was a perverse anticipation of a postmodern utopia. As Leszek Kołakowski argued, Sovietisation was successful not because it became an accepted creed but because the opposite was the case:

[the] doctrine... does not demand faith... or fanatics.... Sovietism presupposes a situation where everybody knows that nothing is, and nothing can be, 'for real\*' in public speech; that all words have lost their original sense, and that one should not be surprised if a cockroach is called a nightingale and a parsnip is called a symphony.... Sovietization reaps its harvest... when it is taken for granted that public speech has nothing to do with 'real' life.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See for example Russell Jacoby, 1999, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in the Age of Apathy*, New York; Stjepan Mestrovic, 1994, *The Balkanization of the West*, London; Keith Windschuttle, 1994, *The Killing of History: How a Discipline is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists*, Padding-ton, NS\C (Australia).

<sup>11</sup> 'doktryna... nie domaga się wcale wiary... i fanatyków.... Sowietyzm buduje się jako właśnie taka sytuacja, w której wszyscy wiedzą, że nic nie jest i nic nie może być „naprawdę” w mowie publicznej, że wszystkie słowa utraciły pierwotny swój sens i że dziwić się temu nie należy, że można karalucha nazwać słowikiem a pietruszkę nazwać symfonią... [S]owietyzacja zbiera żniwo..., gdzie jest rzeczą samo przez się zrozumiałą, iż mowa publiczna nie ma zgoła nic wspólnego z „prawdziwym” życiem' (Leszek Kołakowski, 1982, *Sprawa polska* ('Polish cause'), in: *Czy diabeł może być zbawiony i 27 innych kazań*, Londyn, 302—our translation, N.W. & A.B.).

In this sense, a greatly underestimated aspect of the Eastern European revolution was that it was carried out against *Realpostmodern-ismus*—against the relativity of truth, against the Godless world, against history-less reason—in the name of revaluing the sacred, rehabilitating the idea of human nature, returning to a disgraced notion of truth and restoring distinctions.

It is this curiously 'modern and yet pre-modern' character of the values advocated by the Eastern and Central European intellectual elite which merits further attention. In the numerous attempts to decode the main thrust of dissident thought in the last crucial decades of the twentieth century, scholars invoked adjectives such as 'conservative', 'radical', 'ethnocentric', 'nostalgic', 'reactionary', 'pro-Western' or 'pro-American'. We want to suggest that the peculiarity of the intellectual tradition that fed the Eastern European revolution stemmed from the fact that it was empowered less by the Enlightenment cosmology and more by a resurrection of values central to the European Renaissance.

As has been argued by most contemporary scholars, it is well-nigh impossible to procure a satisfactory intellectual synopsis of the period 1350-1620. But despite the scholarly controversy on the periodical boundaries of the 'Renaissance breakthrough' and the multitude of its cultural manifestations, most authorities concur on a number of identifying features: an intense dialogue and inter-penetration of cultures, the engagement with classical thought, the explosion of scientific and artistic innovation, a growing awareness of the uniqueness of the human self and human dignity, an obsessive exploration of the nature of man and the nature of Nature, and, last but not least, the preoccupation with memory, custom and tradition, which suggest an awareness of the historicity of both nature and culture.

Pico della Mirandola's oration *De hominis dignitate* (1486) is often quoted as an emblem of the time, a tribute to the limitless possibilities of the self:

Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul's reason into the higher natures which are divine.<sup>12</sup>

Inherent in this passage is not an invitation to anthropological experiments; rather it is the conviction that humans have a nature—and a soul. There is an additional consideration. One of the most influential readings of Pico has been offered by Ernst Cassirer clearly under the spell of nineteenth-century Nietzschean ideas. In this version, Pico becomes an advocate of the vision of 'man as superior to angels and equal to God'.<sup>13</sup> What Cassirer, and those who follow him, ignore is the context of Pico's declaration, which deals with moral constraints stemming from the spiritual potential of human beings.<sup>14</sup> It is not the anti-Christian deification of man to which Pico aspires, but rather the goodness exemplified in the angelic and the divine:

Let a certain holy ambition invade the mind, so that we may not be content with mean things but may aspire to the highest things and strive with all our forces to attain them.<sup>15</sup>

It is interesting to observe how an East-European interpretation of Pico's message counters Cassirer's tendentious reading. Kołakowski writes:

The humanism outlined in Pico della Mirandola's famous *Discourse on Human Dignity*, a humanism defined by the idea of man's incompleteness, his inevitable state of hesitation, and the insecurity caused by his freedom of decision, is perfectly compatible with Christian teaching.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, 1998 [1486], *On the Dignity of Man*, transi. Charles Glenn Wallis, intr. Paul J. W. Miller, Indianapolis • Cambridge, 5; cf. E. Cassirer, P. O. Kristeller & H. H. Randall, Jr., 1948, *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, Chicago, 224-5.

<sup>13</sup> See Ernst Cassirer, 1942, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 3, 123-144, 320-35.

<sup>14</sup> This is clear, for example in Hiram Haydn's study, where he sympathetically expounds Cassirer's discovery of an 'almost unlimited power of self-transformation' (see Hiram Haydn, 1966, *The Counter-Renaissance*, Gloucester, Mass.).

<sup>15</sup> Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, 1990, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, Chicago, 28.

The analogies between the discovery of human dignity in the fifteenth century and the intellectual and spiritual upheaval which occurred some five hundred years later in Eastern Europe may not be immediately obvious, but they are significant. Just like the Renaissance artists and thinkers, the dissident intellectuals were breaking free from the 'Second Middle Ages'—emphasising their liberation of the self, of the ways of knowing, of time, space, politics, religion, of historical consciousness. It was an upheaval which, very much like the Renaissance breakthrough, was a reaction against a puritan, authoritarian system, with its dogma, its witch-hunts, its index, and its dismissal of the individual. The censorship imposed on the works of Michnik, Miłosz, Havel, Brodsky, and Kundera in the 1970s and 1980s had its equivalent in the sixteenth and seventeenth century ban on all the writings of Machiavelli, Boccaccio, Erasmus (a ban subsequently modified after suitable expurgation), major works of Lorenzo Valla, Bruno, and Campanella, of Galileo's *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo*, and Charron's *De la sagesse*. Like their forebears in the earlier Renaissance, Eastern European thinkers flaunted the concept of human dignity against the authoritarian regime. In 1983, in a letter to *Krytyka*, Michnik argued that Solidarity's

[f]ifteen months of life in freedom was a great lesson in selfhood, an astounding rebirth of the nation. Even if the people of Solidarity were to expect nothing good from their lives any more, each of them could tell himself 'during these fifteen months I lived like a human being, and not like a beast.'<sup>17</sup>

For Michnik, the Polish resistance to communism had nothing to do with romantic madness, but everything to do with 'saving one's face, one's dignity and one's truth'.

Milan Kundera, in a controversial essay on the 'Central European tragedy', launched the notion of *Mittleuropa* to emphasise the region's distance from the alien Russian culture which had never experienced the Renaissance and thus never developed a tradition which would properly address the value of the individual.<sup>18</sup> To defy the Soviet *uravnilovka*—the programmatic erasure of all social and

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<sup>17</sup> '15 miesięcy życia w wolności wiele nauczyło więźniów. To była wielka lekcja pomiotowości, niezwykle duchowe odrodzenie narodu. Gdyby nawet już nic więcej dobrego w życiu nie miało spotkać ludzi z „Solidarności”, to każdy z nich może sobie powiedzieć: przez te 15 miesięcy żyłem jak człowiek, a nie jak bydlę.' (Adam Michnik, 1983, List z Mokotowa - Grudniowe rekołecje, *Krytyka* 16,14—our translation, N. W. & A.B.)

<sup>18</sup> Milan Kundera, 1984, A kidnapped West or culture bows out, *Granta* 11 (1984), 97.



cultural distinctions—the Central European artists and historians returned to the ancient notions of hierarchy by calling themselves the 'aristocratic republic of dissidents'. It is not accidental that while in prison Adam Michnik wrote the *History of Honour*, the Hungarian writer György Konrad argued: 'We are a venture, a cultural alliance, a literary chivalry; record-holders of ambivalence, problematic by profession. We are more poets than activists.'<sup>19</sup> While these remarks may not fit well with the radical egalitarianism of modernity, they convey humanist defiance in the face of the despotism of the mediocre and the longing for Culture in a cultureless world.

Contrary to the anti-essentialist orientation of the Western academe, the Central European writers of the time returned to the Renaissance ideas of human nature and its limitations. They saw only too clearly the effects of Cartesian reason that has no bounds beyond those of logic and that was harnessed in the service of the totalitarian state:

Central European utopias, including the Soviet utopia, are the expression of human desire to outstrip natural limitations, a product of the 'unnatural animal', the being which has rebelled against Nature, which attempts to subjugate and change it...And that is why they fail when they are to be introduced to the natural world which is on the whole ruled by natural requirements of the human being, that's why they find their way barred by all the natural human attributes like selfishness, aggressiveness, social apathy, all the purely instinctive motivations.<sup>20</sup>

Kołakowski challenged the vogueish notions of the social construction of the self by drawing attention to the sinister moral implications of the loss of our ability to assert the separate, irreducible status of personality

The belief that the human person is entirely society-made, even if molded from a raw material (which is physical and not human) has a number of alarming consequences...If 'I' am not 'I', if the word *I* is a pronoun to which no reality corresponds, at least no morally constituted reality, if I am totally definable in 'objective' terms of

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<sup>19</sup> See György Konrad, 1986, Is the dream of Central Europe still alive?, *Cross Currents: a Yearbook of Central European Culture* 5, 113.

<sup>20</sup> Milan Simecka, 1984, A world with Utopias or without them, *Cross Currents: a Yearbook of Central European Culture* 3, 118.

social relationships, then indeed there is no reason why I, rather than the abstract 'society,' should be responsible for anything.<sup>21</sup>

For Kołakowski, the illusion that there are no limits to the changes that human life can undergo, that society is in principle endlessly autonomous because it is endlessly flexible, was not only demented; it sowed a disastrous despair.<sup>22</sup>

Like most Renaissance thinkers, the Eastern European dissidents treated the desire for transcendence as an inseparable aspect of human nature and of the human condition. It is interesting that independently of their creed (most were agnostics or atheists), the Central and Eastern Europeans saw the sacred not so much as a Durkheimian social binder, and not as a property of human nature (as argued by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto, and religious phenomenologists such as Max Scheler). By contrast, for the Central European thinkers the ground of religion was existential—the awareness of the weakness and incompleteness of humans and the inexorable limits to their powers.

According to the Romanian thinker Andre Plescu, our age suffers from a *crisis of proximity*, a predicament where there is no longer a significant 'transit universe' between humanity and the sacred. 'Everything organizes itself around a supreme goal, around something distant, compared to which current, palpable realities appear diminished... ' The solution is what Plescu called rather provocatively 'angelology'. The world of angels—*mundus imaginalis*— puts humans in their rightful place; the angels are a reminder that humanity will always need spiritual mediation in its communication with the realm of the Absolute.<sup>23</sup>

Closely related to the preoccupation with the notions of the self, human nature and responsibility was the insistence on truth—without the modish, postmodern inverted commas. The struggle for solidarity was, in Wildavsky's phrase,<sup>24</sup> a genuine attempt to 'speak truth to power', a struggle that made no sense in the deconstructed world of mere textuality that dominated the academies of the West from the mid 1980s. Thus Vaclav Havel dwelled on the 'truth which is operating in the existential hidden sphere working like a bacterio-

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<sup>21</sup> Kołakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, 152-3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>23</sup> See Andrei Plescu, 1993, Angels: elements for a theory of proximity, *Wissenschaftskollegium, Jahrbuch* 1991/2, Berlin, 273-4.

<sup>24</sup> Aaron Wildavsky, 1979, *Speaking Truth to Power: the Art and Craft of Policy Analysis*, London.

logical weapon of incalculable political power'.<sup>25</sup> And Leszek Kołakowski spoke against the fluid categories and blurred boundaries in his *cri de cœur* about the necessity of distinctions:

There is no longer any clear distinction, in political life, between war and peace, sovereignty and servitude, invasion and liberation, quality and despotism. Nor is there a clear-cut dividing line between executioner and victim, between man and woman, between the generations, between crime and heroism, law and arbitrary violence, victory and defeat, right and left, reason and madness, doctor and patient, teacher and pupil, art and buffoonery, knowledge and ignorance.<sup>26</sup>

The crux of the matter, according to Kołakowski, is that culture depends on just such distinctions. With the abolishment of the opposing categories, the sense of culture evaporates *tout court*.

The new humanism of central Europe was born in the prisons of the Soviet empire and in the experience of the everyday erosion of human dignity inflicted by an inhuman system. Can it be that, with the demise of communism and the merciless onslaught of neo-liberal values everywhere, the Renaissance *ricorso* is no longer a viable option?

There seems to be a consensus emerging among major historians—such as Jacques Barzun, Peter Burke and William J. Bouwsma—that the European Renaissance has either failed us or 'continues to recede from us at an accelerating rate'.<sup>27</sup> And yet even a cursory look at the conceptual and ideational shifts in the Western world at the beginning of the new millennium seems to indicate that the interment of the Renaissance proposed by modern historians has perhaps been premature.

## Liaisons créatives

In his essay, 'The return of the sacred?', Daniel Bell argued:

The theme of Modernism was the word 'beyond': beyond nature, beyond culture, beyond tragedy—that was where the self-

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in an interview with Milada Bleksted, *Aftenposten*, Friday 22 November 1991. See also Vaclav Havel, 1986, *Living in Truth*, London.

<sup>26</sup> Kołakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, 70-1.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Burke, 1998, *The European Renaissance: Centres and Peripheries*, Oxford, 41. See also William J. Bouwsma, 2000, *The Waning of the Renaissance, 1550-1640*, Yale; Jacques Barzun, 2000, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of our Western Cultural Life*, New York.

infinite spirit was driving the radical self. We are now groping for a new vocabulary whose key word seems to be 'limits' : a limit to growth, a limit to spoliation of the environment, a limit to arms, a limit to torture, a limit to *hubris*.<sup>28</sup>

Now, at the beginning of the new century of global communications and genetic engineering, the issue of natural limits may seem less clear than it did twenty-five years ago. At the same time, however, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the demise of many of the former communist regimes and the intensification of religious commitment worldwide reveal both the fragility of modernist political 'solutions' and a deep-seated desire for limits and distinctions of some kind, at least those that relate to understanding, to marking the great milestones of human life and to articulating our sense of the mysterious, the numinous or the sacred. The concept of *sustainability*, imposing limitations to industrial development and to the extent of human interventions in nature, has entered the agenda of most governments and institutions. There is an ongoing battle of the books and worldviews in fields such as medicine, architecture and design, where imaginative, holistic and intuitive approaches are challenging the prevalent modernist and postmodernist designs. The project of evidence-based medicine is concurrently supplemented with holistic approaches to the human body and a growing recognition of alternative, premodern therapies such as acupuncture and herbalism. And while the academic establishment has been reluctant to admit that there are fixities in human nature, there has been less diffidence among writers and journalists. Thus Francis Fukuyama in 'Second thoughts', published in 1999, declared:

The possibility that we are at the End of History can arise only under two conditions. The first is that such a thing as human nature exists.... Socialism foundered because it ran into the brick of human nature: human beings could not be forced to be different from what they were, and all of the characteristics that were supposed to have disappeared under socialism, like ethnicity and national identity reappeared after 1989 with a vengeance.<sup>29</sup>

And Fareed Zakaria in 'A plan for global security', published in *Newsweek* in February 2002, announced:

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<sup>28</sup> Bell, *The return of the sacred* ?, 3 5 3.

<sup>29</sup> Francis Fukuyama, 1999, *Second thoughts: the last man in a bottle*, *The National Interest* 56,27-8.

Two factors made the attacks of September n possible: globalisation and human nature. Neither is likely to change much. As long as we live in an open, accessible, interconnected world and as long as there are evil men and women, we will face the spectre of international terrorism.<sup>30</sup>

Here we might just as well add that the exacerbation of nationalist and terrorist excesses at the end of the twentieth century has led not only to the exhumation of the old concept of human nature but to an increasing realisation that there are limits to the affront to dignity that people are willing to endure.

These shifts point to the anachronisms at the heart of the modern academy. Entrenched at the university and equipped with all the deconstructive tools, sit analytically helpless victims of a political postmodernity that deemed truth to be a social construction, history a matter of invention as much as memory, and religion a thing of the past. For some time now they have denied the historical experience of the twentieth century which has shown that the Enlightenment rationalism that has entered into the lore of modern thinking—along with the excesses of positivism, bureaucratic rationalism and deconstruction—is urgently in need of reappraisal, overhaul and enrichment.

We live in the age of the Jester, whose philosophy, as Kołakowski observed, 'expresses as doubtful what seems obvious and incontrovertible, derides common sense and reads sense into the absurd'.<sup>31</sup> The problem with this Jester is his post-Enlightenment dossier: his exploration of the hidden motives of the world has become a series of unmaskings which often camouflage an opportunist agenda, a penchant for excusing too much by explaining too much away. The Renaissance Jester, by contrast—by no means less perspicuous or less pungent in his unmaskings than the postmodern one—remains ultimately faithful to a set of values and norms which testify to the humanity within him rather than to abstract Reason. Incapable of Goneril's wickedness (or Cordelia's saintliness for that matter), the Shakespearian Fool prefers to walk in a darkness he cannot fathom rather than to stay in the light of a Reason which he cannot abide:

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<sup>30</sup> Fareed Zakaria, 2002, A plan for global security, *Newsweek*, December 2001-February 2002, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, 1983 [1959], The Priest and the Jester, in: Sydney Hook (ed), *Marxism and Beyond*, Totowa, N.J., 56.

But I will tany; the Fool will stay,  
And let the wise men fly:  
The Knave turns Fool that runs away;  
The Fool no Knave, perdy. (*King Lear*, II. ii)

Revaluing the Shakespearean Jester's vision involves a sceptical *ricorso*. We can no longer endorse uncritical wonder at 'what a piece of work is man'. Neither can we embrace a rigid hierarchic cosmos which was once 'the centre that held', to use Seamus Heaney's famous phrase. We could, however, consider again the necessity of restoring moral order based on wisdom deriving from historical experience rather than from abstract systems.<sup>32</sup>

The project of reclaiming parts of the Renaissance legacy would involve, among other things, the reinstatement of memory into philosophical and ethical inquiry. A memorialist approach can be taken in two senses, one biological, the other cultural. Biologically, it implies respect for the inherent, unique nature of the human and natural world, or, alternatively, its individual genetic memory, the violation of which leads to the emergence of a 'mechanical Lion-headed Nature'. At the cultural level, it calls for a serious effort to reclaim the imaginative-mythical history and continuity of cultures and communities. People are historical: they reach back into the past in which their world, the tribe and religion were grounded, and they need this past to give meaning to their lives and their universe.<sup>33</sup> The memorialist approach runs counter to the fashionable notion of 'invented tradition', which presupposes a mechanical, passive view of cultural transmission and the infinite malleability of man. It implies moving from 'imagined communities' to 'remembering communities'. The elite's constructions of the nation, important as they are, are merely auxiliary to what the nation *itself* chooses to remember and to forget; they are narrative devices which, in order to be potent, have to resonate with the needs, fears, beliefs and previous experience of the collective.

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<sup>32</sup> It was clearly evident in the thought of central European intellectuals that the idea of a system of deductions from first principles—what the Renaissance writers like Salutati, Charron and Erasmus would have called *scientia*—is not enough for wisdom. Wisdom, that is to say *sapientia*, may require *scientia*, but is not constituted by it, for wisdom according to the Renaissance writers, is a form of moral imagination, the reflection of the divine spark in us humans (see Eugene Rice, 1958, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom*, Cambridge, Mass.).

<sup>33</sup> Again the example of Eastern Europe clearly shows that the project of liberation was inseparably connected with a retrieval of history and memory—those two absent variables from the communist Weltanschauung.

In his controversial bestseller *For Common Things*, Jedediah Purdy invites us to engage once more in the quest for things like human dignity, truth and wisdom. It is striking that in his proposal to revalue the best of the Western tradition Purdy adverts repeatedly to central European thinkers and writers such as Miłosz, Havel, Michnik and Kundera:

The choice of Central Europe for a discussion of American politics must seem curious. However, that region has earned a place in the imagination of people who would like to believe in the possible goodness of politics despite the disappointment of recent years...The centrepiece of Central European dissent was the aim of recovering personal integrity and public truth with a single gesture. The dissidents' chief instrument would be neither the bullet nor the ballot, but the truthful sentence.<sup>34</sup>

As we have tried to suggest, one of the most fascinating—and hitherto unrecognised — dimensions of the Eastern European revolution has been its connection with the Renaissance cosmology. The very concept of the 'self-limiting revolution'<sup>35</sup>—which was used in reference to Polish Solidarity—gestures towards Montaigne, who was concerned with developing a model of participation in politics without surrendering to the temptation of excessive conviction. 'We have no need to harden our hearts with those plates of steel,' Montaigne argued. 'It is enough to dip our pens in ink, without dipping them into blood.'<sup>36</sup> It is this model of resistance which Adam Michnik invoked when he wrote from prison:

You are engaged in the argument of Giordano Bruno with the Inquisitor... of Carl von Ossietzky with the blond Gestapo officer ... You score a victory not when you win power, but when you remain faithful to yourself.<sup>37</sup>

To conclude: there are at least two good reasons for returning to the ideas of the dissident European intellectuals and studying their implicit connection with the thinkers of the Renaissance. One of them is a dearth today of a creative vision and a need for renewal of

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<sup>34</sup> Jedediah Purdy, 1999, *For Common Things*, New York, 113,115.

<sup>35</sup> See Jad wiga Staniszkis, 1984, *Poland's Self-Limiting Revolution*, ed Jan T. Gross, Princeton, *passim*.

<sup>36</sup> Michel E. de Montaigne, 1976 [1958], *Essays*, transi J. M. Cohen, Harmonds- worth, 93.

<sup>37</sup> Adam Michnik, 1985, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, Berkeley, 45.

philosophy, culture, and civic institutions (what Purdy calls 'moral ecology'). The other has been spelled out by Czesław Miłosz, who has argued:

I see ahead of us all, ahead of the entire modern epoch—one which may well be one great darkness in which savage hordes will blunder — a gigantic task of exploration, but I believe . . . in the new Renaissance more than in the new Middle Ages.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "Widzę przed nami wszystkimi, przed całą epoką nowożytną - jeżeli nie będzie ona jednym wielkim mrokiem, w którym błądzić będą hordy - ogromną pracę poznawczą i wyznam . . . że wierzę w nowy humanizm bardziej niż w nowe średniowiecze." (Czesław Miłosz, 1996, *Legends of modernity*, Kraków, 255 — *our translation*, N. W. & A. B. )