

POST-HUMPTYDUMPTYISM

Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. by Kathleen Blarney, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1987 (orig. pub. as *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1975); 418 pp; £29.50.

Anthony Wilden, *The Rules Are No Game: the strategy of communication*, London, Routledge, 1987; 432 pp; £25.00.

Anthony Wilden, *Man and Woman, War and Peace: the strategist's companion*, London, Routledge, 1987; 335 pp; £29.95.

To cope with reality you use your imagination. Both Castoriadis and Wilden say this in their own way, and they are right to do so. Put so simply, of course, the advice sounds trite, even old-fashioned. Did not the Romantics try to give the imagination pride of place? Worse, it may sound like the advice of some neo-romantics of today for whom creativity is a guarantee of personal salvation, a free enterprise of the soul.

Add then another fashionable dictum, that this imagination shows itself in a slippage of language, that it makes every word into a trope, every object a *gestalt*-switch. This too does not sound exactly original. One can go further back than Derrida: this is Nietzsche's repeated emphasis, that all truths are ambiguous, all science, play. Some will suspect relativism here, a failure to respect established values, tradition, and authority, reaching perhaps to nihilism, ending perhaps in solipsism, that non-existent realm in which a single self reigns narcissistically supreme over a universe which is itself. Others, more dissatisfied, as much with the state towards which we are advancing as with the status quo, might see this challenge to received opinion in daily communication and action as a restoration of language to its proper use. But the query remains: to put words at the mercy of something so subjective as the imagination is to take a step towards the fragility of Humpty Dumpty: 'When *I* use a word, it means just what *I* choose it to mean - neither more nor less' (Castoriadis, p. 311). Even Castoriadis forgets that Carroll did make him add, 'The question is which is to be Master - that's all.' The issue is clearly one of power.

The two writers proceed in very different ways to attack the concept of a rigid language in which the subjective element has no place. In addition, Castoriadis is against any kind of transcendent support for human praxis, and that includes Marxism if it clings to the idea of a pre-ordained progress towards a Utopia of the proletariat. Both writers clearly believe that attack is the best form of defence. Much of Castoriadis's book is taken up with a critique of what he calls 'identitary-ensemblist logic' (ch. 5), a latter-day critique of reason. It is 'identitary' because it believes that nature can be decomposed into separable re-identifiable entities, be they selves, other persons, things, events, or even

quarks. They provide a comforting foundation as the abiding referents of our common words, a warrant for the teachability of the would-be Humpty Dumpty of this world. Thus at one end the logic assumes what the Greeks called the Many, an indefinite mass of particular things, each *one* in the sense of possessing uniqueness. It is 'ensemblist' because it has to assume that this mass of unique referents can nevertheless be classified, and that the properties by which they can be so sorted are equally given, fixed, and re-identifiable. Under this view, entities already exist in mathematical sets, able to be so sorted because they are like each other. They become what the Greeks called the One, a union of all things, bound by *one* in the sense of sharing sameness.

That this is Wilden's target too is obvious from the huge variety of examples he gives of the defeat which faces those who are inflexible in their definitions of what is before them. A typical example is that of the military commander who can only see adversity on the battlefield as a disadvantage: against whom Wilden's favoured strategists counsel: 'Look for the advantage in adversity.' This dovetails with my own analysis of winning at games:¹ one player discovers a *gestalt* of action in the events both players are watching that is not perceived by his opponent, as in judo, when you use your antagonist's own effort to defeat him.

Logocentrism in language and objectivism in the theory of knowledge thus being their targets, the next question is what modes of attack they adopt. Castoriadis, after his critique of Marxism (of which more below), engages himself with the theory of knowledge itself, arguing for a representative theory of perception in which cognitive acts are well-founded guesswork. This is where imagination comes in, since the precepts chosen from changeable nature are the result of hypotheses tested out in experience. A network of pretended fixities - that is, letting it be the case for the time being that there actually are neatly separable and permanent things, persons, and properties - is laid tentatively on the flux of becoming. Castoriadis thus sides with Parmenides and Heraclitus simultaneously, for entities are thereby granted a would-be logical absoluteness while the underlying unknown flux remains in a constant condition of change. Wilden, on the other hand, does not consider such philosophical enquiry part of his brief: his method is to shake the confidence of the would-be half of this combination. What he fears is the situation in which the logical presupposition of neatly separable entities turns into a complacent belief. He displays a wealth of examples of the failure of that complacency, and by that very wealth endeavours to show that its roots lie in a profound insecurity.

Part of Castoriadis's rhetoric is to use a metaphor for the underlying flux, for he wants to avoid the suggestion that it is a total chaos. If one is to reject the notion of a total natural order guaranteed by language, equally one rejects that of its converse, a total disorder. He draws his image from geophysics, that of the magma, literally that viscous stratum deep under the earth's crust upon which the continents float, and out of which emerge new rocks, new continents. It is an appropriate metaphor: just as the fluid mantle rises from great depths to flow, merge, and crystallize at all stages from viscous half-yieldings to rigid geometrizations, from lava to diamond, so the praxis of perception sorts out the representative flux, choosing out of space-time those short- or long-lived

concretions that it hopes best suit its purposes. Those purposes themselves, being the bedrock of self, are no more securely conceived than actual continents are permanently fixed. It is the operations of identitary-ensamblist logic (Castoriadis calls it *legein*) that produce 'ideal multiple dissections' (p. 344) which are regarded *as if* they were distinct and definite elements. This partial illusion of unchanging referents, temporary holding-points, enables human doing (*teukhein*) to obtain a grasp sufficient to satisfy some human desires. One can deduce from this that there is no possibility of making a complete account of nature in verbal terms: the real is not the rational, nor is the rational the real.

By incorporating a representative phenomenal flux (also a 'magma') into his theory, an idea taken from Merleau-Ponty, he can make any identification, even that of the self, an imaginary choosing out of that flux. But, precisely because this choosing is from a private experience, it has to be the outcome of social interplay, an 'imaginary institution' involving more than one self.

Language is the essential means by which these temporary holding-points are established, all entities thus mutually posited as fixed (p. 347). Castoriadis's forebears are thus Kant, Friedrich Lange, Nietzsche, F. C. S. Schiller, Alfred Sidgwick, Hans Vaihinger, and Alfred Schutz, for all of whom identity and order are the project of the *als ob*, the 'as if' impulse. The mode of the selection mutually arrived at is an imaginary one; the *logos* is at heart a *mythos*. What people are selecting their 'things' and 'persons' *from* is real enough, but obviously the selection itself remains a hit-and-miss affair, only viable for the time being, as Ernst von Glasersfeld has it.² The essential error, which both books expose, is to equate objectivity with reality.

For Castoriadis, not only is the individual an institution created by the *als ob*, but so is society. There are no given roles and functions beyond those which corporate imagining has embedded in human activity. Castoriadis is careful here also to acknowledge that there are crystallizations in the social magma which represent elements resistant to change, but if there is always a 'something else' (p. 347), in the would-be fixed object, there is equally a revolutionary flaw in the most repressive of systems. It is here that his rhetoric warms to the hope that social doing can work towards a transformation of society without depending on any ideal of progress, Marxist or other. Hence he privileges the 'original' in any language use. However, the judgement of what is original on the one hand and eccentric on the other is, of course, a contingent matter. Castoriadis should see, as no doubt he does, that genuine conflict is not out of the question: tragedy is a real possibility, its likelihood increased in a world where too many see the universe reassuringly as a Divine Comedy.

Castoriadis's attack upon Marxism is launched, not from a right-wing point of view, but from that of one who rejects the ideals of progress and certainty upon which it relies for transcendent support. He does not reject the need for a revolutionary stance, but this must be seen as a project, not as a theorem deduced from history. The dialectic of human communication and of human praxis with nature is not to be supported by any dialectic other than that in the nature of language itself, still a material source. The lingering idealism in Marxism is what led to the tyrannical convictions of Stalin and to the inertia of East European bureaucracies, secure in their illusion of prophetic knowledge. Interesting as this opening portion of the book is, it would have been better as

an appendix. In actual fact it was written first; Castoriadis himself speaks of it as scaffolding. It is in fact a practical conclusion.

Anthony Wilden's two books, which really count as two volumes of one book, may be seen as a fairground beside the imaginary institution. There are sideshows of anecdotes, aphorisms, essays, dialogues, quotations, drawings, photographs (2-D and 3-D), articles, engravings, poems, lists, paintings, diagrams, cartoons, newspaper clippings, myths, calligraphic symbols, puzzles, and puns - on philosophy, anthropology, economics, linguistics, military strategy, psychology, psychoanalysis, Busby Berkeley dance-routines, politics, film, advertising, female stereotyping, codes, cybernetics, history, logic, religion, cosmology, semiotics, theology, navigation, DNA, the Boer, Korean, and Vietnam wars, rape, racism, sexism, pornography, entropy, and ecology. Since the montage is deliberate, so too must the reading be a reading at will. Wherever you start and wherever you finish, the impression is of a Coleridgean buttonholer. He may repeat himself, but that is an advantage of his game, for it sharpens the urgency of his persuasion. Since this is a book you can pick up and put down and pick up again, the ever-present danger of boredom need not materialize. The book produces a curious coruscation of thoughts and facts and images on the central theme of the troping of language and world. From Gregory Bateson's double-bind to Palo Alto paradoxes, Wilden relentlessly hunts up *gestalt-switches* in everything. It is a *gestalt-switch* commonplace book, and its obsessive rifling of so many human activities confirms the hunch that there is something in it.

Wilden's persuasion by scissors and paste, however much it may intrigue the sympathetic reader, will not, I fear, do much to move those for whom ambiguity can only be equivalent to fallacy. His volumes are undoubtedly books for the converted. On a popular level there may be some who will be converted by this anecdotal approach, but one fears that the conviction would be only as shallow as the prejudice he wishes to overthrow. Nevertheless, taken as an entertaining stimulus to thought, his books do leave those who already believe that language is essentially tropic with many new, intriguing illustrations.

To conclude, both Castoriadis's and Wilden's books move in the right direction: towards a representational theory of perception, in which what is represented is energy-distributions and not given things or persons; then, out of that, towards seeing the pattern of intersubjective knowing as a common venture in which all can engage, albeit without any transcendent insurance of success; towards the reunion of philosophy with a non-positivistic science; and towards what Georg Simmel understood,³ a meta-tolerance of the other's desire, even if it should, at the worst, lead to irresolvable conflict.

NOTES

- 1 Edmond Wright, 'Derrida, Searle, contexts, games, riddles', *New Literary History*, 13 (1981-2), 463-77 (see p. 273).
- 2 Ernst von Glasersfeld, 'An introduction to radical constructivism' in P. Watzlawick (ed.), *The Invented Reality* (New York, 1984), 17-40.
- 3 Georg Simmel, 'On the concept of tragedy in culture', in *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, trans. K. Peter Etzhorn (New York, 1968).