

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 2 (2010)

Configurations of Cultural Amnesia



Pitcher Jonathan, *Excess Baggage: A Modern Theory and the Conscious Amnesia of Latin Americanist Thought*. American University Studies, Series XXII: Latin American Literature 29.

Antonis Balasopoulos

doi: [10.12681/syn.16524](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16524)

Copyright © 2010, Antonis Balasopoulos



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Jonathan Pitcher. *Excess Baggage: A Modern Theory and the Conscious Amnesia of Latin Americanist Thought*. American University Studies, Series XXII: Latin American Literature 29. New York: Peter Lang, 2009. Pp. x+250. \$ 76.95 (Hb).

Jonathan Pitcher's *Excess Baggage* is a polemical work. This much is obvious by the stridency of its rhetoric, its focus on the critical exposure—and at times, the ridicule—of the opponent, its recurrent resort to hyperbole and even caricature, to sarcasm and invective. Polemic, as its name attests, is linked to the violence of war-like conflict, the latter providing a framework of intelligibility that links Milton's religio-political pamphleteering in the English Civil War to Marx's attempts to exorcise the idealist residues of the young Hegelians from materialist politics in *The German Ideology*, or to the auratic pronouncements of the sundry avant-garde manifestoes that marked (and celebrated) the feverish unrest of the first quarter of the twentieth century. But this is also to say that as a rhetorical stance polemic is likely to evoke a pre-postmodern past, with its higher threshold of tolerance for rhetorical violence, its urge to draw the line and name the enemy, its commitment to victory. As we will shortly see, the slightly old-fashioned, past-inflected aura of polemical style is both revealing of Pitcher's broader ideological orientation and indicative of the problems with which it is plagued.

Polemic, of course, presupposes a clearly identified target, one attacked from an equally clear position. Such clarity is not passively given in facts themselves; it is actively produced by the polemic, whose task is to engender a coherent and intelligible image of the adversarial position, tracing its variations or mutations, scouting for its ramifications in second-order phenomena, mapping the terrain where the opponent draws upon or is likely to move in. In the process, polemic also fleshes out a picture of its own subject position, providing expression to the values and ideas on the grounds of which it pronounces judgment. Indeed, it could be said that it uses enmity as a means of elaborating on its own premises, honing its own arguments and clarifying its own stakes in the confrontation.

Approaching Pitcher's book on the basis of these two fundamental presuppositions of polemic, however, is likely to yield problematic results. Let us begin by remarking that the opponent of his argument is named in the book's subtitle: "A modern theory" signals one of the names of the adversary, as does "the conscious amnesia of Latin Americanist thought," and it might be said that the book is more or less evenly divided between engagements with these two avatars of the adversary, the first four chapters devoted to polemical engagement with the former while the remaining four undertake the scrutiny of the latter. But the moniker "a modern theory" proves rather misleading, for Pitcher will repeatedly identify the target of the first half of his book not as *a* modern theory among many but as *the* theory of modernity, a theory so omnipresent, voracious and imperial that it encompasses four centuries of western thought, revealing itself as the secret and unnoticed link threading together Baconian rationalism and Condillac's mathematical Enlightenment, the Romantic reveries of Rousseau (the subject of the first chapter), the fundamentals of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century "hermeneutic of suspicion" (Freud, Nietzsche and Marx among many others parading in the third chapter), Alain Robbe-Grillet's and Carlos Fuentes's aesthetics of the postmodern novel (in the fourth chapter), or the assumingly shared premises of Macdonaldization and Derridean post-structuralism (in the second).

As one might have cause to expect given this bewildering degree of alleged dissemination, the 'theory' against which Pitcher positions himself is actually quite minimal in substantive content. Its lineaments emerge early on, during the inaugural discussion of Condillac and his epistemological gambit, which consists, in the author's view, in a paradoxical act of willful amnesia, a culturally willed suspension of the received habits of culture. This gesture, which will be identified as endemic to the project of Enlightenment rationalism, inaugurates modernity as a regime of bad faith, a "process of incessant unknowing" (53) that is ultimately deeply irrational, "stripping...an entire culture of the vestiges of the past, of its existence as a social body" (16). In failing "to see...the ramifications of dismissing virtually all past thought," Pitcher's "modern theory" is both a "theory designed to end all theory" and the site of "an interminable chain of ideological supersession" (9), a bad infinity wherein the dream of a "permanent revolutionary spirit" (145) mutates into the nightmare of infinite repetition, of an empty and vapid "innovation" that is in fact synonymous with its opposite.

As it turns out, the deployment of a term associated with the stringent violence of revolutionary (particularly Maoist) left politics to characterise an aesthetic and critical stance is neither catachrestic

nor metaphorical. From the beginning of his book, Pitcher conveys a distinct set of political associations to his aesthetic and critical adversary. Whether he makes reference to (enlightenment) “France’s legalized endorsement of the translucent simplicity of ‘machine thought,’ and of ‘sensationalism’” (20); censors the French Revolution’s idealisation of a theoretical vacuity called “the citizen” at the expense of the lived knowledge and memory of empirical peasants and workers (20); or pours scorn on “the egalitarian luster, the physiological gratification, the lascivious reevaluating and then craving after innovatory techniques...and the curtailing of language to ensure its immediate intelligibility” (25)—the adversary he conjures cannot fail but exhibit familiar (tri)colors, since it insistently traces its birthplace to the trauma of the French Revolution and its Jacobinist afterlife. Such afterlife, on the other hand, seems particularly long-ranging, for it is not simply the likes of Thomas Paine or Karl Marx that it anticipates. It is also those like Jacques Derrida (or indeed Foucault, Althusser and even Bourdieu), since the “egalitarian,” past-negating and transparency-enhancing features associated with “modern theory” “are all lifted from the Derridian [sic] handbook, which in turn was pilfered from its previous, *more overtly violent owners*” (25; emphasis added). It is this energetically reiterated connection between an ideology born in the revolutionary upheaval of Robespierrian Terror and the ideological work performed by an excessively frenchified theoretical hegemony in Latin American Studies that vexes the author. The fundamental presupposition is that such theory is secretly homogeneous and continuous, encompassing not simply anyone who happened to practice theory in France in the last fifty years, but also their German counterparts (from Heidegger to Marx), Anglo-American and Latin American critics, and the great majority of ‘boom’ and post-boom Latin American writers. Writing on Freud, the “master of our doxa” and effective preemptor of the “imitative hermeneutics” (34) of Althusser and Lacan, Pitcher affirms: “psychoanalysis both was and is conformist...The scientific aura, the progressive idealism which is convinced of its natural transparency, that it is operating non-ideologically, the language of opposition, the postulation of a more veritable, asocial freedom and the necessary devolution of thought are all *imitative of the Enlightenment*, itself *imitative* of earlier models” (43; emphasis added).

Given the ubiquity of similar aspersions in the entire work, it seems fair to take a moment to raise a number of questions regarding the epistemological grounding of the general enterprise: first, what is the guarantee of the consistency and coherence of the targeted intellectual formation (“modern theory”) other than the author’s own insistent denial that there is anything significant or substantive in the differences between, say, Marx and Foucault, nineteenth-century social science and literary post-structuralism, modernism and post-modernism? How, in other words, does Pitcher’s mode of argumentation acknowledge the grave epistemological difference between relevant generalisation and unsubstantiated, even paranoid totalisations of the ‘conspiracy theory’ type? Secondly, if “modern theory’s” dialectic between (false) “supersession” and (actual) “imitation” extends all the way from the latest academic study to models ‘earlier’ than that of the Enlightenment, what is the legitimacy or analytical perspicacity of a label like ‘modern’? Thirdly, why would a thought maligned for consisting in barely more than surface variations on the same unchanging and impoverished conceptual core deserve the name ‘theory’ at all? Fourthly, is there really any difference between the image of a theory accused of being violently reductive and the polemical operation of reduction, which actively engineers its target’s villainous ubiquity (so that the enemy can be declared to lie everywhere precisely to the extent that qua ‘enemy,’ s/he is violently torn from any particularising context)? Lastly, is there any real difference between the bad infinity of a theory that obviously masquerades repetition as innovation (“the same ontological paradigm, with the same epiphanic rhetoric *ad infinitum*” [120]) and that of its critical unmasking? In other words, how is one to distinguish between theory’s bad infinity and the repetitive, ritualistic invocation of a meaninglessly abstract core of ostensible presuppositions—so that Condillac practically equals Rousseau equals Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Foucault, Derrida, Borges, Fuentes, Argentine dictator Eduardo Massera or the latest trends of capitalist globalisation? To adduce only a single example of the mimetic reproduction of the ‘enemy’s’ rhetoric by the rhetoric of the polemical invective itself:

If we accept that the *uniformity* of these [late modern] cities constitutes an acknowledged, or even desired global superstructure, then we must also accept that the *Condillacs* [note the hint of serial interchangeability inserted *a priori* in the singular name], the *Rimbauds*, and by implication *poststructuralism*, through not only their complicity in but also their imposition of *this structure* [and one wonders what “structure” refers to here other than the *a priori* imputed sin of “uniformity”], are by no means a fringe element...poststructuralism is *only semantically, or attitudinally, countercultural* [effectively, this is the same accusation that is subsequently leveled against the latent “conformism” of Freudian psychoanalysis], since both its ontology and its praxis have presided over

the general social flux for centuries [the abstraction of the “general social flux” bestowing some vague air of shared “modernity” on it all] (26; emphases added).

In a study so keen to bestow the features of omnipotence and omnipresence on its diagnostic object, one becomes especially curious about the fate of the second presupposition of polemic, namely that of the *positive, affirmative* articulation of a set of values or ideas that are set against those of the adversary. As it is, Pitcher is a lot less forthcoming about the lineaments of his own critical position of enunciation than one would expect; perhaps their most forthright deployment in actual analysis occurs only in the last chapter of the book, dedicated to the continuities between the historical preoccupations of Euclides da Cunha’s *Os sertões* (1902) and Mario Vargas Llosa’s *La Guerra del fin del mundo* (1981). Here, in the complex, ambivalent and at least partly sympathetic portrayal of the rebellious yet “coherent, conservative royalism” (226) of the *fin-de-siècle sertejos*, Pitcher at last locates a meaningful alternative to the “revolutionary paradigm of demolition” that has become “entirely comprehensible within modern theory, since [this last] is operating on an epigonal version of the same revolutionary paradigm itself” (221). Appropriately, the book ends on a note that resonates very closely with that by which it begins: the spectre of the French revolution and its afterlife in the thing called ‘theory,’ a spectre now exorcised by a novelistic discourse explicitly concerned with the tragic history of a counter-revolutionary group crushed by the modern national state. Somewhat conscious of the implications of his insistence on this primal scene, Pitcher demurs: “I am not advocating conservative, Christian royalism as the fundamental in-clause of Latin America” (226); yet he also makes sure to link Llosa’s mnemotechnic, anti-amnesiac return to the tragedy of a tradition-bound counter-revolution (lest we forget, Llosa is perhaps the prominent political conservative of the post-boom generation) to earlier, aesthetically unsatisfying attempts to provide a voice to French royalism: “the novel may be summarized as a more organised, more researched vision of Trollope’s *La Vendée*” (226).

‘Tradition,’ and its association not simply with the respectful treatment of organic continuity, but also with the explicit political conservatism of its advocates (Eliot’s “mediated logos” [216] is among the rare modern aesthetic practices for which the book reserves its praise); tradition is indeed the inevitably Burkean antidote to an amnesia wholly linked with the hubris of the radical “supersession” of things past, whether this last is an explicitly aesthetico-political or a more demurely aesthetic or simply epistemic stance. And it is appropriately in the early, French Enlightenment cum revolution-oriented pages of the book that Pitcher offers his most explicit and revealing defense of the ideology on behalf of which *Excess Baggage* is written:

The fact that a culture may already possess an entirely evenhanded, communal sense of morality is of little consequence, for this system must surely be tainted by years of sinister mediation, so tainted that from now on the people must be entirely reliant upon their omnipotent lawyers to define the benchmarks for right and wrong, as opposed to thinking for themselves....the act of continually referencing a pandect which is always more susceptible to a given individual’s distortion than the system it seeks to replace, is not an act of liberation. In practice, the replacement is often more arbitrary, more transient, and devised with less of a consensus than its antecedent. However, providing the patrons of this superficially enlightened, freer, less superstitious code are effective in their peddling, then sooner or later the governed will indeed attempt to suspend all mental activity and allow it to dominate even the most trifling aspects of their lives. (17)

It would be very difficult to find a contemporary passage in literary criticism that so faithfully replicates the fundamental tenets of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790): the emphasis on the organic, finely tuned wisdom of the people as opposed to the arbitrariness of legal *fiat*; the animosity against a “supersessive” mentality which made the French behave as if they were “a people of yesterday”, despising “all their predecessors” and thus effectively “themselves” (Burke 36-37); the deep suspicion addressed against the anarchic, individualist excess of revolutionary ethos; the investment in an entropic view of history wherein every perturbation of the ‘natural equilibrium’ of society is likely to increase rather than diminish the degree of violence and tyranny; in short, the full gamut of counter-revolutionary common sense, with its proud monopoly over ‘civilised,’ ‘humane,’ and ‘temperately’ rather than ‘dogmatically’ rational discourse. Burke, it should be well known, used a shorthand designation for all that was fundamentally wrong in a modernity conceived thus: it was ‘theory,’ a temptation from which the English were safe to the extent that they preferred “practical wisdom”, and hence “positive, recorded, hereditary title” to “vague, speculative right” (Burke 32)—that abstraction which jeopardised all notions of inheritance, assailing the very discourse of familial continuity on which both kingship and the state were normatively founded. The “right,” David Simpson has aptly noted, “is traditionally against theory”; that tradition was itself founded in “the

revolt against theory that took place in the 1790s,” in the advocacy of “declared immersion in the minute complexities of a ‘human’ nature” as means of protecting “national character” from the “contamination of French ideas.” Pitcher, inveigling against “the unfettered transplantation of Foucault” in “Latin Americanism” (175), is in this sense never quite safe from the Francophobically nativist (and not simply counter-revolutionary) origins of the anti-theoretical posture.

This, of course, is not likely to diminish a book for which ‘revolutionary’ and ‘reactionary’ are adjectives consistently subjected to an ironically all-too-Nietzschean transvaluation of all values, the former having now become a form of aspersion and the latter one of praise. It is, however, likely to suggest that the shock value of *Excess Baggage*’s grand polemic is itself predicated on the “cultured gesture of unknowing” (107) it excoriates in the adversary, the flaunting of a position that is itself deeply amnesic, every bit as prone to a “modern” obliteration of discursive ties to the past as it imagines its summarily indicted—though considerably less monotone—opponents to be.

Antonis Balasopoulos
University of Cyprus