

**Toming Jun Liu, *Modernity in Fugue: Revelations of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century European Literature*. By (童明, 《现代性赋格: 19 世纪欧洲经典文学启示录》). Beijing and Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008. 210 pp. Paperback, ISBN: 9787563377626**

*MODERNITY IN FUGUE: Revelations of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century European Literature*, written in Chinese, is a postmodern reflection on how several significant writers of 19<sup>th</sup> century European literature—Baudelaire, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Nietzsche among others—thoughtfully respond to problems of modernization and to the systematized modernity of the Enlightenment. The book is not only a poignant critical study of the concept of (post)modernity and of 19<sup>th</sup> century European literature, it also offers an insight into the modernity that China has been experiencing if we read the book between the lines. As the author states, "for China, a country that is still in search of a modern consciousness, the lessons from the history of European modernization (the history of literature included) cannot be ignored"(Liu 4). The "revelations," therefore, are directed mainly toward the author's homeland, which he left thirty years ago.

Based on the argument that modernity should be understood as a fugue of themes and contrapuntal themes, Liu's book distinguishes itself in three aspects. First, Liu's book, written in a refreshingly literary style, focuses on how modern literature's rhetorical thinking critically respond to problems in systematized modernity, thus highlighting the critical capacity of poetry and the poetic capacity of criticism. Unlike the dryness usually associated with theoretical writing, Liu's theorizing of modernity is poetically evocative; his reading of the 19<sup>th</sup> French and Russian literatures is not only lyrical but solidly philosophical. Secondly, Liu foregrounds the often overlooked aesthetical dimensions of modernity represented by a diverse range of rhetorical styles by Montaigne, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Chernyshevsky, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, bringing to light a modernity contrapuntal to the unifying narrative of instrumental modernity. "If modern thinking had evolved from Montaigne rather than from Descartes, there would have been a totally different movement of Enlightenment," conjectures Liu at one point (8). The author's readings of Baudelaire, Flaubert, as well as of Chernyshevsky and Dostoevsky, also reveal a more complex map of modernity from both the perspective of a more developed European continent and that of an under-modernized Russia. Thirdly, considering that Liu's readership is his country-fellows in China, he is implying an argument that China has paid and is still paying a high price in a rather blind drive to modernize herself.

The Introduction, in a pleasant prose, connects 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe with contemporary China in the sharing of similar problems in modernity and introduces the book's argument: that the "other" modernity as offered by literary writers is a Derridean supplement to the Enlightenment modernity. After the Introduction, the first two chapters, focused solely on the Enlightenment, set up the basic theoretical framework of Liu's metaphorical argument that modernity is a polyphonic fugue consisting of various themes and responses. Indeed, one must agree that any discussion of modernity has to tackle the issue of Enlightenment. We cannot speak of a modernity separate from the Enlightenment, because the Enlightenment was the historical origin of a system of modernity or modern values. What, then, is Enlightenment? Liu suggests that this is not a question that can be asked and answered once and for all. Kant gave a noble answer that the

Enlightenment means we exercise our independent thinking to free ourselves from the tutelage or guardianship of others. Since Kant, various authors revisited the idea of Enlightenment, developing answers related to and different from Kant. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Adorno and Horkheimer pointed out self-destructive seeds of the Enlightenment's instrumental rationality; and Foucault, furthermore, identified this side as the "blackmail of Enlightenment." For Foucault, we should inherit the positives of the Enlightenment and refuse its blackmail in order to continue the project of modernity.

From Kant, to Adorno and Horkheimer, and to Foucault, reflections on the Enlightenment show a serious critique of systematized modernity and acknowledge the contradictions and tensions of the concept. The word "Modernus," as is known, first came into existence in the 5<sup>th</sup> century to distinguish the "modern" society of Christianity from the older one of Roman Catholicism. And modern philosophy, in the practice of Descartes and Hegel, then embraced subjectivity as *ego sum cogito* and the reason-first tradition and defined modernity in those terms. These and other ideas constituted the Enlightenment. As Liu argues in his book, over-emphasizing this modernity sometimes leads to an oversight of other dimensions (including the aesthetic and cultural dimensions) of modernity. Liu thus suggests that the "Enlightenment is a contradictory historical movement with both its advantages and disadvantages"(5). In spite of all the improvements and benefits it has brought to human history, the Enlightenment's system of rationality, subjectivity and knowledge needs to be re-evaluated so that we can continue the Kantian dream of human freedom.

Drawing from Baudelaire, Flaubert, Chernyshevsky, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, Liu's book deconstructs the supremely unifying narrative of the Enlightenment. Such a way of studying modernity not only distinguishes the book as a postmodernist reading of modernity, but is in itself a fugue of modernity in that it synthesizes different notes and themes from various sources. Some, like Anthony Giddens, would suggest that there have existed two lines of critical reflections on modernity. Beginning from Baudelaire, as is richly discussed in Liu's book, and via Simmel to Foucault, who respectively focused on society and ethics, there evolved a history of aesthetic modernity, which modernity, in Giddens' term, is a "literary aesthetic concept." The second line was initiated by Max Weber, through the two generations of the Frankfurt School, from Adorno and Horkheimer to Habermas is the line which mainly focused on criticism of Enlightenment. This second line, for Giddens, is modernity as a "sociological-historical category." However, the two-line theory may have been challenged by Liu's book. While Liu's analysis of the 19<sup>th</sup> century European literature focuses on the aesthetic reflection on modernity, his poignant relevance to China nonetheless fits his study into the "sociological-historical category."

Liu's advocacy of an aesthetic modernity that responds to rational modernity is wonderfully expressed in his reading of the 19<sup>th</sup> century French writers from the developed Europe and the writers from the underdeveloped Russia. Baudelaire's poetry and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Gogol's short stories and Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, as well as Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, all of which, in Liu's analysis, mockingly criticizes an emergent culture of China's nouveau bourgeois and provoke Chinese readers to find historical mirrors for China's current struggle to develop a culture fitting for her

modernization. Liu is perhaps not unaware that the theme of aesthetic modernity has been a debated topic in the Chinese field of literature since the 1990s and that Chinese discourses of aesthetic modernity are circulated among literary critics as a critical and redeeming force to make up for the costs and blunders of China's modernization. Liu, as both a Chinese and American scholar concerned with China's way of modernization, sees it very clearly that in the ongoing project of modernity, what is rather spectacular is the ever increasing movement of revolt, the changing role of the individual's feeling and behavior in social reality, the changing structure of community ethics, as well as the generative reconstruction of the forms of culture as institution.

As it is the valuable insight of Liu's book, the modern value system created by the European Enlightenment has been a force to push forward reforms, but it also has substantial problems in its oversight of humanity and history (Liu 101). He doesn't say it too explicitly, but we feel his critical impulse in his careful exploration of the modernization projects of Paris and St. Petersburg as reflected in literature and we sense his deep concern with the blind blunders in China's massive modernization and the heavy costs arising therefrom. "After Haussmann, the ghost of Haussmann still looms large in many country's projects of urbanization. Politically, he may have gained an edge. Yet aesthetic judgment, as it is different from political judgment, springs from our humanity and has a very strong force of life as well as a very long memory. It reminds us of the fundamental value of human beings"(Liu 63). Among the consequences of modernization is a "culture" of the new rich marked by their bourgeois shallowness and glorified vulgarity (65, 68, 94, 101). As an antidote to the bourgeois culture, Liu speaks of an aesthetic wisdom which he continually elaborates through Baudelaire, Flaubert, Dostoevsky and most importantly, Nietzsche. Aesthetic wisdom is indeed greatly needed in today's China which is still suffering from a closed value system.

Hegel once said that the owl of Minerva won't fly out of the woods until the coming of dawn. When the optimism- and progress-driven narrative of modernity loses its appeal and validity, we will appreciate more the contrapuntal themes that constitute what Liu calls the fugue of modernity. In the context of globalization, modernity is a fluid concept, as Giddens says. In an age when modernity is global, different nationalities, cultures and countries inevitably will reform and reconstruct modernity according to their actual needs. That, too, is a point emphasized repeatedly in Liu's book. Modernity, therefore, is plural rather than single; it is a fugue, not the solo of the Western world.

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