

Postmodernism—Science—Philosophy

Marek Kwiek

The fundamental questions to be addressed are these: What is the impact of “postmodernism” on the relationship between philosophy and science? What are the possible consequences of the postmodernist whirlwind on the status of philosophy in contemporary culture? And, does postmodernism add new questions to the gnawing issue over the degree, if any, to which a philosopher is a scientist? It would seem that the relationship between science and postmodern philosophy is a radically new one, not only because the place of philosophy in culture is changing, but because the place of science in culture is undergoing a radical transformation as well.

Looking back over the relationship between science and philosophy—this being one possible point of departure—one can describe the evolution of philosophy in terms of the evolution of its relationship with science (to be more specific, through arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music). In the Middle Ages, philosophy could not do without the seven *artes liberales* (grammar, rhetorics and logic, in addition to the others above). It was only as late as the nineteenth century that philosophy actually took a position in opposition to science. According to the German idealists—Kant, then later, somewhat modified, Hegel—philosophy was to transcend both religion and science, becoming a sort of “superscience” with a final and unique account of the ultimate nature of reality as its aim. German Romanticism had elevated philosophy over science for the very first time. It was not to be science (or religion) but philosophy alone that could give the secular intellectual his con-

Zasadniczym pytaniem, jakie stawia Marek Kwiek – wykładowca filozofii na Uniwersytecie Adama Mickiewicza – jest to, „w jaki sposób prąd umysłowy zwany postmodernizmem wpływa na wzajemne relacje pomiędzy filozofią a nauką?” Zdaniem Kwieka, pojawieniu się filozofii postmodernistycznej towarzyszyła radykalna transformacja wzajemnych stosunków filozofii i nauk przyrodniczych. W przeszłości, począwszy od starożytności, przez średniowiecze, aż do XIX wieku, więzi filozofii z nauką były silne. Były to więzi, które w istotnie uzależniały filozofię od „nauk pozytywnych”. Możliwość ich wzajemnej opozycji pojawiła się dopiero w ubiegłym stuleciu głównie za sprawą niemieckich idealistów, w których przekonaniu filozofia powinna wykraczać zarówno poza naukę, jak poza religię, i stawiać sobie za cel poznanie całościowej i ostatecznej natury rzeczywistości. Romantycy pierwsi przedłożyli filozofię ponad naukę sprowadzając „szkielet i oko” do podrzędnej roli w poznaniu natury egzystencji. Z drugiej strony zapoczątkowana przez Comte’a tradycja pozytywistyczna aspirowała do osiągnięcia całkowicie przeciwnego celu – wykazania poznawczej nieprzydatności filozofii jako domeny metafizyki. W rezultacie, sama filozofia utraciła swą jedność: rozpadła się na dwa nurtu – jeden grawitujący ku poznawczemu modelowi nauki, drugi ku literaturze. Postmodernistyczny zwrot w filozofii, manifestujący się w pracach takich myślicieli, jak Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida czy Richard Rorty, zdecydowanie uprzywilejowuje literaturę i kwestionuje status nauki jako dominującej metody poznania. Pełna hegemonia jakiegokolwiek modelu filozofii byłaby dla jej przyszłości fatalna – stwierdza Kwiek. Wiatalność może filozofii zapewnić wielość głosów – konkurujących między sobą, lecz wzajemnie darzących się respektem. Tylko wówczas filozoficzna refleksja może uniknąć groźby kulturowej sterylności, narzuconej apodyktycznie przez naukę, jak również bezsilnej wrażliwości i zwątpienia płynących z literatury.

cept of self, and on that he would build his self-image. From this perspective, science would be almost unnecessary for philosophy. Nevertheless, August Comte's nineteenth-century positivism led to a twentieth-century neopositivism which radically called into question previous fundamental contentions of philosophy, treating them as meaningless and as an unnecessary, metaphysical burden.

In sum, philosophy grew ever more independent of science, confident in its conviction of autonomy while at the same time trying to be the equal of science by giving up traditional, metaphysical aspirations (a process best seen, in the twentieth century, in Husserl's ideas of philosophy *als strenge Wissenschaft* and Russell's ideals of scientific philosophy).

Philosophy in Contemporary Culture

Philosophizing, in general, seems to move between two extreme models, that of science and that of literature. The more it moves away from one, the closer it comes to the other. These differing models are not interchangeable, not mutually accessible, nor are they commensurable. Each powerful move in one or the other direction gives birth to violent questions about philosophy's future, status, place and role in culture.

What has gained now with the advent of postmodernism in philosophy is that the equilibrium worked out over the years has been altered and the scale has begun to move in the direction of literature. Not until recently has philosophy had science as its model (for, since Hegel and Nietzsche, philosophers have not needed science for their identity), but it surely was at a safe distance from literature. Postmodernism seems to have brought with it, among other things, a much higher valorization of literature and its model for philosophical investigations. This influence can be seen first of all in continental, mainly French, philosophy, but also in historiography, sociology and anthropology. Is philosophy turning into literature? And, what is the significance of its deviation from science toward literature? The issue is one of a growing modesty, moderation and caution in philosophical discourse as opposed to its more traditional certainty and to the modern, Enlightenment conviction of the infallibility of science.

The fundamental paradigm of the Western tradition—the paradigm of knowing as descended from Plato—is currently being eroded. This paradigm is not as attractive to contemporary culture as to earlier times. Indeed, there have always been opponents who doubted that “man's essence is to be a knower of essence,” as Richard Rorty put it in his magisterial *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Postmodern thinking in philosophy has exposed doubts about the hegemony of only one vision of the human being (according to which his paradigmatic activity is precisely that of knowing). The exposure of these doubts has begun to undermine the predominant conception of philosophy. It may be the case that man apart from knowing—paradigmatically by means of science and science-oriented philosophy—also feels, self-creates, or takes care of himself. In postmodern culture, sentiment is opposed to reason, solidarity is counterbalanced by self-creation

(Rorty), the Platonic commandment "you shall know!" is opposed by the (also Platonic) suggestion "Take care of yourself!" (Foucault), the "wisdom of philosophy" is confronted with the "wisdom of the novel" (Kundera). Thus, even if philosophy is not threatened with the extreme of becoming literature, it is confronted with a possible change in its predominant conception. The change in its relationship with science makes it necessary to consider new alliances as well as to look for new supporters and new strategic treaties. As postmodernism has called into question the universal model of philosophy, perhaps philosophers ought to look for philosophical answers that are more transitory, less binding and much more local in time and space.

It seems to me that the traumatic events of our century have caused enormous transformations in philosophical thinking. Changes in current continental philosophical consciousness cannot be understood without taking into account the wars and revolutions of this century as well as the social and political engagement of philosophers in concert with them. Indeed, philosophy has in this century been a field of ideological battles, of struggles not only for its own future as a discipline, but also for the future of the university, the nation, the state, Europe and, even, the world. I see postmodernism as, among other things, a return to a philosophy of the awareness of the historicity of thought and as well of the philosopher's paralyzing, individual responsibility for these philosophical proposals.

No matter where continental postmodern thought took roots (from Marx, Freud, structuralism or the French Hegel, as read by Kojève and as later confronted with the French "new Nietzsche"), it is closer to literature than to science. Consequently, the role of philosophy in culture is changing from a provider of fundamental knowledge in synthesis with science and theology, to a superscience of global and universal aspirations, and finally to a substitute for religion for the secular intellectual.

As to what role philosophy serves today in culture, the answer bears directly on its relationship to science. From a cursory review of some of philosophy's recent roles, one can see that the relationship in question has become more and more transitory: philosophy as a weapon in struggles with the political and economic status quo; philosophy as an individualistic "care of the self" or (Nietzschean in spirit) "aesthetic of existence"; philosophy as advanced and high-level cultural criticism. All the above examples, present in today's philosophical discourses, are commonly referred to as "postmodern." Surely, there are different types of postmodernism and types of philosophy. The result is a growing awareness that there is no pre-existing entity called philosophy that determines precisely what it is and is not. Philosophy is what is named philosophy by participants in philosophical discourse. It is they, those deeply involved both in contemporary culture and in traditional philosophical questions, who determine the new conceptualization of philosophy according to more or less contemporary needs.

Thus, there is no longer one only relationship between science and philosophy, be it one of harmony or of antagonism. Rather, I believe, there as many relationships as there

are conceptions of philosophy—meaning no longer movements but precisely conceptualizations, that is to say, answers to the question: “what is philosophy?” A multitude of viewpoints, a multiplicity of possible descriptions, a diversity of perspectives and horizons have been a genre specific of literature and the novel since the time of Cervantes. Milan Kundera, in his exciting *The Art of the Novel*, says that the novel is a utopia, a “paradise of individuals” in which everyone can have his own view, everyone can be right. Previously, the world of the novel and that of traditional philosophy never fit together since they were nourished by different ideals. Today the kinship between these two spheres may be greater than ever before.

Even so, philosophy will never become literature. It has a different history in respect to which each successive philosopher and each successive philosophy describes his and its own place. To participate in the “history of the novel” is to be part of the great tradition of the novel; to participate in the “history of philosophy” is to be part of the great tradition of philosophy. The novelist and the philosopher choose a different history and a different tradition for themselves, but at the same time they attempt to expose and transcend their most important predecessors in literature and in philosophy. The choice of predecessors to transcend is the beginning of a search for identity, the beginning of fashioning a self-image. In this sense there would be no novel “in general” as there would be no philosophy “in general.” The moral provided by philosophy and by the novel flow from reading the history of philosophy and the history of the novel (according to both Rorty and Kundera). Is there thus a threat that philosophy will become literature? No, there is not, as they differ in their respective traditions without which—or outside of which—neither of them can exist.

What positive aspects would result if postmodern philosophy turned away from science? First, there would be an end to the Enlightenment ethos of personal participation in constant progress, the ethos of the individual moving along on an infallible road leading humanity to future happiness. Second, there would appear a greater sensitivity to the here and now—rather than to and instead of sanctioning a promised future *telos*. Third, there would be a deepening awareness of the heteronomy and heterogeneity of different philosophical discourses, an awareness of the riches issuing out of cultural differences. Fourth, there would be an expanding discussion of the public role of the philosopher, of the expectations directed toward him and of the possible fulfilment of the hopes invested in him. Fifth, finally, there would emerge a re-evaluation of the self-image of the philosopher: is he a social engineer, a scientist or a poet? Is he a private or public thinker? Is there a way in which perhaps he could be a combination of these? Each role has had its influential actor in the twentieth century, each of them brings about different dangers and different possibilities. Whatever the fate of the “postmodern turn”—and regardless of the fact whether, with the passage of time, it will really be a “turn” or just a momentary and transitory change—some questions have been forcefully posed as to the definition of the philosopher and his role in culture—his tasks, obligations, place and finally (social, polit-

ical and intellectual) responsibilities. Although neglected and disregarded by analytic philosophy, these questions have led, in continental philosophy in its postmodern variation, to extremely important discussions both in France and the US. They will not be, I suppose, without repercussions for philosophy in general, even though they emerged out of local struggles and local needs (as was the case at the end of the eighties with discussions about the Nazi entanglements of Heidegger's philosophy after the publication of Victor Faricas' book and about the young Paul de Man's wartime journalism).

The oscillation of philosophy between science and literature is at the same time the philosopher's oscillation between scientist (including social engineer) and poet. In antiquity, the debate between philosophy and poetry was won by the former, and, consequently, Plato banned poets from the *polis*. In postmodernity, banned poets may perhaps be returning as victors and trying to ban (traditional, epistemology-oriented and universalistic) philosophy. Yet what has changed since the ancient *polis* is that literature, poetry and philosophy have all acquired their own histories—none of which can by any means be banned from culture. It may be that postmodernism in philosophy is just another reminder, stronger than all previous ones, that the world changes much more radically than traditional philosophy can see from its perspective of *sub aeternitatis*.

It seems to me that philosophy today not only has to compete with science, proposing alternative accounts of reality; it has also to reaffirm over and over its vital role in culture. For, while science manifests its usefulness every day in technology, philosophy has to supply a *raison d'être* and to allow its comparison and juxtaposition with literature and art.

Thus, while on the one hand philosophy is growing more alienated from culture—moving closer to science—and becoming more culturally dead, on the other hand it is moving further away from science, accepting in increased measure literature's conventions, forms, and even tasks and obligations. The world of textualism is quite tempting for culture, and it is definitely far distant from a traditionally scientific, not to mention scientific, account of the world. As there is no single philosophy, so there is no one single postmodern philosophy (there are rather individual, idiosyncratic, unique projects of particular postmodern philosophers. Perhaps it is even better to speak of Rorty's, Lyotard's, Derrida's, or Foucault's philosophy rather than of their neopragmatism, postmodernism, deconstruction or archeology/genealogy). One point can surely be made with respect to the different postmodern philosophical proposals—namely, that they generally manifest an aversion or distaste for the scientific method. They eschew scientific discourse in philosophy and the means and goals traditionally ascribed to science while expressing admiration for the aims and methods of literature and the arts.

An interesting part of philosophy chooses different heroes and puts forward different tasks for its narratives: it intends, just to give a few best known examples, to "testify to the differends," "continue the conversation of the West," "present the unrepresentable," "give voice to the oppressed," "deconstruct Western metaphysics" or to be a "weapon in

struggles" with the cultural, economic or even political *status quo*. In the above tasks there is no room left for the inspirations derived from science. Science, permanently sure of its aims and its scientific methods, is no longer accepted as a model for this part of contemporary philosophy. On the other hand, philosophy in general is suddenly made capable of seeing, with the help of and owing to its postmodern variation, certain burning questions of the end of the century. Epistemology-oriented philosophy, once the unchallenged foundation of culture, has been caught up short by spasms of doubts about its role—from the young Hegel in *Phenomenology* to Nietzsche to Heidegger to the thinkers labeled postmodern today.

It is still hard to speak or even think of a postmodern turn at the moment; it doesn't threaten the dominant paradigm of philosophy with collapse. And though philosophy finds a growing number of anomalies within itself, the road to a critical mass is still a distant one. The questions posed by postmodern thinking are fundamental in nature, but they can still be easily ignored in mainstream philosophy. Yet what they propose is an examination of philosophy and philosophers (but also sociology and sociologists, history and historians, anthropology and anthropologists etc.) in a new cultural setting, in which everything (that has over the ages been so carefully gathered together and so intensely discussed) has to be re-tested. There are probably two roads open to philosophy at the moment: either it becomes even more scientific, and thereby alienated from culture, or it moves closer to culture and as a consequence becomes powerless. The scientific road would lead philosophy away from society; the literary road would remove from philosophy the cultural authority traditionally accorded it by society. Philosophy is confronted by a more dramatic crossroads than the other humanistic disciplines since it was precisely philosophy that once was "the queen of sciences" and the ground of all the other disciplines. A "philosophical point of view" used to be extremely important and the philosopher's voice over the centuries has attempted, with varying results, to dominate the cultural conversation. In a contrary vein, postmodern philosophy no longer wants to dominate the conversation, to be the foundation for the whole edifice of culture or to look for "philosophical" solutions to all traditionally "philosophical" questions.

Consequently, the relationship between philosophy and science on the one hand and literature on the other has changed. Though the relationship of philosophy with science has not changed much in mainstream philosophy, enormous transformations are occurring within its tiny postmodern segment. Science within this new constellation is no longer a model or an ideal, and the heretofore bilateral exchange of influence moves in one direction only. Specifically, postmodern philosophy undermines the traditional foundations of science and science's unshaken belief in certain and unfailing methods. It questions science's belief in its emancipatory significance for culture and humanity in general. In a word, postmodernism performs a negative, destructive task for the purpose of a deepening awareness of the dangers of the Enlightenment—and the modern—belief in Reason (much as postmodern philosophy itself, in varying degrees, has ceased to believe

in Progress, History, or Truth).

Even so, in contrast to that with science, the interaction between philosophy and literature is still able to be reciprocal. This reciprocity results, on the one hand, from literary theoreticians' fascination with postmodernism and, on the other, from the invasion of the motifs and tropes, traditionally seen as literary, in philosophical analyses of contemporary culture. The pragmatic question is still open as to which are the more useful, abstract philosophical treatises or novels enlarging social sensitivity. At the same time, the participation of philosophy and literature in the most traumatic events of the twentieth century gives much food for thought. This question involves their respective roles in changing the world and mankind, constructing a paradise on earth and fitting whole nations and societies into a dimension politically chosen in advance.

The Role of the Philosopher in Contemporary Culture

Bloody revolutions, freedom-depriving totalitarianisms, the naked violence of the brave new world—have shadowed philosophical modernity. Current questions about the role of philosophy and philosophers in history must reach from Plato with his notion of “philosopher-kings” to Heidegger with his notion of *Führung* (or to the post-war French leftist intellectuals). What I have in mind is the conviction often shared in our century that in moments of breakthroughs in history, moments of historical shifts, philosophers and philosophy have to play some specific and decisive role, as if philosophers have to answer history's call. If they were not up to a particular task or didn't treat seriously the historical moment, civilization would face catastrophe. The scenario goes like this: there is a world-historical crisis; time must be re-calculated much in the manner of the French Revolution—from the beginning, from zero. Everything must be measured only as happening before or after the turning-point. All other chronological and historical timetables have become meaningless. Thus, for instance, Heidegger's belief that he lived in a moment critical for the history of the world did not allow him *not* to take tragic role of “savior.” The tension accompanying his taking of the post of Rector at the birth of Nazi Germany can be compared to the tension that accompanied Hegel's writing his *Phenomenology* within the after-echo of the battle of Iena, or Fichte delivering his *Address to the German Nation* in 1807, when Prussia was lost to the victorious France of Napoleon, or Nietzsche who saw the history of the world split in two by his critique of Christianity (for, as he confessed, he was dynamite rather than a man) or, finally—to a much lesser degree—French admirers, *compagnons de route*, of the Communist revolution in the East and, after, over all the world.

Whenever the philosopher has felt a higher need of action, a desire to be actively involved in changing his surrounding world, to accelerate historical events and to guide leaders of society, he himself risked falling into the trap of philosophy/politics. And the first moment at which, I suppose, an alarm should go off, and which in the twentieth century nevertheless often failed to, is the suddenly appearing conviction that one is taking

part in unusual events, is living in a critical moment, in which the scales of history can go either way. A widespread world crisis, the absolute uniqueness of the moment, begets extreme modes of behavior (I have in mind here Heidegger, or the young Paul de Man, but the margin of my reflection is provided by Jacobins and the Hegelian terror in, e.g., Charles Taylor's or Joachim Ritter's account); clocks start to measure out new time. After the revolution, the philosopher can argue, there will be "a brave new world" that will legitimate the present suffering. Until then, the revolutionary cause requires of him immediate decisions, as does every unique moment in human history. It requires of him "constructive" thinking and acting, it requires his engagement. Yet, such participation ought to have been refused outright. The passage of time has confirmed that those intellectual exiles were right who did not believe in some sort of mission for themselves during these junctures of history.

It is disastrous for philosophers to believe that the clocks somehow mark new time, that history breaks in two right before their eyes, and that we live at a turning point of history when anything can happen, depending—among other things—on our philosophical action or its inhibition. They lose their own individual smell and taste, their own capacity for an autonomous analysis of a current situation, their own acuteness of the account of reality, for which they are famous in times of peace. They support sharp, radical political views; use a brutal language of politics and ideology; divide the universe of philosophical positions into "ours" and "theirs", into our stances and those of "the other," and into comrades and enemies; they say and sometimes write things they would never say or write in peaceful, non-revolutionary times. They tolerate crimes and atrocities, turn blind eyes to injustices and violence, do not perceive blatant evil, baseness, smallness. And all these in the name of a great cause, or nation, class, race, state, humanity—or in the name of Germany, Europe, the West, the world.

But the lesson of humility has never been taken seriously: tensions lessen, the world slows down its pace, history returns to its ordinary cycles and its ordinary activities. Until the next explosion, the next enchantment or seduction. (What a strange species is the philosopher: constantly deprived of illusions, permitting himself to be used and abused by ideologies and utopias, he keeps returning to the good old errors as if to a life-giving source. It may be, as Michel Foucault suggests, that one needs oneself to have much humility to acknowledge that perhaps our time is not the only one when everything begins and ends anew. Perhaps Hegel was right when he said that peaceful times are blank pages in history. Perhaps it is natural that a faster pace of events imposes a faster pace of reflection, that revolutionary times require revolutionary thinking, during which temptation can often prove irresistible...). Actually, such a "heroic" vision of the world and of the philosopher came to philosophy no earlier than with Hegel (and too with the aftermath of the French Revolution). It was in the *Phenomenology* that he acknowledged that history was at a turning point: "it is not difficult to see that ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era." Likewise, one can find in Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* the

same belief in participating in great politics and great changes; in a great crisis and in Nietzsche's own—individual and philosophical—role to be played in it; in clocking a new time. It is an intellectual structure, common, I suppose, to much of German philosophical thought, where one easily places passages from "The Communist Manifesto" or Marx's most famous thesis on Feuerbach (according to which *Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert; es kommt aber draussen, sie zu verändern*).

Postmodern philosophy seems to be perfectly aware of the dangers outlined above because it draws an extreme lesson from the modern odyssey of culture, in which a leading role was played precisely by philosophy. And the role was not always a praiseworthy one. It is important to bear in mind that any account of philosophy which disregards historical and cultural embedment is not competent to raise such doubts.

Future Options

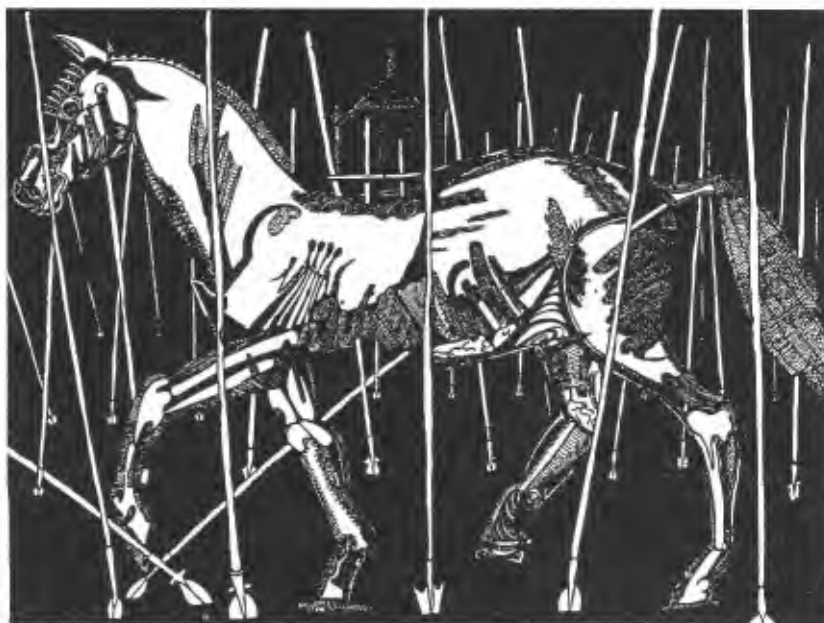
Paradoxically enough, by moving away from science and getting closer to literature, postmodern philosophy has a chance to become—or is already here and there becoming—moralist. The recent Jacques Derrida in his text on "ethics" and "responsibility" or the late Michel Foucault in his vast project of the "history of sexuality" and "aesthetics of existence," and surely Zygmunt Bauman in all his recent reflections on the "postmodern ethics" are such moralists. A turn from science, from epistemological thinking in philosophy and legislative thinking in ethics, opens hitherto totally unknown possibilities to this segment of philosophy, bringing it, potentially at least, closer to life, to the individual and the community. Philosophy itself will decide what obligations it will take upon itself as it confronts its past adventures with modernity. If a critical mass is reached some time in the future, a transformation of philosophy might take place, and if not, what we today call postmodern philosophy may simply cease to be called philosophy.

The point is to redefine the notion of "philosophy" in the face of challenges brought about by contemporary culture. If one assumes that philosophy has no pre-existing being, that it is not defined only and totally by classical, perennial philosophical problems, then the chance exists for such a transformation in the future. Otherwise, there will remain a classical field of science, more and more alienated from culture, which, with the passage of time, will—like theology—no longer evoke any response from society. It is really difficult to say which might be better, potential anachronism or potential powerlessness, a covenant with science or an alliance with literature. Perhaps the best solution would be the coexistence of different conceptions of philosophy and a permanent struggle, even battle, among them. In such a case, it cannot be said whether philosophy is getting closer to literature or to science. A total hegemony of any of two models may be unhealthy and, in the long run, simply fatal. Let the vitality of philosophy be attested to by the multiplicity of competing, but respectful voices, and then it will not be endangered either by the cultural sterility coming from the apodictic voice of science or by the cultural powerlessness coming from the mild and sensitive voice of literature (so let there be room enough

for both the Russell and Kierkegaard of today, both the contemporary Husserl and the contemporary Nietzsche); let philosophy be that “paradise of individualism” described by Kundera, the attractiveness of which comes from participation in the conversation of multitudes of important voices from the single vast domain of culture once recklessly labeled “the love of wisdom.”

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Marek Hapon, *Horse of Swantevit*

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TWO BE (a journal of ideas)
NUMBER 13

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IN TRANSLATION

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