Civilization versus Culture

Oswald Spengler’s Der Untergang des Abendlandes – The Decline of the West (1913), is famous for its critique of the culture of European Modernism, interpreted as a culture in decline, pushed into fin-de-siècle decadence by the pressures of technological civilization. Mikhail Epstein, the Russian culturologist who coined the concept of transculture, maintains, contra Spengler, that ‘civilization’ understood as technology does not always follow ‘culture’ or is the end-phase of culture. In the USA, Epstein claims, a “bourgeois-democratic” civilization on a high level of “technological and economic development” in the 19th century was “destitute of culture.” America imported all its cultural forms, such as literary genres and cultural discourses, from Europe. “The appearance of American culture, as an original, spiritually rooted, national organism capable of exerting worldwide influence, is a fact of the 20th century, determined by the First World War.”

An interesting comparison with Australian culture can be made here in support of Epstein’s thesis. Almost up to the end of the 19th century, Australia was culturally ‘unmapped.’ Its Heidelberg School of painters emerged in the late 1880s, with Tom Roberts’s epochal Shearing the Rams (1889-90) and Frederick McCubbin’s Home Again (1884). Australian national identity, galvanized through Federation in 1901, generated a new cultural production after the First World War. This led to the establishment of new cultural groups and journals such as the Angry Penguins in Adelaide and Meanjin in Brisbane, both launched in 1940. Australian literary culture, following in the wake of Australian art, went through a telescoped Modernism after World War Two, largely through the works of one towering literary figure: Patrick White. White’s novels of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s transposed a European

Modernist sensibility into the Australian landscape and social habitus. By the 1980s, through authors who carried on White’s heritage, Australian culture had become postmodern. These developments are ‘documented’ in iconic Australian novels such as George Johnstone’s My Brother Jack (1964) or Rodney Hall’s Captivity Captive (1986).

Epstein’s second example of culture following civilization is 17th Century Russia. After European civilization was brought to Russia by its reforming tsar, Peter the Great, by way of ship-building technology, architecture, dress, civil bureaucracy and government, new home-grown cultural forms began to appear. One such form is represented by the ‘giant’ cultural figure of Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), hailed as the ‘Russian Byron.’

Elaborating on Epstein, one can add that what propelled Russia into Modernity in Foucault’s sense of the term was the development of a new language that became public discourse. This was the discourse of Russian literature and criticism. The new Russian literature brought the Russian spoken vernacular into High culture while simultaneously paying tribute (in stylized form) to the Old Church Slavonic roots of Russian medieval and religious discourses. The age of Pushkin thus transcended the ‘old’ modes of culture not by discarding them, but by pulling them into the domain of what we can call transculture – a domain which is beyond Russian culture and ‘Russianness’ as it was known prior to Pushkin. Through a new ‘transcultural’ literary language (one that was not ‘spoken’ or written anywhere before Pushkin and his generation invented it), a new experience of Russian culture as a more concrete, authentic and spiritually rooted “national organism,” capable of exerting a wide influence, became possible. The new contemporary language created a transcultural space in which a more self-reflexive discourse allowed the Russian writers, intellectuals and readers to appropriate European literary and cultural models – from Byron’s romanticism and the Gothic novel to European political and economic discourses.

Epstein’s inference from the historical example of Petrine Russia is that “culture is civilization that has realized its ends and embraced its own limit…” In a telescoped argument, Epstein establishes that Russian culture of the 19th century followed in the wake of Russian civilization of the 17th and 18th century. This dialectic of civilization and culture is Epstein’s ‘transcultural’ view of history. What enables the movement of history is the development of “a cultural metalanguage capable of using ‘civilized’ language in the practice of self-analysis or self-critique.” The new metalanguage in the 1970s and 1980s – Epstein’s own formative decades – is the language of culturology, which is the theoretical context for “the mature self-reflexivity of Russian culture” in the 20th century.

Although Epstein does not connect his own epistemology of transculture with Michel Foucault’s culturological approach to French post-revolutionary