

From Postmodernism to Mutation: How the Twentieth Century Draws to a Close

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Dear readers, perhaps you have not realized it, but your lives so far have been spent in a period called 'postmodern'.¹

The word is well-known to you. It has been around for many years. It almost always occurs unexpectedly, half way through an article, in the middle of a conversation, in the course of an argument on radio or television. Something, when all is said and done, is postmodern, someone is what he or she is because he or she is postmodern; a strange and inexplicable phenomenon can be explained as postmodern. This changeable, suggestive, authoritative term, which seems to allude to something precise and technical and which, at the same time, suggests the epoch-making, says all that is good and all that is bad of something. Postmodern is an accusation. Postmodern is praise. What is postmodern is degenerate, has got worse, is hardly serious, of low quality, a poor imitation, irresponsible, frivolous. Nevertheless, what is postmodern is also still more topical, even more modern, forward-looking, amusing and light, cultured without being boring, sophisticated without being elitist, complex without being obscure.

As Remo Ceserani in his *Raccontare il postmoderno* [*Telling the Postmodern*] (1997), (the most exhaustive book on this subject, in Italy there has only been scanty theoretical discussion of the concept. The quickest off the mark and best-informed, Gianni Vattimo and Umberto Eco, have spoken of a 'crisis of modernity', of 'weak thinking', and the overtaking of the avant-gardes. Joining that most postmodern of philosophers, Jacques Derrida, in commenting on and disseminating Nietzsche and Heidegger, speaking of 'overtaking', 'dismissal' and 'decline' in all the great rational ('strong') constructions of classical philosophy, from Plato to Hegel, Gianni Vattimo contributed to the spread of the idea of a 'beyond', of an after-modernity. The connotations of a new epoch were fixed (freer, off-centre, polymorphous, elusive), an epoch in which the aesthetic has more value than the moral and the political, interpretation greater value than theory. The function of the intellectual is to interpret texts, to listen to them, try them out, replicate them, expand them, to glide amongst the folds of language, rather than to set one conceptual system against another.

For his part, Umberto Eco accomplished something more sensational. He became a novelist. This avant-garde theorist of mass culture, the very man who had established a hierarchy of values in which Alexander Dumas and Ian Fleming appeared on the same plane as Dostoevsky and Faulkner, was reborn in 1980 (the year which saw the appearance of *The Name of the Rose*) as an author of encyclopaedic best-sellers. Through his novels, Eco demonstrated that he could practise what he had preached: put together elitist and kitsch culture, academic knowledge and pop narrative, an educated public and

an ill-informed public. (Perhaps he also showed how ill-informed the educated could be; but that is another problem.)

I believe that it is precisely the powerful and overwhelming influence of Vattimo and Eco which has, at least in part, impeded discussion of postmodernism. The enemies of the 'weak thinking' proposed by Vattimo and the critics of Eco's novels (they are few in number, but on the increase) have tended to see Italian postmodernism as having worked itself out with them. What more could be added to what these two authors had theorized, and to what they stood for? It was already too much. Two fashionable authors made people think postmodernism was in fashion. And, as such, material for ephemeral journalism or brilliant but credulous academia. Vattimo and Eco got a following, and how! In a sense, postmodernism was them.

This was only an impression. The postmodern in Italy has fed more off moods and impressions than off historical reflection. One only needed to glance at foreign studies to see that the debate was in full spate. In the United States, Germany, Great Britain and France, most books and studies devoted to defining the present boiled down to a coupling of modern–post modern as consecutive and opposite. There have been many, at least from the 1970s on, who have distinctly felt that they were living in a new epoch. The end of 1968, the collapse of the idea of revolution, the crisis of reason, unease about the idea of History and Progress, the loss of a sense of meaning in both future and past, the irresistible mixture (on television, in the arts, in university life) of 'high' culture and mass culture, the transformations of society and production, new communication technologies and, finally, the torrent of terms such as 'post-industrial', 'post-structuralism', 'post-neo-avant-gardist', 'post-historical', 'post-fordism': quite obviously, the Era of the 'After' had dawned.

With some precocious and sporadic exceptions, there has been little discussion of the postmodern until very recently. And yet the term seems singularly worn-out: perhaps because its conceptual content is, on the one hand, rather complex (implying complicated philosophical and aesthetic notions, often elusive, barely accessible to non-specialists) and, on the other, too elementary (a generic name for everything that comes and 'feels' it comes *after* the great period of modernity that everyone knows at least something about: the modernity of Stravinsky, Joyce, Eliot, Kafka, Picasso, Klee, Gropius etc.).

The results obtained since the end of the 1970s, when the debate began to take hold, and the term 'postmodern' spread like the plague, have scarcely been dazzling however. Confusion between the various meanings of the term remains, because postmodern refers to too many things at once. On the other hand, it is in practice used as a disarmingly simple rallying-call: postmodern defined everything new that happened in our culture after the decline of the period of '68.

Thus, the term and the (vague) idea of the postmodern, applied to all fields of knowledge and behaviour, from cinema to fashion and from the novel to urban life, owed their good fortune to their matchless vacuity and plasticity. This was a category unsurpassed in its helpfulness and hospitality, accepting everything, refusing nothing. If I say that a film, a book, a writer, a musician, a scientist or a designer is postmodern, I immediately arouse a certain interest, as if I had discovered and announced a sophisticated truth. And, at the same time, I do not risk being easily contradicted. Everything which I decide to label 'postmodern' automatically becomes it, can become it. I open up new possibilities, ways of interpreting afresh the already known, after which old concepts expand, revealing

undreamt-of potential for enrichment, for absorbing a world which is extremely varied, heterogenous, alive, continually expanding and metamorphosing.

Even this is typically postmodern. Plurality, expansion, multi-usage, a mixture of high and low culture, of 'educated' and 'consumer' culture, ironic and complicit intertwining of academic tone and mass media materials (or, conversely, an irreverent tone and traditionally 'profound' themes). The central message of postmodernism seems to be just this: separation, rigorous alternatives, dramatic oppositions, threatening frictions and anguished dissonances are things of the past. Culture is henceforth sociable and seductive. It no longer puts the social system on trial, it does not haunt utopias unless they are immediately realizable. Tradition is finished, and that simplifies things. Intellectuals are people like all the rest, and just like their innumerable colleagues, but not the glorious authors of the past. In sum, every form of culture, from Pre-Socratic thought to Hindu metaphysics, from Renaissance symbolism to Pre-Columbian mythology, from Thomas Aquinas to Tristan Tzara, is quotable.

Quotation takes the place of the thing itself: it alludes, insinuates itself, dazzles, it excites, exalts, sweetens. And, above all, in the postmodern, it eliminates distances between different cultures and between different contexts, it takes the drama out of conflict. It ennobles banality, gives a topical allure to experience and wisdom as distant as it is possible to get from our own lifestyle and mind-set.

In Italy we have two masters of quotation who are also two skilful postmodern manipulators of the cultural past: Umberto Eco and Pietro Citati. They are two contrasting and objectively rival authors.

Umberto Eco is the academic tightrope walker, the academic specialist in one of the most fashionable postmodern sciences, the science of signs or semiology. But (and this is also noteworthy), Umberto Eco the semiologist is at pains to underline that semiology, a fairly modern or postmodern science, has always existed, that it claims a noble descent which goes back far beyond Saussure and Peirce, and runs through all philosophy from Aristotle. >From Aristotle to road-signs, from the most ancient treatises on poetics and rhetoric, the way leads directly to twentieth-century studies on language. Everything is language, everything is communication: strip-cartoons, cooking, dress, political struggle, and of course the arts, from architecture to the novel. The classical and the modern, the noble and the banal, Dante Alighieri and Mike Bongiorno are analysable in a fashion at once scientific and comic, learned and entertaining. From one learned quotation and one good joke to another, Eco has worked his whole life long to transform a university lecture into a televised show and to elevate every item of cultural merchandise into an object worth studying. And finally, with *The Name of the Rose*, he wrote the comfort-novel: the European Middle Ages explained to Americans as if it was simultaneously an easy substitute for the *Divine Comedy* and a detective novel nurtured on citations and summaries from manuals of 'European culture'. He unified public and genres and levels of culture, merged the trade of journalist with that of professor, finally transforming both of them into the most attractive figure of the contemporary cultural industry: the best-selling author.

Eco is as sprightly and student-like as Citati is reflective and deep. Scorning universities, he writes in newspapers the longest, most relaxed and prolix reviews, swollen with esoteric wisdom that the Italian press has ever given space to. Great essayists like Eugenio Montale and Mario Praz were much more modest when they wrote their reviews

and leading articles; they respected the pragmatic rules of the genre of journalism. They summarized plots diligently, supplying background information, scrupulously preserving the affable and unpretentious tone of someone who provides a useful information service, one which demands impeccable competence, and made clarity and concision a duty. They avoided a hieratic tone; they flew low. It was in this that their elegance lay. Not so with Pietro Citati. Quotation from the great classics expands and is transformed in his hands into substitutive paraphrase. No question of summarizing a novel briefly with the simple air of one who is simply engaged in making a resumé: no, his writing is a rewriting laden with self-echo, and every author becomes a little like Citati, as if the masterpieces of tradition had no greater hope than to live again in the prose of this writer-critic. This prose is presented to the reader as an original and primary creation, incomparable, because it comes into being not as a marginal to works with a solid existence of their own, but takes their place and supplants them. It is in his books on Kafka, Tolstoy and Proust that this process takes its most congruent form. The biography and work of these authors are dished up Citati-style, a homogenizing style, incomparably exquisite and elevated, which renders everything it touches exquisite and elevate. The postmodern in Citati lies in that pathos of the 'after' which restores everything, allows everything, accedes to everything. The cultural tradition must be completely dead, completely 'beyond' our current manner of being and writing, for us to abuse it so totally and freely. Citati does not, as it were, experience the need to quote. He recreates. Within his language another language, the language of the author of which he is speaking, would jar and introduce a harsh and false note: the note of authenticity. Which would waken us from the sweet postmodern sleep by reminding us that the texts exist and have a voice and tone of their own, outside the critical texts into which we metabolize them.

I think it was no coincidence that the debate over the postmodern was born in the United States. The postmodern is in fact the form given by American hegemony to all European culture since 1945. In his essay, 'The Archives of Eden', George Steiner effectively explained the extent to which the American contribution was decisive for the culture of the second half of the century. Synthesizing it in the extreme, Steiner's theory is that American society never took high culture seriously, it could never conceive that culture could be – following the Greek and later the European model – a value in itself, potentially autonomous even if socially useless or dangerous. In a word, in the United States, the values of cohabitation and social cohesion, the ethic of productive work and economic success supplant every other value mapped out in philosophical systems and works of art. It is for this reason that the American love of culture is a love which comes from a cultural 'beyond'. The great European culture which produced or permitted the existence of the unjust and corrupt European society was to be preserved, archived and venerated like a fetish. But it was to be kept hygienically separate from American social life, 'the American way of life', which is in itself a primary value.

If, as Steiner says, the American cultural scene was the 'epilogue to modernism', if it is, in essence, only a minor and secondary branch of European culture, then it was equally the way in which it conceived culture that gave birth to the postmodern.

In other words, only in the United States is the objective primacy of the market also a cultural primacy, it is the foundation and ethical framework of all cultural activity.

The postmodern coincides in many respects (not all, however, as we shall see) with the specific genre of the 'beyond' which the American viewpoint brings to modernity and

modernism, and as a result to the continuation, variation, study, preservation and commercialization of its heritage. What Steiner calls 'the American cultural enterprise' made up of museums, theatres, libraries, universities and publishing houses, is nourished by the European past: and this same modernity is an integral part of that past, it is assumed like a classical inheritance. This permits an extraordinary 'richness of conservation and transmission'.

'American museums and art collections are brimful of classical and European art. European and antique edifices have been brought to the new world stone by literal stone or mimed to the inch. American appetites for the treasures and bric-à-brac of the medieval, the renaissance or the eighteenth century past remain devouring. Scarcely a day passes without the translation westwards of some further artefact of European glory. American orchestras, chamber groups, opera companies, perform European music. . . . This, then, is my surmise: the dominant apparatus of American high culture is *that of custody*. The institutes of learning and of the arts constitute the great archive, inventory, storehouse, rummage-room of western civilization.'²

Such efficient cultural conservation and transmission has, however, a counterpart: in the United States and, taking account of their growing influence, in the rest of the West, culture and the arts have, overall, been institutionalized (or commercialized), and have neither meaning nor influence outside the university (or entertainment). In this respect also, two classic figures of American modernism, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, were fore-runners. They emigrated to Europe to seize its great tradition, to pillage and idolize it: they are the most traditionalist of the avant-garde authors. Their originality was typically based upon reprocessing, the rediffusion, accumulation and editing of quoted and decontextualized fragments. Their poems are mosaics and collages of archaeological pieces of the tradition (not only European but also Asiatic). 'These poet-critics', says Steiner, 'are erudite tourists racing through the museum galleries and libraries of Europe on a mission of inventory and rescue before closing time.'³

But Eliot and Pound ended an era. During the first half of the twentieth century, it was still Europe that was the incontestable centre of the West. The United States were still only a magnificent periphery in search of its own identity. Even the most American of writers, like Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Henry Miller, felt the need to rush to Paris to understand themselves fully.

After 1945 it was American hegemony which precipitated the whole of western culture into the postmodern. The expatriate exiles from Fascism and Nazism began to prepare the ground in American universities, and it was in America that the new avant-garde forms, like abstract expressionism, action painting, Andy Warhol's parodic exhibitions and the literature of the beat generation were born. In Europe people still thought, theorized a lot, and the most authoritative criticism was still German or French. But, from the myth of the American novel to counter-culture, the material which lent itself to thought appeared henceforth to come from the United States.

Naturally, this is only one aspect of the question. One might for example observe that on the postmodern theme even the French, who are always in the lead, always quick to theorize each and every political, social and cultural event, have fallen to the rear. Lyotard's book⁴ on the postmodern condition only appeared in 1979, when they had been talking about the postmodern and postmodernism in America for several years. It is not only a question of terminology, but terminology is one symptom. Awareness of the present and

of a radically new situation in regard to classical modernity (which stretches from the *Fleurs du mal* to the publications of Joyce's *Ulysses*) was born in the United States before it was born in Europe. It was henceforth America which embodied and represented the present in relation to the European past.

The time has come for me to express my opinion on the subject a little more clearly. I believe that the postmodern (or postmodernism), considered as poetics, particular style or specific trend, should be distinguished from the postmodern as a historical period (or postmodern condition). While the first can give rise to reservations and well-founded rejection, from the second one can only make history. The postmodern considered as poetics and trend (philosophical and stylistic) is precisely a particularly positive, enthusiastic, apologetic and often remarkably acritical way of experiencing a new and undeniably specific cultural situation, and one which can be expressed and evaluated in the most diverse ways. The apologists of the postmodern often end up, with their enthusiasm, by preventing one from taking an obvious fact into account: that the second half of the twentieth century is indubitably characterized by a series of phenomena which clearly distinguish it from what happened before. If we define modernity in its entirety as everything that has happened from the Enlightenment to our own times, from Rousseau to Kant, from the social, political and economic revolutions of the second half of the eighteenth century to their consequences, we must indicate patterns subsequent to the very core of this period. It is, for instance, possible to distinguish four phases.

The first stretches, *grosso modo*, from the publication of Diderot's *L'encyclopédie* to 1790. The second goes up to 1848 and the publication in 1855–7 of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. The third phase finishes with the period between the First and Second World Wars which witnessed the appearance of the great masters of the modernism of the twentieth century, as well as the rise and fall of the European avant-garde movements. To finish there is the current phase, definable as postmodern, which followed the defeat of the various forms of fascism, and which is characterized by the evident hegemony of the United States and by what one might call (although in a superficial and contradictory way) the 'americanization' of the world.

When one reads books and essays on the postmodern, whether endorsements or harsh criticisms, one cannot fail to be struck by the fact that when all is said and done it is possible to designate as 'postmodern', to use just one single term, extremely diverse and often explicitly contradictory phenomena. Among the most recent accounts which we have been able to read in Italy, from David Harvey (*The Condition of Modernity*) to Giulio Ferroni (*Dopo la fine* [*After the End*]), from Remo Ceserani (*Raccontare il postmoderno* [*Telling the Postmodern*]) to Beatrice Töttösy (*Scrivere postmoderno in Ungheria* [*Postmodern Writing in Hungary*]), one thing is apparent: the postmodern is an 'as you like it'. It is in everything, contains everything. For my part, I should, however, like to expand the category. The quasi-totality of the most significant works and cultural trends of the second half of the twentieth century arise from or in awareness of the 'after'. This 'after' has, in its turn, taken diverse colourations and reveals the diverse faces of a polyhedron. No one has ever found fault with the fact that poets as different as Keats and Pushkin have been called 'romantic', authors like Benn and Mayakovski 'avant-garde' or authors like Brecht and Orwell 'committed'. It is a question of contrasting but equally legitimate ways of reacting to a situation: interpretation and criticism of a present which requires the development of ideas and appropriate forms.

Thus in the postmodern there are authors of the after and the beyond (like Paul Celan and Allen Ginsberg, Borges and Camus), of the beginning and the end (like Beckett, Volponi, Zanzotto, Bernhard), neo-classicists and deconstructivists (like Kubrick and Tarkovsky, Enzensberger and Calvino), authors of the new formalism and autoreferentiality (like Montale and Elsa Morante, Tournier and Kundera), defenders of high culture and tradition (like George Steiner and Harold Bloom), those dedicated to mass culture (Eco and his school), nihilist acrobats (Derrida), anti-modern humanists (Ivan Illich), poets of commentary (Naipaul, Chatwin, Kapucinski), abstract realists (Robbe-Grillet, Perec, Pinter, Bacon, Cortázar).

I could go on. And the cards could be shuffled differently to produce other series, collections and analogous combinations of different types. Between the postmodern as explicit, self-confessed poetics and postmodern as situation and period there is co-presence and conflict. Those authors who have expressed critical and radical reservations about postmodern attitudes are part of and are fundamental to an understanding of the *fin de siècle* postmodern situation. This is the case with George Steiner and Hans Magnus Enzensberger, authors crucial to the definition of the postmodern situation but who stubbornly refuse positively to define themselves as postmodern. They prefer radical criticism, sometimes mocking, sometimes apocalyptic. Whatever the case, they tend to sceptical prudence and virtually never put forward a proposition which would not be provocative or utopian. This mixture of equilibration and radicalism, brilliant eclecticism and pessimism is also, dare one say it, typically postmodern. During the last decades of the twentieth century, cultural criticism has experienced manifest difficulties, for it has lost its classic reference-points: to high culture, class struggle or other than western traditions.

This is why, rather than to theoretical schemas, criticism has returned to literary stratagems which draw on autobiography and easily fall into the genre of satire. No essay by Steiner or Derrida which does not rush headlong through the whole history of thought. No film by Kubrick which does not revisit a genre of cinematic history, in order to take it to extreme consequences of formal and parodic perfection. No book by Elsa Morante which has not laboured to bring to life the traditional forms of nineteenth-century novels or even epic and fable. Zanzotto employs a keyboard ranging from classicism to psycholinguistics, from advertising to baby-talk. Volponi strives each time to build the arcades of the Renaissance only to make them fall in ruins. Calvino escaped from the outset the encumbering form of the novel and experimented with every type of short form (novella, poetic prose) to give narrative embodiment to recent theories of narrative. Naipaul's and Kundera's intellectual skills as essayists are in no way inferior to their narrative skills. While Kerouac and Robbe-Grillet, whose books are the product of an elementary ideology, do not appear to have had a single idea cross their minds as they wrote. Critics like Franco Fortini and Cesare Garboli are hostile or indifferent to the avant-gardes, while their work is intensely mannerist and experimental, grows by accumulation without finding a unifying design and methodically strives for incompleteness. Francis Bacon has succeeded in leading modern painting back to the human figure and paints portraits and self-portraits obsessively, but the physical characteristics of these bodies in mundane dress and surroundings explode monstrously in a realism which has nothing mimetic about it: it is mental and paranoid.

Postmodern? I would absolutely agree. The postmodern is a situation, not an ideological choice or a taste. The whole of the second half of the twentieth century which is

coming to an end suffers from being modern still while knowing very well that it cannot still be like the generation of its fathers and grandfathers. The great creative explosion of the first decades of the century was long exhausted in 1945. It could be recaptured, continued, brought to light. Or it could be sought or passed over. And yet the problem, or rather the point of departure, remained the same. But it was above all the Europeans who felt ill at ease. They were crushed by a terrible authoritarian past which now appeared, by comparison, like a paralysing political disaster, like the social bankruptcy of culture, or splendid university archives to revisit.

In successive waves, novelty and freedom of invention now increasingly emanated from American and Latin-American authors, from the society and culture of Asia and Africa. Besides, and above all, Europeans had to adjust to new forms of disempowerment and social inadequacy in philosophical culture and the arts.

'The great modernist literature of Joyce, Proust, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, Faulkner', wrote David Harvey, '... judged as subversive, incomprehensible or shocking [in the 50s] was taken over and canonized by the establishment (in the universities and the major literary reviews).'⁵

The shock of modernity was exhausted. The traditional bourgeois and petit-bourgeois public was no longer the same, it was less and less scandalized. Universities began to teach that transgression (the general method of modern art) was the first duty of those who were culturally in the know. Journalists and university professors were madly enthused by and devoted to the new forms of the avant-gardes. Far from arousing anguish, conflict and risk, modernism was the passport to career success. The young avant-garde author no longer had to wait years if not decades to be understood: he was immediately propelled to the foremost positions, immediately finding a place in scholarly anthologies as soon as the epithet 'neo-modern' had been accorded him.

Not everyone considered this reality an advantage. Starting to play at 'formalists' after the fantastic formal inventions of the 1910s and 20s would have been suicidal. Now, if one did not want to feign belief that some innovations remained new for ever, others had to be sought or discoveries already made had to be used in different ways.

Classic modernity set about ageing and became tradition. In the 1950s Theodor Adorno, one of the principal theorists and defenders of modernity, spoke of the 'ageing' of modern music. The American art critic, Harold Rosenberg, explained that there was a 'tradition of the new'. Enzensberger chose in 1960 to give one of his anthologies the supremely telling title, *Museum der modernen Poesie*.

The true point of departure was this: modernity past, modernity as tradition, museum, market-place. Edoardo Sanguineti immediately grasped this aspect, pointing out the contradictory, if not objectively ambiguous, situation in which the avant-gardes found themselves. From Baudelaire onwards the duty of the modern artist to shock had become a struggle to impose on the market products which at this stage eluded the market. Subversion was the soul of commercialization. But once understood, this dialectic was coldly repeated; it was no longer real but foreseeable and programmable. Montale quickly perceived (one has only to read the essays of *Auto da fé*) that the avant-garde had to be produced industrially, that it was itself part of mass culture.

And so it was, all fine and good, that a postmodern condition of modernity came into being. The postmodern began when the modern became securely established in the world

of acquired concepts. Henceforth, modern art and critical philosophy were no longer protected and encouraged, they were taught.

This panorama would be difficult to conceive without the economic, political and, above all, cultural hegemony of the United States. As we have seen, American cultural hegemony was not a hegemony of content, it was structural; it was not creative but organizing.

From this time onwards it was not the works that mattered but the type of relationship we had with them.

No need to control art, it was sufficient to manage enjoyment and use. In that way, the culture–society relation was institutionally neutralized.

With Hollywood and Hiroshima, with a Europe liberated from Hitler, with the rise of Mickey Mouse, the United States took firm hold of the reins of the West: they created not only the cultural subconscious of the masses but also the mind-set and style of the elites.

Horkheimer's and Adorno's theory of the culture industry was based above all on observation of American society. Far from being grateful to the democratic institutions which had welcomed them as refugees from Nazism, the two philosophers denounced the dangers of a flabby and permissive totalitarianism, founded not on repression but on the reduction of culture to a product for sale. In the greatest, oldest and most powerful democracy in the world, culture presents itself as, has to present itself as, industrial production and commercialization of product.

With the emigration to the United States of philosophers, scientists and artists persecuted by Nazism and Fascism (above all Jews), high European culture became acclimatized to a totally new social and institutional context. Philosophers like Hannah Arendt, critics like Erich Auerbach, art historians like Erwin Panofsky, psychoanalysts like Erich Fromm and Bruno Bettelheim have profoundly influenced the American academic milieu. There is, however, absolutely no doubt that, once across the Atlantic, these intellectuals lost contact with their origins and their contexts. The United States are not a society whose fundamental values can be called into question by an elite of artists and scholars.

It is interesting to observe that an English poet like W.H. Auden travelled in the opposite direction to Eliot: he went from England to the United States, where he lived and taught poetry at university-level for nearly thirty years. And Auden is one of the poets whose journey best reveals the passage from the age of anxiety, the final phase of modernity, to the age of prosperity which inaugurated the postmodern. Having started under the influence of Eliot, and become the best-known of the 'committed' English poets of the 30s, in his later poetry and essays, Auden lasted on into a period in which he found it difficult to keep his bearings and which troubled him.

Although in part Americanized, and an authoritative presence on the American literary scene (together with Edmund Wilson, who was older, and the younger Ginsberg and Ashbery), Auden remained profoundly English and European in his style. It is telling that during his American period, which lasted almost thirty years, he passed half the year in New York, the other half sometimes at Ischia, sometimes at Kirchstetten, in Austria.

While Eliot adjusted perfectly to England, to the extent of appearing more English than the English, Auden in America remained outside, a stranger among so many strangers. Stoically, he decided to tackle the supreme expression of modern urban life, but he remained

loyal to the limited spaces of Europe, the lack of which he was, over time, ever more acutely aware. In New York he lived like a Diogenes, apart, stubbornly attached to his habits, unwilling to accept American dress, brimming with idiosyncrasies and very determined to keep them.

Auden wrote reams of poetry, much more than Eliot had. Who can boast that they have read and clearly understood its articulations and shifts, apart from a few specialists and a handful of enthusiastic disciples?

With only a dozen or so poems, Eliot became one of the monuments of modern poetry, perhaps the most universally known of the poets of the twentieth century. Like Joyce, one can say that Eliot did not fail once, his entire work seems to have been composed of anthology pieces. By contrast, Auden, who is a no less gifted poet and sometimes even greater, is as it were shipwrecked in the postmodern. He lived half his life in a world where poetry could do everything and say everything, because 'poetry changed nothing' not even its readers.

But can one speak of the postmodern without calling to mind its two most confident authorities? What would the second half of the twentieth century have been without Jorge Luis Borges and Samuel Beckett? One would be tempted to say that everything stems from them, by derivation or reaction. No other author has been, nor remains, like them, an acknowledged master, undisputed, never-failing. Criticism has rarely found sufficient courage and imagination to formulate even partial objections to their work. The reason for this is that Borges and Beckett, rather than appearing as authors with precise characteristics, objectively evaluable and describable, have for several decades embodied the very idea of literature. Even the possibilities of literature during the second half of the twentieth century have been invented by them. They are the authors most imitated and the most studied. They are the foundations of the postmodern.

These two writers have taken the place which Rilke and Eliot, Joyce and Valéry occupied during the previous half-century. Moreover, Borges and Beckett succeeded in keeping alive the current of modernity while simultaneously communicating the certainty that something had radically changed.

In sum, after them it became impossible to think of the past, of the past in its entirety, of Shakespeare and Pirandello, Kafka and Cervantes, without seeing almost everything in the manner of Borges and Beckett. More than any other, they are the postmodern authors of the after and the end, of the nameless beyond and the eternal present. Whether showing off their reading (Borges), or feigning a devastating loss of memory (Beckett), the essence of their activity consisted always in reducing to summaries and perfectly exemplary fragments a story too long to form a beneficial legacy. They write in a state of controlled vertigo and incurable nausea. Anguish and misery are their chronic conditions and may become a senile-infantile complaint, comic and pitiable ('Nothing is more comic than misery', we read in *Fin de partie* [*Endgame*]). Historical memory has become ungovernable, nothing new can be written or thought. One can only repeat, comment and condense what has already been written and thought, so that one may learn by heart what one has completely forgotten. Life belongs entirely to the past and the future, it is a virtuality that is never realized. One can neither escape nor draw sustenance from the library of Babel. In the course of the postmodern there has been no other author as capable of demolishing and crushing all certainty. With them everything became labile, fleeting, unreal, unproductive.

Moreover, with Borges and Beckett, the postmodern reaches, at the very moment of its birth, its full negative maturity, its definitive code. It is their tracks which are followed. Of course, there was Harold Pinter and Thomas Bernhard, the New Novel, the New Criticism, poststructuralism and Italo Calvino. But these were variations, remarkable to a greater or lesser extent, on the same theme, accompanied by thrusts of juvenile vitality (above all in Calvino). This circularity is the most hopeless and sterile side, at time magnificently repetitive, of the postmodern (above all in Bernhard).

What else? Adorno and Canetti, also masters of the postmodern, communicated a paralysing consciousness rather than an invitation to continue. But those who thought they could dispense with their desperate intellectual mannerism were the most mediocre and the most flimsy of the postmoderns: and the postmodern who continued to see everything in terms of progressive freedom from ancient ties were two a penny. And there was another side of the coin: an artistic creativity without limits, by all, for all, for every single person had the right to liberate his own subconsciousness and have his own ten minutes of celebrity.

Once again, it was from America that optimism came. Without Kerouac and Ginsberg, Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, we would not have entered upon the reign of mass culture and the limitless reproduction of images with a sense of ever-increasing well-being. In one sense, they were also artists who denounced. But, with them, the elsewhere was already present, India was transplantable to Los Angeles and Manhattan, the images of power and merchandise enchant, and release a captivating energy, if only one manages to avoid the anguish they contain.

Drugs, psychoanalysis, zen, tourism and abundant cultural consumption have de-dramatized modernity, healed it, as well as codified and institutionalized it. Only the manic misanthropy of Beckett, Salinger and Kubrick still allows a glimpse of the memory of the age-old relationship between culture and solitude. The same commitment to critical social debate was expressed by an intensified presence in the mass media, for those who want to spread their truths also wants to have at their disposal an ample audience.

The idea of a commitment which is impotent to communicate and clandestine seems self-contradictory.

The fact is that we should have suspected all along that, in the postmodern too, there was something important, precious, which continued to elude total communication.

We are now leaving the postmodern. Everything has an end, even the fashion of the end has an end. Something will always come after the Afterwards, and also after the end of the Afterwards. And thus, something will succeed even the postmodern. The postmodern will also end, it is ending, or rather it has ended.

In fact, it has lasted all too long. Now we have understood it, we know what it is, there are numerous books which define it, make history of it, draw up a reckoning of it. In itself this hyper-awareness displays a degree of wear and tear. Besides, the postmodern was always a weak concept. Its identity sprung from the derivation, extension and correction of modernity. But modernity also enjoyed incredible longevity. It dates from the discovery of America, or Copernicus, from the taking of the Bastille, from the beginning of the twentieth century . . .

Whatever the case, we have now learnt that modernity finished half a century ago. Of course, some still had yet to reach a proper modernity of their own. We, the Italians,

for example: we began with the 60s. But it is a question of recoveries, of secondary adjustments. How many peoples and countries in the world have entered into Western modernity without ever leaving medieval or prehistoric conditions? We have also learnt this: modernity is not progress, democracy, equality, increased production and consumption for all. Several decades of postmodernity have clarified the fraternal nature of the relationship between developed and underdeveloped countries. At the end of the twentieth century, as someone said, we are on a 'planet of the shipwrecked'. Globalization does not globalize the right to survival, it does not defend against death from hunger. The postmodern has learnt that modernity always creates more problems than it is capable of solving and that, as a result, the situation is excellent, in other words desperate, and that it is best not to think of it.

This is the terminal phase of postmodernity. With modernity faith in progress ended, it persists in rhetoric and advertising, it takes a seat at congresses and summits. No one believes in it, not even the most naïve of newspaper readers. In this sense, History is over: from now onwards, it will no longer be concerned, not even in theory, with keeping its promises. To the apologists of the postmodern Jürgen Habermas has with some irritation objected that modernity has not expired, because it remains an 'unfinished project'. This is true. But it is also quite true that the project of emancipation by reason formulated by the Enlightenment no longer represents a commitment for anyone at the end of the twentieth century, that is to say in the last phase of the postmodern. Imagining that the whole planet will enter the paradise of development and democracy is no longer part of the culture of the West, nor of its programmes or its utopias. What Gandhi knew is true: when someone asked him what he thought of Western culture, he replied that 'it would have been a good idea', in other words, that it remained solely an idea, an illusion through and through.

The postmodern has been no more than a brief, but even then too long phase, during which the sense of the 'after' became dominant. It virtually coincided with the second half of the twentieth century, and thus it now ends. It was the age of authors who were incontestably 'post'. It is clear that Camus came after Kafka and after Hemingway, Auden after Eliot and Yeats, Canetti after Kraus and Borch, Adorno after Freud and Weber, neo-realism after realism, neo-avant-gardes after avant-gardes, Kubrick after a century of cinema history. In Italy authors like Montale, Morante, Calvino, Forini, Pasolini, Zanzotto, Volponi and Giudici live in an obsession with the after, the end or the beginning, with an excess of history or the collapse of history. The youngest often forget history completely, or are crushed by it without realizing, or they submit to it in its academic version, specialized and anaesthetized.

Another definition of the postmodern could be: 'How the twentieth century came to an end'. So here we are to announce that the postmodern has ended, that it ends now, in this very instant, at the precise moment we are talking of its end.

The fascination of the idea of ending is endless. Its solvent power cannot be halted. The last, unfinished, work of the anthropologist Ernesto De Martino is a mass of notes about the end of the world. Gunther Anders claimed to be expert in the end of the world. Thirty years later the apocalypse is in fashion, although no one could be less credulous than we are. The desire which has seized the West is a desire for immortality. New medical and biological technologies make it possible to dream of perpetuating indefinitely our bodies, our identity, our DNA, our lifestyle. On the threshold of the third millennium,

it is clear that we are ready for another 'after' of our very own. The problem of the postmodern has aged unexpectedly, it no longer exists.

Dear readers, we are entering a new era. I propose calling it the Era of Mutation.

Alfonso Berardinelli

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(translated from the French by Juliet Vale)

Notes

1. This text appeared in a slightly different version in *Lo Straniero*, winter 1997–8, 80–97.
2. G. Steiner (1996) 'The Archives of Eden', in *No Passion Spent: Essays, 1978–1996* (London and Boston, Faber and Faber), 280–1.
3. Steiner (1996), 282.
4. Jean-François Lyotard (1979), *La condition postmoderne* (Les Éditions de Minuit) [French trans. note]
5. David Harvey (1989), *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell), 36. [Eng. trans. note]