

Poetry and Modernity

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First of all, I would like to thank the University of Utah and the Tanner Lecture Committee for inviting me to speak to you. I of course accepted, but not without fear and trepidation. My credentials for giving this lecture are more than dubious: I am neither a specialist nor a professional critic nor a historian. The only thing that justifies my presence here is my passion for poetry. Since adolescence — along with the jobs that have supported me, and sometimes in spite of them — I have worked at writing poetry. Poetry has been for me not only an everyday task and an invincible affection but also a vice, a fate, and ultimately, a cult, a personal religion. But I write poems only intermittently and, like other poets, in the empty stretches of time I sometimes reflect on poetic creation and the psychological and historical circumstances that surround and, to a large extent, determine it. Thus my contribution will not be that of a philosopher, critic, or historian but, rather, that of a practitioner: what I say must be seen more as a testimony than a verdict.

I. MODERNITY AND ROMANTICISM

The subject I would like to explore — poetry and modernity — is composed of two terms whose relationship to each other is far from clear. The poetry of this fin de siècle is simultaneously a beneficiary of the poetic movements of *modernity*, from romanticism to the avant-garde, and a repudiation of them. Nor is it obvious what we mean by the word modernity. Its meanings are elusive and changing: the modern is, by its nature, transitory; “contemporary” is a quality that vanishes as soon as we name it. There are as many modernities and antiquities as there are epochs and societies: the Aztecs were moderns compared to the Olmecs, as Alexander was to Amenophis IV. The “modernist” poetry of

Rubén Darío was an antique for the ultraists, and futurism now strikes us more as a relic than an aesthetic. The modern age cannot help but be tomorrow's antiquity, But for the moment we have to resign ourselves and accept that we live in the modern age, conscious of the fact that the label is both ambivalent and provisional.

What does this word *modernity* mean? When did it begin? Some believe that it began with the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the discovery of the Americas; others claim that it began with the birth of the nation-states and the institution of banking, the rise of mercantile capitalism, and the creation of the bourgeoisie; others emphasize the scientific and philosophical revolutions of the seventeenth century, without which we would have neither our technology nor our industries. Each of these opinions is partially correct; taken together they form a coherent explanation. For that reason, perhaps, most cultural historians tend to favor the eighteenth century: not only did it inherit these changes and innovations, it also consciously recognized many of those characteristics that we now claim as ours. Was that age a prefiguration of the one we live in today? Yes and no. It would be more precise to say that ours has been the era of the mutilation of the ideas and projects of that great century.

Modernity began as a critique of religion, philosophy, morality, law, history, economics, and politics. Criticism was its most distinctive feature, its birthmark. All that has been the modern age has been the work of criticism, which I take to mean a method of investigation, creation, and action. The principal concepts and ideas of the modern age — progress, evolution, revolution, freedom, democracy, science, technology — were born from that criticism. In the eighteenth century reason shaped the criticism of the world and of itself, thereby radically transforming classical rationalism and its timeless geometries. A criticism of itself: reason renounced those grandiose constructions called being, good, and truth; it ceased to be the mansion of ideas and became instead a road, a means of exploration. A criticism of metaphysics and of

its truths that were impermeable to change: Hume and Kant. A criticism of the world, of the past and present; a criticism of certainties and traditional values; a criticism of institutions and beliefs, the throne and the altar; a criticism of mores, a reflection on passion, sensibility, and sexuality: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis Diderot, Pierre Laclous, the Marquis de Sade; the historical criticism of Edward Gibbon and Montesquieu; the discovery of the *other*: Chinese, Persians, American Indians; the changes of perspective in astronomy, geography, physics, biology. In the end, a criticism that was incarnated in history: the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the independence movements of the Spanish and Portuguese colonies. (For reasons I have discussed in other writings, the revolutions for independence in Spanish and Portuguese America failed both politically and socially. Our modernity is incomplete or, more exactly, is a historical hybrid.)

It is no accident that these great revolutions, the roots of modern history, were inspired by eighteenth-century thought. It was an age rich with utopias and projects for social reform. It has been said that those utopias are the most disastrous aspect of that legacy. Yet we can neither ignore nor condemn them: although many horrors have been committed in their name, we owe them nearly all the humanitarian acts and dreams of the modern age. The utopias of the eighteenth century were the great ferment that set in motion the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Utopia is the other face of criticism, and only a critical age could be the inventor of utopias. The empty spaces created by the demolitions of the critical spirit are almost always filled by utopian constructions. Utopias are the dreams of reason. Active dreams that turn into revolutions and reforms. The preeminence of utopias is another characteristic feature of the modern age. Each era may be identified by its vision of time, and in ours the continual presence of revolutionary utopias testifies to the exaggerated regard we have for the future. The past was no better than the present: perfection is not behind us but ahead; it is not an abandoned paradise

but a territory we will someday colonize, a city that remains to be built.

Christianity replaced the cyclical vision of time of Greco-Roman antiquity with a time that was linear, successive, and irreversible; one with a beginning and an end, from the Fall of Adam and Eve to the Final Judgment. Alongside this mortal and historical time there was another, supernatural time, invulnerable to death and change: eternity. Thus the only truly decisive moment of terrestrial history was the Redemption: the descent and sacrifice of Christ represents the intersection of eternity and temporality, the successive and moral time of man and the time of the beyond, which neither changes nor moves in succession, forever identical to itself. The modern age began with the criticism of Christian eternity and the appearance of yet another time. On the one hand, the finite time of Christianity, with its beginning and end, became the nearly infinite time of nature's evolution and of history that remained open to the future. On the other, modernity devalued eternity: perfection was transported to a future that was not in the other world but in this one. In the famous image of G. W. F. Hegel, the rose of reason was crucified in the present. History, he said, is a calvary: the transformation of the Christian mystery into historical action. The road to the absolute passes through time; it is time. Perfection resides in the future and is forever ahead of us. Changes and revolutions are incarnations of the human drive toward the future and its paradises.

The relation between romanticism and modernity is both filial and contentious. Romanticism was the child of the age of criticism, and change prompted its conception and birth and was its distinguishing feature. It was the great change not only in the arts and letters, but also in imagination, sensibility, taste, and ideas. It was a morality, an eroticism, a politics, a way of dressing and a way of loving, a way of living and of dying. A rebellious child, romanticism was a criticism of rational criticism; it replaced successive historical time with a time of origin, before history, and the

utopian future with the instantaneous present of the passions, love and the flesh. Romanticism was the great negation of modernity as it has been conceived in the eighteenth century by critical, utopian, and revolutionary reason. But it was a negation that remained within modernity. Only an age of criticism could have produced such a total negation.

Romanticism coexisted with modernity, time after time merging with it only in order to transgress it. These transgressions assumed many forms but only two modes: analogy and irony. I take the first to mean "the vision of the universe as a system of correspondences and the vision of language as a double of the universe."¹ It is a very ancient tradition, reelaborated and transmitted by Renaissance Neoplatonism through various hermetic traditions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Having nourished the philosophical and libertine sects of the eighteenth century, it was recognized by the romantics and their followers through to our own era. It is the central, albeit underground, tradition of modern poetry, from the first romantics to William Butler Yeats, Rainer Maria Rilke, and the surrealists. Simultaneous to this vision of universal correspondence, its enemy-twin appeared: irony. It was the rip in the fabric of analogies, the exception that ruptured the correspondences. If analogy may be conceived as a fan which, unfolded, displays the resemblances between this and that, microcosm and macrocosm, stars, men, and worms, then irony tears the fan to pieces. Irony is the dissonance that disrupts the concert of the correspondences, turning it into cacophony. Irony has many names: it is the anomaly, the deviation, the *bizarre*, as Baudelaire called it. In a word, it is that great accident: death.

Analogy steps itself in myth; its essence is rhythm, the cyclical time of appearances and disappearances, deaths and resurrections. Irony is the coming of criticism to the kingdom of imagination and

¹Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

sensibility; its essence is linear time which leads to death — the death of both man and the gods. Twin transgressions: analogy replaces the linear time of history and the canonization of the utopian future with the cyclical time of myth; irony, in turn, sheds mythic time in order to affirm the lapses in contingency, the plurality of gods and myths, the death of God and his creatures. The twin ambiguities of romantic poetry: it was revolutionary, but it occurred alongside, not as part of, the revolutions of the century; at the same time, its spirituality was a transgression of the Christian denominations.² The history of modern poetry, from romanticism to symbolism, is the history of various manifestations of the two principles by which it has been composed since its birth: analogy and irony.

II. MODERNITY AND THE AVANT-GARDE

The nineteenth century may be seen as the apogee of modernity. The ideas born from criticism, which had a polemical value in the eighteenth century — democracy, the separation of church and state, the end of royal privileges, freedom of beliefs, opinions, and association — became the principles shared by nearly all the European nations and the United States. The West grew, extended its boundaries, and held fast. But at the end of the last century a deep unease spread through the centers of our civilization, one that affected the social, political, and economic systems as much as the systems of beliefs and values. We may name the cycle that includes the birth, apogee, and crisis of modernity the modern age; the last stage, that of crisis, may be called the contemporary era. Nevertheless, its duration — it has lasted nearly a century — leads me to doubt that the term is appropriate. Equally inapt are those words that always appear as soon as one speaks on this topic: *decadence*, *decline*, *sunset*. The word *crisis*, while not inexact, has been

²Ibid.

weakened by continual use. In the end, whatever name we give it, the period that began at the start of this century is distinguishable from the others by its uncertainty toward the values and ideas that formed modernity. The first signs of this universal crisis appeared at the end of the last century; by 1910 they were apparent with a brutal clarity. I need not describe them. For a long time they have been the favorite topic of sociologists, astrologers, clergymen, economists, prophets, psychoanalysts, journalists, and the other faith healers of the ills of our society. I will confine myself simply to mentioning the areas touched by this historical disease.

The birth of the modern age also brought the blossoming of that great upheaval and great aberration nationalism. Transformed into the religion of the national state, it acquired, in the last century, a tremendous ferocity. The reactionary criticism against bourgeois democracy — rationalism, cosmopolitanism, skepticism, hedonism — allied itself with a nostalgia for precapitalist societies and their “idyllic relations,” as Marx ironically called them. In these sermons against the sins of progress there were echoes of the ancient Christian horror of Satan the skeptic and intelligent mammon, lover of industry, pleasure, and the arts. From the other extreme, and with similar passion, the revolutionaries — above all, the anarchists — denounced the oppressive character of the state and of social institutions: family, property, the law. In the first stage of the crisis, socialism — in its various forms, not excluding those of Marxist inspiration — was critical but not subversive; although the Second International contributed greatly to improving the lot of the workers, it still maintained its ties to the social institutions of the industrial nations.

In the second decade of the twentieth century the crisis of the social institutions was transformed into a crisis of international politics that exploded into the First World War. The revolutions that followed changed the face of the planet. Marxism — or more exactly, its authoritarian version, Leninism — became a world power. In the third decade, under various names and with con-

traditory ideologies, it embodied a new historical reality: the totalitarian bureaucratic state. The process has continued everywhere throughout the century. Even the countries that maintain a democratic system have a tendency to copy this model of bureaucratic domination, be it in the huge capitalist consortia, the workers' unions, or in the technocratic states. Few people suspected, at the beginning of this century, that the benevolent libertarian and revolutionary aspirations of those years would degenerate, fifty years later, into a new absolutism.

This crisis of public life was also a crisis of consciousness. A criticism of the family and of male domination, a criticism of sexual morality, a criticism of the schools, churches, beliefs, and values. In spite of the immense technological gains, there began to be doubts about progress — the ruling principle of the West and its main intellectual myth. The spiritual state that prevailed in the first half of the century, with its violent oscillation between passivity and violence, radical skepticism and faith in instincts, extreme intellectualism and the cult of blood, has been described many times and need not be repeated here. I would merely like to point out that these fluctuations coincided with certain fundamental discoveries in the sciences which similarly called into question the ancient certainties. It is hardly necessary to mention these changes: non-Euclidean geometry, quantum physics, relativity, the fourth dimension. To these advances have been added, more recently, those of molecular biology and, above all, genetics. If the ancient spirit had evaporated, transformed into a chemical reaction, then the ancient matter had equally lost its mass and had become pure energy: time-space, a reality that endlessly expands and endlessly falls into itself. If matter has broken down into atoms and particles of particles, what can we say of consciousness? It has ceased to be the cornerstone of the individual and has vanished. For some, it became a theater of war for new entities, species that were, perhaps, no less illusory than those of Renaissance psychology: the subconscious, the unconscious, the libido, the

superego. For others, thought and emotion were no more than the results of physiological and chemical combinations. The family was transformed into a nursery for fantasies, and the crime of Oedipus took on the universal dignity previously bestowed upon original sin: the essential mark of the human species, the feature that distinguishes us from the other species.

Art and literature are representational forms of reality. Representations that are, I need hardly add, also inventions: imaginary representations. But reality, in this century, began to fall apart and vanish; it took on the attributes of the imaginary; it became menacing or contemptuous, inconsistent or fantastic. The chair ceased to be the chair we see and was transformed into a construct of invisible forces, atoms, and particles. Not only did the new physics undermine the presumed solidity of material things, but the non-Euclidean geometries opened the possibility of other spaces, endowed with properties that were entirely different from those of traditional space. A new being was born, and it became the subject of endless lucubration by writers and painters, and the central myth of the first avant-garde: time-space. Only later, in the next generation — that of the surrealists — did psychoanalysis influence the poets and painters. Since then the vision of the “I” and of the self has undergone profound changes, and with it the language of the artists, committed to expressing the discontinuities and lapses of the conscience and the senses.

Symbolism allied itself with an esoteric language: a cult of the mystery of the universe and a cult of the poet as the high priest of this secret religion. The new poets replaced that language with irony and prosaicism. Symbolism exalted chiaroscuro; it was an art of inner doors that took subtle shadings as its treasures. The new art went out into the streets: a poetry of sharp contrasts and brutal oppositions. Symbolism had delineated a nostalgia for the beyond, one that was, for some, located in an impossible past, or, for others, in a no less impossible nowhere. The new poetry celebrated the moment, the present: that which the eyes see and

the hands touch. Baudelaire's city was an urban nocturne in which the gaslights and their reflections — as ambiguous as the human conscience — lit the woundlike streets and their parade of prostitution, crime, and solitary despair. The city of the modern poets was that of the crowds, the city of neon advertisements, buses, and cars, which transforms itself every night into an electric garden. But the modern city was no less terrible than Baudelaire's:

Now you walk in Paris alone among the crowd
Herds of bellowing buses hemming you about
Anguish of love parching you within.³

The romantic hero was an adventurer, a pirate, a poet turned freedom fighter or a solitary figure along the bank of a deserted lake, lost in sublime meditation. Baudelaire's hero was the angel fallen into the city, dressed in black, his elegant and threadbare costume stained with wine, oil, and mud. Apollinaire's hero is an urban vagabond, almost a bum, ridiculous and pathetic, lost in the crowd. It is the figure that later would be incarnated by Charles Chaplin, the heroes of Vladimir Mayakovski's *The Cloud in Trousers* and Fernando Pessoa's *Tobacco Shop*. A poor devil and a being endowed with occult powers, a clown and a magician. Such characters were both new and yet closely tied to romanticism.

Although the human adventure — its passions, madneses, illuminations — continued to unfold in the new poetry, its speakers had changed. The ancient natural world had disappeared with its forests, valleys, oceans, and mountains populated by monsters, gods, demons, and other marvels; in its place appeared the abstract city and, among the old monuments and venerable plazas, the terrible newness of the machines. A change of reality: a change of mythology. In the past, man spoke with the universe, or thought that he spoke with it: if it did not answer, it was, at least, his mirror. In the twentieth century the mythical speaker, the mys-

³Guillaume Apollinaire, "Zone," trans. Samuel Beckett.

terious voices, have vanished. Man remains alone in the enormous city, sharing his solitude with solitary millions. The hero of the new poetry is a loner in a crowd, or more exactly, in a crowd of loners. It is the H.C.E. (*Here Comes Everybody*) of James Joyce. We discovered that we were alone in the universe. Alone with our machines. Milton's industrious devils must have rubbed their hands with glee. It was the beginning of the great solipsism.

The ancients venerated the horse and the sailing ship; the new age worshiped the train and the steamer. No doubt the poem of Walt Whitman that most influenced his followers was the one dedicated to a locomotive. Valéry Larbaud wrote a memorable ode to the Orient Express, "the train of the millionaires"; Blaise Cendrars's equally memorable "Prose of the Trans-Siberian" is the first marriage of poetry and film. The futurists sang to the automobile, and later there were countless poems to the airplane, the submarine, and other modern vehicles. None of these strident texts can compare to the original poem by Whitman. The transatlantic steamers also fired the imagination, as in the "Maritime Ode" of Alvaro de Campos — neither an allegory nor a symbol of Fernando Pessoa: his double and his enemy — written on the docks of Lisbon, but also in Liverpool, Singapore, Yokohama, and Harbin. The steamer was associated, in the poetry of this period, more with Asia than the Americas. The first act of Paul Claudel's *Partage de midi* occurs on a steamer interminably crossing the Indian Ocean. The poetry of the sea, in the novels and poems of that time, was a poetry of the beyond: not only the unknown seas and lands, but also the *other* civilizations: Rudyard Kipling's India, Joseph Conrad's Africa and Southeast Asia, the Far East of Claudel and Saint-John Perse.

The presence of the landscapes and artistic forms of the Orient, Africa, and pre-Columbian America is a major feature of the poetry and art of those years. Poets adopted the haiku, and the Noh theater influenced Yeats and other playwrights. Ezra Pound's translations of Chinese poetry were an important contribution to

those changes. In short, the first third of the twentieth century was the culmination of a long process of discovery of the *other* civilizations and their various visions of reality and of man. This process, begun in the sixteenth century with the discovery of the Americas, resulted, in our time, in the adoption of artistic forms that were not only different from but contrary to the central traditions of the West. It was a change of such profundity that it still affects us and, without a doubt, will affect the arts and sensibilities of those who follow us. This change was, on the one hand, the natural result of the aesthetic revolution that began with romanticism, and its extreme consequence; on the other hand, it was the ultimate change, the change of changes: with it ended a tradition that began with the Renaissance. The models of that tradition were the works of Greco-Roman antiquity. By denying them, modern art ruptured the continuity of the West. Thus the change was both a self-denial and, simultaneously, a metamorphosis. An end of nature as ideal, an end of perspective and the Golden Section, an end of representations that pretended to give the illusion of reality.

The decisive factor was not the replacement of traditional canons — including their romantic, symbolist, and impressionist variations — with foreign cultures and civilizations but, rather, the search for *other* forms of beauty. For this reason I spoke not only of self-denial but of metamorphosis. The aesthetic change was as profound as the changes wrought by the sciences to the traditional visions of reality. Physics had shown that visible reality is dependent on a structure that is a relation of forces in an unstable equilibrium. The artists similarly attempted to dismantle the appearance of everyday objects, and the cubists in particular conceived of the painting as a system of relations. There was a sort of Neoplatonism in this notion: the painter attempted to represent the structure — or more exactly, the archetype, the *idea* — of the coffeepot or the pipe. Thus the necessity of painting both the exterior and the interior of things. The example of African masks, which contained both front and back on the same surface,

opened the way. On their part, the futurists wanted to paint motion, something that photography does much better than painting. In that period the chronophotograph was popular: a series of consecutive instants of an object or figure in motion, a horse running, a woman walking rhythmically, a bicyclist. The most notable example was Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*.

All of these works and experiments were influenced by the new forms of reproducing reality. The major attraction, especially for the poets, was photography in motion: the cinema. The great theoretician of montage Sergei Eisenstein notes in one of his writings that the absence of rules of syntax and of punctuation marks in film has revealed, by omission, the true nature of the art: juxtaposition and simultaneity. That is, the rupture of the linear nature of narrative. Eisenstein discovered the predecessors of simultaneity in the arts of the East, particularly in Japanese theater and the Chinese ideogram. Years later, Carl Jung, in his preface to an edition of the Chinese classic the *I Ching*, maintained that the principle that rules the combination of the hexagrams is not causality but, rather, confluence. Causality assumes that one thing follows the next, that an event is the cause of another event. The *I Ching* is dependent on the simultaneous presence of various chains of causes. Jung called this coincidence *synchronicity*, a conjunction of times that is also a conjunction of spaces. In sum, in the second decade of the twentieth century there appeared in painting, poetry, and the novel an art made up of temporal and spatial conjunctions that tended both to dissolve and to juxtapose the divisions of before and after, front and back, internal and external. This art had many names, the best of which, the most descriptive, is *simultaneism*.

The painters advanced the notion that a painting should be a simultaneous presentation of the various facades of the object. A cubist painting displayed both the interior and exterior of the object, the front and back of reality; a futurist picture showed — or more exactly, pretended to show — the before and after: a dog

running or a trolley crossing a plaza. Painting is a spatial art, and the eye can see, at the same time, a number of representations and forms on a single surface: eyesight is simultaneous. Juxtaposition mandated a plastic order that was a system of visual relations. The principle ruling this type of representation is *contiguity*: things are next to each other and are perceived simultaneously by the viewer. In the temporal arts, such as music or poetry, things are behind each other. In reality they are neither in front nor behind: they follow one another. One sound follows another, one word goes before or after another. The ruling principle is not contiguity but *succession*. Yet there is an essential difference between music and poetry. In the former, synchrony is continual: counterpoint, harmony, the fugue. Poetry, however, is made of words: sounds that are meanings. Each sound must be heard clearly so that the listener may perceive the meaning. Harmony is the essence of music; in poetry it produces only confusion. Poetry cannot be synchronous without going against its nature and renouncing the great powers of the word. At the same time, simultaneity is not only a powerful technique but one which is present in the basic forms of the poem. Comparison, metaphor, rhythm, and rhyme are conjunctions and repetitions that obey the same laws as simultaneous presentation. This was the challenge that confronted the poets about 1910: how to adapt spatial simultaneity to an art ruled by temporal succession.

In 1911 *dramatism* arose in Paris; it was later called *simultaneism*. (Both the word and the concept had been used slightly earlier by the futurists.) The procedure could not have been more simple: the various parts of the poem were read aloud at the same time. The futurist solution was more chaotic: they gave “concerts” in which the human voice, reduced to elements of pure sound, from exclamations to whispers, was mixed with other urban noises, such as the clatter of typewriters. Later in Zurich, during the war, the dadaist Hugo Ball rediscovered the “talking in tongues” of the early Christians, the Gnostics, and other religions. Similarly, in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, at about the same time, the Russian

futurists exploited the possibilities of glossolalia, which they called *transrational language*. But this translation of language into mere rhythmical emissions of vague sense, while admitting juxtaposition and simultaneity, reduced meaning to a minimum. It was an impoverishment and, nearly always, a mutilation.

Cubism and, above all, the Orphism of Robert Delaunay inspired the first experiments by Cendrars and Guillaume Apollinaire, with whom simultaneism truly began. In the case of Cendrars especially, the influence of the cinema — particularly its montage and flashback — was decisive. The use of these cinematographic devices shattered syntax and the linear and successive nature of traditional poetry. Apollinaire went even further: he nearly totally omitted connectives and syntactical nexuses — an act similar to the elimination of perspective in painting — and applied the technique of collage to incorporate found phrases into the text and to juxtapose various blocks of words. In this way he attempted to create a conjunction of spaces and times in a single piece of writing. Unlike the paintings of the cubists, Apollinaire's poems *move*: that is, they not only have a beginning and end, they also *elapse*. Futurism had attempted to represent movement: the new poetry was movement itself. Other French poets followed Apollinaire in this direction, most notably Pierre Reverdy.

Some years later Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot adopted simultaneism. Adopting it, they transformed and extended it, creating a new form of the long poem and exploring a territory left untouched by the French poets: the social and spiritual history of the West. In Spanish, simultaneism, with the exception of a short and perfect poem by José Juan Tablada, was not employed until my generation. It is worth reiterating a small complaint here: American critics, with the exception of Roger Shattuck, the poet Kenneth Rexroth, and a few others, never refer to the French origins of simultaneism and persist in repeating Pound's claim that his method of *presentation*, as he called it, grew out of his reading of Ernest Fenollosa and his translations of Chinese poetry. I have

attempted on various occasions to correct this, but due to the extraordinary influence of Anglo-American culture, the critics of other languages — including Latin America and even France — continue to repeat the canonical version. No one wants to see the *Cantos* and *The Waste Land* as the extreme consequences of the simultaneism initiated ten years before by Apollinaire and Cendrars. It is hardly necessary to add that these fortuitous consequences were also creations. Not imitations but graftings: the results were new plants, more vast, complex, and powerful than the original.

Simultaneism — sometimes called poetic cubism — was another manifestation, at times brash and nearly always effective, of the cardinal principle of romantic and symbolist poetry: analogy. The poem was a totality propelled — impelled — by the complementary action of affinities and oppositions among its parts. A triumph of contiguity over succession. Or more exactly, given that the poem is language in motion, a fusion of contiguity and succession, the spatial and the temporal. Later, at the other extreme of avant-garde poetry — surrealism — both analogy and humor reappeared in a manner that was even more conspicuous and direct. All the great poetic, erotic, and metaphysical themes of romanticism were accepted by the surrealists and carried to their limits. The axis of the two great poetic movements of the first half of the century — simultaneism and surrealism — was the same as that of romanticism: the vision of universal correspondence and the consciousness of rupture — the consciousness of death. The ambiguous relation of romanticism to Western religious tradition and to the revolutionary political movements — affinity and transgression — similarly reappeared in nearly all the great poets of our century. Modern poetry, since its birth, has been simultaneously an affirmation and a negation of modernity.

III. THE POETRY OF CONVERGENCE

With a certain regularity, voices appear warning us of the approaching end of our societies. It seems that modernity has

nourished itself on the successive negations it has engendered, from Chateaubriand to Nietzsche, from Nietzsche to Valéry. In the last twenty-five years these voices announcing calamities and catastrophes have greatly multiplied. They are not the anguished expressions of a despairing outsider or an outcast minority; they are widespread popular opinions that reflect the state of the collective spirit. The temper of this century makes one think, at times, of the terrors of the year 1000 or of the dark visions of the Aztecs, who lived under the threat of the cyclical end of the cosmos. Modernity was born proclaiming the future as a promised land; today we are witnessing the decline of that idea. No one is sure of what awaits us, and many wonder if the sun will rise tomorrow. There are so many ways by which the future has been discredited that it is impossible to list them all: some foresee the depletion of our natural resources, others the contamination of the planet, others the spread of famine, others the petrification of history by the universal establishment of totalitarian ideocracies, others the nuclear holocaust. It is evident that nuclear deterrence has kept us from a Third World War, but for how long? At the same time, even if we succeed in avoiding catastrophe, the mere existence of atomic weapons literally explodes our idea of progress, whether as gradual evolution or revolutionary leap. Even if the bomb has not yet destroyed the world, it has destroyed our idea of the world. Modernity has suffered a fatal wound; the sun of progress has set on the horizon and we still cannot see the new intellectual star that will guide us. We do not know if we are living in a twilight or a dawn.

Modernity identified itself with change, conceived of criticism as the agent of change, and identified both with progress. For Marx, revolutionary insurrection was criticism in action. In the realm of literature and the arts, the aesthetic of modernity, from romanticism to our own time, has been the aesthetic of change. The modern tradition is the tradition of rupture, a tradition that negates itself and, by so doing, perpetuates itself. The discovery

of the arts of other civilizations — India and the Far East, Africa and Oceania, pre-Columbian America — has also been seen and experienced as ruptures with the central traditions of the West. Today we are witnessing the sunset of this aesthetic of change. The art and literature of this *fin de siècle* have slowly lost their powers of negation; for some years these negations have been ritualized repetitions, formulaic rebellions, ceremonies without transgression. It is not the end of art: it is the end of the *idea* of modern art — that is, the end of the aesthetic founded on the cult of change and rupture.

Criticism, with some delay, has noticed that in the last forty years we have entered into another period of history and another art. We hear a great deal about the crisis of the *avant-garde*, and the expression *postmodernist era* has become popular for our time. It is a label as ambivalent and contradictory as the very idea of modernism. That which follows the modern cannot help but be ultramodern: a modernity even more modern than yesterday's. People have never known the name of the age in which they live, and we are no exception to this rule. To call ourselves postmodern is merely a way of affirming our modernity by saying that we are very modern. And yet what has been called into question is the linear concept of time and its identification with criticism, change, and progress — time opening out to the future like a promised land. To call ourselves postmodern is to continue being the prisoner of successive, linear, and progressive time.

If the term *postmodern* is mistaken, what can one say about the word used by Anglo-American critics to describe contemporary art: *postmodernism*? For these critics, the word *modernism* designates that conjunction of works, authors, and tendencies evoked by such names as Joyce, Pound, Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Ernest Hemingway, and others. Nevertheless, nearly everyone knows that in Spanish what we call *modernismo* is the first literary movement of Latin America and Spain. The modernists were Rubén Darío and Valle-Inclán, Juan Ramón Jiménez and Leopoldo

Lugones, Jose Martí and Antonio Machado; with them our modern tradition begins, and without them our contemporary literature could not exist. In reality, the various movements, works, and authors that the Anglo-Americans encompass under the term *modernism* were always known in France and in the rest of Europe, as well as in Latin America, by a term that is equally vague: *the avant-garde*. To ignore all this, giving the word *modernism* exclusively to a movement in the English language, is to reveal a cultural arrogance and historical insensitivity. The same occurs with the word *postmodernism* as a designation of the art and literature of the United States and other countries. This is not a useless distinction, nor does it reflect any sort of hackneyed nationalism: the question of *modernism* is not a debate over words but over meanings and historical concepts. More exactly, the world is a world of names. To take them away is to take away our world.

For the ancients the past was the golden age, the natural Eden that we lost one day; for the moderns, the future was the chosen place, the promised land. But it is the present that has always been the time of poets and lovers, Epicureans and certain mystics. The instant is the time of pleasure but also the time of death, the time of the senses and that of the revelation of the beyond. I believe that the new star — that which has yet to appear on the historical horizon but which has already been foretold in many indirect ways — will be the star of the present, the star of *now*. Men and women will soon have to construct a morality, a politics, an erotics, and a poetics of present time. This change toward the present naturally involves the body, but it need not and should not be confused with the mechanical and promiscuous hedonism of the modern Western societies. The present is a fruit in which life and death are combined,

Poetry has always been the vision of a presence in which the two halves of the globe are reconciled. A plural presence: many times, in the course of history, it has changed its face and name; and yet it remains, throughout all these changes, as one. It has not

been erased by the diversity of its apparitions. Even when it has been identified with the void, as occurred in the Buddhist tradition and among certain modern poets in the West, it manifests itself — a paradoxical sign — as a presence. It is not an idea: it is pure time. Time without measure: this singular, unique, particular time that is passing by right now and that has passed by endlessly since the beginning. Presence is the incarnation of the present.

On various occasions I have called the poetry of this time that is beginning *the art of convergence*, and I contrasted it with the tradition of rupture: “The poets of the modern age sought the principles of change; the poets of the age that is beginning seek the unalterable principle that is the root of change. We wonder if the *Odyssey* and *À la recherche du temps perdu* have anything in common. The aesthetics of change emphasized the historical character of the poem. Now we ask: is there a point at which the principle of change will be fused with that of permanence? . . . The poetry that begins with this century’s end neither begins nor returns to its starting point: it is a perpetual re-beginning and a continual return. The poetry beginning now, without beginning, is seeking the intersection of times, the point of convergence. It asserts that between the cluttered past and the uninhabited future, poetry is the present.” I wrote those words fifteen years ago. Today I would add, the present is manifest in a presence and the presence is the reconciliation of the three times. A poetry of reconciliation: the imagination made flesh in a present without dates.