

**1956 - THE IDEA OF MODERNITY::**  
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Translated by Beatriz Martins Oliveira, 2007

I walk among rows of words, easy and difficult ones, staring at each one. They do not answer me. Today they do not answer. I suppose they are far from me, I can not see nothing in common between them and what I would like to say. The idea of modernity does not please them, or maybe I am being too particular about it. Both of us are right, I believe. What is the point of questioning an idea, opening our way to it among rows of words? But I wonder if this is not the path that can lead me to the dark cave? Of course, it is an attribute of modernity that words and men do not understand one another. Maybe the beginning of modernity is precisely there. Isn't it? Didn't poetry wish to change itself into music by taking all the potential accords from words, all their possible harmonies? And was it not in this wish of becoming music that they began losing their outlines, they turned into magic, stone, cry and they became at last the great instrument of men's disbelief on truth, on reality, on any kind of security?

Modernity became a myth just like any other. Modernity is over. It is no longer the "Great Pan is dead" to which one can listen, coming from the bottom of the forests. Now among the sound of skyscrapers, one can hear: "**modernity is dead**". We need a new name, because some other thing is born. If it isn't born, it needs to be, because the man of modernity is dead and while there is no name for the new age, how can it possibly be born? Modernity died with the discovery of the atom bomb. Modernity is not apocalyptic enough, and there is no room in it for the strength and determination that can make man stronger than the atom bomb. Modernity died of fear.

Formerly there where the capital letters. Man got smaller, in a fit of self-consciousness, and realizing that he was not up to it, proclaimed his failure. Universality vanished, frailty and dispersion were born. That is the portrait of the modern man: from frailty to nothing. These two words contain all the history of modernity, the greatness and misery of modernity. He killed God and could not bring him back to life. He killed Truth and could not bring it back to life. It was not Reason that suffocated him, as reactionary idiots suppose, it was Reason that was too big for man and at last smashed him. Explosives were too powerful and man could not master them. Nothing. And then he described nothing, the little nothings. Now time has come for men to begin again from nothing. Men of modernity lacked strength for such a task and it is for this reason that a new age must begin.

Modernity is a concept without an opposite. It was not born against something but against an absence. "Under an empty sky", as Johan Bojer would say, was the situation in which man found himself when he lost his Faith. This happened centuries ago, or at least began centuries ago. It is not from one moment to another that one can destroy a whole era. The majority of one's consciousness as nothing, happened so recently that not everyone seems to have noticed it. Even nowadays people are fighting in Budapest and in both sides of the Channel [1], between two kinds of illusion, as if such a fight were not a ghost fight. As a matter of fact, it was not necessary to kill outside what is already dead inside.

Today it sounds ridiculous to speak of modernity; it has a taste of ashes, of All Soul's Day. We can only speak of modernity as History. The last decades were eloquent enough for those who want to face truth. Who can honestly doubt that Man is useless? This condition of being worthless could only exist, however, if man had been able to come back to life. He wasn't. Does History repeat itself? That's it: the more it repeats itself the better we can see that man doesn't even deserve to be destroyed by the atom bomb or by a better one.

I think that the best evidence of man's inefficiency is communism. For one time in History, men had been able, somewhere in the universe, to begin something really new. Scarcely ten years later had they already come back to the previous situation? And this is also modernity, because the failure of the Russian revolution is one of the acts, and one of the crucial ones, of the drama. On the other face of the panel is its complement: the Spanish Civil War, that is an example how between the communism and liberalism help, there was born that beautiful flower that is the Franco regimen, all made of negative signs, where everything is a lie: specially the lie of its Catholicism, the perfect image of what the love of Christ can be in this world of ours which I have called more and more properly: "Our time of crosses and gallows unfurled"

Modernity is unable to subsist.

When man realized that he was modern he forgot the responsibilities that implied. It was not worth having discovered it, and therefore his difference, if he could not live to its image. It would have been better to resign. But he couldn't and so he didn't. Everything stayed in words, the Word missed, this is, the Verb, this is action. And it is for that reason that surrealism is for me worthy of a unique respect among all the expressions of modernity: it realized that there were not two revolutions but only one. And there are people who laugh at it. Of course! During the War, I think, André Breton made a speech – ironically, he delivered it, if I am not mistaken, in an US University – which is one of the rare expressions of the thorough consciousness of man towards the world. The speech was neither liberal, nor communist nor Christian. And so no one noticed it. Of course!

Modernity was a fight against everything - but for nothing. For that reason no philosopher belongs more to modernity than Heidegger. And so *La Nausée by Sartre* is one of the greatest books of our time. At least

the annulment takes consciousness of itself, in spite of the weird words of the former author who can't be blamed for being a philosopher and not a poet. But there were lots of poets to speak for him – before and afterwards. One of them is called Fernando Pessoa and here as well no one had noticed what it was about. And I doubt the situation has changed even after the public acknowledgement of his work passed from zero to infinite.

Yes, there were lots of poets who expressed frailty and realized that digging underneath one could only find the stone of nothing, the irremovable stone on one's way, isn't it so, Carlos Drummond de Andrade? But poetry has always been truth and life. The consciousness of nothing, in poetry is hope, an absurd hope if you want, but hope as it is pure consciousness and the pure consciousness of a situation brings about firmness. Who can not understand this should go and read the works of some poets and then come back and speak to me.

The only objection to the obvious fact, that only out of modesty, Mankind doesn't accept, is that man is the most stupid animal in nature, is actually in poetry and adjacent things, like music, certain (very few) expressions of other arts, some novels, some philosophy, - not politics, sociology, theology, economy, etc. at all. And poetry and those other similar things make up the exception, precisely because they are a protest of man against himself.

Besides that, it is in the dreams of men. In the dreams of every man who some day had a glimpse of light or some kind of hope. But Modernity is not made of dreams, but of the fact that one can't have them. Of regret for having dreamt, when he could not master in himself the persisting illusions. This is modernity. To know *actually* that we *know* nothing and, what is more, that we *can do* nothing.

"I am nothing

I shall never be anything

I can't want to be anything", this is the image of Modernity taken to its limits. But Álvaro de Campos adds: "However, I have in myself all the dreams of the world". And here it is no longer the image of modernity, undoubtedly, but the reaction of a man smashed in the bottom of the well who, through his dream, wants to remove its lid.

I am wrong: this also belongs to modernity. But it is a dream that we know not to be real, a dream that creates its own universe – and not a hope. In nothingness there is no hope. Modernity begins perhaps with Rimbaud. I mean modernity as the consciousness of the impossibility of being. As a matter of fact, it begins with *The Clairvoyant Letters* [2]. Nothing is spoken about in it but an impossible plan is presented. The distance between that dream and man's capacity to live is the very ground of modernity, it is the field that men who, for any reason looked at themselves and wanted to say *no* and a total *no*, out of disgust, repulsion and vomit, had to till with their nerves and their blood. The No.

A world unable to subsist, a non world. A world where no one would cheat. The end of the so called "idealism", that is to say, the mild theory of friar Thomas, (who preaches the good and practices the evil), in which the same ground of lie supports apparently in antagonist philosophies and esthetic theories, which are only opposite in the particular way each one lies. So, modernity also begins with Marx's famous "Latest Thesis on Feuerbach": "Philosophers did nothing more than *interpret* the world in different ways, but what really matters is to *modify it*."

Kierkegaard's joke about Hegel, who having built a luxurious palace lived next to it in a miserable hut, is also an excellent image of idealism, of what modernity refuses. And so modernity has only reached its real expression in poetry and in the adjacent arts I have mentioned before. To reach it in the core of its existence would have been the end of its mission. And therefore all the impenitent idealist theories can be no more than false, wrong and unworthy of men expressions, as they wish to create or to continue a consciousness of something where nothing can exist beyond the real consciousness of its unhappiness – of nothing, or of the way to nothing.

A great number of poetical expressions of our time take the shape of "classical" or "realistic" imitations, or reveal, in general, a total accessibility towards all kinds of forms. Stravinsky, Fernando Pessoa, Picasso stand for as the utter example of the incapacity of subsisting of the forms modernity refuses, for to accept one of them would be the same as to believe in all of them, and modernity can not admit any kind of preference, because it would be to acknowledge itself as valid. And modernity is the disqualification of itself, it only exists as it proves its inefficiency to save man under the shape of truth, a conception of the world, a belief, a sort of security.

Modernity is the expectation of a new creation of man. But all the hypothetical builders of a new age are out of work. They were destroyed by the atom bomb even before it exploded: they died in the collapse of the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, they died in all the big and small massacres of human consciousness- because massacres of bodies are of minor importance if we realize that a much greater number consciousnesses than bodies died and that the distressing feeling that there are only unworthy causes is much more appalling than several millions of corpses. The stinking smell of rotten consciousnesses is much worse than that and one can feel a smell of putrid consciousnesses all over the earth.

So, there you have modernity: that's what remained from this, because neither in putrefaction absolute does exist. It is what remained from this not as indifference but as refusal. What remained from indifference is putrefaction just the same. All the retired from existence, who think they are living on an income from the old or the future world and that they have nothing to do with it, may loose their illusions. Let them write beautiful verses, paint beautiful pictures or make beautiful judgments – putrefaction. They are in the common grave, unable of having earned for them an honorable death.

Modernity is an accusation. In an upside down world, it is logical that they ask for accounts. After all, it is always that joke of Picasso with the German officer in front of *Guernica*: "Have you done this yourself? – No, you did it!" Meanwhile the good citizen protected behind any sacred principles, from 89 or the Sacred Mother Church, or of Saint Mussolini or Saint Stalin, not only considers it guilty of having painted *Guernica* but also of having done it, or even of being responsible for the defeat of France in 40 or etc. because there are too many examples. Communists, Catholics, Liberals and whoever, all of them agree to the fact that the responsibility for what modernity just expressed weighs on the shoulders of modernity itself.

Then, isn't modernity an epoch, or era or whatever? Isn't it a period of history of art or of literature? Of course it is not – it is a state of mind, of soul, of consciousness, or of whatever one may exact in order not to say one can not understand. Modernity means in our time the same as the "Mane, thecel, phares"[3] on the walls of Balthazar's orgy room. It is the thorn pricked in the flesh of our time. It is their portrait in negative; it is the zero milestone from where man has to start if he is really determined *to begin* in order *to be*.

*Nous ne...l'avenir"*

But we are not going to ask for sympathy. *A ceux qui furent la perfection de l'ordre*, no Apollinaire [4], we are not going to follow your example and humbly apologize before those... *Dieu*.

Modernity is not the beginning of anything. But it is not either the end of anything. This key is compulsory for all the good willing and anxious people, although of short intelligence and even shorter senses, for whom "there is something there" but who can not understand modernity except as a lack of order, of measure of certainty – of tranquility.

Modernity is a new consciousness, a new situation, in which man recognizes himself at the same time free and imprisoned: free from the era of illusions and imprisoned by his incapacity to change the world. Therefore, among other things, it is forbidden to his art the simplicity to accept the apparent images of man and nature which has been a feature all the history of arts during a few centuries of Greece and Rome and some other from the Renaissance onwards.

That innocence is impossible for modernity, for which that outward appearance means the sickness of a comfortable little life proposed to the universal applause by the comfortable hypocrisy of the lords of the world. How could modernity paint idealism itself?

Thus, modernity appears as a negative issue, as it is judged by eyes in which the idealist concept has put lie as the measure for everything. For those who write Beauty with capital letters, all authenticity is ugly. For those who possess Truth, all authenticity is false. For those who speak about Goodness and Love etc. and who, on the other side of reality, answer promptly with a lie to evil and its hatred, what else can all authenticity be but false?

Modernity does not know very well whether to speak about beauty and truth or not. Its artists don't often know if "classic authors" are right or wrong and so they often apologize because they don't smile to society. Modernity is an imperfect consciousness, because it is not proper of man to have a consciousness, that being thorough, would immediately put a gun in his hand. That same imperfection, that same uncertainty, that doubt of doubt, does not always mean lucidity. Even a poet like Fernando Pessoa believes that "what in this is not this" is at least real. Modernity is not a problem for those rare minds that have always been fighting in the frontiers of the unlimited and of the future, like Kafka, Van Gogh or Artaud.

But the absolute experience of these artists surpasses the powers of the human kind. Pure consciousness is not visible and therefore the three monsters I mentioned were a sort of people from another world to those who used to walk around them, in the illusion they might be human beings just like themselves. No, modernity is agonic, but because of anguish or even only because of uncertainty. Those who are possessed by it can not give it a rule; they illuminate it but they are not its models. Rimbaud put down his burden and he went away to make trade with slaves; the difference is that beforehand he had written *Une Saison en Enfer*, whereas the men of the order did nothing but sell slaves all along their lives, or else they were themselves slaves, respectful, worshipful and obliging of their own abjection.

### **Translator's notes:**

[1] Casais Monteiro meant the Suez Channel, theater of the first large scale Israeli/Arab confrontation in 1956.

[2] The "Clairvoyant Letters" were addressed to Georges Izambard and to Paul Demeny in May 1871. The full text in French may be accessed at: <http://www.mag4.net/Rimbaud/Documents1.html> accessed in 14<sup>th</sup> February 2007 or translated in English at:

<http://www.mag4.net/Rimbaud/DocumentsE1.html#Demeny> accessed in 14<sup>th</sup> February 2007

[3] Bible, Daniel 5, 1-29: Balthasar, last king of Babylon offers a feast besieged by Cyrus. On the wall he sees the sentence appear. He consults Daniel that interprets the signs as "your days are over; you weight very poorly, your kingdom will be thorn and divided".

[4] Guillaume Appolinaire was one of the most outstanding French modernist poets. Although his importance a search conducted in the Internet found almost nothing about him except some poems in generalist poetry sites.