Modernity and Postmodernity: A Cultural Change Seen from the Italian Perspective

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I would like to begin with some preliminary remarks. It is very difficult to perceive the historical changes that take place in the world in which we live. We are at the same time objects and subjects of these transformations; we are affected by them and deeply involved in the process; yet, in order to assess and interpret them, we are supposed to function as their witnesses, to watch them as from a distance; we are asked to be at the same time protagonists and spectators of the drama, observers and observed. Some think it is impossible to historicize the present and that such an enterprise is inevitably condemned to failure. I do not agree: I take it to be a very difficult yet not an impossible task. From an epistemological point of view, making sense of the present is a perfectly legitimate undertaking, not substantially different from all other historical undertakings. As such, it is tentative and yields only provisional and hypothetical results. In the same way, when we try to understand the transformations that have affected the history of an Egyptian or Chinese dynasty, or of an Indian tribe, we must understand the phenomenon, involve ourselves directly in that society; and while judging the phenomenon, we are bound to apply our contemporary convictions, preoccupations, and biases.

It is true, on the other hand, that in the contemporary world any attempt at reading and interpreting the movements of time and society is made particularly difficult by the enormous quantity of data that issue forth from the news agencies, the research institutes, and the statistical and sociological observatories that, like the satellites that whirl around us in the sky, keep our society under constant surveillance and, at the same time, transform every superficial movement, every event or opinion or poll, into a statistical testimony of a trend, of a direction, of a change. The newspaper we find every morning on the steps of our house is eager not just to register any small change but ready to consider it striking and momentous. The weekly or monthly magazines, in like fashion, seem particularly bent on emphasizing the smallest of departures from our habits and behaviors: every week they discover a new bend, a new turning point in our life. We are all so trendy, it thus seems, that in the end we run the paradoxical risk of being unable to perceive any real trend.
My paper will deal with the changes of this sort that have taken place in Italy over the past three decades. I shall focus on certain peculiarities of those transformations and insist on their remarkably paradoxical and contradictory nature. I know, of course, that a large part of the world has been similarly affected by sweeping transformations. This is completely true of what we used to consider the first world, and partly true also of the second world that meanwhile has tried, with no great results so far, to conform itself to the first world. As to the so-called third world, it must inevitably be left out of the picture. In that part of the world of real transformations, at least of the cultural sort which I shall discuss here, there have been few.

I know, of course, that the terms contradiction and paradox would probably apply as well to the general transformations that have taken place on a large scale in all of the so-called industrialized, if not postindustrialized, world. I have in mind, for instance, the uncanny difference of mood between the widespread feelings of elation and enthusiasm we all experienced in the year 1989—what with the non-violent revolutions in Eastern Europe, the fall of the Berlin wall, and so on—and the general sense of failure and discomfort, the regret for numerous wasted occasions, the preoccupation with the economic crises, the civil wars, and the general ideological depression that we are now experiencing, only a few years later. It seems to me, in any case, that the contradictions in Italy have been more striking and more disturbing than elsewhere.

I shall start by telling a story. Some time ago, I was invited to give a lecture to a group of students of Italian literature in a university town in Italy. I chose to compare two novels, one Italian the other American, that I found somewhat similar in theme, yet different in mode and style of writing. One was Libra by Don DeLillo, published in 1988, considered by many to be one of his best, and hailed by some critics (for instance those at Duke led by Frank Lentricchia) as one of the most successful examples of American postmodernism in its progressive vein. The novel tells the story of Kennedy’s assassination in Dallas and the possible conspiracy on the part of exiled Cubans, Mafia figures, and CIA agents in collusion. It tells the story of Lee Harvey Oswald, the supposed assassin, of his imagined dreams, frustrations, and baffling experiences, of his Russian wife, and of his mother. The other novel I examined closely was L’editore (The Publisher) by Nanni Balestrini, which appeared in Italy in 1989, one year after Libra. In the early Sixties Balestrini was an avant-garde poet, one of the most interesting among the group of young Italian neo-avant-garde writers that called themselves Group 63, from the year 1963, when they first gathered in Palermo: Alfredo Giuliani, Edoardo Sanguineti, Angelo Guglielmi, and Umberto Eco were among them.
The political movements and upheavals of the late Sixties and Seventies eventually split the Group 63. Nanni Balestrini, who found himself among the most politicized, radical extremists in the group, wrote a novel that was avant-garde in style and political in theme, *Vogliamo tutto* (We want everything, the we of the title being the working class considered collectively). The novel’s protagonist is the working class itself, in the form of angry auto Turin workers ready to carry out a new Communist revolution. At the same time this novel was published, Balestrini, who was working as a senior editor at the Feltrinelli publishing house in Milan, was brought to trial by an Italian prosecutor who was, to put it mildly, inclined to see conspiracy everywhere. Balestrini was accused of belonging to a political group called Autonomia that was suspected of having been very close to the Brigate rosse with his own radical ideals. Forced to resign his job in Milan and flee from Italy, Balestrini took refuge in France as one of the so-called political exiles in Paris (the best-known among them being Toni Negri). In Paris Balestrini worked as a translator, continued to write poetry, and published two excellent novels, the second of which is *L’editore*. The protagonist of the novel, the editore of the title, is of course Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, founder of the Feltrinelli publishing house, well known for having brought out Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* and Tomasi Di Lampedusa’s *Il gattopardo*.

Feltrinelli, many will remember, died in 1972 in questionable and tragic circumstances, having been found dead at the base of a high-tension pylon in a cornfield near Milan. A terrorist in disguise, the Milanese publisher had blown himself to pieces by inadvertently triggering a home-made bomb with which he had intended to topple the high steel tower. There have been many rumors and speculations around Feltrinelli’s death. He had become obsessed, it seems, with the idea that Italy, along with most of the rest of Western world, was heading towards a new fascist age. He was often seen in South America or Cuba, and had tried to organize Resistance groups in Italy, Germany, and Sardinia that were prepared to use terrorist tactics against what they believed was a new global threat of the neocapitalistic, postindustrial economic system. About the actual circumstances of his death there were, as in the case of Kennedy, various theories: that of the lonely amateur terrorist, that of a group of people present on the scene that had left behind the body of the most inexperienced among them, that of a setup by an extreme right-wing group, that of a political or secret service conspiracy to besmirch the Italian new left.

In my lecture that day, I analyzed the novels of DeLillo and Balestrini side by side, trying to define what was postmodern in DeLillo’s novel and asking whether we could also consider *L’editore* a postmodern novel. Certain characteristics of the work seemed to en-
courauge such an interpretation. One of these, for instance, was the plot that serves as the novel’s frame in which a number of friends and associates convene in a mountain resort villa to prepare a screenplay about Feltrinelli’s death. They discuss the various possibilities and compare explanations, perspectives, and recollections. Some characteristics of the novel that may signal its possible postmodernism are: the montage of fragments of conversation, documents, newspaper clippings, and random quotations; the actual writing technique, which presents such disparate material in a series of unpunctuated and uncapitalized prose units which nevertheless have a rhythm that builds up tension; the presence of some important literary subtexts, including the novel by Malcolm Lowry *Under the Vulcano*, which, by the way, was a great success when it was published in translation by Feltrinelli in 1964.

Yet the gist of my argument was that Balestrini’s work remained substantially modern, in the tradition of the modernistic avant-garde. The novel has a coherent structure, from the initial scene of the autopsy performed on Feltrinelli’s remains to the final scene of his funeral. In spite of the patchwork narration, the reader feels little bewilderment or disorientation. Instead, the overall effect is that of a multiplication of perspectives from which a tragic event can be represented. There is a set of values that remain firm and unchallenged, and it is on the basis of these values that Balestrini can speak out in favor of the political experiences of the Sixties and, especially, the Seventies. At one point, one of his characters says:

> The idea has been planted in the minds of almost everybody from the period that the early Seventies were a mournful and bloody period of history. But yet, come to think of it, we all remember that while the period was certainly dominated by harshness and tension, it was full more than anything else of vigor and joy and intelligence and passion.\(^6\)

Disagreeing with DeLillo’s idea that there are things in the world of Postmodernity that baffle all investigation and, thus, truths that are unattainable, Balestrini seems to rely on fundamental truths, to believe in the existence of certain great ideological narratives of the world and of history. While DeLillo’s narrator, the professional storyteller paid by the CIA, is busy in Washington trying to locate a decisive clue among the contradictory accounts, documents, and testimonies about Kennedy’s death, as well as trying to organize the directories and files that have been added over the years to the hard memory of a battery of computers, Balestrini’s characters (similar to Oliver Stone) actually believe that it is possible to write a screenplay for a movie that will represent the true story of Feltrinelli’s end. His characters, of course, are distracted by internal and external passions, torn
by philosophical doubts, led astray by frustrations, flirtations, false desires, bad literature, and mauvais maîtres. They are pressed and manipulated by mass culture, the media, and the cultural industry; yet they believe that the truth is there to be grasped and revealed to the public. In a surprise ending, a new piece of evidence for Feltrinelli’s death is brought to the reader’s attention: a transcript of a tape made the night of the accident and kept in some mysterious archive, by whom we do not know, proves that Feltrinelli was not alone on the scene.

After the lecture a rather heated debate took place, with most of my audience saying they did not see what all this fuss about postmodernism was; they certainly did not know what was so peculiar in DeLillo’s novel. (They had not read it, however; there was no Italian translation at the time.) As to what I had said about the phenomenon of the intertextuality that I presented as typical of many postmodern texts, they argued that this was a familiar device in European fiction, well-known as far back as Don Quijote.

After the lecture, I was taken by some colleagues, students, and friends to a restaurant. There, since the discussion was still going strong without any sign of reaching a conclusion, I made a final attempt to explain myself better: “Look—I said—I tried to give you an idea of what Postmodernism was by analyzing these two novels. I tried to summarize some of the discussions that are going on concerning this subject in the United States, Germany, and England. I quoted the by now famous definition of Umberto Eco in the introduction to the pocket edition of Il nome della rosa.” I was referring to the passage in which Eco says that it still happens, to all of us, even in the postmodern world, to fall in love, yet none of us dares to walk up to our beloved and say to her or him: “I love you,” since the expression “I love you” has been completely worn out by an assortment of bad movies, cheap literature, TV commercials, and TV serials. All we can do, in our postmodern condition, is walk up to our beloved and say: “If I were a character from a novel by Barbara Cartland, at this point I would tell you that I love you.”

“Well—I went on to say to my friends in that small restaurant—let me make a final attempt to explain myself and give you another example, which is probably more appropriate for this occasion. A few months ago—I told them—I was in Auckland, New Zealand. After a lecture, exactly like to-night, we went to a restaurant near the harbor. There, to my surprise, I was presented, in Auckland, New Zealand, of all places, with a perfect example of a postmodern restaurant. It was a large, square room, with walls, ceilings, lighting, and tables all very colorful (colors, you know, are very important: modernism was black and white; postmodernism is Ektachrome). On each of the four walls
of the square room there was a large kitchen window, where the wait-
ers went to place their orders. Each of the four windows offered a
different menu and different cuisine: Italian, American, Chinese-Thai,
and Japanese, each with its own specialties, each updated with a
touch of nouvelle cuisine. We could, combining the various menus,
make fanciful creations; we could, I might say, intertextualize our
dinners: have, for instance, some sushi with a ratatouillie à la provençal,
coconut soup with a pizza al pesto, and so on.”

This was the concrete example I gave my friends in the nice, old-
fashioned Italian restaurant in that university city in Italy. One of the
graduate students who was there, a very serious and thoughtful per-
son, could not help saying: “Oh, but that is terribly kitsch!” But, ah!—I
thought—he was terribly wrong. It was clear that he had not
understood what I had tried to say the entire evening. As we know,
one of the great transformations that have affected our cultural life
has come from the enormous expansion of the media and the en-
largement of the public, which is no longer distinguishable in cate-
gories such as high-brow, low-brow, or middle brow, but has been
transformed into an undifferentiated mass of consumers of cultural
products. In such a situation there is no room anymore for phenom-
ena like Kitsch or Camp, or, for that matter, even for phenomena such
as Baudelaire’s “hypocrite lecteur” or the avant-garde artist.

One of the most spectacular changeovers of the past few decades
has been exactly this. In the period of modernism we had, on one side,
artistic and literary elites, the avant-garde, and the movements of aes-
theticism, and, on the other, a vast bourgeois and petit-bourgeois
public which, unable to experience aesthetic qualities but eager to be
at least touched by what was presented to them as the beautiful, re-
sorted to the surrogate object, the bad reproduction, the false copy,
Kitsch. Conversely, in the period of post-modernism it is the artistic
and intellectual elite that reacts to the invasion and colonization of all
the territories of the aesthetic by the new products of popular culture,
all well packaged, expertly manipulated, and often based on the very
language and structure of the avant-garde. What the artistic elite does
in response is to isolate some of those products of popular culture, to
select ironically, those that have the greatest public success, like the
movie Casablanca or the rock star Madonna, and elevate them to the
category of the aesthetic, acclaim, and eulogize them, ultimately turn-
ing them into cult objects or, using what is today a fashionable term,
into icons.

It was clear that my naive but likeable interlocutor was clinging to
the modernistic idea of art; phenomena like cult or intertextuality
were clearly something alien and despicable for him, the whole busi-
ness of postmodernism was pure horror. His opinion, in fact, was shared by all the literary people at that table.

This is the problem I would like to consider here. How is it that Italy is, most likely, the country that has plunged into the age of Postmodernity with the greatest ease, or sprezzatura, second only to Japan (but then Japan is a miracle of its own: it has plunged into Postmodernity without even experiencing Modernity); how is it that in many areas of life, from architecture to interior design, from industrial design to fashion, from television shows to the most outrageous new life styles, Italy has been so ready to adapt to the new mood and has contributed so eagerly to fashion it; how is it that, on the other hand, Italian intellectuals and literary critics are so inflexible in their refusal to recognize the new trend and to give it some credit or simply to describe it?

This is a striking phenomenon. While in the United States, in England, France, or Germany there has been an immense crop of books on Postmodernity in all its possible facets (postmodern literature, postmodern sociology, postmodern politics, postmodern ethics, postmodern religion and so on—with an extraordinary output, I would contend, of irresponsible material, and of vain and silly theorizing, though there has been also some good and enlightening work), in Italy the term itself is rarely used in serious criticism or in explicit reference to cultural and literary history. There are of course the Italian architects, who have been among the first to use the term and launch the new fashion whether at the Centre Pompidou or the Musée D’Orsay in Paris or the new airport at Osaka. There are the interior decorators who have completely changed the look and atmosphere of Italian bars or coffee-houses, dressing them up in typical postmodern trappings not only in Rome or Milan but also in many provincial towns. There are a few groups of philosophers and semioticians, mostly pupils of Gianni Vattimo in Turin, Umberto Eco in Bologna, Mario Perniola in Rome, or connected with the center of semiotic studies in Urbino, who have paid attention to hermeneutical thought, that have invited Derrida or Rorty or Gadamer to their seminars, and have discussed the new transparent society, the return of the baroque style, and so on. And yet, in the main, Italian historians of culture and literature do not want to have anything to do with Postmodernity; they affect to despise it.

Before continuing, I should briefly explain my use of the word Postmodernity, instead of the more common Postmodernism. We must, I believe, make a careful distinction between Modernism and Modernity (or “die Moderne,” as the Germans would say), as well as between Post-modernism and Postmodernity. In the first case, we have to do with movements or clusters of movements—either cultural
or philosophical or artistic—with a process of awareness and the need to express this awareness as well as call others to share it: *il faut être moderne*. Futurism, or Zürich Berlin or Paris Dada, London Modernism, Parisian Surréalisme all expressed various forms of that awareness: people issued manifestoes and founded little reviews, wrote programs, organized meetings, they encouraged the forming or splitting of groups in several areas of experience and artistic expression. The same can be said of Postmodernism, as an architectural, artistic, or literary trend—although Postmodernism has never really taken the traditional shape of a movement: there is no longer room in our cultural world for manifestoes, avant-garde groups, or organized movements as such. Terms like Modernity or Postmodernity, instead, refer to historical periods, changes, and transformations that have taken place not in our awareness of them or in our ideologies, but in the material structure of a society, in its economic organization, in its modes of production, and therefore in the organization of work, the perception of time and space, of the human body and mind, the relations between the sexes, the family and community life, the conception of death—and also in the collective imaginary, that is to say, in the way people see themselves, assess their experiences and project their dreams and utopias, and represent them in stories, poems, pictures, and films.

I do believe that in the 1950s and 1960s a great historical change has taken place, at least in industrial or postindustrial countries. We have entered the new era of Postmodernity. We were probably slow in perceiving this and we responded with ideological passion, political turmoil, and enthusiasm, sometimes with cold anger. People of my generation have experienced, I believe, something very similar to what people felt at the great divide between the Eighteenth and Nineteenth century, people like Hegel or Chateaubriand, Stendhal, Wordsworth or F. Schlegel, Hölderlin or Foscolo, people who spent part of their life in one historical period and part of it in another. I have written an essay, half autobiographical and half historical, on this very subject, maintaining that the historical change has split my life, as well as that of my generation, in two: our bodies and our minds were violently joggled by the sudden change of pace, meaning, and shape. Some of us were quick to perceive and make sense of this (in my essay I singled out Roland Barthes, Italo Calvino, and Robert Altman; and I could have mentioned others, although not many); most of us were at a loss. The change was structural and went deep in the layers of society: we entered a new historical period. We have named it Postmodernity. The name perhaps was not well chosen; but we are stuck with it, and in any case the very difficulty of naming the thing is probably a part of its scope, intricacy, and elusiveness.
I agree almost completely with Fredric Jameson's interpretation of the historic change from Modernity to Postmodernity, dissenting from him only on one point. But it, I believe, is an important one that brings me back to the question of why the situation in Italy has been so contradictory. We have had, on one side, a general alacrity by the public to go along with the change, though there is a tendency among intellectuals, and especially among writers, critics, and students of literature, to resist and condemn the change. (There were similar responses at the beginning of Modernity, in the age of the Romantics.)

One possible reason for this resistance lies in a long and respected tradition of Italian literary culture that equates literature with rhetoric or style. There is a strong current of classicism that runs through the entire history of Italian literature, as well as an equally strong current of expressionistic and rebellious deviations from classicism. Both pay a large amount of attention to style. I do believe that writers from the expressionistic tradition conceive of literature as rhetorical craftsmanship parallel to, though different from, and possibly even stronger than those in the mainstream classical tradition. Such writers work busily on language and style, twisting, distorting, and jumbling literary language in order to create their own personal brand of expression. In their writing, the exponents of the expressionistic line adhere completely to the tradition of modern literature; they are akin to Joyce, more than to Borges. And it is probably their strong presence on the Italian literary scene of this century that accounts for the difficulty that Postmodernity has encountered in finding expression in Italian literature. The new age came with new and special thematic material, with new epistemological problems, with a tendency to eliminate, or to play with and manipulate literary canons, but expressionism had, one could say, already occupied the scene.

A few years back, in 1989, I had the chance to review in a daily newspaper the Italian translation of Fredrik Jameson's famous New Left Review article on Postmodernism, now part of his larger book on the same subject. While in agreement with most of what he said, I took issue with his attempt—quite natural in a critic whose models in literary history were not only Adorno or Benjamin, but also Lukács and Goldmann (or Hauser)—to identify a style that would be the dominant one in the age and was deeply related to, Goldmann would say homologous with, the particular social structures and prevailing ideologies of the time. One of the distinctions Jameson draws is based on a comparison between a famous Van Gogh painting representing a pair of Norman peasant boots, A Pair of Boots, and a painting by Andy Warhol of ballerina slippers, the Diamond Dust Shoes. The Van Gogh (which is famous in discussions of aesthetics because the German philosopher Martin Heidegger has written important pages on it in
his Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes) is supposed to be representative of the modern style, while the Warhol painting is supposed to be representative of the postmodern style. My strategy in the review consisted in bringing some other shoes into the discussion, in particular a famous photograph of the shoes of an Alabama farm worker taken by Walker Evans in the late Thirties, and an even more famous painting by René Magritte of two very uncanny shoes that are at the same time shoes and very human and disturbingly carnal feet. Jameson, an omnivorous reader, somehow got hold of my article as published in the not very widely circulated Roman daily, and, when he reprinted his essay in his 1991 book, quoted a few pages and responded to my objection:

Remo Ceserani expands this foot fetishism into a fourfold image which adds to the gaping "modernist" expressivity of the Van Gogh-Heidegger shoes the "realist" pathos of Walker Evans and James Agee (strange that pathos should thus require a team!); while what looked like a random assortment of yesterday's fashions in Warhol takes on, in Magritte, the carnal reality of the human member itself, now more phantasmic than the leather it is printed on. Magritte, unique among the surrealists, survived the sea change from the modern to its sequel, becoming in the process something of a postmodern emblem: the uncanny, Lacanian foreclosure, without expression. The ideal schizophrenic, indeed, is easy enough to please provided only an eternal present is thrust before the eyes, which gaze with equal fascination on an old shoe or the tenaciously growing organic mystery of the human toenail.10

Jameson's effort, I think, is brilliant and fascinating. Yet I am not convinced. I firmly believe we cannot rely on style differences in order to make cultural and historical differences, especially when we deal with a period-change of the magnitude of the one that has taken place in our world since the 50s and 60s—especially when one of the chief characteristics of postmodern literature is its tendency to manipulate, combine, and parody all sorts of styles.

It is its very lack of a style, this tendency at mixing and parodying styles that accounts, I believe, for the stubborn refusal of Italian literary critics and historians to recognize postmodern literature as literature. Even the practicing writers seem reluctant to take up some of the typical themes of the postmodern imaginary, because they fear they will be swept away and lose control of their literary style. It is not that there are no writers in Italy that could be called postmodern, or at least that use some of the typical modes and themes of postmodern literature in their writings. I would not include on the list Italo Calvino, however. While he is often included in American anthologies
and on reading lists for courses on Postmodernism, in my view he, as a writer, and a great one, belongs firmly to the tradition of modernity. Calvino was, to be sure, a keen observer of the inner movements and the structural transformations of our society, its culture, and its imaginary. With inexhaustible curiosity and an unusual openness of mind, he went to Paris to keep in touch with the *nouveaux philosophes* and the new critics, linguists, and rhetoricians. From his observatory as editor at the Einaudi publishing house and as a reviewer and commentator in a number of newspapers and journals, from *L’Unità* to *La Repubblica*, he kept abreast of the experiments in language and narrative technique of some of the most typical contemporary writers, some of whom can certainly be called postmodern, from Tournier to García Márquez, from Pynchon to Cortázar, from Barthelme to Pérec. He paid friendly attention to, and promoted the literary career of several young Italian writers such as Andrea De Carlo or Daniele Del Giudice—individuals who in one way or another tried to deal with some of the new themes, images, and representational modes. In his essays, especially those written to be delivered as the Charles Eliot Norton Poetry Lectures at Harvard, the *Lezioni americane (Six Memos for the Next Millennium)* left unfinished by his sudden death, Calvino singles out, with extraordinary perspicuity, some of the most important epistemological and anthropological problems of contemporary culture and identifies some of its imaginary modes: lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity, and consistency. Yet his frame of mind remained to the very end that of an enlightened intellectual whose experiments with narrative techniques and points of view were substantially those of high Modernism; Calvino’s conception of language was that of a transparent vehicle of communication.

Umberto Eco should of course be included on my list. He is certainly the author of two consciously postmodern novels. In *Il nome della rosa (The Name of the Rose, 1980)* and *Il pendolo di Foucault (Foucault’s Pendulum, 1988)* we encounter many of the typical themes and procedures of postmodern literature, from the indecipherability of international super powers, the widespread presence of intelligence agencies and conspiracy, to the decorative use of history, the manipulation of popular genres (the crime novel, the adventure romance), the parodic remake of a number of subtexts, and the representational use of computer lingo. Proof, if necessary, that Eco belongs among the Postmoderns comes from the response of Italian critics to his work: bewilderment for the novel’s world-wide success, envy for the money he received from it, and continuous chatter to the effect that he is no real writer, has no personal mark, writes in the neutral language of the modern essayist, and rewrites medieval texts in his own contemporary journalistic style.
Antonio Tabucchi is among the most successful, talented, and sophisticated Italian postmodernist writers. He is one of the few, among Italian contemporary writers who does not resent the label postmodern, although sometimes he might prefer to remain in the company of his high modernist model Fernando Pessoa. In many of his short stories and novellas Tabucchi shows he has deep understanding of the masters of the genre, from James to Kipling, and Stevenson to Conrad, and the great ability to make subtle intertextual use of their texts, as well as of such figurative texts as, for instance, the famous Velázquez painting *Las meninas*, also dear to Michel Foucault and many other practitioners of postmodern interpretation and such well-known movies (as those by Lubitch, Curtiz' *Casablanca* to those by Hitchcock). Together with Cortazar, Tabucchi is one of the few contemporary writers capable of revitalizing, within our culture and our system of communication, the nineteenth-century genre of the fantastic short story, especially in its psychological version. From that tradition he derives not only a particular narrative process, but also the tendency to combine the marvellous with the everyday and realistic, the fairytale mode with the humorous, tempering all these elements with a bit of nostalgia and literary playfulness. It is not difficult to find many of the typical features of postmodern literature in Tabucchi’s fiction: the themes of the double or the ambiguous personality, the consubstantiality of love and hatred, the experience of despair and solitude (in its Portuguese version of saudade), the importance of dreams, childhood fixations, and all the obsessions of literature, the open-ended plot that at times reverses itself and gets caught in a sort of Gödel’s knot (as in the short-story “Il gioco del rovescio”), the problematization of points of view and narrative perspectives, the nostalgic evocation of certain periods in recent history such as the Thirties, the Fifties, or the Sixties, the weakening or the multiplication of the subject. The protagonist of Tabucchi’s most recent novel, *Sostiene Pereira*, for instance, is at the same time a “strong” character with a well-developed subjectivity, a past full of memories, gratifications, and frustrations, as well as a narcissistic psychology and a “weak” character with a fragmented subjectivity, a double personality, various projections of the self, disguises, awkwardness, and indecision. Another interesting character in the novel, doctor Cardoso, a therapist both of the body and soul (a postmodern combination of dietician, sexologist, and psychologist, Masters and Johnson together with Deleuze and Guattari), illustrates to the protagonist, doctor Pereira, a curious theory, according to which human beings consist of a confederation of souls each of which is under the control of a hegemonic ego. It can however happen, in the course of our life, as it has happened to doctor Pereira, that all of a sudden a new ego, more powerful than any other, raises its head, de-
thrones the previous hegemonic ego, and takes control over the confederation of souls.

Some younger novelists of interest in this regard include Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Marco Bacci and Aldo Busi. Tondelli, with Altri libertinì and Rimini, has painted a postmodern fresco of the new ways of behavior, dress, dance, car driving, speech, and relationships among young postmodern Italians in the very peculiar settings of Emilia and Romagna, two regions of Italy that, in their own way of searching for amusements and extravaganza, figure as Italian imitations of California. Bacci, similarly, has written two very significant novels, Il pattinatore (1986) and Settimo cielo (1988), in which some of the epistemological problems of Postmodernism (the commodification of the historical past as opposed to our obsessive nostalgia for it, the manipulation of the language of dreams in the virtual space of the computer world) are explored with courage and intensity. In his more recent works, conversely, he has turned to other narrative modes and other problems. Busi, on the other hand, is a typical case of postmodernity in Italy. Some of the themes treated in his books, especially in his early novels Seminario sulla gioventù (1984) and Vita standard di un venditore di collant (1985), can be easily recognized as postmodern and derive from the familiarity he enjoys with much European and American literature (he has been a very active translator of contemporary novels). Yet, my impression is that his chief interest is with language, and especially with expressionistic distortions of languages and styles. In this Busi would belong to the tradition of linguistic expressionism, as practiced by Gadda or Folengo. Paradoxically, the most explicitly postmodernist enterprise on Busi’s part is his recent attempt to translate Boccaccio’s Decameron into modern Italian.

Strangely enough, it is easier to find traces of postmodern themes and representations in Italian poetry. This new trend is best demonstrated by a number of young poets, who in 1987 presented themselves under the ironic banner of a “Gruppo 93” (Group 93), a name that was meant to be a parody (with the digits reversed) of “Gruppo 63,” the avant-garde movement launched in Palermo in 1963. Behind the ironic name, there was a bit of a joke, as if these poets wanted to establish some distance from the worn-out practices of the avant-garde. We are so advanced, they seemed to say, that we are even ahead of history. And in fact, when the year 1993 actually came, these poets who gathered in Reggio Emilia together with many from the old generation in order to celebrate the anniversary of the year 1963, decided, having reached the fateful year, to dissolve the group.

The poets of “Gruppo 93” belong to different social and geographical realities. Their two most important journals, both small, are Altri luoghi, published in Genoa, and Baldus, published in Treviso, but with
an editorial board that includes poets active in Naples and Milan. Some of these poets are, I believe, quite talented, and would probably make both Fredric Jameson and Frank Lentricchia happy, since they can be considered part of a progressive Postmodernism. They are: Mariano Bàino, Biagio Cepollaro, Lello Voce, Marcello Frixione, Marco Berisso, Piero Cademartori, Paolo Gentiluomo, and Tommaso Ottonieri. They have had their difficulties in moving away from the old practices of the avant-garde. And they also have had their internal feuds, differences in programs and their external confrontations.\textsuperscript{18} What is significant from a sociological point of view is that most of these poets are students of poetry and rhetoric who have had professional training. Some are doctoral candidates working for their Ph. D., others are young professors in the high-school system or assistant professors in Italian universities. They work on the postmodern situation, representing the transformation of the world around us as well as inside us often with a critical distance and in an ironic vein. Their primary attention is for problems of language and diction. They are great experts at mixing language: not in the traditional expressionistic manner, but in a more light-hearted, playful, parodic one. Marcello Frixione prefers the poetic forms and images handed down from the tradition of baroque and Arcadian poetry. Marco Verisso goes back even further to the lyric poetry of Guinizelli or Cavalcanti in order to find models for representing the private feelings and actions of young men today who go to Berlin with a backpack on their shoulders, fall in love, watch the great Wall fall to pieces, and listening to rock music. Lello Voce exploits possibilities of written and oral language, all the memorable fragments of great poetry of the past and of radio commercials, in order to split his voice into many voices, and to multiply the resources of a curious, critical, and intelligent mind. Mariano Bàino, in order to celebrate the terrible power of death, translates poems by Góngora, Frénaud, and Vittorio Sereni into a Neapolitan dialect charged with a baktinian and carnevalskesque sense of life.

The area of contemporary Italian literature in which the themes and writing attitudes of the Postmodern are most easily discernible is that of satirical literature. I have in mind the production of some cartoonists and the creators of comic strips and stories (such as, for instance, \textit{Dylan Dog} by Tiziano Sclavi\textsuperscript{19}), as well as the narrative production of three writers who started as commentators, in a satirical vein, on Italian politics, on the Italian school system, or on the Italian intellectual milieu, but have then moved on to more ambitious narrative projects such as writing short stories, or novels, and parodying various genres (from science fiction to popular romance). Stefano Benni and Domenico Starnone are representative of this group. Benni is very successful when he writes, in a mimetic vein, parodies of the
writers of the past as well as of the contemporary world. Starnone, in turn, is good at sketching characters from everyday life. But he can also parody, in a novel on contemporary disasters (marriages breaking up, a brilliant career going to pieces, political commitments turning sour), the poetic language of Petrarch and Foscolo.

In spite of the visible success of some of the novelists and poets or of the satirical writers I have mentioned, the prevailing attitude toward the Postmodern in Italian literary circles is one of suspicion and general distrust. A recent translation of a good book by an English critic of urban life, David Harvey, entitled in the original The Condition of Postmodernity: an Inquiry in the Origin of Cultural Change, was titled by its Italian publisher, Il Saggiatore, La crisi della modernità, clearly to avoid the unpopular word Postmodernism. The majority of Italian critics remain attached to the idea of literature as expression and style: they seem not to realize that change has taken place and we cannot undo it, we can only try to understand it, represent it, and, if we are capable, parody and subject it to irony. To them, it would never be enough to say, adopting Rimbaud’s line, “Il faut être postmodern.”

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NOTES

* This is the text of the first in a series of three lectures delivered at Harvard University for the Lauro De Bosis Foundation on November 3, 1992. It has since been slightly revised, expanded, and brought up-to-date.


5 Nanni Balestrini, Vogliamo tutto (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1971).

6 Balestrini, L’editorie 125.


8 Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke UP, 1991).


I single out the novels published by De Carlo and Del Giudice from 1981 to 1985 that benefitted from Calvino’s support: *Treno di panna* (1981) and *Uccelli da gabbia e da voliera* (1982) by De Carlo; *Lo stadio di Wimbledon* (1983) and *Atlante occidentale* (1985) by Del Giudice. These novels elaborate some such interesting themes, such as narration and visibility, intracodal relationship between literature and moving pictures, the exactitude of science and the describability of the world in linguistic terms. The later development of these writers has taken several other turns.


I have analyzed some of their works in *Il romanzo sui pattini* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1990).


Two recent anthologies that contain texts, poetical programs, and critical comments give two different interpretations of the group’s work: *Gruppo 93. Le tendenze attuali della poesia e della narrativa*, ed. Anna Grazia D’Oria (Lecce: Manni, 1992) presents a balanced historical view and carries an introductory piece by Romano Luperini, editor of the journal *Allegoria* that stresses an allegorical interpretation, in the vein of Walter Benjamin, of the texts under examination and accepts, with caution, the definition of “critical Postmodernism” for the poets’ work; *Terza ondata. Il movimento della scrittura in Italia*, eds. Filippo Bettini and Roberto Di Marco (Milano: ES/Synergon, 1993), instead, stresses the continuity with the experience of the historical avant-garde, provides a leftist interpretation of the political stance of the group, and ultimately rejects the label of Postmodernism.

