Textuality and the Ends of Modernity

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> History reveals its "ironic" essence: interpretation and distortion, or dis-location, characterize not only the relation of thought to the messages of the past but also the relation of one "epoch" to the others
>
> G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity* (180)

Review-essay on Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*. Trans. and with an introduction by Jon R. Snyder. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

1. *INTRODUCTION*

While Gianni Vattimo does not embark upon the theme of weak thought [*il pensiero debole*] in his 1985 *Fine della Modernità* (now available in English), the context for his account of nonfoundational thinking is carefully set. Indeed, *The End of Modernity* can be regarded as a backdrop for this aspect of postmodernism that is now quite generally associated with Vattimo in Italy and increasingly in the English-speaking world as well. "Weak thought" is a kind of thinking that is set off against "strong thought"—rigid, prestructured, grounded, foundational thought. *Il pensiero debole* operates at the limits of those teleological, eschatological, metaphysical, and even transcendental modes of cognition that have become the groundworks of *modernity*. *Il pensiero debole* offers an ironized alternative and yet not a counterpoint to "strong

thought." "Weak thought" moves "strong thought" to its limits, delimits it, but does not substitute for it. *Pensiero debole* is "strong thought" radicalized, taken to its extremes, undermined by its own self-delimitations.

What one finds in *The End of Modernity* is a fully articulated reading of how Nietzsche and Heidegger—but also on occasion Adorno and Benjamin—account for a modernity that sets limits to the epochal notion itself. Modernity is identified, circumscribed, and enframed by the positions that Nietzsche and Heidegger announce. Like Nietzsche's "Madman" (proclaiming the death of God in the *Gay Science*) or like Heidegger's Rilke (announcing an end to the destitute time that his Hölderlin had already identified earlier in "*Wozu Dichter?*"), Vattimo's reading delineates the traces of modernity, setting a frame to itself. Thus the task of a reading of the end of modernity will necessitate an account of modernity and the *Verwindung* that affirms its self-circumscription. That the self-circumscription is developed in terms of Heidegger's notion of *Ge-stell* will require greater elaboration, and the function of this *Ge-stell* as setting the frame for a theoretical practice of textuality will have to be put to the test of even further scrutiny.

2. *MODERNITY*

What does Vattimo mean by modernity and why does he eschew the term "modernism"? Modernity is that acceptance of a concept of the new, of progress, of the individual mind or subject which exhibits its uniqueness in science, art, and religion. Modernity is reassuring, constructive, hopeful, meaning-laden, and reality-referring. When modernity is represented in novels such as those of Joyce, Woolf, and Kafka, its constitution is always with a view to showing *how* things are—as well as to *what* is shown in the showing. With modernity, there is an "outside," "external" world which is "out there" waiting to be described. With modernity, subjectivity constitutes itself as the other—other than objectivity and often other than itself. Alterity, alienation, self-objectification —these features of modernity abound in modern philosophy, literature, and science.

Modernism, in contrast to modernity, is a school of thought and artistic practice that goes beyond romanticism, realism, naturalism in favor of a futurist, cubist, stream of consciousness style of writing, painting, thinking. Modernism is the cult of the "new"; modernism goes in search of the shocking and the forward-looking; modernism is the very discovery of the twentieth century.

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1930s brought the recognition that the whole Cartesian-Kantian—and even Husserlian—program could not go on forever.

What Vico-Hegel, and later Foucault, were able to show was that modernity has inscribed within it the very limitation to its own success. The Vico-Hegel-Foucault complex is well aware that modern thought cannot be understood apart from narrative, poetics, and historicality. But the poetics of human history are necessarily interrupted at various stages—or what Vattimo calls "epochs." The Vico-Hegel-Foucault account remarks on the breaks, discontinuities, and thresholds that mark off the ages of human history. In this sense, however, it affirms many "ends," many places of termination, many moments of conclusion and reformation

The Deleuzean rhizomatic exuberance and the Derridean dissemination unmark any particular end as "the end." They distribute unevenly the multiplicity of ends into a variety of contexts, formulations, and discursive practices. They read "end" in many texts—all circumscribing the text of modernity. And these "ends" indicate places where "something new" will come to *replace* the old, *succeed* the old, *give new identity to* the difference that has inscribed itself at the end of a framework. But what they replace is not a rejection of the former, not a discarding of the old, not a new beginning, but rather a reinscription back into the old as that which is radically other than the old.

4. *The Inscription of Differences*

Somewhere between Nietzsche and Heidegger, and somewhere between the Vico-Hegel-Foucault complex on the one hand and the Descartes-Kant-Husserl lineage on the other, Vattimo inscribes the "end of modernity" thesis. The Descartes-Kant-Husserl genealogy identifies modernity with the subject-object dualism that eventually takes the shape of what Foucault calls an "empirico-transcendental doublet." The Vico-Hegel-Foucault complex finds that modernity only enters the scene in the eighteenth century—with Vico himself, with Kant. But the beginning of modernity carries with it its very end.

The frame of modernity is outlined and predetermined along with its very inception. Hence Vattimo's reading of Nietzsche is one that stresses the genealogical, epochal, and markedly colorful character of the modernist achievement. While the epochal colors are somewhat somber, patterned at twilight and sunset, Nietzsche's Zarathustra is often cognizant of brilliance and light.

Similarly—and in a moment of repetition—the movement of modernist Italian futurism and De Chirico's colorful shapes provide an image of Nietzschean modernity. And while the Schopenhauerian pessimism of an Edvard Munch and the social critique of a Max Beckmann are another side of the Nietzschean panorama, they are only that part that necessitates the call to the end of modernity.

The facets of modernity near its end are multiform and many-hued. Their display and distribution are their surfaces and dissemination. Between Nietzsche and Foucault, the moments of critique mark off the writing of difference as the Being of beings, as the ontological difference. Between them, end acquires an identity of its own, and that identity is "difference."

The Nietzschean appeal to a "revaluation of values" is the proclamation of an end, an epochal end, an end to which any successful *Übermensch* would have to be committed. Following Nietzsche's "death of God" proclamation, Foucault's picture of the "death of man" is perhaps only a displaced repetition. And yet both narratives are part of the inscription of the end of modernity.

What Vattimo inserts in between the Nietzsche/Foucault picture is the moment of Heidegger's *Verwindung*. For Vattimo, the inscribed moment is not so much an "overcoming" (*Uberwindung*)—as Nietzsche might insist—though this is also part of Heidegger's story, but a "getting over" modernity (a *Verwindung* of modernity). Modernity is like a wound that can be healed, a sickness that can be cured, an experience that can be brought to a conclusion. Heidegger's "overcoming" of metaphysics, his claims to the "end" of philosophy, and his assertions concerning the achievements of European nihilism all mark off the place where thinking needs to occur.

Heidegger's *Denken* will have to operate at the end of metaphysics. Out of the forgetfulness—(*Seins*)*Vergessenheit*—that accompanies the preoccupation with the ontic, Heidegger calls for a reinscription of the meaning of the Being of beings, namely, the ontological difference in which thinking inscribes itself. *Denken* names, calls, invokes the meaning of the Being of beings out of forgetfulness. Heideggerian *Denken* is both a return to the hitherto unthought and an end to the metaphysics that is devoid of thinking. Heideggerian *Denken* operates in a differential space. It is not comfortable with identities. Heideggerian *Denken* can only come into its own in the event of difference. *Ereignis*—which Vattimo discusses at length—is the event of appropriation, the happening

of what is ownmost in the ontological difference. Ontological difference—the meaning of the Being of beings—marks out an open space in which *Ereignis* comes into its own. *Ereignis* is the happening of difference, the event of difference, the appropriation of difference. And in that space of difference *Denken* takes place.

Vattimo's *pensiero debole* operates at the end of modernity, at that place of difference where a revaluation of values marks off the happening of *Ereignis,* where *Denken* becomes *pensiero debole.* Heideggerian *Denken* operates within a frame. Heidegger calls this frame the *Ge-stell.* The *Ge-stell* comes under many descriptions. It is sometimes called "a framework," as in the structure of something; sometimes it is a bodily form which gives shape to what it shapes; sometimes it is "technology," the forging into shape of that which would otherwise be shapeless; and sometimes it is a frame, as in a frame of a painting. For Heidegger, *Denken* cannot occur outside a frame, framework, or shape. Yet it also cannot be the determination of the content of what is framed. *Denken* requires difference, and difference needs to be enframed (as *Ge-stell*) in order for it to take shape.

For Vattimo, the *Ge-stell* marks off modernity, inscribes difference within the frames of modernity. For Vattimo, *Denken* operates in the event of difference, in the *Ereignis* of the ontological difference where there is silence, where the call of Being can be heard, but heard without sound. This hearing without sound is the hermeneutic *Verstehen* that both Heidegger and Gadamer extoll. *Verstehen*—hermeneutic understanding—occurs where difference is set by the *Ge-stell.* And the *Ge-stell* marks off where the event of the meaning of the Being of beings happens.

The *Ge-stell* is also where poetizing can occur—perhaps the other end of the poetizing that Vico had prophetically inscribed in his "new science." This poetizing is where modernity is brought to its ultimate achievement. As Vattimo points out, the achievement of poetizing is not an "overcoming" of modernity, but rather a *Verwindung* of modernity—Heideggerian poetizing is what happens in the ontological difference.

In setting its own limits, in marking off its margins, in textualizing itself, modernity, in the sense that it has come to fulfill for itself, is brought to its limits, brought to its end. Its foundations are shown to be foundations within a context, within a frame. At the ends of modernity, foundations are dislocated and displaced. Vattimo's idea of a postfoundational thinking—a *pensiero debole*—operates at the limits of those founded activities that reaffirm the modern. Where

Heidegger notes a falling away from the ground (the *Grund*), where he indicates an *Abgrund*, an abyss, there Vattimo becomes aware of the adventures of difference, there *pensiero debole* comes into its own, circumscribing, marking off, enframing, setting a *Ge-stell* for the *Verwindung*, the self-delimitation of modernity.