

**WHAT'S IN A NAME:
ON SOME HISTORIOGRAPHIC
CATEGORIES AND/IN
ITALIAN MODERNISM**

Luca Somigli

In introducing a special volume of the journal *Annali di Italianistica* on post-modernism in Italy, the editor Dino Cervigni noted the difficulty of dealing with a such a category from the perspective of a cultural tradition in which modernism remains at best a vague and underdetermined notion. Obviously, the question is not that Italian culture has not gone through a “modernist” phase – though the terms of that “Modernism” are precisely what needs to be addressed – but rather that the word, if not the thing itself, has had until recently very little purchase in the context of Italian arts and letters. In fact, it is arguably because of the “importation” of Post-Modernism first via the discourse of architecture, and then that of philosophy that it has been necessary to thematise in relation to what post-modernism can be said to be *post*. The “-ism” in post-modernism is a suffix traditionally linked in Italian cultural discourse to specific and localized phenomena like Decadentism, *Crepuscolarismo*, Futurism, Hermeticism, etc. – in other words, what Walter Binni would have called “poetics” – and the term itself has raised some eyebrows, since from the beginning “Post-Modernism” has been received as a more ambitious program, even, famously, a “condition,” rather than the merely artistic project of a group or school. The investigation of the relationship between this supposed condition and the cultural production that characterises it has led to conclusions somewhat familiar to scholars of Anglo-American

modernism. For instance, Romano Luperini's blistering attack of post-modernism, from a Marxist perspective not unlike that of Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Contradictions of Late Capitalism*, was founded upon a distinction between post-modernity as "a historical period, namely the age which began roughly forty years ago and which is characterized by the electronic and computer science revolution" and post-modernism as "the ideology and the artistic tendencies which accept the self-representation of post-modernity" (1993: 7). However, in his analysis of certain contemporary cultural products, such as the works of the poets associated with the journal *Baldus*, Luperini also suggests the possibility of a critical instance which uses the tools of post-modernity to break down its monologic discourse. Thus, Luperini's reading of post-modern culture recalls similar descriptions of modernism, which also emphasize its openness. Modernism, too, brings into focus the contradictions of modernity. Its celebratory dimension – most famously exemplified by what has been called Futurist "modernolatry" – is accompanied by a series of antagonistic and critical strategies which recent Anglo-American scholarship has brought into focus. For instance Marshall Berman in his volume *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* defines Modernism as "any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it" (1988: 5), while for Astradur Eysteinnsson modernism can be understood as "an attempt to *interrupt* the modernity that we live and understand as a social, if not 'normal,' way of life" (1990: 6).

This is not to say, of course, that the term "modernism" itself is foreign to Italian literary historiography and theory. Rather, what I want to suggest is that there have been historical reasons for its limited application, and that it is precisely because of its relative neutrality – its "foreignness" to the Italian tradition, if you will – that it can serve as a less ideologically charged term to define a range of cultural experiences between the turn of the last century and World War Two. In other

words, and to anticipate some conclusions, far from attempting to theorize “Modernism” as a monolithic notion, yet another of the many “-isms” already canonized by cultural history, we can see it as an “open” or “weak” epistemological category to access the constellation of cultural phenomena which reflect, in complex and contradictory ways, on the experience of modernity in Italy.

One must consider, first of all, the fact that in Italy, as in France, the term “modernism” was first introduced at the turn of the century to indicate the religious movement within the Catholic Church which sought to “democratize” its structures and, most importantly, suggested an ‘evolutionary’ view of dogma, which from their perspective was, as Dennis Mack Smith puts it, “not formulated once and for all, but could be expected to grow organically and change to suit the times” (202). Fiercely condemned by Pope Pius X in his 1907 encyclical *De modernistarum doctrinis*, which associated modernism with “the most blasphemous and most scandalous things that could be imagined from the perspective of Christian religiosity and tradition: [...] materialism, rationalism, atheism, anti-Catholicism and anti-Christianity” (Saresella, 1995: 74), modernism was nevertheless influential on Catholic intellectuals who sought a closer relationship with the social reality of their time. It is certainly possible to establish links between it and a broader literary “Modernism,” not only through such figures as the novelist Antonio Fogazzaro who were directly influenced by the debate within the Church, but more in general through the spiritual meditations of several writers of the period preceding the Great War, who saw both the necessity for a spiritual renewal after the crisis of nineteenth century Positivism and the loss of faith in the power of positivist science – and therefore also of its literary declensions, such as “Verismo” – but who were also unwilling to accept the institutional strictures of the Catholic church. It is in the light of a dialogue with the modernist instances of Catholicism that one can read the experience of writers such as Giovanni Papini, Piero Jahier or Scipio Slataper, for whom writing becomes the central moment in an ethical and moral

quest in which the Church represents a negative, repressive model, and in which the desire for a more intimate relation with one's fellow human beings is ideologically sublimated in the direction of nationalism or of a form of "regionalist" solidarity.

In order to suggest that a broader notion of modernism as a constellation may account for the diversity of the cultural production of the period under consideration, it is necessary to look at the ways in which it has been theorized by Italian literary historiography. The problem, it seems to me, is that the most influential or simply most common attempts to account for the cultural experiences between (to use two convenient sign-posts) Carducci's civic poetry and post-war Neo-realism have made recourse to overdetermined categories which have limited their range of application and have made it difficult to recognize the common roots of the various forms of cultural production of the period. Here I will consider the two most common historiographic categories, Decadentism and Avant-garde.

As Walter Binni noted in his highly influential study *La poetica del Decadentismo* (1936), by the 1930s the debate on the moral and ideological implications of the term "decadentism," clearly related to its etymological origins, had relented enough that it now seemed possible "to consider decadentism historically, to separate it from the abstract concept of decadence, to give it the same historical value that we give to 'romanticism.' Let us remember that even the term 'romantic' can be used to indicate a more or less pathological character" (1988: 6). His invocation of Romanticism was not casual, as at the time of his writing an established critical tradition considered Decadentism as an excessive manifestation of the most extreme aspects of Romantic individualism. According to Benedetto Croce, whose influence on Italian literary historiography was especially long-lasting on this issue, Decadentism was first and foremost one of the currents of contemporary art which precipitated the more general crisis of Romanticism. As he wrote in the entry on "Aesthetics" for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*,

The crisis of the romantic period [...] asserted an antithesis between *naïve* and *sentimental* poetry, *classical* and *romantic* art, and thus denied the unity of art and asserted a duality of two fundamentally different arts, of which it took the side of the second, as that appropriate to the modern age, by upholding the primary importance in art of feeling, passion and fancy. [...] Later, it was thought that the disease had run its course and that romanticism was a thing of the past; but though some of its contents and some of its forms were dead, its soul was not: its soul consisting in this tendency on the part of art toward an immediate expression of passions and impressions. Hence it changed its name but went on living and working. It called itself “realism,” “verism,” “symbolism,” “artistic style,” impressionism, “sensualism,” “imagism,” “decadentism,” and nowadays, in its extreme forms, “expressionism” and “futurism.”

As we can see, and as Matei Calinescu has convincingly argued in his *Five Faces of Modernity*, Croce makes an implicit distinction between a suprahistorical notion of “decadence,” denoting a general sense of decline in several realms of modern life (moral, political, religious, and aesthetic), and a historical Decadentism which, from being singled out as one of the post-romantic “-isms,” finally comes to include a whole range of artistic and literary movements later canonized as either modernist or avant-garde. Thus, Crocean thought casts its shadow over both acceptations of the term – the moral and the historical – and makes it difficult to disjunct them clearly.

The use of Decadentism as a period term has been such that an informed reader like Calinescu, in discussing Elio Gioanola’s 1972 study entitled precisely *Il Decadentismo* can say that it “might be taken by an English reader [...] as one more introduction to literary modernism” (1987: 219). And yet clearly this is not a perfect fit, if nothing else because it remains difficult to escape the value judgement

implicit in the term. Even Binni, the first advocate for the “historicisation” of the notion of Decadentism, cannot avoid this problem. Thus, his book concludes on what we might call an “optimistic” note, which serves at the same time to declare the experience of Decadentism finished. Montale and Ungaretti, the “new poets” who have learned and interpreted in a personal way the lesson of the “foreign poetics” of what we could call Modernism (from Baudelaire to Valery to Apollinaire), also consign Decadentism to history: The new poets “re-affirm the human values, the serene song, which brings them back to the core of our most intimate tradition. All we intend to do is to indicate the new period as the conclusion of decadentism and the birth of a new poetry – Italian, yes, but experienced, European” (Binni, 1988: 137). Aside from the fact that it sets up an implicit hierarchy of values in the experience of modern Italian poetry, this *caesura* between Decadentism and post-World War One poetry, and, in a further permutation, between Decadentism as an uncritical appropriation of European tendencies and the new poetry as its critical re-elaboration further conceals or denies the dialogic relationship which links the authors of so-called Decadentism to their successors and to the broader landscape of European modernism. Consider for instance the question of the poet’s role in bourgeois society: if Baudelaire had announced the loss of the “halo,” the auratic quality of the work of art and of its producer, Italian Modernism, from D’Annunzio to the *Crepuscolari* to the Futurists to Montale and Ungaretti and the hermetics can be read as the articulation of a series of responses to that crisis. The *crepuscolare* Guido Gozzano’s famous renunciation to the title of poet is certainly related to the loss of the social function of art and of the breach between the aesthetic and the praxis of life which, according to Peter Bürger, characterizes late nineteenth century Aestheticism. As he famously writes in “La Signorina Felicita, ovvero la felicità,”

Oh! Questa vita sterile, di sogno!
Meglio la vita ruvida concreta
del buon mercante inteso alla moneta,
meglio andare sferzati dal bisogno,
ma vivere la vita! io mi vergogno,
sì, mi vergogno d'essere un poeta!

(1977: 191)

Yet, this impossibility of assuming the role, the *persona* of the poet constitutes the direct link between – in Binni's terms – a decadent experience like that of *Crepuscolarismo* and its supposed overcoming in a poet like Montale, who in *Ossi di seppia* finds himself forced to admit the purely negative – and yet nevertheless necessary – role of the poet in modern society:

Non domandarci la formula che mondi possa aprirti
sì qualche storta sillaba e secca come un ramo.
Codesto solo noi possiamo dirti,
ciò che *non* siamo, ciò che *non* vogliamo.

(1984: 29)

Thus, Decadentism is problematic as both a historical category, because it parcels Italian literature at the turn of the century in such a way that it erases the complex relationship, between the pre- and the post-war period, of the different articulations of the question of the role of intellectual and literary labor and of the writer him/herself in modern society. It is equally as problematic as a conceptual/aesthetic category insofar as it involves a moral judgement on the validity of certain literary experiences which has traditionally functioned to repress them (this is the case of D'Annunzio).

The reference to Bürger above brings us to the second pole of our discussion, namely the Avant-garde. Here too we are confronted with a series of partially overlapping application of the term. "Avant-garde," of course, tends to project a certain cultural experience beyond the

borders of the national literary debate and to insert it in the context of a broader European phenomenon articulated in a series of movements which go from Futurism in Italy and Russia to Vorticism in England to Surrealism in France, and so on. But the notion of Avant-garde also entails a certain parsing of the literary landscape which is as problematic as that implicit in Decadentism. On the one hand, the notion of Avant-garde has been applied to those movements which have sought to break openly and overtly with the conventions of the literary traditions, and in particular, have confronted both the reification of language in bourgeois literature and the institutional roles constructed by the conventions of literary communication. Futurist *serate*, Dada *happenings*, Surrealist exquisite corpses etc. may entail the same sense of uncertainty as to “what is a poet” as the stanzas of Gozzano and Montale quoted above, but they also entail a radically different relationship with the institution of literature, as Bürger has explained clearly.

There is a further, specifically Italian, question that needs to be considered, given the fact that, within the Italian tradition, the historical avant-garde has been identified with the Futurist movement. Because of the links between Futurism and Fascism, and also as a result of the cultural hegemony of Neo-realism after World War Two, the notion of Avant-garde found itself eclipsed until it was recuperated by the Neo-avant-garde of the late 1950's and the 1960's as a specifically stylistic option. Therefore in Italy more than elsewhere the Avant-garde has been associated with a practice of writing which aims at deconstructing the formative and normative power of language, and which is carried out in particular at the level of expression. It cannot easily account, on the other hand, for all those cultural phenomena, especially in the wake of the Great War, which sought to establish a dialogic relation with tradition, or at least to mediate between the necessity to give formal expression to the sense of alienation and futility of artistic practice on the one hand, and the desire to recuperate in a critical fashion the cultural tradition. Thus, movements like

Hermeticism, *Novecentismo*, or metaphysical art and figures like Bontempelli, Savinio, De Chirico, and even Pirandello or Svevo, who live their relationship with the cultural tradition in neither the epigonistic mode of decadence nor in the rebellious fashion of the Avant-garde, but are nevertheless involved in a debate with both experiences, find themselves cut off from a general discourse on the characteristics of the culture of the first half of the century, or are simply recuperated (and Binni's reading of Ungaretti and Montale above is an example) as a return to traditional forms of aesthetic experience after the iconoclastic moment of the Avant-garde. In this latter construction, the "system-immanent critique" (to use Bürger's term) which opposes the Avant-garde to the traditional institutional sites which mediate between the work of art and its public is simply suppressed from the unfolding of literary history by re-establishing a continuity which by-passes the avant-garde and connects the new poetry of the post-war period to the lyrical tradition and, at best, to the less emphatic side of D'Annunzio and the more melodious strains of *Crepuscolarismo*.

The critical common-place that Futurism was responsible for an enormous amount of propaganda material – especially manifestoes – but for very few "important" works is typical of this inability to read the key moment of the avant-garde in terms of its own challenge to the institution of aesthetics: the separation between art and life which Futurism repeatedly called into question is precisely what is reasserted through the very gesture of distinguishing between the work of art and the act of propaganda, the aesthetic object to be contemplated and the "event" (the *serata futurista*, the concert of noise-tuners, the pamphleteering activity) which brings the audience into the performance and exchanges the place of the receiver with that of the producer. But, as was well known by those artists who, after the Great War, indeed sought to re-establish a seeming and suitable distance between the artist and the public, between the sphere of the aesthetic and the praxis of life, the work of restoration cannot simply be a matter

of returning to the Pre-avant-garde tradition, but must also involve an engagement with the practical and theoretical questions raised by the Avant-garde itself. It is significant, of course, that the return to order should be carried out, in many instances, by artists who had gone through the experience of the Avant-garde. For the generation that came to intellectual maturity during the war, a confrontation with the Avant-garde, in one of its configurations, was unavoidable, whether that meant militancy in Futurism (from Palazzeschi to Sironi to Bontempelli) or a loose affiliation with “-isms” still on the margins of the national culture like Surrealism (Savinio or De Chirico) or, quite simply, the adoption of techniques mutated from the Avant-garde itself (for instance, Pirandello). Bontempelli acknowledged as much in a programmatic essay in his journal *900*, when he wrote regarding the Futurist leader F. T. Marinetti:

Marinetti has conquered and bravely holds some very advanced trenches. Behind him I was able to begin building the city of the conquerors. Obviously, the trench is more “advanced,” but not everybody can go and live there. (1974: 25)

The work of reconstruction of the post-war *ritorno all'ordine* can thus be understood both as a response to the Futurist challenge to the aesthetic on the one hand and as an attempt to translate the Futurist destructive elan into a constructive program on the other. The success of Fascism, whose rise accompanied the *ritorno all'ordine*, was due, among other things, to the fact that it was able to do precisely what the avant-garde had sought to do, namely to close the gap between art and life by aestheticizing the everyday, and to eliminate the antithesis between producer and recipient by turning each individual into an extra on the stage of the spectacles of the regime. But, and this is its original move, it was also able to appropriate the anti-institutional discourse of the Avant-garde and to mediate it with that of its moderate epigones.

By adopting the notion of Modernism as it has developed in the critical debate on the cultural crisis of modernity, I suggest that it is possible to articulate a broader and more complex understanding of the period under study. If we understand modernity as the ground of formation of epistemes of knowledge centered around the Enlightenment categories of reason, social emancipation, and scientific progress whose beginnings can be found in the eighteenth century and culmination in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Modernism then can be considered as the network of cultural responses – at times openly antagonistic, at others characterized by a much greater ambiguity towards modernity itself – which reflect upon, react to, and seek to articulate alternatives to the triumph of the institutions of modernity. Modernism thematizes a series of issues that are central to an understanding of the culture of the period, such as the relationship between the artist and the institutions of culture; the relationship between the artist and tradition and the question of cultural memory; the role of the sacred, the mythical, and the metaphysical *vis-à-vis* the positivist discourses of modernity; the status of technology within modern society and its effect on the production, circulation, and reception of the work of art; the tension between the homogenizing power of modernity and the persistence of local cultural traditions; the emergence of the counter-discourses of marginalized groups questioning the coherence and unity of modern culture; the rejection of realism and the emergence of new modes of representation. Modernism thus allows us to bring into significant relation experiences which have been traditionally kept separate in Italian criticism, but it also makes it possible to show the links between the various manifestations of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Italian culture and the more general European context.

University of Toronto

** The present paper is part of the introduction to a volume of essays on Italian Modernism which I am co-editing with Mario Moroni. I thank Prof. Moroni for his many insightful suggestions. I also thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Connaught Fund for their financial support of my research.*

References

- Berman, Marshall 1988 *All That Is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Penguin
- Binni, Walter 1988 *Le poetica del Decadentismo*. 1936. Firenze: Sansoni.
- Bontempelli, Massimo 1974 *L'avventura novecentista*. Ed. by Ruggero Jacobbi. Florence: Vallecchi.
- Bürger, Peter 1984 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Trans. by Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Calinescu, Matei 1987 *Five Faces of Modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Cervigni, Dino 1991 "The Modern and the Postmodern: An Introduction". *Annali d'italianistica*, 9: 5-31.
- Eysteinson, Astradur 1990 *The Concept of Modernism*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Gozzano, Guido 1977 *Poesie*. Ed. by Giorgio Bárberi Squarotti. Milan: Rizzoli.
- Luperini, Romano 1993 "Bilancio di un trentennio letterario (1960-1990) e ipotesi sul presente". In: *Scrittori, tendenze letterarie e conflitto delle poetiche in Italia (1960-1990)*. Ed. by Rocco Capozzi and Massimo Ciavolella. Ravenna: Longo: 7-16.
- Mack Smith, Denis 1997 *Modern Italy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Montale, Eugenio 1984 *Tutte le poesie*. Ed. by Giorgio Zampa. Milan: Mondadori.

Saresella, Daniela 1995 *Modernismo.* Milan: Editrice
Bibliografica.