Modo, Moment, and Modernity

Gianluca Garelli  
Università degli Studi di Firenze

gianluca.garelli@unifi.it

ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to investigate the complex relationship between literature, as an artistic form, and the very notion of modernity. As the literary is often found mingling in the maze of mythology, it also brings about some questions concerning modernity’s stance toward tradition. These will be argumentatively developed starting with Plato’s first definition of the all-deciding relationship between language and myth. I will then follow the path of the philosophical thematization of literature up to literary modernity, modernism and postmodernism. Finally, I will contextualize the issues of modernity within the broader notion of time and point to the specificity of the Western-Christian understanding of modernity as linked to an always present idea of occasion.

KEYWORDS. Plato; Myth; Modernity; Postmodernism; Time.

* Correspondence: Gianluca Garelli – Dipartimento di Lettere e Filosofia, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Via Bolognese, 52, 50139 Firenze, Italy.
1. A case of apparent death

The tenth and final book of Plato’s *Republic* wraps up with the narration (*apologos*) of a myth. The story of one valiant man is there recounted:

Er the son of Armenius, a Pamphylian by birth. He was slain in battle, and ten days afterwards, when the bodies of the dead were taken up already in a state of corruption, his body was found unaffected by decay, and carried away home to be buried. And on the twelfth day, as he was lying on the funeral pile, he returned to life and told them what he had seen in the other world [*Republic*, 614b].

Newly awaken from seeming stillness, once he regains consciousness, Er describes what awaits human souls after passing away. The message of truth he presents, which is supposedly also lurking in the deepest of each human being, sounds as follows: each one of us is, to a certain extent, responsible of their own destiny (*daimon*). «Your genius will not be allotted to you», he says, «but you will choose your genius [...]»; the responsibility [*aitia*] is with the chooser – God is justified [*anaitios*]» [*Republic*, 617d-e]. And further on:

Even for the last comer, if he chooses wisely and will live diligently, there is appointed a happy and not undesirable

---

1 The contraction *Republic* refers to: *PLATO* 1921.
existence. Let not him who chooses first be careless, and let not the last despair [Republic, 619b].

The relation between mythical language and logical rationality in Plato is too wide a topic to be properly handled here. However, what can be said is that, clearly, Plato’s predilection for dialogues can be linked to the versatility of this literary medium and its ability to provide an aesthetic supplement wherever the discussion defies the linearity of logical discourse – that is to say, precisely, when the most delicate philosophical questions come to the fore. Without the shadow of a doubt one could also say that the final pages of the Republic touch upon matters of extreme delicacy: the cycle of death and rebirth; the relationship between fault and destiny; the nature of time; the link between reminiscence and soul’s transmigration. According to one great interpreter of Plato’s philosophy, nowadays possibly no longer mentioned enough in the scholarly literature, the philologist and philosopher Julius Stenzel (1883-1935), the core of the myth of Er lies in «the connection of freedom and necessity for the rising and shaping of human individuality»². One should be careful here, though. Contrary to the usual function Plato assigns to memory, Stenzel remarks, in this myth «the direction of anamnesis is inverted: in order to act appropriately in pre-existence» – in other words, in order to choose correctly the kind of life one is about to live – «one needs the memory of this worldly life», that is of the existence one has just concluded³. This is why it is only thanks to the memory of this world, «based on their experience of a previous life» [Republic, 620a], that one can seize in the afterworld the instant of authentic decision and achieve the supercelestial choice of one’s character and vocation. In the afterworld the souls are allowed to remember, to a certain extent, their previous experiences. However, before being reborn to this worldly life – before, that is, reincarnation – they have to drink from the river Amelete’s water, the beverage of oblivion. Here as well their wisdom is

---

² Stenzel 1928, 181.
³ Stenzel 1928, 181.
tested, as the amount of water swallowed reveals how much they can resist the urge of thirst, and thus depends on their endurance to the temptation. Hence their ability, in their future life, to remember their hyperuranious origins, and the inclination to open up to that sudden enlightenment which is the lighting up of the soul to the light of truth. As is well known, this bright image originates from what a controversial passage of the *Seventh Letter* says about philosophy:

> For a matter of that kind cannot be expressed by words, like other things to be learnt; but by a long intercourse with the subject and living with it a light is kindled on a sudden, as if from a leaping fire, and being engendered in the soul, feeds itself upon itself [*Letter VII, 341c-d*].

Since late antiquity, there has been no shortage of scholars who spotted a contradiction between the idea of an original choice, as presented by the myth, and the overall educational program of Plato’s *Republic*. As, for instance, Plotinus remarks: «But if the presiding Spirit [*daimona*] and the conditions of life are chosen by the Soul in the overworld, how can anything be left to our independent action here?» [*Enneads, III.4.5*].

Such a choice would indeed appear to predetermine all mundane actions and thwart the validity of any philosophical programme. However, any attempt to bind the myth of Er to its contradiction, demanding from it the same linearity of purely logical reasoning, runs the risk of entirely missing its point. It is true, in fact, that the myth hints heavily – by means of symbolic language – to the idea that each behaviour ultimately depends on those who act and not (at least, not only) on one’s destiny, chance, or external circumstances. Nevertheless, one could hardly concede that *aitia* («cause») entails *hamartia* («fault» or «guilt»). Rationality tends indeed to altogether reject the idea that guilt resides in the seeming innocence of birth. A paradox worth

---

4 The contraction *Letter VII* refers to: *Plato* 1851.
5 The contraction *Enneads* refers to: *Plotinus* 1956.
6 See *Trabattoni* 2014, 19-21.
exploring lies here and reasoning alone is not enough to solve it. As it has been remarked, «at the sources of ethics (according to Plato’s teachings in the myth of Er) lies the acknowledging that the world I happen to be living in, although I certainly did not choose it myself, it is “my” world and therefore I carry its weight to the point that whatever happens in it happens as if it was me who wanted it»⁷. The moral of the story can be thus explained:

Virtue [areté] is free, and as a man honours or dishonours her he will have more or less of her; the responsibility is with the chooser [Republic, 617e]

(please note that «the chooser» is here an aorist participle (heloménou), that is to say by definition the most indeterminate tense available).

2. «To nyn», what is «now»

When it comes to the paradoxes of temporality, even the logos is bound to face solution-defying aporias. Let’s for instance read what Aristotle writes in the Physics about to nyn, what is «now» (Physics, 218b; 220a)⁸. As Anthony Kenny – to whose work my account is heavily indebted – has remarked, Aristotle «seems to use it for two different purposes: one, the most natural usage, to indicate present time; another, more technical one, in which it seems to mean “instant” or “moment”», thereby «one can speak of earlier and later nows».⁹ Such an ambiguity leads however to potentially equivocal consequences. It happens in fact that Aristotle himself mixes up the two meanings of nyn:

We say “earlier” and “later” with reference to distance from the now; and the now is the boundary between the past and the future [...]. But “earlier” is used in opposite ways in respect

---

⁷ Givone 2000, 74-5.
⁸ The contraction Physics refers to: Aristotle 1983.
⁹ Kenny 2004, 188.
to past time and future time: in the past we call earlier that which is further from the now, and later that which is nearer to the now; in the future we call earlier that which is nearer to the now, and later that which is further away [Physics, 223a].

In this passage Aristotle seems to rely on a notion of “the present instant”, which is however a somewhat conflicting hybrid. While “present” makes reference to a given period of time – in the way we say, for instance, “the present century” –, “instant” is but the limit of those periods. If a given interval of time is located in the past, it is delimited by past instants; if it is located in the future, it is delimited by future instants. But, to be rigorous, as Kenny states, present periods – or intervals of time – cannot be delimited by present instants, but rather only by one instant in the past and one in the future. The paradoxical consequence of all this is that one should after all give up on the idea of an «instantaneous present».

Interestingly, this very declination of the topic of continuum is translated by the core of modern philosophy into a pointed correspondence between chronology and topology. According to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, time and space are modes of transcendental knowledge applied to sensibility, in short, the pure forms by means of which the I arranges phenomenically the data coming from the inner sense – time as the sequence of consciousness’ content – and the outer sense – space as the position of things in the world. However, since inner intuition, that is time, as such «has to do neither with shape nor position», for us to grasp its essence an analogy is in order:

We represent the time-sequence by a line progressing to infinity, in which the manifold constitutes a series of one dimension only; and we reason from the properties of this line to all the properties of time, with this one exception, that while the parts of the line are simultaneous the parts of time are

---

10 Kenny 2004, 188.
always successive\textsuperscript{11}.

Elsewhere Kant clarifies that the sequence of instants – that is to say the time marked by chronographers – can and even must be exemplified as continuous spatial quantity.

We cannot obtain for ourselves – he says – a representation of time, which is not an object of outer intuition, except under the image of a line, which we draw, and […] by this mode of depicting \textit{[Darstellungsart]} it alone could we know the singleness of its dimension\textsuperscript{12}.

The time line is everywhere thick, homogeneous, and infinite.

3. A case of homonymy

Ironically, but not unluckily, \textit{Er} (“He” in German) is also the name of the main character in Franz Kafka’s \textit{Notes from the Year 1920}. This is possibly just a strange case of literary homonymy (but could we ever be sure?). Whatever the case, among these Notes one can find an apologue under the title \textit{Er}, which runs as follows:

He [\textit{Er}] has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both. To be sure, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment – and this would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet – he

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Kant} 1953 [1787], A 33/B 49-50, 77.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Kant} 1953 [1787], B 156, 168.
will jump out of the fighting line [Kampflinie] and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other\(^\text{13}\).

By animating the time line – we cannot but remember here, no offence to the great novelist, the adventures of the master comics *The Line* (La Linea), created in 1969 by Osvaldo Cavandoli and then acclaimed all around the world – the apologue explores the topic of the present, understood as contact point between two opposite-direction vectors, otherwise bound to cancel each other out. It seems that Er might tire himself out in this gap; he would like to at least once break free from the impasse he finds himself in, but he is given no opportunity to do it. What on earth could he do? Should he try to make peace with his condition? Should he acknowledge the rationality of reality and bring time back to the concept, as Hegel would have it? Or should he rather try and bend the line with superhuman effort into the circle of eternal return, in the illusion to transform each “it was” instant into a “but thus would I have it”, as Nietzsche would recommend? For those who take their fight on that fine line, even the most sophisticated solutions in the philosophical arsenal might seem of dubious practical value, not much more real than the «dream» of «a night darker than any night has ever been yet».

### 4. Jest, entertainment, addiction

Although almost a century has elapsed since the drafting of Kafka’s *Notes*, something about Er’s situation keeps sounding terribly familiar. Whereas much of the debate on modernity and post-modernity seems to have lost most of its theoretical edge, the world surrounding us features increasingly and unprecedentedly fast changes. On a macro

\(^{13}\) F. KAFKA 1946, 246-7 (the English version is here slightly modified, according to the interpretation offered by Hannah Arendt: see below).
level, the technological acceleration we are witnessing – not necessarily in a leading role, and often not as entirely aware or consenting actors and consumers – produces the unprecedented and almost unlimited possibility to exchange information, based on which the globe appears to be pierced throughout by countless modes of virtual communication. As a result, our image of the world is now mainly made of immediately accessible images, short messages, flash news. All of these qualify as signs and information carriers whose continuous flow and instant decrypting make \textit{ipso facto} all the traditional channels of transmission of knowledge obsolete. Evidence suggests that we are facing «an unprecedented shift in the cultural transmission paradigm», where «the canon […] undergoes a radical transformation: a change subverting codes and channels in the transmission of tradition and its sense»\textsuperscript{15}. In reference to what the Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han has recently called the society of psychopolitical control\textsuperscript{16}, the real challenge is then to understand whether and how an authentic space of freedom is at all possible for a subject shaped less and less by cultural memory and reflexive thinking and more and more by instant communication and immediate response. Existence is hot on everybody’s heels and no distraction is allowed.

To be precise, one should say, on the contrary, that some distraction is indeed allowed and even required in order not to succumb to the tension of conflict. Some problems arise, though, when we discover that Er or anyone else on his behalf – it should be clear by now that we have left behind any literal interpretation of Kafka’s text – might not be able to do without it. Distraction is advocated in the name of self-care and intense-fight coping mechanisms\textsuperscript{17}. Clearly not contenting itself with the financial side of things, late-capitalism rationality branches out into the discipline of bodies and minds and its masterly crafted devices urge us to mostly manage ourselves in the mode of company

\textsuperscript{14} See \textsc{Casati} 2013.

\textsuperscript{15} \textsc{Vercellone} 2017, 7.

\textsuperscript{16} \textsc{Han} 2017.

\textsuperscript{17} See \textsc{Garcia} 2016.
management and live the others in the mode of competition\textsuperscript{18}. In the long term, some help appears entirely justified. Even the most harmless entertainment might then turn into an addiction and have a sedative effect on us, which «takes away our humanity instead of restoring it to us»\textsuperscript{19}. As a result, protecting that simple interval on the continuous and relentless line of time that is our own vital space ends up translating into a series of deadly options that are all forms of annihilation. The novel \textit{Infinite Jest} by David Foster Wallace provides an extraordinary, yet terrifying description of all of this:

Feeling the edge of every second that went by. Taking it a second at a time. Drawing the time in around him real tight. Withdrawing. Any one second: he remembered: the thought of feeling like he’d be feeling this second for 60 more of these seconds – he couldn’t deal. He could not fucking deal. He had to build a wall around each second just to take it\textsuperscript{20}.

5. «\textit{In te, anime meus, tempora metior}»

As is well known, philosophers have often fiercely opposed the mechanist and linear understanding of time. On different accounts, both Martin Heidegger and Henri Bergson rank, among others, in this group. Heidegger attempted to account for the relation between \textit{being} and \textit{time} (the hendiadys providing the title to his unfinished major work from 1927) in reverse terms compared to what above has been presented as Hegel’s strategy. According to Heidegger, it is the concept in its finitude that must be brought back to time, giving up any claim of absoluteness as well as all cancelling effect. Bergson instead has emphasized how the \textit{élan vital} corresponds to a specific temporality understood as duration, which cannot be reduced to chronography, this latter being modelled on the needs of mechanics and serving well

\textsuperscript{18} See for instance \textsc{Dardot \& Laval} 2014.
\textsuperscript{19} See \textsc{Dreyfus \& Kelly} 2011, chapter II: «David Foster Wallace’s Nihilism», 31.
\textsuperscript{20} \textsc{Wallace} 1996, 859-60.
the purposes of natural sciences. At the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, then, both philosophers, despite their very different premises, ended up agreeing on the fact that a thorough rethinking of the nature of consciousness – that is the function recording and bearing testimony to the present time – was required in order to offer an historically up to date diagnosis of their time. One could argue that they both still had to deal so to speak with Aristotle’s impasse. It is also significant, in my opinion, that both authors, despite their very different approaches to the matter, felt the need to investigate the difficult encounter between the Greek-Latin classical heritage and the Jewish-Christian religious experience as taking place in the early centuries of the common era. And as anyone starting on a time-related journey in our tradition, they landed on the radical pages written by Augustin on the topic.

The late antiquity dilemma on time is fundamentally twofold: Based on Greek philosophy categories, how to read the paradox of the creation of the world from nothing? And, in the light of classical thinking, how to explain the outrageous novelty of Christianity? Before creation, Augustin claims, there were neither «before» nor «after». If we want to talk about such things we need to be aware of forcing our language to grasp, by means of analogy so to speak, the divine eternal present. When no created thing was there yet, the Logos resided firmly in the Father. And in such a situation it is hard to even imagine the temporal flowing (\textit{rhema}, \textit{verbum}) which defines discourse. Something beyond human understanding. «For what is time? Who can easily and briefly explain it?», Augustine asks [\textit{Confessions}, XI, 14.7]\textsuperscript{21}. «If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks me, I do not know». About time, what we are most familiar with, are its three dimensions: past, present, future. And yet, by definition the past is no longer and the future not yet. Hence the only real dimension should be, to be rigorous, the present. However, the present, if it stayed such, would not qualify as time, but rather as eternity. What’s more – as previously anticipated by quoting Aristotle

\textsuperscript{21} The contraction \textit{Confessions} refers to: AUGUSTINE 1955.
one hour is made of fleeting moments. In its constant flowing, the present instant shows no consistency, as if it was only an \textit{atom} of time, an indivisible portion of it. But then again, an instant without before nor after, without past nor future, has no duration. It simply does not exist \([Confessions, XI, 15.20]\).

In facing these aporias, Augustin performs a crucial move: from measured time – the one of hourglasses and sand glasses, but also of analogical clocks with hands and digital clocks with liquid crystals and led displays – to lived time, from epistemology to psychology and theology. By always flowing identical to itself, time reveals itself only in the form of dissipation. One could say it actually never \textit{is}. Past is no longer, future is not yet, and the present is but an unextended fraction between past and future. Still, if things exist and last a little, it is because they can hold what is before and what is after in a shape, however fleeting that might be. In their finitude, things imitate the mode of existence of eternity, compared to which what «we call time \([chronon]\)» is but «a moving image \([eikò kineton tina]\)» \([Timaeus, 37d]\)\textsuperscript{22}. All this because our spirit is able to make so that – through memory, will and hope – the past is still and the future is already. Memory, intelligence, will, that is to say our soul’s faculties – Augustine says in the \textit{De Trinitate} – mirror the three divine Persons and with them the economy and internal relations of the Trinity, always in the finite mode of human beings though. Precisely as God can create and give consistency to things, the soul is so to speak able to keep them safe (for a while). Time is then a mysterious «extendedness [...] of the mind itself \([distentionem [...] ipsius animi]\)»: «It is in you, O mind of mine, that I measure the periods of time» \([Confessions, XI, 26.33; 27.36]\).

6. All that is the “case”

When it comes to memory, we do not always remember that the word “modern” comes from the Latin \textit{modus} – which means among other

\textsuperscript{22} The contraction \textit{Timaeus} refers to: \textit{PLATO} 1892.
things “fashion”, “manner”, “measure” – and from the corresponding adverb modo – which means “now”, “in this moment”, “currently”. Incidentally, the Italian moda (“fashion” in English), notoriously stands from the current manner or way of wearing clothes and accessories, in other words the adoption of a given more or less widespread habit (héxis, habitus). In the main European languages, starting in the 18th century, the noun form of “modern” has developed a so to speak reflexive meaning, based on which the current era self-defines itself by contrast to the “ancient”, thus laying claim for its novelty. It is not by accident, for instance, that the telling noun Neuzeit (“new time”), in German, is just another way to refer to modernity as an epoch.

For the purposes of my contribution, the previous etymological remark allows us to tackle, in conclusion, the centuries-old consequences of the Christian novitas, to which Augustin, as previously anticipated, tried to supply an answer. The appropriate temporality here is not that of aión (aevum), that is to say a portion of becoming with a beginning and an end; nor that of chronos with its sequence of atomically distinguishable instants. The time of the event finds instead a better match in the word kairós (the right and opportune moment) – already in use in classical Greek23, but particularly perspicuous in the usage of Mark the evangelist, in expressions such as peplerotai ho kairós (“the time is fulfilled”) (1.15). In reference to the apocalyptic tone of this statement, it is worth remembering that here “apocalypse” does not mean the end of time, in the sense of the suppression of future, but rather – once more, etymologically – “unveiling”, “revelation” (Offenbarung, in the German literal translation coined by Luther). It is not then the beginning of a new time, but rather the (potential) beginning of a new version of time.24 In this respect the disappointment of the early Christian communities for the parusia to fail to take place acquires a whole new meaning. By refusing to conform to the straight line unidirectionally

---

23 According to François Jullien, ancient Greeks tried to think the kairós («occasion», that is the right, opportune moment) between téchnē (control and mastery) and tyche (chance): see for example JULLIEN 2005.

24 On this topic, see CULLMANN 1964 [1946].
stretching toward infinity, as well as to the circle of mere cyclical repetition, the temporality of kairós implicitly entails, in fact, the possibility for the Western (occidentalis) civilization not to be understood – as established accounts of the history of philosophy tell us – as either the land of unlimited progress or the crepuscular culture of sunset (occasus solis), and be presented, to the contrary, as the civilization of occasio, of the event, finally able to escape to some extent from the slaughter – as recorded by pagan mythology – father Chronus makes of his creatures.

That the apocalyptic line does not affect narrow particularisms only is suggested also by the fact that it seems to convey a piece of good news for Er, the laboured character of Kafka’s Notes. In the Premise of an eloquently titled book, Between Past and Future (1961), and then also in her last contribution, the unfinished masterpiece The Life of the Mind (1975), Hannah Arendt – who highly praised Kafka’s pages – insists at length on the dimension of the present as the unavoidable condition of the very spiritual activity of human beings, which Arendt calls thinking. After all, those forces would not conflict if Er did not stand in their way: «It is the insertion of man with his limited life span that transforms the continuously flowing stream of sheer change [...] into time as we know it».25 Hence «his fighting has not been in vain, since the battleground itself supplies the region where “he” can rest when “he” is exhausted». In the present instant, Arendt continues,

In this gap between past and future, we find our place in time when we think, that is, when we are sufficiently removed from past and future to be relied on to find out their meaning, [...] never arriving at a final solution to their riddles but ready with ever-new answers to the questions of what it may be all about.26

References


Clarendon.


