

Dónde los fuertes muros que allanaron,  
Dónde el Árbol de Adán y el otro Leño?  
el presente está solo. La memoria  
Erige el tiempo. Sucesión y engaño  
Es la ruina del reloj. El año  
No es menos vano que la vana historia  
Entre el alba y la noche hay un abismo  
De agonías, de luces, de cuidados:  
El rostro que se mira en los gastados  
Espejos de la noche no es el mismo.  
El hoy fugaz es tenue y es eterno;  
*Otro cielo no esperes, ni otro infierno.*

## Lasting and ephemeral

Humanity has always tried to overcome its irremediable finiteness. «One day's beings, shadow dream, man» said Pindar, using the word *epámeroi* (of a day, *epí heméra*). Man, thus, is transitory, fluid, of the same matter as time in which he lives. And if time cannot be stopped, there are, however, ways to give witness to our fleeting passage through life as a way of retaining the passion it meant. The artist's, poet's, or even more concretely, the architect's need to leave a trace, a witness, a monument to their fleeting passage through life is an example of this.

The word was the basic element in the fight against oblivion. Words and works. Referring to his own poetry, Horace said «Exegi monumentum aere perennius» (I built a monument more lasting than bronze). And further on, «non omnis moriar» (I will not die altogether).

Of this fight against the oblivion which is death, human history gives us constant testimony. The history of art, as part of this history, could be intuited as the attempt to leave a trace, a testimony of our passage through life. Perhaps architecture is what gives shape to this resistance to oblivion, setting up a memorial while projecting towards the future.

However, and it is not casual in times of crisis when the world seems to be going to pieces, we painfully confirm that nothing can resist time's devastating, tenacious action. Quevedo, a poet of the Spanish Baroque which, unlike the European Baroque, showed up the terrifying contradictions and paradoxes of a world where the Counter-Reformation was dominant, saw a whole world of riches dissolved in dreams:

Buscas en Roma a Roma, oh peregrino  
y en Roma misma a Roma no la hallas  
cadáver son las que ostentó murallas  
y tumba de sí propio el Aventino.  
Yace donde reinaba el Palatino  
y limadas del tiempo las medallas  
más se muestran destrozo a las batallas  
de las edades que blasón latino.  
Sólo el Tibre quedó, cuya corriente  
si ciudad la regó, ya sepultura

la llora con funesto son doliente.  
 Oh Roma, en tu grandeza, en tu hermosura  
 huyó lo que era firme y solamente  
 lo fugitivo permanece y dura.

Quevedo bewails the vulnerability of what seemed most lasting, the walls; the Eternal City *par excellence*, Rome, is a ruin. Only the Tiber remains, the river which flows the same as life, as Heraclitus had said.

In this way we observe two lines, made up by the ephemeral on the one hand, and the will to last, on the other, which continue all along the line of History.

In our convulsed 20th Century, we can see the rapid succession of movements which, under the sign of *newness*, automatically wipe out whatever preceded when they are implanted, and will, inevitably, be substituted by the following movement.

In modernity, as G. Vattimo says, being modern becomes a value, or even more, the fundamental value to which all other values refer. This happens because faith in progress, the basic principle of the modern age, is based on a lineal historic process in which it is understood that the future is always an improvement on the present.

Modernity as a cult to what is new drives towards mobility, not towards duration. New communications media: telephone, radio, cinema, television and transportation accelerate modern life, changing its scenario which becomes definitely metropolitan.

The two antagonistic trends quoted above, permanence and change, arrive together at the 20th Century and make up the Modern Movement, with its joint passion for everything new (break with the past, with anecdotic reference, with landscapes, with folklore) and the classic situation (which paradoxically picks up similar characteristics, internationalism, atemporalism, sistematization).

This view is reinforced by the fact that the break with the past which tinged the first decades of the century till the sixties is impregnated with a totalitarian, ideologically marked, and socially utopic discourse which it confers on all artistic and constructive works of a permanent nature.

However, from the 70's on, when faith in progress had sunk, when utopias had become devaluated, and confidence in the power given to architecture, design, education, thought and art to redeem society had been lost, everything was reduced to the ever-quicker succession of novelty, obsolescence was incorporated as a

quality in objects; politics, information and life itself become spectacles and the fleeting becomes a characteristic which, to a greater or lesser degree, plays a starring role in our complex, sectorialised societies.

From the moment when history's lineality is questioned and along with it the faith in progress as a driving force, the past loses its value as a model, as a mirror in which we can look at ourselves; the future as a goal no longer exists and we speak of the end of history. The present is all.

If we take a look at the evolution of art in the 20th Century beginning with the avant-gardes, the passion for newness with no social content became subject to pure renewal of form (happenings, non-art, actions and performances, body art, land art, etc.): inconstancy, the ephemeral, dependence on media and the market.

In postmodernity in art, architecture and design, the return to the past as reference does not intend to take up the threads of the story but rather prove that the present embraces everything, that in it everything is possible.

We can say that the ephemeral as a characteristic of contemporary life, especially that of the 70's and 80's, has made up a social logic of an ensemble, a trait of collective life which has also affected politics, in which the most important factor is image, and seduction techniques from publicity take the place of the discourse in which programme contents were the main point.

From this permanent fluctuation between the fleetingness of our lives and the resistance we put up against it so as to last seen in our history, it would seem that our time, little inclined to epics, are more given to give witness to our undeniable finity, as the times of crisis that they are.

I will finish with a sonnet by Borges, a lucid observer of our every-dayness, from *El otro, el mismo*:

*El instante*

¿Dónde estarán los siglos, dónde el sueño  
 De escapadas que los tártaros soñaron,  
 Dónde los fuertes muros que allanaron,  
 Dónde el Arbol de Adán y el otro Leño?  
 El presente está solo. La memoria  
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