

Ende vom Anfang – What remains of modernity?

Ende des Endes

Within or beneath all the variations of the prophetic beginning of the end, there lies an imperceptible, more inconspicuous end. This end, the end of the beginning, stands—as the title of the exhibition seems to suggest—in a particular relation to modernity. Does it coincide with modernity's end? If so, the period of modernity, regarded as it were in retrospect as one that has come to a close, would be a period essentially determined by the beginning. Is it this that motivates the question of what remains? Yet what ends if it is not the end that begins, but the beginning that ends? What is at issue is what, precisely, changes when one passes from one end to the other, inverting beginning and end. Is this anything more than a rhetorical game?

Whoever sees the beginning of the end perceives and deciphers the signs of the end in order to proclaim its coming. Whether in the guise of paradisiacal promise or of anticipated annihilation, the end is here always consummation (*Vollendung*). It is the point of a coming realization in which foundation and downfall coincide. The end thereby appears as a near or distant point in time at which the purpose is fulfilled or the idea realized. To read one's own present as the beginning of the end therefore means to declare it the end-time, whose ambiguous mode of operation is at once to bring the end closer and to defer it, to hold it at a distance. The present thus becomes the interval of an interim time in which an end not yet reached is already operative as anticipated, so that the present is doubled. In the beginning of the end, the end is equally conclusion, limit, purpose, and death—it implies the conjunction of these four moments.

With the end of the beginning, this cannot and must not be the case in the same way; otherwise it would be nothing other than yet another beginning of the end. The end of the beginning must set itself apart from every variation of paradisiacal promise as well as from the threat of annihilation. At first, the foregrounding of the present, its emphasis, may seem to link it with the beginning of the end, since both figures imply a moment of crisis—though not in the same manner. Whereas the beginning of the end marks a crisis *in* time, interrupting the present in order to double it in the form of a promissory interim, the end of the beginning suspends any possible advent of a new, qualitatively different time, so that it is time itself that is thrown into crisis.

What is ultimately interrogated, doubted, or struck through with the end of the beginning is the possibility of beginning, the subjective capacity to begin. Rather than leading one's contemporaries into the end-time in the face of the beginning of the end—granting them hope or striking them with terror (in view of an impending nuclear or ecological catastrophe, for instance)—it is now the very positing of the beginning that is suspended. What ends with the end of the beginning, what appears hollowed out and depleted, is the ignition of the beginning, the beginning as ignition. Its suspension goes hand in hand with a problematization of the beginning's subordination to purpose, that is, of the beginning's immanent positing of aims and ends (*Zwecksetzung*), its permanent valorization (*In-Wert-Setzung*). For within the framework of a certain rationality (should one call it "modern"?), the possibility of beginning, the subjective capacity to begin, is related to the end from the very outset. According to this rationality, the beginning has always been a beginning-toward-the-end (*Anfang-zum-Ende*), such that, in a certain sense, it was always already the distinguishing mark of this beginning to end.

The end of the beginning would thus occur twice: as the end immanent to the beginning's positing of purpose, and as the exhaustion of this particular form of relating the beginning to the end, of coupling the two in the figure of the beginning-toward-the-end. This exhaustion is an event, or an occurrence, that can be called neither simply positive nor simply negative. A strange end of the beginning: that the beginning ends means nothing other than that the beginning detaches itself from its orientation toward the end, from its positing of purpose—which is at once painful and salutary.

And yet, as is well known, the moment of beginning is also accompanied by a specific vitality and intensity. The beginning is, above all, the momentum of setting in, of pulling oneself together and breaking loose: the beginning's kick in the backside (*Arschtritt des Anfangs*). It is the force to go out, to transgress, to leave behind; the force to dissolve bonds, to erase memory, to give birth to oneself anew (is this a specifically "modern" force?).

The intensity of the beginning, its vitality, results from a force that, in beginning, simultaneously begins to feel itself and, in this very feeling, intensifies itself. This is why that second end of the beginning, in which the beginning is released from its relation to the end, again has a twofold effect: in the face of a painful yet salutary liberation—both from the tension of the initial moment, from the pressure that weighs upon it, and from the enclosure of the beginning within the beginning-toward-the-end—we ask ourselves at the same time what still sets us in motion, what now conveys to us, or lets us feel, the particular force of the beginning. Freed from the compulsion to consume ourselves in the intensity of the beginning or to subordinate the beginning to a purpose, we search once more for a light that attracts us, that lures us toward it, and thereby still thwarts the reflexive circling around our own beginninglessness. Is there a breath of spring without the bloodbath of the beginning?

What is ending today (how far does this “today” extend?), what is consumed, exhausted, played out, what appears to us as violent or deluded, would thus be the beginning's positing of purpose and the force of transgression proper to it. Gone is the beginning as creative destruction or destructive creation; gone the subjectivity of visionary seeing, the scene of annunciation. If this end of the beginning is connected in a particular way with the concept of modernity, does it at the same time mark modernity's end? For perhaps it is the emphatic investment in the moment of beginning that finds expression across all variations of the terminology of the modern, notwithstanding their necessary differentiation (the modern as an autonomous form of temporality, modernity as a historical period, modernism as a subjective stance, and so forth).

Accordingly, the question might be formulated as follows: What remains of modernity when the figure of the beginning is suspended—both in its containment as beginning-toward-the-end and in its own intensity? What remains when the capacity to begin, the momentum of beginning, has become doubtful, and the logic of the beginning-toward-the-end the object of relentless critique or infinite deconstruction? If one assumes for a moment that one is persuaded by the connection established here between the end of the beginning and the end of “modernity,” as well as by an interrogative stance that circles around what remains, one might be tempted to answer: what remains are, first, the remnants of the beginning-toward-the-end; second, the residue of the intensity of the beginning (both pertain to the thinking of production in the broadest sense and to the catastrophic civilization that corresponds to it); and, not least, third, the surplus of the end, its strange iridescence.

The end remains treacherous, for wherever one passes from one end to the other, one ultimately comes up against the end of the end. In what sense? The end of the beginning is perpetually exposed to the risk of relapsing into a beginning. One must therefore prevent the end of the beginning from taking shape once again as a beginning of the end, or from being subordinated to a beginning-toward-the-end. If the end of the beginning is not to turn once more into a beginning, one cannot rest content with a mere reversal or inversion in passing from one end to the other. Instead, the end of the beginning must be enacted as a reflexive step: this end exists only in the more precise form of the end of the beginning-of-the-end and the end of the beginning-toward-the-end.

If it is today all versions and variations of the beginning that appear problematic to us, then the experience of its end must not, in turn, assume the form of an announcement, a promise, or a positing of purpose. Should the thinking of finality literally have come to an end, it will at the same time no longer be possible to frame this end anew in terms of a beginning of the end or a beginning-toward-the-end. If the beginning has come to an end, then not in such a way that this occurrence could be appropriated as its final truth, as its ultimate purpose. What we must therefore attend to, as we pass from the beginning of the end to the end of the beginning, would ultimately—“in the end”—be the end of the end. Where humanity wanders among its ruins, the decisive question is thus not: how can the end be averted or brought about? It is rather: how might the end of the end be thought? How can it be perceived, experienced, communicated?

– Marcus Quent

English translation. The original text was written in German by Jun.-Prof. Dr. Marcus Quent. Where the English cannot fully render the meaning of the German, the original term is given in brackets.