GAVAGAI

# 2
Do we live in postmodern times?

The short answer is: yes, because we no longer live ‘Between the Wars’; no, because the rhetoric of peace reconfigures a breathing space with the theatre of war moved elsewhere, often engaging premodern societies (and mentalities) already convulsing in the throes of a new birth. Thus any answers, like the question, are premised on location. Some preliminaries to a longer answer are the following.

Modernity and postmodernity have shared the same creative and critical space for so long now that one may not be discussed without the other. While modernity, under the continuing influence of modernism, is a vast enterprise affecting culture, economy, politics, society, and even secular institutions and eschatology, its mode of existence and expression has had a variegated course. Nowhere has it been invoked to substitute sameness, simultaneity, subjection to the done thing, or a future bounded by the recency or currency of practice. The challenge is, and was, to avoid casting or becoming a cliché of itself. Historicizing it thus might be self-defeating, for it has not been unitary, or afraid of variance of substance and style, or amenable to artificial divisions of time in the figurative stream of human consciousness. Examples in every field of endeavour or intellectual exercise are too numerous (and probably unnecessary for this audience to be recounted here); also various, for any possible account of living movements is one of consistencies and divergences. The disposition to change is continuous—a dynamics evolving its own momentum and logic without the pre-lapsarian benefit of only exogenous factors in certain myths. Early modernity spoke from confidence in its own centrality, which later developments (in culture, economy, and politics) have either modified or made a matter of many tributaries, each noteworthy in its own right. The laterally added varieties and flavours range from the bric-à-brac of modern life to the simulacra of folk or pop. There is a focused concern with the recovery of locality, personality, and temporality—and as such priority—recouped from the generalized view of any presumptive theory, and thus it is geographically distributed. But a polycentric modernity is sometimes mistaken for postmodernity. All too often, the many intersecting areas between modernity and postmodernity offer the problematics of naming and knowing, the gnosis of ambivalence, the superstition of stumbling.
upon the next step in progression, all in the same merry-go-round. Evidently, like most phenomena of its scale, modernity has embraced contraries, exercised exceptions, and suffered its moments of indifference, and has left swaths of its own heartland untouched by its working. Small wonder then that for strains overlooked or crevices unfilled or patterns revised—as for vast saturnal culture tracts fallowed by insular restriction or over-exertion, postmodernity has credible agency. (A modern/postmodern comparison may be instructive to understand the 20th and 21st Century developments in culture—particularly expression in the fine arts like music, architecture, painting, sculpture, theatre (or cinema), and writing, as well as in various fields of knowledge, as the philosophical bases go far back in time.) Still, except for its staunch subscribers, postmodernity is a trope, the flip side of modernity wherein experiment, innovation, and outreach are de rigueur, all variations acting within the space eked out by the modernist prowess, habit, and ethos. Taking to a rehash of the same ingredients or recipes, though, may not produce the same object or effect. Postmodernity actually comes home as we unwrap the take-away briam dish and try it with friends, who compliment our choice and thank us for offering them fine vegetable chow mein.