Weak Thought
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Introduction

What Is “Weak Thought”?  
The Original Theses and Context of il pensiero debole

PETER CARRAVETTA

General Remarks

Although “weak thought”—il pensiero debole—has been around for over a quarter of a century, it is still little known in the United States. In Italy, from its first appearance in 1983, it has received mixed reviews. Entering a cultural context marked by a “crisis of reason” and competing schools of historicism, Marxism, structuralism, negative thought, and diverse religious strands, it was soundly critiqued by such diverse thinkers as Carlo Formenti, Cesare Cases, Mario Perniola, and Romano Luperini, and lambasted by such an authority as Carlo Augusto Viano. But it was also embraced by mostly younger scholars and philosophers, and students, especially in Turin, Milan, and Pisa. In the United States, from its appearance and through the nineties, commentaries and expositions have appeared by Reiner Schürmann, Hayden White, Hugh Silverman, Peter Carravetta, Maurizio Viano, Rebecca West, Giovanna Borradori, Edmund Jacobitti, Daniel Barbiero, Richard Rorty, and others. In the new century, it has increasingly been the topic of interventions by members of the Society for Philosophy and Existential Phenomenology, the International Association for Philosophy and Literature, and other philosophy and cultural studies groups.

Looking back, it cannot be denied that it represents the most striking current of thought in Italian philosophy in the post–WWII period, and it certainly offers an alternative to the main currents of philosophy which emerged
in France and Germany during the same period, but which by the end of the century had all but waned. Weak thought is an original and stimulating perspective that lends itself to further elaborations and across many disciplines, and its potential ramifications may actually be more evident in a post-9/11 world. Weak thought can show the way to a contemporary understanding of hermeneutics, theories of knowledge, ethics, and discourse but without couching them in ironic or parodic terms, nor by highlighting the negative nihilism that was still typical of most postmodern theoreticians at the end of the millennium. Weak thought seeks a clarification of what might be a viable task for thinking at the slow crepuscle of modernity, or at the end of philosophy, which means when most forms of theorizing cannot find a credible legitimation. Among the many schools or currents present on the Italian panorama, most of which can be identified by the department or university where one or more leaders—or maestri—happen to teach, weak thought represents an anomaly, as it pools perspectives and metalanguages not usually in dialogue with one another. It is by far the most interdisciplinary “movement” in modern Italian social history, strangely disorganized and wary of issuing another specialized lexicon or staking out a series of methodological steps. Weak thought goes to the very heart of the great problems in continental philosophy, but without any intent to raze all previous conceptual edifices to the ground. Quite the opposite, it believes that another form of thinking is available which can still leverage itself upon some forms of critique embedded in modernity. It attempts a most delicate task. In the following pages, I will offer an extended overview of the two founders of weak thought, provide a brief characterization of the content of the other essays, and conclude with a synthesis of its main tenets and possible developments.

Vattimo: Weak Thought and Hermeneutics

From very early in his career, Gianni Vattimo has been engaged on the double front of the critique of metaphysics and the critique of ideology. The first activity can be traced through his early monograph on Heidegger and subsequent writings in the hermeneutic tradition from Schleiermacher and Dilthey, through Sartre and on to Gadamer, with a privileged place for Nietzsche. The second arena of engagement can be sketched through his writings (which include many introductions, translations, and prefaces) on art, poetry, popular culture, politics, aesthetics, and on some of the most influential thinkers of our time. The ever-present connection between his theoretical perspectives and the concrete and factual aspect of existence and society he so closely
monitored have compelled the thinker to fashion a mode of thinking which, arriving at the “end of metaphysics,” is cognizant of its inner self-destructing mechanism and lowers the threshold of critical expectations. At the same time, it is nevertheless capable and willing to at least retell yet again the (hi) story of this endless crepuscule, the ontological decline of Being that informs the present configuration of beings and their movements.

Beginning with his first major book, *Essere, storia e linguaggio in Heidegger* (1963), Vattimo has dedicated many works to Heidegger and the general question of a radical critique of Western metaphysics. Coming out of the existentialism of the fifties with a full understanding of Sartrean Being as Nothingness, and the cogency of Heideggerian Being-toward-death, Vattimo nevertheless essayed early on to look at existential nihilism in a positive light, elaborating those aspects that require an *ontic* and co-founding dimension, the material givenness of the *anthropos* even as Being seemed forgotten or forever elusive; hence the preoccupation with social, political, and historical interpretation throughout his writings and his sympathetic readings of Marxism (in part owed to his disillusion with the church as an institution for viable reform). As a militant intellectual in the sixties and the seventies, Vattimo has always been left of center. In fact we might say he has fruitfully “used” the Left (in particular, besides Marx, Sartre, and Adorno) to keep his readings of Heidegger and Nietzsche from slipping into specious analyses and conservative or “negative” ideologies. This background has allowed Vattimo to “comprehend” the positions of the anti-Heideggerians, by expanding the very horizon within which the fundamental questions of our age could be framed. He thus begins to explore afresh the notions of lived-time, of trans-mission, and of participation, in the spirit of Heideggerian re-calling and remembering. What is key here is to bear in mind this ultimately courageous philosophical gesture, that of confronting the bleak landscape which his French colleagues Derrida, Foucault, and Baudrillard were relentlessly painting in ever-darkner hues. During this time Vattimo also publishes studies that will be gathered into the key 1980 volume *Le avventure della differenza*, among which and relevant to our sketch is the first chapter, “Hermeneutic Reason and Dialectical Reason,” a critique of and partial distancing from Gadamer’s hermeneutical ontology. Another chapter, “Nietzsche and Difference,” which takes Nietzsche as interpreter of and mediator for Heidegger’s foundationless being while rejecting Derrida’s version of metaphysics, is clearly “on the way” to weak ontology (see 86–87, 90–92). Finally, and perhaps the first seed of weak thought, there’s the chapter devoted entirely to “An-Denken: Thinking and Foundation” (123–149), in which Vattimo tackles the problem head-on and resolves it with his notion of *s-fondamento*, understood as an
active de-grounding which ensures movement, continuation, and motivation in the endless task of interpreting even at the heralded “end of philosophy.” The message is that we no longer should speak of philosophy or this or that school of criticism if they are still predicated upon axioms, principles, or strong theories, but simply of interpretations, of conversations seeking to find the right question and essay to propose a negotiable response. After Marxism and structuralism, says Vattimo in the mid-eighties, what we have left is only hermeneutics as the general linguistic form to interrogate ourselves concerning who or what we are.10

In the manifesto essay which opens this anthology, “Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought,” Vattimo has therefore already assimilated the notion, much like many of his peers on the other side of the Alps and on this side of the Atlantic, that philosophy has entered a final declining stage and, at least as we understood it during late modernity, that it cannot really answer, or not answer credibly, the questions which we put to it, in particular in view of the general “epochal” turn toward the technological enframing that informs Being and beings. The essay in other words begins by asking whether we ought not perhaps stop thinking as if implicitly seeking answers issuing from the future, in effect relying on notions of progress, development, and other hidden teleologies in the various branches of learning, and, having acknowledged that there is no escaping metaphysics as this has been the history of the West, turn the glance back and reinterpret some of its rich and still viable notions, or even the remains of being, to use Zabala’s felicitous phrase.11 Weak thought begins by readapting tangible premises embedded in dialectic and difference, but which had been pulverized by the resolution of the first into teleological historical consciousness and by the transformation of the second into linguistic play. Nevertheless, the aim of both dialectics and difference was to provide a general framework to deal precisely with the human condition. Vattimo draws attention to the fact that, though we may all be fallen beings, or beings enthralled in our own supratemporal utopias or dystopias, we are still ultimately human beings and as such we participate in a world of relations marked by contracts, negotiations, limitations, beliefs, chance, life and death. If there is no possibility of turning back the clock on account of our finitude, and we no longer believe in the (by now presumptuous) value of making tabula rasa of all that we inherited in order to seek some “new” foundation or beginning, then our condition is that of dealing with the amass of existing interpretations which we can summon or even invent to make sense of the world. However, these interpretations will be marked by the gesture of appropriation and thus inevitably of distortion, or twisting (Verwindung), we might even say of misreading. This requires
recognition of the fact that some of these versions have become authoritative (archives, canons, traditions) and others have been marginalized (minority discourse, the wretched of the earth, the “slaves”) or forgotten (erasures, “dead metaphors,” suppressed voices). The reality to face is that even the presumed univocal meanings of science, the undisputed truths of first principles and the godhead, and the inerasable facts of history are ever de facto subject to interpretation. In other words, the myth of purity, absolute origin, unshakeable foundations, and atemporal presence have been demonstrated to be untenable and, ultimately, part and parcel of the reason why metaphysics has been found wanting in the first place. Vattimo writes:

The experience with which we may begin and to which we must remain faithful is, above all, that of the largely quotidian already given, which is also and always historically qualified and culturally dense. There are no transcendental conditions of possibility for experience which might be attainable through some type of reduction or epoché suspending our ties to historical-cultural, linguistic, and categorical horizons. The conditions of possibility for experience are always qualified, or, as Heidegger says, Dasein is a thrown project—thrown time and time again. In other words, the foundation, the setting out, the initial sending [invio] of our discourse cannot but be a hermeneutical foundation.12

The other point of reference is the notion of difference elaborated by Heidegger after the “turn” from Being to language in the thirties. Vattimo links this, not in an explicitly historiographic manner, but more at the level of theoretical affinity, with the thought of difference (which begins precisely, we may recall, with a rereading of Hegel). He writes:

The thought of difference inserts itself in this tendency toward dissolution, and the questions it reflects and elicits. (By the words “inserts itself” I want to suggest an itinerary of thought which, without negating its own characteristics, allows itself to be guided by the “thing itself,” encountering the thematics of difference precisely in this micrological-dissolutive tendency of dialectics.) (PD, 17; herein 43)

The point is expounded further down on the same page: in the development of twentieth-century dialectical thought there emerges a tendency toward dissolution which escapes the control and restrictions of dialectics.
When these thoughts were being formulated, in the seventies, there were still legions who would have sworn by some version of dialectics to succeed in making sense of it all, from ontology to ideology to politics. Very often intellectuals on the left criticized Vattimo for this apparently reductive view of the course of dialectics in the twentieth century, yet what is here suggested is a recognition of its limits and a willingness to let it nevertheless remain a key frame of reference, as an irreversible and therefore inerasable historical construct, and finally as a process partaking in interpretation nevertheless, even after its apparent decline. Vattimo develops his Heideggerian theme “through” the destructuring and dissolutive tendency of philosophy pinpointed by Benjamin’s micrology, as well as by “annexing” the “negativity” that characterizes Adorno and Bloch’s “utopianism.”

In the end, however, Vattimo holds that even these thinkers reveal how the dialectical approach to the problem of alienation and reappropriation is still deeply complicitous—whether through its language, strategies, or goals—with the alienation and inequity it intends to combat: “The idea of totality and reappropriation, the very pillars of dialectical thought, are still metaphysical notions yet to be critiqued” (PD, 17–18; herein 43). Similarly, although the thought of difference has indeed explored the self-erasing force of metaphysical absolutes and arbitrary axiomatic methods, it has also produced unresolved paradoxes, skepticism, and yet another—though veiled, or reflected—metaphysics. On the path to a weak notion of thinking, to a weakened sense of Being, to a less overarching tendency to explain everything in terms of some Master Code or general transhistorical hierarchy, Vattimo must now introduce in some guise the selective wisdom (or the topica, I would call it) of these philosophical traditions onto the terrain of the greatest critic of them all, namely, Nietzsche. Because

[it] is Nietzsche who helped bring this awareness to light with his analysis of metaphysical subjectivity in terms of mastery and with his announcement that God is dead. The sense of this assertion is that the strong frameworks of metaphysics—archai, Gründe, primary evidences, and ultimate destinies—are only forms of self-assurance for epochs in which technology and social organization had not yet rendered us capable of living in a more open horizon (as is the case in our day and age), in a horizon less “magically” guaranteed. The ruling concepts of metaphysics . . . turn out to be means of discipline and reassurance that are no longer necessary in the context of our present-day disposition of technology. (PD, 18; herein 43)
It is from this terrain that one must evaluate the aforementioned critical notion of *Verwindung*, which Vattimo reads as a twisting, a distorting, or a making recourse to something or someone else which is inevitably impure and not exactly like what it refers to or what it can infer from another set of claims.\textsuperscript{17} What applies to the understanding of (and indeed the relationship we have with) tradition, namely, that in its being handed down everything undergoes growth or sedimentation or rewriting, or a combination of the three, and is therefore never equal to itself (except to rationalists and dogmatists), applies as well when we interpret our interpersonal exchanges. Because insofar as each utterance needs to be complemented, responded to in some guise, the basic presupposition is that there are other beings out there, there is an-other subject we contend with. But in doing so we are partial to it, we extract what we can or want from it, and we are moreover influenced in return by specific phenomena and peculiar quirks of the speaker in question. In short, a distortion is present in any act of communication or interpretation:

The dialectical heritage through which difference is declined (*verwindet sich*) into weak thought is condensed in the notion of *Verwindung*, and with good reason, for *Verwindung*, as we know, is the term Heidegger adopts in place of *Überwindung*, the overcoming or sublimation proper to dialectics. *Verwindung* (declination/distortion) and recovery ([rimettersi] recovery from, entrust oneself to, start up in the sense of sending on) mark the attitude which characterize post-metaphysical thought in relation to the tradition handed down by metaphysics. (PD, 21; herein 46)\textsuperscript{18}

*Verwindung* in short is the less than perfect interpretation we actually ever do, or rely on: it cannot pretend to be strong and absolute and universal and/or the master paradigm of anything: interpretation is originary bound to the language being spoken/written, and moreover has always an elusive element to it.\textsuperscript{19} Reappropriation cannot be total, it is at best a translation and is not even possible without liberating Being from the idea of stable presence, of *ousia*. But now we must ask: what would be a possible consequence of a reappropriation that no longer deals with Being as a stable structure? The answer is: The enfeeblement of (the notion of) Being. In fact, Vattimo argues, the explicit occurrence of the temporal essence of Being, such as “(ephemerality, birth and death, faded trans-mission, antiquarian accumulation), has serious repercussion for the way we conceive of thinking and of the Dasein
that is its subject.” The hallowed issue of truth, then, is brought down to earth, literally. Staying very close to his own words, and

[to summarize, then, how a weak ontology conceives of truth, we could begin by saying:

(1) The true is not the object of a noetic prehension of evidence but rather the result of a process of verification that produces such truth through certain procedures always already given time and again (the project of the world that constitutes us as Dasein). In other words, the true does not have a metaphysical or logical nature but a linguistic, better, rhetorical, one.

(2) Verification and hypothesis occur in a controlling horizon, in the openness that On the Essence of Truth speaks about as the space of freedom both of interpersonal relations and of the relations between cultures and generations. In this space no one ever starts from scratch but always from a faith, a belonging-to or a bond. The rhetorical-hermeneutical horizon of truth is constituted in this free but “impure” way, analogously to the common sense that Kant speaks about in the Critique of Judgment. Relationships among subjects, civil protocols, and belonging-to are the substance of pietas. Along with the rhetoric-logic of “weak” truth, pietas also delineates the basis for a possible ethics, in which the supreme values—those which are good in themselves and not because they are means to an end—are symbolical formations, monuments, traces of the living: hence an ethics of “goods” [“beni”20] rather than of “imperatives.”

(3) Truth is the product of interpretation not because through its process one attains a direct grasp of truth (for example, where interpretation is taken as deciphering, unmasking, and so on), but because it is only in the process of interpretation, in the Aristotelian sense of hermeneia, expression, formulation, that truth is constituted.

(4) In this “rhetorical” conception of truth humans experience the fullness of its decline . . . Being can only appear to us as Über-lieferung, trans-mission, a dissolving into procedures, into “rhetoric.” (PD, 25–26; herein 50)
A quick commentary on these four traits would have to highlight that weak thought is eminently a linguistic philosophy, and use of the term “rhetoric” ought to be taken in the sense of discourse, the actual interpersonal speech acts produced among humans. The second point reveals the adoption of insights elsewhere developed by anthropology and by his maestro Luigi Pareyson, namely, that there is always already a social Urgrund that serves as the horizon for the linguistic exchange and the values therein contained, whether as symbols, monuments, traces, and so on. In the same paragraph we can isolate the adoption of the sensus communis of the eighteenth century, rescuing the most hermeneutical aspect of transcendental philosophy perhaps through the influence of Gadamer. A problem may arise with the idea of “supreme values” which are “good in themselves,” as this may hark back to those same archai or stable metaphysical essences he had critiqued a few pages earlier. But planting them back into the remains of being may suggest the tacit appropriation of insights deriving from Benjamin, who is discussed in the essay. The third point seems to be derived from Nietzsche, as the truth is essentially an interpretation which can only exist as a fact of language. This aspect is complemented in point 4, where once again the focus is on the practices and experiences of actually existing humans, with their cadres of symbols, codes, protocols, and habits. Were Vattimo not averse to employing the metalanguages of other disciplines, he would have to reckon with the semiotics and the pragmatics of social reality. But as can be seen, weak thought discloses an ample and supple dimension for thinking, as it allows for the coexistence and dynamic complementarity of different traditions, a place where Aristotelians, Kantians, Nietzscheans, and Heideggerians can find a common or at least recognizable locus for interaction. It points to an alternate dimensional field or background to both thinking and Being, a “variation” on the Master Code and its mirroring subversions which, by accepting the “de-grounding” of Being, resituates actual beings in their intrinsinic thrownness, in their finitude, in the concourse of the human experience. It insists that the ontic is primary, and time and place bound as the ontological spinoffs.

The foregoing may explain why Vattimo dovetails his “explanations” repeatedly into a particular area, that is, language exchange, practical communication, in sum: rhetoric. We must quickly observe, however, that the reference to rhetoric is not casual and needs further contextualization. As someone who has followed closely the evolution of Heidegger’s (and Nietzsche’s) theories of language as well as these thinkers’ peculiar ways of expressing themselves, the problem of speech and communication has received much reflection in Vattimo’s work. We might add here that whenever he addressed issues and authors outside of the hermeneutic camp, Vattimo has consistently
looked at and criticized various schools of linguistics (structuralisms) and philosophies of language (analytic schools) for leveraging unacknowledged self-centering, teleological, and universalizing metaphysics underneath the rigorous external dualisms they operated with. But he has also repeatedly emphasized how it is in language, through language, and after language that Being and being-human occur and can be experienced or known at all. This explains his particular attention to and subtle critiques of the language theories of fellow hermeneuticians such as Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas. And although he has not written a “theory of language” or, indeed, a “rhetoric,” the notion that the rhetorical may be the answer, the only pragmatic consequence for hermeneutics is mentioned in several places, especially in the 1985 collection The End of Modernity. As we find in numerous other remarks scattered throughout book presentations and journalistic pieces, we can synthetically conclude that culture, and the interpretation it inevitably calls for, takes on (a) the form of monuments, icons, residues and debris from previous conceptions (in this validating the tradition coming from Dilthey), (b) reveals incessant slippage not only between traces or signifiers (as a great many of the French thinkers and critics of intertextuality have pointed out), but, and this is my reading of weak thought, (c) occurs between signifieds and within entire authoritative constructions as well, whether these were great metaphysical systems or more restricted or regional master codes or culturally determined symbolic systems. This latter point once again distances weak thought from the then dominant theories of deconstruction, grounded on the play of signifiers and the impossibility of ever being able to light upon the meanings actually transacted in linguistic exchanges.

But in the end, however, Vattimo does not challenge, in his own text, the rhetorical dimension of philosophical and ethical discourse, not in the sense in which some of his younger colleagues, and some of the other debolisti included in the present anthology, have attempted to grapple with the expressive medium itself. In the later Beyond Interpretation (1994), Vattimo prefers to address the “content” and no longer the “form” of the interpretive project, that is, he no longer reflects on language qua language, other than taking a stock, everyday, or idiomatic expression in a particular text, and typically from the canon, and wringing out the ambivalences therein contained. As I have argued elsewhere, the idea of going beyond interpretation seems to signal a new Kehre in Vattimo’s thinking toward a more ethically and religiously grounded version of weak thought, in a sense abandoning the fundamental importance he had attributed to the rhetorical component of hermeneutics. His Credere di credere (1996) bears this out. In particular, having established that the most decisive issue for human existence today is
one focused on the relation humans have with science/technology, the task for an ethically sensitive interpretive praxis consists in looking at specific determinations of the process, such as: ethics of communication, ethics of redescription, and ethics of continuity. In this fashion, he is able to reconsider the relevance of the notions of pietas, of inquiry, and of existence as constant discovery within relative uncertainty.28

Rovatti: Weak Thought and the Metamorphoses of Subjects

A few more general insights can be gathered by looking at how the other cofounder of weak thought deals with the question of the dissolution of strong thought, and whether it might still be possible to speak of and if necessary (or even desirable) “save” the subject. Let us briefly follow Rovatti’s argument in terms of how the redefined subject affects interpretation and language, seek another tessera for a weak ontology, and try to comprehend how it fits into the larger scheme of things.

Rovatti begins by citing a Nietzschean aphorism whereby man rolls off the center toward an x, moving away from his own certain place toward an uncertain and unknown place. He asks himself if this unknown can at all be described, and whether this human is the “last man” who has learned to accept, ironically, any nihilism. And then he ponders whether there might be a beyond where the shards of everything we have called the subject for centuries may not be enmeshed in conventions and simulacra without referents. He then asks:

Can we not rather hypothesize a “logic” of the decentering of the subject capable of describing, simultaneously, what happens to man when he moves away from his center, as well as the terrain, to be reckoned with before all else, upon which a new “sense” can be produced? (PD, 29; herein 53)

The questions are unsettling, imposing, and difficult. We can perceive in the background a profound acquaintance with the long and knotty debate over the status of reason,29 and the aforementioned crisis of the subject. There emerges also an ethical (and political) questing, a tone of urgency as when disturbing revelations are made. Thus he counters:

First of all: what else is the loss of the center if not the declaration, the sanction that “strong” thought is no longer tenable? The
typical situation of “strong” thought is in fact that in which the thinker and the thought, he who does the thinking and that which is being thought about, are partisan [solidali]: they hold on to each other in tight, specular correspondence. (PD, 29; herein 53)

Rovatti points out that what Nietzsche had perceived was the possibility of a general disappearance of the anchoring center, thus loosening the subject to drift, fall, vanish. In other words, the human being has reached a limit, one more step and s/he may plunge below, losing him/herself completely. Though this dreaded destiny was the crux of much post–World War II existentialist thinking, now the question for our times ought to be: consider existing in the fall, in the supposition that there will be a someplace, a something, below, an elsewhere, an anywhere. From here perhaps we gain access to the place and time where a sense can be reactivated, where a meaning can be demanded. Now let us ask ourselves: Would this be an alien or impossible place? Would it spur new quixotic quests? Not necessarily, but having learned to coexist with nothingness, the “last man” must chance the next—indeed any—step, and that is preliminarily a daring venture. It will certainly foreground the issue of choice, of will, of experience. But now supposedly this ought to occur against or independently from endlessly criss-crossing and unpredictable yet determining paths whose boundaries and thresholds appear only to reveal, alas, another boundary or limit right after them. The postmetaphysical man acknowledges a “condition” or “destiny,” that of being “forever set on a path tortuous and irregular, extremely long and tiring.” We hear echoes of Heidegger’s phraseology: wegmarken, unterweg zu . . . , irrgarten, etc. Is this not a way both of avoiding technical metalanguages and disclosing the figurative power of discourse? “The image of the path [cammino] is metaphorical (but isn’t metaphor always a path?): it points to a mood, an attitude, a way of life” (PD, 30; herein 54). Of the same mind, we will read further on in Comolli’s essay that this metaphorical awareness may be a positive contribution to a weak ontology. It discloses a new topica, further possibilities by exploring travel, journeying, metamorphosis as tasks and challenges for thinking and interpretation.

According to Rovatti this unstable, constantly shifting situation may suggest perennial unease, but it is not old-fashioned existentialism that is being recast here, rather, it is more like an unstable equilibrium, a path which bifurcates at any moment. How can such a precariousness be the greatest strength? By not being the being who just makes do, by not bowing to sheer necessity, choosing instead to face events, life, and speech whenever and wherever they appear during the journey. More than that, the possibility
is disclosed to the sentient subject to moor itself on a floating conception of being, one which can be swayed by different external forces, but which nonetheless maintains as its own inner gyroscope a weakened conception of being, one no longer intimidated by necessity:

The wheel of destiny continues to spin, we can behold it from the outside or we can jump into it. We can surrender before horrid causality or we can discover the game chance [caso] is playing: it’s a choice. If we can muster the strength to do it, we can discover the affirmation of weakness. The game of chance, like the game of the child on the seashore, is a fluctuation, a letting oneself be taken. But that does not entail being dependent, or being passive, or patient: for necessity has lost its snarl. Chance and necessity are conjugated in two ways which correspond to two lifestyles. Not dreadful chance and necessity that weigh us down, but necessity that makes lighter and chance that plays. (PD, 32; herein 56)

For a philosophy that some old-timers have erroneously tagged “decadent” and “crepuscular,” what we reckon with here is a positive, life-affirming, creative approach to life, thinking, and understanding. And therefore a place/situation for literary and artistic critique to try new pathways. The emphasis on the “local” entails a rediscovery of the quotidian, of the peripheral, without necessarily discarding a “general” sense of the global. The call is to tuning into the background hum of living. Perhaps because they are intrinsically experts on micro details and invisible worlds, writers and poets are very frequently called upon to offer their testimony, lend their poetic-hermeneutic figuras to the philosopher’s argument. To rediscover the “normality” is tantamount to discovering the fragmentation of experience, the oscillating texture of tiny movements that require a different type of observation, a finer analysis. Absent Metaphysical Constants or Universals, these moves acquire a particular sense: the microphysics of normality forces a change in the meaning of the temporal parameter. Time must now be perceived in the diminutive play between speeding up and slowing down, between the anticipations and the “catastrophic” turns. Here the time of “comprehension” is something else, as “it is not linear, not singular, not even homogeneous, yet it makes sense [sensato], the only time that counts” (PD, 35–36; herein 59).

What does this entail for our more traditional notion of reason? Rovatti makes reference to Zeno’s paradox and a reading of the parable by Michel Serres in his The Northwest Passage. Against all paralyzing fatalisms, Rovatti counterfoists a contemporary Zeno who has “finally understood that reason,
that calculation . . . is not a universal, being rather a unique case. Reason is a singularity [singolarità] among others: all reasons are local facts, compasses partial and relative." Agreeing with Serres, Rovatti goes on to reiterate the connection with the notion of subjectivity:

To understand this limit means . . . to become aware that . . . Elea is not a given time and place, it is not the amplification of our reason. Elea (that is, our identity) is rather in the journey itself, in a randonnée, says Serres, a circling, a circle, a going around, but also random action, chance, choice, and certainly risk. (PD, 38; herein 62)

From this position, it comes as no surprise that the questioning should turn on the what, the where, the who involved in decision and risk. In brief, the question now becomes: What is the “idea” of reality? But that same reality to which the model must conform exactly is itself a construction because it is already predisposed to accept a model, enabling a symbolic doubling [rad-doppiamento simbolico]. This being the condition, says Rovatti, weak thought intends to impair or to destabilize the act of knowing in its entirety, both on the side of the knower as well as on the side of the known. Of course this exposes him to the charge that he is still making use of “metaphysical” categories, such as presupposing a knowing subject and an object to be known. But, in keeping with the gesture we saw previously concerning “taking the snarl out of necessity,” once again Rovatti deflates the over-determinate symbolism of the terms and twists them into useful, practical expedients: “Subject and object are by now worn out terms, but are there any better ones available?” Therefore:

“Weak thought” asks us to modify the object of knowledge as well as of the knowing subject. We are propelled toward this end by the nihilist destructuration of fundamental categories, by the attempt to cut a dent into power or, otherwise said, the “strength” [la “forza”] of unity. The “one” upon which knowledge is modeled: that is the leverage point that must be weakened. We would immediately realize that this force is coupled to our ideas of reality and of ourselves, ideas we are not willing to part with. (PD, 42; herein 66)

In concert with parallel discussions going on in other disciplines, such as the philosophy of science, Rovatti looks at the knot that ties the reason of the intellect with the pragmatic exigencies of the social subject, of the individual subject, but also of the person. And one thing that emerges is that we
must abandon the notion of a unitary organizing thought and consider instead the possibilities of a manifold thought, one which is multivoiced, variously shaped, always more than one but just as importantly no longer pretending to be the seal to the claims of Totality or Universality.

It should be evident at this juncture how this way of thinking is predisposed toward forms of critique attuned to relation, and to relation with others, being intrinsically non-ethnocentric and decidedly anti-logocentric, indeed anti-Eurologocentric. Therefore, “only at the cost of a drastic simplification can the horizon within which we deploy the expression ‘weak thought’ be made to coincide, despite its specificity, with one of so many available forms of knowledge” (PD, 50; herein 71). We might develop this further by adding: it is a practical method (re)turned to a rhetoric, a perennially variable set of specific topics and discourse strategies. It is a theory that can and wants to become manifest in conjunction with its de-limited, circum-stantial, oc-casional method, where method is understood as steps, procedures, an “ordered” discourse, a structuration of language use which is at inception a verbal scanning, a setting boundaries to sense-as-occurrence, as fact, as personal event, and no longer as Truth, or Essence, or any other transcendental signifier. It follows that “it is precisely this difference [diversità] which, if we follow it, makes the distinctions and the separation of a field of knowledge impossible” (PD, 50; herein 71).

But if we cannot tell different forms of knowledges apart, can we still speak of philosophy, of having any reason for doing anything? Understandably, Rovatti ponders whether this is still called thinking in the sense of the tradition of philosophy. This “thought,” he says, “if we can still call it such, is not a knowing [non è un conoscere].” Echoing Heidegger, thinking has nothing to do with “knowing”: it even questions whether that is its true task. According to Rovatti, this “knowing” is of a different strain, it is an all-encompassing experience such that it cannot be treated as an object. It is, actually, a contact with reality [è una presa con la realtà], better, a coming into being [un realizzarsi], and the shell of what we formerly called the subject, as “it cannot be detached, isolated, deduced, it is neither a ray of light nor the limit of shade” (PD, 50; herein 72).

A fuller and much more technical analysis of this transformed subject can be found in Rovatti’s next book, La posta in gioco (1987). The “stakes” of the title refer to the somber urgency to rethink the subject for our times in terms of the dissolution of the notion of identity, and to attempt a novel mode of doing philosophy. In order to carry this out he begins with a metaphor! He writes: “On the way to the weakening and erosion of identity, we encounter—insurmountable—the problem of language.” Here Rovatti turns in fact to a reading of what we might call “master tropes,” or “textual dominants,”
and other critical “themes,” or “keywords.” Rovatti will call it “metaphorics.” These include the “fundamental metaphors” of light, space, clearing, awakening, calling, seeing, hearing. Against Derrida’s position concerning the deep bond between metaphor and philosophy and the insuppressible metaphorics of seeing when doing philosophy, Rovatti counters:

But is this road really blocked, as Derrida holds? Metaphorics is held by links, but not exclusively, as it declines and points toward a weakening of the primacy of “seeing.” In this it registers a transition from “seeing” to “listening.” Metaphor does not solely return upon itself, as in a vicious circle, it also protends itself toward a description. This interpretive protension takes shape as the circular form of an experience [peripezia], the clear and risky elusiveness of a narration devoid of a preestablished plot.36

Understanding experience as discontinuous and yet emboldened by its free play, its “liberating” capacity, is very much in tune with different theories of contemporary culture, for instance, Richard Rorty’s “priority of democracy over philosophy.” But this also raises the question of what is meant by “freedom” in a post-metaphysical society. If the reconfigured subject is now more than ever bound to its ex-pression, its being-with-others, in short, in disclosing alternative ethical preoccupations, how will it deal with the issue of freedom, with free speech? The answer might be by continuous theorizing while staying alert not to lay another foundational or normative Theory. When a short time later Rovatti returns to these ideas both to defend himself against hurried responses and misrepresentations of weak thought, and to develop some of its premises further, he inscribes the practice of theorizing—of “doing theory”—as an inescapable predicament, and that we shouldn’t feel afraid or ashamed of it in any way. In this frame, he introduces the notion of pudore, indicating a sense of reservation, discretion, personal yet respectful familiarity with thinking. It also means accepting that degree of risk mentioned many times above, which can be reformulated here as the decentered subject’s destiny to meet, deal with, and accept incompleteness, contamination, the “shadows” of truth.38

Redrawing Metaphysics

Maurizio Ferraris

Having read in context the positions of the two founders of weak thought, we are better prepared to start reframing the relevance of some of the demigods
or icons of the past half-century, in particular those figures of modernity who have in effect disclosed to us the most radical possibilities of critique, what Paul Ricoeur called the “school of suspicion.” Maurizio Ferraris’ essay deals precisely with this last development, namely, with that form of thought or that type of critique that loosened the symptoms of the crisis in modernity and bared the malaise, all of it stemming from the triad Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. But in all three cases, there is still too much Descartes and Hegel hovering about, and in the end they are also to be taken as great metaphysicians. Hence his title, “The Aging of the ‘School of Suspicion.’ ” Expanding the horizon, Ferraris finds that Gadamer’s own hermeneutics also validates a continuity and dialogue with history and the present as both real and transparent at the same time. In this generous if too general sketch of Gadamer’s thought, and diametrically opposed to it, the thinker who according to Ferraris brings the full destructive force of difference to the fore is Derrida, who emphasizes, against Gadamer’s notion of text as an integrative, unproblematic “handing down” of past experience, the discontinuities, the arbitrariness, the cracks everywhere in the monuments, the duplicity of signs, slippery marginalities, paradoxes, and the incessant questioning of the im/possibility of a true reference. Given what we saw as the several tenets of weak thought according to Vattimo and Rovatti, where the emphasis veers away from anything resembling deconstruction in a Derridian sense, it may seem odd to find Ferraris’ piece in this anthology. The justification may be simply that, once again, a hermeneutics of suspicion anchored to the principle that all consciousness is at bottom “false consciousness” presupposes that somewhere there is a “true consciousness” to be sought. And this “absent” truth is basically the reverse of a metaphysical assumption that there exists an atemporal, transhistorical Truth.

**Gianni Carchia**

Gianni Carchia’s contribution to weak thought takes the leap into Hegelian contradiction to fish out what was left unthought or annihilated in this ultimate hypostasis of modern philosophy. Hegel had taken the noncoercive model of Kantian predication and transfigured it on the logical plane by subsuming it to historical mediation. What was thus left out was the possibility of unveiling mediation itself, which he calls “Being itself.” His project is therefore to take Being away from the logic of predication and reposition it under the logic of the event, which allows him to rethink “mediation qua mediation.” In the context of contemporary debates on how to shield thinking away from the shimmer of the appearance/essence dichotomy that so deeply characterized those years, without necessarily obscuring its revealing power, Carchia feels that the issue is
about the determination of a “nonsynthetic” character of the being of predication, an antipredicative mediation whose model can perhaps be furnished still by the Kantian theory of reflective judgment, where the judgment is given solely in the suspension of predication, as the locus of nonsynthesis: the untrammeled contemplation of appearances. (PD, 90; herein 108)

This required him to harvest the discussions concerning the critical import of the linguistic definition of the copula. The unshackling of the metaphysical underpinnings of logical grammar leaves the philosopher open to reconsider the possibilities of what is not or not yet explicitly predicated, but rather implied, suggested, alluded to, and in the end transfigured, narrated.

The Limits of Knowledge

Diego Marconi

It is indicative of the debolisti’s emphasis on language that a strong contribution to the anthology is an essay dealing precisely with the philosophy of language in the tradition of rationalism, positivism, and mathematical logic. Diego Marconi’s “Wittgenstein and the ‘idly turning wheels’” focuses on the crucial years when the philosopher dismantled his own 1921 edifice, the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, that is, the years 1929–1931 when he was part of the Vienna circle of logical positivists. Wittgenstein discovers that no matter how we ground a statement, there is always some slippage or residue of meaning in everything we say which cannot be accounted for other than by falsifying—or at any rate moving outside—the realm of justification covered by the metarules we establish to make sense of the world. An “idly turning wheel” (a mechanistic metaphor inspired by the work of Ernst Mach and Heinrich Hertz) is “a statement that cannot be verified in any manner, and therefore makes no sense”—or, literally in the Italian, “has no sense,” no direction, no perspective even from within his picture-window conception of the world. On the basis of this epistemological rupture for Wittgenstein logic is no longer the centerpiece of his or any theory of meaning. Though this may have already been intuited by some critics working within analytical philosophy, what Marconi emphasizes is that the issue now is not so much to confirm again and again that the epistemological break occurred, or to try to eliminate this phenomenon of language—by introducing yet another controlling clutch or mechanical governor, or reducing the tolerances between
moving parts, just to belabor the mechanistic metaphor—but “to explain why there is such a thing as idly turning wheels in language” (PD, 174; herein 189) once we have unmasked its existence.

Wittgenstein coined the expression when he confronted the problem of representation in language. Without belaboring its genealogy in the history of science, and succinctly phrased, an idly turning wheel would be a statement which is not essential to representation. The analogy turned explicative metaphor is then subjected to a thematic rearrangement; schematically these inessential parts consist of: (a) linguistic elements not necessary to representation; (b) statements that cannot be verified; (c) statements whose negation is nonsense; and (d) conceptual elements devoid of any relation to actual experience. The philosopher finds then that there exist in ordinary language elements which are indifferent to how things actually are in reality, so that, insofar as language bears above all a representative function (the concern of the years 1929–1931), the “idly turning wheels” must be understood as redundant linguistic elements. This can have far-reaching consequences, and certainly the question of redundancy has received some critical and creative attention, in Italy and elsewhere.

What is relevant to a general understanding of weak thought in Marconi’s detailed study of Wittgenstein is philosophically unsettling, and for the sciences and the positivistic worldview, earth-shattering: there is no privileged metalanguage. More than that, we are here made aware once again of the futility of holding on to impossible ideals or objectives whose execution or fulfillment requires a priori encoding, mastery, imposition, ultimately violence. To want to recognize the possibility of error, to persist in forecasting dispersion, and to neutralize the (self)deceiving element of language (of speech) is to continue to think that there is such a thing as normality in some transcendent way. Thus the (metaphoric!) notion of an idly spinning linguistic gear yields another form of the weakening of the iron-clad association or better correspondence appearance/reality. The consequences for analytic philosophy are devastating: it can only turn to translation as its most congenial field of inquiry.

The dramatic shift to this new perspective here needs to be underscored. In this passage from statements and utterances in some “natural language” to analysis of phrases in an “artificial language,” the philosopher’s task would then be to see how the logical articulation of a thought can immediately express what the grammatical or natural form inevitably masks, or drops behind, or keeps palming off for no apparent reason. This state of affairs has meant, for Wittgenstein, the end of the primacy of logic in his reflections on language. These idle linguistic parts are more than sinnlos (meaningless),
for in that they would respond to the logic of normalcy, of order, of a prescriptive grammar; they are rather unsinnig (insignificant), that is, irrelevant or, better, nonsignifying parts or aspects of language use. We might picture the philosopher riddled: these “redundant” linguistic expressions must allude to . . . something else, something which language cannot evidence. But what would that be? In the Tractatus, it was the form of representation itself. But in later years it evolves into the idea of linguistic play, of language-games. And yet from a literary and rhetorical standpoint, these anacholuta will be endowed with (previously unsuspected) meanings of some sort. But in order to bring them to bear on the real world, we would be required to shift our investigation onto the terrain of figural language, of allegory, of the “literariness” of a text, including Wittgenstein’s own stark prose. Weak thought did not address these topics, but one can sense how, with a reappropriation of rhetoric, there is much that lies ahead, and at any rate it brings the scientist and technocrat down to the sidewalk with the rest of us humans.

Marconi’s Wittgenstein discloses thinking to the realm of nonsense and the possibility that symbolic orders are generated and mediated right around and/or through any expression precisely defined according to the set of rules that guide the particular language-game. In concluding, Marconi observes that the theory of idly turning wheels was Wittgenstein’s last attempt to salvage a metaphysical component to language by illustrating yet again the uncertain though not altogether misleading aspects of any theory of reference.

Umberto Eco’s strategy is different. In his essay Eco makes a case for an illogically grounded strong form of thinking (the apodictic-deductive-demonstrative trunk that goes from antiquity through neopositivism), de-grounds his own hyperperfect semiotics of the code, illustrates the limits of the standard of the dictionary and supplants it with the grand metaphor of the encyclopedia, that is to say, a form of thought which is intrinsically social, time and place bound, and where the receiver (the lector) is more prominent than the sender (auctor). Though clearly developing his theory of unlimited semiosis, fully aware of other possible modalities of communication, from Eco’s vantage point, weak thought is not concerned with ragione, reason, but with ragionevolezza, reasonableness. We might say: not with truth, but with verisimilitude. At any rate, the encyclopedia is a hallmark product of modernity, perhaps something that will survive well into the post-postmodern provided we reckon the impact of technology and the media as no longer just accessory instruments, in a way integrating some of McLuhan’s theses, and
Lyotard’s forecast, in *The Postmodern Condition* (1983), that “Data banks are the Encyclopedia of tomorrow.” The arrival of the World Wide Web precisely during those years only confirms these intuitions. From Eco’s standpoint, against the explosion of the trees of knowledge into unlimited galaxies of *differentiae*, we (re)discover that technically the *differentiae* among the names of things, which is to say among their cataloguing and hierarchizing moves and countermoves, *originate outside* of the tree of substances, and are therefore *accidents*—“even ‘rational’ is an accident”—qualities, and are potentially infinite (PD, 70, 73; herein 90, 93). In a way, Eco is “accepting” the critical value of the notions of “rhizome” and “network” as functional metaphors, as linguistic devices (or, in the language of one of his favorite philosophers, Charles S. Peirce, “interpretants”) for an understanding of the semiotics of culture, irreducibly immersed in constellations of messages. In the end, he submits his own term to embody the electronic infomedia, *leakage*. We might say that in the communication process between sender and receiver, even when both share common codes and processes of encryption and decoding, there will always be some noise in the system, something that can in fact generate new sign processes or institute yet unimaginable codes (as in science fiction, for example). Although it can be demonstrated that Eco’s thought of the eighties and the nineties is potentially hermeneutic in the traditional definition of this term, he has been wary of being considered a full-fledged *debolista*. We can say, however, that in his critique of exclusivist formal models of analysis and in his introducing a more flexible, refined, and to all accounts appropriate understanding of the processes of communication in the real world of systems, institutions, genres, categories, and so on, he has weakened epistemology in a way which is not contrary to the broader philosophical outlook envisaged by Vattimo and Rovatti.

**Weakened Foundations of Society**

*Franco Crespi*

Assessing the general crisis of politics and of the rational forms of explanation and action in contemporary (Western) society, in his contribution to this volume Franco Crespi observes that from the first level of theoretical analysis we must grapple with “a progressive recognition of the *limits of knowledge*” which finds its origin in the development of the epistemology of science vis-à-vis empirical experience. Moreover, we must cope with “the disappearance of *télos*,” or, in other words, the demise of evolutionist or
progressive conceptions and the interpretation of universal history. In this context, social critique must deal with “the emergence of the irreconcilable character of both the existential and the social situation,” something that points directly to an identity crisis, amid a “plurality of social formations different from the traditional ones (family, class, employment, politics, etc.).” In this view, social groups and individuals are faced with a “growing pluralization of role involvement” (with a clear reference to Talcott Parsons) and the fact that their identity is no longer “the content of a tradition” (with reference to Jürgen Habermas). In tune with similar evaluations by other social scientists and philosophers, Crespi develops the Habermasian position to explain why, in a radically altered and unstable society, amid new and unforeseen shifts in population and capital, the lack or distortion of a tradition places the individual into an even more intense search for an identity. He writes that, upon close scrutiny, “the priorities of various feminist, homosexual, and youth movements today are of an ontological nature” owing to the fact that what is compelling and matters at all levels is primarily the “right to an identity, while the pursuit of common interests takes a back seat.” Going beyond Parsons, Crespi reiterates that “the present situation is characterized by a plurality of values and models in the social system,” by an “excess of alternatives” which, in the absence of a strong ego, gives rise to a growing “indeterminacy of the collective culture.” Sociology is thus deprived of half of its field of analysis, since general models can no longer function cognitively, pushing the thinker into the fray of postmodern thinking.

The “relative indefiniteness” of the inner dynamics of the ego must now experience a more complex, unstable symbolic mediation, so much so that the reformulated notion of identity becomes “a process of exploration of various possibilities, and different practical solutions.” In this view, we can observe and examine a kind of behavior which he would define as instrumental-opportunistic, “without implying by this any moral judgment.” The thesis is that the relative weakening of the totalizing character of normative-symbolic representations, linked to a situation of progressive differentiation of the social structure, is brought about in part by the “growing ability, present to some extent in every form of society, to go through [attraversare] the institutional orders in the pursuit of particular aims, without necessarily altering the orders themselves.” Once again, the great systems are collapsing, foundations are gone, ushering the possibility of conceiving of a “weak modality of experience” (PD, 246; herein 255). In this, Crespi is already speaking to what is happening today with greater frequency as demographic shifts increase and the individual agents become often invisible.
Alessandro Dal Lago

In Dal Lago’s reading of Simone Weil we are made aware, we might say once again, of the influence, in all our present and past thinking, of blind necessity, and with that of the disturbing prospect that force can express itself and have an impact even within a horizon of incertitude and undecidability. The consideration submitted here is that force, once it is manifested, marks and determines the way it is interpreted by the social agent affected by it. Meaning, says Dal Lago, comes always after the event, and typically we try to construct a theory in order to explain why and how a particular situation developed or a fact came about. But there is no surefire connection between the event and the theorem issued to explain it: as we saw earlier with Marconi, it is always a question of postulating a hypothesis, or appealing to a likely logical system, but also, ultimately, making reference to a story we devise to make sense of our social existence. Seeing through the errancy and arbitrariness of the theory-as-story is the first task of a thinking which, rather than countering force with force, power systems with alternative power systems which ultimately evoke and reinforce each other in diabolical codependency, should essay instead to introduce a weak ethics, one anchored on local responsibility, however intermittent or differentiated, one which has truly abandoned the grand Immutables of Western metaphysics for something less lofty and perennial, yet also closer to home, interpersonal, and meaning-producing even when God is no longer there.

Thinking, Poetizing, Narrating

Leonardo Amoroso

As we saw previously with reference to the linguistic aspect of doing philosophy, the philosophers of weak thought have in their different ways not only challenged the limits of the metalanguages of traditional philosophical and scientific currents, but had also gone beyond toward interrogating language itself. More than that, their own highly personalized readings of literature and of the works of major poets in particular have disclosed critical thinking to the possibility that poetic language may indeed be the ultimate barrier: had Rimbaud not chosen not to write? had Nietzsche not ended up writing a grand allegory? had Heidegger not stopped pursuing his earlier general theory of being because of language, and turned to the study of poetry?
Leonardo Amoroso’s incisive rereading of Heidegger’s notion of *Lichtung* is probably the most rewarding intervention from the point of view of the connection between language and metaphysics. Reading the *Aeneid*, the canonical Latin epic, through Heidegger is significant on several accounts. It suggests that perhaps the “dismissal” of Roman thinking effected in the *Letter on Humanism* (1947) was too quick, ungenerous, and perhaps politically motivated. It suggests also the possibility of reading *à la* Heidegger against his own assessment of certain historical epochs or authors. It further suggests that this mode of reading poetic texts might actually be faithfully imitated, schematically reduplicated, in sum exported and applied as an interpretive model across cultural boundaries. At any rate, for a form of thinking that depends upon language primarily, and has moreover accepted the haunting prospect—not shared by all, to be sure—of *the metaphoric nature of all thought*, a canonical text such as the *Aeneid* offers the possibility of untried speculative itineraries especially for its being a grandly metaphorical, allegorical, and mythographic construct. In this stunning Heideggerian reading, Amoroso practices a hermeneutic *applicatio* of the notion of *Lichtung*, here (r)evoked to disclose its preeminence in the Latin notion of *lucus*, the sacred wood surrounded by the *silva*, delving into the paradox of (non)being. What Amoroso seeks in Virgil’s opus and extracts through an elaborate patchwork of critical terms is *the post-metaphysical relevance* of notions such as *belonging*, *place*, *dis-closure*, *linking*, *sending* and *traveling*, the *challenge of mystery* and *enigmas*, and finally *erring*. The human condition is here understood as *Dwelling*, not as *Domination*, of/in the Light, a *relation* in the luminosity that de-termines the close relation with the world. The *lucus* is originarily the place for the encounter, the crossing of the boundary outside the Light, the *selva* where Being and *Da-Sein* coincide. However, being the “measure,” the “*metron,*” of all things, human beings constantly place things “under a specific light.” They must tell stories even as they set out to dispel and denounce mythologies. Thus the different experiences of the paradox of a *lucus a (non) lucendo* are set in circulation, proliferating, yet still “aware of the ontological-existential co-involvement . . . marked by an essential viability” (PD, 160; herein 171).

Independently of how this reading compares with that of his peers across the Alps or across the Atlantic, Amoroso’s contribution to this collection can be read as accrediting the growing relevance of a “rhetorical approach” to philosophy, and within that to the possibility that metaphorical/allegorical thinking may yet be what awaits thinking at the “end of metaphysics.” On another level, one can perceive how Amoroso seeks to evoke that “historical space,” a Nietzschean *Zwischen*, or Michel Serres’ “included third,” at the interface.
between the symbolic and the material. Mediation is here not shunned, but given time and space to e-merge. A mediation that braces under floating metaphorical referents, no longer assured by the pillars of analogy, the algebra of correspondences, and the statutory impositions of predicative logic.

Filippo Costa

Doing philosophy starting from these assumptions is at this juncture a daunting if not impossible task, but that is the challenge Filippo Costa takes on, teasing out the weak ontology embedded in Kafka’s Werks. Interrogating the deeper connection between event and memory, and the double-bind of a text which is both a protecting and a liberating of senses invisible and enigmatic, Costa runs up against that other small morphosyntactic device of speech, the “as if” (PD, 213; herein 227) in concert with the cruciality of other “linkages” permitted through non-semantic markers such as “but,” “perhaps,” and other “parabolic paradoxes.” What surfaces with some conviction is that, rather than seeking how these linguistic markers or “minor parts” of speech impede truth, they serve to express the sense (i.e., the direction) of truth, a locus which once again is positively predisposed to accept the tertium comparationis as well as the “comparand itself.” Once again negation takes center stage and once again it is made to lead not necessarily or exclusively to nihilism and nothingness, nor to the paroxysm of seeing both subject and predicate frozen in their absurd logical claims, but, rather, to a predication which is aware of saying something primordially heterologic, skirting the conceptual limits of the aphorism61 (PD, 222; herein 234). This is done while cautioning us about claims of identity, as these can be articulated only through reference to something which is not identical to itself, or in short to some other:

How is it possible to say something if saying is predicative and if predication attributes to A a [quality] B which is not A? How is a “material” tautology possible? A proposition which contains the same term as both subject and as predicate is a badly constructed proposition, according to Aristotelian logic. Every authentic saying is saying what is “different,” it is a heterology. (PD, 225; herein 236–37)

Costa discovers that Kafka’s annihilation of identity on the part of the subject is the other side of a fin-de-siècle crisis which finds in Musil the corresponding annihilator of identity on the part of the predicate. The two experiences should be read in tandem, for they stand as emblematic witnesses
to the dismantling of that ontological saturation achieved by modern thinking and culture. The fact that all stories have been told, all accounts closed, so to speak, or that Being is both infinite and forever fictionally enclosed in valiant strictures that claim to be leakproof, only spurs the critic to reconsider the very potential of the hermeneutics of narrative as the path to a thinking which, while following its destiny, its going-to, is not rolling along the rigorous channels a specific destination or finality requires. “For Kafka’s characters, there is no nostalgia” (PD, 228; herein 239). Indeed, there is also nothing to go back to, nothing anyone would want to get back to if we accept that as a retrojected fantasy or misplaced desire. Contrary to some superficial evaluations of it, weak thought is not nostalgic. And it doesn’t bank too heavily on the future either. Interesting, in this context, are Costa’s observations on Kafka’s relationship to his father, and how this may disclose a weakened notion of the Father or even God (PD, 236; herein 245). At the discursive level, we are left to consider, once again, certain “rhetorical” aspects, such as similitude, allegory (“parabola” in Kafka), polysemantic syntax, and finally the haunting enigma of the “unnarratable” (PD, 227; herein 238). In brief, knowledge is out, re-cognition is in, because words (the words and the language of identity, of Oneness) are already consumed and there is no “new” reality to express. The motto might be: “Tell it again, Sam!”—with full awareness that, like Ion of the Platonic dialogue, the narrating is the event itself, it means by being forever the same and forever different at each occurrence.

Giampiero Comolli

On the same wavelength, but going one step further into the uncertain terrains of the diaphora, the contrast or struggle between poetry and philosophy, is Comolli’s contribution to the collection. The essay opens with a sort of existential trance or epiphany within which fact and fiction, memory and imagination, the present and an indistinct past, work together in spurring what ends representing, in the mind of the author, being thinking at the end of metaphysics. And this entails primarily trans-position, re-locations of sense. The theme of the journey reappears, against which Joseph K’s “destiny” of being always suspended between life and death, in other words, his eminently tragic dimension, is ever more dramatically and uncannily displayed. The endless repetition of the same, or the pointless, fruitless returns plunge the character, and the reader, in endless ruminations on the possible sense of it all, at any rate it stimulates interpretation of enigmas. The subject has since the beginning of time been philosophizing on its own, or doing politics, or legislating itself either within logical spaces, pretending access to knowledge, or outside
in incomprehensible symbolic manifestations, searching for meaning in the world. Both approaches have foundered. Now, Comolli says, the subject can only narrate. And that precisely at the very moment when it discovers that its paths point to what in principle cannot be narrated. Still, the critical or better yet critical/creative impulse is to foreground this counter-figure which, though in part autobiographical, does not reveal a limit but rather confronts the symptom and condition of its givenness, of its eventfulness.

Narration, a setting-in-language whose discursive preconditions inform both “fiction” and “history,” appears to be one of the main venues disclosed to a thinking which is originarily post-metaphysical, un-strung, and humbled. In the end, in fact, the crux remains the inevitability of the as if, the mystery of comparison, the generative mainsprings of metaphor. What we can say now with more conviction is that there is no longer an ontology of the Word to be sought, but an ontic-ontological coincidence of discourse-over-time, a mode of thinking and creating which assigns primacy to the verbal construct against the traditional standard lordship, in aesthetic theories and poetics, of the lexeme, of the onoma.62

Topica of Weak Thought

The form of thinking which emerges from the individual contributions to this anthology are potentially subversive of any established, or authoritarian, or “strong” social order or political system, whether left, right, or center. If one develops it further in the direction of political economy, weak thought becomes a thorn on the side of any ideology or program anchored to notions of progress, categorical growth of any production, consumption as the engine of capitalism, and of a jurisprudence which protects property and privileges often even to the detriment of basic human rights. By drawing attention to the fact that interactions are always mediated, and in context, weak thought brings the critical consciousness back to pragmatics and to conventions, to protocols. Esteemed evaluator of weak thought Richard Rorty’s notion of redescription, though derived from a different context, resonates well with a “politics” of weak thought. The revaluation of the being-there that we seem to be requires rethinking the witnesses and remains of lives and thoughts which have been, and have left traces (monuments, codes, traditions), realizing concretely (in body as in mind) that they are constituted by linguistic rules and patterns somehow legitimated, accepted for a period of time, or become authoritative through a particular transmission of values and ideas. There is present in all social organizations an inevitable dynamic of checks
and balances, a rich repertoire of modalities of securing capitals and properties and belongings, suddenly making the “great forces” presumably fueling a society less imposing and mysterious as they acquire the status of a conversation one can undertake while humanly essaying to sway sense in a particular direction. There is a humbleness to weak thought which teaches that no one human being can tackle it all, Being, History, Time, or God. Thus the entreaty seems to be: why not turn to what has been left behind, in the thresh heap of history so to speak (especially that of Memory), to grasp a sense of the truth, and then give it voice. Moreover, what is left behind is hardly a homogeneous whole, and is not definitely a retro-fantasy about what was never there. The past is rather an intricate network of relations and exchanges which, like the Internet, permit countless itineraries, and can be rewritten in yet newer ways. History is the storehouse of the stories we told each other over the centuries, sedimentation of beings who have been (physically) but who can still talk to us (spiritually, through language). Any sort of projecting, of wanting to change things, suggesting the necessity for prototypes (or models, or paradigms), must start with a raking of the archetypes, and not only with that, but with the transmission, the subsequent successful or authoritative versions, of that same arché through specific cultural spaces and times. Being manifests itself in the occasions, in the inevitable interference created, but now with a soft tone, sotto voce, perhaps as “half-truths.”

Another major point of reflection is opened up concerning the long-debated and now partly ignored notion of decidability and the possibility that a new dimension of reciprocal expression may be opened up. Like Handke’s Zeno, Rovatti asks, does it make a difference which mode of reasoning I choose to solve the riddle of whether Zeno would ever go back to Elea? It may seem neither makes a difference, yet the fact remains that the subject, its Dasein, must go one way or the other. There is a weakened existentialism behind this, but lucky for us, not full blown as it was in Sartre (which Vattimo has demonstrated was still in the throes of a strong dialectic). I am referring to the renewed attention to the fact that we, as humans, live in a state of contingency, that the so-called global is no more than what we (or some corporate interest) think it to be. Still, from our own limited condition or perspective, we are “activated” relative to some discourse, whether it is globalism, metaphysics, or getting the subway to run on time: anything, in fact, we might call a dialogue. A position which easily transcends any one coherent (typically self-grounding) ideological take, because, as Rovatti tells us, “contingency and disorder are not [life’s] irrational residues, but rather the keys to its access.” Our lives, the sense of all things, are but a low-tension drifting, a movement among other ones, both real or imagined. But it is the “real,” as understood by Lacan, which drags us down, for it embodies a neces-
sity which contains us, and before which even not choosing is a choice when faced with the inevitability of things. Love is one such dimension of existence: “the now and the always lose their abstract fullness only when we succeed in anchoring them to the never, to the impossible.” The everyday regains a power precisely because it listens to the immanence of reality: ex-sistere, being aware that there is a finite Me in this world which is greater and other than the I I think I am. We may have lost the capacity (or feel the need) for lofty views on reality, but we have accessed laterally an indefinite horizon of possibilities, grounded in that being-there in-the-world who knows that there is fundamentally, principally, this world each and every day but with-others. Here events have to be redrawn, the sextants recalibrated, and spoken about accordingly, differently. With no fear of totalization, for the instancing of the affirmation makes it impossible for it to be subsumed to anything else but its own irreversible necessity, the counter-face of chance, or contingency. It is a revaluation of the particular, of the regional, politically antiglobal.

Weak thought is also eminently an attitude toward things, whether ideas or relationships, predisposed to listening to the world, to the other being with whom I cannot but be forever-with. This discloses an ethical attitude framed on free and reciprocally respectful mobility. Persuasion is that aspect of language in action, of actual speech, which cannot be avoided, people speak to one another, and for a reason. Focusing on the language is not only relevant, but necessary. Broadly said, philosophy must rethink its rhetorical nature, its being thinking-speaking, denken-dichtung. But also and more concretely, explore what today goes under the separate labels of “linguistics,” “philosophy of language,” and “rhetoric” to seek their common foundation—a floating one, to be sure, but an invitation to share views based on the premise that we talk to one another. It is impossible to exist socially without speaking or knowing the language rules, the interactive codes, of precise groups, constituencies, associations, professions, disciplines, rituals. The truth has, before an ontological, historical, or idealized essence, a language dimension to it, which is eminently public, social speech.

I think we have traveled abundantly through the main essays of the Weak Thought anthology to dare sum it up in loosely defined notions, or themes, perhaps to better grasp how it resonates with other (post)philosophical modes of thinking in continental philosophy and cultural studies.

Weak thought, then, understands the task of thinking to be primarily:

a. originary interpretive distortion (Vattimo)
b. semantic slippage, redundancy (Marconi, Ferraris)
c. symbolic residues (Vattimo, Rovatti)
d. ontologically and historically inessential (Rovatti)
e. focusing on cultural leakages, background noise (Eco, Rovatti)
f. the undecidability of the referent vs. reconciliation of humans with nature (Dal Lago)
g. indeterminacy in the collective (Dal Lago, Crespi)
h. poiesis, narration (Dal Lago, Costa, Vattimo, Rovatti)
i. exploring the crossroads of Being and becoming (Vattimo, Rovatti)
j. critical discourse and evaluation arise from a set of canons constituted historically by art and taste (Vattimo)
k. the event is never stable or unique, engages experience (Vattimo, Costa, Rovatti)
l. dealing with plurivocal subjectivities (all)
m. speaking against any totalizing, closed, “strong” logocentrism (all)

The path should be clear, at this juncture, to begin the next stage in the destiny of weak thought: that of comparing/contrasting with other major forms of thought in the post-WWII period, beginning with how it differs from other philosophical and critical schools in Italy, to how it is not like French deconstruction, what its possible conceptual cognates in America are, what it reveals about the endless capacity of German philosophy to take on peculiar shapes and venture into culturally heterogeneous terrains, and finally how it could furnish a philosophical understanding to such interesting forms of critique today, from postcolonial to interliterary analyses, from relational to hybrid criticism. Weak thought seems to be eminently predisposed to developments in a variety of arenas, from ecology to migration, from the politics of health to the ideology of corporatism. It is time it gets a deeper and broader reassessment, working from the original contributions finally available to the English-speaking world.

Note on the Translation

I will refrain from submitting a lengthy theory of translation here. I have been translating Italian criticism and philosophy since the mid-eighties, when I launched my journal, Differentia: review of italian thought (Queens Col-
le, 1986–1999). There are eleven writers, each with their own style, and as they are all implicitly or explicitly against strong, rational, or deductive expression, they have exercised the malleable syntax of Italian. I did not wish to make them all sound like “standard” scientific prose; I did not hesitate to push the English if a certain rhetorical effect was detected in the original. Articulating a new way of thinking poses great challenges in any language. Fortunately, the debolisti are mainly essayists—they do subjectively exploit the language of the tribe as much as possible. In any event, it is a translation after all, and if we can argue about what is the most effective way of saying something in another language, we can certainly agree in determining what is not intended by a given expression. To allay doubts, not only nearly all the authors have seen first drafts, I have given the individual essays to different readers over time, without the Italian, asking simply if they sounded intelligible. Many, of course, were the suggestions, which I in part incorporated. But I did not make the language in the essays non-gender specific, because saying “man” to indicate all human beings was still the norm in professional writing in Italy at the time. It wouldn’t have made sense to “sanitize” them. The starting piece by Vattimo, “Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought,” had already been translated and published (see note 3) by Thomas Harrison and myself in 1985. However, I have revised it enough for this edition to consider the translation wholly my responsibility, and Tom agreed.

For the technical terms, I have followed standard practice in translating l’essere with “Being,” and gli enti with “beings” or at times “entities.” When the sentence is particularly complex and much impinges upon a word which has other plausible renderings in English, I have added the Italian in square brackets. Whenever I could find an existing English translation of the sources cited by the authors, I have added it to the original notes of each essay.

Notes


5. See the bibliography of Vattimo’s published works contained in Zabala, ed., Weakening Philosophy, 423–430.

6. This expression is used by Vattimo in the Heideggerian sense. For the history of Heidegger’s reception in Italy just before and then around the provoking readings of the German thinker advanced by weak thought theorists, see the special issues of Nuova Corrente (Genoa) nos. 76–77 (1978), Rivista di estetica (Turin) no. 22 (1986), aut aut (Milan) nos. 223–224 (1989), and the massive 1989 issue of Archivio di Filosofia (Padua), dedicated entirely to “Heidegger’s Reception in Italy,” which contains twenty-eight contributions (by just about every major living Italian philosopher), and complete bibliographies, translations, and editions up to that time.

7. For details, see Santiago Zabala’s reconstruction of Vattimo’s complex militancy between Marxism and Christianity in his introduction to Weakening Philosophy, 4–34.


9. Vattimo is the translator of Gadamer’s Wahrheit und Methode, which appeared as Verità e metodo (Milan: Fabbri, 1974), subsequently reissued by Bompiani, Milan.


12. Gianni Vattimo, Pier Aldo Rovatti, Il pensiero debole (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983). Further references will be incorporated in my text with the abbreviation PD followed by the page number in the original Italian text and then by the page number to the translation in this book.

13. Hegel and Hegelianism have a profound complex history within Italian thought and politics. For general overviews, see Eugenio Garin, Cronache di filosofia italiana, 2 vols. (Bari: Laterza, 1975); Giuseppe Semerari, Novecento filosofico italiano (Naples: Guida, 1988); and Norberto Bobbio, Ideological Profile of Twentieth-Century
Italy, trans. L. G. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). For the discourse focused on an “end of politics,” which was developing in Italy right about the time Vattimo and Rovatti were formulating weak thought, see the special issue of *Semiotext(e)* “Anatomia: Post-political Politics,” 3, no. 3 (1980) [reissued in 2007, Los Angeles, distributed by MIT Press] and Angelo Bolaffi and Massimo Ilardi, eds., *Fine della politica?* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1986).

14. Vattimo may have been influenced by the version of dialectics developed by Gadamer in his studies on Hegel and Plato.

15. See Vattimo’s critique of Derrida in *The Adventures of Difference*, 151–171, where the distance between the two thinkers is made clear and should prevent one from considering weak thought the Italian version of Derridian deconstruction.

16. In this view, all major traditions which have codified Being into a stable (though elusive) structure—such as the Platonic, Judeo-Christian, Enlightenment, and finally Hegelian one—are in need of revision. To achieve this we need to introduce a dynamic which recalls rather the unstable givenness of beings, suggesting thus that the truth of Being can only occur at times, in flashes, grasped in its (largely artistic) concretions or interpersonal, interlinguistic experiences: “Ultimately, the issue of the difference between Being and beings, called the ontological difference, leads much further than even Heidegger expected. . . . The analysis of *Dasein*, of its thrownness as well as of its continually resituated and qualified nature, leads Heidegger to radically temporalize the *a priori*. All we can say about Being at this point is that it consists in trans-mission, in forwarding [*invio*]: Über-lieferung and Ge-schick. The world plays itself out in horizons constructed by a series of echoes, linguistic resonances, and messages coming from the past and from others (others alongside us as well as from other cultures). The *a priori* that makes possible our experience of the world is Ge-schick, destiny-forwarding, or Überlieferung, transmission. True Being never is but forwards itself (it sets out on the path and sends itself), it trans-mits itself” (PD, 19; herein 44–45, transl. modified).


19. Further on in the pages of *Weak Thought*, Vattimo writes: “Heidegger’s *Verwindung* is the most radical effort to think being in terms of a ‘taking account of’ or ‘realization’ [*presa d’atto*] which is at once a ‘taking leave of,’ for it neither conceives being as a stable structure nor registers and accepts it as the logical outcome of a process. *Verwindung* is the mode in which thought thinks the truth of being as Über-lieferung and Ge-schick. In this respect it is synonymous with An-denken, which never renders Being present but always recalls it as already ‘gone’” (PD, 22; herein 46–47). For this very reason, it would be absurd to pretend to recover a pure image
from the past, or give a perfect account of anything: recollection, interpretation, are always “distorted,” necessarily, we might say primordially. It means accepting perspectivism even when dealing with universals!

20. The Italian word *beni* normally rendered with “goods,” connotes also, and in certain contexts may mean, what we call “deeds,” or motivated actions or qualities read as something which amounts to a good thing.


23. As can be gathered from his other writings, the reservations about Ricoeur stem from the French philosopher never having entirely abandoned Husserlian phenomenology, whereas those about Habermas (and elsewhere about Apel) are motivated by the latter’s reworking of transcendental categories.


29. For an overview of the intrinsic developments as well as of the cultural impact of the philosophy of science in Italy, especially for the post-WWII years, see Evandro Agazzi, ed., *La filosofia della scienza in Italia nel ’900* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1986).

30. It may be useful to contextualize here by recalling that in the culture, the decade before *Weak Thought* appeared, there was ample discussion on the relationship between the dissolution of the metaphysical foundations of logic, the crises of scientific truth, and the constitution of the subject, all of which compelled reflection on the structuring of uncertainty and its possible implications. Representative of this state of affairs are books by Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. A. Cangogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989 [1962]), and *La struttura assente* (Milan:

31. This brings to mind and parallels the much debated question, especially in American criticism, of “undecidables,” though in the Italian context it has been less a problem for literary interpretation and more a concern for ethical and political choices. Some writers, such as Gino Baratta in his “Per un elogio dell’indecidibile” (in Umberto Artioli and Francesco Bartoli, eds., *Il viandante e la sua orma* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1981: 9–20) see this debacle as a wise and perverse “resistance,” non-decision as profoundly subversive. In the same collection, of similar persuasion seem to be Alberto Moravia, “Dell’inutile utilità” (108–111), and Umberto Silva, “Questa o/ quell’persona sono pari” (149–160). But deconstructive undecidability was governed by the play and permutations of the signifier, here we are talking about signification, referential clusters of meaning, concrete semantic options, though of course highly unstable ones.

32. Many issues of the journals *Nuova Corrente*, *aut aut*, *Rivista di estetica*, and *Alfabeta*, for example, have been dedicated to the relationship between poetry and philosophy, spurring articles and books on hermeneutic readings of given authors or literary works.


34. Once again, in order to better contextualize the cultural background to *Weak Thought*, it might be useful to recall the complex, “hot” political and social situation in Italy in the late seventies, with the fiery debates on the status and possible fate of the left (in all its many specific configurations), the first attempts at “historicizing” the magical year 1968, and the turn to terrorism by the outer fringes of both the right and the left.


36. Rovatti, *La posta in gioco*, 9. From this vantage point, we can appreciate Rovatti’s rehabilitation of phenomenological *epoché* understood as a sending, a repeating and a returning, or simply as a setting forth and source of infinite itineraries, all of which can only be expressed through metaphoric language (61–102).


40. This was an early stage in Ferraris’ thought, when he basically agreed with Derridians from the rest of the European scene and the Yale critics of the early eighties. He has subsequently moved “beyond” deconstruction and hermeneutics and developed his own philosophy, which he terms “rationalist aesthetics.”

41. Foremost among his sources were Émile Benveniste and Roland Barthes. For similar reconsiderations on Hegel’s notion of mediation, see Diego Marconi, “Hegel’s Definition of Idealism, Rorty, and Feyerabend,” *Epistemologia* 9 (1986): 95–104.

42. Carchia had already written a book on *Orfismo e tragedia* in 1979, and around the time of the *Weak Thought* anthology he published a collection of studies, *La legittimazione dell’arte* (1982), which contains chapters relevant to the present discussion on “post-histoire” and the death drive of modernity. The Kantian aperture at the end of this essay is developed later in his *Retorica del sublime* (1991). A friend and great human being, sadly Gianni Carchia passed away in 2001.

43. We should bear in mind here that authors such as Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Karl Popper, Ilya Prigogine, and Edgar Morin were widely discussed in different contexts in Italy from the mid-sixties onward and likely represented valuable training ground for philosophers of Marconi’s generation. Marconi received his Laurea from the University of Turin in 1969 with a thesis on “Scientific Language and Non-Scientific Discourse in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein.” Subsequently he studied at the University of Pittsburgh with W. Sellars, N. Rescher, N. Belnap, A. Grünbaum, and earned his PhD in 1979 with a thesis on “Hegel’s Use of Language in the *Science of Logic*.”

44. As Marconi goes on to explain, the expression “idly turning wheels” was first employed by H. Hertz in his *Die Principien der Mechanik*, published in 1894. In developing classical physics in terms of a rigorous scientific system, Hertz wondered whether the very notion of Force—lynchpin of physics from Galileo through Newton—was not something ultimately redundant. Hertz found that when applied to a Great System, say, astronomy, its usefulness was proportionate to its imprecision, as it could not be tested experimentally and could not be verified experientially. He concluded that Force is a *theoretical construct* devoid of factual incidence and remains inde-monstrable. During those revolutionary years in the development of modern physics, the philosopher-scientist Mach takes this a step further when he finds that the direct interpretation of a theoretical construct in terms of observable facts is not a necessary condition for its legitimacy. He thus removes the link with experience, freeing up further possibilities for conceptual elaborations. He suggests that it is no longer theoretically necessary to demonstrate each single experiment, that working with clusters of data is just as scientifically acceptable and correct, and that ultimately we can do away with Newton’s concept of space and time. One can sense that Heisenberg and Einstein are just around the corner. Space and time have now become “ideal entities which are not knowable through experiment,” and moreover they stand as appendices within the same mechanical system that includes them. These systems do not need absolute concepts, and therefore can do without them.
45. This echoes cognate concepts, such as slippage, surplus, residue, to which we will return. In terms of literature, this “loss” may be associated to what used to be called the “elusive” je ne sais quoi and now perhaps, as we will see with Comolli’s contribution, the “unnarratable.”

46. Understood in light of radical rethinking of this field, as we have from such diverse thinkers as Kenneth Burke, Chaïm Perelman, Ernesto Grassi, Paolo Valesio, Edward Schiappa, and thinkers who have not employed the word rhetoric, preferring rather the term discourse, but who have launched renewed philosophical awareness of the mode of philosophizing, such as the earlier Michel Foucault, Ferruccio Masini, Michel Serres, and the Lyotard of Le Différend, just to mention a few.

47. One can think of an entire tradition that extends from the avant-garde poetics of a Gertrude Stein or Tristan Tzara, for whom language (poetic or written or theatrical) had nothing to do with communicating anything about “reality”—though, to be sure, that would be what they essayed to communicate—to the more contemporary “serious” itineraries of apparent non sequiturs by Gilles Deleuze in such works as The Logic of Sense (1990) and, with Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus (1987).

48. Eco’s essay was republished as a subsection of an expanded version, occupying chapter 2, in his Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).


50. In A Theory of Semiotics Eco had already incorporated, explaining their functioning, the model of the rhizome, the Katz and Postal model, and the Quillian model of communication, the latter being most apt at unpacking creative constructs.


52. On a similar path, see Diego Marconi’s encyclopedia article from the same period, “Semantica,” in Enciclopedia, Vol. XII (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), 687–714, where he situates “the relativity of lexical meaning” (709–712) in the transition from dictionary to encyclopedia.


55. Keeping to the Italian context, I will limit myself to listing authors who from the late sixties through the early eighties were concerned with similar issues: Giacomo Marramao, Salvatore Veca, Paolo Flores D’Arcais, Norberto Bobbio, and Roberto Ardigò.

56. Among the theorists who had done similar studies aimed at disclosing this hitherto (at least until the early 1980s) different sense of identity, or this multifaceted
toned-down subjectivity, Crespi makes reference to works by Erwin Goffman and Niklas Luhmann.

57. Crespi explored this terrain in a later (1985) article that followed the one included in *Weak Thought*, titled “Modernità: l’etica dell’età senza certezze,” and another published in 1991 in *Differentia: review of italian thought* 5, 7–18, titled “Cultural Changes and the Crisis of Politics in Post-Modern Society,” from which the intercalated citations are drawn.

58. It is symptomatic, once again, of the climate in which *Weak Thought* appeared, that during those years we see the publication of key books by Alessandro Dal Lago, *L’ordine infranto: Max Weber e i limiti del razionalismo* (Milan: Unicopli, 1983), and Giacomo Marramo, *L’ordine disincantato* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1985) that point to the general sense of a deep crisis of all-encompassing paradigms and general systems of analysis.


60. Virgil’s reputation suffered extensive damage in the cultural unconscious of modern Italy, which is an additional reason why Amoroso’s reading in the context of weak thought is important. Exhumed and praised as god, or prophet, or forerunner of the Risorgimento, the myth of Aeneas was deflated by successive generations, beginning with Croce at the turn of the last century. The forced and shrill revaluation of the prototypical Roman made by fascism only served to transform Virgil, during the past half-century, into an undesirable grandparent. On the occasion of the 2,000th anniversary of his death, in 1981, the then hot political and cultural climate made short shrift of Virgil, who was read, depending on the particular venue, as bourgeois, parasitic to the state, imperialist in his views, nauseatingly anthropologocentric, and so on. Odysseus was the preferred archetypal hero, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* notwithstanding, as a way of slighting the founding father of the national allegory, ignoring the fact that, as Simone Weil reminds us—see Dal Lago’s essay, ch. 5—it seems that the main epics of the entire Western tradition are grounded on force, that is to say, on violence!

61. On the rhetoric of the aphorism (in Nietzsche specifically), see my *Prefaces to the Diaphora: Rhetorics, Allegory, and the Interpretation of Postmodernity* (W. Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1991), 13–76.

62. This recalls for instance the evolving position of Paul Ricoeur from *La metaphore vive* (1975) to *Temps et recit* (1982–1988), which was widely discussed in Italy by many of the authors presented here. See my study of Ricoeur’s “rhetorical hermeneutics” in *dei parlanti* (Turin: marcovalerio, 2002), 143–179, now in English in my *The Elusive Hermes: Method, Discourse, and the Critique of Interpretation* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group Publishing, 2012), 341–361.
In this essay I will try to sketch the main tenets of weak thought, *il pensiero debole*, and how it is related to dialectics and difference. This connection is not to be understood mainly or solely as an “overcoming” but, rather, it is to be defined primarily in terms of the Heideggerian notion of *Verwindung*, a term whose sense also must be understood within the horizon of a “weak” notion of what it means to think. We cannot in any case read the relationship between these three terms as if we were talking of a passage from one to the other. Weak thought has not entirely left dialectics and difference behind; rather, they constitute for it a past in the Heideggerian sense of *Gewesenheit*, which has to do with the idea of sending *invio* and destiny.

With these premises, however, I am not saying that to take dialectics and difference as a point of departure requires I take a theoretical stance which would need to be radically justified, assuming that it could. In the present context, these two terms are “givens” of destiny understood as transmission: they are points of reference we encounter each and every time we engage in thinking, here and now. It is probably only “strong” thought, that of deductive cogency, which fears letting the initial move escape, the move after which everything falls into place. And yet the question of beginnings cannot be avoided even from the standpoint of a weak notion of thinking. Weak thought presupposes that, contrary to the heavily metaphysical framework beneath the problem of beginnings (starting from the first principles of Being), and contrary moreover to a historicist metaphysics (in Hegel’s sense, in which Being has no first principles but is rather a providential process: to think means to be up on the times), a third way may be possible. This third way would have an “empiricistic” nature without, however, presuming to begin with some experience which is either pure or else purified of
historical and cultural conditions. The experience with which we may begin and to which we must remain faithful is above all and largely that of the everyday, which is also and always historically qualified and culturally dense. There are no transcendental conditions of possibility for experience which might be attainable through some type of reduction or epoché, suspending our ties to historical-cultural, linguistic, and categorical horizons. The conditions of possibility for experience are always qualified, or, as Heidegger says, Dasein is a thrown project—thrown time and time again. The foundation, the setting out, the initial sending [invio] of our discourse cannot but be a hermeneutical foundation.¹

Even the logic which informs discourse (for it does have a logic, and its development is hardly arbitrary) is inscribed in situations made up of controlling procedures given time and again in the same impure mode we find in historical and cultural conditions of experience. Perhaps the model to keep in mind—which is in fact always-already at work in the movement of philosophy, even when we interpret this in different ways—is that of literary and art criticism: critical discourse and evaluation always arise from a set of canons constituted historically by art and taste.

Let us then suppose that when we engage in philosophy in this impure way here and now—in Italy today, which means in the context of present-day Italian philosophy, and in its relation to the prevailing trends of Euro-Continental philosophy—we encounter a pervasive but problematic concept: dialectics. And we are forced to take a stand on it. In other words, it may be useful as well as hermeneutically correct to refer to a work (for even here the choice is given in the things themselves, in the situation) which is emblematical of the presence of dialectics in contemporary thought, Sartre’s Critique of Dialectical Reason.² Here Sartre characterizes dialectics in terms of two main notions: totality and reappropriation. He retraces the dialectical paths already traveled by Hegel: truth is the whole, and the authentic formation of humanity consists in assuming the perspective of the whole.

To understand what it means to say that truth is the whole, we do not have to reconstruct Hegel as much as take a closer look at the critique of ideology prevalent in the thinking of our day. Contrary to what may seem to be the case, this critique consists less in an unmasking of the hidden (which would bring it closer to a certain notion of hermeneutics as the “school of suspicion”) than in an effort to reconstruct a non-partial point of view, one which would thus allow us to grasp totality as such. Ideology is not solely false thinking, expressing in an (unconsciously) masked form the truth that lies at the bottom. Ideology masks truth because it is partial thinking.

The reconstitution of totality means also its reappropriation. Only once the landscape is fully disclosed can we truly avail ourselves of it. What is
central in Sartre and in twentieth-century dialectics—which keeps in mind Marx and his critique of the idealistic traits of Hegel—is the awareness of the problematic relationship between totality and reappropriation. The Critique of Dialectical Reason is a critique in the Kantian sense of the term. It intends to clarify under what conditions it concretely possible to constitute a non-ideological, total point of view. We know how Sartre solves the problem, even if not definitively: knowledge that is actually total-reappropriated realizes itself only in the consciousness of the “fused group,” the revolutionary group in action, in which theory and praxis are one and the perspective of the individual fully coincides with everyone else’s. But over and above this solution and the problems it nevertheless entails (as, for instance, the tendency to fall back into the alienation of the “practico-inert” once the “heat” of the revolutionary moments is over), what I find pertinent in Sartre’s analysis is the clarification once and for all of the mythological nature of all other solutions to the problem of dialectics. This applies especially to Lukács, who along with Marx attributed to the expropriated proletariat the capacity for a totalizing vision of the meaning of history, and who then in the footsteps of Lenin ensured the trustworthiness of this totalizing vision by identifying class consciousness with the avant-garde of the proletariat, that is, with the party and its bureaucracy.

Sartre pursued to the limit what one might call the problem of how each and every one of us could become the Hegelian absolute spirit. As a result he could not but fall into a trap. Yet in Sartre’s critical setback one can find a positive contribution to thought, namely, evidence of the link between the ideal of total-reappropriated knowledge and the structures of domination which it was set to overthrow. The return of the practico-inert after the heat of the revolution means simply that totalizing-reappropriated knowledge cannot subsist except as a new form of property (even, and above all, in the linguistic sense of the word: mastery of what is proper [one’s own] against metaphor . . .). This is not solely the transcription of our century’s historical experience with revolutions. If anything, it is proof [verifica] (and not a consequence) of the weakness and internal groundlessness of the ideal of reappropriation, something demonstrable on a theoretical level.

Let me consider another great example of dialectical thought, that of Walter Benjamin, as expounded in his Theses on the Philosophy of History. Alluding explicitly to Nietzsche’s second Untimely Meditation, Benjamin takes a critical look at the idea of historical time as a homogenous process—an image that underlies not only a faith in progress but also the anticipation of the “necessary” event, the revolution. The idea that there exists a progressive unfolding of time, and even that such a thing as history is at all possible, belongs to a culture of masters. As a linear unity history is actually only
the history of those who rose to the top as victors. It is constituted at the cost of excluding, first in practice and then in recollection, an array of possibilities, values, and images. More than the desire to assure a better destiny for those to come, it is disdain for such “liquidation” that really moves the revolutionary decision, according to Benjamin. This decision aims at vindicating or restoring the word to that which the linear history of the victors has excluded and consigned to oblivion. From such a perspective revolution would redeem all of the past. Indeed, this is precisely what would constitute its “right,” its superiority over the culture of the masters.

To this, however, Benjamin counterfoists a “constructive” concern. Historical materialism cannot “squander its energy on a meretricious ‘once upon a time’ in the brothel of historicism” (Thesis 16). Not all of the past can or should be redeemed. Redemption [riscatto] can occur only by means of a constructive vision different from that of bourgeois historicism: “the Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of the Antichrist” (Thesis 6). From this perspective the right of revolution is no longer based on its capacity to redeem everything that has been excluded. It is now the right of a new power that imposes itself through other acts of exclusion.

The difficulty of interpreters in agreeing on the sense of this short piece by Benjamin may well reflect problems concerning dialectics as a whole. More pointedly, we might say that the problems present in all twentieth-century dialectics of a materialistic cast are reflected in the very micrological pathos pervading Benjamin’s Theses. The angel in Klee’s painting that Benjamin speaks of in Thesis 9 feels enormous compassion [pietà] for the ruins that history has accumulated at its feet. It is a compassion for all that could have been and yet never was, or for what is no more, for all that produced no real Wirkungen, or historical effects. This follows not from the fact that these relics seem “precious” in view of some ideal construction, but from the fact that they are traces of something that has lived. It is on account of this basic right of the living that one must declare, along with Adorno, that the whole is false.

Benjamin’s micrological pathos, which can be perceived in many of Adorno’s pages, is the most significant and urgent mode in which the crisis of dialectics comes across today (though one should not forget that Kierkegaard had already founded his own anti-Hegelianism on a revindication of the individual). The importance and suggestiveness of thinkers like Benjamin, Adorno, and Bloch consists less in their having rethought dialectics in such a way as to incorporate the critical exigencies of micrology, than in their having reassessed such exigencies even to the detriment of dialectics, even to the detriment of the coherence and unity of their own thinking. They are not dialectical thinkers. They are thinkers of the dissolution of dialectics.
What I propose here by such broad “emblematic” references to Sartre and Benjamin is a relatively simple scheme. Having assimilated the Marxist overthrow of idealism, twentieth-century dialectical thought presents itself as a philosophy of totality and reappropriation, for it redeems as materialism what the culture of the masters has excluded. Yet that “cursed part” excluded by the masters refuses to be reabsorbed in a totality so easily. Those who are excluded feel that the very notion of totality is a “lordly” notion, one belonging to the masters. With this materialistic overturning of Hegelian dialectics there arises a permanent tendency which we might call “dissolutive.” It finds expression in Adorno’s negative dialectics, in Benjamin’s blending of materialism and theology, and in Bloch’s utopianism.

The thought of difference inserts itself in this tendency toward dissolution, and the questions it reflects and elicits. (By the words “inserts itself” I want to suggest an itinerary of thought which, without negating its own characteristics, allows itself to be guided by the “thing itself,” encountering the thematics of difference precisely in this micrological-dissolutive tendency of dialectics.) We are not dealing here with a casual insertion. Numerous threads even on the level of actual history tie Marxist critics like Benjamin, Adorno, Bloch, and the young Lukács, not to mention Sartre, to the existentialism from which the thinking of difference arises. In its most radical form, difference is expressed by Heidegger.

The thesis submitted therefore must be completed as follows: in the development of twentieth-century dialectical thought a tendency arises toward dissolution which the dialectical scheme can no longer control. Visible in Benjamin’s micrology, in the “negativity” of Adorno and in Bloch’s utopianism, the significance of this tendency consists in its revealing how the dialectical approach to the problem of alienation and reappropriation is still deeply complicit with the alienation it intends to combat. The idea of totality and reappropriation, the very pillars of dialectical thought, remain metaphysical notions yet to be critiqued. Nietzsche helped bring this awareness to light by analyzing metaphysical subjectivity in terms of mastery and by announcing that God is dead. The sense of this assertion is that the strong frameworks of metaphysics (archai, Grundle, primary evidences, and ultimate destines) are only forms of self-assurance for epochs in which technology and social organization failed to render us capable of living in a more open horizon (as is the case in our day and age), in a horizon less “magically” guaranteed. The ruling concepts of metaphysics . . . turn out to be means of discipline and reassurance that are no longer necessary in the context of our present-day organization capability of technology.

Yet even the discovery of the superfluousness of metaphysics (in Marcuse’s words, of additional repression) risks resolving itself into a new
metaphysics—humanistic, naturalistic, or vitalistic—going no further than substituting “true” being in place of the one that has been shown to be false. The risk run by dialectical thinking, whether utopic or negative, can be avoided only if one relates Heidegger’s radical recovery of the question of Being to the critique of metaphysics as an ideology committed to insecurity and the domination that stems from it.

On the surface, and ultimately much more than on the surface, the problem that Heidegger discusses in *Being and Time* is analogous to the one raised by the critique of ideology: we can no longer take the notion of *entity* as self-evident, since its being self-evident is already the result of a series of “positions,” occurrences, or—as Heidegger calls them—historical-cultural “destined” disclosures that, prior to the objective-self-evidence of “entity,” constitute the meaning of Being. It seems then that for Heidegger as well as for the critics of ideology, the question is one of reappropriating the conditions of possibility for what underlies and determines the “objective” and the “self-evident” as such. Yet in working out this problem Heidegger early on is led to discover something else: not a Kantian (or even Husserlian) transcendental structure, nor a dialectical totality in the Hegelian-Marxist vein which would determine the meaning of entities, but rather the untenability of what metaphysics has always ascribed to Being, namely, its stability in presence, its eternity, its “thingness” or *ousia*. The stability of Being in presence is precisely what from *Being and Time* on Heidegger exposes as a “confusion,” as a “forgetfulness,” because it derives from the act of modeling Being on beings, as if Being were merely the most general characteristic of that which is given in presence.

The issue of the difference between Being and beings, called the ontological difference, ultimately leads much further than even Heidegger expected. This difference entails first of all that Being is not: entities or beings are what can be said to be. Being, on the other hand, befalls, or occurs. We truly distinguish Being from beings only when we conceive of it as historical-cultural happening, as the instituting and transforming of those horizons in which entities time and again become accessible to man, and man to himself. To be sure, immediate sense data are not *ontos on*; nor, by the same token, is the transcendental, as the neo-Kantian philosophy of Heidegger’s day believed. The analysis of *Dasein*, of its thrownness as well as of its continually resituated and qualified nature, leads Heidegger to radically temporalize the *a priori*. All we can say about being at this point is that it consists in trans-mission, in forwarding: Über-lieferung and Ge-schick. The world plays itself out in horizons constructed by a series of echoes, linguistic resonances, and messages coming from the past and from others (oth-
ers alongside us as well as other cultures). The a priori that makes possible our experience of the world is Ge-schick, destiny-forwarding, or Überlieferung, transmission. True Being never is, but sets itself on the path and sends itself [si mette in strada e si manda], it trans-mits itself.

The difference between Being and beings also accounts for the particular characteristic of being’s “deferment” (and its problematic “sameness,” if one thinks of Identity and Difference). Into this deferment is woven also the relationship between being and language, a relationship which becomes crucial for Heidegger from the thirties onward. The preoccupation with this relationship, which admittedly Heidegger engages in more radically than others, binds him to other philosophical positions of the twentieth century (which, as we know, Apel speaks of in terms of a “semiotic transformation of Kantianism”).4 What is more radical about Heidegger is the fact that his discovery of the linguistic character of being’s occurrence carries over into his concept of Being itself. Being now ends up stripped of the strong traits attributed to it by metaphysics. Being that can occur does not have the same traits as metaphysical Being with the simple addition of “eventuality.” It offers itself to thought in a radically different way.

In what light, from the perspective of difference [il pensiero della differenza], do the difficulties and dissolutive tendencies of dialectics appear now? Difference can be conceived as the heir to and radicalization of the dissolutive tendencies of dialectics. I am not trying here to dispose of the problem of dialectics by “a theological assumption in the service of historical materialism,” as Benjamin had it, by displacing, as it were, the reconciliation and reformation of totality into a utopic future (as Bloch and Adorno in their different ways had it). My aim is rather to develop fully Sartre’s (perhaps merely casual) suggestion that the meaning of history (or even of Being) will be every person’s patrimony once it has dissolved into them. Reappropriation is not possible without liberating Being from the idea of stable presence, of ousia. But what would be entailed by such a reappropriation that no longer deals with Being as stability? The enfeeblement of (the notion of) Being, the explicit occurrence of its temporal essence (which is also and especially ephemerality, birth and death, faded trans-mission, antiquarian accumulation) has serious repercussions for the way we conceive of thinking and of the Dasein that is its “subject.” Weak though aims at articulating such repercussions and thereby preparing a new ontology.

Such a new ontology is to be constructed by developing the discourse of difference, as well as by recalling dialectics. The relation between dialectics and difference is not one-way: the illusions of dialectics are not simply abandoned in favor of difference. It is likely that Verwindung, the declination of
difference into weak thought, can be thought only by engaging the heritage of dialectics. This might be explained by taking literally Sartre’s suggestion in *Question de méthode*: “the moment must come when history will have but a single meaning and will dissolve itself into the concrete men who make it together.” Sartre does not especially stress the “dissolutive” aspect of the idea nor, however, does he exclude it. In fact, following the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, his thinking may be said to substantiate the interpretation I am setting forth here, especially for its ethical implications. It may also be that Marcuse’s aestheticization of dialectics has the same dissolutive nature, one in which reappropriation might finally occur without the slave becoming the master and inheriting thus the metaphysical tradition with its armamentarium of strong categories.

The dialectical heritage through which difference is declined (*verwundet sich*) into weak thought is condensed in the notion of *Verwindung*, and with good reason, for *Verwindung*, as we know, is the term Heidegger adopts in place of *Überwindung*, the overcoming or sublimation proper to dialectics. *Verwindung* (declination/distortion) and recovery ([rimettersi] recovery from, entrust oneself to, start up in the sense of sending on) mark the attitude which characterize post-metaphysical thought in relation to the tradition handed down by metaphysics. (PD, 21; herein 46). More than that, in the Heideggerian concept and “practice” of *Verwindung* we find a concentration of the dialectical (and thus metaphysical) heritage that still lives on in the thinking of difference. Heidegger’s overcoming of metaphysics seems to involve a dialectical overcoming, yet it is different precisely insofar as it is a *Verwindung*: but as such it still develops something which is proper to dialectics. This relation of overcoming and distortion is already exemplified in Nietzsche’s announcement that God is dead, which is not a metaphysical utterance on the nonexistence of God. The statement is intended as the true realization [presa d’atto] of an “event,” since the death of God means mainly the end of the stable structure of Being, hence also the end of the possibility of stating God’s existence or nonexistence. What is this announcement then? Is it not a historicist (as opposed to metaphysical) thesis which charges the death of God with value, cogency, “logical” necessity, along the lines of “what is real is rational”? Can one declare nihilism to be the truth one must acknowledge?

Heidegger’s *Verwindung* is the most radical effort to think Being in terms of a “taking account of” [presa d’atto] which is at once a “taking leave of,” for it neither conceives Being as a stable structure nor registers and accepts it as the logical outcome of a process. *Verwindung* is the mode in which thought thinks the truth of Being as *Über-lieferung* and Ge-schick. In this respect it is synonymous with *An-denken*, the other more current term
with which the later Heidegger designates postmetaphysical thought. This is thought which recalls Being: it never renders Being present but always recalls it as already “gone.” (We must “let go of Being as foundation,” Heidegger says in On Time and Being.7)

One has access to Being not through presence but only through recollection, for Being cannot be defined as that which is but only as that which is passed on [si tramanda]. Being is sending and “destining.” This also means, however, that postmetaphysical thinking cannot avoid working with metaphysical concepts, declining and distorting them, entrusting itself [rimettendosi] back to and away from them, transmitting them as its own heritage. Heidegger’s work after the turn in the thirties is a colossal attempt to rethink, retrieve, and decline the metaphysical tradition. Since we do not have pre-categorical or trans-categorical access to Being, which would belie and deprive of authority the objectifying categories of metaphysics, we cannot but take these categories as “appropriate,” at least to the extent that we possess no others. But this must be done without any nostalgia for other categories which might be more adequate to Being as it is, since Being is not at all. Verwindung frees these metaphysical categories from precisely what made them metaphysical: the presumption of gaining access to an ontos on. Once this presumption is dispelled these categories become “valid” as monuments, as a heritage evoking the pietas due to the traces of what has lived. Pietas may be another term which along with An-denken and Verwindung could characterize the weak thought of postmetaphysics.

Pietas suggests primarily mortality, finitude, and passing away. What might it mean to think Being under the aegis of mortality and passing away?8 The “program” of a weak ontology holds that such a change in the way of thinking about the fundamental traits (even simply descriptively, or typical) of Being will have important consequences, and of which thought has only begun to become aware of. These are the derangements that substantiate the announcement of the death of God, and which according to Nietzsche are fated to play a major role in the coming centuries of our history. Thus the transcendental, or that which makes any experience of the world possible, is nothing less than transience [caducità]. That which constitutes the objectness of objects is not their standing across from us in resistant stability (gegen-stand) but their be-falling, that is, their consisting thanks solely to an openness constituted by the anticipatory resolve upon death, as expressed in the existential analytic of Being and Time. Be-falling, or Ereignis (in the multiple senses Heidegger accords the term), is what allows the metaphysical characteristics of Being to exist, perverting them through the exposition of their constitutive mortality and transience. To recall Being means to recall
such transitoriness [caducità]. Thinking the truth does not mean “grounding,” as even Kantian metaphysics maintains. It means rather revealing the waning and mortality which are properly what make up Being, thus effecting a breaking-through or de-grounding [sfondamento].

Weak thought accepts and develops the heritage of dialectics, conjoining it to difference. This can be seen at two levels: at the level of content, in its rethinking and degrounding the main traits of metaphysical being, and at the level of form, insofar as the thought of Verwindung entails no legitimation through an appeal to a structure of being, and no support from a logical principle of history, but rather only “a realization” or a “taking account of” [presa d’atto] (which is yet in some guise historicist).9

If this is so, it would appear that the sort of thought which thinks Being in these terms is enfeebled by yet another weakness: the absence of an authentic project of its own, the purely parasitical rethinking of what has already been with a strong edifying and aestheticizing slant. It wants to relive the past as past with the sole purpose of savoring the antiquarian. Indeed, much deconstructive work of recent times can be charged with such an accusation, an accusation which seems all the more convincing the more one assumes that the task of thinking is something else, namely, construction, particularly of historically and politically useful structures (a very dubious idea, especially where philosophy is concerned).

At the root of this weakness of thought with regard to that which exists—and according to which to think means only an enjoyable taking in of the spiritual forms that were handed down—there would seem to be an obfuscation of the very idea of truth. In fact the link between weak thought and hermeneutics makes such a suspicion credible, for if Being is not but is instead handed down [si tramanda], to think being would be only to rethink what has been said and thought thus far. Such a rethinking, which, unlike scientific calculation and technological organization, is the authentic thinking, cannot occur according to a logic of verification and of rigorous demonstration, but only by means of that old, eminently aesthetic instrument called intuition.

Intuition, however, is not an invention of weak thought. Intuition is strictly bound to the metaphysical concept of evidence, of bringing an inner illumination into the open, of gathering first principles. Indeed, the ultimate object of nous, of intellectual intuition, is nothing less than first principles. To what strange cult of intuition, then, could such a thinking belong which, in the wake of Heidegger, thinks Being as never giving itself in presence but only as the object of recollection? To respond to this question, we must reread Heidegger’s essay on “The Essence of Truth” in the light of “feeble” expectations.
Of the two meanings of truth that Heidegger singles out—(1) as propositional conformity to things and (2) as freedom, that is, as the opening of horizons within which any conformity becomes possible—it is certainly the second one that interests us here. Yet this meaning should not be understood in the metaphysical sense of some access to an originary which would devalue the verification of single truths conforming to evidence. As recent readings of Heidegger are beginning to show, it is likely that the elucidation of these two meanings of truth may finally show the single verified or confirmed “trues” to stand essentially as the results of operational procedures. Far from discounting them in the name of a more originary access to Being, we must finally recognize these procedures as the only available pathways toward the experience of truth.

The freedom that Heidegger identifies as the essence of truth may also, and perhaps exclusively, be freedom in the most ordinary sense: the freedom we live and act as members of a society. The call to freedom, then, would double as pure and simple de-stitution of the “realistic” assumptions of the correspondence criterion of truth. That is to say, it would be a different way of formulating Wittgenstein’s idea of the language-game: Truth as correspondence (verified according to the rules of each game) would be placed in the open horizon of dialogue between individuals, groups, and epochs. But this horizon of truth within which demonstrable and forged propositions become possible is itself opened up by Über-lieferung and Ge-schick. Yet respect for those processes by which truth is consolidated in the various languages of reason (and for truth itself as procedure) cannot be established in the name of some ontological foundation of these languages, nor in the name of the possibility of linking such procedures to a fundamental normative structure (as in Apel’s “semiotic Kantianism”). The respect follows only by virtue of a pietas for what has been handed down to us as our heritage. The rules of the various language-games can be imposed neither in the name of the utility of these games (even if this utility consists merely in assuring the good of orderly cohabitation or of organized social labor defending us from the hostility of Nature), nor in the name of their grounding in some meta-rules of a transcendental sort (even if they involve only the “natural function” of reason). The rules of the games can follow only from that irreducible respect for monuments that speak to us at once of passing away and of duration within trans-mission. Moreover, this feeling is not an indivisible “one.” As the beautiful that individuals, groups, societies, and epochs recognize as such, seeing themselves within it (and thereby constituting themselves as groups), is different time and again; in just this way, the pietates are historically variable, and the possibility for them to include other contents and traditions (a possibility in which truth consists) is contained in the fact that they are
the result of concrete, persuasive operations. Hermeneutics, which with Heidegger becomes synonymous with philosophy itself, deals precisely with this.

To summarize, then, how a weak ontology conceives of truth, we could begin by saying: first, the true is not the object of a noetic prehension of evidence but rather the result of a process of verification that produces such truth through certain procedures always already given time and again (the project of the world that constitutes us as Dasein). In other words, the true does not have a metaphysical or logical nature but a rhetorical one. Second, verification and hypothesis occur in a controlling horizon, in the openness that On the Essence of Truth speaks about as the space of freedom both of interpersonal relations and of the relations between cultures and generations. In this space no one ever starts from scratch but always from a faith, a belonging-to or a bond. The rhetorical (or should we say, hermeneutical) horizon of truth is constituted in this free but “impure” way, analogously to the common sense that Kant speaks about in the Critique of Judgment. Bonds, respect, and belonging-to are the substance of pietas. Along with the rhetoric-logic of “weak” truth, pietas also delineates the basis for a possible ethics, in which the supreme values—those which are good in themselves and not because they are means to an end—are symbolical formations, monuments, traces of the living (everything that gives itself to and stimulates interpretation); hence an ethics of “deeds” [beni, also: of “goods”] rather than of “imperatives.” Third, truth is the product of interpretation not because through its process one attains a direct grasp of truth (for example, where interpretation is taken as deciphering, unmasking, and so on), but because it is only in the process of interpretation, in the Aristotelian sense of hermeneia, expression, formulation, that truth is constituted. Fourth, in this “rhetorical” conception of truth being experiences the fullness of its decline (as Heidegger understands it when he says that the Western world is the land of the crepuscule of being), fully living its weakness. As in the Heideggerian hermeneutic ontology, being becomes only Über-lieferung, transmission, dissolving even into procedures, into “rhetoric.”

There is no doubt that once the characteristics of being and truth are rethought in weak terms, philosophical thinking, or the thinking of being, can no longer vindicate the sovereignty that metaphysics attributed to it—mainly through ideological deception—in the sphere of politics and social praxis. In fact, weak thought has no reasons left to vindicate the supremacy of metaphysics over praxis. Does this indicate yet another weakness—that of accepting existence “as it is” and hence one’s critical incapacity both in theory and in practice? In other words, does speaking about the weakness of thought mean theorizing a diminished projectual capacity in thinking itself? Let us not try to hide the fact that this is a problem, even if what it implies
is not so much that we have to restructure the relation between thought and the world as that we have to rethink the question of the meaning of being. By rethinking such meaning in postmetaphysical terms, with whatever consequences it may have for our conceptual grammars, we may find a new “disposition” for the relation between philosophy and society, one of which we now know little. As for the constructive task [progettualità] of thought, which seems to have lost much of its former emphasis in the postmodern experience, a philosophy of Verwindung in no way renounces it. An An-denkend rethinking of metaphysics and of its world, thus also of the corresponding structures of domination and social discipline, is a project that can justify commitment. Even the deconstruction that originates with Derrida is not at all a pure and simple form of aesthetic savoring as it sometimes appears to be (and occasionally is).

A weak ontology that conceives of being as trans-mission and monument evidently tends to privilege the canon over the exception, the patrimony over prophetic illumination. But the inherited patrimony is not a coherent unity. It is actually a closely netted interplay of interferences. If the possibility of the “new,” and thus also (to speak with Kuhn) of changing “paradigms,” cannot come from a mythic encounter with the “other”—with the precategorical or Nature or things as they are—this possibility does nevertheless come into play insofar as Ge-schick does not merely hand down Wirkungen (or effects which unraveled and are now present as constitutive of our worldly project), but also specific traces, elements that have not become world: the ruins accumulated by the history of victors at the feet of Klee’s angel. Compassion [pietà] for these ruins is the only real fuel of revolution—not some project legitimized in the name of a natural right or an inevitable course of history.

To identify the new with the other, as for instance with another culture—whether that of another civilization or of a different language-game, or that of a virtual world contained in those traces of our tradition which never became dominant—does not mean experiencing the difference of Being as occurring somewhere else, in an originary ground and thence yet again as an entity. It means seeing the difference of Being as interference,10 as a whisper [sotto voce], as Gering.11 It means accompanying being along on its twilight journey and preparing for a postmetaphysical world.

Notes

1. For this idea of hermeneutical foundations see the essay “Verso un’ontologia del declino,” included in my book Al di là del soggetto [Beyond the Subject] (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981).


4. I am referring to Apel’s 1973 book *Community and Communication*. On Apel see also the essay “Esiti dell’ermeneutica [consequences of hermeneutics],” included in my *Al di là del soggetto*.

5. *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, vol. 1: 57.


8. These two sentences did not appear in the *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* version of this essay published in 1985. *Trans.*

9. This short paragraph also was missing from the *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* version. *Trans.*


Transformations in the Course of Experience

PIER ALDO ROVATTI

Beginning with Nietzsche

According to Nietzsche, man rolls off the center toward an \( x \), moving away from his own certain place toward an uncertain and unknown place. Question: is it at all possible to point out, describe, narrate this unknown? Yet more than recounting this non-habitual place, perhaps the question concerns the attempt to understand this “rolling off.” Is the man who rolls off the man of complete disenchantment, of negative irony, the “last man” who has already learned to take in everything, who knows how to accept ironically, with the wink of the eye, any nihilism? Or is there a beyond? More than that, is this beyond the dispersion of everything we have come to call the subject, a pure play of interactions, conventions, combinatorial simulacra without referent [referente]? Can we not rather hypothesize a “logic” of the decentering of the subject capable of describing, simultaneously, what happens to man when he moves away from his center, as well as the terrain, to be reckoned with before all else, upon which a new “sense” can be produced?

First of all, what else is the loss of the center if not the declaration, the sanction that “strong” thought is no longer tenable? The typical situation of “strong” thought is in fact that in which the thinker and the thought, he who does the thinking and that which is being thought about, are partisan [solidali]: they hold on to each other in tight, specular correspondence. What Nietzsche perceives, instead, is characterized by the possibility of losing oneself: man has reached a limit, one more step and he may plunge below, losing himself completely. From this perspective, the place where sense can be reactivated can be dramatically seen. Is it an impossible place? There are reasons to believe that this limit cannot be exceeded, and that a logic
of renunciation is possible in order to allow us to live without values. The “last man” is the man who has had to compromise and learned to live with nothingness. But the step that follows is a daring one. The threshold reveals another threshold and then, once again, we find ourselves before yet another one, while we are now set on a path both tortuous and irregular, extremely long and tiring. The image of the path [cammino] is metaphorical (but isn’t metaphor always a path?): it points to a mood, an attitude, a way of life. In Human, All Too Human we read of an undaunted floating above men, customs, laws, and the originary values of things. A free floating? Nietzsche goes back time and again to correct this notion of “lightness” and of “freedom,” for the abyss drags downward and the spiral of necessity is ever more entangled. And it is not possible to balance oneself in flight and float freely like a bird in the sky. Perhaps the only alternative is to learn how to crawl to imitate the snake because it is only by sticking close to the ground that we can hope of raising ourselves above it.

At the end of a famous posthumous fragment (June 1887), Nietzsche tries to sketch the image of the “overman.” To the question “Which men will reveal themselves to be the strongest?” he responds:

The more moderate ones, those who have no need of elevated faith in principles, and can love a good deal of chance, of absurdity, those who know how to think of man’s value as noticeably reduced without becoming because of it small and weak: the healthiest ones, those who can meet the challenge of the great majority of mishaps—the men who are sure of their power and who display with considerable pride the power achieved by mankind.¹

Further on in a fragment entitled “Global vision” [Gesammt-Einsicht], we read:

The ambiguous character of our modern world: the same symptoms can mean decadence and power. And the distinguishing traits of power, of achieved maturity may, on the basis of the traditional (backward) assessment of sentiment, be misunderstood as weakness. In sum, sentiment, as a sentiment of value, is not up to the times. In general terms: the sentiment of value is always lagging behind the times.²

These are two problematic passages. The idea of “power,” which informs a great deal of Nietzsche’s later thought, and the sense of the related idea of “weakness” cannot be identified with each other despite Nietzsche’s own
attempts to do so. Nietzsche is faced with the difficulty of characterizing what is strong and what is weak on the basis of an inadequate, “backward” sentiment. When we say strength or weakness, the image that comes immediately to mind in connection with this dyad—which is part of the sentiment of value deeply rooted within ourselves—leads us astray. The strongest will turn most moderate without, however, becoming weak. We can perceive here the interaction between at least two notions of strength and two notions of weakness. Nietzsche wavers between them attempting strenuously to pinpoint a new semantic field. I think that, at bottom, one can discern Nietzsche’s statement, expressed elsewhere as well, whereby man is now so strong that he can appear to be weak. A paradox? In any event, to Nietzsche this has a profound meaning: the “floating” (and the “staying on the outside”) cannot coincide with a full and positive realization connected to the historical attainment of power, to the realization of a human plan, until such a time when “bearing the load” is transformed into “being powerful.” It is not this kind of dialectic that points to the swerve [scarto].

There is a difficult path within nihilism by means of which man acquires the capacity to relinquish all fetters. Nietzsche suggests that this does not entail taking a step back but, on the contrary, realizing a potential thanks to the strength derived from living nihilism historically. Nietzsche, though, is also well aware that this strength is a self-destroying capacity, an abysmal risk which man seems bent on running. The pathos of this tragic side is itself foregrounded. The image is akin to a situation of unstable equilibrium, a balancing which can lean equally toward the outcome of maximum potential as well as toward the definitive sinking to the bottom. It is no longer a dialectic, but a path which bifurcates without conceivable explanation. Yet the two possibilities go together because, according to Nietzsche, this equipoised stance represents man’s contemporary predicament. How can such a precariousness be the greatest strength? We are far removed from the attempts to find a remedy typical of the post-crisis culture, for this man is not marked by loss or forfeiture, he is not the man who just makes do: by humbling himself he does not become weak.

Here the hypothesis of “weak thought” is related to the transformation of an acquired force (and Nietzsche often alludes precisely to a material force), a force which is, at the same time, affirmation and abnegation. We can think of the eternal recurrence in Zarathustra, of the double necessity that constitutes it. There’s a necessity that weighs down, the grave force of the heavy return of things, a circle that entraps similar to the way in which we are blocked by superior values, by the “true” categories of philosophy, the ultimate end, the unity of things, their being. But the movement that enchains us is duplicated by a movement that slackens: what is the eternal
recurrence if not a “different” [diversa] necessity? The “floating” of Human, All Too Human is no longer a staying outside, but a staying inside, a descending. It is no longer a being satisfied, a keeping at a distance, but a passing through [attraversare] the heavniness, a coming face to face with necessity.

On the contrary, if we keep it at a distance, necessity appears heavy and ironclad. If we work it from the inside, however, then the nothingness that constitutes us is no longer such a terrible thing. The wheel of destiny continues to spin, we can behold it from the outside or we can jump onto it. We can surrender before horrid causality or we can discover the game chance [caso] is playing: it’s a choice. If we can muster the strength to do it, we can discover the affirmation of weakness. The game of chance, like the game of the child on the seashore, is a fluctuation, a letting oneself be taken. But that’s not a dependency, a being passive, or patient, for necessity has lost its snarl. Chance and necessity are conjugated in two ways which correspond to two lifestyles. Not dreadful chance and necessity that weigh us down, but necessity that makes lighter and chance that plays.

Strength and weakness mesh and switch meaning. We are too backward to understand, we stop at ambiguity. The backwardness of our understanding as expressed in the posthumous fragment cited earlier harks back to the enigmatic nature of the eternal recurrence. Pushed to its limit, till it borders on paradox, explanation trespasses into the realm of mystery. Zarathustra’s laughter is mysterious: it is neither of joy nor of sorrow, could it possibly express stupefaction? How can a weak necessity exist? How can we accept destiny if we transform it? What is this strength that allows us to be weak, and this new weakness that seems to be the greatest strength?

Nietzsche’s hesitation before one of his own capital passages is perhaps more relevant to us than his own gestures toward resolution and certainty. This feeling backward may well be his deepest insight in a field which, even before we begin to explore it, must be drawn on paper. Nietzsche discerns a new zone of experience in which the standard yardsticks and the normal categories no longer serve any purpose. There’s an enigma that must be solved and, contrary to what one might expect, it doesn’t involve an exceptional experience. There is no need to climb the mountain peak or to descend to the bottom of the abyss: the experience is our own, what we live each day.

Local or Global: Peter Handke and Michel Serres

There’s a poem by Peter Handke entitled “Changes during the Course of the Day,” which begins as follows:
As long as I am still alone, I am still alone
As long as I am still among acquaintances, I am still an acquaintance.
But as soon as I am among strangers—

As soon as I step out onto the street—a pedestrian steps out in the street.
As soon as I enter the subway—a subway rider enters the subway.

First, a being inside, inside ourselves. Then, a being outside, a becoming something, some category or other. Until through a series of real abstractions, when I fill something up, I am a content, and when I finally move away I am alone and with a purpose. “Then, finally, I sit down next to someone in the grass—and am finally someone else.” This conclusion is somewhat surprising in that it offsets the interpretive momentum which has accompanied our reading up to this point. But it is precisely this “being an other” that matters and which “finally” signals that a positive trait is attained. An other is alongside, besides us, sitting on the grass right next to one like him, like us.

The same theme is explored in the novel *A moment of true feeling.* Much like a more famous Gregor, Gregor Keuschnig wakes up one morning to find himself transformed: during the night he had a dream in which he killed a man. There’s a harsh passage, a leap: night/morning, dreaming/waking up. It is not a gradual passage but a fluctuation [scarto] in experience, a transformation, perhaps that “little” variation—because we are dealing with a tiny movement—that modifies the style of an experience in its entirety, what one might even call a minuscule “catastrophe.” “Suddenly he wasn’t the same.” There’s a noticeable difference between Kafka’s Gregor Samsa who becomes a beetle, where the most fundamental trait is the other’s gaze, how he is perceived (though Deleuze suggests, interestingly, that we read the turning-into-an-animal as an escape route), and Gregor Keuschnig, who does not change on the outside as he alters the way he sees people and things. “But what oppressed him most was that he had become someone else, yet had to keep behaving as if he were still himself.”

First of all, the passage makes us realize that reality is an “ugly word.” Roving through and observing the city, Gregor Keuschnig detects details where before there were none. At a table in the restaurant they were taking a picture of a child: “but [were] waiting to snap it until a genuinely child-like smile appeared on its face.” It is clear that this “genuinely” is related to the difficulty with which Gregor makes believe everything has remained
the same. As, for instance, when he is about to enter his house, with the key already in the lock, he endeavors (to the point of imagining a mirror before him) to look like himself as much as possible, to resemble his own “reality.” The problem therefore is one of adapting to “reality,” not corresponding to it. Children adapt to children’s “reality,” and so he is rewarded, in a calculated way, when bemused he completes the sentence from which is missing the last—his—word: “We put our napkin on our . . .” “Lap,” answers the child correctly.

The second way of changing moves in the opposite direction, and it is here that we find the essence of metamorphosis: by drawing closer to things [avvicinarsi alle cose], by being alongside, sitting on the grass. A change which occurs without thinking, or with weakened thought, a mere sensing, a sort of “accessory consciousness.” One can be placed “next to” things. And what happens? It appears, first of all, that acts multiply: we discern a number of actions which before went unnoticed or even unseen. There’s a reversal between what is relevant and what is supposed to be banal. Banal gestures are now something from which we can derive indications or important meanings in order to understand how experience holds together. The most banal of gestures, like shaving: “He decided not to shave. That was a decision and it relieved him. Then he shaved after all and strode through the apartment, proud of his second decision.” In this simple sentence there lies for Handke the problem of a series of decisions, acceptances, new decisions, the relationship between what one does, thinks of doing, really does, and experiences when something is finally done. A rhythmic and undulating succession, a speeding up of contents and logics, an intense wavering of all that goes into each experience. This and nothing else is the “true” feeling: a multiplying and an oscillating, the frenzied play between panic and resignation, between inside and outside amid the expansion of registers.

This feeling is the “pleasure” of experience. But not as an escape route, because the other into which we may turn is also a diverting with respect to the “ugly word,” but at the same time the regaining of, “normality.” It is the pleasure of what is normal, difficult to attain yet thought as readily at hand. In the diary The Weight of the World we read: “March 24. . . . At the worst moment I wanted to buy newspapers, to pretend to be living a normal day.” The “pretend” is certainly not the “adapting” we saw earlier. Otherwise said, “While I was returning from an open market that lively Sunday morning, headed toward my future, I realized I was repeating to myself: ‘All told, I am a happy man.’”

To discover “normality” is tantamount to discovering the fragmentation of experience, the oscillating texture of tiny movements that requires
a different type of observation, a fine analysis. These are not the moves of a
great game to which we habitually confer a particular sense. The microphys-
ics of normality forces a change in the meaning of the temporal parameter.
Time must now be perceived in the diminutive play between speeding up and
slowing down, between the anticipations and the “catastrophic” turns. Here
the time of “comprehension” is different, it is not linear, not singular, not
even homogeneous, yet it makes sense [sensato], the only time that counts.

Joseph Bloch, the main character of the novel The goalie’s anxiety at
the penalty kick, foreshadows Gregor Keuschnig. For he also travels through
places and his roaming is simultaneously wholly casual and yet meaningful.
He plays out memory, the stockpile of lived experience, there’s a going as
well as a coming back; but memory is also only a weak magnetic pole and
everything dissolves in the contingency of brief gestures which Handke per-
sistently rends one at a time, atom after atom, in order to show them to us:

At the tavern he found a waitress just scrubbing the floor. Block
asked for the landlady. “She’s still asleep,” the waitress said. Stand-
ing up, Bloch ordered a beer. The waitress lifted a chair off the
table. Bloch took the second chair off the table and sat down.

The waitress went behind the bar. Bloch put his hands on
the table. The waitress bent down and opened the bottle. Bloch
pushed the ashtray aside. The waitress took a cardboard coaster
from another table as she passed it. Bloch pushed his chair back.

This comes close to a film director’s notes. Or is it an eye looking in from
the outside? Neither: the whole of the acts and their intervals do not point
toward an observed object, but rather toward the intersecting of movements,
of questions and answers:

When the waitress sat down with him, he soon pretended that he
wanted to put his arm around her; she realized that he was only
pretending and leaned back even before he could make it clear to
her that he was just pretending. Bloch wanted to justify himself
by putting his arm around the waitress, but she had already stood
up. When Bloch wanted to get up, the waitress walked away. Now
Bloch should have pretended that he wanted to follow her. But he
had had enough, and he left the café.

Too late and too early. Is not every experience of an encounter in fact a texture
of missed targets? In this case, a non-agreement made up of so many tiny
unsuccessful agreements. But is it possible to find within the realm of the experience of this “becoming an other” an agreement which is not unsuccessful? Meanwhile, in the passages just read, are we really dealing with a failed agreement? To be sure, the agreement is difficult and is never fully reached: it requires a long complicated journey.

Much like Deleuze, Peter Handke also looks at the child as a clump of experience containing possibilities we can never match with respect to those of the real child. Nevertheless these possibilities constitute for us an opening. As he says in his diary (though the theme is also present with more subtle contours in his Kindergeschichte), children begin to tell each other of a common experience utilizing entirely different words, interrupting one another until, when they reach the end of the story, they still conclude it in the same way, using the same words (see, for instance, The Weight of the World).

The agreement is possible not because there exists a meaningful model that from the start holds the thread and unifies all the differences and the ways in which children tell stories. There is no text to conform to. Quite the contrary, with this example Handke shifts and simplifies the problem while he visualizes its capacity to be resolved; he asserts that it is precisely the different way of telling the story which leads, owing to its diversity, to the same conclusion. Perhaps we can imagine the opposite example: children who seem to be speaking of the same fact, but who then interrupt one another and say different things, finally reach different conclusions, their stories never actually coming together.

In the first pages of Passage du Nord-Ouest Michel Serres introduces the character Zeno of Elea. Well aware of his paradoxes as we are aware of ours today, Zeno sets out from Athens in order to embark at a specific place on the coast, and from there to travel to and from Elea. Midway through his journey he recalls his calculations: he will have to start dividing the spaces and the times, in order to make it through each segment he must first reach the midpoint of that segment. Zeno is stuck: will he reach Elea? Perhaps not. And will he succeed in leaving Athens? Zeno, a different Zeno, must embark yet again. He now decides to shift position continuously, each time a tiny deviation: he will no longer proceed in linear fashion, he will go around in circles, like an ellipsis, a vortex. But once again he will be able to calculate his movements, and once again he will be stuck. It is now necessary to undertake a third journey, a new Zeno is needed. Perhaps this is an initiatory journey, yet the landscape is changed, it is no longer a plan upon which to draw segments and curves, but a journey strewn with obstacles (put there by a God?) and, one might add, trials. Could it be that it was really a god who dropped that enormous mountain which Zeno must somehow avoid? and a peasant who piled up the earth that blocks his path? and the wind that
worked up that subtle dust barrier? And what about that tiniest of atoms? It too clogs things up, and certainly it was pure chance that placed it precisely there. Will Zeno succeed in returning to Elea?

There is, however, according to Serres, a “true” Zeno who has not renounced the idea of calculating and drawing maps of rigorous networks, though by now he is well aware of the fact that calculation will block him. Each of his moves will now be played against chance, and he will move at random. Does this signal the loss of all rational hopes? Is it fatalism? Nothing of the sort: it means having finally understood that reason, that calculation (those modes of calculating) is not a universal, being rather a unique case. Reason is a singularity [singolarità] among others, all reasons are local facts, compasses partial and relative. To understand this limit means, according to Serres, to become aware that for the imaginary Zeno (that is, for each one of us) Elea is not a given time and place, it is not the amplification of our reason. Elea (that is, our identity) is rather in the journey itself, in a randonnée, says Serres, a circling, a circle, a going around, but also random action, chance, choice, and certainly risk.

The lands of the Northwest, almost bordering on the North Pole, are a maze of indentations, of infinite and intricate straits, of endless obstacles which the maps cannot indicate with any precision, it is a sea invaded by myriad archipelagoes and islands. Islands? They are not true islands; upon closer inspection, it is as if each island contained a sea in which we find other islands. Yet our only chance is to set out on the journey because the only passage is there.

What Serres is telling us is that what is “global” cannot be renounced. We can and must effect an upturning [rivolgimento] in our limited quotidian experience. But how is an upturning possible within the “global”? And what does the “global” itself turn into? It seems to be a double upturning. First, almost a turning over of terms, a dizzying inversion. We saw that Zeno will be able to move when he understands that homogeneous space, the time of reversible measure, the space and the time that scan all our actions, are nothing more than a particular case. The “global” is a historically sedimented “local,” a false globality. A monstrous will to power has magnified this point until it coincided with totality. Can we ever convince ourselves that true totality is constituted by local moves, by segments of a journey with no end and ever changing? That order and disorder are always in contact, that contingency is the rhythm of all things? That from one order to another life itself is geared toward disorder? That there is an other sense irreducible to a model?

This “global” which Serres perceives through his philosophical imagination, even though with an eye to the thermodynamics of structures of dissipation and the topological mathematics of catastrophes, is not an elsewhere and
is not a second world. The example that recurs over and over again is that of the living human being. The problem of the “global” is contained wholly in the ever less obvious question: what is life? It is only by beginning to answer this question that others will become legitimate and meaningful, for instance: what is history? Life is a complexity, a regulator and an exchanger of different times: contingency and disorder are not its irrational residues, but rather the keys to its access. How is a knowledge of contingency possible?

What we know for sure is that the knowledge of the global which we possess is not enough, simply because it is an explanation which explains not. Here we are plunged in our contemporary cultural milieu. But you might ask: do we really need an explanation? do we need a “global?” The impetus of Serres’ theoretical inventiveness, above and beyond its “scientific” optimism, puts us on guard, for without an attempt to agree on what we consider “global,” upturning it, changing its sign and nature, Handke’s tiny moves run the risk of remaining mute. Moreover, there will always be a “local” that will demand adaptation, a law that we haven’t succeeded in identifying, a “reality” we may laugh at and yet persist in naming it such. There will remain the doubt that, whether reconquered or barely glimpsed at, “normality” is a simple drifting \[\text{deriva}\], an insignificant variation at the margins. Have we no choice, or is it solely a question of being practical? Will we ever move from Athens, or is it simply a question of understanding which journey it is we are undertaking?

**Lacan’s Impossible Real**

Though he is considered a metaphysician, Jacques Lacan can furnish us with an example of the powering down \[\text{depotenziamento}\] of thought in the same direction we are pursuing. Nietzsche’s “rolling off” can perhaps be represented by the topological interlacing of the modalities of experience. Lacan’s laborious theorizing is really telling us nothing more than the fact that, if the subject is off center, it doesn’t mean we are dealing with pure and simple drift. No matter what we think of him, Lacan exhorts us to embrace the philosophical task of “construction” right at the moment when any theoretical solid ground seems to vanish. Necessity and impossibility, he says, can and in fact must be reciprocally conjugated: in their cutting across one another, they change identity. And the subject changes along with them.

Take for example love. In the 1972–1973 seminar\[14\] love is understood as the “encounter between two exiled traces,” two unsuccessful loci that nevertheless meet and touch each other in the dimension of contingency,
tangential encounter that can never become superimposition: exile cannot be removed, and there can be no conciliation. However, though contingency is the foremost dimension, it cannot by itself exhaust the multiple play of dimensions. At the same time, love aims at being necessary. Making use of a popular expression, we can say: we want to live the idealization of the always in the now, that is, love must be eternal. There’s an encounter, there’s a now, yet to us this encounter bears the inscription [cierra] of the always. The always is necessity that does not cease to be. In the now there’s the exigency of not ceasing to be. Love must be something that does not stop being what it is: that is its necessity.

But there is more. What the description is lacking is the most important dimension of all, the one that ties it all together. This contingent encounter cannot, in view of its link with the always, elude horrid causality, otherwise chance would disappear into ideality. There is something apparently much more dramatic that complicates and defuses [depotenziandolo] the game. In order to remove, we must add. The now and the always lose their abstract fullness only when we succeed in anchoring them to the never, to the impossible. The encounter takes place at a point or by means of a pretext to which we cling in order not to sink. But this sinking is essential. It is the real, according to Lacan, that makes us sink, that drags us downward: the real, that is, impossibility. The sinking is the impossibility of the non-ceasing: there’s no opposition between necessity and contingency, as a matter of fact both are situated on the same side to warrant the existence of a limit, of something which is not possible.

For Lacan, the “not ceasing to” does not mean “not ceasing to be,” but the not ceasing to inscribe and subscribe oneself, as if in that now, during the encounter, the non-inscribing could cease, as if there could be a fullness, a complete inscription. As such, taken by itself, contingency is the illusory ceasing of non-inscription, as if the “tending to” of necessity occupied the entire scene and pervaded contingency. In a parallel text to Encore edited by his students, Lacan graphically depicts necessity as the case of an x such that there is no absence, at least at a certain point, of castration—or, in different language, that it be abolished. It is the hypothesis of exception. Yet Lacan is consciously more elusive: the resolution point interests him less than the movement of the dimensions.

In this movement a “not” is displaced. There’s something that ceases, that does not cease, that ceases to not. What is it that holds contingency, what prevents the two exiled traces from exploding in different directions and become real exiles, foreign and faraway? The always and the never move into the now, a pretext holds and transforms the illusion. It is precisely because
we are suspended, because the always is weakened and cannot fly off at a
tangent of pure imagination that the encounter takes place, that there is love.

Yet Nietzsche teaches: we must be moderate. The ballast of the impos-
sible curbs the empty flight, weakens the illusion, realizes the now of the
encounter. It is not possible to delude oneself, we cannot only possess the
always. When we find ourselves in this situation the illusion of limitless
duration, that is, that there might be a sequence of nows without failures
or voids, is precluded. We cannot possess the always, yet the always is there
[si dà]. On the other hand, we cannot also trust only the never: it would be
tantamount to stepping off the stage, a not being there. We cannot possess
the never, yet the never makes the encounter possible.

Lacan essays to describe a form of experience which is very likely the
one we live in continually. If truth did not reveal itself to be impossible, we
would perhaps believe in absolute and omnipotent necessity, and we would
never be in a somewhere marked by a specific contingency. Contingence,
then, is not the happy chance, and really it isn’t blind chance either. The
weaving of circles drawn up by Lacan suggests that the now, the encounter,
demands new analyses. We would never recognize this moment, this now, if
there weren’t the perspectival shadow of the always that allows us to enjoy
it. But it is a shadow, precisely, a weak variant of necessity. The real cannot
be said and that is why, according to Lacan, we can live it and attribute a
sense to everything we say.

What Does It Mean, “Weak Thought”?

In a restricted sense, “weak thought” stands for a scientific or knowing atti-
tude [atteggiamento conoscitivo]. What seems to be at stake are modes or
categories of knowledge, a type of knowledge. Nietzsche’s fragments on nihil-
ism can usefully illustrate the point: purpose, unity, and being are the idols to
be taken down. But why distinguish them? There is in fact but one objective.
A model that can be superimposed upon, coinciding perfectly with, reality,
becomes one with it. Such a model does not exist, even though we evoke it
incessantly. Is this because the model is imperfect, requiring one which is
more pliant, elastic, less rigid? Must we get used to considering it approximate
and necessarily flawed, a mere indicator, a signal?

Or is it not rather the case we ought to focus on the “idea” of real-
ity? That same reality to which the model must conform exactly is itself a
construction because it is already predisposed to accept a model, a symbolic
doubling [raddoppiamento simbolico]. “Weak thought” intends to impair the
act of knowing in its entirety, both on the side of the knower as well as the side of the known. Subject and object are by now worn-out terms, but are there any better ones available? “Weak thought” asks for a modification of the object of knowledge as well as of the knowing subject. We are propelled toward this end by the nihilist destructuration of fundamental categories, by the attempt to cut a dent into power [il potere] or, put otherwise, the “power” of unity. The one upon which knowledge is modeled: that is the leverage point that must be weakened. We would immediately realize that this force is coupled to our ideas of reality and of ourselves, ideas we are not willing to part with.

Reality, we persist in believing, has a homogeneous nature, marked by a being that we admit is difficult to discover and which is above all deceitful. It consists in a being that does not stand before our eyes, or else is such that it cannot be posited, a being that hides but that is there [c’è]. The deceitful appearance marks already a distance, yet this does not mean that it ceases to represent the overturned history [storia rovesciata] of the revealing of the truth of this nature. In the same fashion, we persist in believing in a transcendental identity of the subject, yet that unity to which we continue to link our cognitive acts is always bound to an ever greater and more general unity in which all of our own individual knowledge [conoscenze] must also somehow be situated.

Odd as it may sound to refer to it by such a timeworn name, and though we hardly pay any attention to it, the category of universality continues to interact in the quotidian sphere. Let us momentarily examine any random experience. If being were not somehow “there” and if our subjectivity were not somehow “here” and recognizable as such, the scenario would change entirely: each thought, each gesture would lose its (however minuscule) certainty, that is, what warrants their authority in virtue of their symbolic legitimation. But let’s look at this random experience a bit closer. It certainly exhibits a structure, in fact it is the locus where manifold structures intersect. The place is complex and stratified. The certainty that seemed to ensure the stability of the scenario will, if looked at from a different angle, appear rather thin, for it seems rather to be a superficial bond, a patina that allows connections and movements, a flow, a contained mobility [mobilità minima]. Instead of registering its oppression—which in any event is surely to be perceived as the oppression of the same, of a moving constituted by one possibility of movement—we feel a sense of dissatisfaction: we are no longer happy with this containment as it feels reductive. But reduction with respect to what? With respect to a certainty of a different degree, the confusing certainty we have before any experience whatsoever, the certainty that such an experience
might be and may mean to us much more than that meager legitimation wherein it already appears constituted and as if preinscribed.

The meaning we attribute to things, what we might call our common knowledge [sapere normale], is usually experienced as if it were something automatic requiring no reflection. But in actuality it is the result of a chain of logical and broadly understood cultural operations. We think we are continually pulled by a current that rises and swells, and we do not question the progress of our knowledge. There is no doubt that the quantity of information of which we dispose grows and that the network of specific and general knowledge thickens. But that above all is a question of naming: though the terms multiply, the type of operation tends to remain identical. That automatism is the result of a powerful simplification. It is a process of abstraction because it precludes from the complexity of experience and reduces everything to a minimum; it tends to converge on to a point, to attain (at the cost of renunciations and omissions) a few simple elements, always the same ones, fixed flow channels of all knowing [ogni conoscere]. The logic that underlies the everyday is subject to a maximum of simplification and abstraction. Knowledge and communication are thus enormously facilitated and express social relevance.

If we imagine a person within a group who begins to refer of his own experience with all—or a high degree of—the specificity of his being there and now, the others would probably not understand him. They would move away from him, showing little interest in a narration which we suppose is complicated, stratified, perhaps even weird. The social power of that individual would be nil. For this reason, each time we are together with others, we take care to avoid such a path and proceed instead in the opposite direction, in an effort to reach a common ground. This is a kind of knowledge we feel everyone adheres to rather spontaneously, not because it pertains to anyone specifically but because it pertains to no one.

Common knowledge and standard communication partake in a special game. The rules of this game are simple and anyone is capable of learning them with great facility. In fact everyone is expected to know them. The practical power of play arises from the extreme manageability of the rules, their obvious communicability. Theoretical power arises instead from the fact that the rules are equal for everyone, therefore universal. At the same time, they are such as to not implicate, beyond the most epidermal level, anyone in particular.

Today we can no longer do with grand principles, ultimate ends, definitive truths. To some a struggle against this type of “strong thought” may appear to be anachronistic, so much so that, in the epoch of what Nietzsche
called “the last man,” the promoter of grand principles would at most stir our curiosity and elicit perhaps even a certain amount of respect. Yet the irony which would greet him is very likely to hide a deeper-seated nostalgia for a condition we consider irretrievably lost and gone. The power of thought no longer regards its “finality” [ultimità], and the shape of this power is no longer embodied in a concrete principle of authority. We ought to seek it rather in the dimension of everyday normality [normalità quotidiana]. Though the priest and the tyrant might continue to exist concretely, they are already out of the picture. The scene is flattened out. This general flattening represents what today we call “strong thought.” The strong traits of thought are present in its automatism, in that normal gesture which consumes a potent abstraction, and in the conscious attempt to simplify everything. From this arises the fear that many have of the obvious, the fear of banality that conceals the attraction to banality itself: we are constantly aware of its power, of what it can permit one to do.

Moreover, there is no need to conjure up a social condition because this applies as well, each and every time, to the I confronting itself. The process of drastic simplification in favor of preestablished rules is constantly applied to us. Exceptional cases aside, no one wishes to push beyond that boundary of the self where he or she realizes that his or her own identity is insecure because some “proper” organization of the I is no longer possible. Fear and indolence stop us much before we reach the limit, and typically we don't even consider going that far. It takes work, the willing disengagement from our habits, if we really want to weaken our I and save it from the logic of the obvious. And then there’s fear, fear of what is not immediately familiar to us, of discovering realities that might trouble us, of finding ourselves before closed doors which it will not be in our power to open, fear that, upon reaching the edge, there will lie before us an abysmal void.

However, we are at the same time less and less willing to accept an identity whose false, provisional, and compromising nature is more and more obvious. Nihilism has truly reached its fulfillment, and though the experience of its passage has not been rough, its assimilation is taking a while, as it is still gnawing away, growing silently. And there’s no going back.

There is not even the need to reach that boundary to be troubled: the sum total of what we are about to leave behind is growing way too much, while the amending power we might derive from this gesture will seem decidedly disproportional, too little when stood next to what we willingly relinquished. This particular calculus, this sort of critical accounting, pushes us onward: when we realize what it is like living with such a liability, we may begin to cast doubt on the validity of the assets.
I mentioned earlier an experience told in literary form by Peter Handke which concerns the moment during which an individual is compelled to want a change of scene. In this situation the obviousness of superficial logic is made evident, and perception of this obviousness induces a feeling akin to death. Suddenly the automatic immersion in the everyday appears far removed, and we contemplate it not only with active disgust but with a passive indifference as well. Much great twentieth-century literature has told us, in different ways, of the anguish, the boredom, the nausea that follows upon such a process of “illumination.” If Handke brings Kafka to mind, how can we not also think of Musil, in order then to wend our way back to existentialism: what else is a philosopher-writer like Sartre trying to tell us in, say, Nausea?

Even if the object and, with it, the world of postromantic literature cool down, another area is enriched and warming up. To the nothingness there corresponds at the same time an overflow in experience. I am reminded here of the example of James Joyce. Such a nothingness seems to connect with a story able to swell again and again like a wave. That this be a story [racconto], a storytelling, a saying by means of literature, is no mere coincidence. At this margin the power of the saying of philosophy has no hold: Heidegger’s case is emblematic of a failure which in a way also plagued Nietzsche. To proceed by aphorisms—a way which is theoretically weak—means to protect from major dangers. Like that of “definition,” the idea of system is intractable, inconvenient, not because there is too little or a lack of tension but, rather, by virtue of a density for which the concept is inadequate. The literary form of Zarathustra is mediocre in quality, yet it is Nietzsche’s masterpiece. If you take away the form you will no longer have a masterpiece, but instead the fatuousness of an impossible philosophic text. Heidegger turns to the poets, goes around and about them, but it is the lines he chooses which steal the show, while his philosophic formulas, even though gaining in symbolism, tend to become increasingly tiresome.

There’s a story to write, then. Literature is not entrusted with a secondary task precisely because in its narrating (poetry too narrates) there’s a possibility to say the truth of the experience about which we are talking. Diverse narratives can arise from that margin, from that ledge over the abyss. The silence that we may encounter is nothing but the image of the distancing, the swerve from one form of thinking to another. It is not a void, provided we abstain from looking back and do not succumb to nostalgia. If we succeed in making it ours, this silence is a predisposition to listening; above all we can hear, as Serres suggests, a background noise which is downright deafening. But how can we understand it, describe it?
First remark: stories multiply, there are “many” stories. And already we can see a thread, perhaps even a category. Can “multiplicity” become the category for a new thought, a “weak” thought? The question is not marginal. Years of discussion around the so-called crisis of reason have in fact pointed toward a step to take, almost the nemesis of the metaphysical origins of our philosophy: from the one to the many. But hasn’t this been rather a concession, a contract, ultimately an act of conservation? The philosophical (and epistemological) disclosure to multiplicity has often concealed (from each of us as well) the defense of an organizing thought [pensiero organizzante]. Thus it has been held that we are in the age of manifold reasons, that “weak” thought means pluralism. From such a perspective we have been exposed and continue to be exposed to a double risk, namely, that of characterizing the new attitude [atteggiamento] as a “renunciation” of something (which nonetheless continues to live, in the renunciation, though it be pale and weak), and of distancing-removing the problem of unity (as if, from a certain point onward, it would disappear simply by collapsing together with the debris of the now shattered and useless subject).

However, the many stories are above all “narratives.” If we accept multiplicity and forget that we are dealing with aspects of a story, we are left with an empty shell from which the essential is already gone. There’s only a small difference—a symptom to catch, a concession made—between this discourse and the usual discourse about unity, for we have merely complicated the operation, multiplied the terms. The background noise is considerable, but we no longer have an object before us and are no longer a subject that can analyze it while remaining untouched by it. The experience that allows us to perceive it cannot fail to be a subversion of experience, not a transaction. There is no category that can function as a unit of measurement because the notion of measure has lost its analytical power, and unity is no longer an image, an inveterate habit of thought, but rather an “x” of which we have yet to grasp the sense.

The metaphor of background noise is effective, however, as long as the metaphor of listening is still a viable one. But both metaphors owe language the price of a dual relation, subject/object, inside/outside. There’s a leaning, a tending toward the object, toward the world. Handke’s character perceives that objects speak a different language; in fact he sees that the whole scene is split in two [sdoppiata]. Things are now merely phenomena. He exits from the scene, and something akin to an unconscious prowling is set in motion to erase the traces of that stereotyped, conventional subject which had already assigned a name to each thing and to any fact a complete meaning. It now
seems as if objects and things speak their own language, without echo. Consider the tiny fragment: meaningless, useless, often absurd. At the margins, a particular. Is it there that being concentrates? If we succeed in capturing the gaze [sguardo] which is looking at us from this point but without seeing us, we are taken by vertigo. It is the sensation we experience before a void or unknown, as the tiny fragment reveals itself to be infinitely great, an absolute, a splinter of eternity.

But this is not how matters stand, for it is we who once again add an overtone, a surplus of pathos, an ecstaticity. Maybe we are once again speculating, looking into a mirror (handled rather well by Hegel) that reverses the terms. The tiny fragment remains tiny. The vertigo dissipates within a familiar strangeness: the everyday does not transcend itself into an absolute, it remains everyday. A veil may be torn, but behind it there are no rarefactions, heights, or abysses to lose oneself in. The gaze of the object moves right next to us, along the side, it doesn’t leap toward our I. For the gaze doesn’t see in the I the fount, the origin, the power to make it exist. Who is losing, who is gaining? The object seems to have acquired an enormous power because we are reluctant to admit our weakening.

The object is not changed. The object has no gaze. The tiny fragment behind the veil: a delusion for seekers of the eternal. As well as for those who never tire of stretching veils upon the veils. If it has anything to teach, the tiny piece of reality helps us in understanding what the veil is made of; there is no getting lost if we follow instructions. However, finding one’s bearings in a new territory implies the act of possession, as when an animal walks several times around a particular space, takes cognizance of it, makes it its own. But precisely because it is a recognition, all the senses are read, sharpened, release themselves, produce experience. The sensation we have is not new after all, if we feel we have always experienced it. We recognize something familiar before which we turn incredulous, somewhat perplexed, a bit childish, and we even feel slightly funny, as if we were discovering nothing more than a normality, a loss and a gain at the same time. We have lost a distance, a gazing from top to bottom. But we have gained mobility, a capacity to move through the range of the experience of the body. We have had to relinquish some power, but the senses have in the meantime become porous, and if we are able to listen to that background noise it’s because it is now part of our body.

The fragment that has taken us thus far is a little fragment. Here’s another trait: again we experience the temptation to institute an order, to build a category. A microphysics? Is it a matter of substituting one order for another? Or of switching logic? An affirmative answer is unconvincing. Every
account [racconto] of this experience tells us that it cannot be reduced to a cultural experience. This dislocation modifies all references to the lived; it is more than merely a question of switching to another book, for we are going from one order to another. Let us, for the sake of argument, grant this as possible. But on condition that this “other” order is recognized as a completely different space, expressing a difference in nature, not in degree, as Bergson would say. In this case, the passage from macro to micro cannot be read as hopping on a scale, or as hypothetical “leaps” in a homogeneous space. It is not the “little” we are talking about, for what is little cannot be a reduction of what is big; in the new environment we may find also what is “big” transformed in turn. It appears in fact that all relationships would have to be redescribed anew. The detail does not function as part of the whole, but as something which by imposing itself eludes totalization and cannot be perceived by everyday language. The particular, rather, seems to manifest itself as that which stands aside, isolated, difficult to see [ciò che sta da parte, appartato, sfuggente alla vista]. As the marginal with respect to the illumined space, the background with respect to the foreground, the bottom with respect to the ground [il fondo rispetto al fondamento]. A being there, in fact, a populating of experience without realizing it, an imperceptible mastery. The tiny fragment can lead us to a universe, perhaps it can make us discover that the great logic dwells locally in this universe, and is part of it. This marginal does not have to produce margins, borders, boundaries, ever smaller islands: quite the contrary, it expands, extends, and “magnifies” experience.

By means of a cipher, a style, a nuance [sfumatura], subject and experience change parts and proportion: the subject becomes smaller while experience becomes larger. Does the subject disappear? Or has it become so small as to be one with its own experience? And does experience grow, blend in with everything around it, ultimately becoming unreadable? Or has it rather become so filled with sounds as to be finally audible? And how is it possible for this dissonance to be similar to a silence? More than that: is the subject undone, fragmented, disseminated? Or has it recognized itself in the imperceptible becoming, establishing contact with itself as it dissolves?

Only at the cost of a drastic simplification can the expression “weak thought” be made to coincide, despite its specificity, with one of so many available forms of knowledge. It is precisely this difference [diversità] which, if we follow it, makes the distinctions and the separation of a field of knowledge impossible. This “thought,” if we can still call it such, is not a knowing [non è un conoscere]. This “knowing” is a global experience. This experience is such that it cannot be treated as an object. It is like getting a grip on reality [è una presa con la realtà], better, a coming into being [un realizzarsi]. The subject
of this experience cannot be reduced to the notion of subject: it cannot be detached, isolated, deduced, it is neither a ray of light nor the limit of shade. And yet it acts, it works; it doesn’t vaporize into nothing, revealing itself to be rather complex. As it grows in size, its space becomes more complicated; as it grows in intensity, its time can be articulated.

This experience is an attitude [atteggiamento, also: a demeanor], and it can become an exercise, a practice, an experimentation, a swimming against the current. What is its destination? We can know only its direction, or perhaps only what its mode is, the style of each tract, what the minimal, necessary conditions are for it to stay on course. Or perhaps only this: what the continuous corrections, the leaps, the tiny swerves might be that we demand of our experience. We can develop the capacity to recognize obstacles, avoid shoals as well as stay clear of fog, we can master a sort of “attention,” practice being on the ready, in a state of suspicion, in an active modulation of anxiety [inquietitudine]. To not let pass, to not let one be led onward. And, at the same time, to be suspicious of immobility, of seeing oneself in one’s own mirror, of the narcissistic grasp of the void.

The experience of true feeling [vero sentire]? Neither the how nor the when are given to us with any precision, but even such a prediction raises doubts. Yet we cannot doubt of this experience simply because we have gone through it, at least once, or because we are always in the midst of crossing a tiny part of it. We are suspicious of those who pretend their story is truthful simply because we know ours would be different.

There is, therefore, in the expression “weak thought,” something which is transitory and in-between [intermedio]. It is provisionally lodged between the strong reason of those who speak the truth and the impotence of those who contemplate their own nothingness. From this midpoint it can work for us as a signpost.

Notes


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5. Deleuze writes about this in his *Dialogues*.
7. Ibid., 105; my emphasis.
8. Ibid., 92.
9. Peter Handke, *The weight of the world*, English trans. R. Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 54. [Citation that follows is taken from the same book—page 126 of the Italian translation—which for some reason has been omitted from the published English version. *Trans.*]
11. Handke, *The goalie’s anxiety at the penalty kick*, 34.
12. Ibid., 56–57.
Antiporphyry

UMBERTO ECO

A “Strong” Semantic Model

“Strong” thought has two ideals. In the first, one aspires to a thought which is so complex (but at the same time organic) that it can account for the complexity (and the organicity) of the world of our experience, or the natural world. In the second, one aspires to construct a model world [mondo-modello] which is simplified in such a way that, no longer so complex as to be intersubjectively uncontrollable, thought may mirror its structure. In this second case, in order for it to be intersubjectively controllable, thought takes on the form of a language \( L \) endowed with its own rules, and such that these rules are nonetheless the same as those of the model world that the language expresses.

In the first case, thought presumes to proceed according to rules which are given (and found in the becoming of thought itself), and which for some reason are the same as those (as yet unknown, moreover) of the “natural” world which it thinks. In the second case, both the linguistic rules and those of the model world are posited and both, insofar as they are assumed, must be known in advance and formulated in some metalinguistic form (naturally the problem of what renders the metalanguage adequate to the language which it describes remains open).

Two requirements are necessary in order to verify the strength of a strong thought of this second type. The first is that all transformations carried out in the language reveal connections of the model world such that, although the rules of that world are assumed, they would not be so evident to the person who had done the assuming: in this way every (linguistic) operation of thinking reveals still unknown aspects of the model world. But if this were the only
requirement to be respected, such a form of thought would take on only an elastic function, so to speak, and it would come to be developed out of a love for thought (in the sense of *gratia rationis*, for thought’s sake) and not out of love for the model world, posited only in order to allow thought to function. Many formal systems are of this kind and are of unquestioned usefulness, but, if they are considered useful, it is on account of their vestibular or instrumental function, insofar as they allow thought to strengthen itself for some end, namely, to think—in the final analysis—the natural world. This end is what constitutes the second and most complete verification of a strong thought of the second type: the model world (assumed), whose structures language mirrors, must show homologies with the natural world (given) of our experience, at least in some of its aspects.

Only in such cases will the transformation of language make it possible, in the first instance, to know unknown possibilities in the model world, but only in cases where the unknown possibilities of the model world (assumed to be homologous with language) then turn out to be possibilities in the natural world (which as such is not assumed but given). In other words, a model world which is assumed (and homologous to the language constructed) appears susceptible to certain transformations which, conveniently pantographed, predict, suggest, allow, encourage transformations of the natural world (even if the latter, insofar as it is given, is not known in all its structural complexity).

It is not difficult to realize that this strong thought of the second type is that which not only experimental science has recourse to but also every axiomatic discipline which, in fact, makes possible predictions about the natural world. For instance, Pythagoras’ theorem not only ratifies the inevitable behavior of the model world of geometric entities in an (assumed) bidimensional space, but makes it possible to ascertain the behavior of certain aspects of the natural world, such as the construction of three-dimensional solids on plane surfaces like that of the earth, in optimal molar conditions.

One of the dominant tendencies in the theory of natural languages, since antiquity, has been that of constructing “strong linguistic thought” of this kind. The ideal has been, namely, that of a linguistic theory which, on the one hand, describes a linguistic model (posited in ideal laboratory conditions) but, on the other, and thanks to the homology between theoretical metalanguage and linguistic model (on the one hand) and between linguistic model and natural language (on the other), makes it possible to predict natural linguistic behaviors (albeit in optimal conditions).

There is no need to allude to those semantics of artificial languages which *assume* the rules of a linguistic model endowed with a very small number of expressions, reciprocally linked by a few meaning postulates, and
articulable according to a few syntactic rules. Rather, one thinks of the formal semantics of natural languages, of transformational-generative grammars, of generative semantics, and of all those rule systems which seek to account for the workings of a natural language as it is spoken by its users in informal settings.

Of the various components of a language regulated in this way we shall consider in this essay only the semantic component. A model language which is posited, and which demonstrates homologies in its workings with the given natural language must have a lexicon and correlative to the expressions of this lexicon a field of contents. We are not interested here in the extensional destiny of the expressions of such a language; that is, if and how it can be used for designating states of a real or possible world by means of expressions which carry true or false propositions. We are interested in whether an intensional analysis of the language can be provided (even if it may be admitted consequently that the propositional extensions formulated by means of this language are functions of the intensions of its elementary expressions). However, the problem of every semantics which seeks to be characterized as an instrument of a “strong” thought about language (and therefore of the world which language is used to designate) is that of having to be conceived as a system of rules (expressed in some theoretical metalanguage) which express the internal structure of an assumed linguistic model, homologous in some way to the natural language used in the course of our experience as speakers.

Insofar as it is posited, controllable, and liable to rule-governed transformations, this language must be composed of a finite set of expressions, correlated with a finite set of contents.

The only way to correlate a finite set of expressions with a finite set of contents would be to have recourse to a commonplace criterion of synonymy, such that to every expression there corresponds, as content, the expression of another language, or another expression of the same language, without there being admitted equivocal cases. For reasons we shall not analyze here, and to which the entire history of semantic thought bears witness, such a criterion does not appear fruitful because it does not in any case reflect the way in which a natural language functions.

In the development of semantic thought two other solutions (reducible, moreover, the one to the other) have shown themselves to be more fruitful: the description of the content occurs by way of definition formulated in the same linguistic model or by means of a more or less hierarchical series of elementary semantic components (semes, semantic features, names of properties), expressed in the metalanguage of the theory. In both cases, the definition and the series of features are both interchangeable with the definiendum.
Man/ is equivalent to “mortal rational animal” and vice versa, just as /man/ is equivalent to “human + male + adult,” and vice versa.

In this semantic perspective, a fundamental problem is immediately posed: it appears, from the way in which we use a natural language, that the definitions or the series of features assignable to the content of a linguistic term are potentially infinite. A man is animal, rational, and mortal but also biped, unfledged, with two eyes, a venal and arterial circulatory system, a pancreas, as a rule he mates only with beings of his own species, is susceptible to having a beard and a moustache, and so on. This infinity of possible features makes it difficult to conceive of a language which can be utilized for a strong thought. When inorganic chemistry defines hydrochloric acid as HCl, it is concerned only with those characteristics or properties of the compound which make possible calculations concerning its combinability with other compounds, and it must ignore the various industrial uses to which it is put, the circumstances of its discovery, or the fact that in certain science fiction novels there are beings which breathe such a substance.

In these cases, a science decides what are those properties without which the precise object cannot be defined as such and cannot not behave as hydrochloric acid, relegating all others (nonessential from the scientific point of view) to the accidental properties which undoubtedly belong to that which is called our knowledge of the world, but not to the rules of that specific language. Thus it might be thought that in order to predict the proper workings and the understanding of the English language it is necessary or essential to establish that /man/ means adult human male, but not that man is the animal which, in the twentieth century, landed on the Moon. The distinction between the two kinds of semantic representation outlined here is that which is usually subsumed by the difference between a dictionary semantics and an encyclopedic semantics.

Strong thought must therefore seek to construct a dictionary semantics which proves the intelligibility and the workings of an appropriate linguistic model which is assumed, and which is homologous to the given natural language, without the rules of this language presuming to explain all types of signification or designation in order to put into effect those for which, in the light of determinate contexts, this language can be used.

The characteristics of an ideal dictionary are that (1) it must be able to represent the meaning of an indefinite number of lexical items through the articulation of a finite number of components; and (2) these components must not in their turn be interpreted into minor components (otherwise the first requirement would not be satisfied) but they must constitute radicals or primes [primitivi].
Though in largely unsatisfactory ways, the various theories do confront in different ways both the problem of how to limit the components and that of their nature (theoretical constructs, platonic ideas, primitive object-words, whose meaning is not definable but is given by a primary extension which has connected them to a given of elementary experience).

It should be clear that the notions of dictionary and encyclopedia are theoretical notions, belonging to the categories of a general semiotics, and in principle they have nothing in common with actually existing dictionaries and encyclopedias. The latter are empirical instruments and often a so-called dictionary contains much encyclopedic information (and naturally every encyclopedia contains dictionary information, which should not surprise us because a dictionary represents “linguistic” information ordered in a series to the exclusion of encyclopedia information, while an encyclopedia, ideally representing all the knowledge of the world, may also include in it linguistic knowledge). It is clear that a dictionary of this kind (whose limitation constitutes its “strength”) is not used to establish the conditions of use of terms in referring to things or states in the world, but simply guarantees the appropriate conditions of the expressions of a given language. It should, therefore, only account for phenomena such as synonymy, paraphrase, relations of hyponymy and hyperonomy, the difference between analytic truths (dependent on the markers or primes that constitute the dictionary) and synthetic truths (dependent on knowledge of the world, which the dictionary does not account for), contradiction, inconsistency, anomaly, and semantic redundancy.

What this essay will attempt to show is that the theoretical idea of a dictionary is unrealizable and that every rigorous dictionary contains encyclopedic elements which undermine its purity. In this sense, the idea of a strong thought about language also appears unrealizable.

The demonstration we shall propose could start with the most recent standard semantics of natural languages. However, in this context we prefer to follow another path and try to demonstrate that the logical cramp which affects every theoretical dictionary is evident at the very origin of the problem. One need only look at the theory of definitions provided by Porphyry the Phoenician in his Isagoge (written in the third century CE). Developing aristotelian ideas without following Aristotle to the letter, the porphyrian misunderstanding is transmitted to us through the scores of commentaries dedicated to his texts by all the medieval philosophers, starting with Boethius, and—as should be apparent in the pages which follow—this misunderstanding still affects, even where the origin of it goes unrecognized, our contemporary idea of a dictionary semantics. We will also look into why so many medieval thinkers who had seen the problem preferred not to make too much of it.
The Porphyrian Tree

Aristotle on definition

In the *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle states that “definition is of what a thing is and of substance” (II 90 b 30). To define a substance means to establish, from among its attributes, those which appear as essential and, in particular, those which cause the substance to be what it is, in other words, its substantial form.

The problem is to find the right attributes which may be predicated as elements of its definition (96 a 15). Aristotle gives the number three as an example: an attribute such as being is certainly applied to the number three, but also to any other thing which is not a number. Contrariwise, oddness applies to three in such a way that, even if it has a wider application (it applies, for example, to five as well), it does not, however, extend beyond the genus number. These are the attributes we must go in search of “to the point at which just so many are taken that each will belong further but all of them together will not belong further; for necessarily this will be the substance [essence] of the object” (96 a 30). Aristotle means that, if man is defined as a mortal and rational animal, each of these attributes, taken on its own, can be applied to other entities (horses, for example, are animal and mortal, whereas the gods, in the neoplatonic sense of the term, are animal and rational) but taken as a whole, as a definitional “group,” “animal, rational, and mortal” only applies to man and in an absolutely interchangeable way. A definition is not a demonstration: to show the essence of a thing is not equivalent to proving some propositions about that thing; a definition says what something is, whereas a demonstration proves that something is (91 a 1), and, therefore, in a definition we assume that which the demonstration must on the other hand prove (91 a 35)—all those who define do not prove that something exists (92 a 20). This means that for Aristotle a definition concerns intensions and does not encourage any extensional process of reference to a state in the world. A definition explains the meaning of a name (93 b 30).

In this attempt to find the correct method for inferring good definitions, Aristotle develops the theory of predicables, that is, of the ways in which categories can be applied to, or predicated of, subjects. In the *Topics* (101 b 17–24) he identifies just four predicables: genus, property, definition, and accident. Porphyry will speak of five predicables (genus, species, difference [differentia], property, and accident), but there are “reasonable,” if not obvious, reasons why Aristotle does not place difference among the predicables: difference is “generic” by definition, it is placed along with genus (Top. 101
b 18), and to define means to put the subject under the genus and, then, to add the differentiae (Top. 139 a 30). In this way, difference, through genus and distinction, is automatically included in the list of predicables. In other words, definition (and therefore species) is the result of the conjunction of genus and difference: if definition is put on the list, it is not necessary to put difference; if species is put there, it is not necessary to put definition; if genus and species are put there, it is not necessary to put difference (and so Porphyry is guilty of redundancy). Moreover, Aristotle cannot put species among the predicables because species is not predicated of anything, being the ultimate subject of any prediction. Porphyry inserts species in the list because species is that which is expressed by the definition.

The Porphyrian tree

In a long discussion in *Posterior Analytics* (II, XII 96 b 25–97 b 15), Aristotle outlines a series of rules for developing a correct division which proceeds from the most universal genera to the *infimae species*, identifying at every stage the appropriate differences. It is the method which Porphyry adopts in the *Isagoge*. The fact that Porphyry develops a theory of division by commenting on the *Categories* (where the problem of difference is scarcely mentioned) has drawn serious critical attention, but it is of no particular relevance to our analysis. In the same way, the *vexata quaestio* on the nature of universals may be avoided, a question which Boethius, starting precisely from the *Isagoge*, passes on to the Middle Ages.

Taking him at his word, Porphyry’s intention is to ignore the question whether genera and species exist in themselves or are mere conceptions of the mind. What interests us is that he is the first to translate Aristotle into the terms of a tree, and, to be sure, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that in so doing he is the tributary of a neoplatonic conception of the chain of being. But we can perfectly well leave aside the metaphysics which is subtended by the Arbor Porphyriana, given that what interests us is the fact that this tree, independently of its metaphysical background, and insofar as it is conceived as a representation of logical representations, has influenced all subsequent theories of definition.

We are not interested in the metaphysical reasons for which Porphyry delineates a single tree of substances, while it may be supposed that Aristotle would have been more flexible in imagining many more trees, perhaps complementary to each other, each dependent on the type of definitional problem which had to be resolved. Aristotle uses the method of division with great caution and, it may be said, with great skepticism. He seems to
dedicate a great deal to it in the *Posterior Analytics*, but appears much more skeptical in the *De partibus animalium* (642 b and following), where he gives the impression of being inclined to delineate diverse trees according to the problem he is facing, even when it is a question of defining the same species.⁴

But Porphyry has sketched out a single tree of substances, and it is from this model, not from the more problematic discussion Aristotle himself put forth, that the idea of a dictionary structure for definitions has its origins and, through Boethius, comes to us even when the proponent of a dictionary semantics does not know whom to recognize as a precursor. On the other hand, though the idea of dictionary semantics has been thoroughly developed in American universities, one cannot pretend—owing to the division of scientific labor—that an expert in semantics is also an expert in the history of philosophy. And so it is necessary to start from the Arbor Porphyriana.

Porphyry, we were saying, lists *five* predicables: genus, species, differentia, property, and accident. The five predicables establish the means for defining each of the ten categories. Therefore, it is possible to think of ten Porphyrian trees, one for the substances, which makes it possible, for example, to define man as mortal and rational animal, and one for each of the other nine categories, for example, a tree of the qualities, in which purple is defined as a species of the genus red (Aristotle says that the accidents are also susceptible to definition, even if only with reference to a substance, *Met.* VII 1028 a 10–1031 a 10). Moreover, there are ten possible trees, but there is no tree of trees because Being is not a *summum genus*.

The Porphyrian tree of the substances clearly aspires to be a finite and hierarchical set of genera and species, though it is not stated whether the other nine trees are finite or not, and Porphyry is rather elusive on this point. The definition that Porphyry provides of genus is purely formal: a genus is that to which a species is subordinated. Conversely, a species is that which is subordinated to a genus. Genus and species are mutually definable and, therefore, complementary. Every genus placed at a high node in the tree includes the species which are dependent on it; every species which is subordinated to a genus is a genus for the species which is subordinated to it, right down to the lowermost extremities of the tree, where the *species specialissimae*, that is, the most specific species or second substances are placed. At the uppermost node is the *genus generalissimum* (represented by the name of the category), which cannot be a species of anything else. Thus, every species postulates its own higher-order genus, while the opposite cannot be asserted. A genus can be *predicated* of its own species, while the species *belong to* a genus. The relation of species to higher-order genus is a relation of hyponymy to hyperonomy. This phenomenon would guarantee the finite
structure of the tree because, assuming a given number of species *specialis-simae*, and given that for two (or more) species there is just one genus, and so on right up to the top, the tree cannot but finally taper to the patriarchal node. In this sense, the tree would accomplish all the functions required of a good dictionary. But a porphyrian tree cannot be composed of genera and species alone. If it were so, it would assume the form as shown in figure 3.1, and in a tree of this type man and horse (or man and cat) could not be distinguished from each other. A man is different from a horse because, even if both are animals, the former is rational and the latter is not. Rationality is the *differentia* of man. Difference is the crucial element because accidents are not required to produce a definition and the proper or property [*proprium*] has a very curious status; it belongs to species, and only to it, but it is not part of its definition.

There are various types of the proprium, one which occurs in one species but not in every member (such as man’s ability to be healed); one which occurs in an entire species but not alone (such as being biped); one which occurs in the whole species and only in that, but only in a determinate time span (such as turning gray in old age); and one which occurs in one and only one species, only in that one and at all times (such as man’s ability to laugh). This last type is the one most frequently cited in the literature under discussion, and it shows the rather interesting characteristic of being interchangeable with species (only man laughs and the only ones who laugh are men). In this sense, there would be many reasons for it to belong essentially to definition; instead it is excluded from it and appears

![Figure 3.1.](image-url)
to be an accident, even if with a particular status. The most obvious reason for this exclusion is that in order to discover the property a fairly complex act of judgment is necessary, whereas it was maintained that genus and species were “learned” intuitively (Thomas Aquinas and the aristotelian-thomist tradition will speak of *simplex-apprehensio*). In any case, given that what is proper is excluded from this game, it is not necessary for us to consider it, at least not within the confines of the present discussion.

Let us return then to differentia. Differences may be separable from the subject (like being hot, moving, being sick), and in this other sense they are none other than accidents. But they may also be inseparable: among these some are inseparable but always accidental (like being snub-nosed), others belong to the subject in itself, or otherwise essentially, like being rational or mortal. These are *specific* differences and are added to the genus so as to form the definition of the species.

Differences may be divisive and constitutive. For example, the genus “living being” is potentially divisible into the differences “sensitive/insensitive,” but the difference “sensitive” can be composed with the genus “living” so as to constitute the species “animal.” “Animal” in its turn becomes a genus divisible into “rational/irrational,” but the difference “irrational” is constitutive, along with the genus it divides, of the species “rational animal.” Therefore, differences divide a genus (and the genus contains them as potential opposites), and they are selected in order to constitute a lower species, destined to become in its turn a genus divisible into new differences.

The *Isagoge* suggests the idea of the tree only verbally, but the medieval tradition visualized this project, as it appears in figure 3.2.

In the tree in figure 3.2, the broken lines mark the divisive differences, while the continuous lines mark the constitutive ones. Let us remember that the god appears like an animal and in bodily form because in the platonic theology which Porphyry takes up, the gods are intermediate natural forces and should not be identified with the One. The medieval tradition resumes this idea purely out of reasons of faith to the traditional example, just as all of modern logic assumes, without further proof, that the evening star and the morning star are both Venus, and that at the present time there is no king of France.

*A tree which is not a tree*

The flaw in this tree is that it defines in some fashion the difference between god and man but not between horse and ass, or between man and horse. This
fault may be no more than apparent, owing to the fact that in every canonical discussion the example which one was interested in instantiating was that of man. If one wanted to define horse, the tree would have had to be enriched with a series of further disjunctions on its right side so as to isolate, along with the rational animals, those which are irrational (and mortal) as well. It is true that even in this case the horse could not have been distinct from the ass, but would have been enough to complicate (still further) the tree on its right side.

At this stage, it would be sufficient to analyze the problems which Aristotle confronted in the *De partibus animalium* to realize that this operation is not as simple as it appears at first sight. However, from a theoretical point of view, it is sufficient to consider the decision of where to place the ass and the horse in figure 3.2 to see a very serious problem emerge.

Let us try to distinguish horse from man. Undoubtedly, both are animals. Undoubtedly, both are mortal. Therefore, what distinguishes them is rationality. As a result, the tree in figure 3.2 is mistaken because the difference “mortal/immortal” must be assumed as being divisive of the genus

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![Diagram of Genera and Species](image)
“animal,” and it is only in the second instance that one should assume the divisive differentia “rational/irrational.” But the formal consequences of such a move are seen in figure 3.3.

How, at this point, shall we resolve the difference between man and god? To do so, we would have to refer back to figure 3.2, and we shall again have lost the possibility of distinguishing man from horse. The only alternative is that the difference “mortal/immortal” occurs twice, once under “rational animal,” and then again under “irrational animal,” as shown in figure 3.4.

Porphyry would not have discouraged this decision, given that he says (18.20) that the same differentia “is often observed in diverse species, such as quadrupeds in many animals which are differentiated by species” (we shall put aside the fact that quadruped must be a property and not a difference, given that as an example of property “biped” is given elsewhere).

Aristotle, too, says that when two or more genera are subordinated to a higher-order genus (as happens in the case of man and horse, insofar as both are animals) it is in no way ruled out that they have the same differences (Cat. 1 b 15 and following).

In the Posterior Analytics (II 90 b and following) Aristotle shows it is possible to arrive at an unambiguous definition of the number three. Given that for the Greeks one was not a number (but the source and the measure of all the other numbers), three can be defined as that odd number which is first in both senses (that is, it is neither the sum nor the product of other numbers). This definition would be entirely interchangeable with the expression /three/. But it is interesting to reconstruct in figure 3.5 the process of division by means of which Aristotle arrives at this definition.

![Figure 3.3: Diagram illustrating the differentiations of animal, mortal, immortal, rational, irrational, man/horse.](image-url)
This type of definition leads to two interesting consequences: (a) the properties in italics are not exclusive to a single disjunction, but occur under other nodes; (b) a given species (for example, two, three, or nine) may be defined by the conjunction of more properties from those above. These properties are in effect differences. In this way, Aristotle shows not only that many differentiae may be attributed to the same species, but also that the same pair of shared differences may occur under various genera. Moreover, he also...
shows that once a certain differences turns out to be useful for defining a
certain species unambiguously, it is not important to keep under consider-
ation all the other subjects of which it is equally predicable. In other words,
one or more differences have served to define the number three, it is
irrelevant that they serve equally well, even if in other combinations, to define
the number two. For a clear and unequivocal specification of this point see
_Posterior Analytics_ (II, 97 a 14–26).

At this juncture we can attempt a further step. Once it is said that,
given some subordinate genera, there is nothing to stop them having the
same differences, and since the tree of substances is entirely constituted of
genera, all of which are subordinated to the highest genus, it is difficult to
say how many times the same pair of differences may occur.

_A tree made up of differentiae only_

Many medieval commentators on the _Isagoge_ seem to lend encouragement
to our suspicion. Boethius (In _Is_. C.S.E.L.: 256.10–12 and 266.13–15) writes
that “mortal” can be a difference of “rational animal” and that the species
“horse” is constituted out of the differences between “irrational” and “Mor-
tal.” He even suggests that “immortal” may be a valid difference for celestial
bodies, which are both inanimate and immortal: “In this case the difference
immortal is shared by species which are differentiated among themselves
not only in terms of the adjacent genera but in terms of all the higher-order
genera, right up to that subordinate genus which occupies the second posi-
tion at the top of the tree.”

The suspicion Boethius puts forward is, according to Stump, “surpris-
ing” and “disconcerting”: instead, I think it is entirely reasonable. Both Aris-
totle and Boethius knew that difference is greater than its own subject, that
is, that it has a wider extension, and this is possible only because it is not
only men who are mortal and gods who are immortal (and so for the other
conceivable differences). If the differences “mortal/immortal” were to occur
under only one node, “mortal” and /man/ would be interchangeable, and
therefore we would not be dealing with a difference but a property. There
are more mortal beings than there are rational animals. But the problem to be confronted
now concerns, to be precise, the ambiguous nature of the greater extension
of difference with respect to the species which it constitutes.
Abelard in his *Editio super Porphyrium* (157 v 15) also suggests that a given difference is predicated of more than one species: “Falsum est quod omnis differentia sequens ponit superiores, quia ubi sunt permixtæ differentiae, fallit.” Therefore: (a) the same difference includes many species; (b) the same pair of differences may occur under different genera; (c) different pairs of differences occurring under different genera can, however, be expressed (analogously) by the same names; (d) it remains an open question as to how high in the tree the common genus is with respect to which many subordinate genera may host the same pair of differences. As a consequence, it is legitimate to repropose Porphyry’s tree according to the model in figure 3.6.

This tree displays interesting characteristics: (a) it makes possible the representation of a possible universe in which many still unknown natural genera may be predicted and placed (for example, animate but irrational incorporeal substances); (b) it shows that what we were used to considering as genera and species (here represented in italics in parentheses) are just names which label groups of differences; (c) it is not governed by relations of hyponymy and hyperonomy: in this tree it cannot be established that, if something is mortal, then it is rational, or that if it is irrational, then it is a body, and so on; (d) as a consequence of (c) it can be continuously reorganized according to various hierarchical perspectives among the differentiae that constitute it.

As far as characteristic (a) is concerned, we have seen what Boethius said about the celestial bodies. As far as characteristic (b) is concerned, it
is clear that this tree is comprised of pure differences. Boethius, Abelard, and other medieval thinkers were obsessed with the problem of the *penuria nominum*, that is, with the fact that there were not enough lexical items available to label every node (otherwise an expression would have been found for “rational animal,” which, as can be seen, is named by repeating the name of the adjacent genus and that of the specific difference). Let us admit that the complaint of these medieval men is for empirical reasons: given that in their experience (as in ours) other rational animals were never encountered unless they were men or (in the form of natural forces) gods, whose link by means of a common genus was not, to be sure, intuitive and could not then be recorded by language, here then is the explanation for the accidental origin of that case of penury. But on closer examination there is no reason for which there should exist a name for that other higher node resulting from the conjunction of the genus “living” with the difference “sensible,” and this reasoning could be repeated for all the higher nodes. In reality, the names of the genera are inadequate because they are *superfluous*: a genus is nothing other than a conjunction of differences.

Aristotle did not list the species among the predicables because the species is the result of the conjunction of a genus with a difference; but for the same reason he would have had to eliminate from the list the genus as well, which is the pure conjunction of a difference with another difference conjoined with another difference, and so on until the top of the tree—where the only entity which is perhaps a genus is located, the substance, but its genericity is so vast that the tree could be read in reverse to say that the substance is none other than the empty matrix of a play of differences. Genera and species are verbal illusions which conceal the real nature of the tree and of the universe which it represents, a *universe of pure differentiae*.

As far as characteristic (c) is concerned, since the lower differences do not necessarily postulate those of the higher node, the tree cannot be finite: while tapering toward the top, there is no criterion which establishes how much it can ramify to the sides and toward the bottom.

As we shall see in the next section, differences, which originate from outside the tree of substances, are accidents, and accidents are potentially infinite. It may be added that, not being, in contemporary terms, analytic properties, differences are synthetic properties, and it is here that the tree is transformed, by virtue of that which was discussed in the early paragraphs of this essay, from dictionary to encyclopedia, given that it is comprised of elements of world knowledge.

Finally, as far as characteristic (d) is concerned, this tree can be continually resystematized according to new hierarchical perspectives. From the moment that “mortal” does not imply “rational,” what prevents “rational”
from being placed under “mortal,” instead of vice versa, as occurs, on the other hand, in the classical tree in figure 3.2? Boethius knew this very well, and to interpret a move of De divisione VI.7, it is clear that, given certain substances such as pearl, milk, ebony, and certain accidents such as white, hard, and liquid, alternative trees may be constructed, as in figure 3.7.

It is true that in this passage Boethius is talking about accidents only, but in De divisione XII.37 he applies the same principle to every division of genus: “Generis unius fit multiplex divisio.” The same thing is said by Abelard in Editio super Porphyrium (150 v 12): “Pluraliter ideo dicit genera, quia animal dividitur per rationale animal et irrationale; et rationale per mortale et immortale dividitur; et mortale et per rationale et irrationale dividitur.” This is equivalent to saying what figure 3.8 shows.

In a tree comprised of differentiae only, these can be continually reorganized according to the descriptions under which a given subject is considered. The tree is a context-sensitive structure, not an absolute dictionary.

**Differentiae as accidents and as signs**

Differences are accidents and accidents are infinite or at least numerically indefinite.

Differences are qualities (and it is not by chance that while genera and species and illusions of substance are expressed by common nouns, differentiae are expressed by adjectives). Differences come from a tree which is not
that of the substances and their number is not known \textit{a priori} (\textit{Mat. VII} 2.6 104 b 2–1043 a). It is true that Aristotle says these things about nonessential differences, but at this point who can say which differences are essential and which are not? Aristotle plays with a small number of examples (rational, mortal), but when he speaks of species, such as beasts and artificial objects, which are different from man, he becomes much vaguer, the differences increase. . . . In theoretical terms, we are entitled to advance the hypothesis that he would not have known how to construct a finite porphyrian tree, but in practical terms, too (or on the basis of the philological evidence), when we read the \textit{De partibus animalium}, we see that he \textit{in actual fact} abandons the project of a single tree and readjusts complementary trees according to the property whose essential nature and cause he wants to explain.\textsuperscript{6} The notion of a specific difference is, rhetorically speaking, an oxymoron. Specific differences mean essential accidents. But this oxymoron conceals (or discloses) a much more serious ontological contradiction.

The person who has understood the problem without pretense (but he has acknowledged it with great prudence, as usual) is Thomas Aquinas. In the \textit{De ente et essentia} he states that the specific difference corresponds to the substantial form (another ontological oxymoron, if it can be put like this, given that the most substantial thing that we can conceive of is identified with one or more accidents). But Thomas Aquinas’ thought does not lead to misunderstandings: differences correspond to form and genus to matter, and just as form and matter constitute substance so do genus and difference constitute species. The reasoning is revealingly analogical; but the recourse to analogy does not exclude the fact that what defines substantial form is difference as accident.

In order to justify such a scandalous conclusion, Thomas Aquinas contrives—with one of his customary strokes of genius—a truly brilliant solution: “In rebus sensibilibus etsi ipsae differentiae essentiales nobis ignotae sunt: unde significatur per differentiae accidentales quae ex essentialibus oriuntur, sicut causa significatur per suum effectum, sicut bipes ponit differentia hominis” (\textit{De ente} VI). Therefore: essential differences do exist; what they are, we do not know; the ones we recognize as specific differences are not the essential differences in themselves, but signs, symptoms, clues of the (undetectable) specific differences; they are the surface manifestations of the existence of something else, unknowable to us. We infer the presence of essential differentiae through a semiotic process, starting with knowable accidents.

That the effect is a sign of the cause is the customary aquinian idea (much of his theory of analogy depends on this assumption, of stoic origin in the final analysis: effects are \textit{indexical} signs). This idea is reaffirmed for example in \textit{S. Th. I.} 29.2–3, or in \textit{S. Th. I.} 77.1–7: a difference like “rational”
is not the real specific difference which constitutes the substantial form. The ratio as potentia animae, or reason as power of the soul, is detectable only insofar as it manifests itself through words and actions (verbo et facto) (and actions are accidents, not substances!). We say that men are rational because they manifest their rational potential through the activity of knowing, both when such actions appear through an internal discourse (and one imagines that this thought activity is grasped through introspection) and when they manifest it through external discourse, that is, language (S. Th. I. 78.8). In a decisive text in Contra Gentiles (III. 46) Thomas says that human beings do not know what they are (quid est), but they know that they are so (quod est) insofar as they are perceived as the actors of rational activity. We know what in reality are our spiritual powers “ex ipsorum actuum qualitate.” Thus even “rational” is an accident and so are all the differences into which the porphyrian tree vanishes.

Aquinas understands that differences are accidents, but he does not draw from this discovery all the conclusions that he should have about the possible nature of the tree of substances: he cannot allow himself (he cannot “politically” but probably not even “psychologically”) to call into question the tree as a logical instrument for obtaining definitions (something he would have been able to do without risk) because all of the Middle Ages is dominated by the conviction (however unconscious) that the tree mimics the structure of the real, and this neoplatonic suspicion affects even the most rigorous aristotelians.

But we may say without pretense that the tree of the genera and species, however constructed, explodes in dust of differences, in an infinite turmoil of accidents, in a nonhierarchizable network of qualia. Like the porphyrian tree the dictionary is necessarily dispersed, by virtue of internal forces, into a potentially limitless and disorganized galaxy of elements of world knowledge. Therefore, it becomes an encyclopedia and it becomes so because it was in actual fact an encyclopedia without knowing it, or else a contrived artifice for concealing the inevitability of the encyclopedia.

The Encyclopedia as Labyrinth

Encyclopedia

If the dictionary is a concealed encyclopedia, then the encyclopedia is the only means with which we can account for not only the functioning of a given language but also cultural life as a system of interconnected semiotic systems. But, as has been shown elsewhere, the moment in which one goes the way
of the encyclopedia, two theoretically crucial distinctions lapse: above all that between natural language and model-language, and as a result, that between the theoretical metalanguage of semantics and object language.

The first distinction lapses because the encyclopedia is the theoretical model which accounts for a natural language in all its complexity and contradictoriness, and the idea of an encyclopedia arises precisely because the “strong” model of the dictionary is revealed to be not only inadequate but structurally untenable. In other words, in order to have a strong semantic theory, it is necessary to construct (to assume) a reduced model of language in some way homologous in its functioning to a natural language: yet, not only is the natural language which is assumed not homologous to the one given, but it cannot be assumed because at the moment in which it is assumed, it weakens of its own accord, it explodes.

The second distinction lapses because it is impossible to construct a metalanguage as a theoretical construct composed of a finite number of primitive universals: such a construct, as we have seen, explodes, and in exploding it reveals that its own theoretical constructs were none other than the terms of the given object language. The semantic universals (and such are the genera and the species) are pure names in the natural language. As such, they are interpreted, and they can be interpreted through differences, which, ontologically speaking, are qualia, assumed to be symptoms, clues, signs (and therefore they manifest themselves as pure semiotic material usable for conjectural purposes) and linguistically they are in turn names of clues.

The encyclopedia is dominated by the Peircean principle of interpretation and therefore of unlimited semiosis. Every thought that language expresses is never fully a “strong” thought of the dynamic object (or a thing in itself) but a thought of immediate objects (pure content) interpretable in their turn by other expressions which refer to other immediate objects in a self-sustaining semiotic process, even if, in the Peircean perspective, this leakage of interpretants generates habits and therefore ways of transforming the natural world. But the result of this action on the world—as Dynamic Object—must at the appropriate time be interpreted by means of other immediate objects, and thus the circle of semiosis, which continually opens beyond itself, continually closes in on itself.8

An encyclopedic semantic thought is not “weak” in the sense that it is unable to explain how we use language to mean. But it submits the laws of signification to the continual determination of context and circumstances. An encyclopedic semantics does not refuse to provide rules for the generation and interpretation of the expressions of a language, but these rules are contextually oriented, and the semantics incorporates the pragmatics (the
dictionary incorporates, even as semioticized, knowledge of the world). What makes the encyclopedia profitably weak is the fact that definitive and closed representations of it are never produced, and that an encyclopedic representation is never global but always local, and produced in view of determinate contexts and circumstances, constituting a limited perspective of semiotic activity. As we shall see later, if the encyclopedic model provides algorithms, these algorithms can only be nearsighted, like those which make it possible to pass through a labyrinth. The encyclopedia does not provide a complete model of rationality (it does not univocally reflect an ordered universe), but provides rules of reasonableness, that is, rules for contracting at each stage the conditions which allow us to use language to account for—a disordered world (or one whose criteria of order elude us).

This is not the place to attempt a review of the encyclopedic models of semantics which the semiotic literature (in the broad sense) suggests to us. Here, we can only refer to the (partial) reviews sketched in previous works. Case grammars, representations by way of circumstantial and contextual selections, contextually oriented procedural semantics, experiments in Artificial Intelligence which, instead of providing definitely systematized codes, provide inferential models based on frames, scripts, goals . . . These and other examples could be produced by an encyclopedic knowledge.

Encyclopedic models do not exclude from semantic representation possible analytic properties, but only insofar as these can function as shorthand devices in order to include other properties: they seek rather to insert into the representation stereotypes which account for the way in which the users of a natural language represent to themselves the contents of the expressions according to contexts and circumstances.

The encyclopedia model deals a mortal blow to the dictionary models because it definitively excludes the possibility of hierarchizing in a single and incontrovertible way semantic features, properties, and semes.

Labyrinths

The project of an encyclopedic competence is governed by a (very influential) metaphysic, which may be expressed through the metaphor of the labyrinth (which in turn relates to the topological model of the polydimensional network). Porphyry's tree represents (at all times, in the course of the history of strong thought) the attempt to reduce the labyrinth, which is polydimensional, to a bidimensional schema. But we have seen that the tree regenerates at every stage the labyrinth (of differences).
There are three kinds of labyrinth. The classical labyrinth, that of Knossus, is one-way (unicursale); as soon as one enters it, one cannot but reach the center (and from the center one cannot but find one’s way out). If the one-way labyrinth were “unraveled,” one would have a single thread in one’s hands. Ariadne’s thread, which the legend presents to us as the means (extraneous to the labyrinth) of leaving the labyrinth, when in fact it is none other than the labyrinth itself. Incidentally, in this labyrinth there must be a Minotaur to lend interest to the experience, given that the course (aside from the initial bewilderment of Theseus, who does not know where he will end up) always leads where it must and cannot be otherwise.

The second type is the mannerist labyrinth or Irrweg. The Irrweg proposes alternative choices, and all paths lead to a dead end, except for one, which leads to the exit. If unraveled, the Irrweg assumes the form of a tree; it is a structure of blind alleys. If errors are committed, one must retrace one’s steps. In this second instance an Ariadne’s thread would actually be useful. There is no need of the Minotaur; the Minotaur is the visitor capable of self-deception about the nature of the tree.

The third kind of labyrinth is a net, in which every point may be connected with every other point. It cannot be unraveled. Also because, while the first two kinds of labyrinth have an interior (their own knot) and an exterior, into which one enters and toward which one exits, the third type of labyrinth, infinitely extendable, has neither exterior nor interior. It can be finite or (provided that it is possible for it to expand) infinite. In both cases, seeing that each of its points can be connected with every other point, and the connecting process is also a continual process of correction of the connections, it would always be unlimited, because its structure would always be different from what it was a moment before and each time one could traverse it along different lines. Therefore, he who travels it must also learn continuously to correct the image that is made of it, whether it is a concrete image of one (local) section of it, or a regulatory and hypothetical image which concerns its global structure (unknowable, for both synchronic and diachronic reasons). A network is not a tree. The Italian territory does not oblige anyone to reach Rome from Milan by passing through Florence: one can pass through Genoa, Pisa, Civitavecchia; one can decide to follow the route through Rimini, Naples, Rome. A network is a tree plus infinite corridors which connect the nodes of the tree. The tree can become (multidimensionally) a polygon, a system of interconnected polygons, an immense megahedron. But this comparison is still deceptive; a polygon has external limits, the abstract model of the network has none. The model of the network is a model, not a metaphor.
Halfway between the model and the metaphor is the *rhizome*. Every point of the rhizome can be connected with every other one of its points. It is said that in the rhizome there are no points or positions, but only lines. This characteristic is doubtful because every intersection of lines creates the possibility of localizing a point; the rhizome may be divided and reconnected at every point; the rhizome is antigenealogical (it is not a hierarchical tree); if the rhizome had an exterior, with this exterior it could produce another rhizome, therefore it has neither inside nor outside; the rhizome can be dismantled and is reversible, susceptible to modifications; a network of trees open in all directions creates rhizomes, which means that every local section of the rhizome can be represented as a tree, provided that one knows that for reasons of temporary convenience one is dealing with a fiction; the rhizome is not globally describable, either in space or in time; the rhizome justifies and encourages contradiction: if every one of its nodes can be connected with every other node, from every node one can reach every other node, but from every node it may also be that one never succeeds in reaching the same node, always returning to the starting point, and therefore in the rhizome it is equally true to assert that *if p then q* and *if p then not q*; of the rhizome there are always and only local descriptions; in a rhizomatic structure without exterior, every vision (every perspective on it) always comes from one of its internal points and, as Rosenstiehl suggests, it is a *nearsighted algorithm*, every local description tends to mere hypothesis concerning its globality; in the rhizome blindness the only possibility for vision, and to think means to move about gropingly, that is, conjecturally.

The third kind of labyrinth does not necessarily entail an irrational universe. It is the model which has been chosen by a weak system of thought *par excellence*, that of the encyclopedists of the eighteenth century, which was based upon criteria of *reasonableness*, not of triumphant rationality. Let us reread the introductory pages of the *Encyclopédie*, attributed to D’Alembert:

> the general system of the sciences and the arts is a kind of labyrinth, a torturous pathway which the spirit confronts without knowing too much about the road to follow. . . . But this disorder, however philosophical it is for the mind, would deform, or at least completely annihilate an encyclopedic tree whereby one wanted to represent it. On the other hand, as we have already revealed with regard to logic, the greater part of the sciences which we consider as implicating in themselves the principles of all the others, and it is for this reason that they must occupy first position in the
encyclopedic order, do not occupy first place in the genealogical order of ideas because they were not invented first. . . . Moreover, our system of knowledge is comprised of various branches; many of which have the same meeting point; and since, starting from this point of view, it is not possible simultaneously to set out on all the paths, the determination of the choice goes back to the nature of the various spirits. . . . On the other hand, the same thing does not happen for the encyclopedic order of our knowledges. The latter consists in reuniting them in the smallest possible space, and in assuming, so to speak, that the philosopher is above and beyond this vast labyrinth, having a very lofty point of view from which it is possible simultaneously to discern the principal sciences and arts; to survey in a single gaze the objects of his speculations and the operations he can perform on these objects; to distinguish the general branches of human knowledge, the points which separate them and which they have in common, and even to catch a glimpse, at times, of the secret ways that reunite them. It is a kind of world map, which must show its principal countries, their position and their reciprocal dependencies, the straight line course from one to the other, a course often interrupted by a thousand obstacles, which can only be known in each country to the inhabitants and travelers, and which could only be shown on particularly detailed maps. These particular maps will be the various articles of the Encyclopedia and the tree or represented system will be its world map. 

The Encyclopédie has no center, it presents a series of pseudo-trees which assume the tentative appearance of local maps.

When one speaks of a crisis of reason, one thinks of globalizing reason, which sought to provide a “strongly” definitive image of the universe to which it was applied (given or assumed, as the case may be). The system of thought of the labyrinth, and of the encyclopedia, is weak insofar as it is conjectural and contextual, but it is reasonable because it allows for intersubjective control, it leads to neither renunciation nor solipsism. It is reasonable because it does not aspire to globality; it is weak in the same way that the oriental wrestler is weak, who works with the adversary’s strength, and tends to yield, only to find in the situation the other has created the (conjectural) means for responding victoriously. The oriental fighter has no predetermined rule; he has conjectural matrices for regulating, temporarily, every event given from the outside. And then to transform it into his own decisive proposal. It is “weak” before whoever believes that the fight depends on a strong dictionary. It is strong and wins, at times, because it is content with being reasonable.
Notes


11. This is according to Rosenstiehl in the cited article “Labirinto.”


13. [Though there is no reference to source of citation in the Italian, the excerpts can be found in Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, trans. R.N. Schwab (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), 46–48. I could not trace the translation used by Eco, which also appears on pp. 82–83 of his *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984). A substantial part of this chapter (herein 80–98) is equivalent to pages 58–74, and 80–81 from Eco’s 1984 book. *Trans.*].
In Praise of Appearance

GIANNI CARCHIA

One of the great testing grounds for German idealism has been its struggle to free thinking from that coercive synthesis of predication based on forms of judgment canonized by traditional, Aristotelian-Scholastic theory. This struggle, however, has failed, and has been passed on unresolved to posterity. The new dimensions of time ushered by bourgeois history had a decisive effect on thinking [il pensiero], which acknowledged the validity of the attempts to free the historical and experiential nucleus of logical forms from the congealed shell of tradition. A similar intention had already characterized the first great systems of modern philosophy. Yet there also the attack on the Scholastic tradition took place in an extrinsic manner, since its object was not to upturn the entire construction but, rather, and more simply, to privilege specific aspects until then hidden or marginally accounted for, as we can see with the revaluation of the inductive syllogism in Bacon.\(^1\) At the heart of the turn that idealism forced upon logic we find, as is well known, the dynamism to which it subjected the desiccated forms of traditional logic, by instilling in its heart time (Kant), movement (Fichte), and history (Hegel). In the course of this “revitalization,”\(^2\) judgment was genetically rediscovered to be precisely a trial [processo], which in fact it has always been since its unforgotten origin in the juridical-economic sphere.\(^3\) However, in its ultimate and conclusive idealistic consequence—that is, in Hegel—this dynamic proved unable to circumscribe the originary character of predicative mediation, unable in short to understand the value of mediation qua mediation. The rediscovery of the trial-like aspect [carattere processuale] of judgment has, with Hegel, affected only the subjects of mediation it constitutes almost exclusively. In other words, Hegel meant to show that “the immediacy of what actuates mediation is more originary than mediation”\(^4\) itself. Judgment
constitutes the very terms of the logic of legal process, and Hegel does indeed bring this out back into the open. However, he is wary of asking what the meaning of this trial-like procedure in itself might be, or, otherwise said, he refrains from questioning mediation as mediation. Once the “interiority of Dasein” is made evident in the logic of reflection, contained in The Doctrine of Essence, Hegelian idealism proceeds to reconstruct for mediation a new exteriority in sempiternal conceptual mediation, which is realized in the Subjective Logic. In this way, in the logic of the Wesen Hegel somehow made reflection and mediation coincide, denying the possibility of a theory of mediation at the level of the Doctrine of the Notion.

At first, Hegel seems to purport a surprising symmetry between the logic of reflection and the logic of judgment:

This signification of the judgment is to be taken as its objective meaning, and at the same time as the truth of the earlier forms of the transition. In the sphere of being, the object becomes and others itself [verändert sich], the finite perishes or goes under [geht unter] in the infinite; in the sphere of Existence, the object issues from its ground into Appearance and falls to the ground [geht zugrunde], the accident manifests the wealth of substance as well as its power; in being, there is transition into an other, in essence, reflected being in an other by which the necessary relation is revealed. This movement of transition and reflection [Scheinen] has now passed over into the original partition [Teilen] of the Notion which, while bringing back the individual to the in-itself of its universality, equally determines the universal as something actual. These two acts are one and the same process in which individuality is posited in its reflection-into-self, and the universal as determinate.

The symmetry consists in the fact that only in this “transition”—which is common to both the logic of Wesen as well as to the copula of judgment—does truth manifest itself, and as Übergang und Scheinen at that. At the same time, however, Hegel tries to introduce an element of radical difference between reflection and judgment: for to the Zusammengehen mit sich, the “coincidence with itself,” which characterizes the movement of reflection, the logic of judgment substitutes the Zusammengehen of subject and predicate in the copula. The purpose of this move would seem to be that of freeing the “positing” of reflection from objectivity—in short, to “demystify” reflection. It would raise the question of coming up with a form of mediation which,
unlike that of reflection, does not conclude nihilistically with the abandon-
ment of finitude, once it is analyzed in its “intimacy”—given that the logic
of Wesen is the inner core of Dasein—but, rather, would lead to the rescue
of this very same finite. In the logic of Wesen, the process of Übergehen
constitutes mediation beginning with the annulment of the elements that
make it up. On the basis of a regressive and concentric movement, mediation
becomes, therefore, the progressive peeling off of all the presuppositions of
being. By deciphering the reality of being as illusory, the logic of essence
posits itself as the equivalent of that substance become subject announced in
the Phenomenology of Spirit. This time, however, the speculative dynamics
of the Zusammengehen mit sich no longer has memory as its foundation, as
it did in the Phenomenology, but, rather, oblivion. As the desubstantiation of
being, reflective mediation cannot contain memory of what has declined: it is now pure nihilism, the true “fury of disappearing.” Reflective
mediation is the logical equivalent of the radicality with which the historical-
social Bildung—what had replaced the ancient “beautiful ethicalness”—has
uprooted the fundamental, “natural” presuppositions of the real in order to
make room for the sovereign reality of the unfolding spirit.

The question to ask is then the following: does the logic of judgment
introduce, as Hegel is wont to believe, a true discontinuity with respect to
this logic of reflective mediation? At first, the predicative nature of judgment
appears to configure itself as a true Zusammengehen taken in and by itself,
no longer objectivistically—“mit sich”—as happens in reflective mediation.
Actually, Hegel’s attention is not turned toward what truly takes place in the
copula, but, rather, is focused on the Übergang which stems from the copula:

This sublation of the judgement coincides with the advance in the
determination of the copula, which we have still to consider; the
sublation of the terms of the judgement is the same thing as their
transition into the copula. In other words, the subject, in raising
itself to universality has, in this determination become equated
with the predicate, which as reflected universality also contains
particularity within itself; subject and predicate are therefore
identical, that is they have coalesced into the copula [sie sind in
die Kopula zusammengegangen].

Nevertheless, the Zusammengehen is in reality a Untergehen: its predicative
nature is not conceived as beginning with itself, but, rather, as beginning
with the extremes (subject and predicate) that must find therein their rec-
conciliation, in a sort of unterschiedlose Identität. Though it is presented as
“comunicative,”14 such an identity cannot obscure the sacrificial ground upon
which, much like reflective identity, it also rests, and nihilistically so. The
“amorous” dialectic which in judgment replaces the reflective one constitutes
itself once again by assuming the model of the Übergehen. Thus the copula
becomes only a meager anticipation of what is the Mitte, the medium in the
syllogism.15 And yet, by referring to the figure of the syllogistic medium,
predicative mediation merely reiterates its inability to free itself from the
scheme of reflective logic. In the predicative model of truth as expressed in
the Hegelian doctrine of judgment, the copula cannot be conceived as the
originary locus of the happening of truth: it does not permit the thinking of
mediation qua mediation. Going counter to what it promised, the judging
mediation does not “save the phenomena”: between the Übergehen of reflec-
tive mediation and the Zusammengehen of predicative mediation, there van-
ishes all difference. In predicative judgment the copula is simply a resolution
point of judgment itself: its Aufhebung, as Hegel puts it.16 Following Emil
Lask’s ingenious reconstruction,17 what becomes evident at this point in a
definitive and emblematic manner in Hegel’s theory of logic is that secondary
or accessory character which from the logical point of view is related to the
very nature of judgment.

Against the attempts aimed at locating precisely in the judging media-
tion the model of a communicative freedom of thinking capable of overcoming
the mystifying character of reflective mediation,18 we can see how the model
of predicative mediation rests on this side of the same exemplary pretension
set forth by the Kantian theory of judgment. From such a vantage point, in
fact, we may further underscore how Hegelian reflective mediation situates
itself exactly opposite Kantian reflective judgment. For whereas the latter is
the end point of intellectual judgment (that is to say, it is the dissociation of
the Zusammengehen of the representational mechanisms working within it),
the Hegelian reflection is instead precisely that attempt to remove as well the
last ineffectuality of representation, trying to mend without any residue the
rift between concept and reality.19 In Kant the reflection working in judgment
aims at unhinging the predicative synthesis; it is, ultimately, contemplation,
and as such a refusal to attribute to the Erscheinung it isolates the character
of a Wirklichkeit which would positively conclude the entire (and nihilisti-
cally affected) movement of the Hegelian reflective mediation. In the theory
of reflective judgment Kant has definitively stated the artificial character—
which Lask will call logically secondary—of the predicative relation. In a
way, this had been announced in the Transcendental Analytic, which had led
moreover to recognizing as radical foundation of synthetic a priori judgments
the nomad faculty of the imagination.
Kant’s reflective judgment is the ultimate and most radical suspension of the judging character of thinking, which is entrusted [rimesso] to contemplation as its sole true possibility. From this vantage point, the concrete spiritual-historical movement which doubles as the hidden model and force for the Hegelian logic of mediation can be interpreted also as a radical misunderstanding of Kant’s critical project, especially in terms of the latter’s crucial introduction of temporality. In Kant, this move had the sense precisely to determine the radically phenomenic character of knowledge [conoscenza]. In fact, intellectual judgment constitutes itself as that act capable of embodying—and therefore limiting on the level of human finitude—the abstract and indeterminate realm of logical truths. And as is evident also from the theory of the reflective judgment, within the precincts of critical philosophy judgment is always a dimension of the constitution of appearance. Precisely that constitution of appearance which, in the Doctrine of Essence, Hegel liquidates as the exclusive product of an inferior logic of the Dasein. With the shift from temporality to history, to the Ge-wesen, Hegel bids goodbye to Kant’s effort to remove violence and coercion from predicative mediation (which was apparent in the intellectual judgment and ineffectual in the reflective judgment). Why? Precisely because mediation was intimately connected to the finitude introduced in logical space by time. To the non-coercive model of Kantian predication, Hegel counterpoised, by transfiguring it at the logical level, the actual scheme of historical mediation. The archetype of movement which is removed in the copula is the archaic sacrificial rite which acts as the model of Hegelian speculative mediation already in the pages devoted to the “tragedy of the ethical” in the Jena essay on Naturrecht. Sublimated to a dialectics of love, the sacrificial scheme, while it guides the historical-philosophical reading of the salvific Christian event in itself, leads to perceive in the copula of judgment nothing more than the sign of an event of “death and transfiguration.”

Bearing in mind that Kant’s theory of judgment displays the characteristic of a “non-synthetic synthesis,” the question is now to see whether we can attribute a totally different meaning to the being of the copula, which in Hegel’s theory of predicative judgment is a mere moment of an Aufheben. In fact, the logically derivative character of Hegel’s judgment is precisely the end result of the “reflexivity” of the being of the copula, of the fact, in other words, that in its predictive aspect being does not seem to cover any proper, eventual, function. What is not thematized, both in the reflective mediation as well as in the predicative mediation, is precisely mediation as mediation, that is to say, being beginning with itself. As we learn from his critical reconstruction of Kant’s thought, Faith and Knowledge, Hegel himself has pointed out that
the difference with respect to Kant’s collocation lies precisely in the way he reads the being of the copula. Hegel in fact reproaches Kant for letting the copula subsist as an unacknowledged element, as an added incomprehensible:

   The rational or, as Kant puts it, the a priori of this judgment, absolute identity, does not manifest itself as the median term in judgment, but rather in the syllogism; in the judgment it is solely the copula “is,” a non-conscious . . . the copula is not something thought, something known, but expresses precisely the not-being-known of the rational . . . the rational identity of identity, inasmuch as it is the identity of the universal and of the particular, is the not-conscious in judgment, and judgment itself is nothing but its expression.

And, further along, we read:

   To the unity of self-consciousness, which is at the same time objective unity, the category, formal identity, to this unity there’s added in an incomprehensible manner, as if something extraneous, a something more than the empirical, which is not determined by this unity . . . and the more itself, that is, the connection between that which connects and the manifold, is the incomprehensible.24

It is revealing to observe how this Hegelian critique of Kant coincides almost to the letter with the dialectical arguments which Adorno, in his Negative Dialectics, submits against the Heideggerian conception of being. Adorno reproaches Heidegger for wanting to proceed toward an objectification, a fetishization of the irreducible transient character of the copula:

   The copula, by definition, is fulfilled only in the relation between subject and predicate. It is not independent. . . . The substitution of the general grammatical form for the apophantic content transforms the ontical task of “is” into an ontological one, a way of Being to be. Yet if the task that is postulated, transmitted, and transmitting in the sense of “is” were neglected in the particular, that “is” would retain no substrate of any kind; there would be nothing left but the abstract form of transmission [mediazione] in general.25

The substance of the dialectical attitude, in Hegel as in Adorno, seems therefore to consist in the willingness to posit a transparency in the middle term
that sees in it, rather than a “first and originary,” the simple resolutive moment of a “speculative threefoldness.”

Now let us ask: what precisely is this “unknowing [inconsapevole]”—“the copula ‘is’”—which still nevertheless, according to Hegel himself, discloses in Kant the possibility for a priori synthetic judgments as originary “absolute identity”? Or even, and parallel to it, in what does this “irreducibility” of the being of the copula consist in, which in Heidegger opens up into the world of comprehension? The answer proposed by Kant and reproached by Hegel—“this more had been acknowledged rationally as productive imagination”—is the same in Heidegger. In *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, imagination is once again identified “not as a median” but as the originary first of rational identity which discloses the possibility of a priori synthetic judgments, in other words the originary trunk from which knowing splits into intuition and concept. Unlike what takes place in the dialectic perspective, however, here the logical judgment can no longer be understood as the locus of the embodiment of truth. Here, in talking about the judgment we are in fact still and always dealing with the “originary,” with the Einbildungskraft, or as Hegel observes in critiquing Kant, judgment is then simply “the redoublement of imagination as reflected duplicitousness.” As it attempts to lock history and logic inextricably together, Hegel’s dialectical scheme finds its greatest resistance in the ineradicable extra-logical nature of Kant’s judgment. The aesthetic-moral origin of judgment is nowhere denied by Kant, who is heir to a logical tradition which in order to designate judgment employed the term *propositio* and translated *sentiment* with *Urteil*.

In Hegel, the subjective logic of the concept situates itself exactly as the attempt to do away with that “more” originary and extra-logical seen as an “incomprehensible” blind spot. Hegel would like to reabsorb it definitely into the logic of predicative mediation, exalting to the maximum the character of pure *Werden* in the being of the copula. Any residual immediacy, any unresolved naturalness is then diluted within that unfolding of the spirit, of which predicative mediation is the logical model. The failure of the latter as the failure of the historical Christian-bourgeois subject marks the setback of the program of logical dynaminization which is central to post-Kantian idealist speculation. An abyss separates Kant’s position, for which in this dynamic what was at stake was the discovery of temporality and therefore of finitude of the logical subject, from Hegel’s, which considers the medial constitutivity of predicative space impossible to explore (without risking falling back into the mystic of the “originary”). In the interim from Schopenhauer to Lask, both the anti-psychologism and the anti-subjectivism of logical theory end up shipwrecked in the wake of Hegel’s attempt to tie up logic and history by means of the primacy attributed to the will of the judging synthesis as
mediation, mediation in which it is supposed that the “unknowing more” of the being of the copula is consumed without any residue. It is on the tracks of this search for an antipredicative meaning of the being of the copula that a path is disclosed within twentieth-century thought toward a renewed notion of ontology (no longer understood objectivistically in a pre-Kantian sense).

The rebirth of ontology is tightly connected to the surfacing of a non-judgmental way of thinking which is logically weak. To reconsign Being to the logic of the event by withdrawing it from the logic of predication means precisely to think mediation as mediation, beginning in other words from mediation itself and not from the elements that make it up as the point of resolution, as Aufhebung. It is a question about the determination of a “nonsynthetic” character of the being of predication, an antipredicative mediation whose model can perhaps be furnished still by the Kantian theory of reflective judgment, where the judgment is given solely in the suspension of predication, as the locus of nonsynthesis: the untrammeled contemplation of appearances.

Notes

5. Theunissen, *Sein und Schein*.
8. Ibid., 25 (Miller translation, 400).
10. Ibid., 314.
11. Ibid., 453.
12. [As a noun *parere* can mean both “personal opinion,” which implies subjectivity though not at all an arbitrary utterance, and “advice,” as when one asks for confirmation on a given situation; but a rarer sense, and one suggested here, is that of “appearance.” *Trans.*]

16. Ibid., 334.
18. As we can see in the recent interpretation by Michael Theunissen in his aforementioned book.
22. Conversely, it is therefore not by chance that a salvific reading of Hegel’s *Logic* of the type effected by Theunissen would ground its emancipative model precisely on the presumed free communicativeness of the predicative mediation.
25. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 101–102. [In the Italian translation of this passage from Adorno, the three occurrences of “transmission” have been rendered with *mediazione*, which may be the reason Carchia is referring to it. *Trans.*]
27. Ibid., 316.
30. Ibid., 308.
31. Ibid., 309.
On the Ethics of Weakness
Simone Weil and Nihilism

Alessandro Dal Lago

The work of Simone Weil represents a borderline case of a way of thinking which for our times is at once symptomatic and untimely. It is symptomatic in terms of the experience of a cultural setback, and of the decline of the images of progress and emancipation, even as it distances itself from regressive myths. At bottom, her thinking harbors the themes of boundlessness, force, uprootedness, and the destruction of tradition, all of which are crucial to the analysis of nihilism and the modern metamorphosis of power [potenza]. Her thought is also untimely because, beginning with the awareness of the annihilation of culture, Simone Weil opted for the solitary path of the exposure of her own existence to the destiny of the world, a choice that brings her close to a philosopher whom she certainly cared little for, namely, Nietzsche. And it is untimely above all because at the peak of de-Christianization and achieved Enlightenment, she accepted the challenge of the absence of God, experiencing to its ultimate consequences—both theoretical and personal—the unhappy love of God.¹

Until her death this last aspect encouraged biased or prejudiced readings of her work, such as edifying or existentialist interpretations that emphasized, either in a religious or an atheistic sense, the dominant themes of the fall and the malheur, calamity [sventura]. Catholics read in her writings an example of the failure of materialism—which was expressed in the revolutionary positions of her youth—and the plan for a return to God, a sort of catechism for unbelievers or the perplexed. All this by ignoring or minimizing the notion of impossibility,² with which Simone Weil indicates knowledge
of God as asymptote, the imaginary and unthinkable locus. Impossibility, absence, unhappy _attente_, calamity cannot be reconciled with the reassurances of positive religion. One can perceive in these words the echo of bygone religious and mystical experiences—gnosis, the Cathar heresy, Elizabethan religious poetry—which Simone Weil _counterfoisted_ against the power and worldliness of Churches and triumphant religions.

On the other hand, only indirectly can her thought be confronted with that _Sternenfreundschaft_ which denotes the renascence of Hebrew thought in our century: Rosenzweig, Benjamin and, today, Levinas. This holds not only in virtue of Simone Weil’s explicit distance from Hebraism, from the mythic violence of the Law, and from the idea of election—which would rather bring her close to another scandalous and heterodox Jew like Hannah Arendt—but above all because her horizon is defined by unhappiness and the impossibility of redemption. Should one insist on comparing her to another Jewish writer, then we might think of Franz Kafka. Simone Weil’s analyses of the force that pulls toward the bottom, of the mechanism that changes men into things or into the carcass of animals, as well as the mystical images of the wait before the gates or of the inaudible call of God, all find striking analogies in the writings of Kafka.

Bataille’s description of Simone Weil at Barcelona—the caricature of a woman, lowest example of humanity, but _nevertheless_ the most human of beings one could know—aptly recreates the repulsion which her presence evoked, and continues to evoke, in the intellectual milieu, together with the obsessive recurrence of her image. It represents the ambivalence on the part of contemporary culture toward what, after Nietzsche, it declares to have overcome but which, much as has happened with Nietzsche, moves forward as something repressed: the image of the scapegoat embodied in a work and a biography that find no solace in hope, and in which philosophy and experience of sacrifice are lived as mere _necessity_. Image, work, and biography that disconcert because askew with respect to the negative and positive assurances of our times, from theological rebirths to the various nihilisms. If we compare them with illustrious conversions of men like Gide and Eliot, we find in these latter an excess of literature, a self-complacency which tends to mar all good intentions. On the contrary, in Simone Weil the nakedness of writing—both in the essays and in the notebooks—translates experience immediately into thought, pointing to something which today has become incomprehensible even though we sense its absence: the concentration of life and work, of experience and language. Something, however, which as her biography shows, can only be revealed in limit-experiences.

A first element which might prevent instrumentalization and appropriation consists in recognizing in Simone Weil a rare example of the iden-
tification of writing with experience. Writing as necessity, life as immediate application of thought. Downfall and calamity do not bear solely a theological meaning, but resonate deeply with natural and moral philosophy, especially as concerns lived experience. The terms that wheel around such a thematic nucleus—force, gravity, pesanteur, irreversibility—suggest the deterioration, decay, and downfall of an order, the process by which even a barely perceptible swerve, a clinamen, is followed by a degrading effect, an “irreparable trait of meaningless actions.” 7 Natural order and human order, geometry and ethics, are mutually reflected in Simone Weil, as attested by the images employed to represent the relations among men. But what makes this geometry of fate troubling is the idea of irreversible change. If an originary divine or sapiential harmony of destinies, or a justice, ever existed, this harmony has been irreversibly compromised by Modernity. Simon Weil illustrates the desire for, as well as the traces of, this harmony in the archaic heritage, Greek and Indo-European mostly, but recoverable also in folklore, myth, and poetry. The incessant recall to ancient wisdom only mirrors modern unhappiness, memory of an ideal fatherland of measure, balance, reconciliation among men and gods from which humanity exiled itself. It follows then that misfortune [malheur] points to the distance from the fatherland, the being always elsewhere, Being as ruin [malora]. The men, heroes, and characters from both myth and history that recur obsessively in her writings represent but errancy, a wandering Simone Weil purposively sought, abandoning herself to its necessity without ever letting reflection and writing become an alibi or consolation.

Force and Gravity

The distinction between harmony and disequilibrium is described by means of the logical and ethical opposition between limited and unlimited. What is limited entails the coexistence of two nondestructive principles, the balancing of contraries. Simone Weil believes that the notion of measure is one of the greatest attainments of archaic, Oriental, and Greek wisdom: “the sense of the famous passage on geometry in the Gorgias: ‘you forget. . . .’ In the nature of things no unlimited development is possible; the world (cosmos!) rests entirely on measure and equilibrium (from which the ‘geometric equality’), and the same takes place in the city. All ambition is excess.” 8 Limitation and measure are therefore the hinges of a geometric conception both of nature and of the human world. The breaking of this equilibrium, the predominance now of the one, now of the other of these principles or elements, implies uncontrollable counter-effects, which translate into a reaction by the physical
world and a moral punishment. In other words, from the time equilibrium is shattered, it is not given to men to know the effects and the counter-effects of excess.

The element which introduces rupture in every equilibrium, whether physical, human, or social, is represented by force. Now, it is characteristic of force to be irreversible. A word can be thrown and withdrawn, and there is no discourse that cannot be counterbalanced by another discourse, just as there is no imaginary furor that cannot be placated by consolation human or divine. But in the use of force as excess or intemperance there is a precipitating—a fatality or uncontrollable consequence—which is beyond human measure, much like gravity is something beyond man. And much like what can be said of the notions of pesanteur (gravity in the physical and moral sense, to be heavy, falling), necessity, and destiny, the notion of the irreversibility of force does not refer solely to the impossibility of controlling the effects of force, but to the illusion of being able to control it. Force is what is irreparable: to oppose force with force means precisely to reinforce the fatality that begins with the originary use of force. Yet men persist in believing that they can control the effects of force, they play with it. Simone Weil attributes to the Greeks the capacity to understand the illusory character of the use of force:

[In the Iliad] almost always, fate and the gods decide the changing lot of battle. Within the limits fixed by fate, the gods determine with sovereign authority victory and defeat. It is always they who provoke those fits of madness, those treacheries, which are forever blocking peace: war is their true business; their only motives, caprice and malice... There may be, unknown to us, other expressions of the extraordinary sense of equity which breathes through the Iliad; certainly it has not been imitated. One is barely aware that the poet is a Greek and not a Trojan.9

Force and illusion are basic elements to the tragic. Thought to be eternally valid, these pure elements are perceived by Simone Weil in Greek tragedy. Much as for Nietzsche, the two constitutive elements of existence she finds in Greek tragedy are the principle of equilibrium and form, and the principle of mismeasure and excess. But contrary to Nietzsche, however, the awareness of the opposition between the two principles produces, as we shall see, an effect of weakness. In mismeasure, in the use of force, men subject themselves to the laws which in nature govern the behavior of matter, stepping down from their condition as humanity. The use of force assimilates men to objects, things, subjecting them, therefore, to irreversibility, falling:
Such is the nature of force. Its power of converting a man into a thing is a double one, and in its application double-edged. To the same degree, though in different fashion, the souls of those who use it and those who endure it are turned to stone. This property of force achieves its maximum effectiveness during the clash of arms, in battle, when the tide of the day has turned, and everything is rushing toward a decision. It is not the planners, the strategists, or men acting on the resolutions taken, who win or lose a battle; battles are fought and decided by men deprived of these faculties, men who have undergone a transformation, who have dropped either to the level of inert matter, which is pure passivity, or to the level of blind force, which is pure momentum. Herein lies the last secret of war, a secret revealed by the *Iliad* in its similes, which liken the warriors either to fire, flood, wind, wild beasts, or God knows what blind cause of disaster, or else to frightened animals, trees, water, sand, to anything in nature that is set into motion by the violence of external forces.

The use of force perturbs the human order, perverting it. Once the harmony is destroyed, it cannot reconstitute itself by means of natural phenomena:

This retribution, which has a geometric rigour, which operates automatically to penalize the abuse of force, was the main subject of Greek thought. . . . In Oriental countries which are steeped in Buddhism, it is perhaps this Greek idea that has lived on under the name of *Kharma*. The Occident, however, has lost it, and no longer even has a word to express it in any of its languages: conceptions of limit, measure, equilibrium, which ought to determine the conduct of life are, in the West, restricted to a servile function in the vocabulary of technics. We are only geometers of matters: the Greeks were, first of all, geometers in their apprenticeship to virtue.

Through these quick comparisons between the ancient harmony and the modern imbalance, Simone Weil’s thought becomes witness to our estrangement from the sources of culture. In this sense, her itinerary is surprisingly similar to Nietzsche’s. In fact, according to the latter, men find the originary harmony horrible, reconciliation takes place only *after* the effects of actions are expiated and the conflicts are resolved according to necessity:
Sophocles chose the most horrible legends (Oedipus, Orestes) in order to bring serenity to them. The lesson of his tragedies is: there are no abductors of inner liberty. His heroes know adventure, not obsession. . . . No one among his characters has the least grain of madness, even though all find themselves in situations to make anyone mad: Philoctetes, Oedipus, Antigone . . . Orestes. Ajax himself, after his feckless delirium, is marvelously lucid. Not once is human form shattered. Electra: the victory of purity over impurity. . . . This reading will always console me . . .

Yet the parallel with Nietzsche must end with this common inclination toward tragedy, for the resolution of plots in a superior order. The heroes which Simone Weil gathers as examples of the tragic condition do not, in fact, resemble those of the mature Nietzsche—the strong who look beyond—but men who experience their weakness before the harshness of necessity; they are the strong about to decline [che declinano].

Ajax, who suffered the most bitter of injustices, learns that there is no earthly action that can redress a wrong permitted by the gods. They decreed that his fury should not fall upon the Achaeans, but rather upon defenseless flocks of sheep. When a divine act of injustice is committed, the effects obey the law of gravitation and strike always those who lie below, dragging the weakest to calamity: that same Ajax who trusted his innocence, the animals. The horizon of justice is not of the earth. What takes place on earth is placed upon one arm of the scale, and with it falls when the gods decide. This conception of the fall has had a definitive influence on Simone Weil, who in the thirties was witness to the perverse consequences of the revolutionary thirst for justice. In an essay from 1933 on revolution she took for the epigraph the words which Sophocles has Ajax utter: “I hold in no account the mortal who warms his heart with vain hopes.”

Becoming Weak

The notion of weakness indicates primarily one’s becoming aware of one’s subjection to the laws of necessity, whether natural or divine, and the irremediable pain that follows. Arjuna, the hero of the Bhagavad Gita, has knowledge of pain and compassion before his close ones fighting in the enemy and who must die at his hand, but he cannot escape necessity—the dharma—which Krishna, the god who leads the chariot, indicates as the duty of the warrior. Compassion is an affection in this world and has no bearing upon the
unveiling of force. What counts in battle is mere force, against one another. Abandoning the battle in the name of compassion not only would not save his relatives, but would destroy his being a warrior:

_Gita_. The explanation is that perhaps he [Arjuna] has no choice left. The two armies face each other. His responsibility toward his allies forbids him to abandon them to the enemy. (Why?) His desire not to fight is altogether unreal; he cannot (any longer?) bite upon reality under the form of action.¹⁵

According to the ethics of the _Gita_—which is addressed to the caste of the warriors and centered upon the theme of transcendence of the world by means of participation in its conflicts—there is, in this world, no alternative to force when the latter is unleashed, for it is only its temperate practice and pain that will bring the warrior to overcome his dilemma and serve as a bridge toward wisdom and equilibrium. Neither Ajax nor Arjuna can do anything against necessity, nor can they oppose its expression upon the earth—that is, force.

To understand force as necessity is, then, the first step on the path toward freedom from the world. This means we must combat the illusion that we can master force. In an essay on medieval Languedocian culture, Simone Weil describes this awareness as the ultimate form of courage:

The essence of Provençal inspiration is identical to Greek inspiration: it is made up by the knowledge of force. This knowledge belongs but to supernatural courage. Supernatural courage includes everything we call courage and, in addition, something infinitely more worthy. But the vile consider supernatural courage as a weakness of the soul. To know force means recognizing it as the nearly absolute sovereign of this world, refuting it with disgust and contempt. This contempt is the other face of compassion for all that is exposed to the offenses of force.¹⁶

What is expressed through force is a necessity, the voice of a god or a demon that would be cowardly to ignore. Nothing is more foreign to Simone Weil than an apology for force, but nothing would be more blind than an unacknowledgment of its reality. It is precisely those who do not acknowledge force, and who therefore delude themselves in thinking they can master it, who pave the way for its boundless triumph. Agreeing with Weber, Simone Weil is convinced that before force man is defenseless, and yet man is given
the responsibility of accepting it. Ajax cannot bear to accept force, and so destroys himself. Arjuna accepts his responsibility when he learns he is a willed and responsible instrument in the hands of Krishna.

There is a close affinity between the notion of responsibility in Simone Weil and the notion of ethics of responsibility in Weber. For both Weil and Weber, the sense of the earthly use of force (in war as in politics) has no rational foundation, whereas the exercise of force must be rationally grounded, if consequences are to be limited. Weil writes: “Man has no power, and yet he has a responsibility. The future corresponds to responsibility, the past to impotence. And all that has yet to come will pass. If Krishna had not intervened to enlighten Arjuna, Arjuna would have fought nonetheless, but badly.” We can observe here how that which makes necessity iron-like, and therefore an imposition for man, is its temporal structure. Necessity casts man into time, yet allows him to choose the possible consequences deriving from his being-thrown. This thought is not unlike Weber’s, for whom what belongs to the sphere of motivations, that-which-moves cannot be controlled rationally (whether by gods or demons), whereas with regard to what belongs to the world man possesses the limited possibility of choosing, by anticipating the future, the consequences of his own participation in the course of events. In both Simone Weil and Max Weber, then, the responsible acceptance of necessity takes on the shape of “the ethics of one’s proper place,” while responsibility consists in “fighting well.” In either case, there is no possibility of escaping God, except to subordinate oneself lucidly or blindly.

However, the difference between the two types of subordination is decisive: to subordinate oneself blindly means to reinforce the weight of necessity, aggravating its consequences, which is what Max Weber calls the irresponsible ethics of conviction. This type of subordination, defined also as adoration of force, is seen by Simone Weil in holy war, in the revolutionary blindness that weighs not the consequences, what is often called mismeasure [dismisura]. This is the case of Joan of Arc, who fights not insomar as being called by God, but for God. Responsible men instead fight when they cannot do otherwise, because they know their action is the result of a previous choice:

*Gita.* Notice that the dharma, by depending on the caste, therefore on birth, therefore on preceding incarnation, depends on a previous choice. It is not a question of not having a choice, but rather, if we situate ourselves in a given moment, we have no more choice. We cannot do otherwise: it is vain to dream of doing things differently. But it is good to elevate oneself above what one does. In this manner we choose something better for a later moment.
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This ethics of a conscious adherence to one’s proper place corresponds quite closely to Weber’s ethic of professional duty (in the sense of *Beruf*, or calling). This can be seen in the famous analysis of the Protestant *Beruf*, as well as in the analysis of political vocation and, above all, in the pages which Weber dedicates precisely to the ethics of the *Kshatriya* (the warriors):

> In the *Bhagavad Gita* this [separation from the world] assumes the particular configuration which the wise man finds confirmed precisely in action, more precisely against his own acting in the world, insofar as he does indeed carry out what is ordered—and that is, always what is ordered by the duties of the caste—but within he remains altogether devoid of participation: he acts as if he did not act. This is made possible in the course of doing something [*agire*] especially by the fact that one’s duty is realized without looking at all toward success, without greed for its fruits.21

An unconventional reading of Weber would reveal how in these words what speaks is not just the scholar but the man of action who reflects upon action as necessity. Weber also was blinded by the unresolvable dualism of action in the world: necessity and choice, participation and detachment, guilt and responsibility. As for Simone Weil, the ethics of sacrifice, of the abandon-ment to the god of necessity, appeared to Weber as the most lucid madness, the most insane wisdom. In the political writings of Weber, the figures of Tolstoy and Bismarck are contrasted without any possibility that one might overcome the other.22

Unlike what we see in Weber, however, in Simone Weil the demon that wounds—dualism—is subdued in an idea of passivity, of weakness, which envelops participation in the conflicts of the world. The example which above all others embodies this particular notion of weakness is Simon Weil’s favorite contemporary hero, T. E. Lawrence, author of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.23 Contrary to so many other heroes who perished while edifying us in Western domination—one thinks here of the pathetic picture handed down of General Gordon’s death24—Lawrence is a winner who, however, from the very beginning of his exploits in the Arab revolt, is embittered by the duplicity of playing a part on behalf of interests he perhaps despises, but which he nonetheless forces himself to serve because that is his role. Like Arjuna, Lawrence knows he is but a toy manipulated by objective powers. As with the *Gita*, his book is replete with the horror at the unattainability of an earthly justice, for the utilitarian aspect of this double game, and the irremediable presence of
suffering. Crunched by the same grindstone, Turkish infantrymen and Arab guerrillas alike will die because in the last analysis it is the great powers who will divide up the stakes for which the dead fought. In a work so devoid of rhetoric as The Seven Pillars, the most recurrent expression with which Lawrence expresses his condition is that of shame.

As we learn from Simone Weil’s biographers, during the last years of her life she kept Lawrence’s book close at hand. In it she found that the scales of justice are not held by human hands. She found also confirmation that the man in charge, who feels nevertheless the guilt of his position, cannot detach himself from his responsibility, he cannot even attempt to save his soul. What is surprising in Lawrence’s biography—a man who followed no religion—is a sort of reverse mystical exaltation, a need for degradation, for sharing the most humiliating aspects of the everyday life of his men—a type of mystical asceticism which Simone Weil saw as the automatic counterweight to the illegitimacy [falsità] of the position of power. But what Weil found above all in Lawrence as the result of this conflict between force and gravity, between the staying above and the being dragged below, is that particular weakening which she calls “the wise command.” By bending to necessity and the awareness of one’s own weakness, the responsible chief limits the effects of his power to the minimum. Often this delimiting becomes renunciation. He who knows that his definitive defeat is written in the sky can allay victory upon the earth. Simone Weil will give a poetic example of limitation, of the conscious weakening of force, in her Venice Saved, the play of renunciation of one’s own demon in the name of compassion [pietà].

Simone Weil saw in the ethics of measure the most precious teaching of ancient and oriental wisdom, as it is realized in the Hindu notion of Yoga (literally yoke, being yoked), or in the Taoist notion of in-action. But her version of these teachings do not emphasize the element of liberation from the world as much as the dualism between participation and detachment. These tendencies wear out, they weaken each other reciprocally. The awareness of the weight of necessity prevents detachment from the world from turning into action. On the other hand, discipline, the yoke, ensures that action does not congeal as a mere consequence of necessity. In Lawrence’s book this turmoil is rendered by the overlapping of layers, and by the capacity of knowing how to see always beyond the events, what Simone Weil calls seeing “the world as a text with multiple levels of meaning.” Because of this turmoil, the fighter does not abandon himself to the seduction of force, does not allow himself to become a thing. In the war scenes in Seven Pillars—actions which embody the idea of what is necessary—the marvelous bursts in and startles. The war plot is ripped by splinters of eternity. During a march an Arab chief points
out to Lawrence the place where the wind blows more odourously, the one that “smells of nothingness.” During a pause in the battle, a beggar drags himself to the fount and becomes, to Lawrence’s eyes, the symbol of a prophet:

An old man in ragged clothes, with a gray beard, and a face with strong and coarse features, but with an expression of great fatigue, walked up the path slowly until he found himself in front of the spring. There he let himself drop to the ground with a sigh . . . the old man heard me and leaned over to look with eyes weakened by rheumatism. . . . He stared at me a long while; then, apparently satisfied, closed his eyes and murmured: “Love comes from God, belongs to God, and returns to God.”

Moments of eternity, but set in ironclad necessity. What permeates is a mysticism known to the Westerner solely as the nostalgic reverse of rationalism, though it belongs actually to a lost tradition, to peoples who turn out being defeated precisely through the illusion of victory. Those splinters of light cannot deter Lawrence from carrying out his task, even if his affliction is thereby infinitely increased. They cannot but confirm his estrangement, the betrayal. He knows he belongs to the night. The result of the Arab revolt—the instrumentalization of power by politics—weighs on the book from the first pages. At the moment of his victorious adherence to the Arab cause, Lawrence knows he will ditch it.

If we compare the example set by Lawrence with the work of Simone Weil, we notice it contains a terrible teaching. Lawrence’s action is the application of blind necessity, it is an unlimited drift. Its entrusting to necessity cannot be inscribed any longer within divine justice. Unlike what happens with Ajax or Arjuna, heroes of myth, there is no tragic consolation or sacred writing that can give a sense to that suffering or can punish that betrayal. Necessity in our time is blind. Justice is no longer the business of gods, it is an undecidable whose horizon is the world. So in the man who becomes its instrument, necessity grows assuming the form of an obsession, of a continuous falling. In myth it is the god who holds the scales, in modern reality it is man who is entrusted with the same task. He is the fulcrum, and as such he is worn down. What does not escape Simone Weil’s attention in Lawrence’s experience is the fact that holding necessity and responsibility together means self-destruction. Following upon the effects of the Arab revolt, Lawrence goes through all the stages of degradation. The famous colonel divests himself of his prestige only to reappear in the uniform of a failed secret agent, a colonial soldier of dubious reputation, a survivor obsessed by the weight of his fame, an
Simone Weil did not see in Lawrence only an example of the shearing between necessity and responsibility, but a conscious mishap, the acceptance of consuming away as a necessity, the acceptance of death. In a note she compares him to the Cathars, to which her attention is drawn during her last years: “It is no accident that the doctrines which require a mystic are more or less oriented toward death. Cathars. T. E. Lawrence.” There is evidence to indicate that Simone Weil perceived in Lawrence a fate which paralleled her own, the awaiting of death as preparation, entreaty. But the example has more than biographical relevance. Much like in Heidegger, being toward death is counterpoised to the drift in which man experiences his being thrown, his being bound to necessity. Weil’s interest in the heresy of the Cathars, in Manichaeism, and in other gnostic tendencies, is directly related to this letting oneself die as a responsible solution to a world dominated by necessity. In the Cathars gnostic dualism is brought to ultimate consequences, the world appears as a mixture of the two principles of day and night, freedom from the world takes on the extreme form of the endura, or mystical suicide. What attracted Simone Weil to these experiences was not so much the doctrine as the radical idea of earthly justice which they involve. In a world dominated by the struggle between the two principles, the way to salvation consists in the least adherence possible to evil, in the greatest possible limitation of the deployment of force. In the essays on the destruction of Languedocian literature during the crusades of the Albigensians, Simone Weil describes the desperate struggle of this tolerant civilization in which the Romance, Greek, and Arab spirit mingle against the feudal army of the crusaders: tolerance, mysticism, and transfiguration of life aptly expressed in these lines by Bernard de Ventadour:

Quand je vois l’alouette mouvoir  
De joie ses ailes contre le rayon  
Comme elle ne se connait plus et se laisse tomber  
Par la douceur qui au coeur lui va . . .

For Simone Weil these lines not only represent most intensely a vanished civilization, they bear testimony as well to a philosophy of decline destroyed by the Occidental mythology of force:

Some verses of the Troubadours have been successful in expressing the joy in such a pure mode that, through the joy, there
transpires the most pungent pain, the inconsolable pain of a finite creature. . . . When this country was destroyed, English poetry picked up the same note, and no modern European language contains such delights.\textsuperscript{32}

**Measure, Limit**

In her last writings, to the retrospection of an order expressed through measure, the limitation of force, and a balance of opposed principles, there is added ever more frequently the notion of cosmic punishment, of the wheel, of Karman. The world is no longer cosmos (\textit{kosmos} = order) but the locus of the unlimited, the indefinite growth of force, mere becoming. Developments in modern science express this degrounding [\textit{sfonamento}] of the cosmos: “The tempest which surrounds us has uprooted all values, it has undone its hierarchy, and has placed them all in question in order to weigh them on the ever false scale of force.”\textsuperscript{33} What Simone Weil has in mind are not so much the developments of twentieth-century science—toward which she has shown an unbiased interest, going as far as to employ some of its concepts as metaphors for fate or for the human condition: irreversibility, entropy, discontinuous, negligible—but the severing of all bonds, the destruction of nature as cosmos. Much as for Heidegger, the world in which science dwells has become image, reversal of the nexus man-world, the forgetting of Being. The incomparable conceptual richness of contemporary science does not belie the fact that what it questions is no longer a balanced relationship with nature—such as Simone Weil sees in Greek science (geo-metry, the art of measure)—but a limitless process of subjection of the world, nature become entity.

In classical science it was still a question of knowing the \textit{real as necessity}, hardness, resistance of the world to the will wherein humanity learned nevertheless to measure and balance the forces:

When referred to things, necessity, which slows us down in the most simple of actions, suggests the idea of a world so entirely indifferent to our desires that we realize we are next to nothing. If I may so put it, thinking from the point of view of the world brings us, when it comes to our concerns, to that indifference without which we cannot shrug off desire, hope, fear, becoming, and without which there is no virtue, no wisdom, and we live in a dream. Making contact with necessity is what substitutes reality to dream. . . . A few splendid lines from Lucretius are sufficient
to make one feel that which purifies in the spectacle and the trial of necessity . . .

The ideal of classical science is here rendered as the contemplation of necessity, knowledge of human frailty in the environment, *ecology*. But this ideal is also musical knowledge, the learning of harmony: “This image is given in some of man’s works by limit, harmony, proportion, the regular patterns . . .” Comprehending limits does not imply in Simone Weil a *closing off* of representation, nor a consoling, nostalgic, archaicizing image of the nexus man-world. For it is precisely knowledge of the limits and of harmony which permit the comprehension of the unlimited and the disharmonic. In the reciprocal game between limited and unlimited, knowledge appears as participation, consonance, communication with the real.

What Simone Weil means here is that the *tension* between harmonic and disharmonic reveals, once again, necessity. By accepting its limitation within the world, its *weakness* (*debolezza*), we realize that knowledge does not appropriate the world, rather, it is appropriated by the world:

A marble statue which we might believe fluid with soft folds, which we might believe flexible under the pressure of the whole universe that surrounds it, has assumed forever the form of an intact human body in a position of equilibrium where gravity cannot alter it and in which each movement is equally possible. A small surface encloses in very precise limits an infinitely vast three-dimensional space in which things and beings are, at one and the same time, bound to and separate from their reciprocal positions, fixed in the appearance of an instant and as if they were not seen by anyone and from any point of view, as if they were surprised but not tainted by a veiled spontaneous human glance. . . . All these are images which reach and wound the soul in its ownmost intimacy. As are images of this kind a body and a human face that inspire simultaneously the desire and even more the dread of drawing near for fear of being a nuisance, which we cannot imagine changing and of which we can acutely perceive the extreme fragility, that can nearly tear the soul out of a given place or a particular moment, yet make it feel nailed to them. And the universe foreign to man presents images such as these.

The play between limited and unlimited, between harmonic and disharmonic, between finite and infinite is such that *wounds* the soul. It wounds it because,
in Simone Weil’s conception, knowledge of the real is primarily passion for the real, a suffering [patire] the real. And it is suffering because knowledge here is not de-cision, cutting of the bonds that link man to world, but abandon-
ment, identification with the real: it is not destruction of the real by means of the affirmation of the knowing subject. Knowledge suffers the real because it models itself on the wounds of the real, on its disequilibrium.

To this cognitive style, which might be defined as refinement [deli-
catezza], there obviously corresponds, on the ethical plane, that weakening which characterizes the responsible man in charge. In the latter we perceive the memory of a philosophy of renunciation to the arrogance of the subject, filtered by Schopenhauer and perhaps also by Goethe, but derived ultimately from the Upanishads, which Simone Weil was translating during the last years of her life. But that style, if we look closely, is also similar to that of the qualitative philosophy of knowledge, as we find represented in the thought of Bergson, Simmel, and the literary work of Hermann Broch.37 For Broch in particular, the way of knowledge begins when the subject accepts his agony, his death as the abandonment to the real. The label of mysticism with which rationalist criticism usually disposes of these tendencies in phil-
osophy and literature does not do justice to their dominant motif, which is the overcoming [superamento] of instrumental knowledge and, therefore, the de-empowerment of the subject, the entrusting of the subject to the rhythm of the real, de-constructing itself.

Simone Weil often points out how in ancient geometry the capacity existed to know the harmony of the real, a capacity which belongs to the field of aesthetic enjoyment:

Most beautiful yet was Thales’ first intuition, when he perceived in the sun the author of a limitless number of proportions which are inscribed on the ground and change with the shadows: from that first moment there appeared the notion of variable proportion, that is, of function; but for us the term function itself indicates the dependence of a term with regard to another, whereas the Greeks simply rejoiced in making the change the object of contemplation.38

The abandonment to the real, however, means also accepting its dishar-
monies, accepting the fact that balance and harmony can be reestablished at the expense of the human position in the cosmos. The stars are the symbols of a dance no less than the measure of a distance that cannot be filled. Abandoning oneself to the real means also abandoning oneself to its terrible aspect. Once again, for Simone Weil order is precarious, and so before nature’s harmo-
ny—which humanity wants to behold—looms dissonance and excess. In this unresolved tension between order and disorder reemerges the elliptical affinity of Simone Weil with Nietzsche. The central idea in Simone Weil is that in any event, above all when man partakes in the unbalance, order reconstitutes itself at a superior level. As a contemporary scientist says, it would be a case of the healing of the wound that man inflicts on the cosmos, of a superior aesthetic of the beautiful-and-the-ugly. Here Simone Weil could have well quoted Coleridge: the ancient mariner, sole survivor of the crew who is guilty of having shot the albatross, sets on his path to peace only when he comes to terms with the environment, when he learns to bless the sea monsters.

The idea of limitation, of weakness, refers therefore to reconciliation, to knowledge as a function of a nondestructive presence of the environment. It refers especially to the delicate play of concealing-unconcealing in which man plans his historical presence in the cosmos. In Heidegger’s words, to the nondestructive contraposition between human World and Earth:

The earth is not simply the Closed but rather that which rises up as self-closing. World and earth are always intrinsically and essentially in conflict, belligerent by nature. Only as such do they enter into the conflict of clearing and concealing. Earth juts through the world and world grounds itself on the earth only so far as truth happens as the primal conflict between clearing and concealing.

For Heidegger this struggle is the very path to truth. And truth as the play of concealment and unconcealment—which as such is opposed to science, which belabors a realm of truth already open—is founded in the work [opera], is fixed in the form of a work. This founding, in the particular sense defined by Heidegger, makes it possible for the work to be essentially poetry. Heidegger is here talking of the work of art (understood not as mere fabrication) as that wherein truth operates. But through the contraposition of World and Earth he alludes also to a nondestructive tension between humanity and earth. In this opposition is manifested, with nearly the same words, that refinement of human presence on which Simone Weil insists:

The conflict is not a rift (Riss) as a mere cleft is ripped open; rather, it is the intimacy with which opponents belong to each other. This rift carries the opponents into the source of their unity by virtue of their common ground. It is a basic design [Grundiss]. . . . This rift does not let the opponents break apart; it brings the opposition of measure and boundary into their common outline [Umriss].
Modernity, Obsession

As in Heidegger, measure, boundary, and nonshearing opposition of contraries are the terms that describe for Simone Weil the outline of human dwelling upon the earth. The process whereby the fatherland of measure has been replaced by the reign of the limitless is a theme to which in our century the philosophy of culture has constantly returned, from Simmel to Weber to Heidegger. In this tradition, the notion of limit with which we understand what gives form to life, what prevents it from becoming repetition of itself, or survival, is decisive. What Simone Weil adds to it is the analysis of the effects of drift—the distancing from the cosmos—on the human imagination. If the cosmos contains imagination, allowing the balancing of the forces within an order (possible and impossible, finite and infinite, real and imaginary), the limitless of the modern world unshackles the imagination. But with such unfettering no new freedoms will be conquered, as in the mythology of progress, rather, what’s in wait is the subjection to a new type of necessity, the limitless. The disengagement from the cosmos does free the imagination but only to bind it to something new: itself. Simone Weil defines this peculiar freedom, the indefinite motion of the imagination, knowledge rotating about itself, as obsession.43

Obsession is pain without end, the fall into bottomlessness. It designates that imbalance for which necessity is not accepted but suffered [subita]:

The feeling of impossibility, disequilibrium; situations in which the imagination, in modeling the past fictitiously, the future and faraway objects, does not succeed in filling in the gaps. It tries but it can’t. Hunger, inner thirst. Obstructed rush. . . . Inner oscillations between refusal and acceptance. Movement of the soul without an object, even an imaginary one. A forced emptiness. After a while, what follows are exhaustion and the death of certain parts of the soul.44

Simone Weil describes here a particular condition of the soul, its coming loose from a principle of order, the impotence of the glance turned to the unlimited and, therefore, the loss of contact with the real, the shipwreck. Torn from its boundaries, the soul errs and cannot stop a continuous glance, the imagination bereft of a referent. The meaning of torture, its unbearable, is not linked to pain as such, but to the infinity of pain. In obsession the soul precipitates into time. Time is not dominated by means of some rhythm, yet it imposes its precipitating: “Relationship between theme in music (and
also in architecture?) and obsession. A fugue by Bach is a controlled obsession—though the initial theme is not very important. Obsession is the only human suffering . . . a pain which is not obsessive is not suffering.” Obsessive means suffering such a devastating necessity that it leaves no break points, pinning one to the infinite. Obsessive is therefore any subordination to the limitless. Simone Weil perceived in the realm of what is limitless the type of imposition which is not redeemable, which has no way out. At that point obsession not only defines the subjection to force in limit-situations, but conditions the very existence of Modernity. To the mythical violence expressed in the notion of cosmic punishment (the scales of Zeus), Modernity substitutes in fact, in all fields, disequilibrium, the rule of limitlessness [dominio dell’illimitato].

Modern knowledge uproots itself from the contemplation of boundaries and the regularities of the cosmos in order to become self-knowledge, obsessive knowledge. But such is also the form taken by human relationships. In the modern world society represents the irruption of the unlimited among individuals, the interposition of a space that cannot be filled. In society human frailty is not entrusted to the care of other persons, but is subject to the inflexibility of an abstraction. Even in the limit situation of war, when the necessity of force is interrupted, the glance of the warrior cannot ignore the entreaty. Achilles cannot in the end bear without compassion the glance of Priamus. Arjuna stops when his glance lands on his relatives. Even if in myth this compassion aroused by the presence of others cannot stop necessity, it at least gives it sense. Non-obsessive pain is what describes the relation between being-with and necessity. It allows for the conscious movement with respect to necessity, for being responsible. Instead, in society as the supremacy of the unlimited, the glance wanders without being able ever to stop on the face of the others. In this sense Simone Weil rigorously describes the modern social relation as an imaginary one. Society realizes the crushing power of the imaginary on human measure.

Here Simone Weil touches upon a crucial aspect of the modern condition. For humanity society has freed itself from the ties that had kept it bound to the cosmos, that intimacy “with which opponents belong to each other,” as Heidegger had put it. The earth is no longer foundation but an inexhaustible, unlimited resource. That natural cosmos is dissolved: modern metaphysics treats it as pure mathesis, a system of abstract functions abstracted from their contents. Yet necessity and force require that an other bond be substituted to the broken one. The social bond substitutes for the natural bond: “Capitalism has realized the release of human collectivity from nature. But as far as the individual is concerned, this collectivity has inherited the oppressive function
which was once exercised by nature." Of course, nature also is oppressive insofar as it manifests imbalance, force, and gravity. But in it, through a nondestructive struggle between Earth and World, a cosmos can be outlined. Archaic wisdom consists in the contemplation and consolation of this imbalance. But what cosmos can man construct for himself within the boundaries of what Simone Weil calls collectivity? The attempts to make of society an order, such as the sciences have been promoting for over a century, are witness to the vacuousness of the new bond. Simone Weil often notes the need to substitute lost bonds with false religions, with false bonds. During the first decades of this century, when she was alive, the purely imaginary need for a new cosmos took on the forms of "civil religion" or "collective consciousness." Or alternatively, as in pre-Nazi Germany, it manifested itself through an anachronistic appeal to the myths of the land and of roots. In our time, the pretense to construct a social body, a culture, is no longer tenable. If nothing else, social discourse has given up replacing religions, showing itself for what it is, a discourse on the organization of force.

In her essay on the Iliad Simone Weil confuted the modern illusion according to which the social bond would abolish the reign of force:

For those dreamers who considered that force, thanks to progress, would soon be a thing of the past, the Iliad could appear as a historical document; for others, whose power of recognition are more acute and perceive force, today as yesterday, at the very center of human history, the Iliad is the purest and loveliest of mirrors.

At least in the Western citadel today we are dealing with an obviously different kind of force. Mythical violence, which transforms men into things whether they wield the sword or succumb to it, has withdrawn from social life in order to affirm itself on the boundaries between states. But force as obsession, as unquestionable necessity, presses on as ever upon social life, it is social life, what Simon Weil calls the new Beast which has replaced the traditional Leviathan. It is society as the place where imagination roams with eyes and thought swayed by abstraction. What Simmel said of money at the apex of Modernity describes the abstract yet obsessive force of the social bond:

Money is the only cultural product which is pure force, having removed its bearer and become absolutely and solely symbol. It is the most characterizing among all phenomena of our times, in which dynamics has gained control of all theory and all praxis.
That is pure relation . . . without including any content, is not contradictory: in reality force is nothing but relation.\(^{50}\)

**Ethics as Limitation**

In its use of a terminology purposely foreign to contemporary philosophical culture and turned toward the archaic order rather than toward the apology of modern disorder, Simone Weil’s thought is ultimately contiguous with contemporary reflection on the topic of nihilism. The terms imposed on us to describe existence on earth are: The search for God in *impossibility*, the analysis of the decaying of the cosmic order, the awareness of the devastations brought about by Modernity, resignation to force itself, the notion of an impossible reconciliation between men and gods, between heaven and earth (what Heidegger calls the *Geviert*, the fourfold). But it is above all in the notion of weakness that Simone Weil’s itinerary will end up intersecting that of philosophy. Weakness means in fact the common condition of thought and of existence before nihilism.

Thinking not at the mercy of the fascination with obsessive force, cannot but recognize in a disenchanted fashion the equating of achieved nihilism with planetary domination. When philosophy reflects upon the subjection of man to his products (what Simone Weil called obsessive knowledge and social fetish), it cannot but find in achieved nihilism a *normal* condition. In response to E. Jünger and his hypothesis concerning an overcoming of the nihilist condition,\(^ {51}\) Heidegger underscores the necessity to accept such a destiny: “Nihilism is not something pathological like cancer. As far as the being of nihilism is concerned, there is no hope of recovery.”\(^ {52}\) Nihilism has become so powerful and global that it is no use denying it, or trying to fight it:

There is no sharp mind that would deny that nihilism, under the most different and hidden form, is the “normal” condition of humanity. Best proof is furnished by the exclusively reactionary attempts against nihilism, and that instead of letting themselves into a dialogue with its essence, promote the restoration of what is no longer.\(^ {53}\)

In many of his writings Heidegger has shown the nihilistic successes in culture: the transformation of philosophy into a plurality of de-ontologized sciences, the world domination of cybernetics and “calculating” thought, and the planetary organization of power. Before such instrumentality of philosophical truth—already pointed out by Nietzsche in his equation truth = power—the
task of thinking consists at this juncture in entering into dialogue with (without any attempt at systematicity and thoroughness) the essence of nihilism, with the achievement of philosophy.

With Heidegger, thinking abdicates the possibility of ever controlling, if only theoretically, the process of nihilism, “techno-scientific rationalization.” Philosophy accepts with detachment having to coexist with an ongoing process of rationalization which, in its madness and lack of objectives, cannot be predicted, remaining open to both the possibility of a final destruction as well as a consolidation with uncertain success. The return to the things themselves, which Heidegger indicates as the present task of philosophy, does not entail for sure a revaluation of objectivism, but a reflection on the precarious status of subjectivity in philosophy. It also means having to consider the relation with a world in which conciliation is no longer thinkable. Such a reflection begins to resemble the gathering, as Heidegger’s terms reveal is the present condition of thinking [pensare]; metaphors in which the presence of a dense and impenetrable wood (the threatening and illusory objectivity of achieved metaphysics) is juxtaposed to the cautious steps of thought; broken paths and itineraries in which the hope of finding or indicating the way is suspended. Thus one of Heidegger’s decisive notions, the Lichtung, alludes solely to the possibility that, in the heat of the “unstoppable expansion of rationalization and the uprooting [das Fortreissende] fury of cybernetics, there could be given a real clearing in the woods (Lichtung),” in the sense of an opening toward the truth which is not yet truth. The task of philosophy, as something not yet achieved and perhaps unachievable, is entrusted to the fleeting reflection on what is given in the clearing, on a hidden sense. Philosophical truth resides in these chiaroscuros, which, as a beacon of light falls suddenly upon the clearing, can reveal the thing itself of thinking. Along these Heideggerian observations, the moment of listening, the attention gathered as waiting for a revelation, and the undefinable voice of poetic language and of nature, all mark a situation of deep and self-aware weakness of thought, the repudiation of any activity primed to conquer and identify with truth.

Such a condition represents in the end a necessary consequence of thought that during the twentieth century has witnessed the transformation of reason into force, without letting itself be conquered by it. A similar tension between rationalization and gathering is present in Weber, where austere participation to the senselessness of the world (responsibility, “the enlightened command”) leaves no space for anything but private concerns, what Weber himself had called the “pianissimo,” The authenticity of existence—on which Heidegger had founded his philosophical program (and which he ended up renouncing)—is today unsayable [indicibile], it turns into something obscene
if exposed to the world. The “pianissimo,” the gathering, much like listening to a voice natural or divine, cannot declare themselves: they serve at most as indices of the poetical-philosophical alluding, and wherein thought finds finally an insurmountable limit to expression, perhaps its very end. In this doubling back or folding [ripiegarsi] of thought, as in the opening up of philosophical discourse to poetry, we witness therefore an active weakness [si manifesta dunque una consapevole debolezza]. To think it means accepting the disenchantment, the loss of the cosmos as inescapable destiny, as necessity. Thinking elects not to separate itself from the process of the achieving of nihilism, suffering it, reserving for itself those chiaroscuro areas in which to show, outside of any consolation, the essence of domination.

The notion of weakness points therefore to the present fragile constitution of philosophical discourse, its oscillating between the recognition-acceptance of the process of achievement of metaphysics as the History of Being—which is the normality of nihilism—and the overcoming of such a condition, troublesome and necessarily ambiguous, intermittent, as it might be. Thought settles itself weakly in difference, but not in the sense of a privilege to what might be marginal, empirically differentiable, or weak; but as undecidability of the ontico-ontological dilemma.

As an example of the condition of the passivity and weakness of man before the event [Ereignis], Heidegger makes an explicit reference to ethics. With a conception that champions the possibility of humanistic projectuality,

[w]e reduce everything down to man, and at best come to the point of calling for an ethics of the technological world. Caught up in this conception, we confirm our own opinion that technology is of man’s making alone. We fail to hear the claim of Being which speaks in the essence of technology.57

It is therefore not with the illusion of recasting an ethic starting from the opaque dimension of technology, and the humanistic effort to overcome it, that a comprehension of the essence of the contemporary world can begin. Here ethics appears as a variant, a breaking off of the process of imposition. Even an ethic without foundation—as propounded by some of the willingly mindless philosophies of today—appears as a translation adequate to the times, to the strong presuppositions of metaphysics. Conceived in weak, merely operational, terms of a minimal coordination of human activities,
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every ethics resents the lost foundation, even in the form of a forgetting of the originary, metaphysical, foundation.

But the condition of weakness can also be associated to ethics in a different way: weakness can be ethics. It can lead one to think of Heidegger’s ontological difference, to a reflection on the condition of undecidability (which limits itself to being present to a condition we might call pathologic), to weakness as the horizon of existence. Weak is therefore, as in the enigmatic thought of the later Heidegger, the very condition of man who yet recognizes he has a bond with necessity. This weakened human accepts, as Simone Weil had done, to decline with the world, limiting whenever possible its contribution to injustice. Limitation, weakness as ethics, can be an acceptable form of responsibility. If to this declining there will ever correspond a new equilibrium, or Justice, this today appears to be something that thinking cannot decide.

Notes

1. This theme will not be dealt with at length. In this essay we are interested primarily in grasping the resonance of Simone Weil’s writings with a specific aspect of the philosophy of nihilism, namely, the theme of weakness. The lack of such an analysis appears to be one of the shortcomings of the critical literature on Simone Weil. Her writings, perhaps owing to their fragmentary, contradictory nature, not to mention the fact that they are posthumous, have been the object of a parceling out rather than a unitary comprehension. Fragmentary writing lends itself to appropriation, citationism, manipulation. In the case of Simone Weil this has been made particularly easy by the circumstances surrounding her last years and her death, besides the uneven and controversial closeness to Christianity. I cannot take up these issues here. Fortunately all of the Cahiers are now available, and Adelphi of Milan is bringing them out in Italian translation. For biographical, bibliographical, and textual information on her writings, see Giancarlo Gaeta, I ‘Cahiers’: Storia di un’opera postuma, in Simone Weil, Quaderni, I (Milan: Adelphi, 1982), 11–100. For an indispensable, exhaustive, sympathetic biography, see Gabriella Fiori, Simone Weil, an intellectual biography, trans. J. R. Berrigan (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989). One of the sources of the present work is Maurice Blanchot. We are referring not only to the pages specifically dedicated to Simone Weil, but also to the themes of calamity [sventura], oblivion, and impossibility. See Maurice Blanchot, L’entretien infini [1969], Ital. trans. L’infinito intrattenimento: Scritti sull’inesperto gioco di scrivere (Turin: Einaudi, 1977). Blanchot situates Weil’s writings in the context of nihilism and limit-experience.

2. This theme recurs insistently in the Cahiers. For Simone Weil the knowledge of God does not pertain to the field of human possibility. It is God who calls weakly,
and weakly doth man respond: “I am well aware he does not love me. How could he
love me? And yet deep within me something, a point in me, cannot help thinking,
trembling in fear that, perhaps, despite everything, he loves me” (Quaderni, I:105). The
distance, the reciprocal weakness of man and God, is a dominant theme of the writ-
nings on God: “God is impotent, if not for the equal and merciful apportionment of the
good. He cannot do more. But this is enough” (La connaissance surnaturelle [Paris:
Gallimard, 1950], 70). For Simone Weil impossibility indicates a condition of weakness,
of yielding to evil, in which however there is given a capacity to listen: “Impossibility
is the only gateway to God. To want the impossible. To love evil” (Cahiers III, Paris:
Plon, 1974, 2nd ed.). It has been observed that this conception, according to which
the evil of the world is to be loved as an uncertain path to God, is influenced by the
gnostic tradition. But we must also observe that the notion of impossibility is linked
to an analysis of the possible as a category in which human imagination disengages
itself from reality: “The possible is the place of imagination, and therefore of deg-
radation. One must needs want either that which specifically exists or that which
cannot absolutely be: better yet the both. That which is and that which cannot be
are both foreign to becoming” (Cahiers, III:194). The relationship between possibility
and imagination is central to the philosophy of Simone Weil. A passion for the real
is a path, perhaps the only one, toward knowledge of the good. This explains how a
thought so prone to mysticism was so capable of political analyses of great insight.

3. Levinas in particular has taken a position against the estrangement of Weil
from Hebraism; see Emmanuel Levinas, “Simone Weil contre la Bible,” Evidences 24
be said, however, that an analysis of the foundations of ethics in Levinas could reveal
a certain affinity with some positions in Weil, for in both there is a strong concern
with limitation of the act with which the subject appropriates itself of the other in
representation. The same might be said for the critique of totalitarianism. On the
other hand, Simone Weil’s adherence to Christianity never entailed the acceptance
of an earthly role of the Church. The affinities of Simon Weil with some of the contem-
porary currents of Hebraism can be perceived moreover if we think of her notions
of fall, errancy, and distance from the fatherland, which recur also in authors such
as Hannah Arendt and Edmond Jabès. Blanchot observed that, perhaps unwittingly,
Simone Weil has been influenced by the Hebrew religious tradition (see L’infinito
intrattenimento, 147). Beyond such difficult comparisons, however, the fact remains
that Simone Weil’s work represents, together with that of these authors, an attempt
at an original response to the questions raised by nihilism and uprootedness. Massimo
Cacciari also alludes to this in his “Metafisica della gioventù,” in G. Lukács, Diario

4. Think especially of texts such as The Emperor’s Message or The Metamor-
phosis, besides, of the course, The Castle.

5. With the name of Lazare, Simone Weil is one of the key characters of
Bataille’s novel Bleu du ciel. Lazare, who identifies himself with the disinherited and
embraces the idea of justice, disgusts the narrator with his appearance, yet fascinates
him to the point of obsession: “I asked myself for a moment if he wasn’t the most
human of beings that I had ever seen; but he was also a foul rat who was drawing
near” (Georges Bataille, *Bleu du ciel*, Ital. trans. *L’azzurro del cielo*. Turin: Einaudi, 1981, 133). In much literature on Simone Weil this obsession produces mostly embarrassment, partial readings and repressions. Marxists tend to consider all of the writings of Simone Weil which do not refer to her revolutionary and labor experience as “ideology.” Catholics tend to ignore everything that is extreme, non-Catholic in her religious thought. As far as philosophy is concerned, what disturbs most is her pretense that she lives her thought immediately. Bataille’s testimony remains, despite everything, one of the most sincere and significant. The most recent Italian contributions signal a revival of interest in Simone Weil, but do not hide the embarrassment and the difficulties of accepting such a troubling, contradictory thought. See especially Anna Treu, “Esperienza di fabbrica, teoria della società e ideologia in Simone Weil,” *AUT* 144 (1974), 79–101; Filippo La Porta, “Riflessioni su S. Weil, E. Bloch e altri,” *Quaderni piacentini*, I (1981), 65–80; Anna Scattigno, “Simone Weil: La volontà di conoscere,” *Memoria* 5 (1983), 5–22.

6. On these aspects and in particular on the limiting character of Simone Weil’s experience, see Blanchot, *L’infinito intrattenimento*, 142ff.
8. Ibid., 125.
11. Ibid., 175.
14. The presence of the *Bhagavad Gita* and Arjuna’s dilemma is one of the key aspects of the *Cahiers*. For Weil the centrality of the acceptance of force complements the idea of justice and of redemption of the Gospel (*Quaderni*, I:233).
15. *Quaderni*, I:270.
19. Consider this: “*Gita* and the legend of Joan of Arc. To fight the English was Joan of Arc’s *dharma*, though a woman and shepherdess . . . but it was nature which realized her actions (*prakrti*), not God (*atman*) (*Gita*, XII:29). We cannot lower God till we make him a partisan in a war . . . . In the *Iliad*, the gods are partisans, but Zeus takes his golden scales.” As well as this: “The difference between the spirit
of the *Bhagavad Gita* and that of the legend of Joan of Arc is a capital difference: he wages war even though inspired by God, she wages war because inspired by God” *(Quaderni*, I:272–273, 232–233).

20. Ibid., 274.
22. See in particular the article “Between Two Laws,” now in *Scritti politici* (Roma: Donzelli, 1998).
26. Simone Weil, *Poèmes: Suivis de Venice sauvée: Lettre de Paul Valéry* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968). As in the case of Lawrence, here again the question is one of responsibility as a particular aspect of cosmic piety, that is, as *lucid* subordination to necessity. Jaffier, the protagonist of *Venise sauvée*, participates in a plot to overthrow the government of Venice, but reveals it because of his compassion for the city, and is subsequently condemned to die. It is a rehashing of a play by Otway in which Simone Weil underscores above all the conscious renunciation to power.
27. See *Quaderni*, I:230.
29. Lawrence reported on some of these experiences in *Ross the Airman*. Lawrence’s fate is surprisingly alike that of Simone Weil.
35. Ibid., 117.
36. Ibid., 118–119.
37. We might think above all of his 1946 text, *The Death of Virgil*. For the themes we are here developing an important reference is Hermann Broch’s *Dichten und Erkennen*, Italian translation *Poesia e conoscenza* (Milan: Lerici, 1965).
40. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, lines 272–287: “Beyond the shadow of the ship, / I watched the water-snakes . . . // O happy living things! no tongue / Their beauty might declare: / A spring of water gushed from my heart, / And I blessed them unaware: / Sure my kind saint took pity on me, / And I blessed them unaware.”

41. Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 55. [It should be pointed out that in the last sentence of the citation, where the English has “only so far as truth happens . . .” the Italian translation (by P. Chiodi) reads “soltanto perché’ si storicizza la verità . . .,” which may help explain Dal Lago’s use of that text. Trans.]


44. Weil, *Cahiers*, II:79.


46. On this point, see the similar position held by Karl Löwith, *Significato e fine della storia* (Milano: Edizioni di Comunità, 1979).

47. This radical critique of society is common to some authors who share with Simone Weil a marginal position in contemporary culture. I am thinking in particular of Hannah Arendt, *Vita activ; oder, Vom tätigen Leben* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1960), and Carlo Michelstaedter, *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, English translation by R. S. Valentino and C. S. Blum (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).


55. Ibid.


58. See on this Heidegger’s reflection in *Gelassenheit*. Italian translation *L’abbandono* (Genoa: il melangolo, 1983).
6

The Aging of the “School of Suspicion”

MAURIZIO FERRARIS

Introduction

In his study of Freud entitled De l’interprétation,1 Paul Ricoeur bestowed the common name of “school of suspicion” on the Nietzsche-Freud-Marx triad. Representative of a widespread view in contemporary culture, Ricoeur holds that the bond which unites thinkers initially as different from one another in their methods and intentions as Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx consists in a common “unmasking” attitude, in a programmatic and radical project of demystification.

According to the “school of suspicion,” to think means to interpret. Interpretation, however, follows a “dizzying” path: from its standpoint, in fact, not only are traditions, received ideas, and ideologies considered deceptive, but the very notion of “truth” is understood as the effect of a historical stratification (and mystification) whose origins are rhetorical, emotive, and intentional. That which is “proper,” the authentic sense whose appearances and secondary formations are metaphors, is in its turn something obscure and derivative, something that in turn needs to be subjected to interpretation. As Nietzsche writes in a page from the Book of the Philosopher: “truths are illusions that we forgot are illusions, tired metaphors that have lost all sensible force, coins whose image is worn and are valued as metal, no longer as money.”2

During the last twenty years in the history of our culture, the “school of suspicion” has indeed been successful, thanks in part also to external factors: one needs only to think of phenomena like the Nietzsche Renaissance in France and in Italy, after the capillary circulation of psychoanalysis, among others. On the other hand, and above and beyond the changes in the cultural

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horizon that first decreed its success, the “school of suspicion” manifests today obvious signs of obsolescence. This aging is all the more evident the greater is the tendency, by contrast, of hermeneutics “in general” (and specifically of the thought of Gadamer) to scan the whole horizon of “classical” philosophy, and of non-methodic reflection on the traditions of philosophy and linguistics. By way of a preliminary hypothesis, we can state that hermeneutics has attained its proper unifying role as a linguistic and theoretical koine precisely by placing in parentheses the most patent unmasking intentions of the “school of suspicion.” Hermeneutics thus emerges not as a break with and overcoming of the philosophic tradition, but rather as its memory and conservation.

Though in terms of the history of culture the reasons that have decreed the aging of the “school of suspicion” and the rise of Gadamerian hermeneutics may seem obvious, there still remain, on a purely theoretical plane, at least three questions which we shall attempt to respond to at least in part in the present essay. These are: what are the intrinsic limitations of the hermeneutics of suspicion? what is its relationship to Gadamerian hermeneutics? to what degree do certain contaminations between hermeneutics and the “school of suspicion,” such as Jacques Derrida’s grammatology, still retain a certain philosophical relevance in the panorama of contemporary theory?

The Limits of Unmasking

Two analyses, one by Foucault, the other by Derrida, can help us to better define some of the intrinsic limits of the hermeneutics of suspicion.

First, in a 1964 text Foucault discerns two risks that hang over Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx: nihilism and dogmatism. Concerning nihilism Foucault writes that, precisely owing to its constant shifting from one interpretation to another, there’s a mask behind every mask, metaphors follow upon one another to infinity without ever reaching a terminus ad quem—the fathoming of the “unmasking” interpretation can lead to the conclusion that, properly speaking, there is nothing to interpret, and that ultimately the whole hermeneutic process revolves around itself. In fact, this nihilistic consequence characterizes not only the hermeneutics of suspicion, but hermeneutics in general. One need only think of certain nihilistic traits interacting in Gadamer’s thought, for whom the “strong” notion of truth dissolves in a diffuse dialogue, in a collective exchange of meanings devoid of any stable referent and not conducive to definitive truths. Nevertheless, in the case of the hermeneutics of suspicion, according to Foucault, this nihilistic dissolution of the referent of interpretation takes on hues which are typically aporetic, conferring pathological traits on a hermeneutic which—unlike what takes place, for instance,
in Gadamer—is tendentially “vertiginous.” One thus ends up, Foucault writes, with a “hermeneutic that turns upon itself, and enters the territory of languages which constantly refer to one another, the mythic region of folly and pure language.”

On the other hand, the flip side of the nihilistic self-referentiality of interpretations is constituted by dogmatism. In a sense, it is its reactive formation. “It is better to have any sense whatsoever, than the absence of sense,” Nietzsche writes in The Genealogy of Morals, describing the genesis of ascetic ideals. Weary of masks, the interpreter may draw back from any mask whatsoever, or otherwise deploy a preformed hermeneutic grid on the basis of which to any one signifier there corresponds a stable signified. Thus a code is established and hermeneutics changes into a semiotics. On this account Foucault writes:

A hermeneutics which in fact leans upon a semiotics believes in the absolute existence of signs: it abandons violence, the unfinished, and the infinity of interpretations, in order to give free rein to the terror of the clue, and suspect language.

We are once again before the ambiguity implicit in every hermeneutics of suspicion, always suspended between an excess and a deficiency of interpretation. The duplicity nested in each reference to an unmasking rationality can be translated in terms of a dialectic of enlightenment as sketched by Adorno and Horkheimer:

Nietzsche was one of the few after Hegel who recognized the dialectic of enlightenment. And it was Nietzsche who expressed its antipathy to domination: “The Enlightenment” should be “taken to the people, so that the priests all become priests with a bad conscience—and the same must be done with regard to the State. That is the task of the Enlightenment: to make princes and statesmen unmistakably aware that everything they do is sheer falsehood. . . . On the other hand, Enlightenment has always been a tool for ‘great manipulators of government.’”

Nihilism and dogmatism buttress each other reciprocally: the unmasking tends either to turn on itself, or else to posit the basis for a new dogmatic myth, ultimately characterized by a “mythical horror of myth.”

But if Foucault’s analyses tend to point out the limits inherent in the consequences (whether they be inevitable or not) of a hermeneutics of suspicion, Derrida—especially in the evaluation of the “white mythology” which
would constitute the kernel of “Western metaphysics”—discerns a constitutive dysfunction, an originary contradiction that characterizes the unmasking enterprise as such.

The passage from Nietzsche we cited in the preceding paragraph, and which Derrida analyzes in the essay on “White Mythology,” is first of all an attempt to “overcome metaphysics.” Through a highly condensed hermeneutic, Nietzsche appears to unravel the metaphysical clauses lodged within the very concept of “truth,” revealing it as a simple metaphor. But are we so sure, Derrida objects, that this unmasking is not also common, and in a profound and constitutive way, to the history of metaphysics? At first glance, with an Enlightenment-like twist, Nietzsche reveals a typical “white mythology,” the belief in a stable fundament to truth, in an objective givenness of the true, beyond the contaminations of the doxa and of interests. Yet this unmasking manifests itself to be closely related with whatever it was that one wanted to demystify, that is, it manifests itself as “classically” metaphysical.

What is metaphysics, Derrida goes on to say, if not the ambition to reveal the metaphors, to overcome the veil of appearance? More than the metaphor of the coin, recalled by Nietzsche, it would be necessary to take into consideration the metaphor of light—understood as a general image for every hermeneutic of suspicion and for every metaphysic—which quite aptly illustrates how the desire to unmask, far from protecting us from metaphysics, is in fact the very essence of what in the tradition of Nietzsche and Heidegger goes by the name of metaphysics. Derrida writes that the light metaphor is the founding metaphor not only because it is a photological one—and in this respect the entire history of our philosophy is a photology, the name given to a history of, or treatise on, light—but because it is a metaphor. Metaphor in general, the passage from one existent to another, or from one signified meaning to another, authorized by the initial submission of Being to the existent, the analogical displacement of Being, is the initial weight which anchors discourse in metaphysics, irremediably repressing discourse into its metaphysical state. This is a fate which it would be foolish to term a regrettable and provisional accident of “history”—a slip, a mistake of thought occurring within history (in historia). In historiam, it is the fall of thought into philosophy which gets history under way.9

The will to unmask—to cast a light beyond the veil of appearance, to reach the true concealed behind the metaphor—is not the final act of metaphysics,
the “midday of free spirits” Nietzsche talks about. Rather, it is the first act of every metaphysics. Said differently, metaphysics is not what it is because it ignores the fact that “truth” is nothing more than an ancient metaphor. Metaphysics as we know it has always been aware of the metaphoric nature of its utterances, and has consequently attempted throughout its history to reduce the metaphoric to the proper, the adequate, the conceptually univocal.

If we understand it in this sense, that is, no longer bound to an enlightenment dialectic but rather to the Heideggerian interpretation of the “history of metaphysics” as the history of the forgetting of being, the hermeneutics of suspicion appears to be the culminating point of that experience. The subject which “unveils,” which recognizes more or less nihilistically the manifold grounds hidden behind the metaphorical—or behind Freudian consciousness, or the bad faith studied by the critique of ideology—that same subject is the metaphysical subject par excellence which embodies its own will to power in the “will to interpret.”

The Hermeneutic Picture: Reconstruction and Integration

What is here confirmed is the not so paradoxical conclusion whereby the hermeneutics of suspicion is a typical example of “strong” thought, no less metaphysical and peremptory than the naïve convictions—be they positive or ideological—which it claims to unmask. This holds true not only owing to some of its possible consequences—such as the nihilism of interpretation, dogmatism, the hardening into a semiotics or a structure—but also and mainly owing to the emphatic unmasking assumption that informs it.

The perspective so far developed can be made clearer if only we attempt to classify this hermeneutic modality within the typological picture sketched by Gadamer in *Truth and Method.* Referring specifically to aesthetics and the interpretation of works of art handed down by tradition, Gadamer begins the exposition of his interpretive model with the analysis of two hermeneutic modalities which he considers no longer adequate: reconstruction according to Schleiermacher, and integration according to Hegel’s philosophy of history. To relate hermeneutically to works of the past, writes Gadamer, means neither reconstructing the historical world of the original, nor inscribing the work into a historical teleology which would motivate it, establishing thus a conscious mediation with present life. In Gadamer’s perspective, integration as a hermeneutic practice requires a different kind of mediation, one effected not by absolute spirit, but by a tradition which is essentially linguistic, and which permits a mediation with the work that same tradition hands down to us.
The hermeneutic relation is therefore made up of a tradition, a transmission and a translation which integrate whatever the work inevitably loses (the historical and spiritual world into which it was born) with the largely accidental (non-teleological and peremptory) history of its interpretations, or of its “fortune,” which ultimately make up an integral part of the work itself, of the object to be interpreted as such.

In the concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte,* or of “history of effects,” it is assumed that the work is constitutively spurious, that is, that the interpretation is carried out upon a terrain which is already compromised. It follows that, strictly speaking, the “unmasking” is not possible. To put it in terms of Nietzsche’s example of truth as an ancient metaphor, the end result of Gadamer’s position is that sense—the reducing of metaphor, the unveiling of what is “proper” hidden behind the metaphoric trope—is constitutively unattainable. Thus interpretation consists rather in a more diffuse and less categorically unmasking relation with the historical unraveling of interpretations, of metaphors, and the relocation of sense.

To be more specific, if we attempt to place the hermeneutics of suspicion within Gadamer’s typology, the actual veil of appearance—or the will to go beyond metaphysics *tout court*—manifests a visible affinity with Schleiermacher’s reconstructive project, that is, with the project of a hermeneutics which aims at going over the internal and external articulations of the work in order to reconstitute, together with the structure, the historical world within which it arose, the origin. Ultimately, despite the fact that, especially with Freud and Nietzsche, the hermeneutics of suspicion does not lack in “anti-metaphysical” warnings—that is: greater emphasis on the effects stemming from those vicissitudes which generated a determinate moral or theoretical conception—the fundamental hermeneutic intention is nevertheless aimed toward a reconstructive analysis. As the historical experience of Freudianism, and Freud’s own metapsychology, clearly show, the hermeneutics of suspicion tends in fact to establish a direct and properly speaking “metaphysical” relationship with nature, with the direct causes, the immediate drives, the biological and metahistorical origins of comportment.

We can therefore say of the “school of suspicion” what Gadamer writes concerning Schleiermacher’s “reconstructive” hermeneutics:

Ultimately, this view of hermeneutics is as foolish as all restitution and restoration of past life. The reconstruction of the original circumstances, like all restoration, is a pointless undertaking in view of the historicity of our being. What is reconstructed, a life brought back from the lost past, is not the original. In its continuance in an estranged state it acquires only a secondary,
cultural, existence. . . . Similarly, a hermeneutics that regarded understanding as the reconstruction of the original would be no more than the recovery of a dead meaning.\textsuperscript{13}

Compared to the reconstructive aims that propel the hermeneutics of suspicion no less than the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher, Gadamer’s project of integration reveals itself to be a “weaker” practice, at the very least it is less peremptory and metaphysical. Much like integration according to Hegel, Gadamer’s hermeneutics is guided by the awareness of the impossibility of a restoration, of a definitive interpretation, or of total transparence. Yet Gadamer’s substitution of Hegel’s philosophy of history (which is teleological, foundational, willed) with the notion of \textit{Wirkungsgeschichte} disarms even more the “unmasking” will sedimented in the hermeneutic act. In the interpretive picture we no longer perceive the assumption of an integral restitution—restoration of the original. More than that, when it comes to justifying the endless number of versions and transformations, interpretation no longer makes use of the “strong time” of history, for it now follows the ultimately accidental ongoing series of differentiated interpretations, which modify at the same time the object of interpretation and our consciousness (and our approach) as interpreters.

No longer identifiable as the consequence of a definitive transparence, of an undoubtable evidence, hermeneutics is here immersed in a constitutive opacity. First of all, writes Gadamer, the \textit{Wirkungsgeschichte} determines in advance both what seems to us worth enquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation, and we more or less forget half of what is really there—in fact, we miss the whole truth of the phenomenon when we take its immediate appearance as the whole truth.\textsuperscript{14}

If to all accounts the hermeneutics of suspicion is, no less than the reconstructive hermeneutics of Schleiermacher, influenced by the historicist illusion (which does not question the historical picture that conditions the subject), then Gadamer’s hermeneutics is by contrast motivated by the awareness of the historical determinations that shape us as interpreters. The hermeneutic “integration” is therefore above all a transitory, changeable, precarious practice: “To exist historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete.”\textsuperscript{15}

The question we can raise at this juncture is: how far does Gadamer’s project go in disarming \textit{degotenzia(re)} the peremptoriness of the hermeneutics of suspicion?
From Integration to Deconstruction

Although pointed toward an opacity which suspends the most peremptory intentions of the hermeneutics of suspicion, Gadamer’s integrative model manifests at least one trait which can be the object of critique. It concerns the obvious predominance of continuity (between past and present, primarily, but also among the different moments of a tradition). It is a tendency toward continuity which acts in two directions. The first is the rather unproblematical access of the interpreter to the legacy (texts, documents, monuments) of a tradition. The second is the possibility, ultimately too easily claimed by Gadamer, of instituting a productive dialogue between the texts of that tradition and the present-day conditions of the social dialogue.

The two tendencies are connected. In Heideggerian terminology, we could say that Gadamer “makes present” tradition rather sharply, that he elides too swiftly the caesuras and the differences operating within it. The observations in *Truth and Method* concerning the interpretation of written texts are indicative of this fact. He writes:

In the forms of writing all tradition is simultaneous with any present time. Moreover, it involves a unique co-existence of past and present, insofar as present consciousness has the possibility of free access to all that is handed down in writing. No longer dependent on repetition, which links past knowledge with the present, but, in its direct acquaintance with literary tradition, understanding consciousness has a genuine opportunity to widen its horizon and thus enrich its world by a whole new and deeper dimension.\(^{17}\)

The past as it is handed down to us by writing (that is, as pure ideality, without the contaminations and casual mediations with the present, as happens with the spoken word) acquires a paradoxical simultaneity with the present. It is a simultaneity characterized moreover by a strong transparence, by a peculiar “evidence” of the written text, in short, by a will to communicate which Gadamer assumes as unproblematical:

But it is true of everything that has come down to us that here a will to permanence has created the unique forms of continuance that we call literature. *It presents us not only with a stock of memorials and signs.* Literature, rather, has acquired its own simultaneity with every present. To understand it does not mean primarily to reason one’s way back into the past, but to have a present involvement in what is said.\(^{18}\)
Raised against the reconstructive will—which persists in reading the past as past, origin in its integrity, the objective truth of the author's intentions—these observations tend nevertheless to consider writing, as a vehicle of tradition, in terms of an abstract ideality of language. Gadamer continues:

In writing, language gains its true intellectual quality, for when confronted with a written tradition understanding consciousness acquires its full sovereignty. Its being does not depend on anything. Thus reading is in potential possession of its history.¹⁹

No longer repetition of the past, understanding becomes participation in a present sense. Guaranteed by the spirituality of writing, a fundamental continuity binds disparate moments (which may be remote, and long past, perhaps no longer fully understandable) which are made present through interpretation.

Yet Gadamer’s integration compels us to ponder further whether the first task of hermeneutics is not so much that of establishing a connection between ourselves as interpreters and the tradition to which we presume to belong, but rather that of asking ourselves if this assumption is legitimate—and if as a result our belonging to tradition is as direct as to permit a “simultaneous” access to the texts.

It appears, in the last analysis, that whereas the hermeneutics of suspicion tends to underscore the “vertiginous” and aporetic aspects of interpretation, Gadamerian integration is excessively irenic, failing as it does to problematize the very connection with the legacy of tradition understood as hermeneutic objects. This impression is further confirmed if only we take a cursory look at the problem of integration from the opposite end, that is, if we consider how Gadamer—for example, during his polemic with Habermas—tends to render homologous two heterogeneous forms of dialogue: that of the interpreter with tradition, and that which takes place between social agents. In this case also, tradition is flattened onto presence, on the present dialogue; or, vice versa, the latter is inscribed without difficulty in the furrow of tradition.

Before this making-present [presentificazione] one can well understand the motivation which led Derrida to envision a grammatology, that is, the hermeneutics of a tradition considered not as a coherent ensemble of texts which are potentially simultaneous with us, and transparent to reading, but as an analysis of caesuras and discontinuities, of the fundamental non-transparence of a traditio which has ceased to belong to us or was never ours to begin with. In this light, the objects of interpretations, and that means above all the texts, show themselves not in their “true spirituality,” but rather in a state of opaque materiality, as “monuments” or as “signs”—in Derrida’s
terminology, as traces which cannot be made present. In this perspective, the hermeneutic act does not aim to reconstruct the past, as happens with the school of suspicion, and it does not aim to integrate it with the present, as happens with the Gadamerian model, but vice versa aims at deconstructing a tradition made up of traces and texts which were never fully intelligible.

The fundamental aim of deconstruction consists in fact precisely in thinking the difference, the distance that divides our interpretation from the objects to which it turns. At this juncture, the hermeneutic activity is changed into a questioning without answers, its value residing in being an ontological exercise, an indication of the incommensurability between understanding and the object of understanding. As Derrida writes in his essay on Levinas:

The questioning must be preserved. As interrogation. The freedom of the questioning (double genitive) must be said and defended. Founded permanence, fulfilled tradition of the questioning which remained questioning.21

Tradition here endures but only as a hermeneutic object, as a thematic unity of interpretation. Contrary to what happens in Gadamer, it does not furnish a positive criterion for understanding, a “historical” legitimation (howsoever disarmed and transparent) of the interpretive act. In contrast to reconstructive or integrative hermeneutics, Derridian deconstruction manifests itself as the extreme dissolution of the intention of authentic comprehension, of the seed if not of things then at least of language as tradition, deposit, repertoire of philosophical keywords.

The purpose of grammatology is not to point out the sense of a tradition or the legitimacy of an interpretation, but to untie, dissolve, and separate by means of swerves or play the instituted (and concretely accessible) models of interpretation. This critical aspect of deconstruction comes to the fore in a different context, during the polemic with analytic philosophy, that is, in Derrida’s response to John Searle, who has accused him of misunderstanding Speech Acts Theory. Vindicating the legitimacy of deconstruction, Derrida writes:

a theoretician of speech acts who was even moderately consistent with his theory ought to have spent some time patiently considering questions of this type: Does the principal purpose of Sec consist in being true? In appearing true? In stating the truth?22

But at this point it is clear that Derrida is playing a different game, not only with respect to the concept of philosophy circulated in the tradition of linguistic analysis, but also with respect to the finalities and modes of
interpretation as they are thought both in the “school of suspicion” and Gadamerian hermeneutics.

Philosophy as a Kind of Writing

What is the meaning of “changing the game”? First of all, on the basis of the internal assumptions of grammatology, changing the game implies a new relationship with written texts and with the problem of writing in general. As we read explicitly in the polemic with Searle—but as is implicitly stated in the whole of Derrida’s work—grammatology radically sets between parentheses the problem of “reference” to reality, and with it the possibility of surrogating, with an ostensive gesture, the “foundational” function of writing and of the interpretation of texts. Grammatology is a type of writing [tipo di scrittura], and this not only owing to the stylistic devices it employs, but mainly because the “referent” is only the written philosophical, “metaphysical” tradition which constitutes us as interpreters. Derrida’s is therefore an emphatic and deviant use of the classical hermeneutical principle of sola scriptura. But precisely insofar as it is emphasis, it highlights a tendency which is already implicitly operating in hermeneutics as such.

The thesis of grammatology as a “kind of writing” [genere di scrittura] is at the center of a recently published essay by Richard Rorty. According to Rorty, by assuming as the only referent the textual corpus of the philosophical tradition, Derrida makes himself the epigone of a “line” in modern thought which begins with Hegel, and which is opposed to a parallel lignée, of Kantian origin, according to which to think means instead to relate in the most opportune manner to the objects and the structures of the natural and real world. For the latter philosophical tradition writing is no more than a “supplement”—to adopt a terminology Derrida derives from Rousseau—and language itself would tend, asymptotically, toward self-suppression, favoring thus pure ostension (understood as optimal correspondence between mind and nature). What’s more, says Rorty, the way in which Derrida turns into the epigone of the Hegelian lignée makes us see that the epigone of the Kantian “lineage” are the Anglo-Saxon language analysts.

Now this relationship between “Hegelians” and “Kantians,” Rorty continues, is not one of exclusion or of reciprocal misunderstanding (as in fact it may appear). Rather, it is comparable to the swerve [scarto] that the epistemological debate introduces between “critical science” and normal science—or to the difference between normality and deviance tout court. What Rorty calls the parasitism of grammatology (with respect to linguistic analysis, and, we might add, on the basis of the preceding section, with respect to
Gadamerian hermeneutics) does not appear as a simple “estrangement,” or as an interrupted path [sentiero interrotto] but, rather, as a sort of experimental terrain, that is, critical and creative at the same time. Rorty writes:

The Kantian versus non-Kantian contrast now appears as that between the man who wants to take (and see) things as they are, and thus make sure that the right pieces go in the right holes, and the man who wants to change the vocabulary presently used for isolating pieces and holes.25

Conclusion

In the wake of the considerations above, let us take up again the problem of the proper collocation of grammatology with respect to Gadamerian hermeneutics and the “school of suspicion.” In sum, the peculiarity of Derrida’s work can be summarized in three points.

1. As we have seen, the most immediate effect of grammatology is that of establishing itself as a critique of Gadamerian “continuity.” In a way, especially when he speaks of “integration” hermeneutics, Derrida seems to edge close to certain “unmasking” moves typical of the school of suspicion. It is in fact only within a critical horizon that we can attribute sense to a group of analyses, like the grammatological ones, which in their very “architecture” and in the theoretical “system” which organizes them, appear not to have either an architecture or a system. In itself, to speak of grammatology as the science of written traces, of signifiers without signifieds, or to submit a theory of difference, that is, of swerves or of the residual aspect not brought out by a tradition, makes little sense. Derrida himself is aware of this, as when he insists on the ineffable nature of difference. Much more meaningful, with respect to the “continuity” of Gadamerian hermeneutics, is instead the deconstructive, critical, effect of grammatology applied to a tradition which we are prone to “read” as homogeneous and translatable.

2. This critical aspect, however, does not mean a simple recovery of the unmasking intention of the school of suspicion. To the unmasking there is substituted terminological invention, which means primarily an analysis of the signifier and not of the signified. We exclude in this manner the possibility of reaching, by means of deconstruction of a tradition or of determined concepts which belong to it, an authentic and fundamental sense, an essential “proper.” Whether it is achieved by means of stylistic, terminological devices, or by means of a distortion or an abuse of determined semantic fields, to
transform philosophy into a kind of writing means to “render possible” \(\textit{possibilizzare}\) the philosophical tradition, to disclose new hermeneutic occasions. The problem of the overcoming of metaphysics as a peculiar goal of the school of suspicion is rewritten by Derrida in terms of the polemic between “critical science” and “normal science.” In \textit{Writing and Difference} we read:

Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger . . . worked within the inherited concepts of metaphysics. Since these concepts are not elements or atoms, and since they are taken from a syntax and a system, every particular borrowing brings along with it the whole of metaphysics. This is what allows these destroyers to destroy each other reciprocally—for example, Heidegger regarding Nietzsche, with as much lucidity and rigor as bad faith and misconstruction, as the last metaphysician, the last “Platonist.” One could do the same for Heidegger himself, for Freud, or for a number of others. And today no exercise is more widespread.\(^{26}\)

The uncontrasted series of unmaskings derives from the non-problematic adoption of the language handed down to us. Instead, in the Derridian perspective, “philosophy as a kind of writing,” and therefore as invention, means the instituting of a rapport of \textit{double bind} with the philosophical tradition: on the one hand, we renounce the hope of overcoming metaphysics through a radical unmasking; on the other, the play and the terminological transformation introduced within that tradition allow for the suspension of its peremptoriness (which vice versa tends to reproduce itself by means of the continuity of the unmaskings).

3. There is finally a third consequence of the “parasitical” function of grammatology. The \textit{double bind} rapport that Derrida institutes between deconstruction and tradition is, in the last analysis, that of the ethnologist.\(^{27}\) It is motivated by a double awareness. First, by that radical discontinuity that separates us from a tradition which is not necessarily ours, and then by the awareness of the inevitability, and its conditioning value, of language which we happen to be using (this corresponds to the ineluctability of “ethnocentrism”). To consider with an “ethnological” gaze the problem of interpretation would mean in this case to assign a positive and recognizable value to the problem of our present discontinuity with respect to the philosophical tradition—without conferring upon this latter discontinuity the truly “metaphysical” emphasis which is proper of the “school of suspicion.” And at the same time without taking for granted an underlying continuity between our present and the past of philosophy, as is the case with Gadamer.
Notes


2. Not yet available, at the time of this writing, in the *Opere* edited by Colli and Montinari, the quote from *The Book of the Philosopher* is taken from the separate volume published by Savelli, Rome, 1977, 76. [See now *Opere di Friedrich Nietzsche* (Milan: Adelphi, 1990), Vol. III, t. 2, 361; and the original in the *Kritische Studienausgabe* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), 1, 880–881. Trans.]


5. Ibid.


11. See especially, in *Truth and Method*, the chapter section “Reconstruction and integration as hermeneutic tasks,” 146–150.


15. Ibid., 269. [The Italian translation reads as follows: “Essere storico significa non potere mai risolversi totalmente in autotrasparenza.” I think the suggestiveness of the word *autotrasparenza*, self-transparency, which is absent from the English version, is important to Ferraris’ argument. Trans.]


18. Ibid., 353. Emphasis added.


24. For example, Searle excludes the possibility that the debate between Derrida and Austin can be considered a confrontation between two traditions, and holds that it is a question of Derrida’s misunderstanding of the theory of linguistic acts. See John Searle, “Reiterating the Differences (reply to Derrida),” *Glyph* 1 (1977): 198–208.


27. The very project of grammatology is born out of the discussion concerning Lévi-Strauss’ “ethnocentrism” vis-à-vis the society without writing. See Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 97–140.
Heidegger’s Lichtung as lucus a (non) lucendo

LEONARDO AMOROSO

Abwärts wend ich mich
Zu der heiligen, unaussprechlichen,
Geheimnisvollen Nacht

—Novalis

Metaphysics of Light and Lichtung

As a Leitmotiv, the metaphor of light is present throughout Western metaphysics. One need only think, for example, of the Platonic myth of the cave and its agaton as the sun of the world of ideas, or the Aristotelian nous understood through the image of light, or the lumen Dei of Augustine and medieval philosophy, down to Hegel’s dialectics as the victorious struggle of the realm of light against darkness, and finally the Nietzschean metaphor of the sun.

What is it that is being thought through the metaphor of light, which has long become a stereotype and part of everyday language? It is truth, Being, God itself. Truth is Being thought as that clearness which allows us to see things as they are. Being, insofar as it is the fundament or the essence of all things, is similar to the light that renders possible not only sight, but also and above all life itself upon the earth. Light, the least “thingly” of all entities, has always been the image most appropriate for Being thought as supreme being. But Being as supreme being is God, toward whom an equally metaphysical approach has been attempted by both theology as the doctrine of the theophany of light and by mysticism as the experience of the “flowing light of divinity.”
In the metaphysics of light, truth, Being, and God are thought primarily as clear light, as clearness already present and always available. In contemporary ontology, and in the language and the thought of Martin Heidegger in particular, we find a word which, if on the one hand it harks back to the metaphysics of light, on the other it questions its tacit presuppositions and transforms its contours. This fundamental word (Grundwort), which we will now follow as a guiding word, is **Lichtung**.

In the German language, *Lichtung* is synonymous with *Waldblöße*, “clearing in the woods”; *ein Holz lichten* means to clear a wood, that is, cut down trees in order to open up a *Lichtung*. If not at the semantic and etymological levels, then at least at the morphological level what is evidenced is the affinity between *Lichtung* and *Licht* (“light”), a relationship which is nonetheless barely perceivable in the everyday use of the word. What is the relationship between *Lichtung* and *Licht*? Perhaps *ein Holz lichten* means essentially to give light to the wood, that is, to allow light to illuminate it? The *Lichtung* as an open place in the light would then be not simply a luminous site, but a place which has been opened to the light, precisely with an effort toward clearing [diradamento]. Next to its luminosity, another essential—and complementary—characteristic of the *Lichtung* would then be that of the darkness or obscurity that precedes its being cleared. This conjoined opposition of luminosity and obscurity is now revealed thanks also to the fact that the *Lichtung*, as a luminous clearing, is defined by its boundaries, that is, by its being surrounded and, as it were, hidden by a wood which is thicker and therefore darker.

Linguistics can furnish us with some clues in this direction. Is there an etymological connection between *Lichtung* and *Licht*? Are there etymological or at least morphological similarities between words which express, in languages other than German, the concepts of “clearing” and of “light”? And is a relationship with obscurity also involved in such cases? Finally, has the plausible, presumed relationship between the three notions of “clearing,” “light,” and “obscurity” ever been explicitly thematized, for example, in thinking about language?

The German word *Lichtung* is of recent formation, though it has, so to speak, a family history of great relevance and cultural consequence. This word, in fact, corresponds to the Old High German *loh*, “(sacred) wood,” which exists still today in dialect and as a morphological element in geographical names such as Waterloo and Oslo. In the Middle High German period it is attested as the use of the verb *liehten* (Old High German *liōhtan* or *liuhtan*), for example, in the language of the mystics (from which we get the substantive *in-liuhtunge* as “illumination”). *Liehten*, however, disappears
at the end of the Middle High German period, and is replaced by the more widely used *leuchten*. The present-day *lichten* is a neologism that dates to the eighteenth century, derived in part from the substantive *Licht* ("light") and in part from the adjective *licht* ("luminous"). From *licht, lichten*, derives, in the nineteenth century, the substantive *Lichtung* (homonym of the term *Lichtung* employed in maritime language as the nominal derivation of *lichten*, "to hoist the anchor," "to set sail," related to *leicht*, "light" in the sense of little weight, and *erleichten*, "to lighten" a load). It is, at the same time, a borrowing from the French *clarière* (today it is *clairière*) which is evidently derived from the Latin *clarus*. Even in this French word, then, the clearing in the wood is thought in relationship to luminosity. We can finally recall the English *clearing*, which corresponds to the German *Lichtung*, both in the sense of an open space surrounded by trees in the woods [*radura*], as well as "the act of freeing, removing, illuminating, etc."

**Lucus a (non) lucendo**

If we now turn to classical languages, we find a word which manifests surprising affinities with *Lichtung*: the Latin *lucus*. As we saw was the case with *Lichtung*, we are once again dealing with a term drawn from forestry which evidences a morphological relationship with terms from the semantic field of light (*lux, lucere*). The current translation for *lucus*, however, is "(sacred) wood." The *lucus*, therefore, is not so much a clearing as, and rather, a small wood, a grove. On this account, it must be observed that according to the *Thesaurus linguae latinae*, the term *lucus* is a "vox prisca quae tamquam theod. Lichtung lucum liberum arboribus saeptum significasse videtur," an ancient word which probably indicated, much like the German *Lichtung*, an open place surrounded by trees. This original meaning of *lucus* is attested in a passage from Livy: "Lucus ibi frequenti silva et proceris abietis arboribus saeptus laeta in medio pascua habuit" (24, 3, 4): here the reference is explicitly to a *lucus* surrounded by a tight forest of tall pine trees. Let us look into this a bit closer, and consider the words *silva* and *saeptus*. The *lucus*, insofar as it is *saeptus* by the *silva*, is in a very complex relationship with the forest, for the latter surrounds the *lucus* and hides it, contains and protects it. But the *silva*, on the other hand, is said *frequens*, with a near topical use of the attribute which expresses the very essence of the *silva*, at least according to what we read in Servius who, in his commentary on Vergil, distinguishes between *silva* and *lucus* (and *nemus*): "Interest autem inter nemus et silvam et lucum; lucus enim est arborum multitudo cum religione, nemus vero composita multitudo
The relationship of the *lucus* with light and darkness has been explored extensively in the etymological speculations of the Latin grammarians by addressing the question, which became proverbial: *lucus a lucendo aut a non lucendo?* Traditional etymology derives the term *lucus* from *lucere* by means of antiphrasis because it has little if any light at all. This etymology was championed for the first time by Varro in his *De lingua latina* (middle of first century AD): “Lucus eo dictus putatur, quod minime luceat” (240, 5). This explanation will be repeated nearly word for word (“quod minime luceat” or “quod non luceat”) by the later Latin grammarians as a scholastic example of deriving etymologies through antiphrasis. But already Quintilian (I 6, 34) expressed some reservations, and with specific reference to the word *lucus*, about the legitimacy of deriving etymologies through antiphrasis. What emerges among ancient grammarians, then, is the hypothesis that *lucus* proceeds from *lucere* not owing to the absence, but, rather, to the presence of light. This possibility is glossed by Servius as an opinion held by many which he does not share, while further down the centuries, Isidore of Seville also legitimately counterfoists this hypothesis to the traditional one. In both cases the luminosity of the *lucus* is linked back to its religious nature, not exactly to the enlightening beacon of the gods, but to the light of cultural torches. By recalling the originary meaning of *lucus* as “clearing” and the possibility that its density and darkness is related to that of the *silva*, we can perhaps suppose that the light of the *lucus* is the mild light of a space in the woods.

But what is relevant to our theme is that the double relationship of the *lucus* with both light and darkness is thematized in etymological speculation by the Roman grammarians. Staying at the linguistic level—or, to be more precise, in the field of rhetoric—we can adduce other evidence of the awareness of this double relationship. A first example is provided by an oxymoron. Vergil, who employs the word *lucus* often especially in the religious sense, writes: “Nulli est certa domus, lucis habitamus opacis” (*Aen*. VI, 673), literally: “no one has a fixed home, we dwell in ‘opaque sites.’” Besides this oxymoron—which, strictly speaking, is not really such, as the *lucus* is not
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The *lux* itself—we then find a *figura etymologica* which harks to the intricate rapport of the *lucus* with light and darkness. Cato writes (in *R. rust.*, 139) that it is not right to *conlucare* ("clear") a *lucus* unless it follows a sacrifice complete with ritual formula. What interests us in this context, above and beyond the historical-religious meaning of this taboo, is the expression *lucum conlucare*. This is a peculiar etymological figura because *lucum conlucare* does not mean at all to make the *lucus* be what it is in its essence, but, rather, and on the contrary, to destroy it in its essence. The *lucus conlucatus* is no longer a *lucus*, a *Lichtung*, but a desolate and parched space in which the relationship of light and darkness, the balanced measure in which it dwells, is irremediably lost and gone.

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*Lichtung*, *Dasein* and Being, Nothingness and Difference

There is a passage in which Heidegger mentions the Latin word *lucus* and its traditional etymology: “We think... a humanism of a particular kind. The word ends up being a denomination of the genus of ‘lucus a non lucendo’” (PW 94). At first glance, the example appears to be purely casual. But because Heidegger had declared himself to be against humanism (since it is but a phenomenon of subjectivist and anthropological metaphysics), his position can be defined “humanistic” only by reversing the normal sense of the word. It would be then a humanism by antiphrasis, as we saw with *lucus*, which according to traditional etymology derives by antiphrasis from *lucere*. Already the fact that Heidegger’s position is not simply “antihumanistic” (that is, it isn’t an overcoming but a simple upturning of metaphysics, and therefore an inner opposition), should compel us to think further. To this we ought to add the fact that the word *lucus* in its originary sense corresponds perfectly to the German *Lichtung*, which is precisely a keyword (if not the keyword) in Heidegger’s thought. If we now consider these two facts, we are entitled to suppose that Heidegger did not report the expression *lucus a non lucendo* as a mere and casual example; rather, it appears to have a more profound relationship with that “humanism of a particular kind.” If we persist in employing the term, this humanism refers not so much to man as “lord of beings” (PW 90) and therefore also to light as clearness simply present and guarantor of visibility, but, rather, to the essence of man as historical ek-sistence (*geschitliche Ek-sistenz*). Thus understood, the essence of man is now a living, a dwelling in the *Lichtung* of Being. Man is not lord of light, but, in his essence, is in a relationship with the luminosity of the *Lichtung*. Moreover, the expression *lucus a non lucendo* alludes to the fact that the *Lichtung* of Being is not a
mere clearness already given, but is in both essential and problematical relation with darkness, much as the Latin *lucus*. At this stage, we must consider the relation of the human *ek-sistence* with the *Lichtung* and the problematical essence of the *Lichtung* itself as *lucus a non lucendo* (two aspects which are obviously interconnected).

Already in *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger had named the opening (*Erschlossenheit*) of *Dasein* *Gelichtetheit* ("being-illuminated"), or even *Lichtung*: *Dasein*, “insofar as being-in-the-world, is luminous [gelichtet] in itself, does not receive light from another being, it is itself *Lichtung*” (SZ 133). “The being that bears the name of *Dasein* is ‘illuminated.’ The light of this being-illuminated [*Gelichtetheit*], of *Dasein* is not a force or source ontically present of a clearness [*Helligkeit*] which, by radiating outward, would appear at times in this being” (SZ 350; but see also SZ 147 and 170). *Dasein*, therefore, is “illuminated” not by the light of another *being*, but in its *being* itself. *Dasein* is the ontological being, that is, it is open with respect to its own being and the being of entities which are other than itself, since what is at stake for *Dasein*, in its own being, is this very being. The relationship with Being constitutes the essence of *Dasein* and therefore makes it possible for *Dasein* to posit—in a preontological or explicitly ontological form—the question of Being. The *Gelichtetheit* of *Dasein*, its aperture, is the “ontological view” of man insomuch as existent. It articulates itself ek-statically as temporality (SZ 408).

At this state, to the “illuminated” (gelichtet) opening of *Dasein* there corresponds the “illuminating” (lichtend) history of Being. The *Lichtung* is, at one and the same time, *Lichtung* of Being and *Lichtung* of *Dasein*, insofar as the *Dasein*, as a relationship with Being, is the locus itself of the happening [*avvento*] of the latter: the “da” in Da-sein is the *Lichtung* of Being (PW 69–72). Therefore neither is the *Lichtung* just any one place of human dwelling, nor is the withdrawing (*Entzug*) of Being insofar as relation to *Dasein* (such is the event of the *Lichtung*) something inessential to Being itself. The *Lichtung* is rather the site of the co-belonging of Being and *Dasein*: the epochal historicity of the former and the ecstatic opening of the latter not only correspond to each other, but are “the same” (*das Selbe*).

Yet man, whose essence rests within existence insofar as being-in-the-world, finds himself above all in an existentive relation with being. What is the role, in all of this, of his relation with Being? “Beyond being [ente], but not away from it, rather, in its presence, we here discover an Other. In the midst of being in its entirety, there dominates [west] an open place. There is [ist] a *Lichtung* [Chiodi translates: illumination] which, if thought as starting from the being, is more being than any being or entity [è più essente di ogni
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entent. This open Center is not, therefore, surrounded by being. On the contrary, it is this Center [disclosing-illuminating: lichtende Mitte] which, barely perceptible much like nothingness, surrounds each being” (H 41). The Lichtung is, like nothingness, different from every being and, like Being, “more being” than every being. The Lichtung is not solely the site of the Schickung, of the destination on the part of Being, but also the site of the Nichtung, of the “nullification” on the part of nothingness (see PW 112–114). These two are, for Heidegger, “the same.” The Nichtung, in fact, is neither Vernichtung (“annihilation”), nor Verneinung (“negation”): it is rather a “suspending” which at the same time harks to being in an “alienating” (befremdlich) way (see WM 34). The Nichtung of the Lichtung sets up the environment for the play of being. And yet, if thought forgets nothingness, then the beings necessarily harden into objects and their Being is subsequently conceived as constant presence and, therefore, as something which is obvious and not at all problematical. It is only through the Nichtung of nothingness that access is granted to Being as “other” from being: “Only in the clear night17 of the nothingness of anxiety there takes place the originary disclosing of the being as such: which is being, and not nothingness” (WM 34). As the nothing of being, nothingness is the horizon that cannot be objectified, the obscurity of the Lichtung in which alone it may appear.

Yet in thinking the Lichtung as the scene of being, however, we must be wary also that the originary “negativity” of its essence, which may render possible the manifestation of being, excludes at the same time the possibility of total illumination: “The open place in the middle of being, the Lichtung [Chiodi: illumination], is never a motionless scenario, with curtain constantly raised, in which the representation of being is carried out” (H 42). The ever uncertain possibility of capturing the being with the glance is based on the impossibility of embracing with the glance the Lichtung itself. For the Lichtung, as the horizon of the visibility of the being, is not itself a being which comes to the light: from this perspective it is and remains hidden (see for example VA 233 and SD 78–79). This can be understood, albeit approximately, with an image: to the Lichtung, scene of the being, there belongs a dark background [sfondo oscuro] which can never be illuminated.

The metaphysics of light never considers anything but being (Being, light, remains unthought and is actually presented as obvious; see WM 7). But if the traditional metaphysics of light is to be overcome with Heidegger’s Lichtung, the fact that the latter is never a being which comes to light should not exclude the possibility that the Lichtung announces itself in some way and that thought can consider it. We can begin to clear up the difference between Heidegger’s perspective and that of metaphysics by reiterating that
in the scene of the *Lichtung* nothing else appears but being; yet whereas metaphysical representation stops at this stage, Heidegger’s rememoration, instead, turns to the *Lichtung* also, and certainly not as immediately visible object, but rather as horizon.\(^{18}\)

How does Being announce itself in the *Lichtung*? The nothingness which displays itself within it “insofar as other than being is the veil of Being” (WM 51). In the *Lichtung* [Vattimo: aperture] there unfolds that veil which hides the essential Being [das Wesende] of every truth and that makes the veil appear insofar as that-which-hides” (VA 29). What appears in the *Lichtung* is only and always a being (see PW 75): what is present cannot be but a being. And yet insofar as being or existing [essente], being harks to Being: Being itself certainly does not appear, never does it come to light, but announces itself as difference with respect to the being that doth appear. Its “manifesting” occurs always solely as deferred “manifestability” of being: “Being withdraws while it uncovers itself in being” (H 311). What Heidegger had already described as a “suspending” (Schweben-lassen) on the part of Being in its relation to nothingness (see WM 32), is now clarified further as “an illuminating staying in itself [lichtendes Ansichhalten]” (H 311) of Being as difference with respect to being. If thought starting from the being [ente], difference is a nothing, it appears neither as a being nor as a variation [diversità] between two beings. Difference is that nothingness which “suspects” any apparent identity of being, insofar as it indicates the essential domain of its appearing, the *Lichtung*, which it allows to come forth (see US 126).\(^{19}\)

As difference which suspends, as “illuminating staying in itself,” Being is “epoché” (H 311): each world of beings appears time and again only and always “beginning with the epochal *Lichtung* of Being” (SG 143). The epochal essence of Being unveils the epochs of history (Geschichte) in which it discloses itself (schickt sich) withdrawing at the same time: “What takes place [geschieht] in the history [Geschichte] of Being? [. . .] Nothing happens, the event eventualizes [das Ereignis ereignet]. The beginning—consuming [ausstragend] the *Lichtung* [the luco]—takes on the leave-taking” (N II 485).

The Dark Light: Nature and the Sacred

Up until this point, we have interpreted Heidegger’s *Lichtung* as a *lucus a non lucendo* above all by bearing in mind the withdrawing (Entzug) of Being, a withdrawing which is at the same time relation (Bezug) with Dasein and difference with respect to Being. If even with Heidegger Being is still thought of through the image of light, it is no longer a total luminosity,
an already given clarity which is constantly present and always available, as with the traditional metaphysics of light. We are not dealing with a blinding light, but rather with a dark light, in the sense of a light which bears an essential relationship with darkness. The essence of the Lichtung, which is explicitly counterfoisted against the “light” of traditional metaphysics, is enriched with ulterior connotations by means of the “thinking conversation” which Heidegger entertains with Hölderlin’s “poetic saying.” In this way, the thinking-poetizing experience of the Lichtung becomes word, which is now turned to the experience of the sacred and nature. In the poem “Andenken” [“Remembrance,” vv. 25–27] Hölderlin exclaims:

Es reiche aber,
Des dunklen Lichtes voll,
Mir einer den duftenden Becher . . .

But someone pass me,
Full of dark light,
The fragrant cup . . .]

Heidegger comments the metaphor of the wine as dark light in a passage which we think ought to be read in its entirety because the position Heidegger assumes vis-à-vis the metaphysics of light is expressed in a particularly concise way:

The dark light does not deny clarity; rather, it is the excess of brightness which, the greater it is, denies sight all the more decisively. The all-too-flaming fire does not just blind the eyes; rather, its excessive brightness also engulfs everything that shows itself and is darker than darkness itself. Sheer brightness is a greater danger to the poet’s presentation, because the brightness leads to the illusion that in its appearance alone there can be sight. The poet asks for the gift of the dark light in which the brightness is tempered and softened. But this softening does not weaken the light of the brightness. For the darkness permits the appearance of that which conceals, and thus in its appearing preserves what is concealed within. The darkness preserves in the light the fullness of what it has to bestow in its shining appearance. The dark light of the wine does not take away awareness; rather, it lets one’s meditation pass beyond that mere illusion of clarity which is possessed by everything calculable and shallow, climbing higher
and higher toward the loftiness and nearness of the highest one. So this filled cup does not produce a stupor. Its work is not to make one inebriated, but it does nevertheless make one intoxicated. . . . This intoxication lifts one into the illuminating clarity in which the depths of the concealed are opened up and darkness appears as the sister of clarity.\textsuperscript{21}

The “dark light” is here counterpoised against the excess [\textit{Übermass}] of the \textit{Helle}, to the excessive [\textit{übergross}] luminosity which we can well identify with the total luminosity of the metaphysics of light. The über of this exceeding is in itself \textit{hubris}, presumption of the luminosity which “brings with it the appearance of guaranteeing, by itself, sight.” The dark horizon of the \textit{Lichtung} is entirely set aside by the metaphysics of light, that is to say, it is forgotten in favor of being (see WM 22–23).

This \textit{hubris} is a violation of measure, a \textit{Übermass}, a “mismeasure.” But where is the measure? Must it be thought as an absolute concept, or is it rather a relative concept since it deals with dark light, that is, with light and darkness at the same time? Is it given as an external gauge or does it rather hark to the very essence of man? These questions find an answer in the Heideggerian comment to certain passages of Hölderlin’s “In lieblicher Bläue.”\textsuperscript{22} Man’s ek-sistence, his “poetic dwelling,” is, according to Heidegger, a “measuring” [\textit{Vermessen}] the “dimension” [\textit{Dimension}] assigned [\textit{zugemessen}] to him, that is to say, the in-between of earth and sky (see VA 188).\textsuperscript{23} The measure for the measuring of man (in which his poetic dwelling is fulfilled) is the manner in which the god that remains hidden reveals himself in that which is foreign to it, in the sky: “The appearing of the Godhead through the sky consists in an unveiling that lets what is hiding be seen, but it doesn’t let it be seen insofar as it attempts to pull that which is hidden from its concealment, but rather only insofar as it guards the hidden in its concealing” (VA 191). This concealing by unveiling, which we have already encountered as the withdrawing of Being as difference with respect to being—that is to say, as a peculiarity of the \textit{Lichtung, lucus a non lucendo} of human dwelling—constitutes now the measure of the poetic dwelling of man, a measure which is not immediately given and promptly available precisely because it is not a yardstick already illuminated and safely placed, but rather harks to the play of light and darkness, a playing in which the essence (\textit{Wesen}) of man as the dwelling in the \textit{Lichtung} is necessarily co-involved: \textit{nulli est certa domus, lucis habitamus opacis}. In Hölderlin’s language: there is no measure on earth, because the earth in its essence is determined by the poetic and “measuring” (\textit{mass-nehmend}) dwelling of man, a dwelling which, moreover,
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looks toward the sky. “But the sky is not pure light. The glory of its heights is in itself the obscurity of its amplitude which contains all. The blue of the sweet azure of the sky is the color of depth. The splendor of the sky is the rising and the setting of the crepuscule which hosts [birgt] everything that can become known. This sky is the measure” (VA 195). The fact that human ek-sistence, inasmuch as it consists in this taking-measure (*Mass-nehmen*), is poetic is what determines further still the essence of man as a dwelling in the *Lichtung*. In fact, both “dimension” and “measure”—the two keywords of the essay “Dichterisch wohnet der Mensch”—can be considered ulterior attempts toward clarifying certain essential characteristics of the *Lichtung: dimension* insofar as “lighted-open” [*gelichtet*] (VA 189),24 insofar as locus of the in-between, that is, inasmuch as new name for difference, whose relationship to *Lichtung* has already been pointed out; and *measure* insofar as unveiling (*Entbergen*) which harks at the same time to a concealing (*Verborgenheit*).

Is it possible to better determine the place of this unveiling while concealing, locus which we saw cannot ever be fully captured by a glance? Heidegger describes it thus: “Everything which, in the sky and therefore under the sky and here on earth, shines and flourishes, resounds and smells, climbs and draws near, but also all that moves away and falls, that laments and stays silent, that pales and darkens” (VA 194). The description corresponds perfectly to what we usually call “nature.” But “nature” here does not mean “a particular dominion of being” (EH 56), but alludes to Being itself. In the word “nature” (from the Latin *nascor* = to be born) there is still a trace of the Greek *physis* which originally meant “to come forth to the light” [*Hervorgehen*] and the rising [*Aufgehen*], the disclosing [*Sichöffnen*] which while rising returns [*zurückgeht*] at the same time in its coming toward the light [*Hervorgang*], and thus encloses itself in that which time and again lets a being [*Anwesendes*] be present [*gibt die Anwesung*]” (ibid.). Thought of as the Greeks did, *physis* is a springing which at the same time harks to a closing up on itself, an unveiling which needs a concealing (see VA 263). To this alludes Heraclitus’ fragment 123, which Heidegger translates as: “The revealing loves to hide” (VA 262). Thought the Greek way, the *physis* corresponds to Heidegger’s *Lichtung, lucus a non lucendo*: “Physis is the rising of the *Lichtung* [of the luco] with its glimmer and thus the hearth and dwelling of light” (EH 56). As a word for Being itself and not for a realm of being, the *physis* is life itself in the sense of the Greek verb *ζήν*, which “denotes the rise in the lighted-open [*in das Lichte*]” (VA 266).

By the same token, ζα- is not a mere amplifier (= “much”), but rather “it means the pure allowing-to-rise” (ibid.). Heidegger recalls in this context the adjective ζάδεος, which Pindar uses for sacred places of nature (moun-
tains, prairies, and river banks): “Those places are particularly sacred because they arise exclusively in their letting the resplendent appear” (ibid.). The \textit{Lichtung}, much like the \textit{lucus}, is the \textit{Ortschaft}, the “locality” which gathers those places (\textit{Orte}).

To want to tag with the epithet of “pantheism” this poetic-thinking experience of the \textit{Lichtung}—“nature” and “sacred site”—would be misleading because nature thus experienced is “above the gods [\textit{Über die Götter},]” as Hölderlin says,\textsuperscript{25} and Heidegger underscores: “She, the ‘powerful one,’ has in its power something other with respect to the gods: in nature alone, insofar as \textit{Lichtung} [\textit{luco}], each thing can be present” (EH 59). It is in this sense that nature is sacred: “The sacred is the essence of nature. Inasmuch as it turns into day, nature reveals its essence in reawakening.”

The \textit{Lichtung} is the sacred dimension of the giving-presence (\textit{Anwesen-lassen}) (a letting-presence-be which is a withdrawing unconcealing)\textsuperscript{26}:

What is highest, “above all light,” is the very opening for any stream of light. This pure opening which first “imparts,” that is, grants, the opening to every “space” and to every “temporal space,” we call gaiety [\textit{die Heitere}] according to an old word of our mother tongue. At one and the same time, it is the clarity (claritas) in whose brightness everything clear rests, and the grandeur (serenitas) in whose strength everything high stands, and the merriment (hilaritas) in whose play everything liberated sways. Gaiety preserves and holds everything within what is safe and sound. Gaiety heals fundamentally. It is the holy.\textsuperscript{27}

The fact that the \textit{Lichtung}, in its sacredness, is “beyond light” means also that it is “more originary” then light itself: “It is never light [\textit{Licht}] that creates originally the \textit{Lichtung}: instead it is the former, light [\textit{Licht}], that presupposes the latter, the \textit{Lichtung}” (SD 72).

\textit{Lichtung} and “Un-concealing”

Heidegger attempts to overcome the traditional metaphysics of light not simply by refuting the metaphor with which Being, truth, and God have been thought, but rather by developing it. If at an earlier stage Being and the supreme being, the godhead, have been thought by means of the metaphor of light as constant presence, Heidegger now turns to the \textit{Lichtung}, that is, to that originary and conflictual dimension whose luminosity is defined by the horizon that \textit{birgt} it (surrounds, hides, and protects it). More origi-
nary than the light of Being is, for Heidegger, the Lichtung of the event of Being (Seinsgeschehen), that is, the withdrawing (Entzug) of Being insofar as relation (Bezug) to the essence of man and difference (Differenz) with respect to the being. The Lichtung as un concealing-concealing (entbergend-verbergende) dimension of the sacred is, for Heidegger, more originary than the light of the godhead.

But what about the light of truth? In this case, also, the Lichtung is a more originary dimension, within which alone something like the truth can be given. And this in a more profound sense with respect to the light of Being and the light of god because the very essence of truth as aletheia as coming from hiddenness into unhiddenness, that is, as a coming-to-light which is in essential relation with darkness, is the essence of the Lichtung itself.

Already in Sein und Zeit Heidegger interprets the Greek word aletheia as a “term which expresses privation” (SZ 222), that is, as a-letheia, Unverborgenheit, the “un-concealing” which harks at the same time to hiddenness. As a result, the essence of truth (which in the word “truth,” Wahrheit, remains hidden) is expressed primarily by the Being-open (Erschlossenheit) of being-there, or Dasein, by its being-illuminated, and secondarily by the being-uncovered (Entdecktheit) of the being, by its getting-illuminated.

The Erschlossenheit of the Dasein and the Entdecktheit of the being are then called by Heidegger also (and respectively) Offenständigkeit, “being-open,” and Offenbarkeit, “being-manifest” (see WW 11ff.) These are two co-originary and reciprocal moments of a single event: the Dasein is open (offenständig) insofar as it lets itself be involved by the being, inasmuch as it opens up to experience. The being is manifest (offenbar) insofar as it is accessible to Dasein, inasmuch as it shows itself to it. Yet both Offenständigkeit and Offenbarkeit, insofar as they are essential determinations, hark back to a third, the open (das Offene) of the Lichtung. The disclosure of Dasein, insofar as it is a “letting-[one]-be-[co]involved” (Scheinlassen) by the being, is in its essence a “letting-be (Seinlassen) of the being” (WW 15). We are not dealing here merely with an ontic relation, but with an ontological rapport: insofar as letting-be, the “letting-be-involved” does not refer only to the being, but instead and primarily to Being, that is, “to the open and its aperture in which each being finds itself, brought so to speak by the same aperture. This open has been conceived by Western thought at its beginning as ta aletheia, the un-concealed” (WW 16) in which alone something can be given: this dimension of reference is the Lichtung of Being. “The name of this Lichtung [Galimberti: light] is aletheia” (WW 29).

More than Wahrheit (“truth”), Lichtung is the appropriate “translation” of aletheia as the dimension of “un-concealing” which is produced beginning with the concealing: an experience which gave the tone to the thinking of the
first Greek sophoi. 28 Yet in order to “translate” the word *aletheia*, in all its richness, with *Lichtung*, we must consider a few more things. If the *Lichtung* is the site, the dimension of the event of truth (*Wahrheitsgeschehen*) as the happening of presence (*Anwesensgeschehen*), it cannot however be thought of as a place already given: rather, it maintains the verbal sense of *lichten*, it is the opening up of an open. To this is connected the essential relation of darkness and light (of hiddenness and unveiling) because the *Lichtung* alludes to a coming-to-light beginning with an irreducible darkness which protects, hides, and surrounds (that is, in a word, *birgt*). Both aspects can be thought in the expression *lucus a non lucendo* if considered not so much in the sense of its etymological derivation, but rather in that of the essential origin of *lucus*. The two conditions which Heidegger posits (VA 265) in order to be able to substitute to τὸ μὴ δὴνόνποτε (“that which never sets”) of Heraclitus’ fragment 16 the expression τὸ ἀεὶ φύον (“that which always rises”), expression which is finally translated with *Lichtung*, are the same under which we can think the *Lichtung* as *lucus a non lucendo*: we must think the *lucus* beginning with the darkness (*lucus a non lucendo*) and in a verbal sense (*lucus, a non lucendo*).

Typical of metaphysics, the metaphor of light is therefore inadequate to express the essence of the *Lichtung* even when the light is not thought as clarity already given and always available, but as an illuminating. In fact, “the illuminating-open [*Lichten*] is not a pure clearing up [*Erhellen*] and illuminating [*Belichten*]” (VA 269). It also brings forth to the open (*bringt ins Freie*) 29 and this not in the sense that it situates something already present in a free (*frei*) place already given, but rather in the sense that the *Lichtung* itself is the opening up of the free and luminous open of the event of truth as the event of presence. “The *Lichten*, the illuminating-opening, is thus more than the simple clearing up [*Erhellen*], and also more than the giving free space to something [*Freilegen*]. The illuminating-opening is the thoughtful-gathering pro-ducing [*Vor-bringen*] in the freedom of the open [*ins-Freie*], it is the conceding of presence” (VA 268). The *Lichtung* not only clears up that which is present, but above all reunites it and hosts it (*birgt*), leading it to presence” (VA 270).

Thinking which recalls the *Lichtung* as *aletheia*, un-concealing, “overcomes” the metaphor of truth in metaphysics by thinking it “more origi-narily,” that is, by bringing it back to its unthought essential origin. That is why “*aletheia*, the non-hiddenness, the un-veiling [*Unverborgenheit*] in the sense of the *Lichtung* of the clearing in the Open, cannot be made to coincide with truth [*Wahrheit*]. Rather, it is only the *Aletheia*, the unveiling thought as *Lichtung* that accords [*gewhären*] the possibility of truth [*Wahrheit*]. As with Being and thinking, truth itself can only be that which is in the element
of the Lichtung, in the clearing of the Open” (SD 76). So with the aletheia: the un-concealing is “more” than truth, since it discloses, as Lichtung, the dimension in which alone something like the truth can be given.

To consider the Lichtung, that is, the aletheia in its originary sense, as lucus a non lucendo, entails emphasizing the meaning of darkness, that is, of mystery [Geheimnis]. Mystery is neither “a particular mystery,” nor and more simply a limit, but rather “that sole mystery (the hiddenness of what is hidden) which in general penetrates and dominates as such the being-there of man” (WW 21). As a dimension which penetrates and reigns over human existence, however, mystery is also the source of every unveiling: it “calls us forth to what is to be thought,” it being “nothing more than what constitutes the Being [das Wesende] of what we attempt to suggest with the term die Lichtung” (VA 272). Precisely insofar as hidden, mystery remains “that which frees” (VA 29) inasmuch as it guards every possibility of ulterior unveilings. The human attitude which conforms to it is “the disclosure for mystery” (G 24): the predisposition to let oneself be involved by that which we encounter each time.

Mystery is called by Heidegger also “non-essence” [Un-wesen] of truth as its “pre-essential essence [vorwesendes Wesen]” (WW 21). Since mystery penetrates and dominates the Lichtung, man moves in it “by erring [in die Irre]” (WW 24), in the sense that he is always on the way toward something and that every unveiling implies a hiding (whether “preceding” or “simultaneous”). The Lichtung of truth is thus penetrated and dominated by a double hiding: “Truth is-present [west] precisely as itself, to the degree in which the hiding negation [das verbergende Verweigern], insofar as refusal [Versagen], confers to each Lichtung its constant provenance; and insofar as simulation [Verstellen] assigns to it the irremediable presence of the erring” (H 43). In order to underscore this essential relationship of the un-concealing with concealing, Heidegger asserts rather audaciously: “Truth, in its very essence, is non-truth” (ibid.), which has subsequently been reformulated in the following terms: the Agon is “the heart of the aletheia” (SD 78).

The Neighborhood of the Lichtung and the Holzwege of Interpretation

We have thus far tried to sketch some essential aspects of the Lichtung as lucus a non lucendo by considering the metaphoric field of light and darkness. Heidegger’s Lichtung seems to be an attempt to “overcome” the metaphysics of light by thinking it in a more originary way, since the Lichtung, with
its verbal and ambivalent essence, is that more originary dimension within which alone can shine the light of Being, the light of the sacred, and the light of truth.

But the words Lichtung, lichten, do not belong exclusively to the semantic field of light (this in fact was not even immediately evident), but also to the lexicon of silviculture, which we have not yet considered. In one of his last essays, Heidegger goes as far as to hold that the verb lichten, the base for the noun Lichtung, means “to make licht (‘luminous’ but also ‘sparse’)” but more in the sense of “making light (leicht) [i.e., less ‘heavy’],” that is, free and open, than in the sense of “making clear (hell)” (see SD 72). With this he means certainly to emphasize “the difference between Lichtung, clearing, and Licht, light” (SD 72), and therefore also the difference between his “metaphor of the Lichtung” and the metaphysical (“Platonic”) metaphor of light: “No aspect [Aussehen] without light: Plato knew it well. Yet there is no light [Licht] or possible luminosity [Helle] without the Lichtung” (SD 74). This difference is due also to the fact that the metaphysics of light has always championed the “extraordinary primacy of ‘seeing’” (SD 171), whereas Heidegger ends with underscoring ever more strongly that the essential aspect of his rememorating is constituted by listening (see US 175–176). Thus the “Lichtung, the clearing, the open, is free not only for its light and darkness, but also for the echo and its waning, for every sound and its fading” (SD 72).

The very characterization of the Lichtung as “the place of calmness [Ort der Stille]” (SD 75) recalls the “sound of quietness [Geläut der Stille] (US 30, 215–216), that “gathering with a silent call” (US 215) which is the essence of language (Wesen des Sprache) as language of essence (Sprache des Wesens).

The fact that the semantic field of Lichtung is related to the semantic field of silviculture brings us to the nexus Lichtung-language-hermeneutics. We have seen how the lucus, with its relative density and darkness, is defined in contraposition to the silva that surrounds it. The same is valid for the Lichtung: “The clearing in the forest [Waldlichtung] is experienced in the contrast with the forest there where it is most thick, called in the ancient German language Dickung (the thick of the forest)” (SD 72). To begin with, the wood can be seen as an image for the Geworfenheit (the “being-thrown”) of the Dasein, that is to say, for the irreducibility of that dark horizon which every human experience implies. The thinking which takes place here is never external objectification because the thinker is always already co-involved with Being. The awareness of the ontological co-involvement determines the manner in which the question of Being is posited in Sein und Zeit, which as we know is through the question of existence. In this work what takes place at the same time is an Auflockerung (SZ 22) which smoothens over by means
of connections and relations what metaphysics had hardened into substances, that is, what metaphysics had thought in terms of a place which was not a *Lichtung*, but a petrified forest of lifeless beings, fixed as entities and never thought of as living beings.

A thinking which is conscious of the ontological-existential co-involve-
ment offers no external, stable, and secure observation point, but is instead
distinguished by an essential viability (*Weghaftigkeit*). What are the traits
of such a thinking and in what rapport are they with the wood and the *Licht-
zung*? Heidegger writes: “Holz is an ancient word to say ‘wood.’ In the wood
[Holz] there are paths [Wege] which, often covered with grass, suddenly end
in the thicket. They are called Holzwege. . . . Woodcutters and forest guards
know them well. They know what it means ‘to find oneself on a path which,
by ending, swerves off [auf einem Holzweg zu sein]’ ” (H 3).

The Holzwege, however, are not errant pathways (Irrwege) in the nega-
tive sense of the word, neither are they paths that lead nowhere. Indeed they
do have a destination: the heart of the wood, there where they end. This
heart of the wood is nothing but the *Lichtung*. It is not an external arrival
point, a faraway place which one reaches after having left his own place of
residence, but rather a place always already near and which nevertheless can
be seen only rarely and suddenly, penetrating in the deep of the forest.

If Heidegger’s thought is a way, it is not a “way toward . . .,” but a “way
in . . .” : the way “in the [in die] neighborhood of Being” (PW 93). This means
first of all that man finds himself always already, in his essence, in relation
with Being: the movement here is not so much a dislocation [*spostamento]*
as it is a deepening [*approfondimento*]. Secondly, the way as “way in . . .”
is not something inessential, as a mere means for the attaining of an end.
Rather, the destination is so to speak in the way itself: “What remains constant
in thinking is movement” (US 99). This brings us to the essential belonging
of the way to the neighborhood (*Gegend*) “which is its real name, because it
discloses and offers [*gegenet*] that which must be thought by thinking. Think-
ing stays in this region or neighborhood by walking its paths. Here the way
is part of the neighborhood” (US 179). The movement (Bewegung) in the
neighborhood harks to the Bewegung of the neighborhood, that is, to its open-
ung up pathways. The ways are opened “by clearing” the wood, which is thus
gelichtet. This opening and freeing is another image for the *Lichtung* itself in
its manifold aspects, as the activity of thinning out, rendering untrammeled
and clarifying, as well as of the co-belonging of light and darkness, of unveil-
ing and concealing: “Said in an allusive manner, the neighborhood [*Gegend*],
inasmuch as it is that which sets-against [*das Gegnende*], is the disclosing
[freigehend] *Lichtung* [luco] in which what is illuminated [*das Gelichtete*]
reaches the open [ins Freie] together with what is hiding. This disclosing closing [das Freigehend-Bergende] of the neighborhood is that ‘setting movement’ [Bewegung] in which the ways [Wege] are given which are part of the neighborhood” (US 197).

The ‘setting’ [be-wëgend] region of the Lichtung, insofar as a “web of relations in which we ourselves already are implicated” (US 242–243), is a new description of what Heidegger had already theorized under the title of “hermeneutic circle.” Thinking ought neither to prescind from nor remove this web, rather, it must learn to situate itself within it, finding its own proper place (ibid.). Concerning the hermeneutic circle he had already stated: “What’s important is not leaving the circle, but staying inside of it in the right way” (SZ 153). This takes place in the measure in which we learn to “dwell” in language (see US 38). In fact, the fundamental character of the hermeneutic experience is its linguisticality: language is here a “means” not so much in the sense of an instrument, but rather in that of an element, of a dimension of interpretation and of communication. The hermeneutic circle is circumscribed by language: “All the pathways of thought lead, more or less consciously, in an unusual way through language” (VA 9). In our relation with language we experience this ontological co-involvement on which the hermeneutic circle is grounded: “We cannot circumscribe language [das Sprachwesen] with the glance owing to the fact that—being able to say only by saying-again the originary Saying [inden wir die Sage nachsagen]—we ourselves fall under its dominion” (US 255). As a circumscribing and enabling horizon, yet not circumscribable itself by the glance, language itself, in its essence (Wesen), is what “unfolds” (west) in the Lichtung: “Originary Saying [die Sage] dominates and composes in unity the free openness of that Lichtung (US 257) which is the scene of the presence of absence.”

What are the traits of this thinking which speaks (spricht) insofar as it co-responds (ent-spricht) to the Lichtung, which recalls (andenkt) the Lichtung? It is not a matter of explication, of total illumination, or rather of removing darkness, a gesture which would lose the truth itself of what may be illuminated (the lucus conlucatus is no longer a lucus!). It is rather a matter of a thinking related to that “measuring” poetizing of which we already know that “it gathers into one the clarity and the resounding of heavenly phenomena with the darkness and the silence of what is strange” (VA 195). It does not remove, but rather it preserves the darkness which, on its part, “preserves for the luminosity [dem Lichten] the fullness of what it can give in its radiant appearing” (EH 119).

Therefore in much the same way in which the metaphysics of light understands itself as “Aufklärung” (“illumination,” “enlightenment”), so the thinking which recalls the “Lichtung” understands itself as “Erörterung”
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(“interpretation,” but literally “collocation”), in the sense of a con-location (Er-örterung). The con-location “indicates” and “observes the place [Ort].” The place, on its part, insofar as it is “what reunites, brings and guards what it has drawn to itself, but not in the way of a coffer, but rather in a way which allows it to penetrate with its own light, giving it thus the possibility to unfold itself in its true being” (US 37). Understood as Er-örterung, interpretation situates the said in the not-said. By doing this, it does not obscure the said (we are not dealing here with an “obscurantist” opposition to the Enlightenment), but instead illuminates it, albeit in a singular manner, that is, by situating it in its possibility, or otherwise said, in the dark dimension of reference which protects it. The place (Ort) of this “interpretation” (Erörterung) in which light and darkness meet in such a way, is the Lichtung as lucus a non lucendo.

Notes

1. This text is the translation, modified and with some additions, of my article “Heidegger’s Lichtung als lucus a (non) lucendo,” published in Philosophisches Jahrbuch 110, no. 1 (1983). I should like to thank Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann and Ute Guzzoni for their invaluable advice, Thomas Bussalb for his productive comments, and Andrea Aragosti for his very valuable philological insights.

2. Heidegger’s writings will heretofore be indicated directly in my text according to the following abbreviations:

SZ = Sein und Zeit (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1972) (12th ed.).
WW = Vom Wesen der Wahrheit (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1976) (6th ed.).
WM = Was ist Metaphysik (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1969) (10th ed.)
H = Holzwege (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1952) (2nd ed.)
EH = Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1972) (4th ed.)
SG = Der Satz vom Grund (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1958) (2nd ed.)
G = Gelassenheit (Pfullingen: Neske, 1959) (5th ed.)
SD = Zur Sache des Denkens (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1976) (2nd ed.)
VS = Vier Seminare (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1977).

I have often modified the extant Italian translations of the above works. Also, I have often reproduced, in brackets, words and expressions from the original German, and written the terms “being” and “there-being” in lowercase even when the Italian
translators use uppercase [in the English, essere is rendered with “Being,” esserci with “Dasein,” enti with “beings” or, alternatively, with “entities”; see Translator’s Note in the introduction to this volume]. Finally, concerning the term Lichtung, I felt it was appropriate to substitute the German with expressions deriving from the Italian translations (all of which are legitimate and intelligent), because if it is the very notion of Lichtung which is questioned in the present essay, the translation also is subject to the same questioning, especially insofar as there is no general agreement among the Italian translators of Heidegger (which may have contributed, incidentally, to the obscurity of this notion in Heidegger’s thought). Chiodi translates Lichtung almost always with illuminazione [“illumination” or “enlightening”], Caracciolo and Caracciolo Perotti always with radura luminosa [“bright clearing”], or apertura illuminata [“lighted opening”], or even slargo [“clearing”], Mazzarella translates with radura [“clearing” as in a forest], though more frequently he leaves the German term. Personally I feel that, on the basis of what I will be developing in these pages, the term Lichtung can be felicitously rendered with the Latinism luco (which may sound somewhat “heavy”) and so I have adopted it (always within brackets) in the Heideggerian passages which I have translated myself.

3. Heidegger does not purport that his own thinking is antithetical to (the) metaphysics of light: the Überwindung, the overcoming which he pursues is more like a Verwindung, and “acceptance-deepening” (VA 68) or a Auflockerung (“fluidification” SZ 22) of the language and of the thought of metaphysics, as takes place here precisely with the Lichtung. Heidegger attempts to rethink the metaphysics of light starting from its dark foundation, to recall the non-ontic source of light (in which metaphysics captures the entity) precisely insofar as that fount is not itself an entity. Metaphysics, in fact, “thinks being insofar as being. Whenever it asks what being is, it is the being [l’essente] as such that surges on the horizon: such metaphysical representing is possible only thanks to the light of Being. Light, or whatever such a thinking experiences as light, no longer comes within the horizon of this thinking” (WM 7). The task of a thinking which goes beyond metaphysics does not consist in making this light (as if it were a being, an entity) an object of sight, but in recalling its obscure origin.

On the traditional metaphysics of light (especially in Aristotle and in Hegel), and on its overcoming in Heidegger, see Werner Marx, Heideggers und die Tradition (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1961), especially 63ff. and 148ff.; and, by the same author, “Das Denken und seine Sache,” in Heidegger, Freiburger Universitätsvorträge zu seinem Gedenken (Freiburg-Munchen: Alber, 1955), especially 25ff.

The relationship between the metaphysics of light in Schelling and Heidegger’s Lichtung would deserve a separate study. See in this context Heidegger’s text on Schellinges Abhandlung über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit (1809) (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1971).

4. On what follows, see Friedrich Kluge, Etymologische Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1921), and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Deutsches Wörterbuch (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1854), entries “Lichtung” and “lichten.”

5. See these entries in Matthias Lexer, Mitterhochdeutsche Handwörterbuch (Leipzig: 1872–1878 [now Stuttgart: Hirzel, 1992]).
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7. We could even go back further, to the Greek root λευχ-, and from that to the Indo-European *loka*-. An inquiry into the semantic field of *lokah-* would be of great interest for our theme inasmuch as this term not only designates the sacred wood, but is also a keyword of the *antichissima cosmologia indiana* (translatable with “space,” “world,” and “sky”). See Jan Gonda, *Loka: World and Heaven in the Veda* (Amsterdam: N.V. Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1966).

8. See also Ernout-Meillet, *Dict. etym. de la langue lat.*, and Daremberg-Saglio, *Dict. des antiquites grecques et romaines*, “Le bois sacré était aussi une clarière dans un bois.”

9. All this is well expressed by the Latin *saepio*, whose manifold semantic connotations cannot be rendered by any one Italian term, whereas the German can use, in this instance, the verb *bergen*, a verb which, incidentally, is widely employed by Heidegger (together with its compound *entbergen*, and *verbergen*, from which we also get *Entbergung* and *Verbergung*, *Verborgenheit* and *Unverborgenheit*) precisely with reference to the *Lichtung*.

10. The issue whether these grammarians were scientifically correct is not crucial for our purposes here. Their etymological considerations are mentioned primarily for their cultural interest as “reflections” on language often rich in philosophical implications.


13. History is *Geschichte* in the sense of *Schickung*, “destination,” and of *Geschick*, “destiny.”

14. After *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger employs the word *Lichtung* (with which he had designated the opening of *Dasein*) for Being itself (see PW 76–77). As a first approximation, this may be explained as a shift in emphasis on Heidegger’s part after the *Kehre* from the ontological-existential analytic to the rememoration of Being: in other words, in the relationship between *Dasein* and Being, which stands for the “thing” itself in Heidegger’s thought, the emphasis is shifted from the *Dasein* to *Being*. This explanation runs the risk of being understood as though *Dasein* and Being are two beings which stand next to one another, but that would mean losing track of the essential question, which is that Being is not a being, and that *Dasein* is not one being among others, but is related, in its being, to Being itself.

15. See for example SG 146: “Insofar as destined to Being, within the destiny of Being, we are, owing precisely to our essence, in a *Lichtung* [luco] of Being. Yet we do not stay in this *Lichtung* [luco] as someone who happened to be there by chance without being called [unangesprochen], but, rather, we stay in it as reclaimed [in Anspruch genommen] by the Being of being.”
16. See for example SG 157: “The destiny (Geschick) of Being remains in itself the essential history [Wesengeschichte] of Western man, to the degree in which historical [geschichtlich] man ‘serves’ [gebraucht ist] for that dwelling which is a building the Lichtung [laco] of Being. Insofar as predetermined [geschickhaft] withdrawing [Entzug] Being is already in itself relationship [Bezug] with the essence of man.”

17. Notice this oxymoronic expression, which goes back to Hölderlin, in the first line of “Heimkumft.” In recalling the Lichtung as Lucas a non lucendo, Heidegger’s thought must of necessity entrust itself to this oxymoronic language, which names together light and obscurity (see further down the expression “dark light”). On the night as “clear night,” see also VA 195: “The night itself is shadow, that dusk [jenes Dunkle] which cannot ever become pure and simple darkness [Finsternis] because insofar as it is shadow it will always be intimately light and by light projected.” The shadow is not therefore “the manifest though mysterious testimony of hidden illumination [Leuchten]” (H 104, n. 13).

18. To speak of “horizon” can be easily misleading if the horizon is thought of “in terms of the objects and of our representing [Vorstellen] and only in view of the objects and of our representing,” without “yet at all experiencing that which makes the horizon what it is” (G 37). Conceived solely in view of the being, the horizon “is nothing but the face turned toward us of an open which surrounds us” (ibid.). The luminous scene of the Lichtung, wherein takes place for us the representation of the being, is surrounded by a wood which is larger and darker, that is, by a neighborhood [contrada] which contains at the same time the Lichtung and us. It is for this reason that Heidegger chooses the word “neighborhood” (Gegend) or the ancient Gegnet in the sense of a “permanent stretch which, by gathering everything, opens itself up, so that in it the open is kept [gehalten] and pushed [angehalten] to let everything come forth in its stillness” (G 40) in order to name that for which the horizon, in its essence, harks to. On the neighborhood as Lichtung see further down.

19. Just as we saw with the word “horizon” in the preceding note, so with the word “difference” there is risk of falling into a circle of metaphysical representations. Being as difference with respect to being [l’ente] is ultimately always determined in terms of being, even though in a negative way. This may explain why the later Heidegger seems to take his distance from difference as a “metaphysical configuration” (SD 36) and, at the same time, from Being, in order to turn to the Ereignis. Although this taking leave entails the renunciation to the overcoming of metaphysics—and therefore to “let go of metaphysics and leave it to itself [vom Uberwinden abzulassen und die Metaphysik sich sebst zu uberlassen]” (SD 25)—the “task of thinking” remains nevertheless that of searching for the “not-said” of the metaphysical metaphor of light, that is to say, what remains “to be asked is what the metaphorical reference to light wants to mean, without yet being able to” (SD 50). As the “not-thought” of the metaphysics of light, the Lichtung remains the “thing” (Sache) of thinking.

On these radical consequences of Heidegger’s thought, see my article “Il problema dell’essere da ‘Sein und Zeit’ a ‘Zeit und Sein’” [The problem of Being from ‘Sein und Zeit’ to ‘Zeit und Sein’], Theoria 10 (1981), where they are discussed also with reference to Gianni Vattimo’s proposal for a “weak ontology.”
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21. Ibid., 141–142. [It should be noted that, to best follow Amoroso’s reading, certain German terms had been rendered differently in the Italian translation, for instance, Helle, rendered with “brightness” by Hoeller, is chiarore in Italian, more like “dim light, glimmer”; Schein is here rendered with “illusion,” but the Italian term for it is apparenza or “appearance.” Trans.]

22. . . . Ist unbekannt Gott?
Ist er offenbar wie der Himmel? Dieses
Glaub’ich eher. Des Menschen Maas ist’s.
Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch, wohnet
Der Mensch auf dieser Erde (lines 29–33)

[Is God unknown? / Is he manifest as the sky? This / I rather believe. That is the measure of man. / Full of merit, yet poetically, dwells / man on this earth.]

23. This “counterposition” of earth and sky had already been called by Heidegger “counterposition [Gegeneinander] of the originary struggle” of “Earth” and “World” (H 43). Such a struggle is nothing but the play of light and darkness, of unveiling and covering up in the disclosure of the Lichtung. “To the Opening belong the World and the Earth. But the World is not only the Opening, corresponding to the Lichtung, and the Earth is not only the closed, corresponding to the concealing [. . .] World and earth are always, and by virtue of their very essence, in contraposition and struggling [streitig und streibar]. Only as such can they find their location in the struggle of Lichtung and concealing.” The struggle of sky and earth (or, in Holzwege, of World and Earth) harks therefore to the “conflictual” (strittig) essence of the Lichtung. But it is not solely an opposition between two elements, but rather a fourfold opposition, Geviert in which unity is the “illuminating” event of the world (see VA 173; on 268 we read: “The event (Ereignis) of the Lichtung is the world”). Yet within the “simplicity” of the fourfold, the Lichtung as the play between light and darkness harks primarily to the sky, as we shall see. See in this context VA 171: “The sky is the path of the sun, the phases of the moon, the splendor of the stars, the seasons of the year, the light of day and its setting, the darkness and clearness of the night, favorable as well as adverse weather, the racing of the clouds and the deep azure of the ether” (emphasis added).

24. On the relationship between the diametrically measurable dimension (durchmessbare Dimension) and the Lichtung, see also SD 15ff., and SD 73.

25. Wie wenn am Feiertage . . .
Jetzt aber tagts! Ich harrt und sah es kommen,
Und was ich sah, das Heilige sei mein Wort.
Denn sie, sie selbst, die älter denn die Zeiten
Und über die Götter des Abends und Orients ist,
Die Natur ist jetzt mit Waffenklang erwacht . . .
(lines 19–23)

[But now it is day! I tremble while I see it coming / let what I saw, the sacred, be my word. / Because she, she herself, who is more ancient than time / and above the Gods of East and West, / nature with sonorous arms is now awakened . . .]
26. This poetic-thinking experience of the sacred certainly evidences many similarities with mysticism and negative theology (see for example SD 51), which after all know and understand the metaphor of the dark light very well. From Heidegger’s perspective, however, mysticism remains prisoner of metaphysics in the way it represents things. Without getting into any details, let us note that Heidegger’s Lichtung is decisively different not only from the pure luminosity of the metaphysics of light, but also from the mystical experience of the illumination and blindness (think for instance of the noche oscura of Juan de la Cruz).

27. Heidegger, Elucidations, 37. [Once again, it should be noted that in the Italian version of Heidegger’s text, das Heilege is rendered not with the equivalent of “holy,” but with sacro, literally, “sacred,” and die Heitere with dimensione serena, which is different from “gaiety.” Trans.]

28. A trace of the ambivalent essence of this experience of the aletheia can be found in the Platonic myth of the cave. “In more general terms, this ‘myth’ can be constructed as ‘myth of the cave’ only because it is from the beginning determined also by the fundamental experience (obvious to the Greeks) of the aletheia, the unveiling of the being” (PW 3).

29. It is in the sense of this “bringing out into the open, in free space” (Ins-Freie-Bringen) that freedom (Freiheit) is, for Heidegger, “the essence [Wesen] of truth” (WW 13ff.) as the opening of Being toward the open. On the relationship Lichtung—truth, see also VA 28–29.

30. In the Italian translation the main phrase of this passage is missing, probably owing to a typographic error.

31. Heidegger adds: “The statement that the essence of truth is non-truth does not . . . mean that truth is ultimately falsity” (H 43). Fundamental, authentic non-truth, as a mystery which pervades, reigns and “starts up” (be-wëgt) is something other than falsity, it is a much more originary phenomenon. As such it is certainly also the ontological condition of the possibility of falsity and of every “ontic” non-truth, but it is precisely solely the condition of their possibility. In some passages, however, Heidegger seems prone to hold that authentic non-truth (or mystery) bears with it not only the possibility but also the necessity of every “ontic” non-truth, so that the darkness of the Lichtung would end up not only surrounding the light, but nearly swallowing it up. The Heideggerian overcoming of the metaphysics of light in the sense of the rememoration of the Lichtung—which is not properly speaking in opposition to “Enlightenment” metaphysics in the sense of obscurantism—runs thus the danger of being misunderstood (or willingly abused) precisely in that sense.

32. Even with respect to the doubts expressed in the previous note, it is interesting to observe that Heidegger has reassessed, a few years later, this statement: it is not the Δηθη, but the το εόν which is “the heart that trembles not” of the Parmenidean aletheia (see for example VS 133ff.).

33. For a reading of Heidegger emphasizing the problems of language and hermeneutics, see Gianni Vattimo, Essere, storia e linguaggio in Heidegger (Turin: Edizioni di “Filosofia,” 1963), especially 105–197. A re-elaboration and development
of the hermeneutic moment in Heidegger is to be found in the by now classic work of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

34. One need only think of the titles of Heidegger’s writings: Holzwege, Unterwegs zu Sprache, Wegmarken, among others. On the essential “journeying” of Heidegger’s hermeneutic thought as the “topology of Being,” see Otto Pöggeler, Der Denkweg Martin Heidegger (Pfullingen: Neske, 1963).

35. See the correspondence between Heidegger and Pietro Chiodi, the Italian translator of Holzwege, to which Chiodi himself refers in his Presentation, ix–xi. Among other things, Chiodi relates that “Heidegger refutes (on January 29, 1963) Sentieri senza meta [i.e., Paths without a destination] as a possible title in Italian for his book, because, he argues, the Holzweg does have a destination, which is precisely the heart of the wood where one can get wood. [The Italian title, Sentieri Interrotti, means literally “Interrupted pathways.” Chiodi is also the translator of Being and Time. Trans.]

36. See US 199: “The way that allows us to reach [gelangen] that which beckons us [belangt], in whose realm we already are. What need is there, then, one might ask, of a way which leads us there? Answer: because there, where we already are, we are in a way [modo] which at the same time we are not, insofar as we have not properly reached [erlangt] that which beckons [be-langt] our essence.”

37. See also for example US 256ff.: the way toward language brings us in the neighborhood of language to which both we and the way itself already belong.

38. See also PW 70: “Language is the hiding-showing [lichtend-verbegende] advent of Being itself”; see also US 215: “Originary Saying [die Sage] is what gives the ‘is,’ making it present in the luminous aperture [in das gelichtete Freie] and in the darkness intrinsically undistinguishable to the possibility of its being thought.”
Wittgenstein and the “idly turning wheels”

Diego Marconi

In the years 1930–1931, Wittgenstein had a “brief flirt with verificationism.” He discussed at great length with Schlick and Waismann the principle of verification on the basis of the formulation which Schlick had devised—“the meaning of a proposition is the method of its verification”—and seemed inclined to consider the verifiability of a statement as the criterion of its meaningfulness. In order to avoid misunderstandings, however, it should be pointed out early on that Wittgenstein’s verificationism implied neither adherence to the basic principles and motivations of the neopositivist program, nor a deeply sympathetic rapport with the specifically philosophical themes of the neopositivist, nor, above all, the epistemological connotations that characterized the verificationism of the Vienna Circle. For Wittgenstein, to affirm that the sense of a proposition is the method of its verification did not entail a delimitation of the field of meaningfulness in such a way as to exclude the statements whose truth or falsity were not determinable with the methods employed by the empirical sciences, and in particular in physics. It meant, rather, exploring the different procedures through which men succeed in determining the truth or falsity of statements of a different kind [di tipo diverso]. Ultimately, the question concerned the articulation through specific examples of a position already submitted in the Tractatus (4.024) in terms which were general and epistemologically neutral: “To understand a proposition means knowing what happens if it is true.”

Despite these qualifications, we must reckon with the fact that at this time Wittgenstein is discussing verification also in the terms suggested by the Vienna philosophers. And it is at this moment that he finds himself employing, on at least four occasions, an unusual expression, the “wheels turning idly” (leerlaufende Räder) of our title. In a first approximation, a “wheel turning
idly” is a sentence that “cannot be verified in any way, and therefore means nothing” (WWK 65).

In at least one case (WWK 47), the context in which the expression is used leads one to suppose that Wittgenstein believed to have coined it himself; and it is certainly possible that he might have “reinvented” it. However, it is interesting to note that a near identical expression (leergehende Nebenräder) appears in a text which the author of the Tractatus knew well, and that is the introduction to the Prinzipen der Mechanik by Hertz. The expression is introduced by Hertz in the course of his attack against the partial redundancy of the typical formulations of the system of mechanics. He wonders whether the system of mechanics is sufficiently sparing to allow for the addition of unessential and arbitrary traits to the essential features of nature (which, in Hertz’ epistemology, are reflected in that “picture” that is a scientific system). His answer is the following: “It cannot be denied that in many cases the forces which our mechanics introduces in order to deal with physical problems, intervene only as if they were auxiliary mechanisms that spin idly (leergehende Nebenräder), in order to move away from efficiency and try to represent (darstellen) real facts.” This does not happen in the case of simple relations, which are historically related to the origin of mechanics. However, as soon as we move on to celestial mechanics, immediately the “forces” cease to be the object of direct experience and become auxiliary concepts introduced in order to permit the derivation of future experiences (relative to the localization of celestial bodies) on the basis of past experiences.

The context therefore is that of the typically Hertzian critique of the concept of force, which in the majority of cases is considered devoid of iconic function. Otherwise said, depending on which formulation is preferred, force does not correspond to either observable reality or to objects of experience. It is not my intention here to analyze Hertz’ critique from either the point of view of the history of science or that of epistemology. My interest is focused solely on the sense of the expression “gears [i.e., flywheels] that spin freely [at idle].” A few pages before the cited passage, Hertz had observed that the adequacy of mechanics when applied to facts was enough to show that the difficulties of this science could not concern “those relationships . . . which correspond to relationships between things.” Rather, such difficulties had to stem from those “essential traits” which mechanics adds to its more properly iconic elements: therefore, from the form of representation (Form der Darstellung) of mechanics. The overdeterminations and the partial contradictions which Hertz critiques in mechanics relate to its conceptual apparatus not in its iconic aspects, but rather in its arbitrary ones. The author of the Tractatus would have said that they concern that which is arbitrary in sym-
bolism. The form of representation of the content of mechanics is, on the one hand, partially redundant and, on the other, it is precisely the redundant elements which create conceptual confusion and generate theoretical contradictions. This applies in particular to the concept of force, even better, to the different concepts of force. Except in the simplest cases, they are theoretical constructs without any factual support and therefore liable to be saddled with theoretical valences which are obscure and contradictory. In this sense, they are “gears at idle.”

The expression must have attracted Mach’s attention, for he refers to it in very critical terms. In fact, Mach attributed to the concept of force full explanatory value, while the difficulties highlighted by Hertz he attributed to the lack of precision and clarity of the earliest historical formulations of mechanics. Mach’s theory of science is more fully articulated than Hertz’: for Mach the direct interpretability of a theoretical concept in terms of observable data is not a necessary condition of its scientific legitimation. The most significant relationship is not the one between individual concepts and data from observation, but rather between groups of concepts (alternative conceptual schemes) and observable data. Of course, within a conceptual scheme each theoretical element must have a function, and in this sense it must “mesh” or “engage” with other concepts; but it is not necessary that in and by itself it “mirror” facts, as Hertz believed. The Newtonian concepts of absolute space, time, and motion are to be removed from mechanics because not only do they refer to phenomena which in principle are not observable—being “ideal entities not knowable through experimentation”—and not even solely because there exist simpler alternative conceptual schemes available endowed with the same explanatory power and devoid of “suspect” concepts, but also and perhaps above all because these concepts constitute worthless ballast within the very schemes that include them. That which, in these schemes, serves the purpose of organizing observable data, does not make use of “absolute” concepts because the latter have nothing to do with the organization of data. For example, absolute time, or time insofar as it is independent from any change, cannot by definition be used in the representation of physical motion, that is, of motion which is empirically verifiable, which means of motion insofar as it is given in relation to other motions and with respect to which it is ascertained to be such and eventually measured. Absolute time is introduced in order to enrich with a misunderstood “intuitive meaning” the physical concept of time. But the conceptual nexus between absolute time and the relative time of physics is foreign to experience, so that absolute time is not an entity whose postulation is required by a certain representation of the data, but a mere metaphysical appendix to a system of representation.
One can thus see how Mach too developed his own theory of the “idly turning wheels” which in no way coincides with that of Hertz. For the latter, a “wheel turning idly” is a concept which from the point of view of observation is empty; whereas for Mach the redundancy is characteristic of those concepts devoid of explanatory function, expressed through terms which occur solely in unverifiable statements, or, should they indeed occur within verifiable statements, they are found to be altogether superfluous. This formulation, however, hides several problems. For the moment, I shall underscore the presence of a tradition of reflections on linguistic-conceptual elements which can be variously characterized as redundant, unessential, devoid of observable content, devoid of explicative power, removable from descriptive contexts, producers of unverifiable statements, etc.; and the relationship of this reflection, in Hertz, with the expression “wheels turning idly.”

Independently of the philological problem raised by the possibility that this expression may in fact be derived from Hertz, let us now see whether on the basis of his analyses Wittgenstein falls within this tradition of the “wheels turning idly.” At the beginning of the Bemerkungen, Wittgenstein appears to characterize the “wheels turning idly” as “those parts of our language” which are “inessential” to representation (PB #1), employing among others precisely the same words—unwesentlich, Darstellung—with which Hertz had qualified the introduction of the expression. Yet in a conversation note with the Wiener Kreis of December 1929, the example of the idly turning wheels which is introduced appears to be rather an unverifiable statement: “things do not exist during the intervals between perceptions” (WWK 48). Immediately after that, another example, which also appears to be a wheel that rotates idly, brings to mind the very important idea of an statement whose negation is a nonsense. Again: in Waismann’s Theses, which are clearly inspired by conversations with Wittgenstein, a “wheel turning idly” is a conceptual element which has no descriptive value with respect to actual experience, but only with respect to possible experience. The hypothesis of the existence of objects—at work in the Tractatus and maintained, though in a different sense, in the Bemerkungen—does contain wheels which spin freely, for objects are not solely the end points of actualized perception (they are not sense data), rather, they are conceived as referents of possible perceptual experiences: they are, in a sense, the objective analogon of the dispositions. We therefore have at least four distinct characterizations of the wheels that turn idly:

1. linguistic elements inessential to representation,
2. unverifiable statements,
3. statements whose negation is a nonsense, and
4. conceptual elements unrelated to actual experience.

Common to these four characterizations is the idea, which for the moment is still relatively vague, of a relation of “indifference” to experience. This obtains either because it is a matter of linguistic or conceptual elements devoid of any real representational function (not essential to representation, as in the first case), or of an actual representational function (as in the fourth case); or otherwise because it is a matter of assertions which cannot be confirmed (second case) or rejected (third case) through experience. The “idly turning wheels” are indifferent to the way matters stand in reality: insofar as language has primarily a representational function—and the Wittgenstein of the years 1929–1931 is still largely within this order of ideas—the wheels which spin freely are redundant linguistic elements. From this vantage point, the introduction of this concept has the effect of downplaying the optimistic view of everyday language we find in the *Tractatus*: “All propositions of our colloquial language are actually, just as they are, logically completely in order” (T 5.5563). Wittgenstein says in fact: “Our language is in order, once we have understood its syntax [see T 4.002] and recognized the wheels that turn idly” (WWK 48, emphasis added).

The problem which immediately arises is whether the “wheels turning idly,” besides being redundant, might not also be misleading. We already know that they must be recognized, which presupposes that they do not always show themselves to be such, as they might seem to be something else, that is to say, “normal” linguistic or conceptual elements. A sentence such as “I can merely remember” (WWK 48) seems to describe a condition which could also be different (similarly to “I cannot feel pain in your tooth” [WWK 49]). A sentence such as “Things do not exist during the intervals between perceptions” seems to be speaking of our perceptual experience, and so on. In reality, however, these statements are other than what they seem. The first does not describe a situation susceptible to alternatives, the second one says nothing about our perceptual experience. The concept of a “wheel turning idly” embodies a new form of the appearance/reality dissociation: as a wheel which spins freely looks like a gear, but lacks precisely the constitutive feature that makes it a gear, that is, the fact that it meshes its teeth, it cogs up, so a “wheel turning idly” in language appears to embody a function which is other from its actual task (assuming that it does have one).

It behooves us to compare this form of dissociation with those adopted in the *Tractatus*. Here dissociation comes in above all and fundamentally through Russell’s distinction between the grammatical form and the logi-
cal form of a proposition, which Wittgenstein adopts in 4.0031. “Language disguises the thought” (4.002): the true identity of a linguistic expression is often masked by its grammatical form, and it is the task of logical analysis to recover it. It is necessary however to distinguish between at least three fundamental ways in which grammatical form conceals logical form and, correspondingly, three tasks of logical analysis. First of all, analysis is applied to propositions and expressions whose logical correctness is masked by a deceiving grammatical form. This is the case with the propositions making up “our colloquial language,” which is “in order as it is,” though this is not immediately evident. It is the task of analysis to rehabilitate everyday language by exhibiting the order and the logical propriety “behind” the grammatical chaos and nonsense.

Confined to this first task, the outcome of logical analysis is, in point of fact, a translation of natural statements into sentences of some artificial language capable of expressing immediately the logical articulation which the natural grammatical form masks. It is to be observed on this account that Wittgenstein never subscribed to the idea—in part shared by Frege, Russell, and the early neopositivists—that there is, or might be constituted, a privileged language as an alternative to ordinary language, a language, that is, which would be at one and the same time absolutely transparent and absolutely adequate to the representation of reality. For the author of the Tractatus, natural language itself is the privileged language. This can be gathered precisely by means of logical analysis, which reveals the true identity of natural sentences. Artificial translations, to which logical analysis reduces natural sentences, do not improve upon natural language, but rather constitute, so to speak, its truth. Owing to this position, Wittgenstein can be said to belong to that current in traditional Western metaphysics—whose first and most illustrious exponent was probably Aristotle—which confers to philosophy the task of showing the truth of common sense and of widespread opinion. For this trunk of the metaphysical tradition, philosophy does no more than say in different words that which people already naturally say. The expression “in different words” [con altre parole] denounces moreover the metaphysical character of even this position: for it is yet (as is the case with “corrective” metaphysics, which explicitly presents itself as an alternative to common sense) a matter of expressing oneself in a language whose privileged relation to reality is assumed, a language inherently close to things and in agreement with them. However, next to this apologetic task, the logical analysis of the Tractatus has also a filtering task, insofar as it sets out to unmask the logical incorrectness of sentences only apparently correct, such as those of metaphysics (4.003, 5.4733). Concerning the latter, the grammati-
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cal form that makes them akin to descriptive sentences masks the absence of a descriptive function, more than that, of any function whatsoever. These are propositions classified as *unsinnig* on the basis of their syntactical and/or semantic malformation.

Third point: logical analysis can be applied to sentences that seem to have a descriptive function, while their real function is not descriptive. Such are, for example, mathematical propositions (6.2) and logical propositions (6.112, 6.14). Here once again the dissociation is between the appearance of sense and a real lack of sense. But the lack of sense (*Sinnlosigkeit*, not *Unsinnigkeit*) does not coincide with the lack of any function whatsoever in language (and this raises the well-known problems of the internal coherence of the *Tractatus*, which we cannot get into here). The third task of logical analysis is therefore that of reestablishing the genuine function of these propositions in language.

Philosophical analysis, to which the *Bemerkungen* attribute the task of identifying the “wheels turning idly,” cannot be identified entirely with any of the three forms of logical analysis provided by the *Tractatus* (or, more precisely, does not directly inherit any of the three tasks which the *Tractatus* confers upon logical analysis). We should observe first of all that for the author of the *Bemerkungen* and interlocutor of Schlick and Waismann, not only is there no privileged language alternative to ordinary language, but there is no longer a language capable of evidencing the substantial adequacy of common language. Wittgenstein openly disputes the conception whereby there is a “primary language” which “expresses that which we really know, that is to say, phenomena” (WWK 46; see also PB #1).12 “I think that essentially we have only one language, and that is our everyday language” (WWK 45), a position which is not different, though differently stressed, from that of the *Tractatus*. At this juncture Wittgenstein no longer believes that everyday language can draw advantages from being translated into artificial languages. As a result, analysis is no longer entrusted with the task of translation, but rather with the task of recognizing the “wheels turning idly.”

And yet, to identify the “wheels turning idly” as such entails neither showing their syntactic-semantic malformation (which was the second task of analysis according to the *Tractatus*), nor recognizing their true function, supposedly hidden by the apparent descriptive function (third task). The “wheels turning idly” are indeed, like the propositions of metaphysics, redundant, but their redundancy is no longer interpreted in logical-semantic terms, but, rather, in *epistemological* terms. It is no longer a matter of indifference to the facts on the basis of a lack of semantic links between names and objects, or of an identifiable logical form. It is instead an indifference
to the facts owing to the impossibility of instituting procedures to confirm or refute. We ought not to think, here, solely of a procedure of the sensorial or instrumental kind, as in operationalism, but of any procedure through which the truth or falsity of a statement is made to depend on any type of facts. Beyond that, the “wheels turning idly” are not even presented (at this stage) as expressions endowed with a function in language which is different from its apparent one, as are tautologies and mathematical propositions in the *Tractatus*. The “wheels turning idly” are therefore neither *sinnlos* nor *unsinnig*, in the sense of the *Tractatus*, even though redundancy relates them to those expressions which had been defined as *unsinning*, and even though—as we shall see—in a later phase of Wittgenstein’s thought they will inherit many traits of *sinnlos* expressions. The fact is that both the *Sinnlosigkeit* and the *Unsinningkeit* were characterized in *logical* terms, whereas as we just noted above the “wheels turning idly” are now characterized in *epistemological* terms. The theory of the “wheels turning idly” is the form assumed by the theory of the demarcation between meaningful and meaningless sentences in what we may call the “epistemological phase” in Wittgenstein’s thought. *This phase presupposes the end of the centrality of logic in Wittgenstein’s reflection on language*. Logical analysis is no longer considered necessary, at least as far as the greater part of everyday language is concerned. By the same token, logical analysis is not considered sufficient to unmask the misleading sentence, the “wheels turning idly.” At bottom, what heaves into a crisis is the ideal, or the myth, of a “complete analysis” of the proposition. Inasmuch as it ought to spur actual philosophical procedures, this ideal revealed itself to be impracticable. Thus, in order to understand that the word “present” in the statement “only the experience of the present moment has reality” is “a meaningless epithet” (PB #54), that is to say, a wheel turning idly, we need not so much logical analysis in the sense of the *Tractatus*, but rather an awareness of the irrelevance, for the truth or falsity of this thesis, of the facts which intuitively seem to determine it (or would determine it, if the appearance of the thesis were not misleading). For instance, the fact whether this morning I actually did get up or not, or that an event of which I have no memory did or did not occur. The thesis is clearly identified as a wheel turning idly once it is clear that it doesn’t imply any of the factual sentences which one might think it does entail. A sentence is characterized as an “idly spinning wheel” by the way—or lack thereof—in which I ascertain the conditions that make it true.

Owing to this emphasis on the lack of an *epistemic* link between the “wheels turning idly” and reality, Wittgenstein can be situated closer to Mach’s view; whereas the position of the *Tractatus*, at least for the part in which
meaninglessness is attributed to the absence of a semantic link, is certainly closer to the point of view of Hertz (besides, obviously, the Frege of Sense and Denotation). And this is all the more natural if only we recall, on the one hand, the profound influence Hertz had on the entire conception of the Tractatus, and on the other, the neopositivist involvement with Machian thematics in the years 1929–1931.

The theory of the “wheels which turn idly” cannot however be simply characterized as the pars desruens of a theory of empirical significance, in the manner of, for instance, the early Carnap. First of all, as we already noted, Wittgenstein applies the concept of verification also to sentences like those of mathematics whose methods of validation make no reference to recorded facts, to immediate data or other elements of an empiricist epistemology: and this point of view already anticipates the pluralistic perspective on language which will be developed later around the expression “language-games.” At most, the theory of the “wheels turning idly” belongs to a theory of factual significance, where the sense of “fact” is expanded to include “mathematical facts.”

However, and turning to the second point, Wittgenstein is aware from this moment on of the fact that the redundancy of the “wheels turning idly,” considered as parts of a description, does not eliminate the need for an interpretation of their presence in language. For the issue is not so much one of eliminating the “wheels turning idly” from language, but rather of explaining why they are there once their claimed descriptive function is unmasked. Even if he does not attribute them a precise function, Wittgenstein is already saying that they must “allude to something else”: not to data, which as such could be given differently, not to something which is in a space, but to something which is itself a space: in short, to “something which language cannot legitimately set in relief” (PB #54).

That which language “cannot legitimately set in relief” was, for the Tractatus, the form of representation which is shared by both language and reality (hence the meaninglessness of the very propositions in the Tractatus, which attempt to characterize this form). In the Bemerkungen, the formal features of linguistic representation constitute its grammar, and the principles which codify them are the rules of grammar. Later, as is well known, the phrase “rules of the (language-)game” will prevail. These differences of expression are not trivial, because they correspond, respectively, to the abandonment of the picture theory in the overly schematic and universalizing form of the Tractatus, and to the relinquishment of the privilege of the representational function of language, which still prevails in the years 1929–1931. Already in the Grammatik and in the Blue Book, in fact, the description of reality is
just one kind of language-game. For the time being, however, let us continue with the Bemerkungen and the conversations with the Wiener Kreis.

If the “wheels turning idly” were casual combinations of signs, it would be difficult to say, of any one of them, that “in a certain sense that is so” (PB #54). If, on the other hand, they were explicit formulations of grammatical rules, there would be nothing illegitimate in them since the task of philosophy is precisely that of “grasp[ing] the essence of the world . . . in rules . . . which exclude nonsensical combination of signs” (ibid.). The fact is that the “wheels turning idly” are linguistic expressions devoid of descriptive content—in this sense, they are redundant—which are given as endowed of such a content (and in this they are therefore misleading) while they constitute inadequate and incorrect formulations of grammatical rules. The reference to Carnap’s distinction between “formal mode” and “material mode” is immediate: the “wheels turning idly” would be rules expressed in the “material mode.” And the fact that Wittgenstein refers to something analogous to the material mode with the expression “dogmatism” (WWK 183–184) cannot but recall Carnap’s principle of tolerance: to proceed in a dogmatic mode means to present as questionable opinion about something what in reality is a rule for the use of a linguistic expression.

At any rate, the identification of the “wheels turning idly” with the “material” formulations of grammatical rules, though it may seem to conform easily to Wittgenstein’s philosophic attitude during these years, is not altogether true to the texts. Above all, it is more precise than what the texts themselves authorize. The texts to which we referred, in fact, belong to a rather magmatic phase in Wittgenstein’s thought, a period during which there are few stable analytic determinations. We are at the beginning of a course that will eventually lead to a rather profound reformulation of the idea of linguistic redundancy and, at times, to the questioning of the very dissociation between appearance and reality. Let’s try to retrace this itinerary.

We saw how in the years 1929–1931, though he had for all intents and purposes abandoned the picture theory of the Tractatus based on the identity of logical form between a proposition and a state of affairs, and the one-to-one correspondence between objects and names, Wittgenstein still adhered to a conception of language which privileged the representational function. Language is still, for Wittgenstein, above all the whole of descriptive propositions: or at least, this is the incontrovertibly “healthy” part of language. However, the link between “reality” and this part of language is no longer conceived in logical-semantic terms, but rather in epistemic terms. On the other hand, the reflection on mathematical discourse in particular leads Wittgenstein to take into consideration parts of language for which one can speak of a link
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with “reality” only provided we include in the latter ontic domains which are foreign to the canon of empiricist epistemology. As we saw, this development is actually carried out by the thinker. Yet, and parallel to this, the awareness that in mathematical discourse we are dealing with validation procedures internal to language induces him to soften gradually the privilege of the representational function, at least in the sense in which it refers to an ontology of common sense. What emerges, in short, is the autonomy of certain areas of language, the independence of their criteria for validation from an “external reality,” whether physical nature or whatever else it might be—while what gradually pushes forward is their complex dependence on “forms of life.” What is born therefore is the need of a conception of language ample enough to make room for these concerns as well. It is well known this conception will be centered around the expression “language-games.”

In the meantime, however, reflection on mathematical discourse is enough to single out expressions which are intuitively similar to the “wheels turning idly.” Wittgenstein’s critique of the “prose of calculus” (WWK 149, 164) (later developed, with specific reference to the mathematical theories of the infinite, especially in the Lectures of 1939) can be assimilated to the singling out of “wheels turning idly” in mathematical discourse (better: in the speech of mathematicians). Here, however, we are not dealing with linguistic elements indifferent to “external facts,” but rather with linguistic elements as “inessential” as the color of a cog in a machine (WWK 164), or with elements that are redundant with respect to the actual procedures of mathematics, such as the word “infinite” in set theory.

At this juncture, then, the concept of redundant expression loses all Machian and Hertzian traits. Lack of factual verifiability, or representational vacuousness, are just very special cases of redundancy. The focus is now the foreignness of a linguistic expression with respect to the constitutive rules of the discourse to which it belongs—or, once again, seems to belong. This is the beginning of the theory of nonsense which characterizes the last phase in Wittgenstein’s thought. From the new vantage point, the “indifference” of a linguistic expression is no longer defined in general but in relation to each single language-game. As a result, the “mechanism” with respect to which the wheels spin idly (see PU #271) is no longer reality inasmuch as it is accessible to procedures of confirmation or refutation, nor is it language as a whole. Instead, it is this or that language-game considered as a more or less structured set of linguistic signs and objects. There are no expressions which in and by themselves are redundant: there are redundant expressions with respect to a language-game, to which they seem to belong, whereas in reality they do not. Such expressions seem to be “moves” within a certain
game, but in reality they do not in any manner modify any of the elements
of the game—for example, if these elements are sentences, they do not in
any way determine their truth conditions.\textsuperscript{14} In a chess game, painting a
fierce look on the face of one's queen does not change anything in the game
of chess. By the same token, to say that an eleven-year-old boy can do “x”
multiplications is not tantamount to saying he is capable of carrying out
an immense task (LFM 31, 141–142): “x” seems to be, but is not, a “move”
in the game of counting.

In Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, \textit{nonsense} is persistently character-
ized as an expression which only appears to belong to language-games, but
in reality it does not: the appearance/reality dissociation is reproduced in
a relativized form. Nonsense arises “from the formation of similar symbols
in certain usages, there where they do not have any use” (LM 274; see also
PhGr #81). Now, to say that an expression does not belong in a language-
game, in the sense that it is not a “move” in that game, admits of at least
the following alternatives:

\begin{itemize}
  \item a. it is not a move in that game because it is a move in \textit{another}
        game;
  \item b. it is not a move in that game because it is a \textit{rule} of that game;
       and,
  \item c. it is not a move in that game because it \textit{violates a rule} of that
        game.
\end{itemize}

For example, “to crown pawn c7” is not a move in the game of chess
in the sense of a); “the bishop can only move diagonally” is not a move in
the sense of b); and “the white queen castles” is not a move in the sense of
c). Wittgenstein, in fact, explores all three of these possibilities. Sense c) is
perhaps the first to emerge clearly: “Unsinn sein heisst antisyntaktisch sein,”
says Wittgenstein already in 1930 (WWK 220). But sense a) is also present
in the texts from this period, albeit in a less evident way. For example, in
\textit{Bemerkungen} #9, Wittgenstein notes that “if we say it’s nonsense to say that
one thing is as identical as another, this needs qualification, since if anyone
says this with conviction, then at that moment he means something by the
word ‘identical’ (perhaps ‘large’), but isn’t aware that he is using the word
here with a different meaning from that in $2 + 2 = 4$.” In such an example
we perceive a crucial tension between the tendency to propose again the
appearance/reality dissociation—“isn’t aware”—and the tendency toward an
anthropological concern—“with conviction”—for people’s attachment to cer-
tain linguistic expressions. In a way, Wittgenstein confirms that there’s an
element of error in the use of the word “identical” in contexts such as “this is identical to that”; even if the error is, so to speak, de-objectivized (it is only the speaker who “does not know” what symbol he is employing), while “appearance,” against which is defined what the symbol “identical” really is in that context, deceives only its user and not the entire linguistic community. On the other hand, Wittgenstein also admits that linguistic expressions which are in any way nonsensical, are nevertheless factually employed in such a manner that they take on, indisputably, a function. In this light we may understand the remarks concerning the “profound need” that people often manifest for certain “conventions” (GM 23), for expressions which by themselves make no difference from the descriptive point of view. The characteristic example is the language of the solipsist, who is not in disagreement with us on any matter of fact (BB 59), and yet he is “irresistibly tempted to use a certain form of expression” (BB 60).

The tension between these two tendencies—the one to corroborate, though in a form relative to each language-game, the appearance/reality dissociation, the other instead to reject it as the entryway to reductionism—comes to light in particular when Wittgenstein reflects on “metaphysics,” that is to say, that part of traditional philosophy which he is constantly disputing. At times metaphysics is considered an unconscious “confusion” (BB 35; Z #458), at other times as the fruit of the unavoidable tendency “[to run] up against the limits of language” (WWK 68). From the point of view of the first of these two jarring tendencies, metaphysics is a leading example of the type b) of nonsense, the one which consists in presenting a rule as if it were a “move” in the game, a criterion to which a representation must conform as if it were part of representation. Characteristic of metaphysics would then be the tendency to obliterate the distinction between factual research and conceptual research (Z #458), and to express an obscurity relative to the grammar of a word in the form of a scientific problem (BB 35). From the point of view of the second of these two tendencies, instead, the formulation of a rule in the form of a descriptive statement, or even relative to the “essence” of something, and the position of a grammatical problem as a substantial problem, signal an attachment to a mode of expression which can be linked to a need—to the depth of essence there corresponds the deep need of convention” (GM 33)—and comprehended in anthropological terms. But as Wittgenstein holds especially in the notes On Certainty, it is no longer a question of assuming a superior viewpoint in order to give each language-game that which is proper to it. The attachment to a particular form of expression which is different from that which we might have preferred may be reproached, but never proved to be incorrect from a neutral point of view. The movement of the “wheels turning idly” is become part and parcel of a form of life.
We can see then how in Wittgenstein's later philosophy the appearance/reality dissociation is on the one hand relativized, and on the other abolished. The theory or the sketch of a theory of the wheels turning idly was the last attempt to come up with a general theory of the demarcation between the meaningful and the meaningless, by applying the appearance/reality dissociation to linguistic expressions as such. And it was therefore the last attempt to save the “metaphysicality” of philosophic discourse (not “metaphysics” in the sense of traditional philosophy) by distinguishing within language a part which was inherently misleading from a part which was inherently non-misleading and “close to the things themselves.” Yet the attempt clashes with Wittgenstein’s loyalty to language as it is, with the intention to recognize in every discourse an aspect of a form of life. Which presupposes, obviously, the shift to an anthropological point of view in which, more than any other thing, what counts is that certain linguistic expressions are actually being used.

Notes


3. For example, in 1929 Wittgenstein writes to Waismann: “To renge metapysics! as if that were something new!” (cited in WWK, preface by B. McGuinness, 18).

4. For example, in PB #166, Wittgenstein writes: “What the immediate datum is for a common language proposition that verifies, the structural arithmetic relation in question is for the equation it verifies.” And, further down: “The way a proposition is verified, that is what it says. Compare the generalities of real propositions with the generality of arithmetic. It is verified otherwise, and therefore it is another.” Wittgenstein goes on to refer both to a sort of “arithmetic experience” (“seeing” a structural relation) which is obviously something other than the experience of neoempiricism, and to a possibility of verification in nonempirical terms or at any rate neither operationist, nor sensist or physicalist or anything else.
5. See also PB #148, and then PU 136.
8. Ibid., 9.
9. Ibid., 10.
12. Wittgenstein holds that he had earlier on accepted this idea, perhaps referring to some development of the thesis according to which all propositions endowed with sense can be represented as truth functions of elementary propositions, these latter being interpreted phenomenistically.
13. This is my interpretation as developed in *Il mito del linguaggio scientifico* (Milan: Mursia, 1971), 102–103.
14. Examples of “wheels turning idly” in this new sense are singled out by Wittgenstein as he develops the “private language argument.” A particularly significant example is that of the “private box.” He writes: “Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a “beetle.” No one can look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle.—Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing.—But suppose the word “beetle” had a use in these people’s languages?—If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a *something*: for the box might even be empty” (PU 293). Here we must point out, a) that what has no function is not a linguistic element—the word “beetle”—but a real determination, that is: the possible content of the box; b) that the corrective intervention, the “therapy,” does not consist in the removal of an expression from language, and not even in the determination of its likely *absolute* emptiness, or lack of function, but, instead, in the distinction between one of its apparent roles—the “designation of a thing”—and real role, that which “these people” do in fact attribute to it. For other examples in PU pertinent to the “wheels turning idly,” see 216, 251, 252, 414, 567–568.
15. For some doubt on the acceptability of this way of putting things, see PU 511.
16. The antireductionist polemic is aimed in particular against the argumentative techniques of psychoanalysis, which according to Wittgenstein makes use of “sentences such as: ‘This, in reality, is that.’ Which means that there are certain differences which you have been persuaded to ignore” (LAE 94). Wittgenstein continues by citing Butler’s motto, which was also Moore’s favorite: “Everything is what it is, and not another thing.” This polemic is carried on also in general terms: “it can never be our job to reduce anything to anything” in BB 18.
When on the snow covered village
silently the Castle appears . . .

The Narrative Tendency before
the Unnarratable Landscape

GIAMPIERO COMOLLI

The Enigma of the Double Snowfall

At the Brenner Pass, a typical setting. It is late at night and the great half-empty
train stops at the border station. There is almost no one outside now, and even
though it is well into spring, dense and whirling the snow keeps on falling.
From the window of the deserted corridor I notice some customs officers talk-
ing, as they slowly inch their way through the snow; other uniformed figures
appear here and there behind the few lighted windows of the huge buildings
that stand on either side of the tracks; above the roofs darkened by the night
there looms the confused mass of the mountains covered by the darkest of
woods, along the border line. I imagine the steps of a customs officer walking
through the unadorned corridor of one of those buildings and then flinging
open a window from the side opposite the station in order to watch silently
the snow that falls upon the abandoned woods, as if glimpsing or searching
for something in the snow . . .1

Right after this image, the whole scape around me (ultimately it is pre-
cisely just any landscape, a banal and very busy border pass) is suddenly illumini-
ated by another light and changes texture, as if the snow were falling from a
more remote place or were lifting the landscape toward such distances . . . the
atmosphere feels strange, tense, I sense the echo of a whisper, the presence of
a message that cannot be heard yet directed at us. . . . But from where does
the confused message in the snow come from?

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To me the answer is simple and immediate, but it raises a new question which captivates me a bit at a time, dragging me to a point beyond which it is not possible to proceed. . . . The simple answer is this: the image of the customs officer that flings open the window is the deformed reappearance of an image I recall having read recently in Kafka’s *The Castle*. During a dark and snowy evening the land surveyor K. arrives at the Gentlemen’s Inn, which was poorly lit; a window is opened on the first floor and K. sees a gentleman, one of the “gentlemen,” who draws to the window gazing in the void. There’s a lull in the air of important matters not voiced . . .

The shadows and the buildings of the Brenner remind me therefore of a landscape described by Kafka (I am presently and rather by chance under his influence). I feel like fantasizing that, if in the village of the Castle there were a railroad station, it could be similar to the one I happened to find myself in; I compare the atmosphere of the place to the one of the novel (aren’t these identifications between life and the book sought by a naive reader such as I myself am still?): ultimately the snow of the Brenner fascinates me because I feel it coming from the Castle, I feel it is the same snow. We are dealing therefore with a double snowfall: I see the snow that falls here and, at the same time, I feel that I can see finally with my own eyes one of the snowfalls described in *The Castle*: in a perfect superimposition the two landscapes coincide, and I am here and there at the same time. . . . Though I know perfectly well that I am here, yet I imagine, I fantasize to be there: is this the way I have to represent my own experience? Maybe, but perhaps also not at all: for as soon as I believe I have given shape to experience by means of such a representation, suddenly the figure *figura* of the double snowfall begins to take on the uncanny shape of a decisive enigma, located at the limits of the insoluble. My representation breaks up, and unexpected characters move forward toward thought . . . what is happening? In order to comprehend, it is necessary to let it happen, therefore to be willing to follow the experience through all the stops along the journey.

**Reality as Tautology, Identity, Boredom**

I find myself in an empty train coach stopped at the border. The wait is extended owing to the usual bureaucratic formalities. The place is rather well known by everyone, nothing in particular sets it apart. The sense of reality about me is therefore predictable and harshly concrete, the “there’s nothing to say” of a banal crossing at the border whose relevance can be explained by simply saying to oneself: “I am waiting to cross the border; tomorrow, when
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y they ask me about the trip, I’ll say . . . ‘and then I waited a long time at the
border. . . . ’” This trivial materiality, so to speak, of the representation of
oneself, this concreteness of reality in which thought gets mired: this is the
realm of tautology. Otherwise put, my body lies leaning in an unseemly man-
ner against the glass of the train window, boredom is killing me. My identity
within reality is therefore certain, I know I am what I am (I must travel by
train and in fact here I am in the train), but this knowledge is disheartening.

The So-called Atmosphere

Nevertheless, the moment I feel the presence of the other landscape, the
one from The Castle, suddenly the real about me (and in me) produces a
different ambiance. But what is this atmosphere? Above all it is a dislocation
or a doubling of sense: to be simultaneously here and there means that the
sense of my being here is cared for elsewhere, and I must go there to find
it. Better yet, it is a question of a double sense: the real remains the way
it is, enwrapped in its opaque and tautological sense, and simultaneously it
is illuminated by the drawing near or the recalling of the other sense. That
which is obvious turns exciting, problematic, mysterious: I am tense, moved,
because everywhere around me I feel the presence of the yet elusive Castle.
In an instant boredom vanishes and is replaced by the emotional sensation of
discovering the reason for my being here: I am here so that I can live the way
one lives there; at the same time, I believe I am finally able to understand how
one thinks there, how things are felt there. I am still living here, to be sure,
but not (only) the way one lives here; rather, I’m (also) living the way one
lives there: I exit from the tautology of the real and come to discover—with
a certain enthusiasm—that the secret reason of my identity as a traveler lies
precisely in this double deferring [rimando] of sense.

Figures of the Book around the Body of the Reader

Such emotional knowledge does not come to me as purely conceptual or
sentimental, in other words it does not manifest itself to me solely under the
guise of a conversation [ragionamento], albeit emotionally tense; rather, it
seems to be directed to the totality of the “me,” therefore also, and perhaps
above all, to my body. What comes to me (to the “me”) are figures: I see again
before my eyes the image of K. nearing the Gentlemen’s Inn, I feel upon my
skin the chill of that snow. Such figures enwrap the body, leading it almost
by the hand: I identify myself with K. (which does not mean: I feel identical
to K.), my wait becomes similar (but not equal) to his countless waits as
described in *The Castle*. In sum, my body, which was formerly dejected in its
tautological boredom, now knows how to move: here then I begin to stroll
up and down the train car, alert in step and tense from pleasure, taken by a
new harmony. I now know in fact that in order to live my wait fully—find-
ing for it a sense, a feeling, even a new body posture—I must engage my
memory and stretch the imagination until I can see how it is that K. lived
his waits. Let’s be clear on this point: it is not a banal fantasy in which I
feign being K. Quite the opposite, I have not forgotten myself, but precisely
in order to remain more profoundly mindful of myself, I must remember K.
(even with my body).

Memory’s Occasions

The images encountered in the book move therefore to gather themselves
in memory, but only to represent themselves to me as unexpected figures,
an occasion whatever in time. Such an occasion is an opportunity also for
memory. Taking advantage of an everyday event whatsoever, and seeing in
it a secret analogy not foreseen by my intelligence, memory (Proust would
say: “involuntary memory”) plays up to the occasion and volunteers to scan
the rhythm of everyday time. There where intelligence saw merely the dead
uniform time of the wait, memory offers the analogy with another wait and
transforms therefore dead time into the living time of an encounter (while
I’m waiting, I meet K., who also is waiting).

The Guardianship of Memory

Now, separated from memory, intelligence can rightly feel authorized to con-
sider the images of the book as independent figures, to us unrelated and
enclosed in a separate book. In this case, the book does concern the intel-
lligence, but it does not regard “me”; if anything, it is intelligence which must
search, pry, and interpret the book as an object separate from the “me.” But
if instead the intelligence dwells in the vicinity of memory, the guardianship
of memory can begin to leaf through the pages of the book and extract a
knowledge which is not closed upon itself, absolute, unhindered by everyday
cares, freed from the occasions of quotidian time; rather, this knowledge is
open, so to speak, downward, toward the distress of everyday life, the simple
actions of the body. Guarded by memory, the figures of the book return to
teach me to walk in the corridor of any train coach whatsoever, to dilate my gaze before whatever snowfall I chance upon. This “whatever” means anything contingent, random: the event that links the Brenner to the Castle, the here to the there, is always bound to the casualness of circumstance, revealing thus that the “open” knowledge of the book is an occasional, singular, and unpredictable knowledge. It is therefore arbitrary, but not unmotivated, given that memory has in fact captured, in a flash, an analogy between the here and the there which we now feel strongly about: the imagination and the intelligence stretch out in the (rather pleasing) effort to respond to the call [richiamo], to the invitation issuing from there. To grasp the analogy means sensing (from the exultant body, from the “me”) the coming of a voice which is more or less saying: “Here it is very much like it is there, if you are capable of listening to the message that is coming from there, and adapt to it, you may learn how to live well here . . .”

Interpreting Reality

What is the sense of such adaptation? That the interpretation of the real (of everyday experience), which was blocked by tautology (by a knowledge of the obvious, of the “there’s nothing more to say about it”), is now made possible, or at least it can be “probed deeper” the moment in which the real that surrounds us finds itself superimposed on another real, the one of the book, of narration. And since in narration what is in play is an open, global knowledge (which invests the totality of the “me”), a similar interpretation of the real entails also a (joyful) modification of my identity: the sense of my being here can and must be found there. My thought is invited to the following experience: the snowfall that I see here is, by itself, almost devoid of sense: it is boring. Yet it looks like another snowfall told about in a book where everything seems engulfed in tension, interest, events; I must therefore go there to find that sense which is absent here, but precisely in order to interpret the real in which I live. The redoublement of sense is in the last analysis the operation which allows the interpretation of the real and the modification of my identity.

The Straying of Thought

But as soon as thought reaches this conclusion, suddenly it does not seem capable of proceeding further, as if thought, severed off at a given point from experience, had already with its momentum continued along a path that leads
nowhere. It is now necessary to go back, to start searching for experience once again. . . . Why? What is the sense of the snow in *The Castle*, the sense hidden in the elsewhere [*nell’altrove*]? With a certain embarrassment I must confess I have absolutely no clue. I see in front of me the Brenner landscape and glittering upon it the invisible presence of the Castle landscape. To be sure, all of this moves me. But if I attempt to interpret such an emotion by attributing to the landscape of the Brenner the sense of the landscape of *The Castle*, the sensation of the double presence withdraws, the air of the Castle vanishes and thought, suddenly deprived of its object, begins to grope in the dark. There’s only darkness, a great mysterious darkness in which thought cannot but divert its gaze in order to return and entrust itself to the certainty of experience . . .

**Remembrances of the Unforgettable Landscape**

The experience is the following: the figure of the double snowfall has led me very near to the landscape of *The Castle* and such a closeness has meant a fascination and a joy to me, as if I were finally about to hear at any moment the unperceivable [*inudibile*] message enclosed in the pages of the novel. Only now do I fully realize the fact that what has always fascinated me about *The Castle*, what to me was unforgettable, absolutely unforgettable, was the description of the environment, the atmosphere of the landscape. Yes, indeed . . . those small streets sunk into the snow, the numerous cottages with ice-encrusted windows, the very short days besieged by gelid and interminable nights . . . and then those parlors filled with the smell of rancid beer, the peasants sitting around barrels, the straw bed on which K. must sleep. . . . All of this, to be sure, makes up only the background, the ambiance in which K.’s experiences occur, his endless conversations with the women of the inns, with the secretaries from the Castle. But why does an environment so squalid, a landscape so desolate, appear to me as altogether unforgettable, supremely fascinating, as if endowed with an inextinguishable, immense beauty?

**The Uninterpreted Landscape**

The reason is—and of this, only now, I am fully aware—that the landscape remains absolutely enigmatic. Unlike the actions and words of the characters, which undergo endless exegesis, the landscape of *The Castle* is never interpreted: it is simply what it is, it exists, it’s there, like any given of the world
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in no need of justification at all. And surely it is a rather ponderous given: it is a place of the saddest, forbidding aspect. Yet K. does not want to abandon it. Once he says, more or less, to his fiancée Frieda: “. . . what keeps me in such a dismal place, if not the desire to remain here.” As justifications go, it is rather scant, being a disconcerting tautology which explains nothing. But though apparently sustaining itself on the basis of pure tautology, it is precisely this silence that, cast upon the landscape, fills it with fascination and mystery. It is a keeping silent [tacere] there where much there’d be to talk about, which implies that upon that snow, through the tiny streets frozen and deserted, in the wooden shacks, one can feel the presence of an unsaid, an uninterpreted enigma, a mystery. That silence in the place of saying arouses an enigmatic sensation, that is something which thinking can always become aware of by itself; but that this silence constitutes the most profound mystery of The Castle, the mystery which primarily engages the gaze, that is something which I realize only now, stopped at the Brenner Pass.

The Overturned Landscape

Let’s be clear on this: we are dealing with an awareness [rendersi conto] not at all determined by thoughtful reflection, but rather by a sensation, an impression: it happens I feel the mystery is that one, even though I don’t know why. It is a “happening,” therefore something purely occasional, singular, even if not unmotivated. But how does one think motivation, where does one look for it? I have nothing to rely on but the certainty of experiencing: a sensation, a premonition, a feeling. The feeling [sentimento] is the following: as I continue to gaze upon the snow that slowly descends on the pass at the border, I realize that the emotion of feeling here the presence of the snow in the landscape there is caused also by the sensation of drawing near to, of being within reach of, the sense of the mystery of The Castle. Now that I am immersed in a scape so similar to that of the Castle and I feel like I am breathing the same air, I have the impression at the same time that the mystery of the landscape constitutes the fundamental mystery of the novel and that it is possible for me to grasp the sense of that mystery. In The Castle the sense of that mystery is kept silent, but since quite by chance I happened to find myself in a similar environment, I can find here that sense which is lacking there, in order to bring it back there. . . . I should therefore look for the sense precisely here, though until a moment ago I thought it made no sense. . . . I feel the presence of sense, but as soon as thought moves toward it, suddenly sense is left behind . . . wherever it might be heading,
thought always finds itself in a landscape which is overturned, reflected, while the image of the real landscape, the landscape of sense, appears to be only darkness, emptiness, silence. . . . At this juncture thought goes astray . . .

The Empty Zone

I am forced to acknowledge that the redoublement of sense, instead of establishing a solid base upon which thought could lean in order to proceed from one concept to the next, from representation to representation, has ushered in a zone which is empty, dark, as if without bottom. The superimposition of the two snowfalls does not yield pure equality: between the two figures there remains a difference. Granted that this is obvious, but—and this is the enigma—it is in this difference that thought precipitates and annuls itself, as if it were impossible for it, so to speak, to transport the sense from one figure to the other, even though the two figures seem to make sense only by relying on each other, the remaining one the resemblance of the other. In other words, this empty zone cannot be represented by thought: what thought can represent to itself is the Brenner, the Castle, their resemblance, their differences, but not the bottomless cleft: thought succeeds in being either here or there, whereas sense lies here and there, in the “and” so to speak. Such an “and” is a sort of difference in its pure sense, without representative content; thought can at most represent it as a black cleft which insinuates itself between the two landscapes only to disappear in the night . . .

Difference as a Sensation of Exultation

What do we do then? The fact is that, having lost the concrete support of representational thought, there remains in me yet a feeling of certainty. But what kind of certainty are we talking about? The fact that the presence of the double landscape, notwithstanding the mark of difference, does not give rise to anguish, but rather to emotion, exultation. The double landscape fascinates me, more than that, I feel that through this duality it is possible to listen to the inaudible message that hails from the Castle. In sum, the point is this: I cannot represent to myself simultaneously here “and” there, I cannot think the “difference.” Yet, I feel the difference: it comes to me in the form of rejoicing that invests the whole of “me.” I mean that I feel myself to be simultaneously here “and” there, and such a sensation is an exultation that in fact continues to supply me with a presence of sense right up to the point where, in fact, thought perceives only an emptiness of sense.
“When upon the snow covered village silently the Castle appears…”

The exultation tells me: “It is like being in the land of K.” Thought states: “This is how things are here, that is how things are there: in these ways they resemble each other, in these other ways they are different.” What eludes and cannot be articulated by thought is the “like.” The “like” is identical to the “and”: it is another word to allude to unthinkable difference. Not here or there, but in the “and” and in the “like” resounds the sense of the message that cannot be heard. For this message we exult even before we cup our ear to its silence, having only noticed its presence. If however one day I am interested in telling someone of this exultation, to lend an ear means finding the appropriate words suitable to the inaudible, the unsayable. And how do we find them, given that to know how to say means also to know how to think?

Memory at the Vigil of Thought

Recently I have had to turn my attention to Kafka’s *The Castle*, and I had to reread several passages, as well as a series of texts that deal specifically with it and, more generally, with literary interpretation. If I suppose that there is in *The Castle* an unsolved enigma, I should therefore now begin to test this hypothesis against criticism of the novel and the text of the novel itself. However, at this point I am riding in a train and it happens I have none of these books: I left home the indispensable tools for the work of thought. I am compelled to trust completely in my memory, as if it had become my only and last text. But such an indulgence and trust in memory does not mean that the exercise of thinking is unacceptable or even impossible. We must in fact recognize that it was precisely the vigil of memory that presented me, by means of the figure of the doubled snowfall, with the problem of the landscape in *The Castle* as an underlying mystery which must be thought out before anything else. To think it entails then that thought stand ever in proximity to memory, consenting the latter to keep vigil over it, never disuniting. To think of the vigil of memory is no longer, properly speaking, a thought of the intelligence alone, a thought that represents to itself a pure string of concepts, but a thought that addresses the totality of the “me.” Thus while thought will go on observing, as it advances, the memories of the landscape of *The Castle* submitted to memory, I must continually observe at the same time—and never forget—the figures of the landscape that show up here, before my eyes, right in front of me. I must in short start journeying toward the there and nevertheless remain always still in the here, until the moment in which, in the empty zone located between the here and the there, something appears which my excitement can recognize no longer as a confused sensation, but
as a word which has been thought, capable of saying over, if only through allusion, the inaudible message . . .

When on the snow covered village
silently the Castle appears

The first lines of the novel: “it was late in the evening when the surveyor K. arrived.” On the wooden bridge leading from the main road to the village, he stops: snow, fog, darkness everywhere. K. keeps his eyes fixed toward an empty point in the sky, there where he should have seen rising the great Castle, but he sees nothing more than emptiness: the Castle lies in that emptiness, wrapped in total darkness. The emptiness is precisely what holds the Castle in its absolute concentration unto itself. When K. days later will be able to behold it, the Castle will of course show itself to his eyes, but one time it is immersed in total silence, another time it is bathed in a mysterious calmness which proves intolerable to the observer, much like a person who, aware of being watched, nevertheless acts freely, indifferent to the observer, his gaze directed nowhere in particular. No clear words and decipherable signs come down from the Castle, not even the sign of beauty (it is not a beautiful castle, it is a rambling pile of innumerable small buildings on a hilltop; there’s a tower, crows flying, never a person at the windows). Simply, the Castle gives itself, appears: it offers itself to other people’s eyes as an unapproachable nearness: it is always there very close to the village, and nevertheless it is remote; it is the emptiness, not the village, that sustains it; in the emptiness it reflects itself . . .

. . . pronouncing an unperceivable message of salvation . . .

The village nevertheless lies gathered at the foot of the Castle, and is sustained by its presence: everyone, in the village, is aware of belonging to the Castle, and they seem to be always talking about it. The Castle’s absolute concentration lures, calls for attention: K. is immediately obsessed with the idea of being able to have access to it, as if in that silence he had captured the echo of a call, the voice of a remote, incomprehensible promise . . .

The first time K. was forced to abandon the climb to the Castle and returns to the inn by the bridge; the moment he turns as he renounces, he hears coming from up there the tolling of a bell. Upon hearing that sound he shudders, because in it he hears vibrating the promise of the future ful-
fillment of his desires: the bell tolls for him precisely the moment when, as he turns to descend, he feels the Castle abandoning him.

At the Castle, the mayor tells him a few days afterward, telephone conversations criss-cross uninterruptedly. If from the village one tries to call the Castle, it is possible to hear the constant whispering of such conversations between the offices up there. K. has heard this whispering: it came through as a song of distant children’s voices. K. had to communicate at all costs with those offices, but upon hearing this song he can’t help but quietly listen: the voices are very far away, yet they reach him, they are for him, like a grace placed there beyond words, and nevertheless meant precisely to summon in us the words, the grace of the word . . .

. . . the desire to narrate which then arises in us . . .

What do I mean by this? There’s the village, there’s the apparition of the Castle. Of the landscape, in the novel, we are given only brief descriptions: it is what it is, it exists, it’s there, and that’s it: it is the ever-present backdrop, the cornice within which, the background against which, the vicissitudes of the narration take place. While reading, we cannot ever forget it, because our imagination ensures that we situate the characters in the landscape. We cannot ever forget it because right from the beginning we feel in it the whisper of the inaudible message. We go on reading in fact just for this reason, to hear the whisper, because at the end the message may be heard. In the course of the narration we seek for the explanation of the inaudible, the unconcealment of the promise.

The subject (us, readers or writers . . . to us, here Kafka is also the subject . . .), the subject could therefore find before its eyes the figure of a landscape that appears to be making him an incomprehensible promise. In order to describe such a figure, and the promise therein contained, the subject may somehow begin to think. It can, that is, begin to philosophize, describe the apparition of the figure, searching for the sense in a language as absolute as possible, abstract, universal. It can po etize, that is to say it can sing the appearing in itself of the figure, in its absolute beauty. It can also, and this is the choice facing us, narrate, which means construct the figure as place, village, countryside wherein and for which the events, the adventures of the narration, take place.

Narrating thought does not pertain solely to him who writes, but also at the same time to him who reads. In fact, by placing in memory the vicissitudes just read so as to remember them at some unspecified time in the future,
the reader has to narrate anew, renarrating (the way he likes, the inevitable deformations: renarration is always a new tale [racconto]) for himself and for others the selfsame (never ever equal) vicissitudes.

... or better the narrative tendency ...

Nevertheless, more than of a narrating thought, we ought to speak of a narrative tendency [propensione]. First of all because, thoughtful before a problem that lures it, the subject pro-pends [pro-pende], inclines toward a word which in the narration responds (not necessarily as a solution). In such propending is implicit a pending, a being suspended, a thought that wavers, doubting between this and that. Oscillating between different possible responses, it propends finally for the narrative response (which does not mean it stops waver...). But above all the narration is not, if we consider carefully, exclusively a matter of thought. As we saw above, what is in play in the narration is the totality of the self [sè]: body, heart, memory. It is in short not only thought, but the entire self that propends, that tends toward something or somewhere. The propensity implies therefore the presence of thought and of a more-of-thought: for it is the gathering of the self that sets out on the journey, accepting the invitation to respond to the problem with a narration.

Invitation? Yes, in the sense of a welcome invitation, of a grace, as I happened to say earlier. The narrative tendency accepts like grace the occasion that invites us to gather up the words we have at our disposal in order to construe a tale precisely about such an occasion. In other words, as a problem the emblematic figure of the landscape brings out, solicits, calls out into the light those vicissitudes which like a response we will have to narrate so as to comprehend the message of salvation guarded in the landscape.

... leads us thoughtful ...

What are, ultimately, the vicissitudes of K., what is being narrated about him? K. is he who takes precisely this problem upon himself. From the beginning to the end of the novel, there he is always strung out trying to hear, consider and unravel the enigmas that issue from the Castle. His are the adventures of a hermeneutician: tireless, he must grasp in each event that he chances upon a hieroglyphic to interpret so as to read in it the
“When upon the snow covered village silently the Castle appears…”

truth the Castle is sending him, that promise that seems to descend for
him.

During a horrible wintry night, K. staggers toward the school, where
he’s been provisionally entrusted with the position of porter; he has not yet
done any work as a surveyor, and is obsessed by his two useless helpers. But
here he runs into the messenger, who hands him a letter from Klamm, his
supervisor. That letter says, more or less, “. . . I’m satisfied of the jobs you
brought to completion as a surveyor till now . . . even the helpers deserve my
praise. . . . I am keeping you in mind . . . be in good spirits, etc.” What does
all this mean? The wind howls by in the gelid street, K. can’t help but keep
on thinking, trying new answers, moving forward toward new enigmas. He
will entrust the messenger with a new answer for Klamm, then, not seeing
him reappear, will go look for him at home, where however he will not find
him but his sister, who tells him a long story from which he learns among
other things that the messenger is rather untrustworthy . . .

K. therefore is led on and on to new events that can then be narrated,
giving them a form. The narratable thus constitutes K. as subject of the nar-
ration: he is the mirror in which the writer and the reader can be reflected as
narrating subject: by drawing from the narratable, the subject attests itself as
such. But precisely this subject is on its way toward a formidable, ineluctable
setback . . .

. . . until the unnarratable.

The message in fact is bound to remain inaudible, or rather uninterpretable,
till the end: one hears its whisper, its delicate whiff, but such a barely per-
ceivable sound, though perceived uninterruptedly, cannot be described and
interpreted by the narrating subject other than as silence. Interpreted and
translated to possess a meaning, the whisper is only silence. It would be in
short an empty message, without content, or with contents which are each
and every time illusory.

For instance, is there a road that leads to the Castle? One might
say yes: K. begins to travel it, but then here’s the road that bends, cuts a
sweep, keeps the same distance from the Castle, it gets neither nearer nor
farther. . . . K. then takes a side road, only to find himself stuck, his feet
depth in the snow. It is there he meets the coachman Gerstäcker, who offers
to free him and loads him on his sledge. K. has just learned that it is that
very snowy road that leads to the Castle, but when he asks the coachman to
take him up there, Gerstäcker pulls the sledge away: there are no choices: K. can only accept to be driven back to the inn. The Castle vanishes into the night and there remains only the figure of the sledge, the coachman, the snow . . . it is in this disembodied landscape that, the moment K. turns his back, from the Castle there comes, light and pleasing like a warm greeting or a vague gesture, perhaps menacing, the tods of the bell . . . K.’s heart trembles for an instant . . . the snow, the sledge that pulls away, that feeble tolling . . .

All of this, to be sure, is described, narrated in detail. K. finds himself completely immersed in that landscape, and of such a landscape there is extensive narration. But the landscape in its turn appears immersed in a something else which is kept silent and which can only be alluded to, it cannot be said, it cannot be narrated. It is the presence of an emptiness which nevertheless sustains, a nothingness which however exists, a silence that lets itself be listened to, that rings causing the heart to tremble.

Ultimately, though narrated, the landscape holds and protects in itself its own unnarratability, in which it comes to a rest. Described, it gives itself to us simultaneously as unnarratable landscape: it is not only what it is, but it is also something else, a nothing, an unsayable. The narrative propensity pushes the narrating subject to the boundaries of the unnarratable, and here, faced with darkness, the subject begins to tremble . . .

Interpretation Made Futile

In fact, having reached the boundary of darkness, the subject still struggles to narrate, to interpret in the darkness. But, as if pushing it aside, the narrative propensity will point to the unnarratable, rendering vain all its interpretations: the subject lives of and in the narratable, whereas the narrative propensity, by overcoming it, simply hangs suspended in the void of the unnarratable, making the subject heed the call of emptiness. But this recall makes it tremble.

Said in simpler terms, the narrative propensity in act in The Castle narrates of the unnarratable. In order to do so, it tells of the vicissitudes of a hermeneutician that struggles in vain to translate the sense of the unnarratable into a secret signification in virtue of which it can be disclosed. Vain vicissitudes, given that the confrontation with the unnarratable renders the hermeneutics of the meaning inert: not impossible, quite the opposite, more than ever realizable; nevertheless it is, at the same time, inane.
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What in effect is staged in *The Castle* is a narrative logic based upon a sort of principle of identity of opposites. In other words, given two or more opposing and mutually exclusive (in terms of meaning) terms, they will nonetheless be identical, both being valid or else valid in alternative stages and therefore liable to be substituted one with the other, or, again, one nullifying the other every time in an unpredictable sequence. By interpreting a given clue, we discover a meaning and at the same time its negation, both equally worthy of attention; if we keep on interpreting, any interpretation we come up with will be valid and usable. It seems to be a derisory situation, an unsettling mockery, in the face of which the subject begins to experience a sense of exhaustion.

Again and again K. finds himself examining clues that confirm or disprove his appointment as surveyor, without there ever being a possibility of grasping the meaning of a truth underlying the clues. Here’s Klamm, his alleged supervisor, that sends him a letter which communicates or confirms that he was appointed: “. . . as you know, you have been hired. . . .” But the letter, the mayor of the town explains to him, is not official, but officious, which confirms that K. was not yet appointed. It is therefore a meaningless letter? No, an officious letter can be even more important than an official communication. It is therefore necessary to interpret it as a sign of particular benevolence toward K.? Perhaps, but it is also possible that it is merely an old letter really addressed to someone else . . . does not the heading say only: “My dear Sir.” But wasn’t it handed to K. in person by a messenger from the Castle! Certainly, but the messenger we find is not trustworthy, he doesn’t even have an official title, and that one is actually the first letter he delivers. . . . Yet Klamm himself gave it to him in person. . . . He is not sure, it could have been a clerk that looked like Klamm. . . . And so on and so forth . . .

The annulment of meaning through the interchangeability of opposing interpretations characterizes all situations and all the relations entertained by K. with the characters he encounters. Each and every time K. is sought and then driven back, held in high esteem and then treated with disdain, with sharp and sudden changes on the basis of reasons that elude him.

Let it be clear: the logic of the identity of opposites is not a logic of defeat, which would imply yet the presence of a meaning, one of impossibility. When the situation seems to have become unbearable, it changes and becomes tolerable, only to fall back again into the intolerable: each move is for K. a victory and a defeat . . .
The Place of Tragedy

The subject trembles: the condition in which K. finds himself is above all a tragic condition. *The Castle* is a terrifying novel: the ineffectualness of truth as the search for meaning does not lead only to the total disorientation of thought. It is identity itself which is at stake: the subject becomes an agonizing “perhaps.”

The presumed end of the unfinished novel *The Castle* is well known: in the enervating and endless search for truth, K. dies of exhaustion. The villagers gather around his deathbed, and right at that moment the message from the Castle arrives granting him permission to live and work in the village . . . but K. is dying . . . Whether it is true or not, this presumed ending is not really decisive. In fact, the novel is finished from the first pages, when, at the moment of his arrival at the Bridge’s Inn, K. receives two consecutive phone calls from the Castle, the first to deny his appointment as surveyor, the second one to confirm it.

From the very start then, though he is kept alive, K. is actually already dead as subject. Let us say, more appropriately, that his subjectivity dwells in an intermediate space between life and death which is extended indefinitely. It is a space which is perennially tragic and from which K. cannot any longer or does not want to exit. If K. died, his subjectivity would be confirmed at the very least by the purifying act of death, by the catharsis of tragedy. But K. instead obtains from the Castle an oscillating identity, suspended between the yes and the no. In order to render it more stable and defined by either the yes or the no, the subject plunges into the interpretation of enigmas. But these enigmas are unsolvable. Interpreting thought attempts to strengthen the uncertain identity of the subject: “I am insofar as I interpret.” But the vainness of interpretation consumes the subject in the anguish of an unresolved tragedy. The narrative tendency is therefore above all description of this tragic place: the landscape appears to be an enclosed place where tottering comes and goes the subject, no longer capable of knowing itself. Narrative tendency means recognition, acceptance of such a plight.

An Indestructible Peace

At any rate, as is well known, K. never either resigns himself or despair: an incredible drive sees him through humiliations and defeats. It even appears that K. derives trust and a mysterious energy precisely from the inexorable fatigue that seizes him since the first day. How is this possible, what is the
“When upon the snow covered village silently the Castle appears…”

power that keeps him going, he, a very weak subject, in the landscape of tragedy? The fact is that, beyond tragedy—or rather, precisely as an offer, as indicated by tragedy itself brought to its ultimate limit—there appears and reappears the image of the Castle. . . . the figure of indestructible peace emerges, descending from the Castle.

It is true that K. never reaches the Castle. But at the village, at the Herrenhof, twice he succeeds in penetrating the forbidden zone of the inn which was reserved for the gentlemen from the Castle when they went down to the village. That zone is, in a certain way, already the Castle. K. has access to it the first time in the snowy yard where a sledge is awaiting Klamm, the second time in the corridor during the morning distribution of documents. Each time he experiences a defeat which would have been decisive for his appointment as surveyor. But at the same time he contemplates something which would never have crossed his path had he not persisted in pushing beyond legitimate limits, beyond the narratable. It is the vision of absolute calm, repose, and joyful industriousness . . . we are dealing once again with a landscape, a scene where nothing speaks to K., and yet that nothingness envelops him, manifesting itself in the sensation, the figure of an indestructible peace.

The strength that sustains K. beyond any refutation derives from that sense of peace, from the desire for that joyful industriousness. K.’s identity is refuted yet he feels compelled to move onward forever: the figure of indestructible peace has summoned K. to consign to it his destiny. The subject remains with a fluctuating identity, but it gains a destiny, the sense of a moving forward toward the unforeseeable, the unnameable. Hailing from that emptiness, it offers itself solely as sensation, a vague perceiving, a listening to nothing: it is like feeling that the bell from the Castle says nothing yet it sings for us . . .

The Landscape of Piety

But the piteous arrival of destiny, sent to us by the character as if to uplift our subjectivity from uncertain identity, makes it patent that the landscape, though devoid of meaning, is nevertheless the region of piety, and it is therefore brimful of sense. Lodged between us and the landscape, the presence of destiny clarifies how the landscape can be uplifted by something which appears to be solely tacit, empty, but which, more appropriately, is also a mute language, the language that points to destiny. It is this language without signification which the narrative tendency tries to express, finding in it
the sense of destiny. . . . Even if “tragic,” it is a destiny, and as such already
beyond tragedy. . . . But how can a language ever exist which is at the same
time endowed with sense and devoid of meaning?

The Language of Ostentation

It is necessary to return to the place where we see K., all intent upon inter-
preting the message that comes from the Castle. If K. wants to consider that
message as made up of a series of clues, he is free to do so: the clues will
reveal now this now that meaning. Except that such a revelation will prove
to be ineffective, irrelevant, owing to the identity of opposites. By the same
token The Castle itself is a novel which has been interpreted in this and
that way. One may believe that its meaning consists in a depiction of the
unconscious, or grace, or power, or culture. . . . All of these interpretations
seem to be at the same time plausible and undecidable, as if one could be
substituted for the other. . . . The Castle appears to be willing to accept from
anyone the meaning desired, but it is precisely such a disposition that renders
interpretation inane or interminable.

Must we then abandon it? No, not at all, that’s not the question; we
must rather push it forward to exhaustion, to its ultimate limit, until we can
show the limit. And it is only by keeping fast to that ultimate threshold that
we may realize how the mystery of The Castle is ever dislocating itself in an
elsewhere. We can interpret its message and there! no sooner have we done
so, that the message represents itself elsewhere, in the “elsewhere,” more
than ever replete with mystery.

How can such an absolute disposition and indisposition coexist in the
one language of narration? The question is that if we consider the message as
if concealing a meaning, we must also understand it as constituted by a series
of clues or, in more general terms, by a concatenation of signifiers. We are at
liberty to do so. For instance, we can think of the figures of the landscape as
signifiers of the hidden signified. But at the same time these figures are, as
we saw above, bearers of a sense without signification. This sense is neither
said nor voiced nor, for that matter, hidden as if in a hieroglyphic. Quite the
contrary, they exhibit it.

The figures manifest themselves from the emptiness, they show us the
emptiness, they exhibit each to the other suspended over the void. They stay
silent but come forward, they let themselves be seen, they indicate their
appearing right before our eyes. We remain spellbound, the heart trembles,
we hear the call [richiamo] coming from them, the entire landscape around
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us seems to be filling up, it now seems to be replete with sense. But since what we see is only an appearing which is for us, we can finally comprehend that, in the “elsewhere” from the signifier and the signified, sense consists precisely in this very act of the showing itself to us, to the “me.” The silent language of the figures comes into being as ostentation.

In other words, for the interpreting “I” the figures are signifiers whose sense must be sought in the relation with a signified which is more or less hidden. But for the “me” who feels in the silence the presence of an “other” sense forever elsewhere, these same figures offer themselves not as signifiers, but rather as exhibitors [ostensori]. In the emptiness they display themselves to one another, and it is in the appearing of this reciprocal ostentation that sense arises and that the recall of destiny reaches me. . . . The snow of the village points to the Castle, which shows itself to K. by bringing from the silence the ringing of the bell, which in turn vanishes as the sledge moves on the snow covered road. . . . The silent [muta] language is born the moment in which the figures, as exhibitors, gather themselves one upon the other in order to compose the landscape wherein lies suspended the sense of identity as piety for man, for the subject . . .

We can finally recognize that subjectivity is an oscillating up and down between an “I” that represents to itself its own identity in the more or less vain search for certain meaning insofar as equal to itself, and a “me” that identifies every time with the ever-changing figures that foreground [osten-dono] the sense of their destiny; not identity, but destiny . . .

“At that man, we should save him . . .”

But if the language of ostentation is a silent language located in the elsewhere of the unnarratable, with what language can we narrate of destiny? that destiny which, going beyond the “I” of the subject, is impelled by the narrative propensity? Let us think once again of K., uplifted by that exhaustion full of energy. In one of the last pages of the novel, in a passage suppressed by the author, the coachman Gerstäcker meets K. a second time and tells him, more or less: “When I saw you here this morning, dead tired in the parlor at the inn, sleeping on a barrel, you, land surveyor, an educated man, dressed in rags, soiled and thrashed to break a heart, only then did I recall the words my mother once said to me: ‘that man, we should save him. . . .’” Upheld by these words replete with a deep compassion, K.’s weary figure rises slowly and advances toward us . . . he falls in the arms of our memory. . . . Will we ever be able to forget it?
Narration as Imitation of the Unnarratable

But if K.’s figure is unforgettable, this happens because through his exhaustion it displays before our eyes the marvel of the promise enclosed in the landscape of the Castle; by the same token, this landscape in turn points toward the figure of K. In order to narrate the landscape in such a way as to make the unnarratable shine forth, the narration must in turn disembodify itself of meaning, it must in short narrate of an interminable vicissitude in which the meaning to attribute to the figures of the events described will remain ever undecided. If at a certain point K. were to find signification in the enigmas of the Castle and become fully, and happily, a surveyor, then the entire experience would remain within the realm of the signified, and the words of the narration would constitute themselves solely as a chain of signifiers. But we know that’s not how matters stand, or better, that his is not the only way. The signifiers are there, fine, but they remain suspended: yet the narration continues, and may continue ad infinitum. With what words, then, does it continue, if we are no longer dealing with signifiers?

The moment we turn to *The Castle* no longer through texts but by drawing from the memories guarded by memory, we realized that what memory releases to us above all is not the tragic remembrance of the contents of K.’s unsolved riddles, but rather his figure enveloped in the piety of destiny. We no longer remember the endless dialogues between K. and the residents of the village, but there appears before our eyes K. himself, his elbow leaning on the zinc counter in the parlor, there he is in the attic at the inn while he hangs Klamm’s letter to a nail, there he is once again, overcome by irrepressible sleep, sitting at the foot of Bürgel’s bed, who is about to tell him of the possibilities of salvation available at the Castle . . .

In the disembodiment of the signified, in the suspension of the signifiers, narration itself changes into ostentation. . . . Inclined to accept the unnarratable, the narrative tendency ensures that the narration no longer realize itself as solution to an enigma of the world, but rather that it exhaust itself as a thing of the world, a something which exists, is there, and in this being-there manifest itself, displaying its own figures, which in turn manifest themselves to us. The narrative propensity identifies itself with the landscape of the Castle, the landscape is imitated by the narration. But this allows us to understand that, though bound to its irreducible difference, the silent language identifies itself at the same time with the pronounceable language of the narration, that particular narrating speech that springs forth the moment in which the narrative tendency inclines to accept the unnarratable into its bosom. Through the words of the narration, suddenly we feel shining once again, beautiful as never before, the snowy landscape of the Castle . . .
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In the Land of the Gods

What happened? What is happening to me? I am still stopped at the Brenner Pass, in the train car. With my body leaning against the window, I keep my eyes fixed on the snow which in absolute silence falls on the tracks, on the firs, on the mountains lost in the night. While I watch, my memory recalls the image of other winter nights, of tiny side streets hampered by snow, then smells of beer and smoke, the faraway ringing of a bell. . . . I am down here, at the Brenner, and yet right here, right next to me, dwell the memories of the landscape in The Castle. I find myself here and, through the protracted labor of thought in the vigil of memory, I brought the Castle from there up to here. . . . And yet, while I believe I can think in this way, I feel at the same time as if taken by a new feeling: it is the living impression, the bodily and emotional impression that this snow which I see, this cold which I feel, are located elsewhere: I myself am no longer here, but elsewhere; the Brenner is elsewhere. And this elsewhere is the locus of the Castle, that is, the broad countryside in which we find the landscape of the Castle. Where is this countryside located, then? Well, most assuredly in Bohemia, where Kafka must have had plenty of opportunities to see similar castles. . . . The reading and the memory of The Castle allow me then to feel the physical presence of the Bohemian landscape? Of course, but this is not the point. In The Castle, in fact, never is Bohemia, or a “where,” mentioned; the landscape remains rather abandoned in a “no-where.” Even if it were Bohemia, it is a transfigured Bohemia: it is the “elsewhere” of Bohemia. An elsewhere which to me, at this very moment, is identical to the elsewhere of the Brenner, is situated in the same elsewhere of the Brenner.

At the onset of my experience I thought I was simultaneously here, at the Brenner, and there, at the Castle. Now, after such a long vicissitude of thought, it appears that the Brenner and the Castle are simultaneously here and in the elsewhere. . . . All of this has a laughable flavor: one might say that as conclusions go, it is somewhat threadbare. In fact, how can I think the elsewhere in the here? I don't know: I find myself back to where I was. . . . Should I then admit that not even a hermeneutic of ostentation, sprung from thought in proximity of memory, is capable of thinking the difference between the here and the elsewhere? What I can always think is: “Here there is a here, the here is here, and the elsewhere is somewhere else, it is in the elsewhere.” But what I feel is: “The elsewhere is here, I am therefore here and in the elsewhere.” In this “and,” in this “is,” there lies the difference that thought, even after having gone through the hermeneutics of ostentation, is still unable to think; the ostentation succeeds at most in showing me once again that empty, infinite, dark zone. . . . I would then be compelled to
recognize that ostensible thought, having joined the representative thought of
the signified, can show me with greater splendor the figures of the elsewhere,
but cannot illuminate in any manner that difference-resemblance between the
elsewhere and the here, that superimposition of two identical which are at
the same time different . . .

At any rate, if I ask myself once again where the landscape of the Castle
might be located (what in brief would be the where of the elsewhere), where
is it that I arrive when I reach the elsewhere, there and then that sense of
exultation—which has never abandoned me from the beginning—increases
yet . . . the snow shines even more in the dark. . . . It is this splendor, it is
the splendor in the midst of the emptiness which elevates my jubilation until
it shows me that . . . suddenly the imagination, the narrative tendency, dives
into the empty zone infused with the splendor in order to bring me a new,
unforeseen figure of difference . . . it looks like the ultimate comparison,
beyond which the narrative tendency cannot proceed . . .

That “elsewhere” in which I find myself and whose presence I feel
everywhere around me does not belong to this world, but it is like it could
be found in the world of the gods. . . . The where of the nowhere seems
to be the place where the gods live. . . . This snow which is touching me,
this night which is given to my eyes to behold: it is just as if they were the
snow and the night that flutter in the land where they, the gods, live! The
landscape of the Castle lies suspended in the void that separates it from this
world, but it is precisely in that emptiness that springs the “other world,”
the beyond. . . . Walking in a sea of snow, progressing into the nothing, K.
arrives to the other side of the nothing, and then there appears a castle. From
the castle someone has even sent him a sign, a murmur that races through
the snow. . . . How can one resist? In the land of the gods snow whispers, it
makes a sound. . . . And while in absolute silence the snow falls whirling at
the Brenner, I feel this sound that springs all about me. . . . In joyous quiet
I finally learn how it snows in the land of the gods . . .

The Mystery of the “As If”

The knowledge conveyed by the narrative propensity is thus not only open
toward what is low, toward the corporeality of simple everyday actions, as I
originally thought; but it raises, so to speak, these same actions (the simplicity
of watching the snow, of a wait in the cold) toward what is high, toward what
is without-measure. No doubt it is an occasional knowledge of the everyday
world, but if it is knowledge, it is so precisely because it proportions the
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occasions of terrestrial time to an incommensurable which is, as it were, a
time of the beyond...

It is always, though, an “as if,” “it is as if,” “it seems,” “one might say
that.” But how are things “in reality?” If the term of the comparison is
given by the “as if,” what is the term of the compared, the something which
is being compared?

When the train finally lurches forward and the Brenner disappears
behind me, my thought stops: around me there is but darkness, emptiness,
and the memory of an indestructible peace. . . . After having seen the land
of the gods appear, I really have nothing left to think about. . . . I have reached
the ultimate limit of the enigma of the double snowfall, beyond which there
is only the unsolvable in its pure state. . . . The as-if is the last similitude,
a term of comparison left hanging in the void because the other term, that
which is being compared, the needs-to-be-compared, does not exist. Or bet-
ter, it exists insofar as absolute mystery, discharged of all responsibility to
our world: there is something like an empty zone of difference. Stretching
until exhausted of all strength, the narrative tendency can thrust its way
to the point of succeeding in thinking this difference under the guise of a
figure which shows itself, an as-if that appears. Below and beyond this last
ostentation—similar to a little balcony overlooking an abyss—there is only
darkness, endless night. . . . Even the man who departs in search of his own
destiny must stop here. And here he meets it, this destiny: suspended in the
void, oscillating up and down, between the as-if and an infinite silence . . .

Note

1. Even though, as I have already noted, during the Brenner episode I had
no texts with me, I consider it appropriate to observe that, beyond the memory of
The Castle, there were other memories which wandered in my mind, and above all
memory of texts which I read or reread recently precisely in order to deal with the
problem of The Castle. I kept these texts present in memory in order to keep my
thought company during the journey. This companionship has been so close that I
can no longer say what part of the itinerary has been traced and determined by me,
and what part by this group, or members of the group. But ultimately, does it matter?
We were a group, we were journeying friends in search of the unknown place where
the Castle is found. Now that the journey is over and I am back here, I would like to
express my gratitude by acknowledging them one by one:

1. For the text of The Castle by Franz Kafka I used the old Medusa edition (Milan:
Mondadori, 1955), which contains the note by Max Brod concerning the presumed

2. Concerning *The Castle*:
   
   
   
   
   
   

3. On the presence of the natural landscape:
   
   

4. On figures, interior images, interpretation of enigmas:
   
   Giorgio Agamben, *Stanze: La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977)

5. On the gaze turned toward difference:
   

6. On the listening of a message inaudible to representative thought and in general on the relation between thinking, poetizing, and narration:
   
   
   

7. On tragic space and the search for identity:
   

8. On the oscillating of thought and therefore of objectivity:
   

And if instead of these books I had read others? Well, very likely I would have ended up in the same place, but by means of a different route, noticing in *The Castle* who knows what different things . . . This bibliography is absolutely not binding, neither
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for me nor for others: it is only a way of wanting to remember what, casually or otherwise, I was reading at the time. To consent to the oscillations of thought means also to refuse to pronounce a definitive discourse. It means if anything a capacity to say: “It happened that . . . on that occasion I happened to think in this way . . .”
In general a literary work acts upon a reader stirring up hidden possibilities for understanding, interpretation, and experience. The reader’s capacities depend on a tradition which the work revitalizes either as an object for the reader’s judging task, or as a source of his interpretive ability.

The theological element belongs to this tradition. Within a given group of texts, it is foregrounded as a problematic or an existential value. A case in point is Kafka’s complex and structurally fragmented production, and not only in those works which lead most logically to theological-religious reflections and confrontations. Yet Kafka’s theologicity is ambiguous and indirect and thus has given rise to many misunderstandings and unilateral interpretations. The greatest theologically oriented reader in the history of Kafka criticism is Max Brod, whose life and actions cannot be construed apart from Kafka’s own. Brod is responsible for the publication of Kafka’s work and especially for the editing of the most “unfinished” (both externally and internally) book—*The Castle*. In Brod’s appendix we read:

For what is the meaning of *The Castle* with its strange documents, its impenetrable hierarchy of officials, its moods and trickeries, its demand (its absolutely justified demand) for unconditional respect, unconditional obedience? . . . this “Castle” to which K. never gains admission, to which for some incomprehensible reason he can never even get near, is much the same thing as what the theologians call “Grace,” the divine guidance of human destiny (the village), the effectual cause of all contingencies, mysterious
dispensations, favors and punishments, the unmerited and the unattainable, . . . the non liquet written over the life of everybody.¹

Among the reactions aroused by this ex abrupto identification we might recall that of Peter U. Beicken who objected to “the negativity of the Castle, the oppressive and deforming weight which it exercises in the world.”² According to Beicken, Brod and his followers belong to the tendency or fashion for a direct, religious explanation of symbolism and of literary structure.³ Representations that make up The Castle and the narrative works of Kafka in general are interpreted as “allegories,” yet the allegorizing method is held by Heinz Politzer to be “the original evil (Ur-Übel) of all interpretations of Kafka,” whose poetic corpus should instead be treated as a “first rate literary document.”⁴ After Brod, Kafka criticism seems to have remained snared between the literary-theological and the literary-philosophical alternatives. To this state of affairs we owe, by contrast, the vigorous, certainly well-grounded opposition to the readings which begin from the philosophical, religious, theological, literary-critical aphorisms of Kafka as the overwhelming criterion of judgment concerning his own literary works. Dissenting from Brod, Beicken himself purposefully declares that the most important thing is to hold to a distinction “between the positive, affirmative Kafka of the aphorisms, and the negative, pessimistic Kafka of the novels and narrative writings.”⁵

The reactions to Brod and his school are anti-ideological in orientation. They tend to transform differences into alternatives and end up disassociating themselves from the theologically well-grounded. Brod is certainly neither a theologian nor a philosopher, his doctrinaire declarations ring naive, but this does not prelude a more profound attempt at understanding by contemporary readers. It is worth recalling his comment following the above-cited passage:

K. sought a connection (Verbindung) with the Grace of the Godhead when he sought to root himself in the village at the foot of the Castle; he fought for an occupation, a post in a certain sphere of life (bestimmten Lebenskreis); by his choice of a calling and by marriage he wanted to gain inner stability . . .⁶

The Grace of God is nothing other than an acceptance and confirmation on the part of God; God is present to man inasmuch as man accepts him. K’s action is thus thoroughly “theological” and not allegorical, since the latter would imply a linguistic disjunction between figurative, allusive discourse and directly theological discourse. Is such a direct “speaking-about-God” possible? The question cannot be discussed here; yet certainly theological studies of our century have brought out the necessity of the direct speaking-about-God.⁷
Is a theological, non-allegorical interpretation of Kafka’s writings possible? If we succeed in sketching this possibility we will understand that what is at stake is no longer a discovery of concepts or theological interests in the author’s texts; the theological point of view regards texts as literary facts and does not ask for specific theological concepts in exchange. We must go beyond Beicken’s attempt to replace the allegorizing method by referring to a “model.” He cites an epistolary piece of June 1921 in which Kafka projects an “other Abraham” who

to be sure would not make it all the way to patriarch, not even to old clothes dealer—who would be as ready to carry out the order for sacrifice as a waiter would be ready to carry out his orders, but who would still never manage to perform the sacrifice because he cannot get away from home, he is indispensable, the farm needs him, there is always something that must be attended to, the house isn’t finished. But until the house is finished, until he has his security behind him, he cannot go away. The Bible perceives this too, for it says: “He put his house in order.” And Abraham actually had everything in abundance long before: had he not had his house, where would he have reared his son, into what beam would he have stuck the sacrificial knife?8

First of all we should observe that the thematic of the house is imposed by Kafka who seeks the “other” Abraham. This is a typical example of the thematic decentering of Kafkian exegesis, and does not necessarily imply a “model.” But Beicken observes:

The willingness and comprehensiveness of the social spheres within which Kafka meditates on this important symbol of faith makes it clear that the poet understands the profane relations of power and social submission as a model for the relations to the divinity.9

Of course the model is never made practical. The use of this concept suggests a fundamental type of thought, one of a theological, metaphysical, philosophical order . . . , and with its own peculiar narrative “expression.” In the end this ignores the essential point of Kafka’s poetic thinking, that is, negativity (which Beicken reduces to a critique of traditional faith!).

In what ways does the Kafkian text contain theology, religion, metaphysics? In order to respond to this question we will make use of the composite notion of a “parabolic paradox,” referring to a formally closed discourse directed toward an ultimate meaning which, as the narrative progresses, continues
to be displaced, undergoes inversions, and finally is decentered in a suspension of sense. The truth of the parable or aphorism remains a suggestive allusion and loses itself in the space in which the determinant discourse no longer holds. We might consider, for example, the following aphorism (which I subdivided into separate passages):

A. That which we are truly able to grasp is the secret, the obscure.

B. God lives in it. And this is good, since without the support of this obscurity we would overcome God.

C. This would correspond to the nature of man. The son dethrones the father.

D. Thus God must remain hidden in darkness.

E. And since man cannot reach God, he attacks the darkness which surrounds the divinity.

F. He throws burning embers into the icy night.

G. Yet the night is elastic like rubber. It pulls back. And thus it remains.

H. Only the darkness of the human spirit is transient—the light and the shadow of the drop of water.¹⁰

Each sentence is a paradox, or rather, it expresses an idea which is contrary to common sense. The A–D set assimilates the paradox and would translate as: God absences himself from human capacity for understanding, he remains secret and obscure in order not to be dethroned by cognitive power. The paradoxical ideas are: A. the secret is that which we can grasp; B. God is obscurity rather than light; C. the obscurity of God sustains us, as our inferiority with respect to God; D. man struggles against God in desiring to know him and in desiring to annul his power (the murder of God); E. God protects himself by remaining in obscurity; F. man desires to destroy the darkness which sustains him. . . . We might attempt to explain these thoughts via a sort of theological exegesis such as that practiced on sacred texts. But such explanations would be useless. In fact they would destroy the aura of wisdom which the poet manages to create around the single aphoristic elements which follow one upon the other, paratactically. The E–H set makes the discontinuity more acute and blocks the exegetical procedure with startling images. The meaning sought at the beginning disappears in the final proposition. This Sinnverschiebung is both an obsession and a suspension of meaning, a
mimic of the deep-meaning lived in theological speech in the aphoristic form. Thus a feeling of truth is produced without a truth, a theoretical experience not destined to establish premises for further discussions or for verifications and developments of a narrative sort. The “darkness of the human spirit” is “transient” (vergänglich), as is the gesture of truth. Theology is reborn as literature; pure thought is de-structured in images. This regressive dynamic suspends the act of existence in a theticity without thesis which constitutes language as the privileged place for the production and consumption of existence. The primary linguistic instruments of such a “de-struction” are the “but,” the “perhapses,” the signals of the inversion of the constitutive flow and particularly the “as-if” propositions.

The Kafkian aphorism exhibits a complex modal structure which makes it difficult to fix the resolute point of theticity. We might consider for example the thought which Kafka forms in response to Bloy’s accusation that “the tragic flaw [colpa] of the Jews lies in not having known the Messiah.” To speak from the start of “knowing” (erkennen) rather than “recognizing” (anerkennen) sets up an insolvable moral paradox. Here the “guilt” [colpa] is more profound than the guilt normally attached to a direct responsibility: theology transcends the moral sphere. Kafka responds:

Perhaps things are different than they seem. Perhaps they never truly knew him. But how he is cruel, this God who leaves (zulässt) his faithful alone! The father always announces himself to the sons since they cannot think or speak correctly.11

It would be foolish to suppose that Kafka wanted to assign to God himself the fault in man’s not knowing God. Above all Kafka does not recognize this guilt, he leaves it hypothetically suspended in order to observe how it might affect God himself. The inability to speak and think is not an excuse or an extenuating circumstance. Rather it acts as a factor of judicative “suspension.” The theological sense of the fault lies under the “perhaps of the perhaps” operating on the moral sense, but this does not imply an overcoming of or alternate theological choice to the moral (as other critics have maintained based on the influence of Kierkegaard on Kafka or at least on an intimate affinity of thought between the two). The thought here outlined does not propose a thesis but a “sense of truth,” produced through the hypothetical suspension.

Several levels of “truth” are distinctly present in the aphorism. Its paradoxicality consists primarily in the fact that the “allusive” [alludente] level (parable, metaphor) becomes confused with the “implied” [alluso] level. To
this we can trace the integrative function of the “as-if” propositions insofar as their form does not seek to create a hypotheticalizing flight from the text, but rather, and following Hartmut Binder, it serves to carry the tertium comparationis as well as the “compared itself” to the constitutive level of the primary expression: “As opposed to the direct and unconditionalized proposition, the “as-if” phrase must express the fact that the content emphasized in the proposition as-if is revealed by an observer and that the narrator grants importance to this fact.”

The possible interpretation is inserted as a constitutive element in the fabric of the text under consideration: which explains the hermeneutic opening of the Kafkian text. In fact, it is the sudden eruption of a systematically deviant interpretation that renders the textual nucleus significantly open to interpretation. Many aphorisms express this semantic structure; the principal aim is to avoid closing the thought inside a self-affirming thesis, which becomes a stable truth to be taken up in every case, developed, utilized, and applied.

If we carry this over to theology, we discover a new type of negativity which we might term “formal.” Theology is the field of speech in which semantic openings and deviations become possible, in which thought remains suspended and is left to consider this suspension as “theological.” In other words there is a “theologicity” beyond theology (just as for the Gnostics there is divinity beyond God).

As to whether the Kafkian corpus contains a theology, we may respond with a paradoxical inversion to the question: it is theology which contains the work. This theology is negative in a sense which remains to be defined.

However, it is possible to speak of negative theology in many senses. We have already distinguished a theology of the “no” from a theology of the “not.” In the spirit of this latter branch we may further distinguish a negation which addresses the predicate and one which addresses the subject of the theological proposition. Let us call the first apophatic theology (which is subordinate to apophantic theology). The general theological-apophatic proposition takes the following form:

God is not X

In turn this form is an application of the general apophasis

S is not P

In the simplest case this is equivalent to

S is ~ P.
Normally $Q = \phi (-P)$. In such a case, the apophasis is termed “reducible.” We must keep in mind that the reduction does not take place between mere concepts but in the predicate-functions, and it is not ruled by principle. The negation of one or more predicates of a subject is thus translatable in the affirmation of other predicates attributed to it, which implies the exclusion of those negated predicates. In the contrary case, negation is irreducible. Furthermore, we must consider the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the negated and affirmed predicates. Heterogeneity is typical of traditional negative theology; to deny a predicate to God does not imply affirming another (or contrary) one, but it leads to an affirmation of a higher or “transcendent” order which can be broken down into a series of implications, without establishing itself as an affirmative proposition. This hierarchy of order can be called “ontological,” and is distinct from a logical or metalinguistic hierarchy which bears an extraordinary weight in negative theology. In practice this constitutes elementary atheism: the ordinary sense of the negation of the existence of God consists in the (pseudo)-inductive affirmation of the absence of the irreplaceable term “God” in speech which defines reality for us. Once the term “God” is defined or thought of as determined by the predicates $P_1$, $P_2$, $P_3$, . . . $P_n$, we have only to deny that a reality implying a formal idea of God corresponds to the Ps to deny the existence of God. This atheism is a sort of predicational negative theology. For example, the proposition: “God created the world” finds its atheistic correspondence in: “The world was not created.” Thus a predicate of God is denied and the content of the concept of God is emptied. It may also happen that negation cancels only certain predicates while those remaining assume a new “exalted” status.

A theology which regards the subject itself is not reducible to this kind of negative theology. We are thus left with the reality of creating, of providence, of the absolute, of transcendence . . . but these predicates of “divinity” no longer claim God as a real subject, as in the paradoxical phrase “divinity without God.” It remains to be seen if and how such a position can be assumed and sustained. To exemplify, at the cost of falling into abstractions, we could reduce apophantic “biblical” theology into the series of propositions:

1. God is father
2. God is judge (who punishes)
3. God is ruler (idea of the reign-of-God)
4. God is love for mankind
5. God is the event of creation
6. God is the event of revelation

. . .
Proceeding further, we finally propose the negative theology which “comprehends” the work of Kafka as that which remains and wastes away of every biblical theological proposition once the subject has become absent, inexistent. Thus we would find ourselves with a “paternal” divinity no longer the property of God, but of man who brings it to dissolution; a judicative divinity, a divine tribunal, no longer supported by the real power of God-as-Judge; a divinity of government, a “divine bureaucracy” without the presence of a God who governs, and thus a divine love without a God-who-loves, a course of things dominated by a divine necessity become autonomous, the self-production and self-determination of events according to a reason and a finality which possess the character and sense of divinity but which are not products of a real God-who-wills, finally a revelation without a revealer . . .

There are no thetic negations in this theology; it is not a case of excluding a property or the reality of God. Negation does not take place in a proposition in which one cannot properly deny but one predicate, even if it is the exhaustion of the connotative resources of the subject. The absence of God is not “posited” but must be “carried out,” witnessed by the very existence of man. There are no specific “negations” nor is there a subject who denies (demonism). The negative attributes are degradations which can be assigned not to a God-who-is but to a God-who-is-not, as to the Nothingness which is the unfillable void of his absence. This negation is modal and expresses itself in axiological determinations.

Now, following our scheme in a most general and condensed way, we can make a link between Kafkian texts and the negative-existential situations modeled after the “biblical” propositions outlined above. Thus the Letter to His Father, the Judgment, the Metamorphosis and in general all the texts dominated by a father figure can be considered as the negative correlative [correlato negativo] of proposition 1. The Trial, taken as an entity unto itself, is linked to proposition 2. The Castle, understood equally as a “great being,” refers to proposition 3. As for the remaining “biblical” propositions, they find a negative-existential correspondence in various characters and in formal situations within the Kafkian corpus. The general theme of the incomprehension and alienation of characters is correlated to proposition 4, as is the theme of the woman-and-love. In the negativity of the event, in the impossibility of a positive happening which pervades in general the Kafkian narration, we recognize the negation of proposition 5. Finally, proposition 6 is mirrored in the general obscurity announced or produced by the texts. The fact that theological negation is neither demonism nor “vulgar” (apophantic) atheism remains essential. These correspondences do not preclude exceptions; schematization is shattered, especially in the later Kafka. Our schemes should serve as an interpretive guide, rather than a set of reductive theses.
The debasing, the degradation of God is, for Kafka, the emptying of his power and personality, a loss of his “existence.” However, the distinction between mere degrading debasement and New Testament *kenosis*, the grace of God-who-is, is theologically decisive. Kafka straddles the fence between these two normally equivalent notions; the developed inexistence of God does not permit a full passage from *Erniedrigung* to *kenosis*. This passage implies the figure of a “mediator” who in Kafka undergoes the fate of the *Erniedrigung Göttes* transfigured in the very structures of disappointment of his narrative. The Kafkian figure consumes the debasement of God into his prohibited “images” within his own narrative developments. The dissolution of Kafkian characters thus assumes the sense of a destruction of blasphemous images, of the idols figuring the God-who-is-not. Kafka’s literature is existence spent in the experience of the God-like, drowning and deprived even of the power of *memory*. They disappear without leaving a trace, after having exhausted the reader’s capacities for understanding. To the “debasement” there corresponds “humility”: if this is taken as the *décadence* (Nietzsche) of the God-who-is-not rather than the presence of the God-who-is, then humility is the destruction of man, the loss of the subject-identity.

The objections to a theological reading of Kafka, which claim that God is not “at the center” of Kafka’s poetry and thought, must be understood literally, not as a critical observation about Kafka, but as a form of Kafkian language. God is not at the center; the God-who-is-not occupies the center of prohibited images which serve as the locus of his *décadence*. The Kafkian world is populated with “pitiful demons” (*faulige Dämonen*, Martin Buber), which are the images of God, such as the judge, the lord of the castle, and in general the characters who assume the “antagonistic” roles inasmuch as they are bearers of a *personality* in the process of dissolution, represented by their torn clothing, their faded uniforms. But the first attribute of the biblical God is (that which we call) his being-a-person [esser-persona]: the Kafkian characters as antagonists of the subject character (the “K”) function as places or centers of reality in which the dissolution of the originally “divine” being-a-person is represented. The same can be said of the “Great beings” which, due to their size or the extent of their forces are not capable of maintaining within themselves the being-a-person which constitutes their very reason for being.

The negative theology which embraces Kafka’s work presents itself therefore as the omnipresence of the God-who-is-not, the determining and decisive lack of a subject God in the creative moments of existence. Thanks to the God-who-is-not, man does not receive “justice,” he does not obtain that justification which creates his authentic being; unhappiness, evil, the judgment-of-death which is attached (like the “bestiality” which Kafka repre-
sents) to the originary moment of the being-in-life, and thus the inexorable mechanism of a process without procedure or events, the conclusive dispersion of existence itself for lack of a real power which could accept or justify it . . . , all of this is bound up in the theological negative where the revelation of God-who-is becomes inverted in the narrative representation of the various figures in which the God-who-is-not explains himself without leaving any residue. Clearly there is no place in this negative narrative theology for the very term “god,” as the language can no longer sustain its original metaphysical purity.

This singular form of negativity corresponds precisely to aphoristic literature, understood as free from doctrinal resolutions, whether these might be characterized by positive, optimistic overtones or by a profound pessimism, by desperation, by nihilism. In avoiding doctrinarism some critics fall into the trap of doctrinal nihilism. For example, the aphorisms: “He who seeks does not find, but he who does not seek is found”15; or “The difference between the ‘yes’ and the ‘no’ which he says to his contemporaries and that ‘yes’ and ‘no’ which he ought to say may correspond to the difference between life and death, and is a difference which he is able to grasp only as a presentiment (ahnungsweise)—these are construed by G. Neumann as direct violations of logic and thus as approaching a type of alogical thought.16 Now the very meaning assumed by the first aphorism is, so to speak, “historical”; it posits a reader already predisposed to the thought: he who seeks finds. Kafka paraphrases paradoxically; above all he denies the common aphorism and then adds that the true, authentic “finding” is not on the part of the seeker but of “someone” (the “theological” passive) who “finds” he who wisely ceased from seeking. Where is the contradiction? What we have before us is a methodological displacement of meaning (in the two terms “seeking” and “finding”) and an anomalous inversion. The aphorism contains a false symmetry which is significant for the way in which it channels interpretive attention in another direction. The second aphorism is formally more complicated: “he” is here one who teaches, preaches, while the object of his teaching is the clear difference, without a middle term, between saying “yes” and “no” (the biblical referent is again uncovered here). However, what happens is that the authentic difference which he should state is not simply the one taught, but another one entirely which he merely suspects. The paradox lies in the verbal pleasure with the differences of difference. In both cases Kafka obtains an enigmatic meaning, but it would be improper to speak of illogicity. Kafka declares the intent of the aphorisms: “That which I ought to do I can only do by myself. To become clear about final things.”17
This clarity is however never the direct content of a thought, but its movement within the aphorism, the dynamic of the paradox. It has been pointed out that Kafkian aphorism does not result in a propositional truth of a metaphysical, theological, philosophical order. Rather the aphorism is understood more or less as a means or an expressive expedient. According to H. G. Pott, Kafka would have been incapable of making a leap of faith; not that he denied the divine, but he would not have seen any possibility for referring to it.

But the fact is that “faith” is the “argument” of the operation of methodical designification carried out by Kafka at times in the aphoristic style and as often in the narrative style(s). For the Kafka of the *work* we cannot speak of faith or non-faith nor even of an “indifference” which also reenters the field of the arguments of the transfiguration of meaning. Thus it does not make sense to attribute to Kafka, as Werner Hoffmann would, a “tension between the impulse to find an answer and the incapacity to give one.”

Kafka’s questions serve to keep answers suspended and thus to let the pure sense of the truth of a question remain in the balance. His is a phenomenology of “truth,” a phenomenological reduction which expresses itself in the structures of the aphorism and the narrative texts. Hoffmann affirms: “Since no faith could have helped Kafka answer the problem of final things, nothing remained but the path of interiority (*nach innen*).” One common aphoristic scheme is as follows: first, a thesis is affirmed, and then, it is developed until it vanishes into ambiguity, in the allusion to a “correction” which is never carried out. This scheme is valid for note 50 of the *Considerations* (to which the above-cited passage from Hoffmann refers) which can be analyzed as:

A. Man cannot live without lasting faith (*Vertrauen*) in something in itself indestructible;

B. where both the indestructible and faith can remain hidden from man.

C. One of the possibilities for expressing this remaining-hidden is faith in a personal God.

The terms *Vertrauen* and *Unzerstörbares* are intentional translations of the more common *Glaube* and *Absolutes* (or *Unbedingtes*, etc.). Kafka makes wide use of synonyms in order to avoid common, overdetermined, and no longer manageable words. Already this fact signals the beginning of a dynamism in which displacements of meaning take place. Phrase B corrects and inverts, without however contradicting, phrase A. To have faith in something
would normally imply consciousness of the thing and of one's own faith. The A–B set creates a scission in the reception of the text through an inversion of meaning which awaits a later justification. It is not that faith is vain or that the indestructible is illusory, but there is a suspension (können) of faith in faith: in A thought is suspended, drawn in on itself (not however as “interiority”). But even this deviation undergoes a second type of deviation. B might mean: “man can fool himself by placing faith in his own faith, in ‘naively’ admitting to an ‘indestructible,’” but in fact B reads as: “the very faith which man nurtures, and the indestructible which is his object can remain hidden from him in spite of everything.” However, it is clear that in exegetically explicating the enigmatic moment of the aphorism, we lose its suggestion-of-sense, we weaken its power. Phrase C stands by itself as a paradox: we admit to a personal God inasmuch as we believe in his revelation, but C states that faith in a personal God is a possible way of expressing (!) the paradoxical concealing of belief in the indestructible and of the indestructible itself. Such a literal explanation, however, misses the point: when we listen to C we must not think back to A and B since we arrive at C only by making a leap. The “why” of C with respect to A and B remains unresolved and this assures the indefinite openness of the entire aphorism. The aphoristic development thus lies not in saying more, but in saying ever less, in making the point of departure disappear without contradicting or antithetically annihilating it. At other times this exhaustion of the thought is carried out, not by means of an external deviation, but through a sort of internal erosion, so, for example:

Faith means: to free the indestructible in oneself,
or rather: to free oneself
or rather: to be indestructible
or rather: to be.21

The subject contracts into the object. The contracted object produces a contraction of the subject in itself. This contraction amounts to a reduction, at first to the identical, then to mere and empty being. Thus a destructuring of the initial concept is obtained.

An exemplary, emblematic case is constituted by the following destructuring of the indestructible.

Before entering the most Holy One you must remove your shoes, but not only your shoes, everything, travel clothing and baggage
and under your nudity
and everything that is hidden beneath it,
and then the nucleus (Kern)
and the nucleus of the nucleus,
then the rest
and then again the appearance of eternal fire.
Only the fire itself is sucked in by the most Holy One and makes itself sucked up by him, neither one can resist it.\textsuperscript{22}

Here the “\textit{reducendum}” is he-who-enters, an expression proper of human being-there [\textit{esserci}]. The final sentence alludes to the entrance: to enter means irresistible fusion of fire and The Most Holy One, but in this fusion the “entering-one” disappears. A semantic deviation takes place, a constitutive “anacoluthon.” Personal identity vanishes without a trace; it destructures itself from without and it is impossible to say when the reduction of the external covering sticks to being-there itself. The actual “self” finds no place, it is continually dislocated. It is not “nudity” since nudity hides an interior, which finally is nothing other than eternal fire. After the first four lines or the first reductions, the terms no longer maintain a normal or direct significance; they turn solely allusive, mythical, improper. Already “remove nudity” is de-meaning [\textit{de-significante}]. Beginning with an initial pregnant representation we dig down to a negatively other “intimate,” the neutral absolute of the eternal fire. The indestructible is therefore the paradox of identity: “The indestructible is one; every individual is this one, which at the same time is common to all.”\textsuperscript{23}

The indestructible is the de-structuring [\textit{de-struzione}] of the individual in the universal. In general, the theological “positive” exists as its translation into the “negative,” but not as the negative itself, thus the following aphorism:

\begin{quote}
We were created to live in Paradise (the first paradox with respect to the theologue of the banished—paradoxical inversion).

Paradise was destined to serve us.
Our destination has been changed;
Nothing is said as to whether this has coincided with Paradise.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Here the reduction operates on the man-Paradise difference, thus on its two terms. The change in our destination is the objectification of change of direction or of the deviation in meaning which takes place within the text.
The theme of Paradise implies that of destruction: “If that which should have been destroyed in Paradise was destructible, it was not however decisive; if it was destructible, then we live with false faith.”

Here the actual meaning of the saying is destroyed. There is not actually any thing which should be destroyed in Paradise, but Paradise, destined to be lost, pointed to the root of all destruction: that which in existence and in language describing existence narratively, becomes lived reality.

The Kafkian aphorisms put into effect an Unwertung aller Werte which remains, however, within the limits of literary experience and does not posit the text in terms of a possible exterior change, in the spheres of the practical, the moral, or the psychic . . .

Identity and the Text

The negative [il negativo] of Kafka’s aphoristic thought has been widely recognized, but various escape routes have been created, including framing this negativity within the traditional themes of theological ethics. Thus Werner Hoffmann:

The words consumption (Aufzehrung) or loss (Abbau) of the ego indicate that the renouncement of the world, the turning of one’s shoulders, cannot be reached through an act of will . . . but rather through patient intense activity. . . . Our sins are usually pitiful false steps, not dramatic, irreversible falls.

From here the critic concludes with a notion of “human hope that good will may be recognized.” The unfoundedness of this interpretation leads us to confront the theme of identity in Kafkian narration. That which the author expresses in his aphorisms cannot serve as a guide for reading his prose but as an “analogue” or a term of confrontation in a consonant relation which brings the two “genres” to the same level.

I believe the concept of identity is at the center of Kafka’s works. The very place of identity is language: to say that being [ente] is identical to itself actually means to indicate certain primary characteristics of speaking about being (a purely ontological “identity principle” makes no sense and does not appear in Aristotle). Originally the question is posed in these terms: how is it possible to say something if saying is predicative and if the predicate attributes a B to A which is not A? How is a “material” tautology possible? A proposition which contains the same term as subject and predicate, taken in the same sense, is a
malformed proposition, according to Aristotelian logic. Every authentic saying is a “different [diverso]” saying, a heterology. Beginning with the heterological structure of the proposition, we can explain the tautology either as a limit proposition or as a metalinguistic proposition. From Aristotle to Kant and beyond, a genuine first level proposition must be a “heterology,” so to speak. To speak difference [il diverso], inasmuch as it is properly a saying, implies the constitution of a new type of identity (proposition as synthetic unit). This means that speaking is progressive and cumulative, hence the possibility of knowledge and experience of all types, of existence as historicity.

The highest unity is the text, which constitutes the second dimension of propositional meaning: the full meaning of this depends, in fact, on its position in the text, or, rather, it is co-determined in a varied and complex way by the propositions which precede it (and indirectly by those potential propositions which follow). A proposition is “added” to the others in the very textual order of succession. The text is thus essentially progressive. The “regressions” have their place as specifically qualified content and are subjected to the condition of formal progressivity (that which Kant called temporal reconstruction in the past plays a crucial part here). Our logic is substantially progressive, hence its metaphysicalness.

Linked to this is the self-understanding [autocomprensione] of Dasein [esserci] as substantial identity which becomes activated or constitutes itself within a synthetic temporal progression. For personal identity, every act in life “must be taken into account.” The concept of identity can thus be taken up to embrace different, even contrasting philosophical concepts, as well as fields such as reality, the conception of being, of nature, of the world, of the soul, history, the individual, society. . . . The concept of experience is perhaps the one which best summarizes the complex significance of this metaphysics; thus Heidegger’s essay on experience in Hegel becomes illuminating. If we take the concept of identity in all of its metaphysicalness, we see the return to preeminence of the Hegelian dialectic as complete exhalation and exploitation of the possibilities for “synthesis” which make up the richness of being, of entity, and of being-there.

The conceptions of man elaborated particularly in our century lie in the charged shadow of identity. As much as we recognize the lacks, indeterminacies, the weaknesses, the “intentionale Hingabe,” as well as the “second nature” which leads man to exist in his relation to the other, primarily as existence in a coexistential context, so much the more we witness the triumph of a synthetic identity configured as anthropological ideal of “integrity” (from Maritain to Gehlen). Now every concept or project of identity remains presumptive until it manages to realize itself (according to its intrinsic logic.
of realization) in some experience of fruition, which in general we term art. Here we recognize the “metaphysical” function of literature where the identity of the subject, reflected between author, protagonist, and reader, is put into question in order to receive confirmations or denials.

Is there no alternative vision to the metaphysics of identity? The revolt against metaphysics is the critique [contestazione] of the power of identity, a struggle against the destiny of identity which hangs over man. The task now before us is a recognition, an interpretation, a reexamination of the motives of this struggle, as we await a new form of experience not destined to burn itself out in the facit of “knowledge.” The possibility of such an experience has been affirmed by Gadamer who opened the meaning of truth as a movement from the interpreter to the interpreted rather than as a present assimilation, an exploitation of interpreting on the part of the interpreter. Among the literary experiences which focus on a so-called truth without identity, the work of Musil is of central importance. Musil’s techniques of annihilation consume the identity of man on the part of the predicate or of “qualities.” In the abstract, the other, non-identic possibility remains open, that which regards man in his identity as subject, as ύποχειμένον, both of qualities and of non-qualities. The Kafkian work develops this possibility in terms of a narrative kind.

Kafka appears at the end of the metaphysics of identity. What for this movement was the point of infinite fulfillment, a regulative notion of progress, is now, for Kafka, the “having become,” the point of departure for a journey which can only be regressive. Being is already infinite, closed and worn away in its achieved totality, history is already finished—there are no more events to wait for, the world has reached the perfect fullness of being, men are completely humanized, allzu menschlich, and the individual is already identity, he is finished within himself. In any case, identity should not, and above all cannot, be constituted. The paradox blocks the syntheticity of “thought,” and narration reveals the “unnarratable,” that is, the impossibility of gathering properties and relations within a merely logical structure or of filling out an empty paradigm with reifying content.

This is exemplified in the chronological “age” of the characters who are both children and old people. Like children they have no past, like the old they have no future, and they do not even have a “present,” which is proper to youth as enjoyment of life. Thus there are no creative experiences, only flashes of revelation, recognitions which consume the objects under the beams of knowledge and recognition. Description does not create, it dissolves, it distances the object or “other” in order to annihilate it through a familiar and habitual nearness which leaves no opening for approach or orientation.
in general. Narrative presentness is a phenomenization without residue, and hence without a result which the subject could take into account. Incapable of and prohibited from enriching himself or growing through experience, man simply has no identity. Kafka’s is a “man without identity.” But this should not be taken in the optimistic sense of an indefinite opening to every alterity, real, personal, historical, divine even, but rather, in the neutral sense of an attained finality or an ontological saturation which annihilates every added feature or novelty by itself. Since he cannot grow or decide upon his identity, since he “has” no identity, man is not even capable of losing it, he cannot die. The death of a Kafkian character is neither an event nor a catastrophe, neither an added ending, nor even a brusque truncation of a process in formation; rather, it is the revelation of an initial non-identity since it is already decided with the introduction of the character. From the point of view of literary experience, this implies that the characters do not have the potential to enrich the memory of the reader with their disappearance from the narrative scene. We feel no nostalgia for Kafka’s characters. The Kafkian figures, situations, and destinies are not presented to the reader so that he can identify with them, so that he can “become” the narrated (and often narrating) character. And yet there is no separation [distacco]: it is impossible to project the “Ks” or other characters into a speculative distance, to make of them an object of (a finally negative) Einfühlung. I cannot become one of these characters because I am already this character, from the beginning. If later the narrative explicates a possible-I, it does not pull it from the unconscious, and does not reveal a hidden-I: for this would be a moral praxis since what is brought to the light of the Bewusstsein is judged by the Gewissen and found guilty simply by virtue of its having been hidden. The possibility of radical guilt consisting in the structural fact of the hidden-I barely touches Kafka’s thought and poetry. The guilt of the “Ks” is “analytic”: there is no original sin, no radical evil which the word might provoke, condemn, or exorcise, in our consciences. This word belongs only to the God-who-is.

Can we still speak of a “universal” in Kafka? If we exclude Emrich’s interpretation, we might seek along the “formal” path. But above all, we do not find a model-type rich in value which could be assumed as “the good essence” of man (Feurebach), or as an “ideal” (Kant). The humanity of man does not know how to elevate him above the details and exceptions, mere surrogates of authentic singularity. On the other hand, we are not dealing with a jaded humanity in general or, if we prefer, the common bourgeois consciousness as the locus of the destruction of “qualities.” The man without identity is the consumption of his own identity-self in the succession of acts-of-being which constitute life. This succession is characterized by a parataxis of plans and
projects which refuse to conform to large figures or a comprehensive image of “man.” The essence-identity of being as thrown project would not apply to Kafka either since in the interim between being-thrown and projecting the identifying reflection is “slyly” reconstituted. The individual remains with all of his peculiarities and qualities within the dynamic of non-identity, since only the existentive can serve as the locus for the authentic reduction of identity. Thus the man without identity is not asceticism.

We must insert the “negative” in an absolutely unique and irreplaceable sense into the universal. This negative coincides with the “literary” or with the linguistic, insofar as we question how language can access the positive, the creative, when it has at its disposition a limited and discontinuous quantity of identical and preestablished meanings? How is “speech” \[il dire\] in general possible? The man without identity has no inner treasure to reveal or to communicate. His words are already used, consumed: \textit{thus there is no new reality to express}. What remains is the reductive language of analogy, and the free resonance between its elements. The man without identity \textit{is} similitude:

Many complain that the words of the sages are always and only similitudes (\textit{Gleichnisse}), inapplicable to daily life. . . . All similitudes mean that the ungatherable is ungatherable and this we have always known. . . . [But] why do you resist this? If you had followed the similitudes, you would have become similitudes yourselves and thus be free of daily toil. . . . I bet that even this is a similitude. . . . You won the bet, unfortunately only in the similitude . . . \textsuperscript{29}

Let us omit the paradoxical conclusion which overturns the thesis. What is worthy of attention, poetic discourse, is constituted by similitudes which attract and capture the mode of being or the “truth” of whoever runs into it. There is no escape from similitude, not even by means of reflection on its character as similitude. And no metalanguage can restore the identity spent in the pursuit of similitude or poetry.

Now how is it possible to maintain non-identical being-there in the similitudinal mode, to keep it from falling into a false monadological, solipsistic, solitary identity? The dissolution of the world as “in-which” guaranteed by the possibility of being-there, its retraction on this side of its reality-identity figure in the obsessive terms of the beast, the bed, and explicated in the deconstructuration according to time, space, cause, substance, the return to a \textit{primordial dream}—these themes only come together in the background of a \textit{coexistentia analytic} according to which the reality of the
“I” lies in the act of fulfillment of the relation-to-the-other (das Andere). This relation is formed in various ontologies, each one dependent on the form taken by alterity, that is:

A. “real” alterity (of things);
B. personal alterity (of the other-I’s);
C. absolute alterity (of God).

Each of these three forms contains a multiplicity of modes and different possibilities for correlation with other norms. The I-myself is “one” as a term of the originary one-other. Now if the other is absolute, as the God-who-is-not, the “I” (the “one” of one-other) is essentially non-identic. Thus the “identity crisis” unfolded and consumed in Kafka is another aspect of the unreality of the God-subject. Without the support of God the “I” lapses into vain projectuality, deploying the power of representing in the internal-external destruction of reality. “I” itself becomes metaphor. Walter Benjamin spoke of a “marsh world,” and of the “ethereal” phase of Kafka’s characters: “oblivion is the true protagonist of The Trial.” Thus oblivion is not a cancellation, a voluntary forgetting, an overcoming of the past, but the dissolution of the event in contact with the non-identity of being-there, with non-memory. If action is represented in gesture, this also depends on non-identity. As Benjamin explains: “Kafka . . . removes the traditional supports from human gesture and locates there an object of endless reflection.”

Gestures resolve the presence of characters and substitute for words, thus impeding any sedimentation of meaning, any identity inducing accumulation of acts and events. The gesture “consumes” action, it dis-owns [disproppria] the agent.

The gestural pact contrasts with the substantial verbal misunderstanding between the characters. The impossibility of locating truth, so much discussed in writings on Kafka, takes place precisely as a systematic misunderstanding in which the wish for identity manifest in the dialogues is deluded. It is in this coexistential interim of misunderstanding that the very “guilt” of the individual is born. Misunderstanding takes shape on the surface of narration as injustice, but in the role of alienation which becomes a general mode of existence of the “one” facing the “other” (the “hero” is a stranger). Because of this, social differences, as all generic differences, assume a determinate importance. Generalizing somewhat social differences are not due to structural or substructural factors, but to the primary superstructural fact of intrahuman language, which is rendered possible only by slippages, misunderstandings, divergences of every sort.
Imminent and progressive misunderstanding averts a direct collision between characters, it literally underplays action. The disharmony which derives from this—an antidialectical situation—encloses the characters in surroundings which then permit narrative exhaustion, consuming any possibility for the identity of the subject (protagonist, author, reader) to develop. What remains of the misunderstanding, the unrecognized rational faculties of the character (often the protagonist), have no weight in personal growth (as would be the case for the traditional hero figure who creates his identity through vicissitudes), but rather, serve in the progressive weakening of his reason-for-being.

The man without identity implies an integral reformulation of the relation between life and work, a new definition of autobiography. In a sense, the entire Kafkian corpus is autobiographical, while the expressly autobiographical writings are literature. Kafka does not recount himself, he does not abandon himself to the pleasures of memory, yet he lives the bitterness of a justification which is constantly sought and never found, the torment of an inexorable judgment which looms large as it precedes the very action to be judged. But justification and judgment are held dangling by a writing that prevents any judging process from becoming an event where justice can finally be achieved.

Writing absorbs the identity desired by the author. Kafka considers it

[a] compensation for a diabolical service. This descent into dark powers, this release of spirits imprisoned in nature, ambiguous embraces and all that can still happen below, about which nothing is known above, where they write stories by the light of the sun. Perhaps another writing exists, I only know this one; at night when anguish keeps me awake, I know only this one.31

However, the night is not a void or a shipwreck at sea. In fact it is the only authentic time of the wake as “writing.” But in the night nothing happens. The night is the world of dreams in which the dreamer can add nothing to the “materials” gathered while waking (according to empiricism). Precisely because of this a “meaning” [senso] is produced at night which does not transcend the boundaries of writing, and has no force in the world of daytime reality. Writing is not the interpretation of a reality which preexists it. Kafka adds:

Immersed in the night. In the way that often one bends one's head to reflect, thus to be entirely immersed in the night. All around
men sleep. A little play, a false illusion that they sleep at home, in
their solid beds . . . in truth they come together, as before and as later, in a deserted land, an open field, an incalculable number of men, a herd, a people, beneath the cold sky on cold ground, thrown down where they were before, foreheads pressed against arms, faces on the ground, breathing slowly.32

The night in which the poet is immersed is not his private night, the dream in which he finds refuge, but the moment of his greatest contact with humanity in the nocturnal situation of non-existence (to be thrown down where one already was), of the non-event (the cold above and below), of the non-other (an incalculable number of others), of non-life (the immobile position of man folded in on himself). . . . The poet’s night is the suspended existence of all humanity which no longer seeks communication. For communication belongs rather to the noise of day, to commerce, to history.

Kafka’s man is not, therefore, the “inner man,” nor is he solitary since his solitude is negative, it does not exclude, comprehend, or recall others. The man without identity is not “singular” or “universal,” neither self-affirming nor self-denying, neither sinner nor innocent. On the positive side, he signifies possible identity through the subsuming of others’ identities. But there are no authentic “others,” every other is, so to speak, other from the other, thus a projection of his own possibility or lost identity. And all of this can take place only during the “night of writing.” On the other hand, as we have pointed out, non-identity is not the same as annulment, mystic night, or identification with the alien figure. Narration consumes the alterity of the “other” without self-gain for the “one.” Hence the radical dis-temporalization which makes authentic death impossible. Writes Kafka:

The reasons for the fear of death can be subdivided into two principal groups. In the first place the writer has a tremendous fear of death because he has not yet lived. . . . But why [does] . . . the conclusion remain always the same: “Could I live though I do not.” The second principal motive (perhaps they are one and the same . . .) is the consideration: “That which I aimed for will actually take place. Through writing I have redeemed myself.”33

It is important to stress the non-nihilistic (and not anti-nihilistic) tone of this prose. The fear of dying is pure “fear,” as a definitive lack of being. The poet has never lived, he is confined to the night, he cannot throw himself into the flow of life. Thus the fear of dying is not actually rooted in life, it belongs
to writing: it does not say that which must happen as an extreme possibility, but repeats that which has always happened, better, the very impossibility that anything will happen. The fear of dying is consciousness of the other “impossible” possibility—impossibility in writing, possibility in living. Writing is thus not the world of the dead: the fear of death keeps it from dying. Suspended between his incapacity-to-die and the fear of dying, the individual is ultimately a missed identity [identità mancata]. Capacity for death is possible when there is foremost a “something” as substantial identity which is the subject of dying and when, moreover, there is a “to-which,” a world as other correlative, one may yet die for. We cannot die to the world of the night. The author goes on to say: “I realized I lived upon an ephemeral, indeed inexistent, ground, atop a dark fold from which the obscure power erupts at will and without any concern for my babbling destroys life.”

Perhaps life begins to exist with the act of its destruction? This means that man gains identity in the act of losing it, he makes a gift of it to an undetermined recipient. But is to be in the night of writing a different identity? Does the poet, refusing the identity of life (since this is precluded), withdraw into the monad of his writing-I affirming his identity in the style, the meaning, the “authority” of writing? Kafka refuses this surrogate identity: existence in the world of writing is not identificatory belonging, it does not imply one’s acceptance into the castle of poetry. In other words the writer has no “substance as writer.” The writer’s existence is ephemeral, it is a non-existence which gets lost in the pit of obscurity. We cannot speak of two existences, two fears of death; there is only real, daily identity lacking in a sense of identity, and identity which “mimics” writing. The writer grasps his desk like a drowning man a piece of wood, fully aware that he is destined to sink: “The writer’s existence truly depends on his desk, and if he is to avoid madness he must never leave it, but attach himself to it tooth and nail.”

Self-Identity and the Father

Man tests his identity in his relations with the other, he expects it from the other. For Kafka, the privileged other is the father. But in the “destruction” of the father the destruction of the son is consumed and destroyed simultaneously.

Kafka poses the question of his identity between writing and reality in the Letter to His Father. This letter is not intended as a means of communication, it does not intervene to modify the father-son relation, rather, it transmutes every lived reality—Kafka’s entire Lebenswelt—into a fact of
writing. The “life” of the son who makes his inner self available as material for the nocturnal world of writing is represented on the stage of a formally closed language.

In the Letter Kafka tests his own identity with respect to that of his father. The two planes of existence clash and converge alternatively, but in the end they fail at communication (whether this is understood as converging, or diverging and antithetical). The son places the father in a condition of being unable to listen; the letter is a “nocturnal” simulation of patricide. All that the father might be has already been exhausted in the words which the son directs to the father. Thus the father has no possibility of responding. As to the fact that Kafka never posted the letter, it amounts to an act of filial love. Beyond this the father had no reason for existing. In fact, within the letter he already ceased to exist. Franz’s defense of the literary aspect of his existence will consist in his moral triumph: the difference is attributed to the father, but it is not his “fault.” The difference is due to an innate necessity in the essence of the son who must recognize: “even if I had grown up free of Your influence, I would never have become a man like you wanted.” Diversity is predestined in the “other” origin of the son, the maternal one, which takes shape in terms of a cosmic duality between “force” (represented by the paternal origin) and receptivity, sensibility, or the “maternal aculeus . . . which acts more secretly, fearfully.” Any attempt at identification based on these two origins is already bound to fail given the duality which becomes ambiguity in the constitution of the son. The denouncement does not promise a superior harmonic composition of synthesis, but the failure of self-identity: “You influenced me as you should have; but it was necessary that I would end up succumbing to this influence.” At the level of solar existence, the only alternative to dependence is a transposition of Kafka’s self-subjectivity into that of his father, that is, marriage (appropriation of the father as father-function). Kafka is utterly sincere when he states: “To marry, have a family, accept all the children one might have . . . this, according to me, is the highest goal a man can set himself.” Yet Kafka eludes this enticement to identity. To become-himself by positing himself as his own natural other, to exchange the antagonist’s role for that of the protagonist, thus to obtain an identity according to genus, would have meant to deny writing of its primary possibility, that of distance, of difference, of methodic displacement of the writer’s own self-being. Marriage would have been a usurpation of the father figure, an acting-as-the-father to reproduce the identical original sin of acting-as-God. Nocturnal writing saves Kafka from usurped identity.

The sense of “justice” is kept alive by the son inasmuch as he can make it count in his incessant accusation of the father. The prospect of marriage
constitutes the crux of Kafka’s “decision.” He defends his own “non-identity” against matrimonial identification: “The essential impediment, unfortunately independent of every single case, lies in the fact that I am without a doubt spiritually incapable (geistig unfähig) of getting married . . . I am destroyed by the simultaneous assault of fear, weakness, self-deprecation.”

On the contrary, in refusing marriage, Kafka defends his fear and weakness, his very strengths in life-as-struggle. The prospect of marriage, the acting-as-the-father, or rather the reconciliation of the two spheres—or the time of night and the time of day—would create an identification according to an already discounted qualification where the possibility of existence, and existence as possibility, sink. Kafka chooses non-decision and knowingly assumes the responsibility for his non-choice:

If I want to liberate myself from the strange, unhappy relationship which unites me to You, I must do something which does not have the slightest connection to You; marriage would be the greatest and most honorable independence, and yet it is linked with You. There is something crazy about wanting to get out of it, and every attempt is almost punished with madness.

Madness is punishment. Thus marriage appears as the greatest guilt, original sin. Marriage destroys the dual structure of existence, the coexistentiality of one-other; woman has no potential for alterity, so to speak. A relationship with a woman is not authentic since eros is a private affair; eroticism is auto-eroticism. Marriage is a “false” act since the son must follow the model of the father in realizing his independent personality.

This does not imply an identification reflected almost as an acceptance, the fruition of his own weakness and dependence. In order to save himself from this masochistic, melancholic fall, in order not to give in to the sophism of poverty (a mystification of not-having and not-being as a superior “value,” the quality and richness of the poor, poverty as “beatitude” . . . ) Kafka must hold fast to his position as accuser, attributing the primary cause and responsibility for his necessary lack in being, his nullity, his non-identity, to his father: “My sense of guilt depends precisely on You and it is also too conscious of its own singularity”; “The sense of nothingness which often assails me (a sentiment which otherwise could be noble and fertile) finds its complex origins in Your influence.”

The paternal influence acts on the intimate nucleus of the son’s subjectivity; the constant guilt of the father lies not in one of his actions, but in his pure presence which conditions the son’s originary act of being. The
father never ceases to “generate” the son. The guilt of the father does not exculpate the son, it pursues him in its “singularity” and coincides with the sense of its nothingness.

Physical stateliness is one and the same with the paternal exclusivity which overwhelms the son, killing off any possible “other” which might appear on the horizon of his subjectivity. When Franz demonstrated interest in someone or was leaning toward an independent spiritual life, the father intervened against the object of interest, the friend, with “insults, slander, profanities”: “Without knowing him you would label him a repugnant insect; many times, with people who were dear to me, you cited the proverb of the dog and the fleas.”

The repugnant animal is the regression and degradation of subjectivity, the return to the body, the lowest point in the fall of the “other.” Corporeality is bestiality, the insuppressible residue of the other which attaches onto the “self,” incapable of facing it. The animalesque degradation of man, the loss of his identity for lack of an authentic “other”—these factors frame the son’s widespread fear before his father, now become “flagellator.”

Here the son’s “guilt” is revealed. He usurps his father’s identity, but the father, in turn, is smitten by mortal decadence, lacking the power of authentic identity. The son’s victory lies in his assimilation of the father’s defense; the father’s justification is neutralized by the fact that it is contained in the son’s letter. The father is asked to exhibit a power so great as to permit another of equal force to subsist through creation. The father is not up to such a task and is thus condemned to decadence. He appears as a God-manqué, a blasphemous caricature of God. The son is guilty of having made of his father an effigy of God, and so must succumb to this guilt: the winner becomes loser since no God comes to his aid.

Perspectives

The absence of God accounts for the text’s regressivity. As the presence of God generates the prophet, so his absence is alluded to in the writing of the night without time, incapable of an announcement or message. The text is already life and experience, it is its own “signified.” Having no reality to draw from, cut off from all transcendence, it can do nothing but “consume” existence in the various forms it manifests itself.

Once its “protensive capacity” has been neutralized, the text can then absorb the hermeneutic moments which settle in its gaps and typical discontinuities. The using-subject’s repeated cry against illusion, the first motor of
simulated textual succession, corresponds to this dis-identifying, de-structive power. For example, Josef K’s attitude, his demand for “rationality” from the court which has arrested him without any formal denouncement is the very illusion which, from time to time, generates the various “cycles” composing The Trial. Frequent metonymies serve to methodologically displace the comprehensive intent; the systematic designificance “signifies” the duping of the protagonist.

Hence the nature and specific uses of various parables. The essence of parable lies not in what it might mean, but in its having the sense-of-parable and in suggesting a hidden writerly authority. The intention of direct signification is thwarted, but precisely because of this it is revealed as illusory. No interpretation can reveal hidden meaning since there is no hidden meaning. The reader’s attention is shunted toward implications, secondary meanings, analogies . . . and it stops at the obstacles where it stumbles over straightforward understanding.

Kafka’s world is populated with evanescent entities which do not persist beyond the present of description. The power of language is concentrated and exhausted in the figures and situations which take the stage within the proscenium of narration. What is said now is not taken into account later, and is not the result of what was said earlier. Language is free from memory, the characters have no locus of provenance; it is not the continuity of the “narrated” which can grant unity to the narration, but style, structure, resonance, metaphor. . . . The “great entities” slip away from the clutches of description, and thus they keep alive a false impression of their transcendence, while in truth they have no reality, no “existence” appropriate to their “essence.” The indifference of the “great entity,” the Castle, risks being confused with the indifference of man toward it, but this remains suspended in an irresolvable doubt (man wusste nicht, war es Ursache oder Folge). We will never know whether the isolation of God, his indifference even toward himself, is a consequence of the weak, fleeting gaze of man, or whether radical human weakness is a consequence of the hardening of divine conscience. With the appearance of the Castle, a tenuous balance of reciprocal inconsistencies manifests itself. The negativity of this entity is reflected in the voids, the darkness, the cold, and the dead ends woven into the novel.

The shipwreck of absolute self-reflexive subjectivity (as Adorno says, it is “subject-less”) corresponds to the ontological lack of the object. The I does not carry the non-I within itself like a force waiting to expand in “nature,” but it is both positioned in and removed from the preceding non-I without origin or originating power. The abandonment for which the subject is destined, the renouncement of struggle (impossible for lack of an authentic antagonist)
is the consigning of the self to the residue of thingy objectness \([\text{oggettità cosale}]\), which lacks the potential of being-other. The subject loses and finds itself in the substanceless no-thing. The subject's destruction takes place in its thingly interior: in trying to reach the absolutely foreign, it reduces itself to the bestiality that doubles as corporeality in degrading emanation.

The fields of interior and exterior, subjective and objective, or thingly, remain open to the reader’s interpretive intervention, attracted by the text which provokes the very doctrinaire violence and misunderstandings to which the author seems to sacrifice himself. This applies to both *The Castle* and *The Trial*: closure of existence to event is predetermined from the very beginning. The episodes which follow in the novel serve to lead the reader back to a never-pronounced condemnation. In *The Trial* time stops at the moment of Josef’s arrest. The novel is mostly concerned with the sensory distortions produced by this event which places the arrested man in a unique isolation with respect to time, space, causality, and his relations with others. The here-and-now of the arrested annuls time and space, the non-reason for the arrests annuls causality: these annulments produce narration. The arrested-I functions like a greatly reduced version of Kant’s I-think of the *Critique*—an I-think as: “simple, and in itself completely empty, representation. . . . of which we cannot even say that it is a concept, but only that it is a bare consciousness which accompanies all concepts.” This I does not possess the power of the it-self: “it cannot entail a perception of my existence,” so that thinking about myself: “does not mean that I, as object, am a being or a substance subsisting for me. . . .” “Consequently I do not know myself through being conscious of myself as a thinking being.” This “emptiness” arrives at the point where, since it must recognize that “the I that thinks can be distinct from the “I” that intuits itself,” the difference no longer poses a problem. As a consequence all that occurs is already in the I-think, but not from it or for [per] it. The I is constrained to pure and bare “transcendental liberty,” much like a prisoner who is negatively free for lack of a self-identity that might be constrained. The arrested man does not even have a prison. The Kafkian character lacks the force of being-prisoner. As he writes, “he was truly free, he could participate in everything, nothing escaped him, he could even have left the cage, the bars were about a meter apart, he was not even a prisoner.”

Negative liberty points toward the notion of “somebody” whose existence is consumed in the impotence of “care” between men. Thus the absence of a judging, pardoning, absolving God is the “Power” underlying the trial without jury and in whose presence real eventuality is brought to its utmost exhaustion.
Man is left no choice but to regress into an insect, that other-self in himself into which the identity of the narrating-subject dissolves. The self collapses into its own theriomorphic pre-identity. Thus in *The Metamorphosis*, the protagonist’s conscience can only be recognized in the rejected insect, like the *child* cut off from those who “did not accept him” in spite of his attempts to accept them.

But is it not perhaps the story [*racconto*] itself, the language, the “logos” . . . that locus for a second acceptance which does not justify or save, but is capable of recognizing others without judging them? Is it not toward this locus that *The Castle* unfolds, where the fate of the protagonist is raised to principle of comprehension and narration of the very story of the others, freed finally from the “protagonist’s” anguish?

**Notes**

19. Ibid., 479.
20. Ibid., 483.
22. Ibid., 104–105.
23. Ibid., 47.
24. Ibid., 49.
25. Ibid., 47.
32. See Ibid., 83.
33. See Ibid., 83.
34. See Ibid., 82. Translation modified.
35. See Ibid., 84.
38. Ibid., 678.
39. Ibid., 683.
40. Ibid., 683.
41. Ibid., 685.
42. Ibid., 643.
43. Ibid., 646.
44. Kafka, *Das Schloss*, 134.
48. Ibid., B 407.
49. Ibid., B 406.
50. Ibid., B 154.
Absence of Foundation and Social Project

FRANCO CRESPI

The most rigorous interpretation of Heidegger’s meaning of the end of metaphysics is the one which underscores the link between metaphysics and the history of being.¹ On this account, the end of metaphysics is also the end of the history of being. The authentic sense of Heidegger’s research endorses neither the attitude of anticipation for a wholesale return of Being, and the attendant recovery of its foundational function (reflected in the religious or theological reading of the Heideggerian text), nor the “construction of a ‘non ontological’ humanity turned exclusively toward beings and engaged in the techniques of organization and planning of their diverse environments.”² This last position actually reiterates the “strong” conception of metaphysics “insofar as it ends up attributing to beings and to their fields of interaction the same peremptory authority which thought in the past attributed to metaphysical Being.”³

Given this state of affairs, the perspective is supported neither by the anticipation for an absolute overcoming, nor by an absolute commitment to being, while the subject, in turn, appears no longer as “founding center,” in fact it doesn’t reside in any center. As a result, each project cannot any longer be thought in the pure terms of the transcendental constitution of Kantian reason (i.e., the individuation of the conditions for the a priori possibility of experience); at the same time, each problem connected to the transcendental dimension must now be thought in rigorous conjunction with the “finite-historical thrownness which unfolds between birth and death” (i.e., the individuation of the conditions of possibility understood in the factual sense of the term).⁴

The consequences of this reflection on the meaning of Heidegger’s research, which here is barely alluded to but assumed as background to the present essay, deserve to be confronted with some of the problems which are
of more direct interest to sociological theory, particularly in its critical and planning [progettuali] functions.

In the first place, in fact, the acknowledgment of the end of any perspective for a future advent of Being coincides with the present-day crisis of the utopian perspective of a final overcoming of contradictions that inspired major sociological theories, such as those of positivist or Marxist matrix which were dominant during the first half of this century.

Second, the denunciation of the metaphysical character of the “empirical” attitude assumed in the techniques of organization and programming [pianificazione] affects directly those still common neopositivist models of social technology which claim to be neutral.

Third, the question raised concerning the nature of the transcendental constitution evidences the problematic character also of those theories which, though still partaking of the hermeneutic camp (Apel, Habermas), are nevertheless operating within the Kantian tradition.

Fourth and lastly, the absence of an absolute anthropological foundation (humanism, essential rationality, etc.) puts in crisis the critical capacity of social theory, which finds itself deprived of those ideal referents needed to legitimate its claims on the existent.

If the first point is today largely common knowledge even among the prevailing currents within sociological theory, the other three indicate areas with respect to which much work remains yet to be done. The crisis of foundation and the end of ontology do not in fact question only the attitude of sociological theory with respect to social dynamics, but rather invest also what could be considered the underlying base of sociality, that is, the conditions for the predictability of behavior [dell’agire], which until now have always been guaranteed by forms of absolutization of the symbolic normative order. The awareness concerning the limits of knowledge is now counterfoisted to the strong experience of thought, characterized by the possession of truth and of absolute foundation, and tends to deteriorate the basis for the legitimation of power and of norms.

The problems we are confronted with here are manifold and complex, as well as of varying nature. We must therefore proceed to a selection, and then attempt to evidence those problematic nuclei whose investigation bear fruit to the development of research. The issues to be addressed in this essay, albeit in a schematic fashion, are the following:

a. What are the general characteristics of the experience of the absence of foundation insofar as it is a cultural phenomenon?
b. In terms of the sociology of knowledge, what is the type of society and of historical experience that makes the emerging of this new awareness possible?

c. Starting from this experience, in what way can we configure the critical function of sociological theory?

d. In the contrast between this position and the requirements of a foundationally strong social predictability, is it possible to configure a collective experience of the end of foundation, or is the weak position to remain fatally the thinking of the elite and therefore still a form of Enlightenment?

To acknowledge the absence of foundation with its irrevocable traits entails renouncing all temptation to formulate a total project for the transformation of social reality, not only on the basis of the awareness that such a reality, owing to its complexity, eludes any planning [progettuale] intentionality, but also because the recognition of the limits of knowledge discloses the violence contained in the will to impress on real-life experience the excessive simplification of theoretical paradigms. Such experience is therefore characterized more by an attitude of attention [attenzione] than by one of action-intervention, an attitude which aims to display [mostrare] rather than to demonstrate [dimostrare] or to “construct.” That the recognition of the limit is not in itself sufficient, and that therefore there is also need to refuse the seductiveness of the totalizing project and of paradigmatic violence, is demonstrated by the fact that in no way, for example, can Kant’s thought (which nevertheless inaugurates the analysis of the radical limits of the intellect) be assimilated into the present-day experience of the absence of foundation. Nor can we turn to such diverse forms of thought as logical neopositivism or pragmatism, even though these are variously marked by a recognition of the limits of reason.

In order to come upon a weak modality of the experience of the limit we must look back to Nietzsche, who from a certain angle inaugurates it, while under a different light appears to be practically negating it. But above all it is with Heidegger that thinking becomes absolute attention and listening, and it is with Wittgenstein that thinking must heretofore relinquish all pretense to totalization—think of the itinerary that goes from the supreme attempt to construct, with the Tractatus, a system of logical thought authentically strong in its definitive though limited character, to the recognition of the plurality of language-games and forms of life. When we can say, concerning Wittgenstein, and stretching things a tad, that he believed passionately that
everything that counts in human existence is precisely that upon which, according to his way of seeing it, we must be silent; when Wittgenstein writes that only if we refrain from expressing it, “nothing [of the unsayable] is lost,” it is then that the experience of the limit of thinking and of the sayable asserts itself with full evidence.

Such an experience has nothing crepuscular about it, nor is it brought about by yielding to forms of aestheticizing, self-complacent pathos. The rigorous recognition of the unsayable as the limit of the sayable means maintaining a tension between the sayable and the unsayable which finds its high point and “appropriate” attitude in being silent [Tacere]. Such an attitude is totally alien to both, a lyricism of the unsayable, which would be precisely an attempt, doomed to fail, to grasp the inexpressible, as well as to any form of contraposition of life to thought, insofar as any vitalism would not be but an undue reconstitution of an ontological reference, and an arbitrary absolutization of a symbolic image of what cannot either be thought or said. The rigorousness of such experience, its lending itself neither to emotive or consolatory drift, nor to easy mysticisms of the ineffable, constitutes its specificity.

The moment in which, starting from the experience of radical limit of any form of the sayable, and inasmuch as necessarily tied to a determinate form of mediation, thinking recognizes itself as transcendence, at that point thinking succeeds in not transforming this awareness into a Hegelian conclusion concerning its being absolute. It will know itself as being at one and the same time in-cluded and ex-cluded, that is to say, within and outside the forms of symbolic mediation, but not in a way such that through this self-knowledge it can resolve its situation, and comprehend itself. Thinking in fact remains open in transcendence [aperto nella trascendenza] without being able to either solidly grasp itself again in determinacy, or let itself go in indeterminacy. Moreover, in this non-concluding, thinking does not yield to skepticism either, insofar as its remaining open makes it “trustful” about its capacity to stay suspended in an unsustainable [insostenibile] situation. In this light, thinking is in fact the recognition of the irreconcilable character of the existential situation and of the absence of a definitive overcoming of its contradictions. There is therefore no telos of history, which, quite to the contrary, now reveals itself to be the repetitive experience of forms of symbolic mediation, albeit ever new and with differing degrees of awareness, of the very same irreconcilability.

Weak thought is therefore constituted primarily by the lack of absolutization, is characterized by both the recognition of the radical limit of thinking and of existential irreconcilability, and finally it is naturally opposed to any logical or historicist triumphalism.
The “desperation” of this thought, however, has nothing dramatic about it, inasmuch as it has now been divorced from the need of those reassuring certainties which only ideologically absolutizing forms can furnish: the pathos of lack would be nothing more, in this case, than the flip side of faith in the absolute. To exit the logic of absolutization means in fact leaving behind the hope/desperation alternative. More than that, it means opening up to a new, non-illusory hope which consists in being able to adhere—without yielding to the temptation of negating or suppressing it—to the irreconcilability which is proper to existence, in being able, in short, to be finally moved by a “life drive” (acceptance of the irreconcilability) instead of a “death drive” (aspiration to the overcoming of the irreconcilability). We are therefore dealing with a strong sense of the acceptance of irreconcilability, for it is not a repudiation of the struggle that is born out of the contradictions of ex-sisting (which would be another way of reductio ad unum), but on the contrary an involvement in these contradictions, aimed not at masking but rather at managing [gestione] them for what they are: the precarious and unstable form for temporary support of a situation which, in the last analysis, is unsustainable.8

We can now ask ourselves: in what kind of society and of historical experience does it become possible for such a position to emerge? In order to answer, it is necessary to refer to a series of well-known phenomena: the improvement in material structural conditions of present-day developed societies, and the cultural elements which characterize the epoch of science and technology.

Concerning the first aspect, the experience of the demise of foundation appears as the (only superficially paradoxical) result of the relative strengthening of the material conditions for human existence, owed to the progressive freeing from the primary needs for survival and the reign of necessity, courtesy of economic and technical development. In order to be able to attain that experience we had to go through the radical relativization of cultural forms and a recognition of their plurality, more than that, of the difference between nature and culture and therefore of the necessarily conventional character of symbolic mediation. When the conditions for social life remain tied to the primary needs of self-preservation, we cannot shift away from the absolute predictability of behavior in a given situation. In fact, in the relation between man and environment, as among different cultural units, these situations are generally risky and difficult and do not allow individual initiative the luxury of ample margins of discretion. As a result, the form of cultural mediation is absolutized, becoming natural or sacred bond, and its historical-conventional character is thus obscured. At best, the recognition of these relations is reserved for those who hold the levers of power, as Nietzsche taught us.
The loosening from the reign [regno] of necessity enfeebles territorial links and allows for wider circulation among different societies, thus facilitating the relativization of cultural forms.

Increasing the differentiation of social functions and roles accentuates individual traits, and promotes the broadening of the margins of discretion of social norms and values. No longer bound mainly to the function of normative sense production, but rather to transformation-manipulation of a scientific-technical kind, thinking perceives its own partiality the very moment in which it discovers within itself hitherto unsuspected potentialities: for the very scientific method applied to the same modalities of knowledge reveals the essential limits of the latter.

On the other hand, if from the consideration of the relation between the structural conditions of society and the increased awareness of the limitations and reductiveness of thinking, we move on to the analysis of the particular type of historical experience which has laid the groundwork for the rise of such an awareness, then the latter appears also as the product of the increased consciousness of the destructive character manifested by the absolutization of the products of thought. This type of experience is too well known for us to belabor it here: suffice it to say that this is the context for Hegel’s reflection on the nexus Enlightenment-Terror, as well as for the more recent analyses of the connection between dogmatic Marxism and the gulags, passing through Nietzsche’s denouncing of the relationship between Truth and domination. But it is above all the critique of rational-scientific rationality from Max Weber to Adorno that has evidenced the destructive character of a thought which, insensitive to its own limitations, assumed its own operative effectiveness to be the absolute rule, committing itself without much ado to changing the world.

The violence of theology, of metaphysics, of rationalism, and of science runs through the entire course of our history as the manifestation of a thought strong in its dogmas, of its ontological foundations, of its “objective” criteria. It is this violence that is loathsome to a thought which refuses to impose itself on reality while seeking to establish with it a more cautious hermeneutic rapport inspired by attention; a thought which attempts to grasp the interaction of complex magnitudes, and is not reducible to the univocal schemes of expeditious rationality; a thought, therefore, which advances by trial and error, reflecting on the consequences it might unleash, apt to consider certainty an error and the belief of having understood as deception.9

The critical consciousness of the destructive valence embedded in the ratio and in the ratio-control relationship does not surface as the result of a real weakening of the structures of domination, but rather the moment these structures reach the highest level of objectification, engendering a crisis in the
ideological forms which legitimated them. Domination appears then in its crude brutality, no longer dressed up in sacral garments that might justify it, and liable to be exposed by a thought already aware of its relative impotence.

In order to comprehend the specificity of the demise of foundation with respect to the critique of the ratio and the problems connected with the critical function of social theory, it might be useful to confront it with the experience of someone who has at once promoted the critique of the ratio and claimed a critical role for social theory. More than any other contemporary philosopher, Adorno has constantly underscored the fatally destructive character of both Enlightenment reason and of utopian forms grounded upon the totalizing ideal of an illusory overcoming of historical contradictions. At the same time, Adorno has never abandoned the commitment to a radical transformation of the existing social orders, exposing every critique of reason not backed up by a trust in reason itself and by an open-minded disposition toward yet untried possibilities.

The fact that Adorno would have very likely been distrustful of any radical questioning of the power of reason, insofar as it would have sounded to his ear as suspect of irrationalism, should not make us forget the many points of contact between his critique of Enlightenment and the present-day experience of the limits of reason—even though the latter issues rather from that Heidegger toward whom it is well known Adorno manifested a radical antipathy. Nevertheless, we are not trying to deny the theoretical, even substantive, differences that sets apart the two discourses, but rather to grasp, often precisely through an analysis of these differences, the specific significance which is assumed by the experience of the end of foundation with respect to both traditional rationalism and the problem of the social.

The terms for such a comparison cannot be developed here with the necessary amplitude, we shall limit ourselves to an outline. As a first approximation, we can consider Adorno’s position as intermediate between on the one hand the strong positions of classical metaphysics, idealism, and positivism, and on the other the weak positions of Heideggerian nihilism, which announce the end of metaphysics and of ontology, of Wittgenstein’s experience, which underscores the limits of the sayable, and of those other positions which insist on the recognition of the irreconcilability of ex-sisting. What brings Adorno’s position close to the latter modalities is without a doubt the refusal of any affirmative character of the true and of any absolutization of identity.

In Adorno in fact negative dialectics itself is not rescued from the objective connection of blinding, which is common also to other forms of thought. It too must therefore, in the last analysis, turn back against itself, unable
to rest in itself without becoming in turn a totalizing form. Thought must capitulate, but that’s not reason enough for it to withdraw, leaving the “obtuseness of realized counter-reason” triumphant. Thought must maintain open the opening to possibility, to the promise of the other, even if it will not be kept, to hope, even if it cannot and should not be formulated.

The inadequacy between thought and thing, the excess of the real with respect to thought, is what according to Adorno must be constantly kept in view in order to feed that tension toward what remains outside of the determinate form of thought itself. Yet the reductive character of such a form ought not lead us to think (as happened with the concept of reification in Lukács) of the possibility of a thought devoid of determination, or of the exaltation of an immediate coincidence between being and thought.

The critique of identity affects therefore every form of absolutization and of totalization which can be inscribed in the very concept of immediacy or in the concept of absolute subject. It is precisely in this refusal to absolutize both identity (as in idealism) and non-identity (as in the diverse forms of irrationalism)—meanwhile recognizing that the latter, when chosen against identity, becomes itself identity—that we can perceive the close gap between Adorno and those positions that stress the limits of thinking. In either case, in fact, what edges onward is the awareness that, if thought cannot do without symbolic mediations, since no reference is possible which is external to them, then these same symbolic mediations, precisely insofar as they are determinate, produce contradictions, which in turn are tied inevitably to their very function. What on the other hand separates Adorno from the present-day theoretical positions can be perceived by the fact that his critique of Reason is always developed through reference, in the strong sense, to reason itself.

The statement contained in Dialectic of Enlightenment: “We are wholly convinced—and therein lies our petitio principii—that social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought,” finds continuity in the later Adorno of Negative Dialectics, where in his criticism of Heidegger he states that “today philosophy demands, as it did in Kant’s times, a critique of reason by means of reason, and not its banning or elimination.” Nevertheless, if it is obvious that no form of thought as such can ban thinking reason, this does not mean that we may not seek different modalities from those of Enlightenment or Kantian rationality.

The loyalty to the discursive forms of reason reveals, at the same instant in which disenchantment is made evident, the “incessant self-destruction of Enlightenment,” and represents perhaps one of the highest moments of Adorno’s ethical and philosophical commitment. But—despite the proclaimed necessity to keep the door open to what is other, so close in spirit to herme-
neutics—this loyalty is also the element that renders it more unyielding to the possibility of a different modality in the use of philosophic language, as attempted, in fact, by Heidegger and hermeneutics. The adherence, albeit in the negative, to the dialectical scheme seems to mark Adorno’s continuity with the tradition of strong thought. Even though he refused a dialectic which concluded with the unity of absolute overcoming, Adorno does not renounce the “hope of conciliation,” though it be a hope for something which in no way can be defined. Such hope is in fact above all a form of resistance of thought “against what is merely existing,” a sign of the “imperious freedom of the subject” with respect to the object. A reference, this last one, which betrays the links with Kant’s transcendental constitution and renders problematic the approach to locating that possibility in the factual sense of the term, to which I referred to at the beginning quoting Vattimo. Adorno in fact has always had an ambivalent relationship with sociological research of the empirical stamp.

The negation of positive utopia does not therefore eliminate the utopian tension as disclosure toward the possible and the indeterminate, remaining thus within a redemptive perspective (even though the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself is left suspended). What matters most is to retain the tension, though for Adorno thought which tends toward the unconditioned never really frees itself from its preconditions and often runs up against inevitable deformations. Perhaps it is precisely in the final passage of Minima Moralia, in which there is a reference to redemption, that one reads most clearly Adorno’s ambivalence in this regard. In this passage Adorno points out that the task of knowledge is to “establish perspectives in which the world is disarranged, become estranged, revealing its fractures and its chinks, as it will appear someday deformed and lacking in messianic light.” Having stated that, when faced with hopelessness, philosophy’s justification resides in considering all things “from the point of view of redemption,” positioning itself, that is, within a positive perspective of liberation which is born out of the negation of the existent, Adorno recognizes that the absolute positivity of redemption constitutes the “absolutely impossible” insofar as it presupposes “if only by a whisper” a point of view absolutely external and transcendent with respect to existence.

Thought is therefore to be kept in possibility-impossibility, an oscillating with respect to which the problem of the reality-unreality of redemption becomes secondary. It would then seem that the particular meaning conferred upon the utopic orientation does not essentially contrast with the recognition of the end (without return) of being, unless perhaps we refer to the degree of intensity felt by the necessity of opening up toward the positivity of the promise.
I believe it is important to understand the deeper reason for Adorno’s insistence on both the function of rationality as well as the disclosure of the promise: such an insistence appears in fact directly linked with the vital importance in Adorno of the problem of social order and of the struggle against domination.

Adorno’s categorical imperative: “To arrange . . . thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself,” 23 points to the gravity of a commitment with which we cannot but confront ourselves. The problem disclosed here can be analyzed along two guiding principles: the first concerns the requirements of a thought which does not yield or become accessory, not even implicitly, to a repressive system, maintaining its critical function intact vis-à-vis the logic of domination and violence. The second guiding principle concerns instead the question of the possibility of founding consensus and social solidarity without slipping back into some form of absolutization.

With regard to the critical function, there seem to be no great theoretical difficulties, given that the experience of the absence of foundation is by its very nature constitutively antagonistic to any form of absolutizing statement. It removes from domination any possibility of legitimation precisely through the radical critique of ontology, of the idea of truth, and of the utopias of final overcoming. The specific modalities of this attitude of thought, in fact, situates overcoming in a context which is wholly alien to the ideology of imposition and of violence, making it rather an element of dissolution of the very structures of domination. But on a practical level this possibility can be obtained only by remaining faithful to the tension between sayable and unsayable, otherwise we readily fall back upon those forms of aesthetic disengagement or facile irrationalism which Adorno rightly dreaded.

The recognition of the radical limits of thought is faithful to itself only if it remains rigorously vigilant vis-à-vis the ever possible relapses in new forms of univocal absolutization, which would lead back to metaphysics.

Adorno’s call to reason and to the promise of redemption finds therefore its justification not so much in the invitation to remain loyal to the models of dialectic or enlightened rationality, but in alerting us against the dangers of yielding which are congenital also to the thought of the lack of foundation, as for instance when it doesn’t measure up to the difficult tension which protects it in its specificity.

Adorno’s position becomes even more comprehensible if we consider the different implications contained in the second aspect of the problem here analyzed, the one concerning the possibility of founding a social order on the basis of principles which are relativistic and explicitly conventional. If we
consider the social function of culture as a significant scheme constitutive of “reality” (meanings), and we observe the specific nature of the determinate forms of symbolic mediation in which the cultural system finds its objectification, we then must recognize that such a function entails necessarily a reduction which is somehow absolutizing. In itself, determination is in fact an absolutization based upon the selection of certain determinations to the exclusion of others. Now, since culture is the result of the reflexivity of consciousness, its function appears directly connected to the broader problem of guaranteeing realms of certainty with regard to the sense of life and the rules governing action [agire]. But precisely insofar as consciousness represents a fracture of immediacy, it is characterized by ontological insecurity. It follows that with respect to such an insecurity, and the related exigencies of sense and normativity it entails, there cannot be, at the collective level, any weak cultural order, inasmuch as such a weakness would end up compromising directly the very possibility of constituting those dimensions of identity and of belonging upon which any social order is founded.

The essential condition of the predictability of action [agire] for the constitution of the social cannot be guaranteed, at least as far as the primary needs of self-preservation and peaceful coexistence are concerned, except by the rules of a game which are fixed and unquestionable, that is to say, once again, absolutized. Any crack in the certainty of these rules would in fact undermine the very base of the social order. From this springs the constant tendency in culture toward sacralization, presenting itself as nature or as founded upon the immutable basis of Theology, of Reason, or of scientific Laws. This tendency represents a constant search for an absolute legitimation which would allow it to remove from culture its traits as a historical-conventional product and establish a reflexive automatism in individual and collective action as strong as that of instinctual mechanisms. Of course culture, precisely insofar as it is mediation, is never fully absolutized, and as a result there always reemerges in the social dynamic a more or less ample margin of unpredictability and uncertainty. The fact remains, nonetheless, that without a certain degree of absolutization there could not be a society.

The rule which would relativize all rules cannot be part of the same system of rules; the awareness of the lack of absolute foundation for rules can subsist only outside the game, but the moment in which the game is played, the rules are no longer negotiable, because at that point in the social sphere the game cannot stop, it becomes a question of life and death. Here is shown the profound contradiction which subsists between the theoretical experience of the limits of thought, geared in its rigor to underscore the reductive character of any determinate form of mediation, and the practical
experience of the social order, which can survive only thanks to absolutized rules. At the level of social theory it is necessary therefore to recognize, at one and the same time, next to the limits of the determinations of symbolic mediation, also the necessity of their absoluteness: for in fact it is precisely the recognition of the tension between the sayable and unsayable, the determinate and the indeterminate, which attests this contradiction.

After all, social dynamics itself lives only in the managing of such a difference through forms of unstable equilibrium and in endless processes of transformation. In fact, if it is true, as we said, that society as a system of determinations is in need of a certain degree of absolutization, it is also true that the social realm is the place for lived experience: in order to survive, therefore, the social order must avoid its forms of mediation becoming too absolute and turning up sclerotized, compromising its capacity to adapt to the changing processes of such an experience.

Contradiction is therefore not so much of a theoretical order, as it is of practical order. It is precisely at this second level that we see how the experience of the limit of any form of symbolic mediation with respect to the strong forms of traditional thought, bears a much greater capacity of penetration of the character proper to social reality. Paradoxically, we might say, whenever such a capacity is used cynically at the practical level, following a logic of domination, it would constitute a force vector par excellence. At all times those who had power actually founded it, more or less consciously, on the capacity to manage [gestire] that oscillation between determinacy and indeterminacy which envelopes any social order.24 The wielders of power absolutize for others the rules of the game, keeping for themselves the awareness of their relativity: this is precisely the origin of their power. We are dealing therefore not with a question of theoretical weakness, but of practical weakness, which is founded upon a choice: on the one hand, not to conceal the limits of thinking, and on the other, starting from the knowledge of these limits, avoid techniques of manipulation, and essay instead to promote the collective awareness of the conventional character of any symbolic order. However, at this point we run up against what is perhaps the greatest difficulty in the relationship between this modality and the social order. Above all, if we reason in terms of historical effectiveness, it is necessary to recognize that when it comes to being accepted in society, radical conventionality meets up with strong psychological resistance, as it unleashes the anxiety of existential incertitude. The difficulty consists above all in the objectively impractical character of the “weak” modality, given that, were it able to carry out to its ultimate consequences the promotion of the awareness of the conventionality
of symbolic orders, it would provoke, for the above reasons, the end of any social order.

The only position suitable for use seems to be the intermediate one between the struggle against excessive absolutization and the need to preserve the conditions of predictability which alone can maintain the social order. But this unfortunately brings us back to an elitist position—albeit of an elite which refutes the logic of power, not folded up upon itself, neither alien to social reality, but open and available to communication—and marks the end of any perspective for radical collective emancipation.

Insofar as experience of the radical limit of the sayable and acknowledgment of one’s own ontological incertitude, the end of ontology and of any absolute foundation to thought can only be lived, in the best possible scenario, at the individual level, but cannot ever become, at least at the level of social organization, a collective experience—if for no other reason than the fact that, were we to hypothesize a society made up entirely of “mature” adults, there would always remain the problem of children and youth, for whom the absence of any sure reference would be disastrous. If this holds true, we cannot but recognize the lapse of a social model without differentiations between those who know and those who don’t, between the awareness of those who manage and direct and the unawareness of those who are guided, between those who know how to relativize and those who are in need of absolutizing. Despite everything the experience of the end of foundation finds itself being yet again a form of Enlightenment.

The reflection on the nature of the social order inflicts therefore a hard blow to the perspective of the elimination of power and of absolute emancipation, and compels us to reformulate more clearly the Adornian problem of the promise for redemption in the sense of a progressive tension, which of course cannot ever hope of reaching completion, toward the adherence to the oscillation of the determinacy-indeterminacy relation, a tension which would set in evidence at the same time the necessity and the limit of the forms of mediation. The crisis which invested the postmodern age, while seeming under certain guises to favor this experience, under another light threatens it owing to strong regressive currents toward new forms of absolutization (mystical fideism, political fanaticism, technological and consumerist fetishism, aestheticizing escapism, etc.). These opposing aspects have after all an obvious linkage: the more the awareness of the end of absolute foundations grows, the more the inevitable anxiety generated by such uncertainty increases.

The only remedy to the heightening either of the tendencies to absolutize the forms of determinacy or those that, in ignoring the necessity of
mediation, provoke an excess of indeterminacy in social life, seems to be situated in the ethical responsibility toward collective needs, but the balance point appears to be extremely unstable and delicate. If in the wake of reactionary theoreticians of the psychology of crowds (and shouldn’t we here cite Gramsci?), we think that the masses have always been driven by emotive and fideistic forces, then we cannot but think along the terms of their instrumentalization on the basis of an enlightened *strong* parameter. If, on the other hand, we recognize in democratic reality the possibility of a form of society in which absolutization is reserved solely to some fundamental rules of coexistence which would allow for a plurality of games, then we can entrust ourselves to a *weak* enlightened parameter. But even in this latter case we ought not forget that there is no dimension wholly immune to the risks of domination: the experience of the absence of foundation invites us therefore to accept untenability [insostenibilîtà] as the normal condition of existence.

Notes

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 47.
7. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 45, 249, 344.
15. Ibid., 363.
16. Ibid., 97–98, 137.
17. Ibid., 36, 154, 176.
18. Ibid., 45, 248, 317.
21. Ibid., 18.
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