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Idea of Prose



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To
José Bergamín
in memoriam

*Y es tanto su desvelo que, al velarlo
de sueño sin sentido,
siente que por debajo de ese sueño
nunca despertará del sueño mismo.*

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Integral Actuality

Alexander García Düttmann



I

If only by the discontinuity or the elliptical character of its prose, this book revives the question of the relationship between philosophy and poetry. Is the constellation of ideas that it forms the product of a poetic vocation, or of a thought that seeks to liberate truth from its linguistic reification? This question, the question of the relationship between philosophy and poetry, between signification and *melos*, between a prose whose implicit philosophical determination regulates the effects of its signifying function and a poetry whose purely sonorous and rhythmic dimension seems to resist any translation—this question is also explicitly posed in the fragment or aphorism that carries the same title as the book: *Idea of Prose*. It is not a matter of keeping signification apart from poetic sound and rhythm. Indeed, the question of the relationship between philosophy and poetry becomes that of a language or a prose that no longer lets itself be governed by the difference inscribed in this relationship: “*Né poesia né prosa, ma il loro medio*” (*IdP*, p. 23). How are we to translate “*medio*,” the word with which the aphorism or fragment entitled *Idea of Prose* closes? If there is an idea of language or an idea of prose that leads beyond the opposition between signification and sonorous rhythm, between content and form, between the syntactical and the metrical, then these terms are all divided by what they share: “*il loro medio*.” On the one hand, the idea of prose does not merge with either (philosophical) prose or (poetic) sound; on the other hand, it is the divided place, the milieu where (poetic) sound and (philosophical) prose constitute

themselves in their specificity: prose and poetry expose themselves thus to one another, they never succeed in constituting a unity, a stable identity. To turn to the idea of prose (but this idea does not belong to a suprasensible world) is to understand that, if prose and poetry do not each form a unity, there is no unity that gathers them together. It is for this reason also that what thought must confront and what poetry leaves behind as a heritage is neither poetry nor prose: thought must confront or come to terms with a "poetic legacy" that consists precisely in the impossibility of attributing an absolutely distinct and recognizable identity to poetry: "This sublime hesitation between meaning and sound is the poetic inheritance with which thought must come to terms" (*IP*, p. 41). Could thought put itself into action as thought if it did not have to *confront* or *come to terms with* something—put differently: if it did not have to mark the tradition of a non-identity, of a hesitation without psychology?

The double negation—"neither poetry nor prose"—takes the form of a double injunction: thought has to orient itself towards an "idea of prose" (or towards an idea of poetry), but it can do so only by assuming a "poetic legacy." The "*medio*" which already divides philosophical prose and poetic sound at the very moment they affirm their instable identity (faithful to the Aristotelian allusion of the text, and orienting himself by the spatial reference that attributes an opposite movement to the cadence of poetry and the sequential character of prose, the American translator renders "*medio*" as "*middle term*") is certainly not a term placed in between the extremes, a third term adding itself to poetry and to philosophy—if such a term existed, the question of the relationship, of the relationship between the three terms, would pose itself anew; nor is this an amalgam made up of a philosophical element and a poetic element, a language half poetic and half philosophical—otherwise the elements of such a language would either allow themselves to be distinguished, and then the question of the relationship would come up again, or else they

would become indistinguishable, and then one would have to let oneself be guided by the radicality of the “neither . . . nor,” instead of being content with the compromise of the “half . . . half.” “*Medio*” has the double sense of the word used by the German translators of the book, “*Mitte*”: when Hegel, for example, notes that the Greeks lived in the “happy midst” (“*glückliche Mitte*”) formed by the moral substance (“*sittliche Substanz*”) and a free and self-conscious subjectivity, he refers to what takes place in the middle, what, not giving way to the extremes, remains surrounded by the milieu that characterizes such an intermediary state. The “*medio*” of poetry and prose designates perhaps this “midst/milieu” of the “between” without which there would not be a relationship between philosophical prose and poetry. But this “midst” is an originary “milieu,” not a milieu created by two extremes already constituted or already presupposed. The milieu on which poetry and philosophical prose depend, this “between” that exceeds what it simultaneously separates and brings together, is nothing but language, language itself in its sharing or in its division, neither poetry nor prose. The idea of prose is language as midst/milieu, it is this “communication of communicability” which, in Benjamin’s diction, describes the being-language of language: language, Benjamin says, is the medium of communication, “*das ‘Medium’ der Mitteilung.*” If there is language, if there is communication, then there is necessarily an idea of prose, a medium that can never be reduced to a philosophical or poetic particularity, a communicability that always communicates itself. Each time poetic singularity and philosophical generality point out—and, in this way, dissociate themselves from—each other, they are already effacing themselves.

Communication cannot be anything but the communication of communicability, because it is impossible to communicate what is not communicable, what does not belong to the order of language; but, as such, communication implies an exteriority that originally transforms it into communication of *something*: it is in this

way that language gives rise to poetic singularity and to philosophical generality, it is in this way that it lets differences be. To confront the “poetic legacy,” to think the idea of prose, means therefore—at least if one subscribes to the proposed interpretation—to attain communicability and language as midst/milieu. One will wonder, however, if it is in this case a question of touching the limit of a “sublime hesitation” (at this limit, the exteriority of communication disappears and continues to manifest itself), or if it is a case of achieving the passage into an integral actuality of language, into an actuality without hesitation, into an actuality that can no longer arise out of an opposition or a gap between potentiality and act, between possibility and reality, between essence and existence, between communicability and communication, between the “between” of the midst/milieu and the midst/milieu itself.

II

How does thought confront what poetry seems to leave it as heritage? Heidegger describes the relationship between poetry and thought in terms of a double movement, a movement that, through its perpetual splitting-into-two, perpetually supplies its own lack, the lack that constitutes it as movement and prevents it from stopping. As two parallels that do not cross except at an indeterminable point in the in-finite, at a point that always precedes them and that does not presuppose any tracing, poetry and thought do not cease to call each other without ever regaining the silence in the call of the other. In this way, poetry and thought inscribe themselves in the existence that marks the difference of language: for what existence lacks, what calls for poetry and thought from the groundless ground of existence is the word that says the essence of the word, the word or the speech of Being.

If the essence of the word does not consist in an operation that makes the thing available, if the word calls the thing in order to let it appear, to show it by letting it show itself, if the word, and above all the word of the poet, the name which the poet gives to the thing, lets the thing be as thing, as Heidegger argues in his lecture on a poem by Stefan George, "Das Wort" (Heidegger, *WL*, p. 151; *USp*, p. 232), then the difference that traverses each word and that separates it from itself, cannot be said without transforming itself into a being and without in turn dividing itself. The word of Being is not a word: it is nothing but a pure communicability. Heidegger calls this communicability *Sage*, and he

maintains that *Sage* and Being, the word and the thing, the opening that devotes language to the secret and the difference that relates each being to Being, are indissociable: "The oldest word [. . .] for saying [*Sagen*] is *logos*: it means the Saying [*Sage*] which, in showing, lets beings appear in their 'it is.' The same word, however, the word for *saying* [*das Sagen*], is also the word for *Being*, that is, for the presencing of beings. Saying [*Sage*] and Being, word and thing, belong to each other in a veiled way, a way that has hardly been thought [. . .]." (Heidegger, *WL*, p. 155; *USp*, p. 237). The unsayable of language and of communication, this secret that does not guard anything that one can identify or let appear, this absolute secret that itself is its own secret, if one can say so, and that, consequently, is anything but a secret, does not at all have the character or the consistency of a hidden or invisible substance. Communicability always communicates itself, it is nothing but communication itself—if communicability maintained itself separate from communication, the thing would not let itself be named and would be unable to appear. But, at the same time, communicability cannot ever be communicated; it opens the immanence of communication to a hesitation, to a trembling, to an indecision, to the affirmation and to the suspension of exteriority—if communicability let itself be communicated, it would take the form of a thing, and communication, reducing itself to the simple communication of something, would erase itself immediately.

The communication of communicability: the "objective" contradiction of communication, the contradiction which causes communicability and communication necessarily to exceed their objectivation, perpetuates the lack that inscribes poetry and thought into existence: this lack cannot be filled, it must be seized as such. But how can we seize a lack as such, if the "as such" defines the appearance of the thing named? This question expresses perhaps the difficulty that poetry and thought never cease to encounter. If thought is called by what poetic speech says without ever succeeding in saying,

then what needs to be thought calls poetry for thought to confront its task: to think what, in any thing, is not a thing, and what, in any language, has no name. Unthinkable and unsayable, the alliance between thing and word evokes, provokes, and incites poetry and thought, because communication is always a communication of communicability. What is at stake for any poetic word and for any thought that seeks to attain communicability, the *medio, Sage*, is to seize, in itself and beyond itself, a communicability that coincides with its communication, a word and a thought that, being neither the word of the poet nor the prose of the thinker, exhaust the word of Being. Does the idea of prose indicate the integral actuality of such a coincidence?

III

In his essay on the relationship between poetry and society, Adorno attempts to describe the consolatory gesture that he detects in the indecision or in the hesitation of certain poems. Does to console mean to affirm the presence of what seems lost and to negate its loss? No. For such an affirmation is nothing but a denial, a vain attempt to reassure what is unconsoled. The consolatory gesture—the gesture of the poem itself, not a gesture represented by the poet—consists rather in enduring the indecision which makes any limit tremble; in order to console, it is necessary to know how to render uncertain the limit that separates absence from presence, it is necessary to know how to locate the uncertainty that traverses this limit like a trembling that cannot be sounded out. And what if the hesitation, the indecision, the ellipsis of the “neither . . . nor” (neither prose nor poetry, neither philosophy nor art, neither presence nor absence) denotes in fact a kind of integral actuality? Is to aim at the integral actuality, instead of restoring a particular presence, the true determination of the consolatory gesture?

The hesitation that results from a fundamental indecision, from an experience of the undecidable that no longer belongs to the order of calculation—this hesitation does not let itself be reduced to possibility, to reality, to potentiality, or to actuality. Whenever one hesitates, whenever one lets oneself be carried by the vacillating movement that establishes itself between two or more possibilities, each possibility begins to oscillate, ceasing thus to remain in itself. Hesitation exposes the

possibility to a virtual or deferred realization. If one could persist within pure possibility, there would be no place for hesitation. Perhaps hesitation also indicates a certain work of mourning that puts an end to the melancholy of potentiality. "The Idea of Study" explains the melancholic propensity of the one who devotes his life to interminable studies: nothing, in effect, is more bitter than remaining too long in the sphere of "pure potentiality," infinitely deferring the passage to action (*IP*, p. 63) (but melancholy already indicates a contamination of potentiality). Hesitation does not abandon itself to the sphere of "pure potentiality"; however, it does not exclude potentiality either. Even if it seems to perpetuate the possible, even if it seems to perpetuate it in its multiplicity (in its exteriority, in what exposes it to the real), hesitation begins to thwart the opposition between possibility and reality, between act and potentiality, between existence and essence. Hesitation touches the limit at which opposite or simply different terms no longer affirm their identity, their opposition, their difference. This touch is nothing but the experience of integral actuality—of an act exhausting potentiality or of a potentiality actualized as such: at the moment when potentiality, for example, reaches the limit, it interrupts itself, it ceases to be what it is without becoming what it is not.

To persist in hesitation, however, amounts to renouncing the integral actuality; for just as hesitation (the experience of the undecidable) is only hesitation if it ends in giving rise to a decision (provisional and embarrassed, irrevocable and final), the experience of the integral actuality is only such an experience if it includes the force of exclusion inherent in any decision. It is here that the political significance of an idea of prose reveals itself—the political significance of a midst/milieu that forms the limit of what holds itself there, of a communication that touches communicability as its own limit. The idea of prose is incompatible with power, it defies it with such a radicality that power is incapable of becoming effective as a dividing and segregating force: "Power is the isolation of potentiality from its act, the organization of

potentiality" (*IP*, p. 71). But what happens to exclusion in integral actuality if actuality cannot exclude the dividing and segregating force without immediately losing its integrality, without opposing itself anew to a potentiality and thus producing the very possibility of power? In a recent essay, Agamben conceives of a redemptive task assigned to memory. In the perspective of this essay, the question of exclusion that has to be answered whenever one attempts to think the "neither . . . nor" of the *Idea of Prose* can be phrased as follows: how does the "*restitutio in integrum* of possibility," which holds the advent and the not-advent, the ability-to-be and the ability-not-to-be in a precarious equilibrium, and which, as a consequence, cannot be anything but the "memory of what has not been" (*BC*, p. 86), relate to what renders possibility partial and memory exclusive, beyond any suspension and any hesitation? How does it relate to what is nothing except by excluding the possible through the real? How does it relate to the force of exclusion, which is always blind and uncompromising?

IV

There would be no exclusion if one did not belong to a whole, to something that can be identified and named. When, by a movement towards belonging itself, by an appropriation of belonging, exclusion is overcome (this is how the project of another book by Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, could be summarized), one finds again the decisive difficulty of an integral actuality: the difficulty of an integration and of an integrality that have to restore what has not taken place, but also what has only been able to take place because of exclusion. To seize being-such [*essere quale*] in its being-as [*essere tale*], to seize being-singular in its being-whatever [*essere qualunque*], to seize existence in its taking-place or in its Idea (CC, pp. 1-2)—is this not to attain an in-difference that (while not excluding any property of the thing or of the individual) resists identification? At the limit, identification constitutes each property as an exclusive property. By resisting identification without, however, abandoning itself to the pure absence of identity, by transcending belonging within belonging, the community holds together in an actuality that could be called integral.

Elsewhere, in a text on the concept of *popolo* [a people], Agamben argues that, just as one should not construct grammars from jargons and slangs, but let appear what the multiplicity of languages recover, i.e., the “*factum* of language,” one should not assign a state-controlled identity to a people, but let emerge the *factum*—the “*factum* of community”—that it dissimulates and to which it points. We pass from a people to the

community; we pass from the belonging to a band (every people is, according to Agamben, the “more or less effective mask of the *factum pluralitatis*”) to the exposition of this belonging as such. With the passage to the community as *factum pluralitatis*, the belonging to a people is not only interrupted, but it reveals itself as a simulacrum: in truth, one never belongs to a people, because, as a dissembling mask of multiplicity, it can never be a substantial or a spiritual individuality. Nevertheless, one wonders what happens to the *being-such* when it is seized in its *being-as*. On the one hand, the indifference of the singularity insofar as it is whatever singularity [*singularità qualunque*] does not result from a lack of belonging; on the other hand, it indicates the impossibility, for an existence that has appropriated its own belonging, of also relating to what marks a difference, to what cannot be separated from the difference marked. Does such an in-difference not exclude the belonging that excludes the other, does it not exclude the simulacrum of belonging, at least inasmuch as a simulacrum is only a simulacrum because of the efficacy of its artifice? Does it not risk abandoning itself to the dividing force and committing itself to the dialectics of exclusion (as soon as exclusion becomes necessary to constitute what cannot constitute itself without it, the excluded thing, sometimes exclusion itself, becomes more powerful than the excluding force: as a consequence, exclusion repeats itself infinitely)?

V

“Idea of prose”: this expression can be found in a fragment by Benjamin that is part of the late texts on the concept of history. Yet one must not forget that Benjamin was already interested in prose when he wrote his dissertation: as the “idea of poetry,” as the final determination of art, prose possesses an absolute privilege in German Romanticism. If, within the Romantic hierarchy of literary genres, the novel distinguishes itself by a kind of double, contradictory potentiality, by the possibility of limiting itself and of extending itself infinitely (reflexive self-limitation is only possible because of unlimited self-extension), critique has to present the “prosaic nucleus” of the work of art; it thus makes the experience that separates it from simple appraisal, from a judgment that merges with opinion (Benjamin, *BK*, p. 109). For German Romanticism, prose is “indestructible,” it is marked by sobriety rather than by ecstasis or *mania*.

Perhaps this trait of indestructibility, attributed to prose, also characterizes the idea of language that, in the notes on the concept of history, coincides with the “messianic idea of a universal history.” Benjamin calls this idea of language “idea of prose,” and he specifies that its coincidence with the “messianic idea of a universal history” marks the end of the multiplicity of languages as well as the end of the plurality of histories. In the world of universal history and of the idea of prose, in the “messianic world,” translation comes to an end, and language finally reaches an “integral actuality”—it is Benjamin who expresses himself in this way, it is he who speaks of *integrale Aktualität*: “The messianic world

is the world of general [*allseitig*] and integral actuality. Universal history exists only in this world. But this history is not written; it is a history celebrated as a festival. As a purified festival, however, it does not have the character of a ceremony and does not know any hymns. Its language is free prose, a prose which has broken the chains of writing" (*Benjamin I.3*, p. 1235). If one wanted to paraphrase Benjamin's remarks by referring to what Agamben says about the function of quotation marks in *Idea of Prose*, one could assert that, in the "messianic world," thought will have accomplished its task: it will have come to terms with the "poetic legacy," it will have broken the bonds of writing, it will have destroyed the mute signs that haunt language and represent our "imprisonment within language" (*IP*, p. 104). The prose of redemption is free, it no longer depends on writing, i.e., on the constraints to which language remains subject as long as the difference between communicability and communication, between translation and translatability proves to be determining for speech. Everyone understands this prose without writing, Benjamin adds. Prose without writing, without constraint, without convention, without rhetoric, without pathos, without fixation, and without fetishism: it can be understood immediately, because it does not convey any meaning, because it does not deliver any message, because it does not have to be interpreted, deciphered or deconstructed. If one conceives it in terms of such an immediacy, of a midst/milieu that does not differ any more from what holds itself together, then the idea of prose is indestructible.

It seems clear that the expression "idea of prose," used by Benjamin, indicates a bond between language, world, and history, a bond that is no longer of the order of (pre)supposition: the integral actuality does not presuppose anything [*voraussetzen*], for it is the language of completed translation (*Benjamin I.3*, p. 1239); it is a prose without writing, it is an idea, it is an exposition of language itself. How is this bond to be thought? Can we think it in the light of Giorgio Agamben's *Idea of Prose*? In his lecture "The Thing Itself," written a year

before the publication of this book, Agamben describes the Platonic idea by using an expression that recalls Benjamin's notion of communicability and Heidegger's concept of poetic language: "The warning Plato attaches to the idea is, then, that sayability itself remains unsaid in what one says about that on which one speaks; that knowability itself gets lost in what one knows about what there is to be known. [. . .] The task of the philosophical exposition is to come to the aid of the word with the word in order that the word itself does not remain supposed by the word but comes as the word to the word" (*ThI*, p. 23 and p. 25). As long as language presupposes language, as long as knowledge presupposes knowledge, as long as communicability does not communicate itself in communication, as long as the knowable remains hidden in knowledge, in short, as long as the thing, divided by difference, is not the thing itself, the idea merges with a (pre)supposition. Thus, the philosopher has to shed light on this confusion, has to give the idea back to the idea, as it were. The task implied here is the one that, at the end of "Idea of Prose" (pp. 39 to 41), directs the thinker to come to terms with the "poetic legacy." This one can verify by reading "Idea of Appearance," a text in which the idea appears as an exposition of the (sensible) thing and as a presentation of the thing (itself). Exposed and presented, the thing does not presuppose itself any more, it is no longer "some sensible thing *presupposed* by language and knowledge," it does not remain any longer in the realm established by the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible: "[. . .] the thing no longer separated from its intelligibility, but in the midst of it, is the idea, is the thing itself" (*IP*, p. 123).

From such a conception of the idea, from such an ontological interrelation and articulation of language and knowledge we can draw at least five consequences: (1) It makes no sense to talk about an idea of the idea, since the idea is the "thing itself." (2) The "Idea of Prose" is not an idea among others, it is nothing but *the* idea itself: the idea is always the "idea of prose." (3) It is

impossible to remember the idea (of prose), for it is not the presupposition of a past: the idea is the immemorable and unforgettable thing, the nothingness that precedes both the present and memory, and becomes a being or a substance whenever it is transformed into a presupposition ("The immemorable, which skips from memory to memory without itself ever coming to mind, is, properly speaking, the unforgettable. This unforgettable oblivion is language, the human word." [IP, p. 68]—"For [him] it is a question of remembering precisely nothing: nothing that happened to him or manifested itself, but which also, as nothing, anticipates every presence and every memory." [IP, p. 97]). (4) Being the "thing itself," the idea (of prose) does not give rise to a new thought or to a new art; it does not inaugurate another epoch ("We do not want new works of art or thought; we don't want another epoch of culture and society: what we want is to save the epoch and society from their wandering in tradition, grasp the *good*—undeferrable and non-epochal—which was contained in them." [IP, p. 88]). (5) The idea does not rise above the phenomenon, it saves it: only the immemorable, only absolute forgetting can save what is always already forgotten, the sensible manifestation or the phenomenal appearance of the thing. Conversely, the phenomenon guards the immemorable, guards the idea that risks being merged with a presupposition (of language and of knowledge).

If it is necessary to save the phenomena, if it is necessary to free thought and poetry from a structure of presupposition, then the historical bond that links together world and language has to be elucidated at the very moment one establishes that the idea is nothing but the exposition and the presentation of the sensible thing in its intelligibility, and that language is nothing but a "*non-latency without presupposition* which men always already inhabit" (EL, p. 14; IH, p. 9, translation modified). Is the imposition of a structure of presupposition not the splitting of the idea into the idea of the idea, is it not a separation of the idea from itself, a separation that cannot affect the idea without threatening the thing? This is the

fundamental aporia of any attempt to save something. On the one hand, one can only save what is not what it is (to save always means to restore or constitute the integral actuality of the thing by exposing and presenting it itself: in this way, Benjamin links translation to restitution, he perceives in translation a movement of language that “ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the most intimate relationship between languages” [Benjamin, *AUe*, p. 12; *TT*, p. 72, translation modified]). On the other hand, one can never save what is not what it is (for there cannot be an integral actuality without not-being, without difference and oblivion, but the not-being defers actuality and eventually exposes it to oblivion). How can, from the double point of view of this aporia, the institution of an integral actuality be thought?

It cannot be thought as the result of a progressive approximation, as the end of a historical progress (whether assured or precarious): approximation and progress presuppose a direction, they presuppose that towards which history is heading. It must be thought as a pure interruption, as an interruption without remainder, since the idea itself can never be presupposed (the inscription of presupposition in language and in thought renders problematic any assertion of this kind). To admit the possibility of a pure interruption, however, is not sufficient to think the institution or the emergence of an integral actuality. Certainly, the pure interruption absolutely escapes what it interrupts, it does not prepare anything and nothing precedes it: but is it not necessary to show the place that the integral actuality assigns to this nothingness? The question of the idea of prose is the question of an impossible integration: it is a question of not excluding the radical interruption on which the institution of an integral actuality necessarily depends (if one says that the integral actuality does not depend on the interruption, because it *is* this interruption, one would still have to analyze the moment of discontinuity without which the interruption remains inconceivable).

VI

The problem (of language and of thought) with which the idea of prose confronts us is not an aesthetic or metaphysical problem, but above all a historical and political problem. Agamben's interest in "political" topics is thus by no means the interest of a thinker who, not content with philosophical abstraction, also wants to be a politically committed intellectual. By opposing a vision of history and politics that is guided by the representation of an infinite progression whose goal is a kind of regulative idea (the horizon formed by a community that establishes itself on the basis of a communicative activity that is completely free, rational, and transparent), the thought that tries to institute the integral actuality of the idea (of prose) justifies the necessity of a radical interruption by the impossibility, for any progressive logic of presupposition, of operating differently than by reproducing the historical, political and practical conditions from which it would like to liberate itself. It belongs to the logic of presupposition (to the reification of the idea and of language) to enclose itself inescapably within the continuity of what is: whence the notion of the infinite task. The thought of the integral actuality as interruption reminds us of the fact that the catastrophe is never imminent. What turns out to be catastrophic, Benjamin says, is that everything continues to move forward on the same path and in the same direction. Because every moment in history thus comprises a revolutionary chance, because history is nothing but the *différance* of revolution, Benjamin not only emphasizes the essential relation between interruption and integral actuality, but

also recognizes the thinker of the revolution by the attention he pays to the specificity of the political situation (*Benjamin, I.3*, p. 1231).

VII

Do we not find the intuition that incites the thought of the idea of prose expressed, with an extreme intensity and a disturbing simplicity, in an unpublished fragment by Adorno, entitled “On Metaphysics”? Here is the passage that raises (in the terms of speculative dialectics) the question of integral actuality: “If the absolute cannot exist without the conditioned, then the conditioned has to be part of the absolute while still remaining conditioned. This agrees perfectly with the feeling [*Lebensgefühl*] that everything in this life is at the same time absolutely insignificant and infinitely meaningful” (Adorno, *ZM*, p. 109).

Translated from the French by Kerstin Behnke

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Threshold



In the year 529 A.D. the emperor Justinian, acting on the urging of the fanatical spokesmen of the anti-Hellenic faction, decreed the closure of the Athens school of philosophy. It thus turned out that Damascius, the incumbent scholarch, was the last diadoch of pagan philosophy. Through friends at court he sought to reverse the decision. Their promises of help came to nothing more than the offer of a stipend as librarian in one of the provinces against the confiscation of the property and income of the school. The likelihood of persecution drove the scholarch and six of his closest helpers to load books and belongings on a cart and seek refuge at the court of the Persian king, Khosru Nushirvan. Thus it came about that the purest Hellenic traditions that the Greeks—or rather “Romans,” as they were then calling themselves—were no longer worthy of preserving, came into the keeping of the barbarians.

The diadoch was no longer young; the moment was long gone in which he had thought to concern himself with marvellous stories and the apparition of souls. After the first few months of court life at Ctesiphon, the task of satisfying the philosophical curiosity of the sovereign with commentaries and critical editions was left to his students Priscianus and Simplicius. Cloistered in a house in the north of the city with a Greek scribe and Syrian housekeeper, Damascius determined to devote the last years of his life to writing a work to be entitled: *Aporias and Solutions Concerning First Principles*.

He was perfectly well aware that the question he intended to take up was not just another philosophical question. Had not Plato himself written, in a letter which even the Christians thought important (without in truth understanding it), that the question concerning the First Principle was the root of all evil? But, he had added, the suffering that that question caused in the soul was like birth-pangs, and until one did give birth, the soul would never find the truth. Thus it was without hesitation that at the very start of the work the old diadoch set out his theme: "Is what we call the single and supreme beginning of the Whole, beyond the Whole? Or is it a certain determined part of Whole, the highpoint, for example, of all things that proceed from it? Must we say, moreover, that the Whole is one with the beginning, or that it comes after it and proceeds from it? Because if this alternative is admitted, then there will be something that is outside of the Whole, and how could that be possible? That which lacks nothing is, in fact, the absolute Whole; but the beginning is lacking, and therefore that which is after the beginning and outside it is not the absolute Whole."

Tradition has it that Damascius labored on his work for three hundred days and as many nights, that is, for the exact duration of his exile at Ctesiphon. At times he broke off for days and weeks, and in those moments the vanity of his undertaking loomed at him as through a mist. The text we read is strewn with phrases such as "despite the slowness of our work, I have not, it seems, concluded anything," or "may God do as he please with what I have just written!," or again, "all that can be said in praise of my exposition is this: that it condemns itself through its recognition of its inability to see clearly, and its impotence to look at the light." But then unflinchingly he takes up his work again, until the next halt, until the inevitable new crisis. Because how can thought pose the question about the beginning of thought? Or in other words, how can one comprehend the incomprehensible? It is clear that what is here in question cannot even be set out as incomprehensible, cannot even be expressed

as inexpressible. "It is so unknowable that it doesn't even have the nature of being the unknowable, and it is not by declaring it unknowable that we can delude ourselves that we know it since we do not even know whether it is unknowable." This is why the pupil of Syrianus, who had also been the teacher of his first teacher, Marinus, and who many thought could not be gone beyond, had once written that since the unknowable has no name, we can think of it through the aspirated accent we put on the vowel ϵ in the term $\acute{\epsilon}\nu$. But—clearly—this was a subtlety unworthy of a philosopher, a consideration verging on charlatanism. It would not be in this way, through an unreadable sign or a breathing, that in his *Aporias* he addressed the unthinkable which is beyond breath and beyond what can be written. And so it was that as he was writing one night the image suddenly sprang to mind that would guide him—so he thought—through to the conclusion of his work. It was not, however, an image, but something like the perfectly empty space in which only image, breath, or word might eventually take place. Or, rather, it was not even a space, but the site of a place, as it were, a surface, an area absolutely smooth and flat, on which no point could be distinguished from another. He thought of the white stone yard of the farm where he had been born, at the gates of Damascus, where the peasants threshed the wheat in the evenings to separate grain and chaff. Wasn't what he was searching for exactly like the threshing floor, itself unthinkable and unspeakable, where the winnowing fans of thought and language separated the grain and chaff of everything?

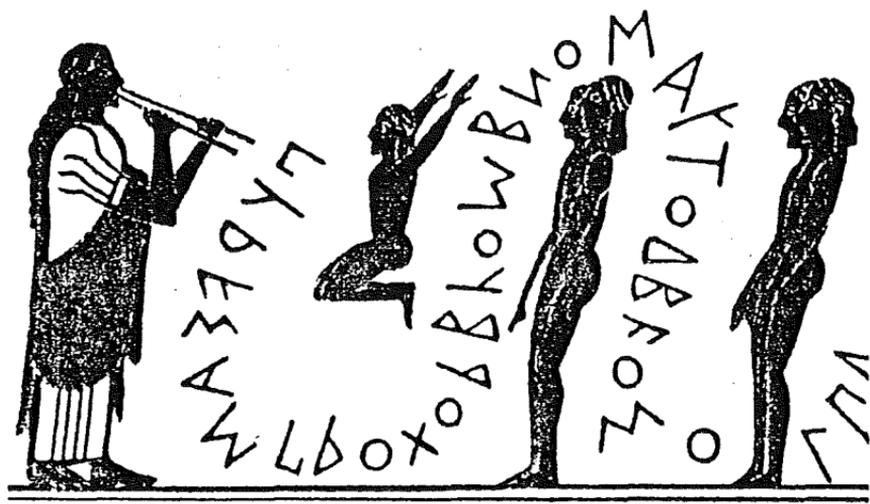
The image pleased him and in following it, a word, never before heard, came to his lips, a word that brought together the term for the threshing floor or area with the term astronomers used to indicate the surface of the moon or sun: $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\omega\varsigma$. No, it wasn't a bad solution for what he wanted to say. He had to stick to that and add nothing else. "It is certain," he wrote, "that as for the absolutely ineffable, we cannot even affirm that it is the ineffable, and as for the One, we have to say that it

withdraws from every composition of name or discourse, as likewise from every distinction, such as that of the knowable and the knower. It is necessary to think of it as a kind of flat and smooth halo on which no point can be distinguished from another; as the most simple and comprehensive thing; not simply one, but all-one, and one before all, not one of an all . . . ”

For an instant, Damascius lifted his hand away and looked at the writing tablet on which he had been jotting down his thoughts. Suddenly he remembered the passage in the book on the soul in which the philosopher compared the potentiality of the intellect to a tablet on which nothing is written. Why had he not thought of it before? It was this that he had been so futilely trying to grasp day after day, it was this that he had unceasingly pursued by the light of the brief flash of the unglimpsable, blinding halo. The uttermost limit thought can reach is not a being, not a place or thing, no matter how free of any quality, but rather, its own absolute potentiality, the pure potentiality of representation itself: the writing tablet! What he had until then been taking as the One, as the absolutely Other of thought, was instead only the material, only the potentiality of thought. And the entire, lengthy volume the hand of the scribe had crammed with characters was nothing other than the attempt to represent the perfectly bare writing tablet on which nothing had yet been written. This was why he was unable to carry his work through to completion: what could not cease from writing itself was the image of what never ceased from not writing itself. In the one was mirrored the ungraspable other. But everything was finally clear: now he could break the tablet, stop writing. Or rather, now he could truly begin. He now believed that he understood the sense of the maxim stating that by knowing the unknowable it is not something about it we know, but something about ourselves. That which can never be first let him glimpse, in its fading, the glimmer of a beginning.

I





The Idea of Matter

The decisive experience, so difficult to talk about, it is claimed, for those who have had one, is not even an experience. It is nothing more than the point at which we touch the limits of language. But what we reach is obviously not a thing so new and awesome that we lack the words to describe it; it is, rather, matter, in the sense in which one says, "the matter of Britain" or "going into the matter," or even "subject matter index." Whoever touches on his own matter, in this sense, simply finds the words to say. Where language stops is not where the unsayable occurs, but rather where the matter of words begins. Those who have not reached, as in a dream, this woody substance of language, which the ancients called *silva* (wildwood), are prisoners of representation, even when they keep silent.

It is the same for those who return to life after an apparent death: in reality they were never dead at all (otherwise they wouldn't have returned), nor are they rid of the necessity of dying some day; they are, however, freed from the representation of death. This is why, when asked about what they went through, they have nothing to say about death but find matter for many stories and many fine tales about their life.

The Idea of Prose

No definition of verse is perfectly satisfying unless it asserts an identity for poetry against prose through the possibility of *enjambement*. Quantity, rhythm, and the number of syllables—all elements that can equally well occur in prose—do not, from this standpoint, provide sufficient criteria. But we shall call poetry the discourse in which it is possible to set a metrical limit against a syntactic one (verse in which *enjambement* is not actually present is to be seen as verse with zero *enjambement*). Prose is the discourse in which this is impossible.

There are poets—Petrarch foremost—in whose work zero *enjambement* is the rule. There are others—and Caproni among them—in whom the *degré marqué* tends to prevail. In Caproni's late poems, however, this fondness goes too far; *enjambement* takes over the verse, reducing it to the one single element that still allows one to recognize it as such, i.e. to its specific differential core, given my claim that *enjambement* is the distinguishing characteristic of poetic discourse. Here is one of Caproni's most recent poems:

... The white
door ...
The door
that, from transparency, leads
into opacity ...
The door
condemned ...

Here traditional metrics are drastically curtailed, and the dotted breaks, so characteristic of the late Caproni, stand for the impossibility of developing the metrical theme of verse beyond its constitutive core (which is to say that this core is to be found not at the beginning, but at the end, at the *versura** point), just as in the adagio of Schubert's quintet, op. 163, from which Caproni learned so much, the pizzicato each time reconfirms the impossibility of the strings ever completing a melodic phrase. But not for this does the poetry cease to be such. To say it once again, *enjambement*, in a different way than Mallarmé's blank space, which annexes prose to the field of poetry, is the necessary and sufficient condition of versification.

What precisely is it about *enjambement* that gives it this governance over the metrics of poetry? *Enjambement* reveals a mismatch, a disconnection between the metrical and syntactic elements, between sounding rhythm and meaning, such that (contrary to the received opinion that sees in poetry the locus of an accomplished and a perfect fit between sound and meaning) poetry lives, instead, only in their inner disagreement. In the very moment that verse affirms its own identity by breaking a syntactic link, it is irresistibly drawn into bending over into the next line to lay hold of what it has thrown out of itself. It hints at a passage of prose with the very gesture that attests its own versatility. By this headlong dive into the abyss of meaning, the purely sonic unit of verse transgresses its own identity as it does its own measure.

In this way, *enjambement* brings to light the original gait, neither poetic nor prosaic, but boustrophedonic, as it were, of poetry, the essential prose-metrics of every human discourse, whose early appearance in the *Gatha* of Avesta, or in Latin satire, bears out the non-coincidental

*The Latin word that indicates the place (and the moment) where the plough turned round at the end of a furrow. It is from the term *versus* (furrow) that the English word *verse* derives. (tr.n)

character of the *Vita Nuova* on the threshold of the modern age. The *versura*, the turning-point which displays itself as *enjambement*, though unspoken-of in treatises on metrics, constitutes the core of verse. It is an ambiguous gesture, that turns in two opposed directions at once: backwards (*versus*), and forwards (*pro-versa*). This hanging-back, this sublime hesitation between meaning and sound is the poetic inheritance with which thought must come to terms. In order to take up the legacy, Plato rejected the transmitted forms of writing, and fixed his gaze on that idea of language which, according to the testimony of Aristotle, was for him neither poetry nor prose, but their middle term.

The Idea of Caesura

Perhaps no poetry of the twentieth century so consciously entrusts its rhythm to the braking action of the caesura as that of Sandro Penna. Within the brief span of a couplet, he summarizes a whole metrical treatise on the subject:

Io vado verso il fiume su un cavallo
che quando io penso un poco un poco egli si ferma.

I go towards the river on a horse
which when I think a little a little stops.

The horse on which the poet rides, according to an ancient exegetical tradition of the Apocalypse of St. John, is the sound and vocal element of language. Commenting on Apoc. 19,11, in which logos is described as a "faithful and honest" knight astride a white horse, Origen explains that the horse is the voice, the word as utterance, which "runs with more verve and swiftness than any steed" and which only logos makes clear and intelligible. It is while asleep on such a horse—*durmen sus un chivau*—that Guillaume d'Aquitaine, at the very beginning of Romance poetry, claims to have composed his *vers*. It is a sure indication of the symbolic tenacity of this image that in Pascoli at the beginning of this century (and, later, in both Penna and Delfini) one finds that the horse takes on the blithe shape of the bicycle.

For the poet, the element that arrests the metrical impetus of the voice, the caesura of verse, is thought. But what is exemplary in Penna's treatment of the problem is the fact that the thematic content of the couplet is perfectly mirrored in the metrical structure: in the

caesura that breaks the second verse into two hemistiches. The parallelism between sense and metre is again reconfirmed by the repetition of the same word on either side of the caesura, almost as if to give to the pause the epic density of an atemporal interstice between two moments, which suspends the gesture halfway in an extravagant goose-step (perhaps this is why the poet here uses an alexandrine, the double verse *par excellence*, the caesura of which is conventionally called epic).

But what is it that is being thought in this caesura that brings the horse of verse to a halt? What does this interruption of the rhythmic transport of the poem reveal? The least elusive answer comes from Hölderlin: "The tragic transport, in fact, is quite empty and that which is the truly free. This is why in the rhythmic succession of representations where the tragic transport is displayed, the pure word, the anti-rhythmic interruption, in meter called caesura, becomes necessary so as to block the enchanting succession of representations at its height in such a way as to make manifest no longer the alternation of representation, but representation itself."

The rhythmic transport that gives the verse its impetus is empty, is only the transport of itself. And it is this emptiness which, as *pure word*, the caesura—for a little—thinks, holds in suspense, while for an instant the horse of poetry is stopped. As Raymond Lully writes, "astride his palfrey, the squire went to court to be dubbed, but lulled by the sway of his mount, he fell asleep as he went. Arrived at a fountain, however, the beast stopped to drink, and the squire woke up, because in his sleep he perceived the horse no longer moved."

The poet, here asleep on his horse, awakens and contemplates for an instant the inspiration that carries him—he thinks nothing else but his voice.

The Idea of Vocation

To what is the poet faithful? What is in question here is something that cannot be fixed in a proposition or memorized as an article of faith. But how can a vow be kept if it is never formulated, not even to oneself? It would have to quit the mind in the very moment it affirms its presence there.

A medieval glossary explains the meaning of the neologism *dementicare*, which was beginning to substitute the more literary *oblivisci* in common usage, as follows: *dementicastis: oblivioni tradidistis*. The forgotten is not simply cancelled or left aside: it is *handed over* to oblivion. The pattern of this unformulable tradition was set out by Hölderlin in his notes to the translation of Sophocles' *Œdipus* where he writes that God and man, "in order that the memory of the heavenly ones not vanish, communicate in the form, all-oblivious, of infidelity."

Fidelity to that which cannot be thematized, nor simply passed over in silence, is a betrayal of a sacred kind, in which memory, spinning suddenly like a whirlwind, uncovers the hoary forehead of oblivion. This attitude, this reverse embrace of memory and forgetting which holds intact the identity of the unrecalled and the unforgettable, is vocation.

The Idea of the Unique

In 1961, in response to an inquiry from Karl Flinker, the Paris book dealer, about the problem of bi-lingualism, Paul Celan gave this answer: "I don't believe in bilingualism in poetry. Yes, a double language does exist, and even in many contemporary works, in particular those which adapt themselves so gleefully to current cultural fashion, as polyglot as it is polychrome.

Poetry is uniqueness in that it is the destiny of language. It therefore cannot be—forgive me this banal truth now that poetry, like truth, loses itself all too often in banality—it cannot, therefore, be doubleness."

Coming from a German-speaking Jewish poet, born and raised in Bukovina, a region where at least four other languages were spoken apart from Yiddish, this answer cannot have been given lightly. And when in Bucharest just after the war his friends tried to convince him to become a Romanian poet (his Romanian poems of that period have survived), on the grounds that he should not write in the language of the murderers of his parents who died in a Nazi concentration camp, Celan simply replied: "It is only in one's mother tongue that one can tell the truth. In a foreign language the poet lies."

What kind of experience of the uniqueness of language was here at stake for the poet? It was not, to be sure, simply a question of mono-lingualism that makes use of the mother-tongue to the exclusion of others while remaining on the same level as them. It is rather a matter of the experience Dante had in mind when he wrote of the mother-tongue that it "is the one and only thing

first in mind.” There is, in fact, an experience of language that forever presupposes words—in which we speak, so to say, as if we always already had words for the word, as if we always already had a language before having one (the language which we then speak is never unique, but always double, triple, caught up in the infinite recession of meta-languages). Contrariwise there is another experience in which man remains absolutely without words in the face of language. The language for which we have no words, which doesn’t pretend, like grammatical language, to be there before being, but is “alone and first in mind,” is our language, that is, the language of poetry.

This is why Dante did not seek, in his *De vulgari eloquentia*, this or that mother-tongue plucked from the vernacular wilderness of the Italian peninsula, but only that illustrious vulgate which breaths its perfume into each without coinciding with any. For this reason, the Provençal poets recognized a poetic genre—the *descort*—which testified to the reality of a unique, absent language but only through the babel of multiple idioms. The *unique* language is not *one* language. The unique, in which mankind takes part as the only possible maternal truth, which is to say common truth, is always already split. In the moment one arrives at the unique word, one must take sides, one must choose a language. In the same way, in speaking, we can only say *something*—we cannot say just the truth; we cannot only say that we say.

That the encounter with this unique language, both divided and unshareable as it is, constitutes, in this sense, a destiny, is an admission that could be wrested from the poet only in a moment of weakness. How could there be in fact a destiny where there are not yet any words with meaning, where there is not yet an identity of language? And to whom might this destiny occur, if at that moment we are not yet speakers? Never is the infant* so untouched, so remote and so without destiny

*The author here employs the Italian word *infante* (instead of *bambino*), in reference to the Latin: *infans* = unspeaking. (tr.n)

as when, as the word suggests, he stands without words in the face of language. Destiny is concerned only with the language that, faced with the infancy of the world, vows to be able to encounter it, to have forever, beyond the name, something to say of it.

This vain promise of a meaning in language is its destiny, which is to say, its grammar and its tradition. The poet is the infant who piously receives this promise and who, though avowing) its emptiness, decides for truth, and decides to remember that emptiness and fill it. But at that point, language stands before him, so alone, so abandoned to itself that it can no longer in any way impose: "*la poésie ne s'impose plus, elle s'expose,*" so Celan writes, in French this time, in a posthumous text. The emptiness of words here truly fills the heart.

*The Idea of Dictation**

When poetry was a responsible practice, it was assumed that the poet would on any occasion be able to provide a reason for what he had written. The Provençal poets gave the name *razo* to the exposition of the hidden ground of the poem, and Dante warned that the poet risked shame were he unable to “set it out in prose.”

In the 1956 introduction to the second edition of his short stories, Delfini wrote for *Il ricordo della Basca* [The Memory of the Basque woman] a *razo* longer than any yet conceived by a poet for one of his works. But as is often the case with the love poets, the *razo* can lead the reader astray. It points in the direction of the author’s biography, a biography invented, of course, in relation to the work, but which the reader is tempted to take at face value. And so the Basque, who is the transparent *senhal* of the language and of the *dettato* of his poetry, turns into Isabel De Aranzadi, a girl met at Lerici in the summer of twenty years earlier.

The Basque woman is what is so intimate and present that it cannot in any sense be remembered, and this blissful impossibility of remembering (“I’d like her

*The Italian word *dettato* has kept, apart from the meaning dictation, a meaning deriving from the Latin *dictare*, which, towards the end of the Latin culture, had taken on the sense of “compose a literary work” (a sense also kept by the German *dichten*). In this sense the Italian *dettato* corresponds almost exactly to the German *das Gedichtete*, the “Poematized” that both Heidegger and Benjamin use, each in his own way, to indicate the essence of the poem. (tr.)

to be so close to me that any memory, even if thrust on me could give me no image of her") is the true theme of the short story which ends up, consequently, in a glossolalia, that is, in the myth of a language in which the spirit is immediately blended—at least apparently—into the voice. The story, nevertheless, is entitled, *The Memory of the Basque Woman*, to indicate that the writing is the attempt, though doomed to failure from the outset, to grasp an immemorable proximity, a love that cannot be distanced (and hence, "the irreparable tragedy of this memory"). As for the rest, the poetry, for which the short story itself is the *razo*, is not really a glossolalia, but a *copla* written in the purest Basque which concludes with these verses: "When I find poetry / you are falling asleep; / may my song be for you / as the dream in the night."

Contradicting himself in this way, Delfini gives a courteous nod in the direction of that other Basque woman of twentieth-century Italian literature who most likely constitutes the model: Manuelita Etchagarray, the Creole of *Dualism* in Campana's *Canti Orfici*, whose name unmistakably betrays a Basque origin. Against the naïve belief of an innate immediacy in poetry, Campana (who formulates his poetics in the poem), favours a dualism and diglossia that for him constitutes the experience of poetry: memory and immediacy, the letter and the voice, thought and presence. Between the impossibility of thinking ("I didn't think, I didn't think of you: I never have thought of you"), and a power of only thinking, between an inability to remember in the perfect, amorous attachment to the present, and the memory that arises precisely out of the impossibility of this love, poetry is always divided, and this intimate divergence is its dictation. Like Folquet de Marseilles, the poet recalls in the song what in the song he would like only to forget; or—and this is bliss—in the song he forgets what he wanted in the song to remember.

This is why the lyric—which uniquely keeps to such dictation—is necessarily empty; it is always transfixed on the verge of a day that has always already set: it

doesn't have, literally, anything to say or recount. But thanks to this sober, exhausted dwelling of the poetic word in the beginning, something like a lived experience (which the narrator will gather as the material of his tale) comes to being for the first time.

This is why the traces of Beatrice in the book of memory shape a "new life"; that is why the memory of the Memory of the Basque Woman—which is how Delfini defines his extremely long *razo*—is an autobiography.

The Idea of Truth

Scholem once wrote that there is something infinitely saddening in the doctrine of the absence of object to supreme consciousness, an idea set out in the first pages of the Zohar and in any case the ultimate lesson of every mystic. In these pages of the Zohar, the interrogative pronoun *What?* (Mah) stands at the uttermost limits of knowledge, beyond which no other response is possible: "When a man questions, and seeks to clearly see and understand step by step until the last, he arrives at the *What?*, that is: you have understood *What?* You have seen *What?* You have sought *What?* But everything remains as impenetrable as it was in the beginning." According to the Zohar, however, there is another interrogative pronoun even more inward and obscure which marks the upper limit of the heavens; this is *Who?* (Mi). If *What?* is the question that asks *what thing* (the *quid* of medieval philosophy), *Who?* is the question that asks for the name: "The impenetrable, the Ancients, created that. And *Who?* is he? He is *Who?* . . . Since he is both the object of the question and the undiscloseable and hidden, he is called *Who?* Beyond that there are no more questions . . . Existent and non-existent, impenetrable and closed in the name, he has no other name than *Who?*, a longing to be unveiled, to be called by name."

Having reached the limit of the *Who?*, it is clear that thought no longer has an object; it experiences the absence of a final object. This, however, is not saddening; or rather, it is only for an enquiry which, mistaking one question for another, continues to ask *What?*, where not only are there no more answers, but no longer any

questions either. The truly saddening thing would be if final knowledge still had the form of an object. Precisely the absence of any final object of knowledge saves us from the irremediable sadness of things. Every final truth that could be put into an objectifying discourse, even though it seemed satisfactory, would necessarily be a doom, our condemnation, as it were, to truth. The drift toward this definitive closure of truth is a tendency of all historical languages which both philosophy and poetry stubbornly oppose, but from which the signifying power of human languages as well as their ineluctable death both draw sustenance. Truth, the opening which—according to a Platonic *oros*—is proper to the soul, shapes itself into a final, immutable state of things, into a destiny.

It was from this thought that Nietzsche tried to save himself through the idea of the eternal return, through the “yes” uttered in that worst moment when truth seems to close itself off forever in a world of things. The eternal return is, in effect, an ultimate thing, but at the same time the impossibility, also, of an ultimate thing. The eternal repetition of the truth closing itself off in a state of things is, since it is repetition, likewise the impossibility of such a closure. Or, in Nietzsche’s supreme formulation: *amor fati*, love of fate.

This monstrous compromise between destiny and memory, whereby that which can only be object of memory (the return of the same) is each time seized on as destiny, is the discontorted image of the truth with which our times are unable to come to terms. Because the opening of the soul—the truth—neither gapes open to an infinite destiny, nor closes itself off in the eternal repetition of a state of things, but rather, by opening itself in a name, illuminates only the thing, and in closing itself in the thing, nonetheless clings to its own appearance, and remembers the name. This difficult intersection between gift and memory, between an openness without an object and that which can be only an object, is the truth in which, according to the author of

the Zohar, the just man dwells: “*Who?* is the highest limit of heaven; *What?* is the lowest. Jacob inherits them both: he flees from one limit to the other, from the initial limit of *Who?* to the final limit of *What?*, and he holds himself in the middle.”

The Idea of the Muse

At Le Thor, Heidegger held his seminar in a garden shaded by tall trees. At times, however, we left the village, walking in the direction of Thouzon or Rebanquet, and the seminar then took place in front of a small hut hidden away in the midst of an olive grove. One day, when the seminar neared its end and the students crowded round him, pressing him with questions, Heidegger merely remarked: "You can see my limit; I can't." Years before he had written that a thinker's greatness is gauged by his fidelity to his own internal limit, and not to know this limit—not to know it because of its closeness to the unspeakable—is the secret gift that being, at rare times, can make.

That a hiddenness be maintained in order that there be disclosure, a forgetfulness maintained in order that there be memory, this is inspiration, the rapture of the muses which brings man, word, and thought into accord with one another. Thought is close to the thing only if it gets lost in this latency, only if it no longer sees its thing. It is this which is dictated in it: the dialectic hiddenness/disclosure, oblivion/memory, so that the word can come, and not be simply manipulated by the subject (I cannot—obviously—inspire myself).

But this hiddenness is also the infernal core around which the obscurity of character and of destiny thickens; the non-said, growing in thought, precipitates it into madness. That which the master does not see is his own truth: his limit is his beginning. Unseen, unexposed, the

truth passes into its West; it shuts itself in its own *amanthis*.*

“That a philosopher fall into this or that form of apparent incoherence for the sake of this or that compromise is conceivable; he himself can have been aware of it. But what he is not aware of is that the very possibility of this apparent compromise has its deepest roots in an insufficient exposition of its beginning. If, therefore, a philosopher has truly made recourse to a compromise, his followers must explain on the basis of the inward, essential content of his awareness what, for him, has taken the form of esoteric awareness.”

The insufficient exposition of the beginning is what constitutes it as the place of the muses, as inspiration. But so as to be able to write, so as to become an inspiration also for us, the teacher had to smother his inspiration, come to terms with it; the inspired poet is without works. This extinguishing of inspiration, which plucks thought from out of the shadow of its waning, is the exposition of the Muse: the idea.

*The name the Egyptians gave to the abode of souls after death. (tr.)

The Idea of Love

To live in intimacy with a stranger, not in order to draw him closer, or to make him known, but rather to keep him strange, remote: unapparent—so unapparent that his name contains him entirely. And, even in discomfort, to be nothing else, day after day, than the ever open place, the unwaning light in which that one being, that thing, remains forever exposed and sealed off.

The Idea of Study

Talmud means study. During the Babylonian exile, with the Temple destroyed and themselves forbidden to sacrifice, the Jews entrusted the preservation of their identity to study rather than to worship. Torah, indeed, did not at first mean Law but teaching, and even the term Mishnah, the set of rabbinical laws, derives from a root whose central meaning is "repeat." When the edict of Cyrus gave permission for the Jews to return to Palestine, the Temple was rebuilt, but by then the religion of Israel had been marked forever by the piety of the exile. Alongside the single Temple, where blood sacrifice was celebrated, arose numerous synagogues, places for meeting and for prayer, and the dominion of the priests yielded to the growing influence of the Pharisees and Scribes, men of the book and of study.

In 70 A.D. the Roman legions again destroyed the Temple. But the learned rabbi Joannah ben-Zakkaj slipped covertly out of Jerusalem through the siege and obtained permission from Vespasian to continue the teaching of the Torah in the city of Jamnia. The Temple has never been rebuilt since, and study, the Talmud, has become the real temple of Israel.

Hence, among the legacies of Judaism there is also this soteriological polarity of study, proper to a religion which does not engage in worship but makes it an object of study. The figure of the scholar, respected in every tradition, thus acquired a messianic significance unknown to the pagan world: since redemption is at issue, its ambition blended into that of the righteous for salvation. But thereby it took on opposing tensions also.

Study, in effect, is per se interminable. Those who are acquainted with long hours spent roaming among books, when every fragment, every codex, every initial encountered seems to open a new path, immediately left aside at the next encounter, or who have experienced the labyrinthine allusiveness of that "law of good neighbors" whereby Warburg arranged his library, know that not only can study have no rightful end, but does not even desire one.

Here the etymology of the word *studium* becomes clear. It goes back to a st- or sp- root indicating a crash, the shock of impact. Studying and stupefying are in this sense akin: those who study are in the situation of people who have received a shock and are stupefied by what has struck them, unable to grasp it and at the same time powerless to leave hold. The scholar, that is, is always "stupid." But if on the one hand he is astonished and absorbed, if study is thus essentially a suffering and an undergoing, the messianic legacy it contains drives him, on the other hand, incessantly toward closure. This *festina lente*, this shuttling between bewilderment and lucidity, discovery and loss, between agent and patient, is the rhythm of study.

Nothing resembles it more than the condition which Aristotle, contrasting it with the act, defines as "potential." Potential is on the one hand passive potential, passivity, a pure and virtually infinite undergoing, and on the other hand, an active potential, an unstoppable drive to undertake, an urge to act. This is why Philo compares achieved wisdom to Sarah who, because of her sterility, urges Abraham to mate with her handmaid Hagar, which is to say, with study. But once pregnant, study is returned into the hands of Sarah, who is its mistress. And it is no accident that Plato, in his seventh letter, uses a word related to study ($\sigma\pi\omicron\upsilon\delta\acute{\alpha}\zeta\omega$) to indicate his relationship to what he has most at heart: only after a long, studious rubbing together of names, definitions and knowledge is the spark struck in the mind which, in enkindling it, marks the passage from undergoing to undertaking.

This also explains the sadness of the scholar: nothing is bitterer than a long dwelling in potential. Nothing shows better what disconsolate gloom may derive from an incessant postponement of the deed, than the *melancholia philologica* which Pasquali, feigning to transcribe it from Momsen's will, sets down as the enigmatic sum of his own existence as a scholar.

The end to study may never come—and, in this case, the work is stuck forever in the fragmentary or note stage—or coincides with the moment of death, when what had seemed a finished work reveals itself as mere study. Thus it was for St. Thomas, who shortly before his death confided to his friend Rinaldus: "The end of my writing is coming, for things have now been revealed to me that make everything I have written and taught look foolish, and so I hope that with the end of learning that of life will also come soon."

But the latest, most exemplary embodiment of study in our culture is not the great philosopher nor the sainted doctor. It is rather the student, such as he appears in certain novels of Kafka or Walser. His prototype occurs in Melville's student who sits in a low-ceilinged room "in all things like a tomb," his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. And his most extreme exemplar is Bartleby, the scrivener who has ceased to write. Here the messianic tension is reversed or, rather, has gone beyond itself. His gesture is that of a potential that does not precede but follow its act, has left it behind forever; of a Talmud that has not only renounced the rebuilding of the Temple but has even forgotten it. At this point, study shakes off the sadness that disfigured it and returns to its truest nature: not work, but inspiration, the self-nourishment of the soul.

The Idea of the Immemorable

There are times when, upon awakening, we know we have seen the truth in our dreams with such palpable clarity as to satisfy us perfectly. Perhaps we are shown a script that suddenly unseals the secret of our existence, or perhaps a single word, accompanied by an imperious gesture or repeated in a childish sing-song, lights up in a flash an entire landscape of shadows, restoring every refund and definitive detail to its place.

Once awake, however, even though we can still recall the dream images in all their sharpness, the script and the word have lost the power of truth. Sadly we fondle them, the spell gone, unable to glean their portentous significance. We do have the dream, but the essence is inexplicably lacking, buried in a land to which, wide awake, we no longer have entry.

Rarely are we quick enough to remark what ought to be perfectly evident to us, which is our vain belief that the secret of the dream lies somewhere else or in some other time: the dream exists for us in its entirety at the moment it flashes into mind on awakening. The same memory that has given us the dream also hands us the absence that lames it: a single gesture contains both.

A similar thing happens with involuntary memory. In this case, the memory that brings back to us the thing forgotten is itself forgetful of it and this forgetfulness is its light. It is, however, from this that its burden of longing comes: an elegiac note vibrates so enduringly in the depths of every human memory that, at the limit, a memory that recalls nothing is the strongest memory.

Far from seeing in this aporia of the dream and of memory a limit or weakness, we should instead recognize it for what it is: a prophecy regarding the very structure of consciousness itself. It is not that what we have experienced and then forgotten now returns imperfectly to consciousness, but rather that we enter at that point into what has never been, into forgetfulness as the home of consciousness. This is why our happiness is steeped in longing: consciousness contains within itself the intimation of the unconscious and that intimation is precisely what makes for its perfection. This means that all attention tends, in the last instance, towards thoughtlessness, and that thought, at its peak, is only a shiver. Dreams and memories plunge life into the dragon's blood of the word, and in this way make it invulnerable to memory. The immemorable, which skips from memory to memory without itself ever coming to mind, is, properly speaking, the unforgettable. This unforgettable oblivion is language, the human word.

So it is that the promise the dream formulates out of its own lack is a promise of lucidity so powerful that it can restore us to thoughtlessness, of a language so achieved that it can send us back to infancy, of a reason so sovereign that it understands itself as incomprehensible.

II





Einiges aus und

Kochs. S. 192

The Idea of Power

Perhaps it is only in pleasure that the two categories invented by the genius of Aristotle, potentiality and act, lose their by now stereotyped opacity and become for an instant transparent. Pleasure—as Aristotle writes in the treatise dedicated to his son Nicomachos—is that whose form in every instant is fulfilled, perpetually taking place. From this definition it follows that potentiality is the contrary of pleasure. It is what is never enacted, what never achieves its end. It is, in a word, pain. And if pleasure, according to Aristotle's definition, never takes place in time, potentiality must essentially be duration. These considerations throw light on the hidden links between power and potentiality. The pain of potentiality disappears, in fact, the instant in which it passes into act. But there are forces everywhere—even within ourselves—which constrain potentiality to hang fire within itself. Power grounds itself on these forces: power is the isolation of potentiality from its act, the organization of potentiality. Power bases its authority on this upgathering of pain, it literally leaves the pleasure of man unfulfilled.

What gets lost, however, is not so much pleasure as the very sense of potentiality and its pain. Becoming interminable, it falls prey to dreams and dallies with the most monstrous equivocations about itself and pleasure. In perverting the strict link between means and ends, between setting out in inquiry and setting down in result, potentiality mistakes the height of pain—omnipotence—for the greatest perfection. But only as an end of potentiality, only as absolute impotence, is pleasure

human and innocent; and only as a tension that obscurely foretells its own crisis, its own resolving judgment, is pain acceptable. In the accomplished work, as in pleasure, man finally enjoys his own impotence.

The Idea of Communism

In pornography, the utopia of a classless society displays itself through gross caricatures of those traits that distinguish classes and their transfiguration in the sexual act. Nowhere else, not even in a carnival's masquerade, does one find such a stubborn insistence on class markers in dress at the very moment that the situation both transgresses and nullifies them in the most incongruous of ways. The starched caps and aprons of maids, the worker's overalls, the butler's white gloves and striped waistcoat, and more recently, even the smocks and half-masks of nurses, all celebrate their apotheosis at the moment in which, set like strange amulets on inextricably tangled naked bodies, they seem to trumpet forth that last day on which they are to appear as the emblems of a community we can still barely glimpse.

The only thing similar in the ancient world are the representations of the amorous relations between men and gods, an inexhaustible source of inspiration for classical art in its decline. In sexual union with a god, the overwhelmed and happy mortal suddenly cancels the infinite distance separating him from the heavenly ones; but at the same time, this distance is re-established, though in reverse, in the animal metamorphosis of the god. The guileless muzzle of the bull that bears Europa away, the sharp beak of the swan poised over Leda's face—these are signs of a promiscuity so intimate and heroic as to be, for a little while yet, intolerable.

If we look for the truth content of pornography, it immediately displays is artless and insipid claim to hap-

piness. The essential character of this happiness is that it be enactable at any time or place: whatever the initial situation, it must inevitably end up in a sexual relation. A pornographic film in which by some mischance this didn't happen would, perhaps, be a masterpiece, but it would no longer be a pornographic film. The striptease is, in this sense, the model of every pornographic plot. Always and without exception they start with people in any old situation wearing clothes, and the only space left to the unforeseen is the way in which they must come together, stripped, at the end. (Pornography has in this the austerity of classical literature: there must be no space for surprise, and talent consists in imperceptible variations on one mythic theme.) And here the second essential characteristic of pornography unveils itself: the happiness shown is always anecdotal, always a story, a moment seized on, and never a natural condition or something taken for granted: the naturalism that merely does away with clothes has always been the most relentless adversary of pornography; just as a pornographic film without a sexual act would make no sense, the simple motionless display of man's natural sexuality can hardly be defined as pornographic.

To demonstrate that the potential for happiness is present in every least moment of daily life wherever there is human society: this is the eternal political justification of pornography. But its truth content, which sets it at the opposite pole from the naked bodies which crowd *fin de siècle* monumental art, is that pornography does not elevate the everyday world to the everlasting heaven of pleasure, but rather shows the unremediably episodic character of every pleasure—the inner aimlessness of every universal. This is why it is only in representing the pleasure of the woman, inscribed solely in her face, that pornography achieves its intention.

What would the characters in the pornographic film we are watching say if they in turn could be the spectators of our lives? Our dreams cannot see us—this is the tragedy of utopia. The exchange between character and

reader—a good rule for all reading—ought to also function here. Except that what is important is not so much that we learn to live our dreams, but that they learn to read our lives.

“It will seem, then, that the world has possessed for a long long time the dream of a thing of which it must only possess the awareness in order to truly possess.” Well and good—but how are dreams possessed, where are they kept? Naturally it is not a matter here of fulfilling something; nothing is more boring than a man who has fulfilled his own dreams: this is the insipid social-democratic zealousness of pornography. But neither is it a matter of carefully keeping in chambers of alabaster, untouchable and garlanded with jasmine and roses, ideals that would crumble on coming things: this is the secret cynicism of the dreamer.

Bazlen said: what we have dreamed, we have had already—a long time ago; so long ago that we don't even remember. Not in a past, therefore—we do not have any records of it. Rather, the unfulfilled dreams and desires of humanity are the patient limbs of the resurrection, always ready to reawaken on the last day. And they don't sleep enclosed in rich mausoleums, but are fixed like living stars in the farthest heaven of language whose constellations we can barely make out. And this, at least, we didn't dream. To know how to grasp the stars that fall from the never dreamt-of firmament of humanity is the task of communism.

The Idea of Politics

According to theology, the greatest punishment a creature can meet with, the one for which there is truly no remedy, is not the wrath of God but his forgetting. His wrath, in fact, is made of the same stuff as his mercy: but if our evil has overflowed the measure, then even the wrath of God abandons us. "Behold the terrible instance," writes Origen, "the extreme instance in which we are no longer punished for our sins: when we go beyond the measure of evil, the jealous God withdraws his zeal from us: 'My jealousy,' he says, 'shall abandon you, I shall be wroth no longer for your sake.'"

This abandonment, this divine forgetfulness is, beyond any punishment, the most refined revenge, and the believer fears it as the sole irreparable one, before which his thought retreats in terror: How, indeed, can one think what even divine omniscience knows nothing of, what has been erased from the mind of God forever? Of the person who encounters this abandonment Bernanos says he is "non pas absous ni condamné, notez bien: perdu." There is, however, a single case in which this condition ceases to appear disastrous and gains its own particular felicity: that of unbaptized children who die with no other fault than original sin and dwell everlastingly in limbo, in the company of the demented and of righteous pagans. *Mitissima est poena puerorum, qui cum solo originali decedunt.* The punishment of limbo, of that eternal marge of hell, is not, according to theologians, an afflictive pain, there are no flames or torment: it is only a privative pain, which consists in the perpetual lack of the vision of God. But,

differently from the damned, the inhabitants of limbo feel no pain for this lack: since they only have natural knowledge and not supernatural, which is implanted in us by baptism, they do not know they are missing the supreme good, or if they know (as another opinion allows) they cannot regret it any more than a reasonable man would afflict himself for an inability to fly. (If they were to suffer, in fact, since they would be suffering for a fault they cannot mend, their pain would bring them to desperation, as happens with the damned, and that would not be just.) Furthermore, their bodies, like those of the blessed, are impassible, but only in respect to divine justice; for the rest, they enjoy to the full their natural perfections. The greatest punishment—the lack of the vision of God—thus turns into natural felicity: they do not know, never will know, of God. So, irremediably lost, they dwell without pain in divine abandonment: it is not God who has forgotten them, but they who have forever disremembered him, and against their obliviousness divine forgetting is powerless. Like undelivered letters, these risen creatures are without destiny. Neither blessed like the elect, nor despairing like the damned, they are forever laden with a hope without outcome.

This limbo nature is the secret of *Bartleby*, the most anti-tragic of Melville's creations (even though to human eyes no destiny could seem more disconsolate than his)—and this is the ineradicable root of that "I would prefer not to" on which, along with the divine, all human reason shatters.

The Idea of Justice

For Carlo Betocchi

What does the Forgotten want? Neither memory, nor awareness, but justice. The justice, however, in which it trusts, by being justice, cannot give it access to naming and to awareness; its implacable decree is carried out, as punishment, only on the forgetful and the executioners—it says not a word about the forgotten (justice is not vengeance; it has nothing to avenge). Nor could it say anything without betraying what entrusted itself into its hands not to be delivered over to memory or language, but to remain immemorable and without name. *Thus justice is the handing on of the Forgotten.* More essential for man than the transmission of memory is the transmission of oblivion, which piles up anonymously behind his back each day, impossible for him to consume or shelter. For each man, and with even more reason, for every society, this heap is so enormous that the most perfect archive could hardly contain even a scrap of it (this is why every attempt to envisage history as a court of justice fails).

And yet this is the only inheritance that each man unavoidably receives. In the withdrawal of the Forgotten from the language of signs and from memory, justice, in fact, is born for man, and only for him. It is born, not as a discourse to be passed over in silence or made widespread, but as a voice; not as a testament in one's own hand, but like a heralding gesture or a vocation. In this sense the most ancient of human traditions is not Logos, but Dike (or rather, they are indistinguishable at

the start). Language as a self-aware historical memory is only the desperation that came upon us when faced with the difficulty of tradition. Believing that they are handing on a language, men actually give each other voice; and in speaking, they deliver themselves over without remission to justice.

The Idea of Peace

When liturgical reform brought back into the mass the sign of peace to be exchanged amongst the faithful, it became somewhat embarrassingly clear that the faithful were genuinely ignorant about what a peace sign might be; and in their ignorance, they fell back on the only gesture familiar to them. After some perplexity, and without much conviction, they shook hands. Their gesture of peace, that is, was the one used in the bargaining of markets and country fairs to close a deal.

That the term peace originally indicated a pact and an agreement is inscribed in its etymology. But for the Latins, the term that indicated the state that derived from the pact was not *pax*, but *otium*, whose uncertain correspondences in Indo-European languages (Gr. ἄβυσσος, empty, Gr. ἄβρωσ, in vain; Gothic *aupeis*, empty; Isl. *aud*, desert) hover around the semantic field of emptiness and absence of finality. A gesture of peace might thus be only a pure gesture, without meaning, showing the inactivity and emptiness of the hand. This is, in fact, the sign of greeting amongst many people, and perhaps it was precisely because the handshake is nowadays simply a way of greeting that the faithful, called on by the priest, fall back unconsciously on this bland gesture.

The truth is, however, that there is not, nor can there be, a sign of peace, since true peace would only be there where all the signs were fulfilled and exhausted. Every struggle among men is in fact a struggle for recognition and the peace that follows such a struggle is only a convention instituting the signs and conditions of mutual, precarious recognition. Such a peace is only

and always a peace amongst states and of the law, a fiction of the recognition of an identity in language, which comes from war and will end in war.

Not the appeal to guaranteed signs, or images, but the fact that we cannot recognize ourselves in any sign or image: that is peace—or, if you like, that is the bliss more ancient than peace which a marvellous parable of St. Francis's defines as sojourn—nocturnal, patient, homeless—in non-recognition. Peace is the perfectly empty sky of humanity; it is the display of non-appearance as the only homeland of man.

The Idea of Shame

I. Ancient man experienced neither the feeling of squalor nor that of chance which, as we see it, takes away in the end all greatness from human misfortune. To be sure, joy for him could at any moment, as ὕβρις turn upside-down and become the most bitter disillusionment, but precisely at that moment the tragic intervened with its heroic objection to block all possibility of squalor. In front of his fate the shipwreck of ancient man is tragic, never petty; his unhappiness as well as his happiness betrays no littleness. It is no less true that in comedy the tragic shows its ridiculous side; nevertheless, this world abandoned by gods and heroes is not one of meanness, but, justly speaking, graceful: "What grace man has," says a character of Menander's, "when he is truly human."

In the world of the ancients it is not in comedy but in philosophy that one encounters the first and only trace of a feeling we can, without forcing, compare to the shame that paralyses Stavrogin's faith, or that we find something similar to the mythic promiscuity, or the mythic filth of the courts and castles of Kafka. (In the ancient world, filth can never be mythic: undaunted Hercules cleans the Augean stables, bending the forces of nature to his will. We, however, can never get to the bottom of our filth to which a mythological residue always remains attached.) It occurs, strangely, in that passage of the *Parmenides* where the young Socrates expounds his theory of ideas to the Eleatic philosopher. Confronted with Parmenides' question whether ideas exist "of hair, filth, mud and every other thing to the utmost degree

vile and disagreeable in nature," Socrates confesses that he feels struck as if by dizziness: "already once the thought that it was universally extendible tormented me. But as soon as I entertain the notion, I immediately dodge it for fear of losing myself by falling into an abyss of foolishness . . ." But this lasts only a moment: "it is because you are still young," Parmenides replies, "and philosophy has not yet taken hold of you as I predict it one day will, when you will no longer shudder at any of these things."

It is important here that it is a metaphysical problem (theological, in the last analysis) that unseals for thought, if only for an instant, the vertigo of squalor. God himself—the hyperuranian world of ideas, the model on which the Demiurge creates the sensible world—presents that repugnant countenance so familiar to us today, and faced with which pagan man averts his gaze, and feels that αἰδώς that marks with such force the piety of the ancients. God has no need for justifications: θεὸς ἀναίτιος rings out in *The Republic* the decree of the virgin Lachesis.

For modern man, however, a theodicy is necessary, but likewise the most miserable sort of failure. God himself accuses himself and rolls, as it were, in his own theological muck, and just this gives our unease its unmistakable quality. The abyss over which our reason sways is not that of necessity, but that of the chance nature and banality of evil. One cannot be guilty or innocent of an accident: one can only feel embarrassed or ashamed, as when we slip in the street on a banana skin. Our God is a shamefaced God. But just as every shudder betrays a secret solidarity with the object of disgust, so shame is the index of an unheard of, frightening proximity of man with himself. The feeling of squalor is man's last *pudeur* face to face with himself, just as accident—beneath whose sign man's entire existence now seems to gently unroll—is the mask hiding the growing weight that uniquely human causes exert on the fate of humanity.

II. It is a very poor reading of Kafka's works that sees in them only a summation of the anguish of a guilty man before the inscrutable power of a God become estranged and remote. On the contrary, here it is God himself who would need to be saved and the only happy ending we can imagine for his novels is the redemption of Klamm, of the Count, of the anonymous, theological crowd of judges, lawyers, and guardians indiscriminately packed together in dusty corridors or stooped beneath oppressive ceilings.

Kafka's genius is to have placed God in a closet—to have made the scullery and attic the theological place *par excellence*. But his greatness, which flashes forth only rarely in the gestures of his characters, is that he decided at a certain point to renounce theodicy and forego the old problem of guilt and innocence, of freedom and destiny, in order to concentrate solely on shame.

He was faced with a kind of humanity—the worldwide middle-class—which had been expropriated of every experience except its shame—the pure, empty form of the most intimate sense of self. For such people the only kind of innocence possible would have been that of feeling shame in unconcern. Αἰδώς was not for ancient man an embarrassing feeling; on the contrary, faced with shame, he recovered, like Hector before the bared breast of Hecuba, his courage and piety. Kafka seeks to teach men the use of the only good left to them: not to liberate oneself from shame, but liberate shame. It is what Joseph K. strives to achieve during the entire period of his trial, and it is to save his own shame, not his innocence, that at the end he obstinately bows to the headman's knife: "It seemed to him," we read at the moment of this death, "that his shame would survive him."

Only through this task, only by saving for humanity at least its shame, did Kafka recover something like an ancient bliss.

The Idea of Epoch

The most hypocritical aspect of the lie implicit in the concept of decadence is the pedantry with which—at the very moment complaints are being made about mediocrity and decline, and predictions made about the coming end—each generation tallies its new talent and catalogues its new forms and epochal tendencies in art and thought. What gets lost in this petty calculation, often done in bad faith, is precisely the one incomparable claim to nobility our own era might legitimately make in regard to the past: *that of no longer wanting to be an historical epoch*. If one feature of our sensibilities deserves to survive, it is just this sense of impatience and almost of nausea we feel when faced with the prospect of everything simply beginning all over again, even if for the best. When tradition again tightens the momentarily loosened threads of its ancient, infamous fabric, in the face of new works of art and new trends in behavior and fashion, there is something in us that cannot restrain a shudder of horror, even when we admire.

It is precisely this that gets lost in the blind will of our time to be at all costs an epoch, even if it be the epoch of the impossibility of being an epoch, indeed, the age of nihilism. Concepts such as post-modern, the new renaissance, humanity beyond metaphysics, all betray the seed of progressiveness hidden in every conception of decadence and even nihilism. The essential point, on every occasion, is not to miss the new epoch already here or about to arrive or which at least might arrive and whose signs are already around us to be deciphered. And

nothing is sadder than the sleight of hand whereby, in the general discomfort, the wily rob their fellows of their very sufferings by showing them that these signs are nothing but the hieroglyphics, for them still temporarily illegible, of the new epochal happiness. On the other hand, those who simply conjure up the phantom of the end of humanity do not hide their nostalgia for everything that, in spite of everything, might just as well have continued.

As if beyond these alternatives there were not the only really human and spiritual possibility: that of surviving extinction, of overvaulting the end of time and historical epochs, not toward the future or the past, but toward the heart itself of time and history. History as we know it up to now has been no more than its own incessant putting off, and only at the point in which its pulsation is brought to a halt is there any hope of grasping the opportunity enclosed within it, before it gets betrayed* into becoming one more historical—epochal adjournment. In our stubborn effort to give ourselves time, we mislay the meaning of this gift, just as what gets lost in our incessant breaking into speech is the very reason for language.

This is why we do not want new works of art or thought; we don't want another epoch of culture and society: what we want is to save the epoch and society from their wandering in tradition, to grasp the *good*—undefferable and non-epochal—which was contained in them. The undertaking of this task would be the only ethics, the only politics which measures up to the moment.

**Tradita* in Italian has the double sense of "betrayed" and "transmitted." (tr.)

The Idea of Music

The current plethora of conceptual analysis of the present time is matched by a singular lack of phenomenological description. It is a fact that a handful of philosophical and literary works, written for the most part between 1915 and 1930, still maintain their hold over the sensibilities of the age, and that the last persuasive description of our states of mind and heart dates from more than fifty years ago. It is true that after the Second World War, French Existentialism (and in its wake European cinema of the late fifties) did attempt a popular reassessment of man's basic moods, but it is equally true that the attempt became—almost overnight—incredibly bland and outdated. Neither Sartre's nausea nor the brooding absurdity of Camus' characters have added anything to Heidegger's characterization of anguish and other *Stimmungen* (moods) in *Sein und Zeit*. And if we want to look for an image of our estrangement and social misery, it is still to the description of everyday life in *Sein und Zeit*, or to the novels of Joseph Roth, or the febrile, staccato notations of Benjamin's *Journey through German Inflation* that we must turn. As for the phenomenology of love, no one has managed to add much to those pages of *La Recherche* which were the last occasion when the features of its *facies hippocratica* were fixed, nor have shame and promiscuity ever again found the epic graph-icness of Kafka's stories.

Nor did even surrealism, which with undoubted timeliness had set about redrawing the map of the sensibilities of the age, succeed in the attempt. The surrealist atmosphere, with its Rimbaudian junk and its

incongruous associations, has today the same flavor of the somewhat frivolous archaism which Benjamin noticed in its prototype in Parisian *Passages*, and if it retains some point notwithstanding, it is not for having set its seal on the taste of an era, but for having made clear the essentially utopian character of the modern sensibility.

If sensibility is the sphinx against which every historical epoch must measure itself, then the enigma which our age must solve is the very one formulated for the first time in a Paris darkened by the First World War, in Germany during the great inflation, or in Prague at the fall of the empire. This does not mean that valuable works of philosophy or literature have not been produced since then—just that these works did not contain the inventory of the new sentiments of the epoch. When they did not limit themselves to revisiting the past, or patiently recording nuances, their greatness consisted precisely in the sober attitude with which they resolutely set aside the question of states of mind. The registering of *Stimmungen*, the listening to and transcription of this silent music of the soul, came to an end once and for all in Europe around 1930.

One of the possible explanations of this phenomenon (and like all explanations, unsatisfying) is that in the meantime, what had originally been the limit—experience of an intellectual elite became mass experience. On the steepest pinnacles of thought, where nothingness presents its inexpressive mask, the philosopher and poet now found themselves in the company of an interminable planetary mass. A *Stimmung* of the masses is not recordable music; it is mere bedlam.

More conclusive is the evidence of the dizzying loss of authority of private existence and of the private life. Just as we no longer believe in ambience and just as no intelligent man today would want to leave his mark on the furnishings of a house or style of dress, so we no longer expect much from the sentiments that furnish our soul. The capacity for dialectical reversal which was implicit in anguish and desperation, the *πρώσας ἰάσεται*

and the promise of healing, which still for Heidegger were the guardians of the final hope of the age, have lost their prestige. Not that it is no longer possible to experience the dialectical polarity of anguish, just as he who truly desires can certainly feel the cathartic power of moods, but we no longer dream of putting forward an experience—and much less an experience of the kind—as the basis for a claim of authority.

Our sensibility, our sentiments, no longer make us promises. They survive off to the side, splendid and useless, like household pets. And courage—before which the imperfect nihilism of our time is in constant retreat—would indeed consist in recognizing that we no longer have moods, that we are the first men not to be in tune with a *Stimmung*, the first men who are, as it were, absolutely non-musical: without *Stimmung*, without, that is, a calling. It is not a happy condition, as some mean creatures would have us believe; it is not even a condition, if every conditioning is always a way of predisposing in a certain way and of providing a destiny. But it is our situation, the decrepit *locus* in which we find ourselves unconditionally abandoned by every calling and by every destiny, exposed as never before.

And if moods are the same thing in the history of the individual as are epochs in the history of humanity, then what presents itself in the leaden light of our apathy is the never yet seen sky of an absolutely non-epochal situation in human history. The unveiling of being and language, which remains unsaid in each historical epoch and in each destiny, perhaps is truly coming to an end. The human soul has lost its music—music understood as the scoring in the soul of the inaccessibility of the origin. Deprived of an epoch, worn out and without destiny, we reach the blissful threshold of our unmusical dwelling in time. Our word has truly reached the beginning.

The Idea of Happiness

To Ginevra

In every life there remains something un-lived just as in every word there remains something unexpressed. Character is the obscure power which sets itself up as the caretaker of this untouched life: it jealously watches over what has never been, and without you wanting it, inscribes its traces on your face. This is why the new born baby seems to already resemble the adult: in reality, there is nothing common to the two faces except, in the one as in the other, what has not been lived.

The comedy of character: at the point when death snatches from the hands of character what they tenaciously hide, it but grasps a mask. At this point character disappears: in the face of the dead there is no longer any trace of what has never been lived; the wrinkles furrowed by character smooth out. And so death is tricked; it has neither eyes nor hands for the treasure of character. This—what has never been—is taken up by the idea of happiness. It is the good that humanity receives from the hands of character.

The Idea of Infancy

In the freshwater lakes of Mexico there lives a species of albino salamander which has attracted the attention of zoologists and students of animal evolution for some time. Those who have had occasion to observe this amphibian in an aquarium are struck by its infantile, almost foetal appearance. Its relatively large head is sunk into its body, its skin is opalescent, slightly marbled with grey on the snout and vivid blue and pink around the constantly moving gills; its slender feet splay in crude petal-shaped pads.

At first the axolotl was classified as a singular species which had the particularity of maintaining throughout its life characteristics—such as gill-breathing and aquatic habitat—typical of the larval stage of an amphibian. That it was an autonomous species was proven beyond doubt by the fact that despite its infantile aspect, the axolotl was perfectly capable of reproduction. It was only later that a series of experiments showed that the administration of thyroid hormones brought on in the small newt the normal metamorphosis of amphibians. It lost its gills, and upon developing pulmonary respiration, left its aquatic life and developed into an adult specimen of speckled salamander (*Ambystoma tygrinum*). These circumstances might induce one to classify the axolotl as a case of evolutionary regression, as a defeat in the struggle for life forcing an amphibian to give up the terrestrial part of its existence and indefinitely prolong its larval state. Recently, however, it was just this stubborn infantilism (pedomorphosis or neoteny) that offered a new key to the understanding of human evolution.

It is now supposed that man did not evolve from individual adults but from the young of a primate which, like the axolotl, had prematurely acquired the capacity for reproduction. This would explain those morphological characteristics of man, ranging from the position of the occipital orifice to the form of the auricle of the ear, and from his hairless skin to the structure of his hands and feet, which do not correspond to those of adult anthropoids, but to those of the foetus. Characteristics which in primates are transitory became final in man, thereby in some way giving rise, in flesh and blood, to a kind of eternal child. More importantly, however, this hypothesis makes for a new approach to language and to the entire sphere of the exosomatic tradition which, more than any genetic imprint, characterizes *homo sapiens* and which, up till now, science seems constitutionally incapable of comprehending.

Let us try to imagine an infant that, unlike the axolotl, does not merely keep to its larval environment and retain its own immature form, but is, as it were, so completely abandoned to its own state of infancy, and so little specialized and so totipotent that it rejects any specific destiny and any determined environment in order to hold onto its immaturity and helplessness. Animals are not concerned with possibilities of their soma that are not inscribed in the germen; contrary to what might be thought, they pay no attention whatsoever to that which is mortal (the soma is, in each individual, that which in any case is doomed to die), and they develop only the infinitely repeatable possibilities fixed in the genetic code. They attend only to the Law—only to what is written.

The neotenic infant, on the other hand, would find himself in the condition of being able to pay attention precisely to what has not been written, to somatic possibilities that are arbitrary and uncodified; in his infantile totipotency, he would be ecstatically overwhelmed, cast out of himself, not like other living beings into a specific adventure or environment, but for the first time into a *world*. He would truly be listening to being. His voice still free from any genetic prescription, and having

absolutely nothing to say or express, sole animal of his kind, he could, like Adam, *name* things in his language. In naming, man is tied to infancy, he is for ever linked to an openness that transcends every specific destiny and every genetic calling.

But this openness, this stunned post in being, is not an event that concerns him in some way. It is not in fact even an event, something that can be endosomatically recorded and acquired in genetic memory; it is, rather, something that must remain absolutely external, nothing that concerns him, and that, as such, can only be entrusted to oblivion, which is to say, to an exosomatic memory and to a tradition. For him it is a question of remembering precisely nothing: nothing that happened to him or manifested itself, but which also, as nothing, anticipates every presence and every memory. This is why before handing down any knowledge or tradition, man necessarily has to hand down the very thoughtlessness, the very indeterminate openness only in which something like a concrete historical tradition has become possible. Which can also be expressed by the apparently trivial constatation that before transmitting something himself, man must first of all transmit language. (This is why a grown man cannot learn to speak; children, not adults, entered language for the first time, and despite the forty millennia of the species *homo sapiens*, precisely the most human of his characteristics—the acquisition of language—has remained firmly linked to an infantile condition and to an exteriority: whoever believes in a specific destiny cannot truly speak.)

Genuine spirituality and culture do not forget this original, infantile vocation of human language, while the attempt to imitate the natural germen in order to transmit immortal and codified values in which neotenic openness once more shuts itself off in a specific tradition is precisely the characteristic of a degraded culture. In fact, if something distinguishes the human tradition from that of the genetic code, it is precisely the fact that it wants to save not only the saveable (the essential characteris-

tics of the species), but what in any case cannot be saved; that which is, on the contrary, always already lost; or better, that which has never been possessed as a specific property, but which is, precisely because of this, unforgettable: the being, the openness of the infantile soma, to which only the world, only language, is adequate. What idea and essence want to save is the phenomenon, the irrepeatable that has been, and the most fitting purpose of logos is not the conservation of the species, but the resurrection of the flesh.

Somewhere inside of us, the careless neotenic child continues his royal game. And it is his play that gives us time, that keeps ajar for us that never setting openness which the peoples and languages of the earth, each in its own way, watch over in order to both preserve and hold back—and to preserve only to the extent that they defer. The plurality of nations and the numerous historical languages are the false callings by which man attempts to respond to his intolerable absence of voice; or, if one prefers, they are the attempts, fatally come to nothing, to make graspable the ungraspable, to become—this eternal child—an adult. Only on the day when the original infantile openness is truly, dizzingly taken up as such, when time has come to fullness and the child Aion has wakened from and to his game, will men be able finally to construct a history and language which are universal and no longer deferrable, and stop their wandering through traditions. This authentic recalling of humanity to the infantile soma is called thought—that is, politics.

The Idea of Universal Judgment

For Elsa Morante

The souls of men gather from everywhere in the court of justice, but the dock is already occupied. Some are led to seats in the jury box; others form noisy groups in the body of the court. When a buzzer announces the opening of proceedings, the accused, who has in the meantime stealthily put on a wig and robes, hurriedly mounts the judge's bench. But no sooner has he declared the court in session than he casts off his robes and slips down into the prosecutor's seat, and then into that of the defense. Whenever there is a recess, he dejectedly returns to sit in the dock.

While God is involved in this judgment of himself, in which he takes on one by one all the parts, men, disturbed and puzzled, silently drift out of the courtroom.

Universal judgment is not a judgment *in* language, which as such can never be truly decisive and comes in fact to be constantly adjourned (hence the idea that a universal judgment will come only at the end of time). It is, rather, a judgment *on* language itself that eliminates, in language, language from language.

The power of language must be directed towards language. The eye must see its blind spot. The prison must imprison itself. Only thus will the prisoners be able to make their way out.

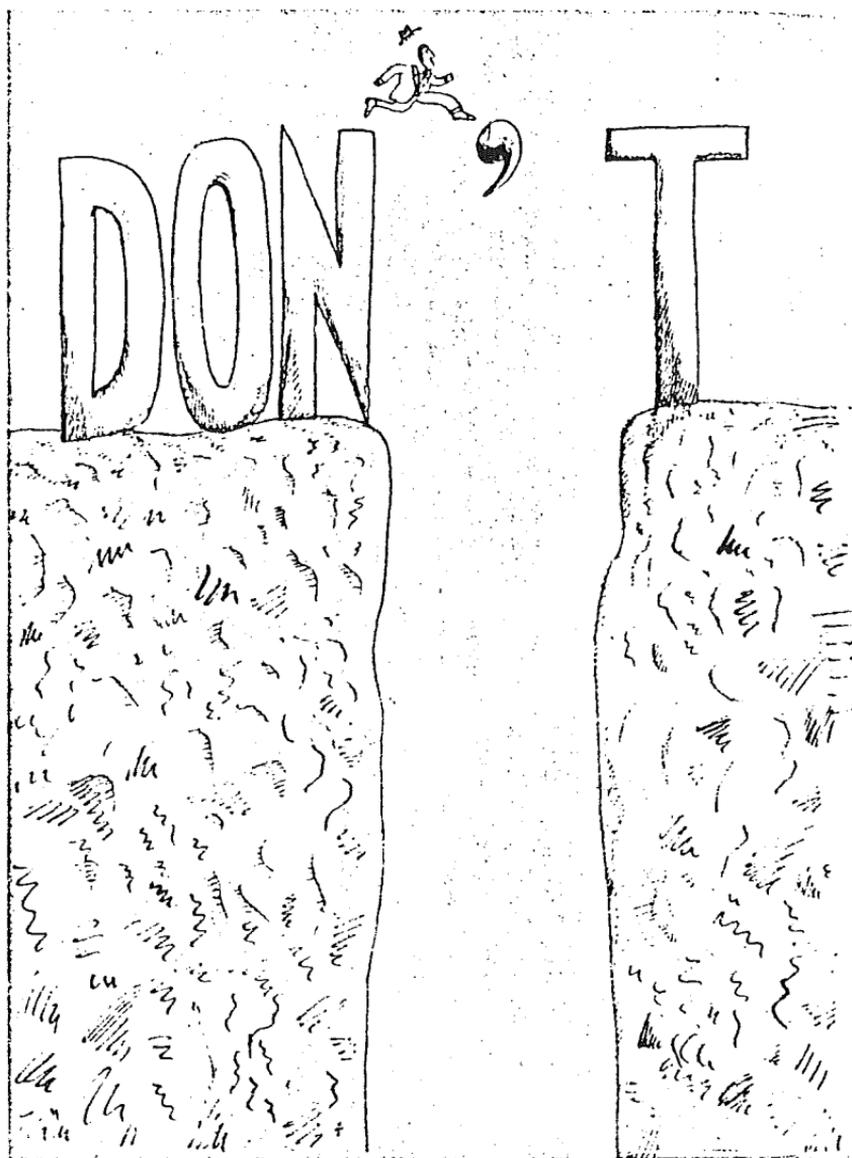
Somewhere, in that decrepit courtroom with its moldy benches, where the candles are guttering in their

sconces and enormous cobwebs have formed in the corners, the trial of God by himself still goes on.

But, then, this is only about a colored illustration in a book for children entitled: *Li siette palommielle*.

III





The Idea of Thought

For Jacques Derrida

I. Of all punctuation marks, quotation marks have enjoyed for some time now a particular vogue. The extension of their use beyond the *signum citationis*, in the already too widespread practice of putting a word between quotation marks, suggests more than superficial reasons for the vogue.

What does it mean, in fact, to put a word between quotation marks? With inverted commas the writer takes up a distance from language. The marks indicate that a certain term is not taken in its usual meaning; they indicate that its sense has been shifted (cited, called out) from the customary one but not yet completely cut off from its semantic tradition. One doesn't want or can't simply use the old term any longer, but one can't or doesn't want to find a new one either. The term put in quotation marks is suspended within its history; it is weighted—and therefore, at least embryonically, thought.*

Recently a general theory of citation has been devised for use in the universities. Those who think they can handle, with the usual academic irresponsibility, this risky practice, extrapolating it from the work of a philosopher, should remember that the word enclosed within quotation marks is only waiting its moment of revenge. And no vendetta is more subtle and ironic than its. He who puts a word in quotation marks can no

*Pun, in the Italian text, between "pesato" (weighted) and "pensato" (thought) (tr.).

longer rid himself of it: suspended in mid-air in its signifying élan, the word becomes unsubstitutable—or rather, it is now, for him, absolutely impossible to take leave of. Thus the spread of quotation marks betrays the unease of our time vis-à-vis language: the marks represent the walls—thin but unbreakable—of our imprisonment within language. Within the circle the quotation marks tighten around the word, the speaker is likewise enclosed.

But if quotation marks are a summons against language, citing it before the tribunal of thought, the proceedings of this trial cannot remain indefinitely adjourned. Every completed act of thought, to be such—to be able, that is, to refer to something standing outside language—must work itself out entirely within language. A humanity able to talk only within quotation marks would be an unhappy humanity that, by dint of thinking, had lost the capacity to carry thought through to a conclusion.

This is why these proceedings against language can only end with the cancellation of quotation marks. Even if the final verdict were a death sentence. In that case the quotation marks tighten round the neck of the accused term until they throttle it. At the point in which it seems to have emptied itself of any meaning and is breathing its last, the little executioners, appeased and frightened, return to the comma from which they came and which, according to the definition of Isidore of Seville, scans the rhythm of the breath in meaning.

II. Where the voice drops, where breath is lacking, a little sign remains suspended. On nothing other than that, hesitantly, thought ventures forth.

The Idea of the Name

For whoever mediates on the unsayable, it is an instructive observation that what one cannot speak of, language can nevertheless perfectly name. This is why ancient philosophy carefully distinguished the level of the name (*onoma*) from that of discourse (*logos*) and considered the discovery of this distinction of such importance as to ascribe the merit to Plato. In truth the discovery was made earlier: it was Antisthenes who first affirmed that for simple and primary substances there could be no *logos*, but only name. According to this idea, the unsayable is not that which is in no way attested to in language, but that which, in language, can only be named. Whereas the sayable is that about which one can speak in defining discourse, even should it finally lack a name of its own. The distinction between the spoken and the unspoken passes, therefore, through the interior of language, dividing it like a sheer-cliffed watershed.

The ancient wisdom that, under the name of mysticism, keeps watch against the level of the name being made to coincide with that of the proposition takes its stand on this fracture in language. The name enters, to be sure, into propositions, but what they *say* is not that which the name has *called*. Dictionaries and the tireless labors of science can easily place a definition next to every name, but what is said in this way is said only on the presupposition of the name. All language, rather, rests on a single name, never in itself preferable: the name of God. Contained in all propositions, it necessarily remains unsaid in each.

The stance philosophy adopts is different. It shares mysticism's distrust of an overhasty equation of the two levels, but does not despair of being able to render justice, in its own way, to what has been named. This is why thought does not remain on the threshold of the name, nor knows, beyond this, other secret names: it pursues, in the name, the idea. Because, as in the Jewish legend of the Golem, the name through which the unformed is called into life is that of truth. And since the first letter of this name has been erased from the forehead of the terrible *famulus*, thought continues to fix its gaze on that face where now is written the word "death," till even this is erased. The mute, unreadable forehead remains its only lesson, its only text.

The Idea of the Enigma

I. One always and only fears one thing: the truth. Or more precisely, the representation we make of it. Fear is not, in fact, simply a lack of courage in the face of a truth that we more or less knowingly represent to ourselves: even prior to this is the fear already implicit in the fact that we have made to ourselves an image of the truth, that in any case we have had a name and a presentiment of it. It is this archaic fear, contained in every representation, that finds in the enigma both its expression and its antidote.

This does not mean that the truth is something unrepresentable, something we are always hastening to cover up with our representations. Rather, truth begins only an instant after the point at which we acknowledge the truth or falsity of a representation (in the representation it can only have the form: "that's how it was!," or "then I was wrong!"). This is why it is important that representation stops an instant before the truth; this is why the only true representation is that which also represents the gap that separates it from the truth.

II. A story about Plato says that as an old man he one day called together his students at the Academy and announced he would talk about the Good. Since he had used this term only when alluding to the innermost and obscure core of his teaching—something he had never explicitly dealt with—there was an understandable expectation, even a certain nervousness in those gathered in the exedra (among them Speusippus, Senocrates, Aristotle and Philip of Oponte). But when the philosopher began to speak and it turned out that his discourse

touched only upon questions of mathematics, numbers, lines, planes, and the motion of the stars, and when at last he claimed that the Good was the One, the students were at first stunned but then began to swap glances and shake their heads, until finally some left the hall in silence. Even those like Aristotle and Speusippus, who stayed to the end, were embarrassed and tonguetied.

Thus Plato, who until then had always put his students on guard against the thematic treatment of problems, and who in his writings had willingly made room for fictions and stories, became himself, for his students, a myth and an enigma.

III. There was a philosopher who after long thought became convinced that the only legitimate form of writing was one which immunized his readers against the illusion of truth which his writing might elicit. "If we were to find out," he would repeat, "that Jesus or Lao-Tse wrote a detective novel, it would seem indecent to us. Likewise, a philosopher cannot hold a thesis or express opinions about problems." For this reason he decided to follow those simple, traditional forms such as the apology, the fable, the legend, which not even the dying Socrates had disdained and which seemed to warn the reader goodnatureedly against taking them too seriously.

Another philosopher pointed out to him, however, that such a choice was, in fact, contradictory because it assumed that the author was so irremediably serious about his intention that he was forced to distance himself from his expression. The only reason the didactic intention of the old fables turned out acceptable was that they had been repeated and altered an infinite number of times throughout the centuries and nothing was known about the original author. Otherwise, continued the objector, the only intention which escaped all possibilities of deception was the absolute absence of every intention. And it was precisely this lack of intention that the poets expressed through the image of the Muse who dictated to them their words, and to which they merely lent their voices. But in philosophy this was not possible:

what sense, in fact, would there be to an inspired philosophy? Unless, that is, one could find something like a Muse of philosophy, unless it were possible to find an expression which, like the song of that most ancient of muses the Thebans called the Sphinx, would shatter to pieces in the very moment it unveiled its truth.

IV. Let us suppose that all signs were fulfilled, man's condemnation to language purged, that all possible questions were answered and all that might be said had been uttered—what then would be the life of man on this earth? You say: "But our vital problems wouldn't even have been touched." But supposing we still felt the desire to laugh or cry, what would we cry or laugh about, what would that cry or laugh be, if, while we were prisoners of language, these emotions were no more, and could be no more than the experience, sad or blissful, tragic or comic, of the limits, the insufficiency of language? Where language were perfectly fulfilled, perfectly delimited, there would begin the other laugh, the other cry of humanity.

The Idea of Silence

In a collection of fables from late antiquity, one can read this apologue:

“It was customary amongst the Athenians to give a good thrashing to whoever desired to be considered a philosopher; if he bore the beating patiently, he could then be considered a philosopher. Once there was a fellow who underwent the beating, and having endured the blows in silence, exclaimed: “Well worthy am I, then, to be called a philosopher!” But he was rightly answered: “You would have been if you had but kept quiet.”

The fable certainly teaches us that philosophy undoubtedly has something to do with the experience of silence, but undergoing the experience in no way constitutes the identity of philosophy. In silence philosophy stands exposed, absolutely without identity; it endures the without-name, without finding in this its own name. Silence is not its secret word—but rather, philosophy’s word perfectly leaves unsaid its own silence.

The Idea of Language

I. A beautiful face is perhaps the only place where there is truly silence. While character marks the face with unspoken words and with intentions that have remained unfulfilled, and while the face of the animal always seems to be on the verge of uttering words, human beauty opens the face to silence. But the silence then is not simply a suspension of discourse, but silence of the word itself, the becoming visible of the word: the idea of language. This is why in the silence of the face man is truly at home.

II. Only the word puts us in contact with mute things. While nature and animals are forever caught up in a language, incessantly speaking and responding to signs even while keeping silent, only man succeeds in interrupting, in the word, the infinite language of nature and in placing himself for a moment in front of mute things. The inviolate rose, the idea of the rose, exists only for man.

The Idea of Language II

In Memoriam Ingeborg Bachmann

A singular light is thrown on Kafka's tale of the Penal Colony when one realizes that the machine of torture invented by the previous commandant of the colony is in fact language. But by the same stroke it becomes even more complex. In the tale the machine is primarily an instrument of justice and punishment. This means that, on earth and for men, language is also such an instrument. The secret of the penal colony is the same as that which a character in a contemporary novel reveals in these words: "I'll let you into a terrible secret: language is the punishment. All things must enter it and perish there according to the scale of their sin."

But, if it is a question of expiating a crime (and the officer is absolutely certain of this: "Guilt is never to be doubted"), in what does the meaning of the punishment consist? Here again the officer's explanations leave no doubt: It is what happens around the sixth hour. Six hours after the Harrow has begun to write into the flesh of the condemned man the commandment he has disobeyed, he begins to decipher the text: "But how quiet he grows at just about the sixth hour! Enlightenment comes to the most dull-witted. It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates. A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow oneself. Nothing more happens than the man begins to understand the inscription, he purses his mouth as if he were listening. You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one's eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds. To be sure,

that is a hard task; he needs six hours to accomplish it. By that time the Harrow has pierced him quite through and cast him into the pit, where he pitches down upon the blood and water and the cotton wool."

What the condemned man thus manages to grasp in the silence of his last hour is the meaning of language. Men—one might say—live their lives as speaking begins without understanding the meaning at issue; but a sixth hour comes for everyone in which even the most dull-witted cannot help but understand. It is not a matter, of course, of grasping a logical sense, something one could read with one's eyes; but of a deeper meaning that can only be made out by one's wounds and that belongs to language only as punishment. (This is why logic has its exclusive realm in judgment: logical judgment is, in truth, immediately penal judgment, sentence.) To understand this meaning, to measure one's own guilt is a hard task, and only when this task has been completed can one say that justice has been done.

This interpretation does not, however, exhaust the sense of the tale. On the contrary, it really begins to reveal itself only when the officer, realizing that he is unable to persuade the explorer, frees the condemned man and takes his place in the machine. Decisive here is the text of the inscription that must be cut into his flesh. It does not have, as for the condemned man, the form of a precise commandment ("Honor thy superiors"), but consists in the pure and simple injunction: "Be just." But it is precisely when the apparatus tries to write this injunction that not only does it break apart, but it fails to perform its task: "the Harrow was not writing, it was only jabbing . . . this was no exquisite torture . . . this was plain murder." Thus on the officer's face there is no sign of the promised redemption: "what the others had found in the machine the officer had not found."

Two interpretations of the tale are possible at this point. According to the first, the officer has, in his role of judge, effectively violated the precept to "be just" and so must pay the penalty. But with him the machine, a

necessary accomplice of the injustice, must be destroyed. That the officer does not find in his punishment the redemption others believed they found there is easily explained by the fact that he knew the text of the inscription beforehand.

But another reading is equally possible. According to this, the precept "Be just" does not refer to the decree the officer has broken, but is rather the instruction that shatters the machine. And the officer is perfectly aware of this given that he tells the explorer: " 'Then the time has come,' he said at last, and suddenly looked at the explorer with bright eyes that held some challenge, some appeal for cooperation." There can be no doubt: he inserts the instruction into the machine in the intention of destroying it. The ultimate meaning of language—the tale now seems to say—is the injunction "Be just"; and yet it is precisely the meaning of this injunction that the machine of language is absolutely incapable of getting us to understand. Or, rather, it can do it only by ceasing to perform its penal function, only by shattering into pieces and turning from punisher to murderer. In this way justice triumphs over justice, language over language. That the officer does not find in the machine what others had found is now perfectly understandable: at this point there is nothing left in language for him to understand. This is why his expression is the same as in life: his look calm and convinced, through his forehead the point of the great iron spike.

The Idea of Light

I turn on the light in a dark room: naturally the lit room is no longer the dark room; I have lost it forever. Yet isn't it the same room? Isn't the dark room the only content of the lit room? That which I can no longer have, that which infinitely flees backward, and likewise thrusts me forward is only a representation of language: the dark which light presupposes. But if I give up the attempt to grasp this presupposition, if I turn my attention to the light itself, if I receive it—what the light gives me is then the *same* room, the non-hypothetical dark. That which is veiled, that which is closed in itself is the only content of the revelation—light is only the coming to itself of the dark.

The Idea of Appearance

It was one of the late commentators on Aristotle, Simplicius of Cilicia, professor in the school of Athens a few years before its closure and his subsequent exile along with the last of the pagan philosophers to the court of Khosru I, who handed down to medieval astronomy (and through it to modern science) the expression “Save the appearances” (τὰ φαινόμενα σώζειν), as the motto of Platonic science. If not from Plato himself, the expression certainly comes from the milieu of the Academy; and it is no chance, perhaps, if we find it first attributed to Heraclides of Pontus, candidate for the succession to Speusippus as head of the Academy, about whom it is said that he tried to falsify the appearance of his own death (by substituting a snake for the corpse), and who, according to the same biographer, was mocked in an acrostic for not having spotted a Sophoclean forgery.

In his commentary on Aristotle’s *De Coelo*, Simplicius sets out in the following way the task that Plato assigned to the astronomy of his day: “Plato posits the principle that the celestial bodies move according to a circular, uniform and constantly regular movement; thus he poses the following problem for mathematicians: what perfectly regular and circular movements are an appropriate hypothesis so as to save the appearances of those wandering heavenly bodies?”

It is well known how the Greek astronomers, beginning with Eudoxus, responded to his question. To save the infinitely complicated appearances presented by the irregular movement of the heavenly bodies, known for this reason as “wandering” (πλάνητες), they were forced

to suggest for each of them a series of homocentric spheres, each one animated by its own uniform movement whose combination with the movement of the others resulted in the apparent movement of the planet.

The decisive question here was the status attributed to the hypothesis. For Plato, hypotheses were not to be considered on the same level as true principles, but precisely as hypotheses, which exhaust their purpose in the saving of the phenomena. As Proclus writes in his quarrel with those who confuse hypotheses with non-hypothetical principles: "These hypotheses are conceived in order to discover the form of the movement of the heavenly bodies—which in truth move just as they appear to do (ὡς περ χαῖ φαίνεται)—in order, that is, to make the calculations of their movements comprehensible." This is why from the moment Newton inscribed on the threshold of modern science: *Hypotheses non fingo*, thereby giving science the task of deducing the *real* causes of phenomena from experience, the expression "save the appearances" began the slow semantic shift which exiled it from the scientific sphere and led it to take on the pejorative meaning it still has today in common use.

But what could the expression τὰ φαινόμενα σώζειν mean in Plato's usage? In view of what were appearances to be saved? And from what?

The errant appearance, thanks to the hypothesis, is made comprehensible, and kept free from the need for any further scientific explanation, from every "why?" now satisfied by the hypothesis. The hypothesis, by accounting for it, shows the errancy of appearance as the appearance of errancy. This does not mean that the hypothesis is true, that it can be substituted for appearance as a real basis, toward which knowledge should turn. The beautiful appearance, not further explicable through hypotheses, is thereby treasured, spared, "saved" for a different understanding which now grasps it as it is in itself, *anhypothetically*, in its splendor. What is reached here, that is, is something still sensible (from

this comes the term idea, which indicates a vision, an *ιδεῖν*). But not some sensible thing *presupposed* by language and knowledge, but rather, *exposed* in them, absolutely. Appearance which is no longer based on an hypothesis, but on itself, the thing no longer separated from its intelligibility, but in the midst of it, is the idea, is the thing itself.

The Idea of Glory

"It appears"—how strange the grammar of this verb! On the one hand, it means *videtur*: "it seems, it appears to me as a likeness or semblance, which can therefore be deceptive," on the other, *lucet*: "it shines, it stands out in its evidence"; here, a latency that remains hidden in its very yielding of itself to sight; there, a pure, absolute visibility, without shadow. (In the *Vita nova*, which is entirely constructed as a phenomenology, so to speak, of appearance, these two meanings are at times intentionally opposed: "It seemed to me [*mi pareo*] that I saw in my room a fire-colored cloud, inside of which I discerned the figure of a man of fearful aspect for he who looks upon him; and he stood out to me [*pareami*] in himself full of delight . . ." Guinizelli differentiates between the two just as ironically, as if to better exhibit their confusion: "more than the star Diana shines [*splende*] and seems [*pare*]" .)

The two meanings are not precisely separable and it is not easy, at times, to decide for one or the other: it is as if every shining implies a semblance; and as if all "appearing" implies "it seems to me."

In the human face the eyes strike us, not for their expressive transparency, but precisely the contrary, for their obstinate resistance to expression, for their cloudiness. And if we truly fix our gaze on the eyes of the other, we see so very little of him that his eyes give us back to ourselves, or rather, we are given back that miniaturized image of ourselves from which the term "pupil" takes its name.

In this sense, the gaze is truly “the dregs of man”—but these lees of the human, this abyssal opacity and poverty of the face (in which so often the lover loses himself and which the politician knows so well how to gauge to make of it an instrument of power) is the only genuine seal of his spirituality.

The Latin word *vultus*—from which Italian derives its word, “volto”—has an exact equivalent in the Indo-European languages only in the Gothic *wulthus*. In the Bible of Ulphilas, which has passed it on to us, the word is not used to render a word meaning “countenance” (Cicero had already remarked that Greek did not have an equivalent for this word: “What we call countenance,” he writes, “and which cannot exist in any animal, but only in man, indicates the moral element in man: this meaning the Greeks do not know and they entirely lack any word for it”), but translates the Greek δόξα, which means the glory of God. In the Old Testament, glory (*Kabod*) indicates the divinity in its manifestation of itself to man, or rather, manifestation as one of the essential attributes of God (etymologically δόξα means: appearance, semblance). In John’s Gospel, he who believes in Christ has no need of signs (σημεῖα, miracles), because he immediately sees his glory, his “countenance.” This is wholly exposed on the cross, the last “sign” in which all signs are consumed.

I look someone in the eyes; the eyes lower (it is a shrinking shame, i.e. shame at the void behind the gaze), or they in turn look at me. And they can look at me impudently, displaying their emptiness as if behind it there were another fathomless eye that knows that emptiness and uses it as an impenetrable hiding-place. Or with a chaste shamelessness without reserve, allowing love and words to occur in the emptiness of our gazes.

It is a calculated strategy in pornographic photographs to have the subjects sometimes looking toward the viewer, thereby displaying their awareness of being

exposed to the gaze. This unexpected event fiercely contradicts the fiction implicit in the consumption of such images, that the unseen onlooker catches the actors by surprise. These actors, in knowingly challenging the gaze, oblige the voyeur to look them in the eye.

For as long as that brief instance of surprise lasts, there flows between these mean images and the onlooker something like an authentic amorous questioning; shamelessness borders on transparency, and the apparition is, for an instance, sheer splendor. (Only for an instant, however: it is clear that here intention blocks perfect transparency; they know they are being watched and are paid to know it.)

At the point of innervation at which the image reflected in the retina becomes sight, the eye is necessarily blind. It organizes vision around this invisible centre—which also means that sight is entirely organized in order to prevent you from seeing its own blindness. It is as if every openness contained, set in its very centre, an uncancellable latency, as if every luminosity imprisoned an essential darkness.

This blind spot remains forever hidden for the animal, which is stuck so close to its vision that it can never betray its own blindness and make of it an experience. Thus the animal's awareness vanishes at the same moment that it is given; it is pure voice. (For this reason animals do not know appearances. Only man is concerned with images as images; only man knows appearance as appearance.)

In holding fast to this blind spot with all his might, man constitutes himself as a conscious subject. It is as if he desperately sought to see his own blindness. And so for man, a delay, a non-contiguity and a memory between stimulus and response, insinuates itself into every sight. For the first time appearance separates itself from the thing, the semblance from the shining. But this splash of darkness—this delay—permits that something *be*, is being. For us alone things *are*; only for us are things set free from our needs and from our immediate

relation with them. They are: simply, marvelously, ungraspably.

But what can the vision of a blindness mean? I want to seize my obscurity, that which remains in me unexpressed and unsaid; but this is precisely, my own openness, my own being nothing other than a countenance and an eternal appearance. If I were truly able to see the blind spot in my eye, I would see nothing (this is the darkness in which the mystics say that God dwells).

This is why every countenance contracts into an expression, rigidifies into a character, and in this way passes on and collapses in on itself. Character is the grimace of the countenance at the point in which it becomes aware of not having anything to express and desperately retreats behind itself in search of its own blindness. But the only thing there would be to grasp here is an openness, a pure visibility: only a face. And the countenance is not something that transcends the face—it is the display of the face in its nudity, victory over character: word.

And wasn't language given to us to free things from their images, to carry to appearance appearance itself, to lead it to glory?

The Idea of Death

The angel of death, who in some legends is called Samael and with whom it is said even Moses had to struggle, is language. Language announces death—what else does it do? But precisely this announcement makes it so difficult for us to die. From time immemorial, for the entire duration of man's history, humanity has struggled with this angel, trying to wrench from him the secret he restricts himself to announcing. But from his childish hands one can wrench only the announcement he had in any case come to bring. The angel is not at fault for this, and only those who understand the innocence of language likewise grasp the true sense of the announcement and may, in the event, learn to die.

The Idea of Awakening

For Italo Calvino

I. Nagarjuna travelled far and wide through the realm of Andhra, and wherever he stopped he taught the doctrine of emptiness to all those eager to learn. At times it happened that adversaries mingled with his disciples and the bystanders and then Nagarjuna was reluctantly obliged to refute their objections and dismantle their arguments. These discussions in the perfumed vestibules of temples or in the din of marketplaces always left him with a certain bitterness. What tormented him, however, were not the rebukes of the orthodox monks who called him a nihilist and accused him of destroying the four truths (his teaching—if well understood—was nothing other than the meaning of the four truths). Not even the ironic comments of solitaries, who like rhinoceroses cultivated illumination only for themselves, bothered him (had he not been, and was he not still such a rhinoceros?). What distressed him were the arguments of those logicians who didn't even come forward as adversaries, but rather claimed to profess the same doctrine as himself. The difference between their teaching and his own was so subtle that at times he himself was unable to grasp it. And yet one could not imagine anything farther from his own position. For it was in fact the same doctrine of emptiness but one constrained within the limits of representation. They employed the principle of reason and the conditioned production in order to show the emptiness of all things, but they did not reach the point at which these principles revealed their own emptiness.

They upheld, in short, the principle of the absence of all principles! Hence they taught knowledge without awakening—they taught the truth without its invention.

Of recent this imperfect doctrine had even managed to penetrate the thinking of his disciples. Nagarjuna mulled over these thoughts while travelling on a donkey towards Vidarbha. The path skirted a high, rose-colored mountain overlooking a boundless meadow, dotted with small ponds reflecting the clouds on the other side. Even Candrakirti, his beloved pupil, had fallen into the error. But how could he refute it without dwelling in representation? With his knees gripping his grey mount, his gaze lost amongst the rocks and mosses of the path, Nagarjuna began to sketch out in his mind what was to become the *Stanzas of the Middle Way*.

“Those who profess the truth as a doctrine, as a representative of the truth, treat the void as if it were a thing, they make a representation of the emptiness of representation. But awareness of the emptiness of representation is not, in its turn, a representation: it is, simply, the end of representation. . . . You want to use the void as a shelter against pain, but how could an emptiness shelter you? If the void doesn't itself remain void, if you attribute being or non-being to it, this and only this is nihilism: to have seized one's own nothingness as prey, as a shelter against emptiness. But the sage dwells within pain without finding in it any shelter, any reason: he remains in the emptiness of pain. For this reason, O Candrakirti, set down that he for whom emptiness is an opinion, and even the unrepresentable a representation, he for whom the unsayable is a thing without a name—these are ones whom the Victorious will rightly call incurable. He is like the over-eager customer who, when the merchant says, 'I will give you no merchandise,' replies: 'Give me at least the merchandise called nothing . . .' Whoever sees the absolute sees nothing other than the emptiness of the relative. But precisely this is the most difficult test: if, at this point, you don't understand the nature of emptiness and you continue to make of it a representation, then you fall into

the heresy of the grammarians and the nihilists; you're like a magician bitten by the serpent he didn't know how to take hold of. If instead you patiently dwell in the emptiness of representation, if you do not make of it any representation, this, O blessed one, is what we call the middle way. Relative emptiness is no longer relative to an absolute. The empty image is no longer the image of nothing. The word draws its fullness from its very vacuity. This peace of representation is the awakening. He who rouses himself knows only that he dreamed, knows only of the emptiness of his representation, only of the sleeper. But the dream he now recalls no longer represents, no longer dreams anything."

II. "*Redeo de Perusio et de nocte profunda venio huc et est tempus hiemis lutosum et adeo frigidum, quod dondoli aquae frigidae congelatae filunt ad extremitates tunicae et percutiunt super crura et sanguis emanat ex vulneribus talis. Et totus in luto et frigore et glacie venio ad ostium, et postquam diu pulsavi et vocavi, venit frater et quaerit: Quis est? Ego repondeo: Frater Franciscus. Et ipse dicit: Vade, non est hora decens eundi; non intrabis. Et iterum insistenti respondeat: Vade; tu es unus simplex et idiota; admodo non venis nobis; nos sumus tot et tales, quod non indigemus te. Et ego iterum sto ad ostium et dico: Amore dei recolligatis me ista nocte. Et ille repondet: non faciam. Vade at loco cruciferorum et ibi pete. Dico tibi quod si patientiam habuero et non fuero motus, quod in hoc est vera laetitia et vera virtus et salus animae.*"

(Francis finds no shelter in non-recognition; in no case can absence of identity constitute a new identity. Rather, he insists on repeating: *I am Francis, open up!* Here, representation is not transcended through another, higher representation, but only through its display, its going through with it. As threshold, the insignificant name—pure subjectivity—is included in the edifice of joy.

Threshold



Kafka Defended Against His Interpreters

The most diverse legends circulate about the inexplicable. The most ingenious—which was found by the present guardians of the Temple while rifling through the ancient traditions—claims that, being inexplicable, it remains so in all the explanations which have been given and that will continue to be given through the centuries. Indeed, precisely these explanations constitute the best guarantee of its inexplicability. The only content of the inexplicable—and in this lies the subtlety of the doctrine—consists in the command—truly inexplicable: “Explain!” One cannot escape from this injunction because it does not presuppose anything to explain, but is itself the only presupposition. Whatever your response or non-response to its injunction—even your silence therefore—will in any case be meaningful, will in any case contain an explanation.

Our illustrious fathers—the patriarchs—finding nothing to explain, searched their hearts for a way to express this mystery; but for the inexplicable, they found no more fitting expression than explanation itself. The only way—they argued—to explain that there is nothing to explain is to give explanations. Any other stance, including silence, seizes on the inexplicable too clumsily: explanations alone leave it intact.

For the patriarchs, however, who first formulated this doctrine, it had to be inseparably linked to a codicil, which the present guardians of the Temple have dropped. This codicil specified that explanations would not last eternally, and that on a certain day, which they

called the "day of Glory," explanations would end their dance around the inexplicable.

Explanations are, in fact, only a moment in the tradition of the inexplicable: they are the moment, to be more precise, which keeps watch over it by leaving it unexplained. Emptied of their content, explanations thus fulfill their task. But at the point where explanations, by showing their emptiness, leave it be, the inexplicable itself is in jeopardy. Only the explanations were, in truth, inexplicable, and the legend was invented to explain them. What was not to be explained is perfectly contained in what no longer explains anything.