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THE END OF THINKING

by Giorgio Agamben

It happens much as when, walking through the woods, we are suddenly struck by the unheard variety of animal voices: trills, whistles, and gurglings; knells as of wood or metal splinters; chirps, whirrs, and whispers: springing immediately from him, each animal his own proper voice. In the end, the cuckoo's double note mocks our silence and reveals the untenability of our being, unique, voiceless amidst the boundless chorus of animal voices. Only then do we attempt to speak, to think.

In our tongue, the word thinking bears originally the meaning of anguish, of burning anxiety, as can still be found in the familiar expression "stare in pensiero," to be thoughtful, to worry. The Latin verb pendere, from which the word is derived in the Romance languages, means "to be suspended." St. Augustine employs it in this sense in order to characterize the learning process: "The desire inherent in research ushers from the seeker and, somehow suspended [pendet quodammodo], doesn't rest in the end it seeks but when the seeker and what is sought find each other in unity."

What is it that is suspended, what "hangs" in thinking? We can think, in language, solely because language is and is not our voice. There's a pending, an unresolved question in language, and that is, whether language is or is not our voice, the way braying is properly the voice of a donkey and chirping that of a cricket. That is why, when we speak, we can't do without thinking, without keeping the words suspended. Thinking is the pending of the voice in language.

(Obviously the cricket cannot think while chirping)

When in the evening we walk through the woods, at every step we hear the rustling of invisible animals amidst the bushes that line the path, knowing not whether they are lizards or porcupines, thrushes or snakes. The same happens when we think: what counts is not the path of the words we are traveling, but the indistinct toddling we hear occasionally moving by the edges, a fleeing animal or something suddenly aroused by the noise of our footsteps.

The fleeing animal, we've been told, the fleeing rustle we feel through the words, is our voice. We think – we hold the words suspended and ourselves hanging in language – we think because ultimately we hope to find the voice there, in language. Once, we've been told, the voice wrote itself into language. The quest of the voice in language is called thinking.

That language surprise and ever anticipate the voice; that the pending of the voice in language have no end: this is the problem in philosophy. (How each one resolves this slant is called ethics.)

But the voice, the human voice is not: there is no such thing called our voice that we can follow in the traces of language, enabling us to gather—so as to remember it—the moment it vanishes into names, the moment it inscribes itself in letters. We speak with the voice we don't have, the voice that was never written (Antigone, 454). And language is always like “dead letter.”

Thinking: we can think only if language is not our voice, only if we fathom the bottom of our voicelessness. But in truth, there's no bottom. Such an abyss is what we call the world.

Logic shows that language is not my voice. It says moreover that the voice, though it has been, is no longer, nor can it ever be. Language takes place in the non-place of the voice. Which means that, concerning the voice, thinking has nothing to say. This we may call its piety.

So then the fleeing, the pending of the voice in language must come to an end. We can finally stop holding language, and the voice, in a suspended state. If the voice has never been, if thinking is the thinking of the voice, then it has nothing to think about. A thought which is fulfilled, in other words, has no thoughts left to think.

*Of the Latin verb that, for centuries, indicated thinking, cogitare, scarcely a trace remains in our language, in the word tracotanza, haughtiness, arrogance. In the XIV Century, coto, cuitanza meant: THINKING. Tracotanza stems, by way of the Provençal oltracuidansa, from the Latin *ultracogitare: to exceed, to go beyond the limit of thinking, overthinking, dis-thinking.*

What has been said can once again be said. But what has been thought cannot ever be said again. One takes leave of a thought word for ever.

We walk through the woods; suddenly, we hear a whirring of wings or displaced grass. A hen-pheasant flies up and we can barely see it disappear amidst the boughs, a porcupine delves deeper into the thick of the brush, parched leaves creak and crumble under the sliding serpent. Thinking is not the encounter with, but the flight from invisible animals. No, it wasn't our voice: we drew as near to language as possible, we almost skimmed it, held it suspended: but our meeting did not take place, and we must now turn away, thoughtless, toward home.

Then does language become our voice, our language. The way you are speaking now, this is what we call ethics.

[English version by Peter Carravetta]