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Re-thinking Thought

Francis Wybrands

Review-essay on *Critique*, January-February 1985, no. 452-453: *Italian Philosophers by Themselves* (221 pages). Paris, Editions de Minuit.

To the question raised by Eugenio Garin of knowing whether we must recognize the existence of an Italian philosophy—a question of historical interest, perhaps, but philosophically of little relevance (would it then be legitimate to speak of a Spanish mathematics, a Swiss biology or a Canadian philosophy?)—it would be better to respond by asking instead in which ways the philosophical heritage which has been passed down to us since Parmenides is being taken up and worked on in Italy today. That is, how are the questions which have constituted, and still constitute, philosophy being reinvented in Italy today?

(Perhaps the very notion of dividing up “the country of philosophy” according to geographic regions results from the fact that our epoch, as the epoch of communication, lives under the constraint of having to pass and circulate thought as “cultural merchandise.” So if it is right to applaud this enterprise of making known in France what is going on at her doorstep, then it is proper to note that the very realization of such a project throws a merciless

[Trans. from the French by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas]

light not only on the miserable state of translation in France, but also, and most important, on the discrepancy, which has become more and more obvious, between thought and the means which it has to make itself heard. It is, perhaps, against this antipathy which our epoch has toward thought that the essays collected in this volume, better than many others, bear witness.)

"Since the beginning of the twentieth century the general meaning of the world can no longer be read in the book of the philosophers." This statement by A. dal Lago sets the tone for a philosophy which no longer has illusions about itself and which attempts to respond to a disillusioned world by redefining the tasks of thinking. Thus the notion of "weak thought"—illustrated here by philosophers such as P. A. Rovatti, A. Gargani and especially G. Vattimo—and "sobered thought" [*dégrisée*], a rationality exorcised of its own powers and inspired by thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger (with Husserl and Gadamer) and Wittgenstein.

The line of separation between being and nothingness is no longer stable; the solidarity between "thinking and that which is thought" (P. A. Rovatti), between the one who thinks and that which is thought, has collapsed, leaving behind a shattered unity, a state of crisis for "strong thought" (that which concerns itself only with the specular reconciliation of man and the world in the name of a unifying principle). It is this crisis which, beyond knowledge, allows the *question of meaning* [*question du sens*] to appear in all its nakedness and fragility. What remains is a rupture between the structures of our thought—structures meant to equate the truth of adequate propositions to that which is—and the world, which, more than ever, is at the mercy of domination and, more than ever, finds itself sent back to its unsuspected opacity.

To counter the common false interpretations of Heidegger—that is, Heidegger's thought read as ontology, as the nostalgic return to a green, pre-Socratic paradise, as negative theology, or as historicism and irrationalism . . . —it is salutary to read G. Vattimo's text, which attempts to read the work of the thinker in its entirety, taking as its starting point Heidegger's most scandalous affirmations in order to discover in them the traces of a "thinking of the decline" [*pensiero del declino*]. That there is nothing left of being means, among other things, that nihilism is "the only possible path for ontology." Being is to be understood neither as a stable and fixed term, nor as an ultimate foundation: it "is not one of the poles of oscillation . . . it is the domain of the oscillation itself." Neither pure luminosity nor foundational force, being is inseparable from both its decline and its declension. Its "contingent character" is not

one of its attributes but its very essence. "We are beings [*étants*] only insofar as we are ventured [*risqués*] into and through the venture of being" (Heidegger). Being ventures itself to us: it is only as this venture, this risk; and we are only insofar as we confront this venture. Risk, venture, putting into play—these are ways of expressing the contingent character of that which Heidegger called, in terms which are still provisional, "the ontological difference." Thus the being to which we are related by the modes of impermanence and mortality is both uncertain and transitory, both temporal and provisional. There is no shared foundation, therefore, but a common destiny or decline. The essential finitude of this play shapes, at each moment, new configurations whereby life and death invent themselves. Far from justifying, in the manner of the philosophies of history, that which is in the name of a transcendent principle [*arché* or *télos*], the non-reconciling thought of Heidegger (similar in this way to the thought of Adorno) would arrive all at once at an aesthetics or an ethics, a style of life *and* of thought which can be summed up in the notion of *piety*. *Piety* is not to be understood as "attention and respect," as "rememoration"—which is not mere recollection of that which once was, but memory of the uncertain traces left by the singular and unique experiences of man. "Not to overlook anything, not to let oneself be carried away. And at the same to be suspicious of immobility, of one's own reflection in the mirror, of the narcissistic seizure of the void" (P. A. Rovatti).

In the margins of this mode of thought, R. Bodei devotes himself to a rigorous reading of dialectical thought—of its past, its present crisis, and its possible meaning. What, in fact, Bodei asks, could replace the dialectic which acted as "a strategy for individuation," "as a constructive procedure, an enrichment and socialization of individuality"? If the present crisis of this "metaphysics of development," this "partisan thinking of civilization," is positive, in that it allows us to denounce all the theological presuppositions on which this thinking was established, must it necessarily entail the withdrawal of the individual into his own emptiness? The individual quest for salvation, together with the corresponding loss of that which founded metaphysical subjectivity, appears as a flight into "a religion or a metaphysics which cannot be relied upon to fill an interior void" (echoing Spengler's diagnosis). To counteract this state of affairs and the division of discourses into "a logic of force" and "a powerless and consoling rationality," it would be necessary to opt for a "weak," sobered dialectic, which is apt to translate "contradictions into opportunities for change."

Besides two essays by M. Vegetti and B. de Giovanni which

reexamine, in an historically oriented fashion, one the notion of classicism (in the light of stoicism) and the other the thought of Vico (who, as the thinker of the origin and of its oblivion on behalf of the useful, proves to be an important link for understanding "all civilization of the twentieth century"), it is necessary to mention two quite different, though both unclassifiable, texts: one by G. Agamben and the other by E. Severino. The first is a meditation on "the concept of language": "Is there a possible discourse which, without being a metalanguage and without falling into the unsayable, says language while exposing its limits. . . ?" The task of philosophy today is to confront this question which theology, ontology and psychology can no longer answer. To see language itself—that is, language as "immediate mediation" — could send us beyond all presuppositions to the "ahypothetical beginning" of which Plato speaks in the *Republic*. Weakening and enfeebling of the philosophical question, which, in this way, sees itself taken back to its essential and original poverty — such would be the path of a thinking in quest of the blind task which allows all vision, all speech, and is the foundation of all community.

The second text, the one by E. Severino, presents itself as an original meditation which attempts to go back beyond "the original separation between being and beings as the essence of time" toward the eternal unity of which Parmenides, "the most misunderstood thinker in the history of man," would have had a presentiment. The original separation of being and beings, of being and appearance, is the origin of alienation and nihilism (a true "fall in time") that thinkers such as Hegel, Heidegger or Habermas, along with all quests for salvation, only strengthen, thereby participating in the will of technical domination.

From R. Pineri's useful historical account of Italian philosophers between 1940 and 1960, a work which recalls the great figures (B. Croce, N. Abbagnano, A. Banfi, E. Paci, L. Pareyson, P. Chiodi . . .), one must remember the tremendous labor and concern for dialogue displayed by these thinkers which allowed German Idealism as well as the phenomenology of Husserl and the investigations of Heidegger to go on living.

To conclude it is necessary to mention two particular phenomena pointed out by documentary articles. The first is the fecundity and longevity of the Marxist tradition (retraced by A. Tosel) which, from A. Labriola in the last century to P. Togliatti, A. Gramsci, L. Coletti and A. Negri, bears witness to a current of thought which, without giving up its practical concerns, retains its demand for critical thought. The second phenomenon (recounted

by R. Dadoun) is this curious "School of Lecce" which, though less famous than the Frankfurt School, shows that there is no privileged place for giving oneself to serious philosophical reflection.

If one had to draw a lesson from this volume, it would be that freedom of thought is not that which is given reluctantly by the powers that be, but that which is opened up by the works of those who dare to invent it.

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