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After Deconstruction

by Rodger Friedman

Review-essay on Gianni Vattimo and Aldo Rovatti, eds. *Il pensiero debole*. Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 1983. 262pp.

Post-structuralist philosophical writing in Italy, as elsewhere, is faced with taking seriously the thesis of "the end of philosophy" sketched earlier this century by Heidegger and continued in the work of Adorno, Benjamin, and on into the French 1970s. The thesis of the end of the parabola of Western philosophy (actually, the end of expository philosophical discourse) was conceived partially in a polemical stance toward Western rational metaphysics and toward the totalizing, systemic philosophies epitomized in Descartes, in Kant, and (more or less judiciously) in Plato, depending on the polemic involved. Philosophical writers in Italy find themselves in a position where the polemic has largely served its purpose. The restrictions inherent in the metaphysical undertaking have been disclosed to the extent that further disclosure of the problem would not seem to obtain. Rather, late philosophical writing is testing its language to discover what, in the age of the end of philosophy, philosophy might become. In other words, the Italian philosophical community is occupied less now with deconstructing its metaphysical period than with finding out what

philosophy does in a fresh, nonmetaphysical mode.

Il pensiero debole is a collection of propositions and demonstrations—theory and practice—by eleven philosophical writers of greater or lesser fame who do not cohere into a recognizable group, school, or party line. Professors Vattimo and Rovatti, in their joint introduction, call immediate attention to the collection's diverse theoretical orientations. The banner title, they say, unifies diverse authors

whose common idea is that Italian discussions on the crisis of reason . . . as well as several versions of French post-structuralism . . . manifest still too much nostalgia for metaphysics, and do not bring to its fullest consequence the experience of the *forgetting* of being, or of the death of God. . . .

Even while formulating such an unbinding theoretical point of departure, the editors are quick to point out that it only holds for "many of the writers of these essays—not for all of them—and it is not in all ways equally valid even for those who recognize it." In fact, generalizations about "*pensiero debole*" are distinctly foreign to the idea of systemless "weak" philosophizing.

Generally, however, Adorno's formulation (and Heidegger's sometime practice) that "philosophy dissolves into poetry" is being tested. "Poetic thinking" finds its practitioners in Leonardo Amoroso, Diego Marconi and Giampiero Comolli, and it has its theorists in Gianni Carchia, Alessandro Dal Lago, Gianni Vattimo. When philosophy dissolves into poetry, philosophy employs a degree of fictionality to disclose truth in a nonrational, lyric contemplative mode. Fictionality in this case does not tend toward fabularity, as it did for some fifteenth- and sixteenth-century prototype weak thinkers. Rather, it pursues a mode of discourse which wields the texture of language in a recursive, reflexive manner. In order for philosophical language to present itself free of received stances, the language must itself be revised and retooled by each philosopher to intensify it for the purposes of the poetic-philosophical voice. The poetic formulation is often contemplative in voice in order to reveal the dialogic relationship that exists between the philosopher and thinking, which takes on independent status from the "subject" of thought. This shift in attitude toward contemplation is in sharp contrast to the deconstructive tendency of recent years in the dominant of French philosophical writing and American literary criticism.

It has been pointed out popularly that some of the criticism that identifies itself as deconstructive has a tendency to express

itself in martial terms, beginning with the term "avant garde." We also hear of deconstruction as a "strategy," of disturbing a linguistic construction along its fault lines, of "inserting the lever of difference," and so on. The cumulative effect of this "strategy" results in "the imperialism of the signifier" on the one hand, and, on the other, the related mastery of the critic over the text. The critic does the text's signifying for it. The critic "attacks" the text, imperiously chisels open the gap between thing and word, and declares an absence, a hollowness at the center of language (with an implicit deep nostalgia for presence). Of course, this gesture drawing of deconstructive criticism oversimplifies it to the point of caricature. Nevertheless, philosophical writing about language and the literary criticism that has merged with it like a cartel seem to please critics with their new power over the text, with their new strategies against the text. As a by-product, critical writing has been freed to become very writerly. Writerly philosophy has its own anti-canonical history which bears pressure on it, and that history provides the antecedents to "pensiero debole."

In ages when philosophy tends to define itself as an undertaking whose business it is to make explicit the defining qualities of the totality of our life in the universe (that is, the tradition of metaphysics), its works take on the familiar transparent quality of prose. The definitions of words are honed to discrete precision. They direct the reader with a minimum of apparent mediation to the world of the clear referent. The works tend to be exhaustive in length. They index the world that the philosopher presents as the real world. That world is recreated for the reader in language.

This is philosophy's epic mode. Its characteristic vehicle is the treatise or the summa, and it implies by its form, as Stephen Rendall points out, a finished, completed formulation of the truth.

However, in ages when philosophy has tended to define itself as an undertaking whose responsibility it is to articulate a *modus vivendi*, it has commonly reached toward literary presentation and language that more or less draws attention to itself. In the Renaissance and in Republican Rome, the dialogue is perhaps its commonest form, an open form that does not claim to present a universal, apodictic proof or to beat us over the head with rational conclusions; it dramatizes philosophical activity. Whatever expository line a dialogist may present is presented through the fictional terms of dramatic representation in which the process of thinking is primary to conclusive thought.

In Italy, the emergent directions of thinking would seem to confirm the historical trend, that philosophy in literary forms takes

on an ethical underpinning. In the introduction to *Il pensiero debole*, Vattimo and Rovatti outline what they call a "rather rhapsodic" list of coordinates which may define the directions of weak thinking. They call for a manner of thinking that will "take seriously the nexus between metaphysical evidence and the relationships of power outside and within the subject." Note that they use the word "nesso," nexus, connection, where a Derridian would use "gap" or "hollowness" or "absence." The essayists of *Il pensiero debole* characteristically postulate ontological presence where less ethically minded thinking finds absence. The editors would also warn against declining weak thinking into a systemic philosophy of emancipation based on hermeneutical "smascheramento," on "unmasking," that is, on transference of the power of the signifier to the signifying critic. Rather, they would let it function as a

new, friendly look at the world of appearances, procedures of discourse and symbolic forms as possible location for the experience of Being, not in the direction of Deleuze's "frenzy of the simulacrum liberated from every reference," but in a direction of thought capable of articulating itself in the half-light.

("Half-light" is a Heideggerian metaphor for the locus of the disclosure of Being in an incidence of *Lichtung*, like light in a forest that is filtered through the moving branches of trees.) *Pensiero debole*, then, would never be a system (like structuralism) or a party line, but merely an approach to the world as it is seen, using Heidegger's "identification of language and Being as a mode of encountering Being anew in the form of trace and memory, consumed and weakened."

According to this formulation, language can be used as a way to intensify sensibility of Being, and as a mode of adjusting and realizing the dialogic relationship inherent in that sensibility. Dialogue itself, in fact, becomes an ethical responsibility. The philosopher can no longer afford to attack; the philosopher has to negotiate.

In an essay which attempts to put *pensiero debole* into relief against the kind of thinking characterized as dialectic or as difference, Vattimo's language is pointedly unmilitaristic. Rather, he manipulates the language of ethics. Referring himself to Walter Benjamin's obsession with Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, an angel "moved by great pity for the ruins that history accumulates at its feet, for everything that could have been and wasn't or isn't any more, that didn't produce historical effects," Vattimo appropriates the term *pietas* along with Heidegger's *An-denken* and *Verwindung*

to characterize *pensiero debole*. *Pietas* toward the absences of the past along with a “friendly” regard for the “world of appearances, procedures of discourse and symbolic forms” cast *pensiero debole* into an ethical stance toward the possibility of philosophizing. Vattimo, in fact, speaks of an “ethic of weakness” in thought. This weakness can be understood as the act of thinking without a program, without a theory to save, without applying the ten categories to experience. It is hermeneutics without a hermeneutic key. What makes it “debole” or “weak” is its lack of a skeletal framework within which to operate. Thus, *pensiero debole* does not refer to debilitating the role of philosophy in the world, as Mario Perniola seems to interpret it in his “Lettera a Gianni Vattimo” (bibl.). Rather, it prescribes an ethic for philosophizing that would debilitate philosophy’s relation with its subject matter from one of dominance to one of interaction, of dialogue.

By trying to work outside of a theoretical cornice, Vattimo sees *pensiero debole* as achieving a suppleness and a capability for perceiving detail that would be unknown from a strong, structural approach to thinking. “It’s enough to observe,” he says,

how many fields and objects can be—in fact, must be—excluded by a totalizing inquiry. The price paid by strong reasoning is an impressive limitation of the objects that can be seen and discussed.

That is, a hermeneutic key automatically assimilates its objects into its framework, thus inevitably distorting them for the purpose.

Vattimo seems to be calling for an ethics of contemplation, study and response. The critic ought to pipe down, reduce dominance over the text or risk drowning it out, losing what the text has to offer. The critic, in fact, should respond to the text as if he were a lyric poet with the scope of disclosing aesthetically, intuitively, the ineffable realm of Being, conceived as absence that falls between subject and object, between word and thing. The proposal would seem to reverse forever the expulsion of the poets from Plato’s philosophical utopia by promoting the total integration of philosophical and lyric discourse. The manner in which thought can approach Being, not as an entity but in a way which “lets Being be,” is the *An-denken* and *pietas*, with poetry as an agent. In a postmodern Republic, all philosophers would be poets, throwing language to “its own extreme limits, where it becomes marooned in silence,” as Vattimo says elsewhere. Posed in such language of paradox and oxymoron, the appropriation of poetic language by philosophers makes operable an aesthetic response to thinking that, in differentiation from epic or even

dramatic forms of philosophy, might be called "lyric thing," a passable translation of the concept behind the expression "il pensiero debole."

One of the more interesting essays in *Il pensiero debole* exemplifies the process of thinking. Giampiero Comolli's essay is called: "Quando sul paese innevato silenziosamente appare il Castello (la propensione narrativa di fronte al paesaggio inenarrabile)," [When in the snowy landscape the Castle suddenly appears (the tendency to narrate before the unsayable landscape)]. Comolli spells out a succession of thoughts, a line of thinking, that occurred to him one evening on a delayed train in the Brenner pass, when the snowy landscape became charged up with the landscape of Kafka's *The Castle*. Comolli's essay is elaborate with literary device. The narrative present of the essay is the moment that the protagonist, the theorizing "I," is delayed on the train. That narrative present reverberates with the setting of Kafka's novel, and the essay proceeds to follow the fiction of the author thinking his way across the gap he perceives between his own present moment and that of *The Castle*.

Comolli dramatizes a significant shift in attitude from a deconstructive analysis of Kafka. The protagonist feigns to have left the book at home. Of the text he has only what he can remember, only what has been appropriated by the protagonist himself between his present self and the self-dimensionalized K., Comolli discovers a gap between the two, an aspect of landscape that he cannot symbolize and that he cannot see. He finds there a "zona vuota," an empty area, which eventually becomes the focus of his contemplation. The zona vuota, discursively present in *The Castle* as well as in the protagonist's thinking, enlarges with contemplation, and becomes an unhearable message:

In fact the message is destined to remain unhearable or better, uninterpretable, to the end. Its whisper is heard, its light breath, but these sounds . . . cannot be described and interpreted by the narrating subject except as silence. The whisper interpreted, translated into signified, is only silence. But it is a silence which makes one listen, that sustains, that makes the heart tremble, a nothing that nevertheless is [un nulla che però c'è].

Like a deconstructor, Comolli has opened the gap of language and experience, but he has found there a presence to contemplate, not merely an absence to dominate. Vattimo's *pietas* asks the valuation of that empty space (what chassidim call "the white letters of Torah") not as a neoplatonic truth that is prior to language,

but as an unarticulated (and unarticulatable) portion of the "horizon of language" into which Heidegger says we are thrown, a glow that shows up in language but which language cannot reach. As philosophy turns lyric, that ground of Being which subject and object share may not be so imperiously drowned out.