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# *Pudore:* The Theory and Practice of Modesty

Rebecca West

Review-essay on Alessandro Dal Lago and Pier Aldo Rovatti, eds., *Elogio del pudore. Per un pensiero debole*. Milano: Feltrinelli, 1990.

1. Rovatti was the co-editor, with Gianni Vattimo, of the 1983 collection entitled *Il pensiero debole*. Born in 1942, he teaches the history of contemporary philosophy in Trieste and directs the review *Aut Aut*. Rovatti has published studies in the areas of phenomenology, cultural criticism, and political and psychoanalytical thought. His most recent titles include *La posta in gioco. Heidegger, Husserl, il soggetto* (Milano 1987) and *Il declino della luce* (Genova 1988). Dal Lago, born in 1947, teaches political science at the University of Milan. He contributed an essay to the volume *Il pensiero debole* entitled "L'etica della debolezza. Simone Weil e il nichilismo." He has edited various works of Hannah Arendt, and among his most recent titles are *Il politeismo moderno* (Milano

1989) and *Il paradosso dell'agire* (Napoli 1990).

The volume *Elogio del pudore* consists of a first section by Rovatti in which he writes an excursus called "Effetti del pensiero debole," followed by a chapter entitled "Elogio del pudore." The second section, by Dal Lago, includes his excursus, "La tentazione della forza," and a chapter dedicated to Heidegger, "La politica del filosofo. Heidegger e noi." The "Appendice," which in fact takes up more than half the volume, is made up of five previously published essays, three by Rovatti and two by Dal Lago. Both Rovatti and Dal Lago summarize and respond to various reactions to and critiques of "pensiero debole" in their first chapters. Rovatti then moves on to an elaboration of the concept of "pudore" in relation primarily to the issue of the subject, while Dal Lago undertakes to do a "weak" reading of Heidegger's 1933 discourse *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universitat*, which inaugurated his assumption of the rectorship of the University of Freiburg. All of the essays, to one degree or another, attempt to deal with the ethics of philosophizing, both from the point of view of the contemporary transformation of philosophical language and from that of the relation of philosophy to other discourses, be they literary, political, or private.

Rovatti opens "Effetti del pensiero debole" by writing of the many effects the proposal of "weak thought" has created since the appearance of the eponymous volume in 1983. Well beyond the immediate philosophical context, the word "debole" has been taken up by various specialists and non-specialists alike to capture what Rovatti terms "una risonanza semantica . . . [e] un bisogno" (9). Seeking some way of approaching the great and abiding questions concerning truth, the representability of experience, the individual's identity, and so on, while recognizing the limits of a purely analytical and/or rational approach—an unself-consciously "strong" approach, in short—many welcomed the proposition of a "weak thought," while many others saw it as a direct threat not only to the traditional strengths of philosophy but to thought itself. Rovatti notes that while the 1983 volume's overall tone was "poetica, sperimentale, aperta, per sua natura non inglobante," the negative reactions were disproportionately "definitorie, generalizzanti, rapidamente liquidatorie" (10). However, Rovatti recognizes the necessity now of going beyond the experimental and generally open proposition of "debolezza" advanced by the 1983 collection if "weak thought" is going to be anything more than an already consumed or used-up metaphor

for a variety of concerns and attitudes.

Before positing a way of doing so, he returns to the negative critiques advanced against it, primarily the arguments of C. A. Viano in his book *Va' pensiero. Debolezza e indeterminazione nel "Pensiero debole"* (Einaudi, 1985). Anyone who has read Viano's book knows how sharp, ironic, and ultimately dismissive his critique of weak thought is. Redubbing the representatives of "debolezza" as "i flebili," he writes that the culture they are suggesting is "consolatoria," "una macchina apologetica," and that their proposition is nothing more than a "moda" which repropo- ses "vecchie masserizie." Rovatti succinctly sums up Viano's critique: "Ma qual' è il punto? 'Manca la teoria'" (12). The essays in the 1983 collection refuse theory in favor of hermeneutics, etymological speculations, dialectics and difference, and literary digres- sions. These are not "conoscenza," according to Viano, even if they can be called "pensiero." And clearly philosophy's task is in the realm of knowledge and not mere thought.

There followed a debate, on the pages of *La Stampa*, between Viano and Vattimo. Rovatti also later attempted a reply to Viano's criticism in a piece published in *La Repubblica* on December 16, 1985, entitled "Se il filosofo ha paura." In it he makes two points to which he returns in the present chapter: one, that the term "pensiero debole" was and is "una metafora infelice" in the sense in which all metaphors are unfortunate and failed, that is, are attempts at completely and fully describing something while hav- ing already recognized the impossibility of doing so. Second, he asserts that negative critiques of weak thought are motivated pri- marily by fear of the loss of philosophy's standing and of the philosopher's privileged relationship to language. To assert that weak thought is dismissible because it is "only literature" is to imply, of course, that there is writing which is absolutely distin- guishable from literature; that, in other words, philosophy is somehow beyond and safe from the "dangers" of polysemy, metaphorical modes of thought and expression, and temporality. To suggest that such is not the case is certainly to deny philoso- phy's exclusive and privileged relationship to truth and to lan- guage through which it is expressed.

Rovatti's point is precisely this, and he makes it in reference to another negative critique of "weak thought": that of Massimo Cacciari who, in an interview published in the *Corriere del Ticino* on June 11, 1988, said that the success of weak thought

quella certa vague post-heideggeriana che ha avuto successo soprattutto presso i discepoli di Derrida in Francia e poi si è diffusa anche in Italia e negli Stati Uniti, . . . non sia dovuto ad altro che alla sua natura di mera letteratura. Il pensiero debole è letteratura, una letteratura che porta ad espressione quella che è ormai l'idea guida del nostro senso comune, la convinzione che il molteplice, il frammento, sia qualcosa che in quanto tale possa contestare e decostruire la totalità. (15)

Rovatti sees in this a reappearance of "l'antica paura che la purezza della teoria, che il filosofo dovrebbe sorvegliare, possa subire la contaminazione di un discorso esterno e secondario" (15). If, as Cacciari suggests, literature is the realm of common sense regarding the multiple and the fragmentary, then philosophy is perforce something else—or it too becomes "mere literature." Rovatti argues that weak thought introduces the notion that philosophy is also (and must be) the realm of the multiple, the fragmentary, and above all the "non dicibile" which is "il nostro qui ed ora" (16). In so doing, he once more challenges the presuppositions of philosophical language's privileged access to truth, and the philosopher's privileged subjectivity which permits him or her total objectivity and consistency.

Here we are, then, poised once again over the abyss of resignation; contemplating the "non dicibile," must we then be resigned to being nothing more than mourners? Rovatti's answer is that we have other options, for he asserts that a recognition of the loss of a "padronanza dell'io" need not lead to a purely contemplative reiteration of what we can no longer do. As he puts it, "disinvestimento" in the concept of "un io forte" is not the same thing as "de-responsabilizzazione," nor, I would think his argument implies, does rejection of the concept of foundational truths expressible in privileged discourse mean that all that is left are assertions of the futility of thought and the radical limits of language. This would indeed be a resigned and nostalgic attitude without any ethical potential or force.

So we arrive to the question: How to proceed? What indeed can the mode of thought called "weak" do once it has pointed out the limitations of traditional metaphysical discourse, once it has argued the unprivileged nature both of philosophical language and of the philosophizing subject? Rovatti writes that weak thought and the resultant "pudore del linguaggio" are, like all metaphors, "un abbassamento di voce, un silenzio nel linguaggio e nel pensiero: il tentativo di sbloccare una pienezza" (20). Weak thought is not yet another salvific proposal nor is it a project

which seeks ultimately to transcend its own limits by offering systematized and systematizing substitutions for other past failed projects. It seeks to remain in the realm of risk, contradiction, and conflict:

Dunque l'esercizio del pudore, che qui indichiamo come la chiave del pensiero debole, è il tentativo di abitare una condizione di conflitto con noi stessi. E allora il pensiero debole potrebbe essere il tentativo di 'dire' questa condizione nella sua paradossalità. (22)

The "pudore" of which Rovatti speaks does not permit us to remove ourselves from our shared "dimora" which, in order to be "abitabile" must be "pensabile," but which cannot, through human thought of any sort, be brought into line or dominated by pretenses to ultimate truth or truths that resolve the dilemmas of existence.

In the second chapter, "Elogio del pudore," Rovatti further elaborates the concepts of "weakening" and "modesty" as an ethics of philosophizing. With recourse to Nietzsche, Freud, Jung, Ricoeur, Heidegger, Vattimo, and others, Rovatti explores the issue of a weakened subjectivity as fundamental to his view of pensiero debole's task. If knowledge is not going to be a continual search for domination and overcoming, it can perhaps become thought's goal to inhabit ("abitare"), modestly and poetically, the paradoxical dilemmas of self and the world. Using the metaphors of "full" and "empty," and of "illumination" and "shadow" (which are connected to the unconscious), Rovatti proposes that the latter terms, more traditionally imbued with negativity, are in fact endowed with positive representational power in that empty zones and shadowy realms (such as dreams) permit us to escape from the tyranny of a belief in domination over ourselves and over the world and our experiences of it. As we recognize that the "non dicibile" is our "dimora," and that we are exiled not only from a full grasp of experience and of its expression but, more importantly, from our own selves (difference and alterity, that is, reside within each of us and not only within others), we institute a different rapport with thought, language, and actions. Listening becomes more important than seeing; "pudore" (and I understand it both as "shame" and "modesty") becomes an inevitable attribute; and the *hic et nunc* in which we find ourselves—the space and time of our being and of our thought—are endowed with their full validity, in contrast to monolithic, transcendental, and privileged concepts either of the consistent subject or of

thought itself. I'll quote Rovatti's concluding words, which sum up his proposal of modesty (which is also a modest proposal):

Il non padroneggiamento, la caduta della pretesa, comportano uno scarto ironico. . . Il ritrarsi, che intacca la padronanza del sapere e in primo luogo del sapere del soggetto su se stesso, o che comunque ci permette per un momento di guardare le cose sotto un'altra luce, è al tempo stesso un affidarsi a una zona mobile e rischiosa. Il carattere fittizio e ironico della metafora esprime questa instabilità. . . un'ulteriore cautela: quella di non far diventare 'seria' e stabile una condizione che assomiglia piuttosto a un momento (mai fissabile) di squilibrio. (47)

Thus we are reminded that weak thought is not itself exempt from the instability and internal erosions which it explores.

Moving to Dal Lago's "La tentazione della forza," we listen to a very different voice. Although he and Rovatti clearly share many similar preoccupations and perspectives, Dal Lago's emphases are other. The excursus is a spirited and at times rather acerbic response to the critics of weak thought. He suggests that had the title of the by now infamous 1983 volume been something more anodyne and conventional like "Saggi sul postmoderno," "Filosofia e letteratura," or "Crisi del sapere e filosofia," the book would probably have received a no more negative or sarcastic reception than many others. But it broke the rules and went against convention by daring to assert that philosophical thought could have something to do with weakness—that philosophy, in short, can be and is in fact made up of something which is not only strong thinking ("idee forti") (53). Dal Lago then individuates two areas put into question by weak thought; first, "la forma del discorso filosofico" and next, "il ruolo della professione filosofica." It is well recognized that philosophy is having a hard time living up to the scientific model it has often emulated and that it has long since lost a certain kind of unassailable legitimacy. But Dal Lago writes that it is time to say openly that all sorts of heterogeneous activities now go under the name of philosophy: historiography, philology, political science, interpretation of a wide variety of texts the choice and importance of which depend on which philosophical tradition the culture in question happens most strongly to validate. Certainly there is also theorizing, what Dal Lago calls "il lavoro della filosofia sulle proprie verità eterne e atemporali: il soggetto, la ragione, il divenire, le forme del pensare, la verità stessa." But here we find "le scissioni più radicali, i conflitti più insanabili" and here is where weak thought has

found its severest critics as well as some measure of comprehension. For here is where "la filosofia gioca la sua partita eterna, che è quella della verità, della propria verità, e quindi della propria legittimità" (all quotations on 56). Now, regarding the form or forms of philosophical discourse, Dal Lago writes that weak thought has been so severely criticized by some not because of its practitioners' interest in literature and art (which, after all, philosophers of aesthetics at least have always been permitted), but because it "contaminates" the "scientific" language of philosophy with literary language. He continues:

Se dovessi definire cos'è per me il pensiero debole, parlerei di una pratica paradossalmente morale: divenire ciò che si è, accettare la marginalità della filosofia non solo rispetto al mondo, ma soprattutto rispetto ai propri miti fondativi. Miti che non sono difficile rintracciare. . . verità, forza, purezza metodologica, profondità, superiorità, e simili. In questo senso, rinunciando all'esibizione della propria potenza immaginaria, si può parlare di pudore in filosofia." (60)

As for the role of the profession of philosophy, Dal Lago's view is that philosophers do not have a large role (or at any rate a privileged one) in the various civil and political, as well as generally intellectual, debates carried on in today's societies. He does not lament this fact, nor is he suggesting that there should be a return to the times when philosophers had a special aura; he wishes simply that it be seen as a fact. He concludes:

Nel suo accettare le contaminazioni—in primo luogo il senso che può provenire da altri linguaggi, poetici e letterari ma non solo—il pensiero debole minaccia le pretese [di una purezza intrinseca alla filosofia]; sia quelle che provengono da un certo moralismo scienziasta or storicista, sia quelle che si manifestano in un certo tono oracolare in filosofia, compreso anche—non c'è bisogno di dirlo—quello di Heidegger, quando è il caso. Come si vede, minacciare il primato delle forme ha anche degli effetti di sostanza. (58)

In the chapter on Heidegger, Dal Lago analyzes the discourse read by Heidegger in 1933 upon assuming the rectorship of the University of Freiburg. (Dal Lago primarily uses the Italian translation, *L'autoaffermazione dell'università tedesca*, but provides his own versions of the original when necessary to his argument.) Dal Lago's thesis, in extremely condensed form, is that the discourse, strangely ignored by specialists of Heidegger, is an "indubbia espressione filosofica" and should be approached as such, and not only as an expression of "una scelta politica desolante" (61). Dal Lago's main point is that the discourse implicit-



ly proposes and furthers a "pretesa di potenza" for philosophy itself and for the philosopher as educator not only of the people but also of political leaders—a sort of "capo dei capi" or Platonic "philosopher-king." This attitude is not, according to Dal Lago, merely the result of Heidegger's personal megalomania, but rather indicates once again the "qualcosa di perennemente eccessivo nella filosofia . . . la pretesa di dire la verità ultima . . . pretesa di fondazioni trans-storiche, di parole dette una volta e echegianti senza fine nel mondo." (103) The concept of "pudore" seeks to counter this pretense, not only as it is revealed in Heidegger, but also as it is manifested in those of his critics who confuse "il balbettio del filosofo nel mondo" with "l'essenza del totalitarismo" (103).

2. Following Peter Carravetta's lead, a few scholars working in the American academy have begun to pay serious attention to weak thought. The intellectual and ethical seriousness and relevance they perceive in this area of work are no more evident than in their thoughtful critiques of it. (We do not, after all, criticize what we do not value.) In Maurizio Viano's essay, "Sesso debole, pensiero debole," published in the 1989 *Annali d'Italianistica* volume dedicated to women's voices in Italian literature, he brings feminism and weak thought together in such a way as to highlight some of the inherently flawed aspects of the latter. If, as the "debolisti" insist, both the subject and language are not transcendental entities but rather are tied to temporality, flux, contradiction, and the local, then surely they are also *gendered* and *sexed* entities. But gender is never discussed as a conditioning factor of thought in the work of the "debolisti," nor are the "weakened" perspectives proposed and advanced by feminist critiques of dominant culture and discourse recognized. Viano can argue his own case much better than I, and I therefore urge that his essay be read in its entirety. My point here is that this "blind spot" remains in the volume I have discussed, and deserves to be further questioned. Rovatti proposes that "debolezza" is a metaphor that reflects a "risonanza semantica e un bisogno" in many different arenas of current critical and theoretical production. But if we think for a moment about the "semantic resonance" of the new term being advanced—*pudore*—we cannot help thinking about its etymological sense and its semantic field, both of which pertain to gender and to the sexual sphere.

The *Dizionario italiano ragionato* gives us the following information regarding the word "pudore":

latino: *pudor, pudoris*; dal verbo *puđere*: "vergognarsi." Nell'accettazione piú legata all'etimologia: Quel ritegno che trattiene del mostrare pubblicamente le parti intime del corpo o *parti pudende* (di cui si deve avere vergogna). Tuttavia i dizionari contemporanei presentano imbarazzanti diversità; vi si può infatti leggere che il pudore è "un sentimento di riserbo e di vergogna nei confronti di *tutto quanto* riguarda la sfera sessuale", ma anche che il pudore è "un senso di avversione e difesa nei confronti degli aspetti equivoci e morbosi del sesso". Forse oggi potremmo dire: "il naturale senso di ritegno per quanto riguarda sia l'intimità fisica sia l'intimità spirituale della propria persona e della altrui.

The related term "pudicizia" is defined as "discrezione nel parlare e nell'agire, in particolare riferita al sesso."

Of course, Rovatti and Dal Lago are using the term "pudore" in ways distant from its etymology. Nonetheless, their own aversion to an explicit acknowledgment of the gendered nature of the subject can perhaps be seen as etymologically "pudico." It is a commonly shared reaction that "pudore" is a term most often applied to women in everyday speech, as well as a fundamental concept at the basis of many elaborations of Freud regarding female sexual development and behavior. In choosing this particular term, Rovatti and Dal Lago cannot have been deaf to such resonances. I am not out to "get" the proponents of weak thought and philosophical modesty, both of which are to my mind welcome and potentially positive propositions. Yet the problematic and disturbing silence of these thinkers around the issue of the sexual and gendered aspects not only of the fractured subject of which they so consistently speak, but of systems of thought and presuppositions of language that have dominated and continue to dominate their own culture is, I think, worthy of further note. If they themselves wish to admit various "contaminations"—poetic, literary, and so on—into philosophical discourse, will the resultant "abbassamento di voce" nonetheless affect a paradoxically *disembodied* yet distinctly and exclusively *male* voice? There are good silences and bad silences; if we are silent because we aim to be so, then perhaps we are indeed involved in "unblocking a fullness." If, however, we are silent because we have no voice, or rather, a voice unheard and ignored, then we remain in the realm of imposed lack rather than potential fullness. The heterogeneity of "pensiero debole" and of its advo-

cates—as Rovatti put it, its “poetic, experimental, open, and unsystematized” nature—appears to welcome the participation of widely diverse discourses and practices. Can the difference that has been and continues to be biologically, culturally, politically, and socially defined between the male and female remain a moot subject for philosophy, especially for a “*filosofia pudica*”? It has not remained so for literature, for literary and cultural criticism, for history, for law, for politics.

Another stimulating critique of weak thought has recently been elaborated by Edmund Jacobitti in his “On the Wisdom of the Most Recent Italians or How Italian is Weak Thought?” which was read at the 1989 Purdue University Conference on Romance Languages, Literatures and Film and published in the conference’s journal, *Romance Languages Annual* (Vol. I, 1989). Jacobitti’s critique is quite different from Viano’s; his interest is in the *debolisti*’s general avoidance of any reference to the specifically Italian philosophical tradition with its long-standing civic and practical emphases. In this he finds a paradox, for weak thought appears to argue for precisely a more practical “doing-in-the-world” approach to philosophical work. He writes:

There is in weak thought a shift of interest and emphasis away from the *Civitas Dei* and onto the world of practice; a general recognition of immanence as opposed to transcendence, of the need to forget abstract theories and systems and to get down to practical hard work. (144)

Jacobitti’s critique—that *debolisti* appear to have forgotten their own Ciceronian-Machiavellian traditions of “doing in this world”—points out that, in spite of their claims to wish to concentrate on immanence, their concerns remain nonetheless “oddly, wholly metaphysical” (145). He writes that they claim to be pragmatic, in short, but remain on the level of abstraction and devote almost exclusive attention to the deconstruction of any and all foundational modes of thinking. By working primarily out of a non-Italian philosophical tradition, weak thought, according to Jacobitti’s perspective, may indeed not be very Italian at all—and this to its detriment.

I cannot summarize Jacobitti’s entire argument, but do urge that it, like Maurizio Viano’s critique, be read for the very valuable perspectives it brings to some of the limitations and flaws of the *debolisti*’s project, at least as far as it has manifested itself up to now.

In my final few words I would like to turn to a brief consideration of the usefulness of the concepts of weakness and modesty for the critical, creative, and pedagogical tasks in which we are all to one degree or another involved. If weak thought is indeed a metaphor and responds to a generalized need in many areas of thought and action, it would appear appropriate that, following the *debolisti's* lead, we make use of their propositions in our areas of interest—literature, pedagogy—just as they incorporate literary preoccupations into philosophical discourse and practice. In fact, I would like to see more of an explicitly open exchange in both directions. Many of us have moved toward weak thought and its advocates in the role either of supporters or detractors, but all as disseminators. It would be good to see the *debolisti* move beyond what is still primarily the world inhabited by professional philosophers, toward the worlds lived in by writers, literary critics and theoreticians, and teachers of other related disciplines. They “contaminate” their discourses with those of literature, psychoanalysis, and all sorts of areas and methodologies, of course; but I am speaking of a different sort of opening out, that would bring the living voices of non-philosophers into their activities, and would curtail a bit the tendency to elitism that quite clearly mars their stance. How many more readings of Heidegger can we—or they—find useful to being (with a small “b”)? Would pondering together the not inconsiderable problem of how and what we teach, of the validity of academic institutions of all sorts, and of the domination of our Western academies by what is still preponderantly strong thought and practices be any less valid a way of divesting in concepts of the “*io forte*” and of strong thought than re-reading certain modern masters of the philosophical tradition for yet another time? This may be an unfair criticism of the weak thinkers, for they turn attention quite naturally to texts and issues most closely associated to their own immediate areas of professional concern, as do we all. But if you are advocating a general shift in perspective and “contaminating” your discipline with the language and views of others, are you not implicitly advocating as well real changes in academic practices that affect both present and future thinkers of whatever ilk?

To end on an openly personal note, I want to give voice to my own sense of how I would like to incorporate the perspectives of “weakness” and “modesty” into my own practices as an American woman academic. I have long been interested in what might metaphorically be called the “muted” qualities of certain

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writers and of certain poetics and practices. Yet I am also aware that my profession is a declarative one; both criticism and teaching have traditionally relied on an assertive style, a mastery of a body of material, and a hierarchy not only of judgments but of institutional practices by which the academy functions. Weak thought first captured my attention precisely for its "semantic resonance"; how good to read of a project openly situated in the "muted" realm of weakness as opposed to the "declarative" kingdom of strength! As I read more, however, my initially enthusiastic response has itself been muted somewhat. I've alluded to some aspects of weak thought—the fundamental lack of attention to the gendered nature of experience; the essential avoidance of issues pertaining to "doing in the world," the elitism—that disturb me and many of my colleagues also working in our shared context of the American academy. But it is not only these lacks that create a certain diffidence in me. It is the failure, at least so far, to explore the very concrete ethical, social, personal, and especially pedagogical implications of "debolezza." Our professional discourses have changed radically in the last twenty years or so, but I fear that the changes affect us locally as professional academics much more than our students or, beyond academe, our contributions to wider societal and deeper personal ethics. Weak thought remains firmly and squarely within traditional academic boundaries; *debolisti* write and speak to and for each other and/or against professional *fortisti*. I do not believe that the professional academic's role is or even can be primarily social and political. We remain in the abstract realm of theory and the intensely specialized discourses of our own preoccupations whether we do so "weakly" or "strongly." But we do have an important *pedagogical* function and, for those of us who teach literature, we certainly recognize that literature itself still has an ethical and pedagogical value no doubt far beyond its intent. I myself have felt in recent years a need to return to literature; that is, to escape at least somewhat the critical and theoretical mazes in which our profession wanders, and to encounter the creations of writers, if not "innocently" and "directly," at least non-aggressively. Whatever we may have to teach our students, and however we may wish to employ critical methodologies, I think that we can agree that the human capacity to create, through words as through paint, stone, or chords, is worthy of at least as much respect as the human capacity to elaborate theories or to critique systems and structures. My own view may be seen as "nostalgic," "humanistic,"

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even "belle-lettristic," but it is my goal to help my students to experience the richness and positivity of literature in its function as a mode of creativity and a way of organizing the infinite proliferation that is experience, rather than only or primarily as fodder for professional criticism and theory. I wish to weaken and mute my own role as a critic and theorist of literature, and to concentrate more on my role as a reader and writer among many others, not because I think that the critic's and theorist's is an irrelevant or necessarily falsely privileged role, but because I want to take the lessons of weakness, non-aggressivity, and modesty seriously, therefore turning more attention to the creative and the pedagogical and to whatever literature and teaching (as contrasted to criticism and theory) might be or become.

I also want to continue to encourage others to think about ways of breaking out of some of the straitjackets of the academy's traditional practices as they affect our and our students' daily lives. The paradox is, of course, that this can appear to be a call for the transformation of our academic practices and institutional structures, and thus a call to "strong" action, yet another "projectual" vision like so many that have come before us. Perhaps it is, and perhaps any "putting into action" of convictions, perspectives, and thought is inevitably "strong." But we cannot avoid recognizing that within academics "we" are "they"; we create the rules of the game—the game itself, in fact—within our own universities and colleges, and within our own broader practices such as publications, conventions, debates, promotions, and the like. Can those of us who believe that all too often the best is marginalized, while the worst nakedly ("spudoratamente") struts about, modestly state that this is the case, much as the child who refused to be awed by the emperor's non-existent new clothes? Can we not only state it, but act on it in the contexts of our classrooms, our departments, our institutions? The feudally baronial mentality that continues to dominate Italian academic practices, for example, need a good dose of "pudore," as do many of our own attitudes and ways of doing on this side of the ocean. It seems to me that words like "foster," "nurture," "collaborate," and "respect" are too often written out of our theories and practices in favor of terms and acts of aggression, appropriation, domination, and the like. I am searching, like many others, for modes of being and doing that permit what I see as the positive potential of weakening and modesty to function as an ethics at once personal, professional, pedagogical, and social. If we and others involved

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in our enterprises who are part of this search—and I know there are many—have the strength to be weak, we may find that living out this paradoxical contradiction may have a modest value. And that might be enough to navigate through the fragmented, foundationless world with some sense of direction, even though the final destination must remain unknown.