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Literature and Weak Thought



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I. WEAK THOUGHT: PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

The basic aims of this book are: 1) to capture and describe the fundamental characteristics of so-called “weak thought” in contemporary philosophy; 2) to show in a reasonably thorough and exhaustive manner its links with modern literature; and 3) to point towards possible applications of its basic assumptions within the field of literary studies. Clearly these three distinct problem clusters constitute, to a significant extent, separate and autonomous areas of inquiry: philosophy, literary history and literary theory. Therefore, capturing the titular “weakness” in each of these separate areas clearly demands the adoption of a slightly different perspective and the application of slightly different descriptive language and analytical tools. Nevertheless, I consider that the combined treatment of phenomena traditionally belonging to the separate domains of philosophy and literary studies – in both its historical and theoretical varieties – is possible and justified for three fundamental reasons.

First of all, this is because weak thought itself grants aesthetic experience, including its literary dimension, an essential, even fundamental role – and a privileged role in relation to other discourses and practices – in the interpretation of the experience of the being, subjectivity and culture characteristic of late modernity in particular. It is precisely literature and modern art that have captured and depicted through artistic intuition many of the phenomena and problems described by weak thought in the language of philosophical discourse. Moreover, this discourse has sometimes boldly reached for means or forms of expression bearing a strong affinity with literature, such as metaphor or the generic form of the essay. Secondly, this is because modernity and postmodernity have brought definite changes in our understanding of the relationship between philosophy and literature. These changes have drawn them much closer together both in thematic terms and with respect to the means of expression used, as well as in the means of constructing and shaping utterance. In this way, the traditionally accepted and culturally established differences between them have been weakened or, in some cases, even erased. Thirdly, and finally, this is because the concept of weak thought – though it originally comes

from philosophy and is used above all for the analysis of philosophical problems – nevertheless has a broader meaning and thus can be successfully applied to the study and interpretation of many other phenomena in modern and late-modern culture. Therefore, I wish to treat some of the fundamental ideas and categories used by this concept – and particularly the idea of the trace – in a dual manner; that is, I wish both to extract and underline their philosophical potential, and to use them in an attempt to construct a poetics capable of capturing and describing certain essential – in my opinion – characteristics of modern literature. Such an operation may, in my view, bring a double benefit, since it allows us to place literature within intellectual contexts essential to modernism, and to preserve, at least within certain limits, its specific identity and autonomy. This specificity and autonomy is guaranteed by the framework of poetology, even if it has – in the spirit of the concept here presented – a somewhat “weakened” character (which means here that it is more open to inspirations coming from beyond literary studies and to other languages from the humanities) in comparison with the main modern discourses of literary theory.

The very expression “weak thought” has had – at least until now – the character more of a loose metaphor than of a precisely and unambiguously defined idea. In fact, this is the basis of both its weakness and its strength. It has weakness, since the lack of precisely drawn conceptual boundaries means that it is difficult to define the essence, character, range of problems, status, etc. of weak thought within the contemporary intellectual scene. Are we dealing here with a relatively defined philosophical trend or current, style of thought or method of cultural analysis, approximately comparable, for instance, with structuralism, hermeneutics, deconstruction or neopragmatism? Or are we dealing rather with a certain general intellectual tendency, which cannot be reduced to any concrete “school” and which instead tries to name and express the general intellectual and spiritual climate of the era of late modernity, describing its characteristic way of experiencing being by making use of, gathering together, or even synthesizing the achievements and diagnoses of humanistic thought in the second half of the twentieth century? This second characterization admittedly seems to give a better description of the nature of weak thought, which aspires rather – to evoke the title of Vattimo’s well-known essay on hermeneutics – to the role of a very particular “*koine*” of contemporary thought. Nevertheless, it is not easy to give an unambiguous and complete answer to the question posed. After all, the representatives of weak thought themselves often emphasize its temporary and undefined nature, which is deprived of any distinct theoretical or conceptual status, as well as of any certainty as to its own foundations and assumptions, which is to express the cognitive uncertainty of contemporary thought and the condition of

contemporary philosophy: “There is something transitional and temporary in the expression ‘weak thought.’ It is provisionally situated between the strong reason of the one who speaks the truth and the symmetrical powerlessness of the one who contemplates his own nothingness. Thanks to this intermediacy it may serve as an indicator.”⁴ In a similar vein, another thinker writes: “The idea of weakness points towards the fragile constitution of today’s philosophical discourse, its oscillation between diagnosis and acceptance of the process of metaphysics’ fulfillment as the History of Being – a normal thing in the case of nihilism – and a transgression of this condition that is necessarily ambiguous and full of difficulties and lapses.”⁵ Therefore weak thought does not appear as an unambiguous phenomenon, situated fully on the side of the nihilistic tendencies in contemporary thought, rejecting all forms of fundamentalism, essentialism and the philosophy of presence. “Intermediacy” – accented in both quotations cited above – gestures towards the opposite pole, towards the possibility of going beyond one’s own weak and uncertain condition, towards an attempt to reclaim regions of thought that are located between dichotomized orders, and elude thinking based on categories of strong oppositions. This “anti-dualistic” aspect of weak thought – although it is not always highlighted or developed by its representatives and commentators – appears to be both essential and promising.

However, the strength flowing from this metaphoricity is undoubtedly the great elasticity and accompanying range of the term “weak thought.” The striking metaphor of weakness, which is intentionally – as we might suppose – left undefined and unhindered by the rigor of an exact and “strong” definition, can be used, precisely thanks to its relative ambiguity, in many different fields and contexts, and broadly extended into different areas of learning and experience.

The “weakness” here under discussion may be interpreted in several ways. When considered on the ontological plane it would refer to being itself, or perhaps to being and its fundamental characteristics. It would be an event that “happens” to being itself. Therefore, weak being is being that has lost its own essentiality, substantiality, “gravity,” “stiffness,” its function as a basis, a foundation, as that which is first, that which exists authentically and in a

4 Rovatti, Pier Aldo, “Transformazioni nel corso dell’esperienza,” *Il pensiero debole*, eds. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1998), p. 51. This book can be considered a manifesto of weak thought.

5 Dal Lago, Alessandro, “L’etica della debolezza. Simone Weil e il nihilismo,” *Il pensiero debole*, pp. 117-118. Unfortunately, we received no guidelines on this before we started. There are many possible systems. Ultimately, it will depend on the publisher, so let’s just leave things as they are for now.

characteristic and essential way, as that which is different – and differentiable – from what is not fully existent, only apparent, afflicted, fleeting, founded, and from what has the essence of its being beyond itself. The ontological interpretation of weakness can be found above all in the work of Constantin Noica, who consistently speaks of weak or weakened being (*ființa slabă, ființa slabită*). However, for Noica this weakness has a fundamentally positive dimension, signifying a liberation from the excessive “burden” of the traditional, metaphysical conception of being as an absolute that is radically transcendent in relation to the empirical world and human, historical or cultural reality. The theme of the weakness of being also appears occasionally in Emmanuel Levinas’s work and, in a somewhat more developed form, in the work of the best known representative of weak thought, Gianni Vattimo – especially in his interpretation of the Nietzschean and Heideggerian idea of nihilism and the concept of the trace as that which remains of beings, or after being. However, in Vattimo’s work – in contrast to that of Noica – the departure from the “strong” form of being, especially in his books of the 1980s and 1990s, develops in a melancholic and nostalgic mood. The possibility of understanding the weakness of being as a kind of “relief,” a literal or metaphorical liberation from the material burden of things, comes into strong relief only in the philosopher’s final books, which are devoted to religion. This ontological interpretation of the idea of weakness, or – in other words – weak ontology, seems to be particularly significant, since it shows an important change in philosophical sensibility seemingly characteristic of late modernity. The traditional metaphysical perspective – in which the privileged role falls to that which is permanent, unchanging and perfect – undergoes here a reversal. Instead, those areas of existence and types of experience characterized by weakness, deficiency and fragility rise to the rank of that which is first and fundamental, of that which constitutes the point of departure and the privileged area for philosophical reflection. To put it succinctly, weak ontology and the ontology of weakness attain the rank of the first philosophy, where the first term (weak ontology) itself characterizes the status of philosophical thought and discourse, along with its methods and tools, while the second (the ontology of weakness) points to its object and the area of its interests.

But the idea of weak thought (*pensiero debole*), coined and popularized by Vattimo, also allows for a somewhat different, epistemological interpretation of the idea of weakness under discussion here, which – it must be admitted – appears relatively rarely among the representatives of weak thought more broadly. From this perspective, weakness no longer relates to being itself, but to human knowledge and its fundamental conceptual tools. It refers to a situation of epistemological uncertainty and point to the inability of thought and language

to fully capture being. It points to the loss of thought's power to re-present, meaning its capacity to control and appropriate being, or perhaps – in a less radical version – the possibility to give an exhaustive description of reality. The epistemological dimension of weak thought is most strongly emphasized by Pier Aldo Rovatti in his article “Transformazioni nel corso dell'esperienza”: “In the strict sense, weak thought is a certain epistemological attitude. Methods or even categories of knowledge all come into play, a certain type of knowledge. [. . .] ‘Weak thought’ claims for itself the right to undermine the act of knowing entirely, both from the side of the one who comes to know and of that which is known. Subject and object are clearly worn-out ideas by now, but do we have any better ones at our disposal? ‘Weak thought’ demands a change both in the object of knowledge and in the subject of the process of knowing. Once this task has been undertaken, we are inclined towards the nihilistic destructuring of fundamental categories, an attempt to undermine authority, or – in other words – to undermine the ‘power’ of unity.”⁶

Weak thought may also be treated as an attempt to describe or diagnose contemporary culture. This would be the third area – alongside the ontological and epistemological – where the concept might be applied. Thus it would describe modern and postmodern experience, especially its characteristic randomness, the disintegration of the permanent structures on which existence has been founded in traditional societies and the supplanting of them by forms of life deprived of any stability or rootedness in unchanging values, the disappearance of the difference between the real and the imagined, the thing and its image, the mediation of cognition and experience of the world through the “I”, and the end of “strong” subjectivity. It is precisely this historical and cultural dimension of weakening that Vattimo most clearly accents.

Vattimo has also frequently taken up the ethical aspect of weak thought, which he developed especially in his *Etica dell'interpretazione* and *Oltre l'interpretazione*. This ethical aspect is strongly associated with the question of nihilism and its interpretation, so I shall be discussing it in the chapter devoted precisely to these issues. Here I shall simply mention Alessandra Dal Lago's interpretation from the essay already cited, “L'etica della debolezza. Simone Weil e il nichilismo.” The fundamental concepts of weak ethics, according to Dal Lago, include moderation, self-limitation, passivity, submission to necessity. These traditional indicators of the classical wisdom position – which the Italian philosopher follows Simone Weil in finding above all in Greek and Hindu thought – are compared with the condition of the postmodern subject and with the striving to overcome instrumental rationality; they weaken the subject,

6 Rovatti, “Transformazioni nel corso dell'esperienza,” p. 42.

deconstruct it and submit it to the rhythm of the real.⁷ Apart from the thought of Simone Weil and of the traditions she refers to – whose language and terminology are, as Dal Lago himself admits, somewhat alien to contemporary philosophical culture – another source of inspiration for weak ethics is Heidegger's philosophy. In the end, Heidegger's work stands as the common – though diversely interpreted – heritage of the philosophers who develop weak thought in its various aspects and variants. These two inspirations, Weil's philosophy of religion and contemporary nihilism, which at first glance seem so difficult to reconcile, are in fact linked by the critique of modernity, and by the "strong" subject as a foundation and of metaphysics understood as violence. Weak ethics depends neither on the rejection of traditional values, nor on the simple negation of deontic, normative ethics. Instead it constitutes a certain existential attitude, for which the most important idea is responsibility as a response to late modernity's fundamental event of nihilism understood in the sense of the decline of being and its "strong" forms. Therefore, weak ethics is a consequence of weak ontology, of the forgetting of being and the ontic-ontological distinction, as well as of the fulfillment of metaphysics in the world of scientific-technological rationality, which demands of the subject an attitude of resignation, passivity and weakness. This ethical dimension – according to Dal Lago's interpretation – is more important than the epistemological dimension:

"Every ethics – to the extent that it is thought in weak and merely operational categories, as a minimal point of orientation for human activity – is formed in reaction to a loss of foundation, even if this takes place in a condition of forgetting, which dictates a mocking of the original, metaphysical foundation.

But the idea of weakness may be linked with ethics in various ways. *It may be an ethics*. It may refer, analogically, to the Heideggerian idea of ontological difference or to reflection situated in conditions of undecidability (*indecidibilit *), limiting itself to being present in the process of thrownness without pretending to liquidate its cause. Weakness appears here not only as a logical condition, a defined formation of thought, but also refers to a situation that might be defined as *pathological*, to weakness as an existential horizon. After all, it describes – even if it does so only from an empirical perspective – the essence of the human condition in a world of technology (not only as the imaginarium of nature, but also of the human being and of society). Therefore,

7 Dal Lago, "L'etica della debolezza. Simone Weil e il nihilismo," *Il pensiero debole*, p. 109. It is characteristic that Dal Lago (p. 98), as well as Rovatti (p. 30) and Vattimo (*Dialogo con Nietzsche. Saggi 1961-2000*, p. 190) in their ethical reflections invoke a posthumously published passage from Nietzsche claiming that the strongest are those who are most moderate and who have no need of extreme principles.

the condition of the human being who considers himself submitted to necessity is weak, as in the enigmatic reflections of the later Heidegger. Man accepts – as in Weil’s work – his own decline together with the decline of the world, limiting his participation – insofar as this is humanly possible – in the perpetration of injustice. Limitation and weakness, *as ethics*, may be the form that responsibility takes today. Will this decline find its counterpart in a state of renewed balance and justice? Today’s thought cannot settle this question.”⁸

Weakening as an event in being, thought and culture covers, it would appear, the three basic dimensions of weakness as a philosophical idea, or perhaps rather as a metaphor. Their distinction does not mean that they constitute different and entirely independent realms; on the contrary, they more often interpenetrate one another and combine in the attempt to construct – in various ways and by various means and languages – a very particular ontology of the present. They are united in the aspiration to recognize the modern shape – and especially the late-modern experience – of being, existence and culture, as well as in the aspiration to name what characterizes and differentiates it, even where – as in the case of Constantin Noica – the historical and cultural context is less strongly accented.

The original impulse for the formation of weak ontology was undoubtedly the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger, especially in the idea of ontological nihilism and the conception of ontological hermeneutics, with its primary assumption of the interpretive nature of being. This patronage means that weak thought in its broadest sense can be counted within the anti- or post-metaphysical tendencies in contemporary philosophy and humanities in general. Indeed it may even be identified with them, as an attempt to construct highly generalized concepts (categories, metaphors, narrative, language) – of an entirely different nature to the traditional tools of philosophical discourse – with which to describe being and ways of experiencing it.

Emmanuel Levinas was probably the first to use the metaphor of weakness, though he did so only once. In *Humanism of the Other* (*L’humanisme de l’autre homme*, 1972), Levinas uses this metaphor precisely in the same anti-metaphysical context, as part of a critique of transcendentalism as a philosophy of representation, of experience as the source of meaning, of the primacy of the Same (*Même*), as well as of being understood in terms of essence (in the scholastic sense of being *in actu*). According to Levinas: “As if a strange weakness caused *presence* or being-in-act to shiver and topple. Passivity more passive than the conjoint passivity of the act, which aspires to the actualization

8 Dal Lago, p. 119.

of all its potentials.”⁹ But the metaphor of weakness is used more frequently and consistently by Constantin Noica (1909-1987) and Gianni Vattimo (born in 1936).

The first of these two thinkers belongs to the exceptional generation of Romanian thinkers and artists born at the beginning of the twentieth century. His work can be placed within the broad realm of contemporary hermeneutics, despite the fact that Noica himself did not directly refer to this particular philosophical orientation. The influence of Heidegger – whose seminars the Romanian philosopher attended in the 1940s while he was working at the Romanian Cultural Institute in Berlin – is clearly visible. We may see this influence in the concept of the circle, for instance, which Noica used in his ontological, epistemological and aesthetic reflections, especially in his main work, the expansive, two-tome treatise *Devenirea întru ființa* (1981). Heidegger’s influence is also apparent in the Romanian philosopher’s acceptance of the primacy of the question over the answer in ontological reflections. This influence can also be observed in the emphasis Noica places on temporality, becoming, and the event in his description of the human condition, and – perhaps most distinctly – in his treatment of language as the horizon within which the understanding of being is given, and through which the subject opens itself to this being. From this conception of language, Noica produced various works devoted to Romanian philosophy, or rather to philosophizing in the Romanian language, among which two beautiful and original essays stand out, “Rostirea filozofică românească” (1970) and “Creație și frumos în rostirea românească” (1973).

Noica’s philosophizing and his reception of Heidegger’s thought occupy a separate place on the map of post-Heideggerian hermeneutical ontology and post-metaphysical thought broadly understood. They constitute an original, Eastern European – from the geographical perspective – variant, with its own specific characteristics rooted in local culture and spirituality, though in certain respects they remain close to the main, Western current of this tradition. In any case, this is how I would like to interpret his thought. Noica’s work can sometimes seem to constitute a closed intellectual universe, difficult to penetrate and not easy to compare with other conceptions, if only precisely because of its strongly accented Romanianess. However, it is also a universe where thoughts and intuitions are expressed that are penetrating, universal and close to contemporary philosophical problems. This is astonishing particularly when we take into account the time and conditions in which Noica lived and worked. At

9 Levinas, Emmanuel, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, 2003), p. 6.